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ART EDUCATION IN THE TIME OF AIDS

PETER SCHELLIN

Motivation

The health crisis which in recent years has depleted the ranks of the art community, has not received much formal notice in art education journals. A continuing stigma remains attached to AIDS due to its appearance among gay men and IV drug users. Many people pretend it is not there. My own life has become consumed by it, due to the illness of many, many friends and associates. For nearly two years, because of the enormity of the crisis combined with relatively little action on state and federal levels and the mounting grief and loss in my own life, I began to feel that art education is a silly field contributing very little to society in general and contributing nothing to end this awful disease. I decided, despite my advanced age and status at the university, to work on a nursing degree and leave teaching, finger paint and clay to other people. In nursing, I found an advancing technological approach to treating human organisms, not human beings. Wanting to work with people, I switched to social work. In the meantime, I have been volunteering on the National AIDS Hotline, handling diverse crisis calls ranging from suicide threats to education about the virus and its effects. I have also volunteered to spend time with the dying at the Brownlie Hospice, in a move to do something else very concrete. I may still complete my MSW degree to work with PWAs (People with AIDS) as a professional social worker. Curiously, however, this mid-life career crisis has led to a re-evaluation of the importance of art and art education in the lives of every person I know including myself. As with the dying themselves, there seems little time for game playing and intellectual gymnastics. Our human limitations, our financial constraints and the unrelenting, destructive, lethal character of this particular virus, form a metaphor drawing attention to why we do what we do and why it matters.

History

The value of art in the curriculum has been the subject of debate in American schools since the time of Samuel H. Smith and the Massachusetts experiment.¹ When Puritan values were still dominant in this culture, art was part of a child's learning primarily for practical reasons, no different than learning various trades or gaining the skills required to run households and farms. The idea that art is a frill goes back to the days when quilt making and the drawing of patterns for sewing were considered luxuries.²

As America's Protestant values matured, art gradually gained prestige not only in the schools, but in society at large. By the mid-twentieth century, most art teaching had become an endless series of Friday after-recess project-making, although sometimes very aesthetic project making, without much intellectual underpinning or concern as to how art fits into the social, historical and political fabric. The emphasis on technique, however, especially among high school students, resulted in some wonderful art products. Nowadays, fewer art teachers but many art students, are still largely unaware of the history of art, its social functions, its political implications or its psychological impact. Some teachers and most students cannot separate art as product from art as process. They frequently do not understand the value of art lessons which do not produce art products.

Society at large remains skeptical about the value of art except as some remote and strange "stuff" that the wealthy can afford to collect and use as tax write-offs when they give it away to publically owned museums. As late as 1989, the application forms for entry to the MSW graduate program at a well-known Southern California university required computation of the entrant's GPA, specifically excluding grades received in studio art and physical education courses.³ When asked why, the clerk in the graduate school, stated, "Art and gym are recreational, not academic." This one example may be typical of general American attitudes despite the growing awareness that art and design pervade all aspects of our daily lives and often determine our reactions, thoughts and feelings. The level of visual and aesthetic sophistication among teenagers is sometimes quite profound, due partly to better teaching, more informed home environments and possibly even to the wonderland of television, cable, film and highly visual mass-media magazines, outdoor advertising and newspapers.

Better teaching about art has been given a boost by Disciplined Based Art Education (DBAE) primarily because, for the first time, art is being taught as an academic subject in an organized way, with factual information being learned in structured sequences. Art teachers can assert that they teach data on which objective tests can be written. These data include historical background, aesthetics and art criticism along with technical skills and other relevant bits of information. DBAE has given art education a patina of respectability among academics, but it has also created dissension among some art educators who feel that DBAE does not address what's really important about art, namely, its social context. Since DBAE is standardized and achievement oriented, some claim that it ignores the increasingly diverse cultural make-up of most American classrooms.⁴

A small number of writers in art education have called for an alternative approach, named "Cultural Literacy in Art Education (CLAE)" which would, they claim, better recognize the needs of minorities and multicultural students in the public schools by guiding students to decode personal cultural experience related to their own art products, the culture and the art of others. CLAE would not abandon training in criticism, art history or aesthetics. CLAE would, however, be a more personal and more inclusive approach, with less emphasis on goals, achievement and art products. It would be a much less standardized approach to education in the arts than is DBAE.⁵ And there's the rub: it must be acknowledged that CLAE would also depend on the flexibility, education, sensitivity and

intelligence of the individual teacher much more than DBAE does. Perhaps the greatest value of DBAE is that a teacher, relatively uneducated in the arts and methods for teaching art, can have some sense of success using its standardized formats.

But the question really ought to be asked: success at *what*? Is the purpose of art in the curriculum only to teach skills, facts, history, heritage, and social context *by rote*? Is the purpose of art in the curriculum to teach better citizenship or one's place in the social order or the impact of certain colors, lines and shapes on the psyche? Is the purpose of art in schools to foster creativity or conformity? Are we training future Picassos? Are we educating a generation for visual literacy to better appreciate what artists do or to oppose, with better information, the Jesse Helmses of the next century? Are we creating a group of connoisseurs to enrich the art community with wealth and social prestige for inflation's sake? Do we want a generation of people who are more sensitive to and demanding about everyday designs? Do we wish to have even bigger, better and richer publically controlled museums and museum programs for our evening and weekend entertainments? Do we want to encourage private collections? *Why are we teaching art?*

The need to give coherence and definition to the aesthetic area of education is urgent. Economic cutbacks and political reactivism have put arts education under considerable threat - however, some of the responses to this present crisis among arts educators themselves have been seriously misguided... The basis of their argument(s) is that their particular emphasis will allow the integration of the arts into the mainstream of the curriculum. I want to suggest that this is entirely to misconstrue the singular contribution that the arts could make to a child's general education - that the arts are different and that therein lies their strength.⁶

In addition, what can we learn from art in a time when thousands of people are jobless, filthy and sleeping in the streets? What is the *strength of art* in a time when possibly twenty per cent of all the children in America, and more than half the children in the world, go to bed starving? What's *important about art* in relation to the millions of people who go without medical attention in a country which seems to reserve ordinary, daily health for those who can afford to pay for it? What aspects, elements or *strengths* can be found in an *art curriculum* for a society which has been described as addictive, where almost every household is struggling with some form of abuse of alcohol, drugs, credit cards or food? And, while the government does next to nothing to stop it, possibly because the "right" people are dying, *what is the value of teaching art in the time of AIDS?* What are some of the metaphors for AIDS and the implications for art education of the AIDS epidemic?

A Reflection on Artistic Processes

One of my students completed an assignment to visit a museum and write a paper about one of the paintings she had seen. It wasn't enough for her to write the paper. She had to talk about it, not just to me, but to several of her friends. I overheard a conversation between them in which this relatively uneducated eighteen-year-old, who described herself as uncreative, a little dumb and "completely terrified about taking art in college," started expressing her feelings about a nineteenth century portrait of a young girl, sitting in her mother's lap after a bath, a typical work by Mary Cassatt which both she and I had admired in a local museum.

What I remember about her statements is not so much the words she used, but the tone in her voice. She was excited. She was enthusiastic. She said something about being surprised at herself for feeling that the painting was so important to her and that it had held her attention for so long and that she felt as though she knew the girl. Then she corrected herself. "No. I felt like I became the girl. I felt like I had lived there and I could feel my mother's hands drying me off. I was a part of the picture."

I turned the corner and caught her eyes as she wiped tears away, somewhat embarrassed. It was obvious that she was not trying to impress the teacher, but rather, she had had a truly moving experience. It taught her something about who she was becoming and about how she experiences the world. She had trouble expressing herself in words, I suspect because we have been trained to think in terms of static entities, not in terms of fluctuating processes. I tried to emphasize that the learning she had experienced was more profound than mere facts about the painter, the era, or the technique. "Maybe that's what art is really about," she said.

The above vignette is perhaps illustrative of those rare moments when we are moved through art by a profound identification. It is the exploration of such a *process* in a time of AIDS which I find, requires restating. In an age of specialists, art educators have often been both valued and devalued for being generalists. Elementary teachers and teachers of art may be the *last* generalists with degrees in liberal arts and global vision. Subject specialists may never desire to conceive the overall picture, being concerned mainly with the minute detail of their particular expertise. Art educators, however, possibly due to the unique character of art, learn to think inclusively, like painters, production designers or movie directors. Artists consider the whole. Every aspect of any lesson, like every aspect of a painting, a stage production or a film, must be arranged, or the overall outcome may feel incomplete. This may be due to the *experience* of making art as a *whole process*. However, neither of the newly defined approaches to the teaching of art (Disciplined-Based or Cultural Literacy) take into account the art process as the *transitory* experience of making and/or viewing art. But it is this transitory, fleeting experience in a time of AIDS, which is a constant reminder of my own finitude. The reason for this neglect may be that the major philosophical influence in contemporary art education theory, has been, and remains John Dewey. The history of art education is

filled with defenses of Dewey's democratic and inclusive idea of aesthetic experience as integral to complete concepts of human nature and the human condition.⁷ However, it is unrealistic to insist that the subject perceiving is central to an understanding of either art or the human condition; most contemporary aestheticians, especially those who are persuaded by reception aesthetics, no longer maintain this view. AIDS has vivified the fleeting experience of art. Mapplethorpe, an AIDS victim himself, has been declared a postmodern master. What does this say to us, as artists and educators? The compression of history, and time itself, provides an instantaneous verdict.

It is surprising that few art educators have picked up on the philosophical output of one of the last great generalists to publish in English, Alfred North Whitehead, whose rich writings explore what could be described as the human experiential equivalent of Einstein's theory of relativity. Whitehead's process philosophy seems so natural for art education. In contrast to traditional Western philosophy which views reality in terms of concreteness, permanence and uniformity, Whitehead defines reality by emphasizing change and novelty.⁸ Whitehead's reality is essentially historical, taking into account the continuing emergence of actual occasions ("things") with a past, becoming something new in a novel future.⁹ Static, traditional conceptions, like atoms as fundamental entities of the universe, are inadequate, according to Whitehead, for understanding the temporal nature of the universe which we experience as a process.¹⁰ Whitehead's process philosophy, as an adumbration of what was to come, remind us, again of the finitude of all things. We have come to a historical cross-roads where the permanency of things is greatly shaken. New metaphors are emerging to grasp this postmodern condition.

Four Images From Our Time

First: (The following event took place during the same time period as Martin Luther King's March on Washington for civil rights and the Woodstock Music Festival in upstate New York.) Around midnight on Friday, June 27, 1969, four police officers and a pair of detectives descended on a seedy gay bar in Greenwich Village and prepared to arrest patrons without ID's. Such raids were routine... but the atmosphere at the Stonewall Inn that night was antic, almost carnival. As the habitués -drag queens, leather(men) and assorted demimondaines- emerged in police custody, the gathering crowd cheered ... them on with cries of "We're the pink panthers..." A mobile chorus of transvestites mocked the police with impromptu cancons. But when a paddy wagon arrived on the scene, the mood turned ominous. Onlookers hurled beer cans and bottles at the windows, coins at the cops' heads... A burning garbage can was tossed inside (the Stonewall Inn)... Brush fires between cops and gays continued to break out for two more nights. Stonewall, which occurred twenty years ago...was the opening salvo in the fight for gay liberation.¹¹

Second: AIDS is not a disease, but a condition in the body resulting from the invasion of a virus which attacks the immune system and leaves the person open to a variety of rare illnesses. Several of these, alone or in combination, are often lethal. The virus is transmitted through blood, blood products, semen and vaginal secretions and possibly through other body fluids. The virus is not air-borne and dies quickly in the environment. In Africa and the West Indies, the virus took hold in the heterosexual population, but in Europe and the United States, it got a foothold among gay men where it appeared first in 1981. Since the beginning of the epidemic, the virus has killed 107,312 people. Sixty-seven per cent of these have identified as gay men. Many of these people, a majority of whom had not made public that they were gay, had been leaders in the popular and fine arts communities. The virus has now also spread among IV drug users by way of contaminated syringes; hemophiliacs and other people who had blood transfusions before March, 1985, are at risk and so are the sex partners and children of people in any of these groups. AIDS may not show up for years after infection. The virus does not discriminate between races, male and female or gay and straight. AIDS is simply a disease-like condition which progressively destroys the body's ability to fight off lethal infections. AIDS is now estimated to be affecting more than a million people in the United States, many of whom do not know they have it. The CDC believes that the virus may be spreading into the heterosexual community via bisexual men and prostitutes who use drugs. People with AIDS currently live longer due to treatment, but not enough is known about the virus. At present, there is no cure for AIDS. Most people with AIDS die within eighteen months of diagnosis.¹²

Third: In October, 1989, *The Quilt* was unrolled in Washington in its entirety for the last time because it has become too large to display in one place. It is a huge piece of folk art, made up of three by six foot panels designed and sewn together by survivors of people who have died of AIDS. The last unfurling filled the Ellipse. More Americans have now died from this epidemic than were killed in the Viet Nam War. *The Quilt* has been coordinated by the Names Project whose motto is "Remember Their Names." Each panel commemorates one person. Each is quite individual, sometimes incorporating personal items once owned by the person, such as items of clothing, or a favorite poem, embroidered with loving care by the maker of the panel. It has become a uniquely American memorial, starkly contrasting the solid and seemingly permanent memorials to those fallen in wars. While it may not be displayed all together again, *The Quilt* will continue to grow, offering both makers and observers an outlet for their bereavement and their love.

A Metaphor only for "today"

Viruses are not simply agents of infection and contamination. They transport genetic "information;" they transform cells and evolve. While the smallpox virus appeared to stay constant for centuries, influenza viruses evolve so rapidly that vaccines need to be modified every year to keep up

tables, in the same inn where his friends had earlier planned for a brighter future; he sings a lament:)

There's a grief that can't be spoken.
 There's a pain goes on and on.
 Empty chairs at empty tables.
 Now my friends are dead and gone.
 Here they talked of revolution.
 Here it was they lit the flame.
 Here they sang about tomorrow and tomorrow never came.
 From the table in the corner they could see a world reborn.
 And they rose with voices singing.
 I can hear them now.
 The very words that they had sung became their last communion
 On the lonely barricade at dawn!
 Oh my friends, my friends, forgive me
 That I live and you are gone.
 There's a grief that can't be spoken.
 There's a pain goes on and on.
 Phantom faces at the window.
 Phantom shadows on the floor.
 Empty chairs and empty tables
 Where my friends will meet no more.
 Oh, my friends, my friends, don't ask me
 What your sacrifice was for.
 Empty chairs and empty tables
 Where my friends will sing no more.¹³

A Metaphor only for "today"

Viruses are not simply agents of infection and contamination. They transport genetic "information;" they transform cells and evolve. While the smallpox virus appeared to stay constant for centuries, influenza viruses evolve so rapidly that vaccines need to be modified every year to keep up with changes in the "surface coat" of the virus. The virus or, more accurately viruses thought to cause AIDS, are at least as mutable as the influenza viruses. Indeed, "virus" is now a synonym for change. Linda Ronstadt, recently explaining why she prefers doing Mexican folk music to rock 'n' roll, observed: "We don't have any tradition in contemporary music except change. [It] [m]utates, like a virus..."¹⁴ Because of the countless metaphoric flourishes that have made cancer synonymous with evil, having cancer has been experienced by many as shameful, as something to conceal, as unjust, or as a betrayal by one's own body. With AIDS, the shame is linked to an imputation of guilt; and the scandal is not at all obscure. Few wonder, Why me?... Indeed, to get AIDS is precisely to be revealed, in the majority of cases, as a member of a certain "risk group," a community of pariahs. The illness flushes out an identity that might have remained hidden from neighbors, jobmates, family, friends.¹⁵ The medical discourse on AIDS shapes its

If the "rule of metaphor" is so powerful in representation, what does this mean to the art educator in a time of AIDS? By objectifying students' own feelings and values, art educators, like the artists who create metaphors in the first place, are in the business of clarifying who we are, as individuals and as groups. While values clarification has this therapeutic and cultural outcome, the beginning of the quest is a personal, aesthetic encounter. The quest for self-knowledge and the identification of values is the result of the curious, intimate and unceasing activity of the artist. That, in turn, transcends the particular circumstances of both the art and the observer-participant. Transcendence, that sense of being "moved" or taken into another time and space, as my story recounts, is a signal that some kind of transformation is taking place, a transformation which leaves people permanently changed. It is in this sense that art is a way of knowing. The elicitation of such powerful emotions through artistic representations, it must be understood, works both ways. In a time of AIDS it can provide the public, through images in newspapers, magazines, film and television, a representation of AIDS victims as deviants who deserve their fate, much as the moral majority might argue, or other representations might reveal the suffering and struggle of life as that which is common to all of humanity, regardless of sexual preferences, gender, color. In a time of AIDS, I feel it is these transcendent aspects of human worth which require a reminder.

The religious overtones injected into my description, through the use of a word like "transcendence," are not an overstatement. Scholars generally agree that what art does, religion, in the broadest sense of the word, also does.¹⁶ With almost childlike innocence, people, deeply experiencing either the art or religious process, welcome the new and the unusual. Both the aesthetic process and the worship process yield collectively created frames of perception and meaning by which we interpret and order our experiences through separating and distancing ourselves. Aesthetic and spiritual processes each function to objectify and clarify what we would not and cannot assimilate from direct experience. Ceremony and ritual function like the art process, transcending the temporal and introducing us to a new time and space which we cannot know through any other means or in any other way.¹⁷

No one teaching art, ought ever to ignore the process just described simply because it is what makes art unique; yet no theoretical approach in art education is rooted in it. Methods for clarifying values, like "aesthetic scanning" in DBAE, imply that DBAE teaches students what makes art important. However, the great strength of the experience of art, unlike anything else in the world, is the personal and intimate way individuals interact with it. The Discipline-Based approach allows nearly any intelligent teacher to teach art because of its standardized, goal oriented objectives. It must be extremely difficult, by necessity, ever to be very personal or intimate using standardized objectives. The whole idea of intimacy, and thus, the whole idea of what art is about, is excluded from such objective solutions. In a time of AIDS such programs cannot possibly speak to the need for a compassionate representation. CLAE, on the other hand, encourages personal decoding and other intense encounters with art media and art products, especially within the contexts which produced and used them. That is certainly better than standardized formats, but look what we

sacrifice when we try so hard to be thoroughly academic in our self-conscious strutting of hard curriculum ahead of the one quality about art which makes it what it is, and makes it so important! Especially in the time of AIDS, it is urgent that we come out boldly and confidently about the significance of intimacy in art, as if to defy that lethal virus which flushes out everything that used to stay hidden in our private lives. Douglas Crimp's recent edited book, *AIDS: Cultural analysis, cultural activism* (1988) presents an overview of the sorts of sympathetic representation and activism necessary in a time of AIDS.

During crises like earthquakes and plagues, one discovers that many simple absolutes are no longer true. Engineering can fail; solid ground can liquify; muscular, seemingly healthy young men can drop dead overnight from the effects of an invisible virus contracted ten years before; acts of love can become lethal; doctors can admit out loud that there is nothing to be done. In the time of AIDS, it has become plainly obvious that medicine is not the cure-all and doctors are not the gods we once thought. Drugs, which used to be magical, are now thought to be dangerous and sometimes destructively addictive. The time of AIDS has reversed so many things, turning them upside down, flushing out identities that in other times might have remained hidden.

One of these identities is that of the *healer*.¹⁸ It was assumed, when we were children, that if you wanted to be a healer, you studied chiropractic or medicine and became a doctor or a nurse. Likewise, if you wanted to deal with the spiritual or the transcendent, you studied religion, especially mystical asceticism, Buddhist meditation and the lives of people like Julian of Norwich and Saint John of the Cross. But in the time of AIDS, healers can be found in every profession. Some people in medicine have no idea what healing is about, and some people, even in art education, spend their lives healing. Healing used to mean that the disease was arrested and you got to live in your own body on this side of the River Styx. But in the time of AIDS, healing has come to mean "going in peace," either here or beyond, either in this body or whatever form comes next, if any. Healing has come to mean, "issues and values clarified," and "angers put to rest." In this sense, the arts can be more significant for healing than any drug or surgical procedure, and many times more transforming. We can be strengthened by them. We can be reassured through them that we are not alone. We can experience who we have been and who we are becoming because of the arts.¹⁹ We cannot, however, continue to gloss over the unique element which makes art itself and the teaching of art so dynamically healing and important.

In the broadest sense of the terms, art and education in the arts can heal AIDS. It will be through personal encounter with images and metaphors, recreated and universalized by artists from the horrors of the AIDS epidemic, that finally, as with other great tragedies, all humankind will not only understand what has happened, but will be able to assimilate it into consciousness. Doctors and social workers may administer to immediate medical and social needs, but only art heals in this sense, and the healing happens as a result of sensitive and intense intimacy.

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Footnotes

- 1 Logan, pp. 14-15.
- 2 *ibid.*, p. 17.
- 3 Instructions for the application for a *master of social work*, California State University, Long Beach, June, 1989.
- 4 Boyer, pp. 58-59.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 Ross, p.1.
- 7 Munro, p. 4.
- 8 Mellert, p. 21.
- 9 *ibid.*, pp. 22-5.
- 10 *ibid.*, pp. 26-7.

11 *Newsweek Magazine* (1989). July 3, p. 56.

12 AIDS data and definitions compiled from the statistics issued at the Center for Disease Control, Atlanta, October, 1989, and from AIDS Project Los Angeles, *AIDS: A self-care manual* (1987), Santa Monica: IBS.

13 Boubliil, Alain and Schönberg, Claude-Michel's (1986), *Les Misérables*, a musical adaptation of Victor Hugo's novel by Cameron Mackintosh, lyrics by Herbert Kretzmer, produced by Royal Shakespeare Company Production, London.

14 Sontag, p. 69.

15 *ibid.*, pp. 24-5.

16 Broudy, pp. 42-4.

17 Martland, p.159.

18 *Ibid.*

19 Pearson, pp. 132-5.

20 Brownowski, pp. 106-7.

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