Abstract Expressionism and Art Education: Formalism and Self-Expression as Curriculum Ideology

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In the 1940's and 1950's, formalism and self-expression theories about abstract expressionism were incorporated into art education. However, as these products of the art community became a part of curriculum, the social and political foundations of the art and the theories were ignored. A school art style was emphasized that contained only selected elements of Greenberg's formalist analysis of abstract expressionism. Curriculum also contained a reduction of Rosenberg's theory of expressive process to some pseudo-expressive technical characteristics. While the argument is not made that there was a studied and analytical reinterpretation of these critics' theories in school, the theories represented and became part of a general climate of opinion, which helped to shape people's (including teachers') understanding of modern art. The transformation of abstract expressionism in art education was not arbitrary. It supported and legitimated post-World War II institutional priorities of socialization and professional training.

The theories which frame curriculum often approach issues of education from within. For example, artistic development is viewed in terms of physical and psychological traits of children or strategies of teaching which are believed to promote children's growth. A different form of analysis is to examine how internal definitions of school art are influenced by exterior, social relations. An analysis which focuses upon exterior influences includes not only a discernment of causes but a reconstruction of a climate of opinion in order to understand what was possible for curriculum.

The exterior relations that shape curriculum include the priorities of public schooling and the dynamics of the art community. Schooling is shaped by institutional purposes such as the upbringing, socialization and labor training of children. Art involves a different set of social arrangements. By distinguishing between the dynamics of the art community and those of schooling, we may better understand the ways in which school art has been shaped by institutional imperatives.

This paper concerns the cultural and political dynamics of the abstract expressionist art community and the conceptions of the artistic movement represented in education. Although all of the complex processes which have shaped art education during this period cannot be dealt with in a single paper, it will be argued that the formalist and expressive concerns that developed around abstract expressionism influenced, but were transformed in school. The vital social values and intellectual interests which sustain the art community were largely ignored in curriculum. What became possible for curriculum was determined by the social purposes and arrangements of schooling.

The Establishment of Abstract Expressionism

Abstract expressionism is considered America's first avant-garde art movement and the first international style to have originated in the United States.

However, the movement was not concerned merely with a set of stylistic techniques or individual acts of self-expression; the processes and products of abstract expressionism represented a community of discourse concerned with social alienation and political reform.

Abstract expressionism emerged at a time of radical cultural change. During the late 1930's and 1940's, a desire for a culture independent from European tradition emerged within intellectual and artistic circles. A nationalism developed which focused upon cultural leadership and was confirmed by a growing faith in American enterprise. These cross-currents provided a source of debate and inspiration in the art community.

Social Foundations of the Art Community

A number of conditions made the focus upon national culture possible including changes in the international political and economic scene. The development of an influential art community in New York was enhanced by its physical distance from the war. The destruction of World War II made it difficult for the continued development of European artistic traditions, while American cultural activity and study were sustained.

However, the American art community had strong European roots through two groups of artists and intellectuals. One of the groups was made up of first and second generation immigrants who sought assimilation and social mobility through cultural (academic and artistic) knowledge. A second influential group was the refugees. Many of Europe's greatest artists and intellectuals came to the United States to escape the war. Although some of the refugees later returned to Europe, they influenced American cultural discourse through their European understanding of science, the arts and literature. The Europeans brought with them ideas associated with the moral and social commitments of socialism and communism.

Many of those who initiated abstract expressionism were employed by the Federal Art Project. The project gave artists an opportunity to work; but there were cultural agendas as well. It supported social realism as a representation of national culture. The style was thought particularly appropriate because it was considered democratic and easily understood and appreciated by the general public.

Some Federal Art Project artists attended Hans Hofmann's influential Eighth Street school. Hofmann, a German refugee, has a perspective that was both a conceptual and perceptual contrast to European cubism and a vital urban alternative to rural social realism. He emphasized Matisse's imagery and color at a time when most of the art community was influenced by Picasso's analytic abstraction. Hofmann explored the idea that art could emerge completely from within an artist.

By the middle 1940's these various groups came together for social interaction and debate. Artists who had been meeting at the Waldorf Cafeteria merged with the American Abstract Artists to form the Eighth Street Painter's Club. A vital aspect of this coalition was that it was not only artists within their own coterie; the Club promoted a joining of academics and intellectuals with the art community. Lectures and discussions were held concerning political and philosophical issues involving painters, writers, composers and people associated with literary magazines, museums, and universities.

These interactions enabled New York painters to become acquainted with European surrealism. There was

also a growing familiarity with the symbolic abstraction of artists such as Klee, Miro and particularly Kandinsky through reproductions and exhibited examples of their work. The artists adopted the surrealist practice of automatism as an expression of the unconscious. However, unlike the surrealists, the American painters used the graphic representation of chance and unconscious gesture to explore the possibilities of imagery.

Social Visions of the Art Community

From these social relations and artistic experimentation emerged the ideas and images which developed into abstract expressionism. At least three social and political currents coalesced to give direction to the art movement, One was a belief in American democracy as the guardian of individual rights and autonomy, a belief particularly cherished by the refugees and immigrants who had come from countries where these values were denied. Hofmann and others believed that artists represented the independence and creative freedom which democracy promised and which had been sought in their exile from Europe (e.g. Seitz, 1983).

A second current was a concern with modernism and the relation of science to society. Modernism is an intellectual, as well as artistic, movement. In contrast to nineteenth century certitude, modernism involves a consciousness in which conventions and traditions are thought tenuous and existence is considered ambiguous and paradoxical. Modern art focuses upon a self-reflexiveness which draws attention to the medium and process of production. Aesthetic forms have a technical immediacy which contrast with previous pastoral, contemplative and romantic notions of knowledge and culture. Art is thought cognitive and perceptual, rather than symbolic, and is generated through crises of urban technological life. There is a sense of alienation of human beings in general and a marginality of artists in particular.

The view of science also includes a belief in progress based on psychology. It is assumed that a science of the human mind will solve social problems. When abstract expressionism emerged, Freudian and Jungian ideas framed many exploratory responses to modern existence. Artists rejected mechanistic views of man and society and glorified both the idiosyncratic experience and human union through a common mythical unconscious.

A third current in the art community was an American socialist vision which became prominent in the 1930's. During the Depression, many artists and intellectuals identified with socialist reforms and Marxist theory.

In the 1930's, a debate concerning Marxism and modernism received a forum in the literary journals where abstract expressionism was first discussed. There was a problematic quality of the alliance between Marxism and modernism. Some who supported Marxism sought to combat alienation with the pastoral values and worker controlled labor represented in Regionalism which contrasted with abstract art which could not be understood by common people. But Marxism also represented an international social consciousness which challenged the wartime situation in Europe and the isolationism in mainstream intellectual life. By the 1940's an urban disillusionment with Regionalism developed. Although the work of artists such as Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood was supported by urban museums, it provided a sanctified view of American country life which New York artists rejected as isolationist. New York artists sought an urban art which would be more compatible with

international communism (Cox, 1982).

There were tensions as artists with these social commitments engaged in their work which may be illustrated by two examples. First, their support for international communism became coupled with a fierce patriotism by the end of World War II. There was a belief that the United States would lead the next cultural revolution. Second, psychology was to replace older forms of manipulation but possibly provided a more compelling form of social control by focusing upon inner thoughts and beliefs.

For a time, New York artists sought to retain a theoretical perspective of Marxism without allowing authoritative constraints of the doctrine to determine the form of their work. However, by the early 1940's, Soviet aggression (particularly the invasion of Finland in 1939) resulted in a rejection of Marxism. Also influential were the dynamics of the cold war. A growing national fear of communism placed individuals and institutions with communist sympathies at risk.

Part of the American cold war social climate was a pressure on artists and intellectuals to disengage from the political arena. Anti-communist campaigns ended the financial support of many New York artists and federally funded art projects until the 1960's (Guilbaut, 1983). Previously radical artists and intellectuals began to support more mainstream American values (Barrett, 1982; Guilbaut, 1983).

There was a political shift that appeared to be toward an apolitical stand. Part of the shift was a glorification of the individual which deemphasized the social qualities of life and art.

The popular press publicized the work of abstract expressionism as a symbolic representation of these values. For example, Henry Luce, editor of Life, Time and Fortune, sought to represent United States corporate industry as a superior model of production and economy. Originally he had supported regionalism as a national culture. However, as it grew evident that regionalism represented progress through worker control and the style became associated with mass culture, Luce stressed individuality through abstract expressionism which he believed illustrated independent thought (Doss, 1987). For example, a 1948 issue of Life represented the non-objective work of Jackson Pollack as an imagery without social conflict which would be free of political manipulation (Doss, 1987). However, rather than autonomy, Luce promoted a form of cultural and political consensus while maintaining an illusion of neutrality through an implied reporting of the facts.

To this point, I have presented a brief historical sketch of the social and political climate in which abstract expressionism emerged. Although what has been presented in this and the following section must be limited and may be familiar, it is an important background for final section in which the transformation of abstract expressionism in curriculum will be discussed.

Social Consciousness and Art Criticism

One way to understand the development of abstract expressionism, and its representation in curriculum, is to consider the analyses of two critics which became essential parts of the movement. Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg supported abstract expressionism from different perspectives, but both helped to illuminate the artistic style and the intellectual climate of the time. Their perspectives of modern art have continued to influence contemporary taste

(e.g. Kuspit, 1979; Tillim, 1987).

Greenberg and Rosenberg took part in the intellectual debate about Marxism and modernism. Greenberg was a literary reviewer and editor of the Partisan Review, an influential journal which began in association with the Communist Party, but later became an independent leftist forum concerned with modernism in art. In the 1940's, before art magazines reported on abstract expressionism, Greenberg championed the style in the Partisan Review and the Nation. His argument for the style developed from what he conceptualized from Hofmann's lectures on Eighth Street as a historical determinism of art. The determinism was not unrelated to the historical materialism of his Marxist perspective.

For Rosenberg, Marxism was a perspective from which to investigate individual existence and cultural life. The relationship of the individual to society was an issue that Rosenberg focused upon through his life and a cause of the rift with Communist Party loyalists as he gave greater emphasis to the notions of idiosyncrasy and creativity independent of social constraints (Cox, 1982).

The conditions of the war, Stalinist pograms and the growing nationalism in the United States moved Greenberg and Rosenberg toward relinquishing their Marxist sympathies by the 1940's. Greenberg supported American nationalism, but opposed people such as Michigan's conservative Congressman George Dondero, who believed that modern art was part of a communist conspiracy (Guilbaut, 1983). Greenberg, like Luce, criticized communism but supported the production of abstract art as important to a free and stable society.

In his movement away from Marxism, Greenberg changed his perspective "from purist ideology in politics to pure aesthetics in art" (Kramer, 1962, p.61). His notion of purity assumed that art should maintain an integrity of the properties inherent to a medium. He argued that abstract expressionism had evolved from cubism toward a pure experience of medium that he thought was the essential nature of art.

Greenberg's support of abstract expressionism was based upon a conception of formalism. He considered a purging of subject matter from art (which he thought distracted from pure form) a historical necessity. Greenberg assumed that objective standards of art quality and criticism were revealed over time. His focus upon objective standards of formalism was to free art from the influence of mass culture mediocrity and uniformity (Greenberg, 1940). The particular concern about mass culture was related to a growing fear of banality as a representation of the authoritarian control blamed for Hitler's rise to power and the German people's participation in World War II.

Rosenberg's rejection of Marxism took a different form. He did not absolve artists from social commitment. He recognized that artists could not easily address certain issues during the cold war; however, they were obligated to resist conformity and support expressive freedom. Rosenberg believed that abstract expressionism provided the potential for a pure, human expression in an alienating world. His conception of purification involved an existential process which was to eliminate political ideology from art while maintaining opposition to the moral and aesthetic European traditions of the masterpiece.

In Greenberg's and Rosenberg's criticism, the quality of art was determined by forces internal to the object and the subjectivity of an artist, rather than by external sociological forces. Greenberg took

a historical approach which ironically led to an asocial argument and an interior examination of the production and experiencing of art. While Greenberg argued that there is a dialectic between the history of art and any particular work of art, he omitted considerations of the relation of production to social context. Greenberg assumed, for example, that Rosenberg had arbitrarily connected abstract expressionism with the existentialism that pervaded intellectual thought at the time. He accused Rosenberg of constructing an interaction between the philosophy and the art merely because both were newsworthy (Greenberg, 1962).

Rosenberg, interested in the subjective life of the individual as a representation of human struggle, was ahistorical. He did not attend to the historical construction of social life by various groups, or the multiple subjectivities, which became legacies that make possible and shape contemporary subjectivity. Rosenberg defined the process of painting as the restoration of the metaphysical to art which resolved individual crisis without ideological mediation.

While both critics denied ideological qualities in art and in their criticism, the art community, including Greenberg and Rosenberg, responded to social and political conditions. These critics helped to shape public understanding of abstract expressionism in relation to concerns about alienation and the definition and purposes of culture in industrial society. Paradoxes in their theories about abstract expressionism reflected the social conflict. The emergence of the style became possible in and was part of a milieu which focused upon democratic freedom, but also upon existential isolation; an idiosyncratic production process was valued as well as a common materialism. It was due in part to the political climate, and in part to the denial of ideological qualities in their theories and in abstract expressionism, that Greenberg's formalism and Rosenberg's notion of self-expressionism were easily technicized in curriculum.

The Institutionalization of a Movement: Curriculum and the Avant-Garde

The introduction of abstract expressionism into curriculum was part of a movement in general education which developed in the 1950's and promoted curricula based on professional knowledge of school subjects (Barkan, 1955). The reforms resulted in new requirements for art teachers' studio training and an increased use of art theory to justify school practices. Future art teachers had course requirements similar to those training to be professional artists. Through this education (and the popular press) art teachers became particularly influenced by abstract expressionism (Logan, 1975).

Greenberg's and Rosenberg's explanations of abstract expressionism represented and became part of a general climate of opinion which helped to shape teachers' understanding of modern art. As the art and theories of formalism and expression became part of education, the social and political foundations of abstract expressionism were ignored. The social context that shaped and gave meaning and importance to the ideas, images and processes of the style were lost.

In school, art was transformed into displays of emotion and problems to be solved, eliminating conflict and changing the cultural purposes of the avant-garde. In higher education art was interpreted as a training of "craft plus inspiration" (Rosenberg, 1972, p.47). Similarly, in public school, there

was a belief that a combination of familiarity with media and free self-expression would yield creative art from children (D'Amico, 1953).

A school art style emerged which emphasized certain technical and formal qualities. While Greenberg's formalism had concerned a vitality of medium and the control by form of aesthetic experience, the use of media in education was a process of physical manipulation for young children and the development of skill in using particular media for older students. Rather than the contemplation of artistic traditions, school practice focused upon an arbitrary concern with physical qualities such as paint, drips, and splashes. Knowledge was to emerge through an institutionalized form of play instead of through the historical study of media, form, and function.

Curriculum also contained a reduction of Rosenberg's expressive process to qualities which were assumed to represent the individual expression of "the child". Expression in school was shaped by definitions of what was considered natural and normal in children. While Rosenberg's notion of expression was an idiosyncratic process, school art involved a conception of psychological norms. Expression was reinterpreted from a statement of alienated discomfort to a procedure which provided an illusion of personal well-being.

The transformation of abstract expressionism in art education was not arbitrary. Art education has historically responded to the socialization and labor training functions of public schooling (Freedman, 1987a; Freedman & Popkewitz, in press). In the 1950's, curriculum supported and legitimated post-World War II institutional priorities of socialization and professional training through a focus upon nationalistic priorities. For example, as in the press, abstract expressionist artists were depicted as heroic figures who represented national values and policies of cultural authority. Educators defined the avant-garde as signifying the cultural supremacy of the United States.

Three important socializing mechanisms interacted within art education, and in some ways, legitimated a curriculum already in place. First, individualism was to develop in children a confidence in the correctness and independence of their actions and beliefs. Curriculum maintained that producing art was an act of autonomous expression without social or institutional mediation. Through this lens of individualism, the history of art was a culmination of individual acts of self-expression.

A second mechanism of socialization was the achievement of a certain conception of mental health through art activities. Art was to be therapeutically self-expressive in order to maintain a society without anti-democratic elements which were considered pathological. Art became an aid to develop a democratic, and therefore, healthy, personality in children (Freedman, 1987b).

However, rather than provide the rigorous analysis of a particular person's past experiences which occurred in psychotherapy, the school art style became a subtle form of social control. The style was not personal. Groups of school children were given the same assignments but were to make something expressing the individual and personal. Students are expected to express themselves through a generic freeing of mundane emotion for display in school. A manipulation of medium and certain formal developments were to denote expression and were assumed to represent the psychology of a child. Through the use of technical devices, such as bright colors and painterly brush-

strokes, school art supported the humanistic rhetoric of public education (Efland, 1976).

Interacting with the first two mechanisms was a third: the development of a faith in professional and scientific expertise. As a result of the war, there was a fear of the development of an authoritarian personality in children (e.g. Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson & Sanford, 1950). Direction from professional psychologists was to prevent this from occurring (e.g. Lowenfeld, 1947). The strain between a reverence for scientific structure and certitude and fears of dehumanization by science and technology provided support for the therapeutic perspective of school art during this period.

The transformation of the formal and expressive concerns of the art community helped to facilitate school practices. Art was represented as both objective (in relation to professional scientific interpretation and judgment) and subjective (characterized by the inner self of a mythological generic child). The shape of curriculum determined the meanings of the knowledge that supposedly made up its content.

Conclusion

The phenomenon of art education can be understood in the context of education. As school subjects are reconstructed for schooling, the communal relations of a field are filtered and redefined by the priorities of schooling. Historical analyses of various aspects of education indicate shifts in beliefs and values as theory and practice reinterpret and recontextualize each other (i.e. Franklin, 1976; Kliebard, 1979; Popkewitz, 1987).

The legacies of abstract expressionism remain important in school but are practiced outside of their historical context. Political and social structures of the period discussed, while still influential, have dramatically changed. The current reform effort to draw art education closer to the art community reflects some of these larger changes.

As we develop a new relationship between adult art and school art, the quality of that relationship must be attended to in a way that has not previously been reflected in art education. Too often, art has been decontextualized in school. It has been reduced in ways that respond to institutional agendas but which are contrary to the cultural importance of art making and understanding. While seeming innocuous or healthful, nationalistic beliefs about individual autonomy, professional expertise and the commodification of art have been focused upon at the expense of other vital issues and have become reified through curriculum. Art education should include a representation of the complex historical and social dynamics which provided the possibilities for art rather than allowing the current shift to merely lead us away from a subtle, but manipulative faith in psychology, toward a more crystallized representation of expertise as the standard for aesthetic judgment. Rather, the continual flux and debate of artistic production should be retained in school.

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