

Thought on Social Contextualism
in Art and Art Education

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Abstract

Art as a manifestation and reflection of culture has been clearly established. Discussions of various depth on the subject are available in many general art education texts (Chapman, 1978; Feldman, 1970; McFee, 1970, McFee and Degge, 1977). However, the concept of art as a reflection of culture may take many forms and thus has the potential for ambiguity.

Culture, as defined by the social sciences, is the complex of knowledge, beliefs, mores, customs, laws, and social institutions held by human beings as a part of society. Culture, in this sense, does not refer to what is commonly known as high culture, except as high culture is included in the larger complex defined above. Thus, art as a reflection of culture does not refer to the state of understanding, appreciating, and collecting art as a manifestation of good taste, aesthetic education, social position, or wealth. Rather, it refers to the mirroring of the human condition as this condition is formed through its social institutions.

Art when broadly viewed as a reflection of culture creates opportunities to understand our world, to understand oneself, and to understand the qualities inherent in an artwork. A socially defined art curriculum can serve as a catalyst for the development of students' sensibilities. This requirement is most fully met when all aspects of making, talking about, and appreciating art are incorporated into an organically structured integrally related program.

Artworks mirror the culture of a society not necessarily because artists set out to illuminate social concerns, but simply because artworks reflect the specific concerns of the artists who produced them. Artists, like other people, live in a largely socially-defined environment. Each artist interacts within and interprets his society in a unique fashion. Thus, each will perceive and interpret reality differently than any other artist. However, this does not alter the fact that every individual artist's personal development has taken place in a specific place and at a specific time, and therefore is subject to the customs, mores, and institutions which are the modus

operandi of that place and time. The artist's point of view cannot be separated from the context of its formation. The expression of that point of view, no matter what is propagated, referred to, or even denied, in illuminating the artist's position, also illuminates aspects of the culture which helped to define the artist.

It follows, then, that the varying concerns of individual artists will reflect a cross-section of the concerns of a society. Through examining artworks with an underlying concern for the cultural and societal nature of their genesis, one may gain significant insight not only about art, but about the nature of the society from which it arose. For example, if one were to critically examine the works of the contemporary American artists Andy Warhol, Frank Stella and muralist William Walker one would find vastly different visions of reality represented. In critically examining their works one would also find that each of the artists exhibits an internal verity in his or her works. That is, each of the artists understands and utilizes what Dewey (1985) would call a pervasive quality or unifying emotive element which mandates form. Thus one must assume that the differences in form between the three artists are not qualitative in nature. Each has exhibited a unifying sensibility and the technical and formal expertise to validate that sensibility. Differences in form, then, must be attributed to the different sensibilities of the artists - sensibilities which reflect varying points of view in relation to the larger culture. The work of each artist represents a point of view honed within the context of American society. Together, they reflect a more complete image of American culture than any one of them alone. Yet each of them reflects some individual aspect of the contemporary American sensibility, and removed from the social context, each work loses much of its potential meaning.

It is ironic, then, that the modern approach to viewing art tends to remove the artwork from the context of its making and formally intellectualize its content. This process of formal intellectualization is encouraged by the gallery and museum system, and by the reproduction of artworks together in art history, art appreciation, and like volumes. In Voices of Silence, Malraux

(1953) describes how the separation of art from the context of its making is a very recent phenomenon, corresponding with the rise of the art museums two hundred years ago. Indeed, the idea that art is an entity complete unto itself and separate from any other function - an idea taken for granted by many artists and critics today - was unknown before the advent of museums. How is it that both museums and volumes of art reproductions, which aim to disseminate art to the widest possible population, are also responsible for diluting art's power through formal intellectualization? How does this dissolution of power function, arising as it does from an apparently honest attempt simply to disseminate images?

The proximity of one artwork to another in both the museum and the book of reproductions gives the unwary perceiver a false impression of connectedness between works rather than emphasizing the more natural connection between the artwork and the context of its making. The human perception and interpretation process naturally follows a pattern of connection making, the underlying aim being categorization, with the end goal of understanding the world and one's place in it. This has been necessary not only for intellectual advancement, but for survival, and so is deeply ingrained. Thus, because of a propensity for making connections in order to make sense of things, one assumes all components included in a frame are part of the piece - that they are all related. When artworks are displayed or reproduced together the natural human quest for meaning takes the most accessible path - comparison and contrast. In the absence of the artwork's formative context the quest for meaning is referred to an examination of a work's formal qualities. What is lost in this process of formal intellectualization is the social meaning of the artwork as the work arose and functioned in the context of its making. Removed, either physically or intellectually, from the social context, an artwork loses a substantial part of its *raison d'etre* - the illumination of the human condition.

None of the foregoing should be thought to imply that aesthetic concerns should be eliminated from the examination of art. It is, after all, the aesthetic component which differentiates art from anthropology, sociology, history, psychology and the other humanistic disciplines. But rather than

considering formal qualities as ends in themselves, it seems more productive to analyze style in an artwork as a conduit of deeper meaning. Feldman (1967) states that style

leads us to look for meaning beneath the subject matter and apparent purpose of a work of art. Just as handwriting conveys meanings which are not in the words alone, style reveals much about an artist's way of thinking, about his environment, and about the society and culture in which his work is rooted. Archaeologists use style to reconstruct past cultures. They put pieces of stylistic evidence together like a mosaic, to form an idea of culture or civilization as a whole. Similarly, we study the styles of art - to assemble in our minds an idea of the changing condition of man. (p. 130)

Thus, it becomes apparent that the aesthetic quality - the formal makeup and the style of an artwork - is crucial to its overall significance and meaning; but the consideration of formal qualities divorced from culturally contextual concerns inevitably leads the viewer to an incomplete or even false understanding of the work. Judgments will be incomplete or false to the extent they are based on incomplete or faulty information. As stated by Chapman (1979), "There is a direct relationship between visual forms and social values; indeed, a judgment of one implies a judgment of the other" (p. 109).

In addition to the process of formal intellectualization, a second factor tends to separate the modern viewer from an awareness of the artwork as a reflection of culture. This factor resides in the fact that the contemporary approach to making and viewing art is overwhelmingly psychological, and thus, individually oriented. Feldman (1967) states: "In the modern world this personal function of art may seem to constitute the very essence of art for artist and viewer" (p. 17). This propensity may be directly linked to modern art's general separation from any socially instrumentalist function.

The separation of art from direct social functions is uniquely a product of modern times and western culture. Traditionally, the personal psychological component of the artwork was subservient to the social component in determining

the final aesthetic form. Primitive man used art as a form of magic to insure the success of the hunt. Ancient Egyptian artists were employed to develop images of servants and goods meant to serve the pharaohs in their afterlives. The pope and the Medicis employed Italian artists to promulgate their religious and political ends. But with the demise of the social directive came the rise of the personal as the primary mode in making and viewing art.

It is often expressed that the rise of personal and idiosyncratic aesthetic expression negates the validity of art as a reflection of culture. In countering this view, however, one must simply understand that the contemporary emphasis on personal creativity is a tacitly or even expressly agreed upon social premise. Individuals who make works of art do not live in a social vacuum. If the emphasis in art today is on personal expression, it is surely a result of a socially agreed upon manner of behaving. Personal, even idiosyncratic, pre-eminence within works of art signifies not a lack of social context in their making, but rather, a socially agreed upon acceptance of personal expression as culturally predominant in this society at this time.

General Implications for Teaching Art

A major function of education is the transmission of culture. It is the experience, beliefs, and knowledge of the eons of generations which have come before us which separate us as a species from all others on this planet. Unlike the other animals, who transmit only the most rudimentary information from generation to generation, we do not have to start over, discovering knowledge anew with each lifetime. Through our records we can draw on the accumulative human wisdom of the ages. Art, as one of these records, is the aesthetically framed transmission of human experience. Art serves as a record of culture in a way that is often inaccessible to language; for while language generally tells what has happened, art addresses the issue of how that phenomenon appeared and felt, in context (Langer, 1958). Anthropologists have long understood this and have examined artworks as a matter of course, along with other societal artifacts, in order to come to an understanding of past societies.

The most obvious implication for the art teacher, whether one's specialty be studio art, art criticism and theory, or art history, is to consciously incorporate a cultural perspective on art into the curriculum. This would entail helping students to become aware of artworks as culturally symbolic and socially definitive in all their aspects. Like the anthropologist, the art teacher should develop and transmit to students a consciousness of the artwork as an artifact reflective of social conditions. The art teacher should also make students aware that the students' personal development and the process of making thoughts and feelings concrete has a social and cultural validity that justifies their expression. In short, an understanding of the social context of the processes and products of art could and should be made intrinsic, at the conscious rather than subliminal level, in all phases of making and perceiving art.

The incorporation of a socially defined art curriculum necessarily mandates a strong experiential component when making and perceiving contemporary art. Students must draw upon their own experiences to define and validate the forms they make, as well as to interpret the forms they see. This experiential component must, of course, be supplemented, defined, and put in context by the introduction of experiences and forms from the larger artistic and social context. These experiences and forms might consist of written records, including fiction and poetry, as well as non-fictional description; supporting visual materials; or even oral substantiation drawn from personal or vicarious experience. The teacher's role, in addition to the introduction of these materials is one of prompting, questioning (about forms, processes, motives, connections, meanings...), and constructive criticism and feedback.

If artworks being perceived are from a time or culture different than the students', the examination of the culture will have to come largely from the written record or through vicarious experience from people who have experienced the culture. Although this condition is not experientially ideal, at least it will make the student aware that a cultural context does exist in connection with an image. Undoubtedly, knowledge of that context will increase understanding, thus appreciation, of the work being examined. For a

more total contextual experience, the art teacher might develop a unit around the understanding of cross-cultural images. This approach to art is an exercise not only in the formal qualities of design, but in cultural literacy.

Another way a teacher might approach cultural literacy through the teaching of art is to use communally significant current events and manifestations of contemporary culture as motivational stimuli for both studio and appreciative assignments. While this may, at first, appear to be simply an elaboration of the old holiday art syndrome, there is a qualitative difference in the context of socially defined curriculum. That difference arises from the students' examination and understanding of the social significance of the event or phenomenon being treated. These communally meaningful phenomena which serve to stimulate art need not be national or international holidays such as Christmas or the Fourth of July. They may just as well be locally specific. Every community has its own significant local events. Most people in a given community have at least a passing interest in the football team going to the state championship tournament, or in the local rodeo, crab racing contest, or opera season. These are the sort of communally meaningful events which not only can be addressed by the art program, but which will bring that program from a peripheral into a central position in the community's life and consciousness.

Thus, in terms of curriculum design, the mandate of the socially defined approach is two-fold. First, art teachers must make themselves aware of the cultural values embedded in visual images and pass this knowledge on to their students. This does not mean that teachers must be aware of all facets and subtleties of the pluralistic American culture, and of all cultures, through all of time. What it does mean is that teachers should be aware that cultural embedding exists and is present in all artworks. Ascertaining meaning cannot begin until there is a conscious knowledge of its existence. Class assignments should be devised with a consciousness of the fact that both content and style reflect social beliefs and values. From this concern arises the second facet of the socially-defined mandate - that

content be considered as integral to the visual form as style. This premise mandates that the teaching of formal elements and principles of design as an end in themselves, and for their own sake, be abandoned. Rather it requires that these tools of style serve some function beyond formal excellence disassociated with other meaning. This is not to deny formalism, because formalism is a statement of values. It is a recognition that students must be taught what the values of pure form and color are, beyond the fact that they are form and color. In teaching only form and color for their own sake the potential for art content is lost. The potential for the added dimension of deeper meaning in art lies in a full realization of art content, whether that be figurative, abstract, or non-objective. That content, which reflects the mores, values, and identity of a group and/or society must be consciously examined within the socially-defined curriculum.

Conclusions

There can be little doubt that art is, indeed, a reflection of culture. It has been established that artworks take on points of view in relation to the social conditions, media, and individual concerns of the context from which they arise. That Larry Rivers' and Rembrandt's styles did not develop together in South America in the 1850's is no accident. (Art styles and the values which determine art content do not magically appear as gifts from the art gods, but are the result of an interaction between an individual and the individual's cultural milieu. Aesthetic forms reflect the cultural content of their origin.)

Thus, it has also been determined that the qualities of an artwork may only be ascertained within the context of its making and in relation to the criteria it sets for itself. To the extent that artworks are approached from outside their context, or with incomplete information, or with a comparative and evaluative attitude, the experience of viewing or making art will be incomplete and/or fallacious.

It has been argued that as a reflection of culture - as a way of understanding our world - art should be used not as an end in itself, but as a catalyst for the development of students' sensibilities. It should be used to promote personal development and an understanding of individual

students' places in the larger cultural context. This does not negate the quest for aesthetic excellence in art, but simply gives added dimension and meaning to forms and media from both the making and perceiving ends.

It has also been argued that a socially defined art curriculum may be utilized in all the traditional aspects of an art program: studio, art history, and theory and criticism. Indeed, it should be emphasized that a socially defined curriculum functions best when it incorporates all aspects of making, talking about, and appreciating art into an organically structured, integrally related program.

The end goal of the socially defined art curriculum is the understanding of human nature - oneself included - in the societal context, through the processes of making, examining, and talking about art. It is through values that humanity defines itself and separates itself from the other creatures of the earth. It is our cultures, passed on from generation, which make human social and technological evolution possible. And it is the arts which personify the values and ultimately define a culture, a people, and humanity. The end result of a socially defined art curriculum dispells the myth of art as an extra, art as superficial, art as mere adornment. Within a socially defined context art takes its rightful place as a primary means of human expression. In this context, art is revitalized through consciously realized connections with the vital events of the society. When socially defined, it becomes apparent that art cannot be separate from life.

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