Playing in Public
or
Creatively Expressing the
Aesthetic Dimension in Social Life

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Abstract

This philosophical study is in part a critical examination of Richard Sennett's sociological account of what it means to be out in public in the company of strangers and expressing oneself aesthetically in a playful, self-distanced encounter with them. His urging for a rediscovery of the classic mid-eighteenth century connection between actors on the stage and persons on the street in order to make social life aesthetic once again is seen as having significant implications for art educators concerned with putting into practice the aesthetic and social function of art and art education. The arguments developed in the paper take issue less with Sennett's calling for a rebirth of the aesthetic in social life and more with his one-sided view of aesthetics, art, and theatre and his notion of what it is that actors do as well as what society is and what public, self-distanced encounters should be. A view of art and art education which goes beyond the traditional narrow and limiting mainstream Western concept of art as a "thing" framed and set apart from the ordinary everyday immediate and sensuous encounters of persons in public is presented.

In The fall of public man, Richard Sennett (1977), an American sociologist, traces an interesting development in the rise of public man in the cities of London and Paris during the middle of the eighteenth century. According to Sennett, because of its size, the capital city was where one had the opportunity to come in contact with a wide diversity of people and share the sort of knowledge and information which could not be found among one's family and close friends (p. 17). Thus, when one was out in public, one was thought of as being outside the private domain of family and friends and removed from the expression of personal thoughts and feelings.

In order to facilitate civility and give order to an impersonal exchange between strangers, modes of speech and dress were adopted similar to the acting and costuming of actors in the theatre (p. 64). The street became a stage upon which persons could perform their roles believably in society and keep their personal selves at a distance. A code of dress signified the role, not the person; attention was not drawn to the person behind the role. The elite and the wealthy, for example, decked their heads with monstrous, ornate powdered wigs and painted their faces red or white, with "beauty marks" smeared on the chin, nose, or forehead; masks were also worn. At home, in private, however, the simple natural look was the fashion since no role was being played and the self did not have to be kept at a distance.

Public speech, following speech in the theatre, consisted of conventional signs (general patterns, movements, and gestures) composed and calculated to arouse emotions in the listener and, likewise, keep the speaker's (actor's) personality at a distance. Sennett makes the point that the artificiality of such performed or posed expressions evoked a spontaneity of emotional response every bit as great as--but unlike--natural expression (p. 73). The listener was released from being vulnerable to the accidental in the natural expression of personal and private feeling and could thus be more at ease.

Sennett then goes on to show how this image of public man as actor changed drastically in the nineteenth century in London and Paris. Where public man was once free to go up to a stranger and talk to him through the mediation of social conventions, he is now silent and amazed, a passive spectator to the feverish pitch of select, exciting, charismatic personalities in the streets. Sennett explains how, as a world view, individual and particular phenomena were gradually emerging from behind their general and universal categories and becoming concrete, sensuous and immediate things in themselves to be apprehended and given categories of their own (pp. 150-151). Such phenomena in people were taken to be their personalities, and it was to personality that attention was now being paid in social situations

rather than to the impersonality of the role being played.

Personality revealed itself in the way people spoke, dressed, and behaved. The self was no longer at a distance in public life; it was involuntarily out there in the open for all to see. As a result, the boundary between private and public was becoming confused. People were unprepared for the confusion and became paranoid about their inner selves being involuntarily exposed in public and went to great lengths to hide the immediate impressions their personalities made by suppressing their feelings, remaining silent, and dressing plainly (by contrast to the costuming of the previous century). These defensive measures, however, were to no avail; for they merely prompted a more refined scrutiny of personality and invited a closer decoding of more intricate details of dress, speech, and behavior by the onlooker.

The ability that people had in the previous century to perform a role in public and interact impersonally was lost. The people were left to become nothing but spectators, voyeurs. They rationalized their fears and insecurities and their new public role with the belief that the development of one's personality profited by being a silent spectator in public life; in isolation from others one was free to think and fantasize and daydream while watching life go by on the streets. Sennett (1977) characterized the loss of the ability to perform in public as "artists" deprived of an art" (p. 29).

Interestingly enough, actors in the theatre (as well as dancers, musicians, and visual artists) did not suffer the problem with personality. By contrast, they were encouraged to bring it out in their art and become those persons who could express themselves openly and clearly and be free. The theatre, concert hall, and gallery became the places where audiences could see other persons express the sort of freedom and spontaneity of feeling they were fearful of exhibiting in the street. Any attempt at being uninhibited or nonconforming in public was considered deviant behavior, and deviant meant abnormal. Few persons were willing to risk being identified with such labels; only those super beings with the confidence,

skills, and talent to continue the imagery of man-as-actor were exempt. The "star" personality, as we conceive of it today, was being born. Artists in all the arts were "elevated" above the audience, and the stage of the theatre, concert hall, and gallery took on a vibrant life of its own separate and distinct from ordinary life in the streets; public man sat silently before both, doubting his own expressive powers.

Sennett convincingly makes the point that for all our efforts today to liberate ourselves from alienation, self-doubt, and Victorian repression, we have only succeeded in adding to psychic distress by burdening our social relations with problems of intimacy, self-expression, authenticity, and identity (pp. 259-261). We have failed to see that it was the intrusion of personality in public in the last century which brought about repression, alienation, and self-doubt in the first place. He claims that any attempt to rid ourselves of repression, alienation, and self-doubt which is not at the same time an attempt to put aside our personality in public is no attempt. In the eighteenth century, it was understood that one is free to relate in public only when personality is kept at a distance. It was taken for granted that public life was impersonal.

So, Sennett urges us to put aside personality and rediscover the classic connection between the stage and the street, between aesthetic life and social life; rediscover the tradition which says we are all artists because we can act. He admits that an aesthetic dimension intrinsic to social processes is not easy to imagine; for whenever we link up art and society, we usually talk about how social conditions effect the artist's work or how the artist expresses these conditions in his work rather than how social processes themselves are artistic (p. 313). In our relations to others, we have lost contact with the power of expression as a force unto itself, separate from personality.

For Sennett, this power has its beginnings in childhood experiences of play. He cites Piaget (1951) to support his view of our coming to know expression as early as "the later months of the first year of life" when, as infants, we found pleasure and satisfaction in toying with objects

(Sennett, 1977, p. 317). He then sees this play appearing in a significantly developed form at our fourth year in our ability to toy with symbolic images. At this age, we are no longer merely delighting in immediately sensuous images, but finding pleasure and satisfaction in performing the art of playacting--taking on the role of adults, "dressing up," and acting out situations of adult life--and interacting with other children in formal games.

Sennett (1977) makes the point that in these forms of symbolic play we "focused on the expressive quality of a convention" and learned to believe in conventions, in the rules for behavior which kept our desires for instant self-gratification at a distance and enabled us to control and manipulate our expressions in order to communicate whatever we wanted to with them (p. 321). We learned that conventions, or rules, had a reality of their own too, that they were not absolutely given, that they could be "played" with, and that we could change them and improve upon them in order to bring about better social relations. We also learned, in the face of fear and frustration, to risk the unknown and carry the play to a satisfying conclusion; in games, the motivation was to win.

But, unfortunately, as Sennett also observes, children have to repress all this knowledge and ability as they grow up today and become adults; for in adult society self-distanced play is not the name of the game. Revealing oneself voluntarily and openly to others is now all important for improving social relations; intimacy and authenticity are the moral imperatives. What goes by the name of play is actually amusement--forms of fantasy to provide escape from the tyrannous reality of imposed self-expression and the incivility resulting from the lifting of the barriers of artificiality between people.

Oddly enough, in the midst of this increasingly open self-liberated society, the self-doubting, alienated, passive spectator of the last century is still very much with us, sitting in slavish, uncritical admiration before a spectacle of "star" performers, being entertained by them, yet wishing to be like them, wishing to have their freedom of action and expression. And,

needless to say, the skilled charismatic performers of the last century are still very much with us too, and they are still the only persons exhibiting personality in public without having to remove the artificial barriers between themselves and other persons, without having to give up the art of self-distanced play, the art of theatrical illusion to arouse emotion in an audience.

What Sennett does not tell us, however, is that there are artists today in all the arts who are not interested in being stars and exhibiting their personalities and keeping the artificial barriers of theatrical illusion between themselves and their audiences to arouse their emotions. They do not want to be amusers or to merely entertain. They have no desire whatsoever to provide fantasies for people. They believe that art is something other than craft and representation, something more than contriving generalized make believe situations and calculating words, gestures, costumes, sounds, colors, lighting, shapes, and body movements to arouse certain kinds of emotions in people so that they can discharge them harmlessly in the unreality of the make believe situations. For them, art is a process of creatively and imaginatively expressing aesthetic feelings and emotions which are not private or personal to the one imagining them (Collingwood, 1958). As artists, with deep concerns for the aesthetic, moral, and social responsibility of art, they are interested in showing their audiences what it is like for persons to be freely and expressively intimate and authentic with one another in public without their intimacy and authenticity having to be a disclosure of private feelings or a means of satisfying unfulfilled personal needs and desires.

They would like their audiences to become familiar with those feelings that can be warmly expressed without their expression having to be a threat or a burden to anyone. They would like all persons in society to know that the potential for self-distanced closeness, contact, and familiarity among strangers in public is right there, already given, in the simultaneity of their immediate and sensuous presence to one another, in the sensuous and immediate interpenetrating of their bodily spaces. The power of the aesthetic is already given in that brief moment when their eyes meet and they are seeing

one another from the underlying level of wholeness where their living bodies and minds are unified with the world. It is where the dichotomies of self and other, public and private, personal and impersonal, and stranger and close acquaintance are not yet present to consciousness and determining their responses to one another (Madenfort, 1975).

By simply focusing upon and giving their undivided attention to the sensuousness of their seeing, sounding, touching, and moving experiences when freely and openly moving in and about other persons and touching them and bursting forth with vocal sounds and creatively expressing in an immediate manner the intertwining unifying presence of one another's live sensuous beings, the artists allow their private and personal selves, with all their compulsive needs and desires and their frightening unresolved sense of separation pervading their experiences since early childhood to fall into the background and show us new and vitally significant ways of not only being close, making contact, and becoming familiar with other persons but coming to know and experience the underlying sensuous and immediate wholeness existing between all persons.

Of course, Sennett would not encourage this particular aesthetic of artistic creation and expression among persons in public because he regards with suspicion any level of mind which makes no distinction between self and other. Taking a view similar to Lasch (1979), he sees any attempt at being whole with other persons in immediate and sensuous intimacy as narcissistic and destructive to conventional tools of culture. To him, it is nothing more than another attempt at erasing boundaries between people and doing away with roles and games simply to become immersed within one's own feelings and come to know oneself more intimately and authentically. It is to experience oneself <u>in</u> the other rather than to experience the other as other, as separate and external to oneself. Sennett sees this narcissism, of not experiencing the other as other, as reducing the desire to produce the conventional tools of culture that permit one to play at a distance from the self, the play that he considers necessary for being sociable in public life (p. 325).

While it may be that the playing of conventional roles and games is necessary for the practical workings out of certain aspects of public life, and that personality should be kept out of them, it may also be that the playing with others in immediate and sensuous wholeness is needed just as much for the practical workings out of certain other aspects of public life. Sennett is correct in pointing out the negative effects of narcissism on the self-distanced playing of roles and games in public; but he fails to see that the reason many persons are not able to put themselves at a distance and play roles and games in public is not so much because they are narcissistically desiring to be their true selves in public as it is because their true selves have become all the roles and games they have been playing throughout the many years of their lives. Without realizing it, in growing up, they have imagined themselves into being the roles and games they played; they came to believe the play to be real, to be what life was all about. They never learned to know or develop their individualities, that part of themselves which is undivided and fundamentally whole with the world.

When Sennett tells us that, at four to seven years of age, children learned to believe in the magic of conventions and rules for behavior when pretending to be adults and playing formal games, he is as much as saying that children imagined themselves into being the roles and games they played. But he does not take the position that children, during these years, are still by and large under the influence of imagination and not yet able to clearly differentiate when they are playing and playacting on the one hand and living so-called reality on the other. He does not see that everything they do is an expression of their imaginations and assumed to be real. When playing and playacting, they do not self-consciously choose to put reality at a distance and then pretend to live it. If they did, they probably would never learn to believe in the reality, the magic, of conventions and rules for behavior and become the roles and games they were playing. They probably would never learn to sit silently in isolation before the fantasies of amusers and believe them to be the reality they are not able to live in public. Children are never told while growing up

that the social reality they are imagining is actually a fantasy, a substitute dream for the individual which was lost when conventions and rules for behavior became necessary. Everyone is undoubtedly too busy trying to successfully be and become the roles and games making up the social reality of the culture being imagined.

But, when children become adults and possess the power of understanding and reason, they can know the difference between magic and fantasy on the one hand and reality on the other. With the help of artists rather than magicians or amusers, they can come to know their individualities and get in touch with what they fundamentally are and what they secretly desire to be. They can dis-identify with their self-distanced playing of roles and games, the selves they have become, and identify with the sensuous images that are immediately given as the unity of their living bodies and the world, without thinking that they are narcissistically regressing to the self-distanced playing of infancy or fantasizing themselves to be the reality they are not.

When toying with objects in our infancy, it was not a matter of having to put ourselves at a distance in order to imaginatively be and become sensuous images and bring them forth in new and meaningful ways; for we were already imaginatively being and becoming sensuous images by virtue of our being the unity of our living bodies and the world. We were not yet a self separate from sensuous images (Wilber, 1980). Actually, it was in our toying with objects that ourselves and the world were being creatively and expressively brought forth as two separate entities. And it was only later when we imaginatively and playfully learned to talk that sensuous images gradually became symbolic images, that ourselves and the objects became the words and terms we were speaking, and that we became the roles and games we were playing. It was then that sensuous images in their immediacy finally became lost to us and that, in turn, our ability to be immediately and sensuously whole with the world was forgotten or repressed (Schachtel, 1959).

The point is: we do not have to wait until the world becomes a stranger to rediscover that we are fundamentally whole with it. We can

encourage children to continue believing in their ability to play with the world in immediate and sensuous wholeness at the same time that they are taking on the playing of roles and games and learning to believe in conventions and rules for behavior (Madenfort, 1982). We can show them that they do not have to lose consciousness of being whole with the world and other persons and come to believe that the separations between themselves, the world, and other persons are there as a built-in feature of reality and only bridged by reaching out and making the sort of contact that comes through words and concepts and conventional systems of communication.

Up to seven years of age, children experience words and concepts and conventional systems of symbolic interaction against the sensuous and immediate background of the unity of their living bodies and the world, anyway; they are not even separate from the words they utter. They continue to experience the undivided connection between words sounded as expressions unto themselves separate from the objects they name and their gestural and sensuous content (Werner, 1961). Words are heard by them as sensuous and moving wholes possessing their own color, shape, texture, taste, and kinaesthetic flow; and the children are even creatively and imaginatively bringing forth words and names of their own to vocally express in a concrete and immediate way the sensuous and moving qualities of their experiences. When rubbing their hands over the bark of a tree and feeling the tree's roughly textured surface, they say things like, "The tree has scruggles on it," or, as they finish eating a chocolate ice cream cone, they smack their lips and utter something like, "Boy! That tasted optayunder!"

Of course, when thechildren come forth with words like scruggles and optayunder, they are not self-consciously attempting to foolishly make up words that have never been heard before, nor are they attempting to form word concepts of sensuous and moving experiences. Rather, they are spontaneously and creatively expressing their ability to experience with the wholeness of their living bodies and the world and live the similarities between the sensuous and moving qualities of their touching and tasting experiences of sounding vocally. Children can imagine for themselves and

create their own meaningful forms of expressions. They do not have to be always taking on predetermined, readymade conventions and rules for behavior.

In art education, it is important for us to take a broader and more general view on what constitutes art and art teaching. We can no longer afford to remain bound to the narrow and limiting traditional mainstream Western concept of art as a "thing" framed and set apart from life (Kaprow, 1983). It is not enough to merely think of art as capable of expressing life, but not being and becoming life. In a manner similar to performance artists, we need to express ourselves poetically, musically, and aesthetically before the children and be more whole with our speaking, touching, seeing, and body movements in order to give the children the confidence they need to continue doing the same (Madenfort, 1977). We need to help them break the boundaries of separation and dividedness built into the syntaxical structure of ordinary verbal language. We need to show them that there are other realities to existence and other ways of expressing themselves wholly to the world.

In order for the children to feel their talking and vocal soundings flowing to the world and fusing with it and giving verbal and vocal meaning to all that comes within their gaze, we can take them out of doors onto the lawn and have them lie down with us on the grass with their backs and heads against the ground and their eyes looking up to the sky. And, once they are all quiet and comfortably lying there on the grass and looking up into the sky and feeling all alone with it, feeling that there is nothing in the world but themselves and the sky, we can suddenly and expressively start talking to the sky and poetically say hello to its clear deep iridescent blue and pour forth whatever is moving us of its immediacy and sensuousness.

Some children might snicker and giggle a little by our sudden outburst of imaginative vocal soundings and expressions, but it would not be long before all of them were talking and sounding imaginatively with us to the sky and, together, all of us were becoming a full chorus of many voices

resounding and speaking within the spaces where the sounds of our voices and the blue of the sky intermingle and blend together, where the sky is enveloped by our voices and creatively given meaning by our voices' sensuous power, out of our living bodies' wholeness with the sky. And it would not be long before the sky itself was suddenly speaking and singing and giving new meaning to our speaking and singing and we and the sky were singing a duet glorifying our being whole together.

From this experience we can allow the children the sensuous freedom to go on to speaking and singing and being immediately whole with flowers, trees, buildings, rocks, grass, and all the objects of the world (Madenfort, 1972, 1973, 1979; Bersson, 1982). We can encourage them to move in and about other children and sound vocally with them and allow their arms and hands and the whole of their bodies to flow in abandonment and expressively "sing and dance" the sensuous and immediate wholeness between themselves, the world, and other persons. We can teach them that art and life can be one.

It is important for children to discover the individuality of their own bodily movements and to express in their own ways the aesthetic wholeness existing between themselves and other persons. They must not be made to feel that they are ultimately or basically separate and divided from other persons and having to follow predetermined cultural patterns and rules for behavior in order to be whole with them. They are to have confidence in the individuality (undividedness) of their movements and to be guided by it as they move among other persons. They must discover for themselves the value and significance that playing with other persons in immediate and sensuous wholeness has for bettering public life and bringing about a creative renewal to the meaning of being an individual among individuals. By being able to go beyond the dichotomy of the individual and society, they will create for themselves a view of the world and a life with other persons in public grounded on the truth, clarity, openness, and moral significance of immediate and sensuous wholeness, the necessary being of aesthetic expressions in social life.

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