A SOCIALLY RELEVANT ART EDUCATION

Lanny Milbrandt

Wichita State University

"Plato...implied that a society is sensitized and influenced well by every sight and sound of beauty; he compared the effect to that of a pure breeze blowing across a good land." (Schinneller, 1961, p. 5) The foregoing statement may imply that a society is shaped in its responsive aesthetic dimensions through interactions with the arts.

What is it that we are about, our raison d'etre? In these times of survival concerns, it is often all too easy, or perhaps convenient, to find ourselves totally submerged in the local and pragmatic affairs of teaching art lessons to youngsters. Perhaps a consideration of what our potential might be, in its broadest sense, could serve to focus our attention again on those goals that extend the significance of art education.

I would contend that our mission is nothing less than to change the valuing structure of a whole society. To be an agent for change in society we must see art education as having a role in the social growth of the individual and of society itself. When viewed in those terms we find that the goals of art education simply coincide with the goals of American education, and the case for art education must be argued within the larger context of education generally.

There may be a tendency for art teachers to address local problems and to ignore overarching concerns such as the relationship of art education to larger issues of social responsibility. Questions regarding the potential of art education to affect the growth of the individual and the society must be considered.

Individual and social change: an interactive view

One of the most distinguished authors to have considered this matter is Sir Herbert Read:

> The purpose of education can then only be to develop, at the same time as the uniqueness, the social consciousness or reciprocity of the individual...the individual will inevitably be unique...it may be a unique way of seeing thinking, of inventing,...in that case, one man's individuality may be of incalculable benefit to the whole of humanity. (1974, p. 5)

The communication of individual meaning, its exchange, is the process through which the social development of the person, and more widely, that of the community and the society occurs. All that is touched beyond self by the uniqueness of the self induces social development.

This integrative view of man functioning uniquely and at the same time organically with the whole of society (or even in a larger context, the universe) is a visual of man provided by creative shapers such as Oskar Schlemmer and R. Buckminster Fuller. In his syllabus for the Bauhaus, (Subject of Instruction: Man), Schlemmer defines man as:

> A cosmic being, a world totality...the things of the visible world acquire an intellectual meaning for the artist only when they are freed from their isolated objectivity and are viewed cosmically...together with man and the whole world. (Kuchling, 1971, p. 23)

Schlemmer was indeed concerned with the societal, and even more than that, the world- or universe-wide function of man expressing and experiencing the visual world artfully. This consideration of the social import of individual uniqueness has been treated from the point of view of art education as being a socializing force in the process of growth and communication. Barkan recognized this socializing aspect:

> The aesthetic object, when appreciated, bears a social responsibility because it can be appreciated only as it is socially shared and socially sharable...aesthetic experience becomes an avenue for social interaction. It is a significant way for children to share each others experiences. (1955, p. 64) [Author's emphasis]

In fact, it is most difficult for children not to share, in a social way, their expressive forms of child art. Children's paintings, drawings, and other art forms are available to their fellows. The art products of children are easily shared. Because of the visual nature of art products, they offer a natural vehicle for interpersonal communication. School art products are organically a socializing medium.

> Lowenfeld considers the socializing process of art education: Social Growth, or the increasing ability to live cooperatively in his society is one of the factors of greatest significance in human development... This inclusion of the self and others in his creative work, this sensitive identification with his own and their needs, is most important for the awakening of social consciousness. (Silverman, 1972, p. 68)

Socially responsive visual communication

That art is a means of communication is recognized: the communicative function of art provides the locomotion for social growth through art education. As a visual language system, or symbol system, art has the capacity to communicate, to create exchange, to provide for interpersonal contact. Art education has the potential to order its objectives in such a way that interpersonal and intercultural communication may be a reality. McFee addresses this point when she states, "Art is a major language system of society. Through art man can share his experience with other men, and groups of men can communicate their shared values and attitudes, their culture, with other groups of men." (1970, p. 49) Beyond merely communicating existent values and attitudes, perhaps a more important poential for

art education is that social change might be provided for. The recognition that the expressive potential of art as more than a reiteration of the existing condition of man implies the entering in of the imagination and a questioning of what the condition of man might be. It's all too easy to negate the present conditions of life, but the more useful social purpose of art education would be to communicate what might be. Eisner feels it is the special attributes of art that promote in man the sensitivities necessary for a qualitative and imaginative existence: "The work of art remakes the maker". (1972, p. 282) If the meaning of his statement can be given a larger social significance beyond the individual, one might conclude that a sensitive and imaginative society would develop from artistic, imaginative, and creative activities of its collective of individuals.

The restrictions to social exchange may also be noted as they appear in education today. A restrictive element in art curricula may be the extreme specialization that course proliferation has caused. This factor of specialization has made itself felt in most facets of our society. In academia, scholars have difficulty at times understanding one another, even within the same discipline. In vocational roles, the working man often has little understanding of his fellows, whose functions are different because of intense specialization. One wonders if a renaissance man is possible today. Certainly we cannot be fluent in all the specialized communication systems but we may find a potential in art education that fosters expression not bound by severe specialization.

The socializing function of art education permits the student to not only share with his fellows the responses of his individuality, but it also provides the individual with opportunities to respond to (in social awareness) his contacts with artifacts of the society at large, whatever they may be and wherever they are to be found, from both historical and contemporary times. There develops a confluence of the temporal aspects of social meanings in art. (Hausman, 1965, p. 142)

Art education, a qualitative change agent

Art education provides for the recognition and understanding of other cultures as well as our own, for understanding of what is, and for consideration of what might be. This awareness is part of the social growth of the student of art. F. Graeme Chalmers writes of the enculturation of youth:

> Because the school is concerned with transmission, conservation, and extension of culture, it cannot ignore the arts -- because art is a medium that transmits the cultural heritage, maintains certain cultural values, and indirectly effects cultural change and improvement. (1974, p. 21)

The democratic political state tries to provide for access of all its citizens to the opportunities for excellence, and to give some representation to all its citizens in the determination of what they will value. (Feldman, 1970, p. 53) The very fact that, theoretically, the people have something to say about the shape of their society is the very reason that art education is so vital. Let us hope they are equipped to shape our environment -- our whole society -- with sensitivity and vision.

Concern for the qualitative aspects of social development brings one to fundamental concepts regarding the responsibility of the individual and of the educational system. Art education provides the avenue for personal, interpersonal, cultural, and social values to be transmitted and developed. It is the expressive and communicative properties of this symbol system that enable us to recognize and reveal ourselves to that which is beyond ourselves.

Apropos to this concern, Gardner interprets a theological point made by Paul Tillich as having the following implications:

> The seemingly contradictory requirements of self-affirmation and commitments beyond the self are most nearly resolved when man sees himself as reflecting a larger harmony, as a bearer of the creative process of the universe, as a microcosmic participant in the creative process of the macrocosm. (1964, p. 93)

Conclusion

In view of the foregoing arguments for art education in a social context one might ask: do art educators bear a responsibility for the shaping of a society? If one agrees that such a responsibility is within our jurisdiction, the next question must be: what is our potential sphere of influence and activity in this realm of responsibility and how do we get on with the job? Art educators must develop a commitment to socially responsive goals and take active roles to enable those goals to be realized.

One must question on what grounds art education will continue to exist. If it exists narrowly as a self-serving entity, unresponsive to society's needs, it most certainly will appear as an unnecessary appendage to the broader spectrum of education.

Those populations that are potentially accessible to art educators deserve better than to remain semiliterate in expressing or deriving meaning from the visual experiences provided by their environment. Provision for a visually literate society must be grounded in rationale derived from, and attendant to, a comprehensive general education.

The promise of art education is nothing less than contributing to the development of a world of grace and beauty; a world with a responsive and attuned citizenry judging and shaping the aesthetic significance of the visual impacts upon them. Only as this occurs will Plato's contentions that a society is positively affected by aesthetic interactions be recognized as a valued orientation for our succeeding generations.

References

Barkan, M. A foundation for art education. New York: Ronald Press, 1955.

Chalmers, F. A cultural foundation for education in the arts, Art Education. January 1974, 27(1), 21.

Eisner, E. W. Educating artistic vision. New York: Macmillan, 1972.

Feldman, E. B. Becoming human through art. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970.

Gardner, J. W. Self renewal. New York: Harper & Row, 1964.

Hausman, J. J. (Ed.). Report of the commission on art education. Washington, D.C.: National Education Association, 1965.

Kuchling, H. (Ed.). Oskar Schlemmer man. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The M.I.T. Press, 1971.

McFee, J. K. Preparation for art (2nd ed.). Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Company, Inc., 1970.

Read, H. Education through art. New York: Pantheon Books, Random House, 1974.

Schinneller, J. Art: search and self discovery. Scranton: International Textbook Company, Inc., 1961.

Silverman, R. H. A syllabus for art education. Los Angeles: The Foundation, California State University, 1972.

CONCEPTUAL ART AND THE CONTINUING QUEST FOR A NEW SOCIAL CONTEXT

Robert Morgan

Rochester Institute of Technology

In order to understand the meaning of artistic products, we have to forget them for a time, to turn aside from them and have recourse to the ordinary forces and conditions of experience that we do not usually regard as aesthetic. We must arrive at the theory of art by means of a detour (Dewey, 1934).

In challenging the notion of formalist aesthetic taste during the late sixties, a scattered group of artists, centered primarily in New York City, began to reveal the wider implications of art which had been largely ignored by galleries and museums. Their efforts suggested that objects made and distributed within a somewhat limited art context become part of a much larger social context; that, although art reflects the concerns of a society at a particular time and through a particular artist's interpretation, its attachment to that society is eminently clear. Whether art works exist in the form of objects, installations, propositions, or events, they have the power to effect and to be effected by the social structure which attributes meaning to them.

A decade ago, conceptual artists became the new mediators between information and culture. They chose to create statements instead of objects. These statements were presented in the form of language which translated their intentions into ideas. Language was also a vehicle of criticism for evaluating the content, often depleted, in the production of art objects. This further involved the task of examining the role of art in relation to the social and political structure--whether or not this structure was a conscious part of the work in terms of formal intent.

In retrospect, conceptual art may be seen as a polemic gesture--a series of attacks which disturbed the seemingly rational aesthetics of critics who sought to dictate formal taste as historical fact. The subtle incentives which dealers began to impose upon artists as a result of these criteria--beginning with the advent of abstract expressionism as big business--was mistakenly correlated with substantive aesthetic value. Regardless of how abstract these images appeared or how much raw emotion was displayed, they ultimately became symbolic representations of a lucrative and powerful social investment which needed the reinforcement of aesthetic taste.

The alternative, for the conceptualists, was to induce a form that could exist beyond the necessity of object-making altogether. Form might then be evaluated in platonic terms, that is, in its pure idea state, without the interference of conventional containers (objects) that were presumed to hold sensory and/or formal qualities. The Modernist complicity between viewer, critic, and object could be replaced by recalling attention to the artist's mode of inquiry. The viewer's patience or