

Who Needs It: A Review
of Instant Art Instant Culture

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Laura Chapman's book, Instant Art Instant Culture: The Unspoken Policy for American Schools, Teachers College Press, New York, 1982, was difficult to review. I found that while I generally agreed with what was written at the same time I had an uncomfortable feeling. I came to the conclusion that Chapman dealt with the symptoms well but those symptoms together indicate a different disease than the one she diagnosed. This review will be from the standpoint of the visual arts alone, it will be critical of an important and useful book, and also of a profession which is more important than it seems to know.

Chapman has a big subject; how art is taught in the public schools, what is wrong with that teaching, the myths about art and art teaching, why art is not given greater support in public schools, and finally what could be done to alter the teaching of art and to raise public awareness and support for art. If in some places this review seems about other than what is in the book, or what is not said strongly enough, it is because of the largeness of the subject and because the specific contents have already been well documented in prior reviews. *(Crisis in Education)*

There are children and some serious teachers being hurt ultimately not because of lack of support from the outside but because of the practices, attitudes, and ideas of those in the art professions. Chapman's is a good and useful book, but it does not forcefully enough recommend a solution which goes to the root of the problem.

Serious support for the visual arts will not, and should not come until the root cause of the problem, the lack of congruence between our real and existing culture and the "visual arts," is acknowledged and to some degree lessened by those of us who are professionally involved in the arts. There is no need for culture-wide support for the visual arts in education because they do not have culture-wide meaning or function as they are now often

conceived and taught. Chapman recognizes that current teaching in the visual arts does not serve a wide enough need but what she recommends would not solve the major problem.

Chapman suggests the visual arts form a major part of a triad of subject areas which together with communication and calculation skills should form the major content of all public school curriculum, she writes in her introduction:

"I have cited the arts, sciences, and humanities (referring to social studies) as broad fields of study which, in addition to mathematics and the practical use of language, ought to be required in the general education of all students in elementary and secondary school."

This would seem to place the visual arts on at least an equal basis with other elements in education: indeed it would to the minds of the modern liberal middle class. This is deceptive for while the liberal middle class still has a modern mythos we are now in a post-modern world. "Modern" now refers to a period and a period style. The truth that art is expressive of what is valued by individuals and cultures was transformed in the myth of modernism to mean that artists (and art teachers) are value leaders, that they have a unique capacity and responsibility for what is good. I can't help but feel Laura Chapman believes this herself at some level. The artist-teacher assumes the role of teaching what is good (for you) or filtering the good from the bad (whether it is art or students). This puts the artist and the art teacher squarely in the role of identifying, nurturing and elevating a narrow range of artifacts, and a few people. Everyone's needs as indicated by everyone's desires, culture, and the needs of functioning groups are not uniformly considered. Myth serves to justify the categorization and degradation of people.

A more useful view of art is as simply something people do: it is one of the defining human characteristics like language or the thumb. The visual arts have had and will have, a fundamental role in many aspects of life as useful, entertaining, and expressive. Like language, visual thinking is value neutral to be used for good, bad, gain, fear, seduction or release. To elevate art too far and give it a priori moral function, to

see it in only a judgmental manner is often to destroy it.

An artist may use art for moral purpose, socially or in its own terms, but that should be the artist's choice. No onus should be put upon choosing not to do so just as we might choose to write a note, a poem, or a memo with equal morality. The notion that all art and "good design" should serve some purifying ideal may have been necessary in a Western culture which needed to accommodate to industrialization and which was becoming mass society. It has much less justification in the pluralistic culture of post-modern times. The artist and teacher who clings to the modern myth does not fight elitism. By playing a role in this outdated mythos the artist makes elites.

It is still often conceived that to be an artist or art teacher one should be involved with what to value: to suggest otherwise or to indicate that visual organization could be used for other functions is somehow to be corrupt. Artists and teachers easily become champions for an exclusivist use of their craft.

The other two components of the triad - science, partly via technology, and social studies via what they teach about people and institutions - are involved in all of life, work and leisure. They teach concepts and skills useful to all sorts of people for all sorts of reasons. We associate the arts with valuing - often someone else's valuing, but not with something "useful" - and relegate it to leisure, specifically to that part of leisure which is good for you but which you get over as quickly as possible so you can get on to the real fun.

Both the sciences and social studies are interconnected with the basic skills of communication and computation. They require the use of speaking, reading, and calculating and they can be used as vehicles to teach speaking, reading and calculating. The visual arts as they are now conceived do not and can not. Again this revolves around the idea of valuing. Math teachers teach math, one does not often hear of their avoiding less able students, or concentrating on the abstract purity of numbers theory, much as they might like to do those things. They teach math to students who will figure their taxes, build bombs, or whatever. A broadly based approach to visual understanding would need and involve skills as basic as reading or math. The

greatest part of the elementary schools' responsibility to the visual arts part of education involves developing visual and perceptual skills necessary for the understanding and organization of meaningful form by whatever conceptual, illusionistic or symbolic means are appropriate, and for the discovery of meanings visually manifested. Those skills are necessary to organize and communicate great quantities of information with the economy necessary in our world. Consider the amount of information available in that visual document, the road map. Maps, charts, graphs, non-commercial and commercial graphics all require visual skills to make and use and all are essential to most people in our pluralistic society. Children need to become aware of the subtleties of visual rhetoric if they are to deal with the mass of information and propaganda in media. People need sophisticated visual skills even if they never make a pot or enter a museum. Chapman correctly argues for an approach to art education which is developmental, sequential and integrated, and which involves professionals and sophisticated support materials at all levels.

Although it should also form a part of the primary program Chapman's recommendation for inclusion of or greater emphasis on art appreciation and history would have greatest impact on the secondary level. She goes so far as to suggest that a studio background is not the only, or even necessarily the best preparation for the art teacher. It is true that the studio courses art education students take normally require great amounts of time to impart relatively narrow content, and many studio instructors on the college level are only dimly aware of the larger questions in art beyond their medium and time. This problem is compounded for public school teachers who have less time for a particular subject and whose teachers are likely even less knowledgeable about art in a broad sense. It would certainly be reasonable to balance studio projects with art appreciation and history through which differing visual concepts may be presented more rapidly and possibly more objectively.

To give a meaningful exposure to art appreciation the art teachers would need a knowledge and capacity for objectivity which few programs in art education now offer or foster. Many among those who teach studio

courses and control programs in art education still believe that art teachers, critics, historians, theoreticians and even applied artists exist in a parasitical relationship to the fine arts. Future art teachers would need exposure which is broad enough and deep enough to counter the Renaissance, Modern and fine artists biases which pervade many art and art education programs. For the Renaissance myth of the specialness of the artist and the modern one that art in its purity is a vehicle to either a classless society or for the identification of those with refined sensibilities must be broken if we are to have public school art programs that serve culture-wide and not just groups within the culture. By progressively separating themselves from a broad cultural base and by championing a reductivist fine arts position art teachers often find themselves valuing concepts of art higher than people. It is not clear that there is any distinction in the quality of feeling one has before a Hudson River landscape, a new van, an engraved shotgun, a lithograph of ducks coming into a pond or a Mark Rothko. I am sure that having feelings for one of these and not another has nothing to do with the quality of a person.

Consider the client. In what ways will the people the public school students become need the visual arts and visual skills. A few of them will become art professionals including those entering the fields of art teaching, design (graphic and industrial), fine arts, connoisseurship, architecture and museum work. Of this group a small part, those becoming fine artists, is served best by current practice and even they would benefit by the adoption of Chapman's recommendations as would most of the others. However even the larger group of potential art professionals will not be well served by art in public schools unless the modern myth is broken so that teachers and designers do not see themselves as secondary to the fine artist.

For a second group of art connected professionals Chapman's suggestions are less important. This group would include those who use visual skills in their occupations. It would include among others: people in advertising and marketing, anthropology and archeology, planners, theater people, and

decorators. Most of these people need to understand visual thinking from an analytic and cross cultural standpoint. It is particularly important that fine arts biases be broken so that they would benefit from Chapman's recommendations, for them to be really served much more must be done. While these people will not be artists the understanding they need in the visual arts is both broad and deep.

The art amateurs - collectors, museum goers, craft oriented people, Sunday artists - are served by current practice so long as they make things, but not served so well if they mostly look at things. Chapman's suggestions would improve circumstances for all these people.

If all the above three categories of clients for the visual arts programs in the public schools were taken together they still would represent only a fraction of those needing education in our society. The largest group that needs visual skills and knowledge are those people who need those skills as voters, concerned citizens, people decorating their homes, people trying to deal with what the media flings at them, people caught up in the conflict of images in a heterogeneous world. These people, just about everyone, have some use for and some reason to expect that our public schools will have a program in the visual arts which seriously attempts to impart the basic visual skills and understanding of how we express thoughts in and understand visual symbols. If the growing necessity for visual expertise was known and was associated with programs in the visual arts and if it were met with some degree of objectivity we could expect much more support for the arts in the public schools.

More importantly, those of us in the arts could rehumanize the visual arts by being more useful and more accepting.