

FOR CULTURAL DEMOCRACY:
A CRITIQUE OF ELITISM IN ART EDUCATION

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In the spirit of the poet and art critic, Charles Baudelaire, the essay which follows is "partial, passionate, and political." As such, it stands in direct contrast to the kind of critical writing the poet decried, "cold [and] mathematical which, on the pretext of explaining everything has neither love nore hate, and voluntarily strips itself of every shred of temperament." (1846)

To its credit, Ralph A. Smith's (1981) passionate argument for elitism in art education, "Elitism Versus Populism: A Question of Quality," elicited from me an equally partial and passionate response. This response focuses on Dr. Smith's essay and the Reagan administration's arts policy position because, taken together, they are the clearest and most unequivocal defenses of elitist art education policy that this writer knows.

It should be noted that the introductory section of this essay appeared as a "Commentary" in the November, 1981 issue of Art Education.

Introduction

After reading a good deal about the Reagan administration's proposed arts policy, I was a bit shaken to discover a strikingly Reagan-like art education policy espoused in the front pages of the July, 1981 issue of Art Education. Was it possible that the nationwide rise of political and cultural conservatism was finding its way into the ranks of our own profession? Over the years, I had come to know art educators as persons of generally liberal persuasion, but here was philosophy and rhetoric to match the best of the Reagan arts advisors. The article causing my surprise was "Elitism Versus Populism: A Question of Quality." The writer was Ralph A. Smith, Executive Secretary of the Council for Policy Studies in Art Education, a group which seeks to promulgate and assess policy for the profession.

In the past I had seen Smith take what I would call liberal positions on certain issues. For example, his opposition to competency-based education as a dehumanizing, technocratic form of training, not education. What I had not realized at the time was the conservative, elitist nature of Smith's basic philosophy of art education, especially his view as to what constitutes correct content for our discipline (Smith, 1981). The shock of full recognition did not strike home until

I had read over and over again the remarkably similar positions held by Smith and the Reagan arts advisors, and then put both to the litmus test of asking, "What does all this mean in terms of the real world?" The answer was clear in both cases: the startling elimination of popular, folk, ethnic, applied, social, and political art as cultural forms worthy of federal support and art teaching, respectively. Based on the intellectual justifications provided by the Reagan arts advisors and Smith, the place of the popular or "people's arts" in the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and in the schools, museums, and community arts centers of this country would be severely reduced, or eliminated. Fine or "high" art would reign supreme. In fact, it would be the primary--or possibly the only--form of art which would be federally funded and, following Smith's philosophy, taught in art education settings nationwide. What such philosophy and practice represents is a conservative, elitist, and historically reactionary response to the "expansion arts" ¹ developed under the Carter administration (Kramer, 1980), and the significant cultural advances made in art education over the past decade.² The Women's Caucus, Committee on Minority Concerns, United States Society for Education through Art, the Social Theory Caucus, and Environmental Design and Rural Art Educators special interest groups--all products of the last decade--should take serious note. Hard-earned socio-cultural gains of recent years are now under heavy philosophical and political attack from both inside and outside the profession.

The Elitist Conception of Culture

Getting to the crux of the matter, let us see how Smith and the Reagan advisors define "fine art" and how they justify it as the primary or only category of art worthy of being funded and being taught. According to Smith, fine art is "elite art," "the kind of art appreciated by genuinely open elites, that is elites composed of persons with a higher degree of education than that found in the general population." (1981) The Heritage Foundation Report (Martin, 1981), which serves as justification for the Reagan arts policy, echoes the Smith definition:

The arts that the NEA funds must support belong primarily to the area of high culture. Such culture is more than mere entertainment, and is concerned with permanent values beyond current tastes and wide appeal.

As Smith notes, fine art is "the best" art, the "more difficult, aesthetically more rewarding" art, the art whose "artistic merit has been certified."

Rebuttal to Elitist Cultural Philosophy

The Big Question suddenly lights up the sky: Certified by whom? Who certifies that certain forms of art (e.g., popular, ethnic, folk) are "mere entertainment" whereas another form (i.e., fine art) is of "permanent value?" Who decides that one form of art is political and another above and beyond politics? Who defines the terms, decides upon evaluative criteria, and determines the rules of the game? Why, the experts, of course: persons like Smith and the Reagan arts advisors--

partial, passionate, and political proponents of high culture. It is on this most-important-of-all question, and the circular reasoning that justifies it, that the arguments of Smith and the Reagan advisors begin to fall apart.

Easiest to rebut is Smith's contention that fine art is the type of art preferred by open elites--those persons, groups, or classes with "a higher degree of educational attainment than that found in the general population." It is only too apparent that there are many persons of higher educational attainment in our society and, more specifically, in our own field--e.g. the members of the professional special interest groups named above, and others--who value popular, ethnic, folk, applied, social, and political art as much as, or possibly even more than, works of traditional fine art. Must we dismiss all of these persons and groups as not being of a sufficiently "high degree of educational attainment," or rather, as being simply misguided or mistaken in their cultural preferences? Perhaps only those persons and groups--and only highly educated ones at that--who agree with the Smith/Reaganite definition of fine art (and its preferred formalist aesthetic criteria of judgment) should qualify as "open elites" capable of defining and determining arts policy?

A second contention which is not difficult to rebut concerns the assertion that fine art is characterized by "high standards," "the pursuit of perfection," and "excellence," (Smith, 1981) whereas ethnic, folk, popular, social, and political artforms are not. All of us could, I think, agree that artists working in every conceivable form--popular, folk, ethnic, propaganda, film, video documentary, commercial photography, graphic design, etc.--can and do achieve "fine art" standards, and do create art of "permanent value." The fact that some of this art, like some fine art, has proven to have lasting value and "the integrity of great art" (Martin, 1981)--and that it is represented in the most respected art museums, books, and journals--only confirms that the finest art is a matter of, not category, but of rich, complex quality.

The Reagan art advisors, the new champions of formalist aesthetics, contend that art which is primarily concerned with social or political content should not be federally funded because it is prone to be of lesser "artistic merit" (Kramer, 1980). This contention is summarily refuted by an examination of art history. The creation of art which is supposedly separate from life (art for art's sake) and its accompanying philosophy of aesthetic formalism are recent phenomena, being no more than two hundred years old (Hauser, 1951, 5-25). Almost all high art prior to the Romantic period, as well as much fine and popular art of the last two centuries, has been deeply concerned with socio-cultural and/or political content. This in no way has reduced its artistic merit; witness the Parthenon, Gothic cathedrals, the Sistine Chapel ceiling, the consciously political paintings of David, Goya, Delacroix, Courbet, Picasso's Guernica, and all of the great often-anonymous folk and popular art--concerned with the everyday lives, struggles, and triumphs of common people--that have come down to us over the generations.

The related contention that the extra-aesthetic(i.e., practical,

psychological, socio-cultural, political) dimensions of art are less worthy of study and experience than the purely aesthetic dimension finds itself opposed by many art educators both past and present (Logan, 1955). Many contemporary art educators of "higher educational attainment;" have come, for example, to view the socially humanizing values of art experience and study as being at least as important as the benefits derived from formalist aesthetic experiences. For socially concerned art educators, the following goals have become of the utmost importance: multicultural understanding through art; critical understanding of the dominant visual culture, especially its more manipulative and dehumanizing aspects; critical understanding of the way in which the larger social context shapes art and art education; actual improvement of our individual and collective lives through art study, experience, and practice.³ For art educators of formalist persuasion to discredit or ignore the social dimension of the study, experience and practice of art seems exceedingly narrow, as well as irresponsible. Supporters of a socially relevant art education therefore are gratified that the NAEA has issued an "Art in the Mainstream" (Feldman, 1982) policy statement wherein the social significance of art as work, language, and values is emphasized.

Those who favor aesthetic formalism and essentialism by maintaining that art education ought to concern itself only with art-centered goals and thus avoid any analysis of socio-cultural and political values, represents a severely reductionist, as well as unrealistic, point of view. Fine art, even the most "art for art's sake" art, is socially and politically involved. The most abstract art bears a social message about the world and the place of the artist and viewer in that world. The most consciously asocial and apolitical works of art--as well as aesthetic experience which many assume to be transcendently detached from life and culture--function in tangible socio-cultural and political ways in our society. In actual effect, they qualify as political art and aesthetic experience; that is, they serve to either strengthen(i.e., conserve) or change--in reactionary or progressive ways--the socio-cultural, politico-economic order that governs and shapes our daily lives (Hauser, 1951, pp 5-25).

Elitist Art Education and the Dominant Social Order

Where, one might then ask, do the various philosophies of art education fit into the overall scheme of contemporary American culture and politics? More specifically, and relative to our discussion, where does elitist art education fit into the overall scheme of American society? Giffhorn (1978) and Feldman (1978) have offered insightful answers to these questions. The Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education was specifically brought into existence to study the connections between art, education and its social context (Bersson, 1980).

The connection between elitist art education and the cultural policy of our society's power elite is most clearly seen in the strikingly similar philosophies advocated by Ralph Smith and the Reagan arts advisors. Both represent the cultural philosophy of oligarchy, as opposed to the cultural philosophy of democracy; that is, culture created of and

by the few, as opposed to culture created of, by, and for the many. Elitist cultural policy is largely certified, shaped, financed, and produced by the wealthy, powerful and academically educated. It is transmitted to the larger public by primarily middle-class art specialists and educators who are of upper-class cultural persuasion. That upper-class collectors, museum trustees, gallery owners, art book and magazine publishers shape, as well as prefer, high culture is no secret. In this respect, high culture is clearly class-based culture (Bersson, 1981a). Feldman (1978), in his excellent article, "A Socialist Critique of Art History in the U.S.A.," has incisively explicated this process by which middle-class art historians, critics, and the "fine art" educators have become the often unconscious guardians, champions, and educational emissaries of the upper-class power elite. Ardent proponents of expertism, essentialism, and aesthetic formalism in art education must become aware of how they have become cultural allies of, and educators for, the arts policy of the Reagan administration and upper-class America. If we, as art educators, are concerned with the real world implications of art and education, we must look beyond the walls of our universities, museums, and public school classrooms in order to realize the larger socio-cultural and political effects of our philosophies and actions.

For Cultural Democracy in Art/Education

What I believe art educators should be arguing for is "cultural democracy," which is succinctly defined as "culture created of, by, and for all the people." Cultural democracy equates with equality of opportunity for all persons, classes, and groups to create, study, and enjoy the arts. It is culture as a human right and not as an upper-class privilege. Cultural democracy does not mean "forced equality of results" (Smith, 1981). Cultural democracy, or "egalitarianism"--a term Smith distorts in his article--does not equate with "a flat philosophy of the equality of everything." In point of fact, it means the opposite. It means pluralism, diversity, variety, difference. It means financial and educational support for the full range of visual culture. Employing an analogy from the world of music, we support our composers and performers of classical music, but we also support our jazz and folk musicians, labor balladeers, ethnic and neighborhood artists.

Elitist Fear of Cultural Democracy

The Reagan advisors and Smith seem to be afraid of putting cultural power in the hands of the "untutored" masses. Scenes of women textile workers making documentary films about their past struggles and black youth finding out about their roots through artist-in-residence blues singers in the schools apparently send shudders up the spines of the Reagan arts advisors (Adler, Hager, and Shabad, 1981). More cultural democracy does mean more participation and power for the "untutored" common folk. Putting political, economic, and cultural power (i.e., democracy) in the hands of middle- and lower-class persons and groups has always caused fear among elites, and with good reason. Such sharing or democratization of power threatens upper-class political, economic, and cultural hegemony. In this well founded upper-class fear, and the surrounding air of superi-

ority that hides it, is a deepseated apprehension about, and resistance to, change. Thus the frequent connection between upper-class elitism and conservatism. Somehow the unschooled masses might come to share power with the upper classes, just as these classes have appropriated power from the aristocratic and clerical ruling classes that came before them. This fear by the elite--often paranoiac--surfaces at times in their language, images, and references. We have Smith, for example, through the words of Barbara Tuchman, comparing the cultural sentiments of the "new egalitarians" or "populists" to those of the "Jacobins denouncing aristocrats to the guillotine." A more vivid example of elitist fear of the democratization of culture could probably not be found.

Conclusion

As art educators, we cannot be--and most of us are not--afraid of "the people." What makes us art educators is our concern for the education of the larger public. We are committed, not to art education for the privileged few, but to art study, practice, and experience for all people. An elitist art education, one based in fear of and insufficient respect for all the citizens of our multicultural, multiclass society, cannot be our way. Our road can only be toward cultural democracy, and the tolerance, respect, and equality of opportunity that it brings.

Cultural democracy, with its values of generosity and tolerance, is the only cultural and educational policy capable of embracing both elitism and populism. Reagan's arts policy which amounts to "elite art for the elite" is certainly not desirable; nor is Smith's well-intentioned but restrictive art education policy which would mean "elite art for the masses." What we do want is art and art experience of, by, and for all the people. As United State Congressman Sidney Yates has asserted, "What we want is elitism plus populism. We want quality in the arts, and we want the arts represented throughout the country "(Martin, 1981)-- in every neighborhood, and among every group and class.

Reference Notes

1. The Expansion Arts Program is described in the National Council on the Arts' Advancing the Arts in America (July 1981) as "a point of entry for developing groups that are established and reflect the culture of minority, blue collar, rural, and low-income communities."
2. In addition to the development of the National Art Education Association affiliate and special interest groups subsequently cited, major art education texts with a socio-cultural focus were published during this decade, among them: Edmund Feldman's Becoming Human Through Art (1970); June King McFee and Rogena M. Degge's Art, Culture, and Environment: A Catalyst for Teaching (1977); Eugene Grigsby's Art and Ethnics (1977); Laura Chapman's Approaches to Art in Education (1978); and Vincent Lanier's The Arts We See (1982).
3. See the following recent articles which are concerned with one or more of these goals. Graeme Chalmer's "Art Education as Ethnology," Studies in Art Education, 1981, 22(3); Hermine Feinstein's "Art Means Values," Art Education, 1982, 35(5); Vincent Lanier's "Six Items on the Agenda for the Eighties," Art Education, 1980, 33(5); and Daniel Nadaner's "Recognizing Social Issues in the Art Curriculum," in Bulletin of the Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education, 1982, 2.

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