

Summary of
TOWARDS A MODEL FOR
CONSIDERING THE SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF ART

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The purpose of this paper is to suggest development of a model for examining the social functions of art with the goal that art educators might better understand and value that dimension of human activity. In recent decades individuality, self-expression, and creativity have reigned supreme to the neglect of other dimensions of art important to human welfare-- functions important to maintaining the group. The more recent valuing of art of the culturally diverse and the importance of art to groups such as Blacks, Chicanos, the elderly, and others has suggested that art educators need to understand how art functions in a social sense if that dimension of human behavior is to receive its educational due. To understand the nature and structure of art's social functions we need more precise research constructs and tools than currently exist.

Among art educators, June McFee (1966, 1970) has recognized the importance of subculture social values as a key determinant of children's perceptions, and thus a force to be reckoned with in education. Chalmers (1978, 1981) has also recognized the importance of a culture's artifacts in maintaining its values and has likened art education to ethnology or how art functions in the enculturation process. Useful as these studies are in pointing to the important social and cultural uses of art in the education of people, we need a more systematic approach to researching the social functioning of art if the social uses of art are to be more than conjecture. As a step towards the empirical study of art's social functioning a framework for study is suggested.

"Social", when it has been used in the study of art, has often referred to art and ideology (Fischer, 1963), the sociology of knowledge (Morris, 1947), the sociology of culture, (Antal, 1947) or the social history of art, (Hauser, 1951). In Mukerjee's (1948) The Social Function of Art, written from a Freudian-Jungian perspective, the unconscious forces of the mind are considered to be similar among all people and thus recorded in myths, archetypes, symbols and images in art; this he considers the scientific foundation of a comparative sociology of art. However, until we have established a firmer understanding of the nature and structure of the social functions of art through empirical research, Mukerjee's approach seems rather limiting to the production of new knowledge and understandings. Silbermann's ideas (1968) seem more plausible in that he suggests that the sociology of art be built upon the assumption that the arts, and how they are experienced by society, form a continuous social process involving the interaction between artist and a social-cultural environment, resulting in the creation of works. These arts are in turn received and reacted upon by that environment. The reception-reaction of a public to art, in effect, involves both social and psychological constructs in its study. It is within this general

context that the wedding of sociology and psychology offers a reasonable course in determining the social functioning of art, particularly from the structural-functionalist view that phenomena such as art serve the essential nature of living systems. Psychological systems serve individual goal-seeking activity, while social systems serve more of a pattern-maintaining and integrative function. The systems operate so to adapt human functioning to an evolving and changing environment.

Parsons (1951) sets a view of interaction and social systems within a comprehensive theory of action in which it is assumed that meaningful motivations and goal-directedness operate. Based on the work of several sociologists, Parsons (1967, 1977) has developed a four-fold classification of function which deals with the essential nature of all living systems. It is, I believe, within such a comprehensive system combining both social and psychological theory that the social functioning of art can be examined most fruitfully, since society is, after all, composed of acting individuals.

The major elements of a rationale for studying the social functions of art, based on the work of Parsons, include the following: (1) Individuals interact according to a structured, ordered interactive process. (2) The key element in the integration of an interactive system is the shared basis for a normative order. A symbolic system provides a value system establishing stabilizing elements by defining desirable and undesirable lines of action. (3) The normative culture becomes internalized in the personalities of individuals and institutionalized in collectivities. The normative culture serves to control actions by moral authority. (4) Normative culture is encoded in cognitive, expressive, and evaluative symbols. (5) The normative culture establishes roles, a set of expectations according to which one acts. (6) The determination of functions, roles, rewards, and the very structure of the social system is the cumulative result of individual selections, reinforced by institutionalized value patterns legitimizing commitment to certain selections within the framework of sanctions and rewards. (7) When the symbols constitute the role expectations of the social system they function in a social sense; they perform social functions. (8) A social system continually interacts with the environment both in terms of internal-external interactions and in terms of a time dimension. These axes characterize the social system's interactions with the environment. (9) Social systems interact with the environment in terms of the four-function paradigm, with symbolic systems serving to orient individual and group behavior. (10) In this way art as a symbolic system serves to: maintain culture patterns; obtain social goals; integrate the system; and act as an adaptive mechanism to social-environmental relationships.

How, then, does one go about obtaining data relating to the social functioning of art? And, what analyses will allow one to draw conclusions regarding the nature and degree of social functions being served? Initial exploratory investigations would be followed by hypotheses grounded in descriptive and correlative results. Data would need to be obtained from the following areas: (1) A careful description and structural analysis of the group or groups being studied. Various sociological dimensions may be pertinent to group description, such as ethnicity, socio-economic class, social roles, religion, politics, occupations, and value and belief patterns. (2) Cultural forms including visual and related arts. A description and

documentation of the art would be followed by inquiries on sources of imagery, whether traditional or of recent origin, whether containing social referents or of an idiosyncratic nature. Also, how are objects used and by whom? Analyses by types of reality reflected in the cognitive orientations of art--common, normative, archaeologic, prophetic--could be useful, (Kreitler and Kreitler, 1972). Gotshalk's (1962) functions of art--aesthetic, recreational, therapeutic, commercial, educational and commemorative--could be a starting point for the functional analysis. (3) A Study of artists. Do they come from particular strata of the group? How are they trained? Professionals, amateurs? How supported? (4) Societal reactions to art and artists. How do members value art forms, and what reasons do they give? To what dimensions do they react? Rating scales, semantic differential techniques, and grouping techniques would be useful in assessing reception of and reaction to art forms. Information on these areas obtained by both psychological and sociological techniques could provide a basis for developing hypotheses relating to the social functioning of art as an interactive process of art, individual, and social group. Elements from Parsons' theories should be seen as guidelines in developing an empirical sociology of art, including the social functions of art, rather than as prescriptive. We may well find that, as Gotshalk (1962) suggests, art may serve a number of nonaesthetic individual and group needs, while maintaining a central aesthetic function as well. In a comparative sense, there may be greater similarities than differences among social and ethnic groups' reactions to art, as indicated in a recent study (Neperud & Jenkins, 1982).

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