

## Toward Foundations for a Socially Critical Art Education\*

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*Significant recent developments in Australian art education have moved away from a consideration of the aesthetic value of fine art products to a broad sociological conception of the visual arts which includes folk and popular arts. Many art educators assume a socially functionalist approach which celebrates cultural diversity and attempts to describe the function of cultural artifacts, sometimes in terms of lived experience. While acknowledging the importance of these developments, the author adopts the view that cultural production is part of an unjust society in ferment and is a site of ideological struggle. The view advanced is that to be true to its subject, art education must adopt a socially critical position. Drawing upon the culturalist tendency within English Cultural Studies, possible theoretical foundations for a socially critical art education are explored. These include: social structure is as important as lived experience; society is comprised of competing interests and is structured in dominance; cultural production is constitutive of social reality; basic to human action is agency, constraint and struggle; and explicitly engaged judgement is essential to the development of a more democratic society.*

The democratic impulse at work within the Australian Institute of Art Education reflects a collective motive and a genuine commitment to principles derived from no less than deeply engrained cultural expectations. It is perhaps not surprising to find that in our official policy statements we adopt explicitly democratic approaches to art and art education. We argue against competitions in favour of exhibitions (1987); and we propose that the visual arts should be broadly conceived to include not only fine art, but the folk and popular arts (1984). Our practice, however, may not accurately reflect our rhetoric. Not all of us have the training or experience to echo in practice our stated intentions, but our intentions at least, are clear. If we take seriously the endorsement of our policy statements by the various art teacher organizations around the country, Australian art educators, at this time in history strongly support a broadly conceived, inclusive, democratic approach to the visual arts.

## Cultural Pluralism

Among the many pressures for this position not least has been a search for relevance. By defining our subject as the aesthetic, we long ago condemned ourselves to a marginal role within education, a position that merely echoes the marginal role of aesthetic considerations within society. This marginality is spelled out each year at A.I.A.E. conferences, state by state.

A search for relevance has led to the consideration of students' own tastes, attitudes, and beliefs. Increasingly, we have become aware of the need to be sensitive to students' own ways of life in a society stratified by economic classes and comprised of numerous ethnic groups (Boughton, 1983). Both here and overseas the acknowledgements of a multicultural society has led to calls for visual art education to be broadly understood; to include, potentially, all visual artifacts through which people make meaning. Robert Bersson (1983) calls for an art education that acknowledges "pluralism, diversity, variety, difference. . . the full range of visual culture" (p. 29). Calls are made for a sociocultural curriculum, a sociological curriculum, and a social studies approach (Nadaner, 1985; Chapman, 1978; Chalmers, 1985). Edmund Feldman (1982) calls for an anthropological orientation. Laura Chapman (1978) writes of the need for art educators to be willing to talk "about life, not just art" (p. 99) and Graeme Chalmers (1985) writes of the need "to focus on, meaning rather than the perception of form" (p. 281).

The shift of focus can be captured by examining a story told by Vincent Lanier (1987) in his Leon Jackman Memorial Lecture last year. Lanier argues that aesthetic experience is not peculiar to art, certainly not to fine art, and need not, as is often claimed, have high moral associations. Yet his framework remains aesthetic. He writes:

I myself have an aesthetic response I am not proud of and cannot explain. Many years ago, our oldest son brought back for me from a trip to England a small ceremonial dagger in a metal sheath. On the black handgrip is an enamelled red swastika on a white field and on the blade is engraved Blut und Ehre, the German for Blood and Honour, the motto of the S.S. As an unrepentant anti-Nazi of World War 2 vintage, I stand behind no one in my hatred of the Third Reich. Yet I must confess I think that dagger is beautiful; horribly beautiful, but beautiful nonetheless (p. 16).

Lanier is perhaps the father of a socially critical art education (1969), but since his avowed interest here is aesthetic, though he knows more, his response is divided. He is unable to reconcile his aesthetic response to his knowledge of the wider social context. By contrast, Chalmers' concern, and mine, would be in the whole meaning of the dagger, aesthetic and otherwise; indeed, in this case, the tension between the aesthetic and the context. Many art educators today profess concern for meaning, not just aesthetics.

And they are interested in the meaning artifacts have for students, not just connoisseurs. Pat Brady (1986) calls for an art curriculum of "the human social condition" (p. 61). In reply to a quote offered by Ralph Smith (1986) as a paradigm of aesthetic sensitivity, Brady argues that a legitimate response could be "Merde!!!" (p. 60).

On what basis are we now to proceed? Having opened the school-room door to allow in the plethora of cultural products previously locked outside, what do we do? How do we deal with the diverse and often deeply disturbing cultural products that exist. While we have learnt to deal with Monet aesthetically and Van Gogh in terms of expressiveness, what are we to do with television soaps, teen magazines, supermarket paintings, with illustrations on the back of cereal packets and bubble gum wrappers? How are we to deal with the kinds of cultural experience with which most of our students are most familiar? We have recognised the issue of cultural diversity; how are we now to deal with it?

Most of the art educators I have mentioned as champions of an open-door policy to the visual arts are theoretically indebted to functionalist sociology and functional anthropology. Chapman (1978) makes her approach clear in advocating the study of artifacts in terms of paired opposites like traditional and innovative. Feldman (1982) would study cultural artifacts as bearers of themes common to all humanity; birth, death, grief; and rites of passage like marriage.

The end product of this approach is description. It seeks to make students aware of their own participation with the visual arts in a way that relates their participation to others in time and place. In this, the approach responds to deeply felt pressures. As the anthropologist Braudy (1982) has written,

The pre-occupation with the present, the search for patterns and the exposure of its images . . . is historically associated with periods when the signs are unclear and cultural classification becomes the prime way to get control over events (pp. 484-485).

By exercising the control of interpretation, art educators would place themselves, and invite their students, to stand outside the chaos. They assume that if they can describe what is going on they have at least some measure of power over it. The desire to impart such power, such control, appears to me wholly commendable. The desire to better understand the lived experience of students appears equally commendable. The need to make art education relevant and vital to students goes without saying.

Yet the approach is, I want to suggest, seriously flawed. It is not enough to describe social function as if standing outside looking in. Society is at least not only a functioning organism. It is hierarchic, stratified and, in many ways, unjust; and whatever else the visual arts may be they are essentially an integral part of such a society. Since they are part of a struggle to make meaning in an unjust society, a hierarchic and stratified society, inevitably they are bound to issues of power and domination.

I agree with Lanier (1976) when he writes elsewhere of arts education:

What is required is a critical consciousness, an informed awareness of the social forces which oppress our lives, confine our growth, and define our dreams, and an additional awareness of what we can do to combat them . . . to clarify the ways in which the social, political, and economic worlds work and how it can be improved (p. 20).

I agree with Gerry King (1987) who calls for an art education that is "issues conscious" because that is the way art is. I agree with Landon Beyer (1984), who calls for an art education that interprets culture in ways that "puts it at the centre of social conduct and ethical deliberations" (p. 8).

### Foundations for a Socially Critical Position

I will attempt to lay before you several theoretical foundations upon which a socially critical art education could be built, an art education prepared to address not only the socially embedded nature of its subject, but its political nature. In developing a socially critical position, I will be keeping in mind the two competing positions I have already mentioned: the cultural-pluralist approach, many of us now advocate, and the aesthetic orientation many of us, in one form or another, still practice.

The foundations I will offer are not exclusive. Other approaches are available, and all are constantly being revised. I will not be translating theory into classroom practice; that work remains to be done. The kind of theoretical ideas I will be drawing upon have been developed largely for literature and the media, not for art education. Where they might lead us in the classroom I cannot yet say. Here, I will seek only to outline some general principles.

In the spirit of the intellectual tradition from which I will be coming let me spell out what that tradition is. Let me lay my cards on the table; that way I will be a stationary target. I will be drawing upon what has been called the culturalist tendency within contemporary Cultural Studies in England. This is a network of ideas that owes a major debt to various Marxist theorists and, indeed, has been a significant contributor to a new, complex Marxism. In particular, I'll be drawing upon the ideas of Raymond Williams (1958; 1961/65; 1977; 1979; 1981; 1983), E. P. Thompson (1962a; 1962b; 1963), Stuart Hall (1977; 1980; 1982), Terry Eagleton (1983), and Richard Johnson (1979), including their interpretations of continental theoreticians, notably Antonio Gramsci, Mikhail Bakhtin, and Michel Foucault.

What I will be offering is not a coherent body of knowledge, not a single theory, but a number of intersecting themes, a set of interwoven proposals. As ideas about society and human action some will seem unremarkable, though used as the basis for thinking about cultural products they can have far reaching consequences.<sup>1</sup>

## Social Structure and Lived Experience

The first foundation I wish to propose is that there needs to be as much stress on social structure as on lived experience. On the one hand, studying culture means to try to understand how cultural products are generated and used within the context of people's lives. One needs to be sensitive to student's own meanings, beliefs and values. This far many of us are now prepared to go. But going only so far means ignoring the wider context of the social structure in which experiences are had. As well as responsiveness to lived experience we need the scale of a theory concerned with the social world as a whole. Naturalistic approaches take us only so far. From a Marxist position, experiential accounts of culture disregard the ever-present possibility of false consciousness and the power of social structures to operate behind our backs (Johnson, 1979). And this applies as much to the fine arts as it does to television.

When we gaze at a Monet haystack bathed in warm afternoon light, perhaps we are overwhelmed by the loveliness of the colours, or like Kandinsky (1964) claimed, transported into another dimension. Perhaps the only response we wish to make is aesthetic. Political considerations seem irrelevant, intrusive, even tasteless. Of course, there are times when all we want to say about an artifact is "how beautiful." However, an educated response is at least aware of the pressures that drive one to this position, and as educators it is incumbent upon us to make those pressures visible to our students.

We should be cognizant that the notion of aesthetic experience, like our modern conception of fine art, was a direct response to the Industrial Revolution; and that the emergence of these concepts was bound closely to the emergence of culture as the cultivation of a refined sensibility and later the works of such refinement. We should recall that these developments occurred in response to the ugliness of industry, to a general social emphasis on utility, but also, to calls for democracy by the new proletarian class oppressed by their industrial masters (Williams, 1958, 1983). We should remember that the honoured place afforded aesthetic sensitivity, of refined taste, has often been used as a weapon in the class war inaugurated by the Industrial Revolution. We should be aware, and make it known to our students, that we are all heirs of the Industrial Revolution, all subject to the social dynamics that arose at that time; to the split consciousness between art and industry, the aesthetic and utility, high culture and mass culture, the culture of the elite and the culture of the so-called mob. And we should never forget that these distinctions have frequently been used to check democratic impulses.

The single most influential text of the high culture social critique, forever after regarded as a pinnacle of high culture analysis, was Matthew Arnold's (1869) *Culture and Anarchy*. It was written in direct response to a riot which occurred in London's Hyde Park when police charged into protestors who were calling for a widened franchise (Williams, 1979). At the turn of this century, at the dawn of modernity, the single most pressing dilemma facing young members of the European avant garde was whether art should serve the international working class movement for social justice, or

whether art should serve itself (Shapiro, 1976). In deciding, as most did, that art should serve itself, they responded to the same social pressures we are subject to when we respond to their work with "how beautiful" and are prepared to leave it at that.

Foucault advises, whenever there is talk of meaning and of goodness and virtue, look for "strategies of domination" (Dreyfus and Rabinow, 1982, p. 212). Lived experience is vital to cultural analysis, our own as well as our students, but it should never exclude considerations of social organization.

## Society Consists of Competing Interests Which are Structured in Dominance

The second foundation stone I wish to lay is that society consists of groups whose interests are in conflict and is structured in dominance. Society is not just a functioning organism. The anthropological view of culture as a whole way of life is a false generalisation, altogether too impersonal and passive. It is more accurate to speak of a whole way of conflict, or whole ways of life (Thompson, 1962a). But society is not only conflictual; it is, in Althusser's phrase "structured in dominance" (cited in Hall, 1977, p. 327). Society should be understood in terms of power and domination.

To understand cultural production in such a society a concept which has proven enormously helpful is that of hegemony. Gramsci described hegemony as the domination of one group over another by, among other means, establishing what will count as definitions of reality. Definitions which are favourable to the dominant group are institutionalised in civil life and the organs of the state. This includes education, the major communication systems, and the arts. Such definitions of reality are so persuasive that they come to constitute the primary lived experience of subordinate groups. All competing definitions of reality are framed within the preferred range of dominant groups. This does not mean the dominant groups are able either to prescribe or proscribe the specific consciousness of subordinate groups, but dominant groups strive to bring all alternatives within their horizons of thought. Consciousness is saturated to such an extent that pressures and limits of what is actually economic, political and cultural, seem to most of us the pressures and limits of human existence and common sense (Williams, 1977). The interest serving nature of hegemony is thereby rendered invisible. By such naturalness, such taken-for-grantedness, ideology secures consent. Ideology masquerades as common sense (Hall, 1977).

In a society that is structured from top to bottom, to study cultural products is largely to study definitions of reality acceptable to dominant groups. In a hierarchic society, to study culture is often to study how the ruling hegemony is produced.

## Cultural Products are Constitutive of Social Reality

The third foundation I wish to propose is that cultural products should be regarded as constitutive of social reality. The keyword here is constitutive. Culture is constitutive of social pressures and processes, social values and beliefs. In proposing that culture is *constitutive* of social dynamics, I am rejecting expression theory and reflection theory and all the other theories which assume culture and society to be autonomous domains.

In orthodox Marxism, culture was a reflection of the socio-economic base. In common, liberal parlance, culture is an expression of social dynamics. Both views are equally rejected. Instead, cultural production is seen to be interwoven with the general social order (Hall, 1982), as inseparably interactive with economic and political processes (Williams, 1961/65). The inherent passivity of expression and reflection theory is rejected in favour of the view that culture is as much an ongoing contribution to society as a mere response to it. Culture is seen as an active, ongoing intervention which helps to highlight, exclude and frame issues; even to define what will constitute an issue.

For example, research now focuses on television as only one, not clearly demarcated influence, among other influences within society, an independent element of a whole social reality rather than about social reality (McQuail, 1983). The media is seen not as one thing but as offering an enormously diverse set of messages, images and ideas, most of which do not originate with the media themselves, but come from society and are sent back to society. Thus, visual images should be regarded as an integral part of what has been called "the teeming forces which jostle each other within the combat zone of the world" (Holquist, cited in Kijinski, 1987).

I said earlier that to study culture is often to study how the ruling hegemony is produced. But cultural production does not only mean reproducing world views; it also produces them. A paradigm for this analysis is language. As individuals we are born into and shaped by language. This is at once our socialisation and our individualisation (Williams, 1977). Similarly, we are born into and shaped by the plethora of visual images that today saturate our environment. Yet we can also actively contribute to the development of the visual arts. We should not think of a reified visual arts and a separate society; we should think of a social art.

I believe this point to be of great significance. We need to reject Romantic notions about the arts as highly impactful as well as behaviourist notions about the media to the same effect. On the other hand, we need to abandon the popular contrary notion that the arts have no effect on society. Rather, we need to understand culture as an active generation of meanings as much a contribution as a response to society. As art educators we need to be realistic about the impact of images on society; equally, since our subject is an integral constitutive part of society, we cannot avoid social commitment. A failure to engage with social issues cannot be founded on the belief that the visual arts are passive.

## Agency, Constraint and Struggle

This analysis of culture as active is built upon a general view of human action in terms of agency, constraint and struggle. To view human action in terms of agency, constraint and struggle is the fourth foundation I wish to propose. The importance of this proposal is twofold. There is a real need to individuals and groups of individuals to perceive the power they have to make changes. There is an equal need for us to understand the strength, tenacity and pervasiveness of the forces with which we must contend.

While we enthusiastically celebrate individual achievement, it is always necessary to remember that human agency operates within historically formed constraints. Engels wrote, "we make our own history ourselves, but . . . under very definite assumptions and conditions" (cited in Williams, 1977, p. 85). Culture is something people make for themselves; an active process which is lived, not fixed, and not consumed. Culture is something which happens in human relations as the result of human agency (Thompson, 1962a). As Williams (1977) writes,

Everything we see and do, the whole structure of our relations and institutions, depends finally on the effort of learning, description and communication. We create the world as we have thought of art being created (p. 54).

We are not powerless, but our power is limited. The control established by hegemony is very great, but it is always a struggle and usually, only partial. There always exists the possibility of counter hegemony; and always, in actual social practice there exists opposition and alternatives. Cultural forms close to the general social and economic organisation tend largely to reproduce the ruling hegemony. We have only to think of who owns television stations in this country to make this connection. But other forms of cultural production exist. Cultural forms which were once dominant, but are now marginal, like painting often have an alternative or oppositional relation to dominant culture. Other cultural forms suggest new meanings and values, new practices and kinds of relationships (Williams, 1977).

However, such alternative and oppositional possibilities exist, by definition, only in relation to the dominant. And they are always in danger of incorporation. The most challenging ideas can be rendered acceptable; by selection, modification, contextualisation. Thus, in speaking of cultural production it is only ever possible to speak of agency and expression, while also speaking of regulation and constraint. I said earlier that society should be understood in terms of power and domination, and so should cultural production. Yet both social dynamics and cultural production should also be viewed in terms of resistance and struggle.

To make meaning is to struggle with competing definitions of reality. This applies whether one is producing a cultural product or using one. The meaning of a visual image is modified and transformed by the variable

social tones, valuations and connotations with which it is used under specific conditions. Far from being neutral, images are a focus for struggle and contradiction. To study an image is to investigate its varied history as conflicting groups, classes, individuals and discourses have sought to appropriate it and imbue it with its own meanings. The visual arts is a field of ideological contention, a site of ideological struggle. The many images produced in our society carry with them values and world views. There are many official images which are passed off as the only true images, but their values and world views are constantly being tested - and then accepted, or rejected, or modified, or subverted - by the multiple interpretations of the various classes, age groups, professions and ethnic and other minorities.

Media research is now premised on the "resilience and self-protective capacity of individuals, groups and even cultures" (McQuail, 1983, p. 222) in dealing in complex, negotiable and oppositional ways with media content. Research focuses on audience exploitation of the media, where initiative and control of the media are often located with those who use it. The meaning of an image is never fixed. Meaning, despite its pedigree, and no matter how seemingly fundamental, is always contestable by those who seek to exercise the power of interpretation for themselves. We should look upon images, not as stable possessors of beauty or truth, but as items in a network of manoeuvres, tactics and techniques which serve interests.

### A Commitment to Explicitly Engaged Judgement

The fifth foundation I wish to propose is that there should be a commitment to explicitly engaged judgements. While cultural pluralists are content to describe and celebrate, a socially critical stance is premised on the assumption that offering judgement is central to one's responsibility toward the development of a more democratic society. If culture is an instrument of power, it is naive merely to describe and irresponsible always to celebrate. What is needed is a willingness to confront the hierarchic, unjust, undemocratic nature of our society as manifest in cultural products. Being an art educator should mean appraising cultural products on the basis of what contributes toward a genuine participatory democracy.

How is judgement to be offered? A number of past practices surely are to be avoided. We should not conflate all that is good and worthy with the fine arts and all that is bad with the popular arts. The boundaries between these categories are often arbitrary; close examination reveals as many similarities as differences (Gans, 1975). It should not be categories of culture that count, but the interests they serve. What is important is the intentions of, and responses to, cultural producers, not the medium of communication.

Equally, we should reject the imperialism of aesthetic judgement. We should avoid the kind of judgement which is ostensibly, though never in reality, one of detachment, where the judgement and the judged are alike in being taken out of all their conditions and intentions. There should be no place for making judgements on the basis of some kind of spontaneous sixth

sense where the product judged is hermetically sealed from history (Eagleton, 1983). Furthermore, we should not merely assume, as the cultural pluralists do, that cultural products fulfil needs. This is to fall into a black hole called cultural relativism. Finally, we should avoid, as the cultural pluralists do not, dissolving criticism back into descriptive sociology.

What we should do is to begin where the cultural pluralists leave off. Like the cultural pluralists we should accept no *a priori* honouring of selected cultural forms, but rather, work on the assumption that people's conditions of existence are diverse and a wide range of cultural forms is necessary to fulfil their need to grapple with meaning. But we need to go further. We need to examine cultural products in terms of people's whole conditions of existence; that means in terms of both lived experience and social structure, in terms of power and domination. It also means - this is an essential ingredient - describing the nature of one's engagement.

Judgement means describing artifacts in terms of their whole conditions of existence while also describing the conditions under which the judgement is offered. It is necessary to state where one is coming from, to make clear one's relationship with the artifact judged, to make visible the nature of one's own engagement. Engagement is, thereby, open to scrutiny and, thus, open to being contested. Acknowledging the nature of one's engagement avoids cultural relativism; it avoids the imperialism of omnipotence and it avoids the reduction of criticism to mere description.

Lanier made explicit the nature of his engagement with the Nazi dagger. Perhaps if we were more explicit about how our middle-classness influences our judgement of the kinds of cultural participation many of our students prefer, our judgements would be more honest. Certainly, they would be more contestable, and that would be no bad thing. Williams (1961/1965) writes that the purpose of cultural study should be

to make the interpretation conscious, by showing historical alternatives; to relate the interpretation to the particular contemporary values on which it rests; and, by exploring the real patterns of the work, confronts us with the real nature of the choices we are making. . . . The more actively all cultural work can be related either to the whole organisation within which it was expressed, or to the contemporary organisation within which it is used, the more clearly shall we see its true values (pp. 69-70).

For those concerned that such judgement takes us far from aesthetic considerations, it is fair to say, while aesthetic value is no longer at centre stage, it is not ignored. Not even a central focus on ideology and only a marginal interest in aesthetics is being suggested. Rather, I am advocating an interconnected ensemble of considerations - the social, the economic, the psychological, and the aesthetic - in which the aesthetic is essential.

The view of aesthetic value adopted here is far broader than the usual conception of the fine, beautiful and vital. It is expanded to include, not only the intensifying, the heightening, but sense activity in general - the dulling,

the lulling, the chiming and the overbearing. Analysis will show where the orchestration of such general sensory phenomena stimulates, reinforces and extends meanings and values in intense, even irreplaceable ways. But analysis will also show where sensory means aid the evasion of other important human experiences. This needs to be of at least equal concern. Lanier's story about the Nazi dagger makes the point, Rambo-type films make the point; pornography makes the point, the presentation of the news makes the point. Even television programming makes the point.

## Conclusion

Let me draw together the threads of this address. I am interested in an art education which acknowledges pluralism, but is not uncritical of it; that is accepting of lived experience, our own as well as our students', but is equally conscious of how lived experience is framed by how society is structured. I am interested in an art education which recognises that to focus on meaning is to do so in an unjust, stratified society; that is aware that concentrating on the human social condition means to acknowledge as central dimensions power and inequality. I am interested in an art education that is open to both consummatory experience and self-expression, but is conscious from where such concerns derive and resists allowing such pressures to dominate. I am interested in an art education that is as much concerned with power as aesthetics, an art education that would place aesthetic value back into its historical pressures and social processes. The kind of art education which I seek to support is not passive or reactive, but proactive; indeed, interventionary. To celebrate cultural diversity is fine; certainly preferable to a narrow aesthetic interest in the fine arts. Cultural pluralism is at least democratic, but it is a soft kind of democracy; one without any fight in it. The art education I seek plays its part in challenging undemocratic practices and is characterised by struggle, an inevitable consequence of being at the centre of social issues and ethical considerations.

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## Footnotes

1. For a more comprehensive survey of these proposals, and others, see Duncum (1987a). For an indication of how these proposals may effect art education see Duncum (1987b).

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