

OUR NEIGHBOURS' UNDERSTANDING OF ART: A CLASS FIELD STUDY

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Introduction

Most people believe that taste in art is highly individual, that one person's opinion is as good as another. However, the literature on art and art education usually reflects the assumptions and values of the established authorities—art critics, historians, and aesthetic philosophers. The adult education specialist, David Jones (1988), provides this interpretation of similar behavior in the arts in general:

A cultural hegemony exists within the compulsory sector of the education service, and maybe in the country at large, which perpetuates a set of values rooted in what we have come to call high culture. ...In a perverse way they are persuaded it is of value, even though they themselves derive no pleasure from it. They are persuaded that their lack of sympathy stems from their own educational inadequacy. High culture is still believed to be superior, even though the majority of the population feel no sympathy for it (p. 23).

It is assumed that, "With varying degrees of success, schools and colleges pass on a set of cultural values which reflect the dominant culture of society..." (Jones, p. 135).

Other institutions, such as museums, also promote these values. However, Johnson's study of socialization in art museum tours found that docents and visitors both emphasized the validity of personal preference. One docent explained, "Ideas of why you like it are absolutely as valid as anybody else's. And there's, you know, there's [sic] no law that says that you should like this kind of art" (Johnson, 1981, p. 62).

The Class Field Study

A course, *Art/Art Education Ethnographic Studies Investigation*, was attended by fourteen graduate students and one undergraduate at The Ohio State University. The course focused upon the design of ethnographic studies that were examined as they related to the fields of art education and

art. The ethnographic approach to research in these areas was investigated through literature and direct experience with naturalistic observation techniques and interviews with subjects. From the literature, students developed rationales for conducting a qualitative field study using ethnographic methods to collect information. The time constraints of the quarter system prohibited the students from each carrying out their own field studies. Instead, the class conducted a joint study on a topic they developed as a group: *Our Neighbors' Understanding of Art*. The purpose of this group's study was to determine how "ordinary" people understand art, through the analysis of a collection of interviews. Each student chose a person from the neighborhood in which they lived to be a participant in the study.

Methodology

Popkewitz's and Tabachnick's (1981) explanation of the ethnographic approach to research relies partly on direct naturalistic observation and interviews with the subjects. Direct naturalistic participation pertains to the researcher's role as a spectator entering the subject's physical environment in a manner as unobtrusive as possible, while sensually and cognitively recording what is going on. This approach to research was applied when the class conducted its study.

The questions and questioning strategies were devised collectively by the group based on Spradley's (1979) *The Ethnographic Interview*. After a discussion of this book, each member of the class produced a list of questions designed to reveal a neighbor's understanding of art. The class then compared, discussed and voted on the composite list of questions to determine the eight that were most appropriate to be used in their interviews. The eight questions were:

1. What do you think of when you hear the word "art"?
2. What is art to you?
3. Describe an early experience with art.
4. What makes something art?
5. How is art a part of your life?
6. Would you describe your preferences in art?
7. Who determines what is art?
8. Where might you find art?

Spradley suggests that the information that a subject offers should be rephrased and repeated to the subject to check for correct interpretation, and that the native terminology and vocabulary of the subject be utilized in this process. The interviewers' stance was autocratic in the sense that they acted as independent agents, using the results to serve their purposes (Spradley, 1979).

The students tape recorded the interviews with their neighbors. After a critique of the interview by the instructor, a few students chose to repeat their interview with another neighbor. Each student transcribed his/her tape and analyzed the interview in accordance with Dobbert (1982), who

said that analysis is an ongoing process which attempts to fit data "into the conceptual scheme on which the study was based and to answer the basic research questions" (p. 271). He/she then wrote up the findings supporting his/her work based on the course readings and discussion. The microethnographic studies were then shared with the class through verbal reports.

Description of Subjects

Students were also required to describe their neighbors in the manner recommended by Spradley (1979). A neighbor, for the purpose of our study, was defined as a person living on the same block as the interviewer. All were residents of Columbus, Ohio. All of the subjects had been educated past the high school level, so our ordinary neighbors were not so "ordinary" in that regard. There were twice as many women interviewed as men. Most of the neighbors were chosen because they were at home during the time that the interviewer was able to do the interview. Some of the neighbors were known to the interviewers before the interview. The subjects ranged between the ages of early twenties to early seventies. Their occupations varied: housewife, university student, physical therapist, and Assistant Attorney General of the state. An example of the kinds of description students provided about their neighbors are presented by Michele:

My neighbor is a soft-spoken man in his late 50's. He has a delightful sense of humour and has been my friend and neighbor for eight years. He grew up in the heyday of Reynolds Tobacco Industry, home-based in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. In the course of telling his tobacco stories of a bygone era, he may touch on his original family's conversations about the Civil War. He says that today his 97-year-old mother discusses Civil War controversies as if it were yesterday. My neighbor is an attorney in Columbus and has lived here since 1967. ...despite my novice ethnographic tendency to lead, give answers, and play the expert role, my neighbor, a fellow of solid opinion, surfaced as a person of keen insight into many areas of art (Darling, 1988).

Deborah provided another example:

The informant's name is Rita _____. Approximate age, early 30's. The date is May 14, 1988. The location is Columbus, Ohio. For this first interview, the surroundings changed from an outside back porch to an inside sewing room as the evening got darker. A large tree full of leaves encloses a corner of the porch where the interview begins. Metal and cloth porch chairs are sandwiched by black tables where ferns are placed in a corner arrangement. Cricket sounds are abundant. Rita appears to be a little

uncomfortable, yet excited when we begin the interview. She has on a plaid dress with tailored silver earrings which can be seen under her cropped brown hair. Her deep brown eyes and small hands move expressively when she speaks. By the time we finish the first side of the tape, it is dark and Rita suggests we go inside to her work room. The room is bright yellow and white with hints of mint green accents. The furnishings are modest. There are various levels of light sources. Shelving and framed needlepoints are strategically hung on white walls except where there are windows trimmed with lace curtains. The immediate reflection which enters my mind is that I have seen this room, even before, maybe in one of mother's home furnishing books. The room, even though lived-in, via the sewing projects on a table, is remarkably clean and picturesque (Ramage, 1988).

The students' brief descriptions of their neighbors provided insights into the subjects' personalities and a context from which to evaluate the interviewees' statements.

Data Gathered From Interviews

The initial information the class decided to elicit from their neighbors was concerned with their informants' early enculturation and socialization concerning art. Enculturation was defined as the process of acquiring the characteristics of a given culture, simply by living and participating in its everyday life and by becoming familiar with its language and symbols. Socialization was defined as the general process of learning to function as a member of society by learning its rules, values, and social roles such as: mother, husband, student, child, and occupational roles such as teacher, the president, plumber, artist, etc. (Miller, 1979). Socialization in the dominant American culture usually implies formal schooling, but can be taught through other institutions, churches, family and informally through the media.

The class decided to first ask their neighbors to "Describe an early experience with art." The interviewees' initial responses tended to be descriptions of positive or negative enculturation experiences centered around their homes and families. The most frequent early enculturation experience mentioned by several of our neighbors was drawing at home.

Deborah's neighbor, Rita, described an early positive enculturation experience concerning music:

...my mom would buy me these little Golden Records at the grocery store. I was allowed to have one a week. And, I would memorize all the words. I had a little record player and I would play those songs and sing them (Ramage, 1988).

A negative aspect of this experience was also relayed:

Oh, and my dad one time when I was six...he stopped at the record store to buy me a record and they didn't have any Golden Records, so he did come out with this *Nutcracker Suite* thing. It had part of the *Nutcracker Suite* on there, which scared me because it had a picture of the Rat King fighting with the prince on the cover. I never played it because I thought it was scary music (Ramage, 1988).

There were a few other negative enculturation experiences discussed. One neighbor prefaced her discussion with, "I grew up in rural Ohio. Rural Ohio is not big on art." (Shaw, 1988). Jeff's neighbor discussed the frustration she felt because she constantly compared her art efforts to those of her younger sister, whom she reported to be "gifted in art" (Leptak, 1988). Her sister, she rationalized, went on to become a fashion designer. Another negative experience recounted was one of being exposed to country-western music by parents.

The participants generally described their early school (socialization) art experiences as very important. Most of the school experiences were positive. The most frequently referred to experiences were art classes in grade school in which they participated in activities such as drawing, painting or making crafts. An elderly neighbor woman described her art experiences: "...in grade school we cut out pictures of famous paintings and memorized them, then we were tested on them" (Tizzano, 1988).

Our neighbors also discussed art classes beyond primary and secondary art instruction in which they drew and painted from figures, models and nature (Miranda, 1988). One informant discussed a college course in which students "...talked about shape and color" (Gatton, 1988). All of these positive schooling experiences referred in some way to the values of the high or fine art world as defined through the established hierarchy of the dominant culture art world and reproduced through public schooling.

The socialization experiences our neighbors discussed that did not take place in the schools were: participating in plays in the community and at church, touring Europe and visiting the Louvre and other museums "...where they collect what people collectively consider 'good' art" (Shaw, 1988), and being exposed to parents' friends who enjoyed and played classical music (Ramage, 1988). The only negative school experience was attributed to a grade school teacher who told one of the neighbors, when she was seven, that all trees must be colored green (Leptak, 1988).

The next questions asked of our neighbors were, "Would you describe your preferences in art?" and "What is art to you?" Their responses were remarkably diverse. Most of the informants first discussed art as they had been taught to in school, in terms of the fine arts. Many preferred realistic paintings, such as landscapes and natural scenery, while two mentioned Western art specifically. Several named traditional fine artists as examples, such as Millet, Remington, and Russell. Although most seemed to assume this question referred only to painting, one person was quick to explain that

art is all encompassing, including dance, music and opera.

After reciting their formal art schooling version of what is fine art, they revealed other very personal and idiosyncratic statements concerning art(s). Discussing "painting and sculpture and things on the wall," one person added, "I think I see art in other places, but it's what I think art is [emphasis added]" (Leptak, 1988). Their expanded explanations were often prefaced with condemnation of the socialized versions of fine art they had previously discussed. Several people thought immediately of Picasso whose works, they said, were incomprehensible and overvalued.

Many people accepted everyday sights as art, such as commercial signs, sidewalk paintings, subway graffiti, blonde wood furniture, refrigerator child art, needlework, T.V. and even an austere shelf with a plant on it. One person suggested "European posters" (Leptak, 1988), apparently thinking that domestic posters are less artistic.

There was disagreement about whether nature is art. One neighbor said pointedly that art is "not things that nature does, but that people have done—and that hang in museums" (Shaw, 1988). On the other hand, another responded, "I like to appreciate trees and flowers and I think they are the arts created by maybe God or somebody" (Miranda, 1988). Two persons seemed to have found a middle-ground, offering bonsai trees and Japanese gardens as examples of art, both instances of nature modified by some human creator. It is interesting to note that European, not American posters, and Japanese, not American gardens were considered art, which seems to suggest that for some individuals, an element of mystery or rarity is necessary for art. The commonplace does not count.

To describe their preferences, some people also identified general characteristics of art, such as "visually pleasing," which was the most common response, with one person defining "pleasing" as "relaxing" (Miranda, 1988). Several thought that art required "greater contemplation" (Leptak, 1988), pleasing both eye and mind. It is unclear whether they thought art could evoke both relaxation and contemplation at the same time. Other characteristics named were beauty, creativity and uniqueness, "something quite special that is quite different from the normal objects we use in our everyday life" (Miranda, 1988).

Many informants seemed to find it easier to discuss art in terms of the artists' attributes. One person explained that, "somehow, an artist sees things differently than we do and then has the physical skill to put it down [in art media]" (Shaw, 1988). Many informants emphasized the importance of the artists' "talent" and "technical skills," meaning mastery of the medium. However, more than technique is necessary for true art, according to some. One person criticized technicians who lack "substance or guts" (Ramage, 1988), while another person, unimpressed by classic art, admitted that although the Old Masters had technical skill, they lacked creativity. Several maintained that art is expression by artists, revealing their feelings through their artwork. Only one person distinguished between artists who create "artwork" and artisans (or craftsperson) who create "products" (Darling, 1988). The difference was clarified with an example of a musician who performs as an artist, but who makes French horns as an artisan.

When asked, "What do you think of when you hear the word art?" again the neighbors first named things associated with fine art. Some of

their responses were: Venus de Milo, abstract art, Rembrandt and Rubens, paintings and crafts, old paintings, 19th century Impressionist landscapes, big museums such as The Met, The Louvre, The Chicago Museum of Art, and things in a museum such as paintings, sculptures and things on a wall. Their references also were directed to the "fine art(s)": classical music played with a full orchestra, dance such as *Swan Lake* music and architecture.

After the perfunctory lists of "fine art(s)" were presented, our neighbors expressed more personal explanations of what they thought of when they heard the word art. Some of the examples mentioned were from a more popular realm, such as jazz, bluegrass, cooking, fashion design, and somewhat facetiously, Ronald Reagan's speeches. According to Mary, the arts are "things that are creative. You can be a chef and be creative. I could make a plate of spaghetti and present it attractively." She added that art is "not the same as everything else." To be an artist, "you have to add something different to the norm" (Leptak, 1988). One man asserted that "...art becomes art when it is appreciated," adding that "...appreciating is a matter of personal preference" (Darling, 1988).

For many people, mentioning art automatically evokes a negative reaction, sometimes in response to what others have approved as art. Rita first responded, "you say art and I think of this real, real pretty statue," but she then proceeded to criticize other images of art acceptable in some parts of society, but not to her. For her, the archetypal modern painting, mentioned repeatedly, was a white dot on a red background, which she found to be unmoving and in fact, unartistic. She also argued that jazz is merely "a tool," country music is "mediocrity personified," and twentieth century music is "unorganized" (Ramage, 1988). Departing from the majority opinion, Mary eschews the Old Masters because their works are too representative, thus lacking creativity. Warhol's soup cans, she believes, are equally deficient in artistic quality.

The neighbors were polled for their responses to, "What makes something art?" All of these responses tended to incorporate personal aesthetic opinions and judgments. Gary's neighbor related the following answer to this question.

Some sort of consensus by people who know art, that is art—which is a circular way of figuring out what art is. I would assume there are mathematical proportions that make things visually pleasing—and so when people make their art with these proportions, colors, and those things that balance each other would be judged to have art. Somebody finds it to be visually pleasing, wanting to look at it, and calls it art, therefore it is art (Shaw, 1988).

This neighbor's reply was typical of many of those interviewed. He expressed a sense of mysticism and faith in a scientific paradigm about what makes something art. There also appeared to be confusion about who made this determination and how this was accomplished. Other neighbors suggested "...art becomes art when it is appreciated" (Darling, 1988) and "...art doesn't always make me happy, but it moves me in some fashion"

(Ramage, 1988). Others expressed that art made something pleasant to the eye which adds character to your home, work place, community or college campus. Most agreed that art is an expression of people, yet this was often contradicted by individuals who said that it is not art, unless it is new and improved. Some complicated this further by suggesting that we return to "classical values" (Ramage, 1988). A quality which was suggested as essential to the make-up of art was the expression of feeling.

In answering "Where might you find art?," our neighbors' responses fit into three categories. The first were the locations where one might find fine art such as museums, galleries and schools. Included in their responses were also public and private locations in which one might find art. Private locations included: clothing you wear, "...but not if they were bought at K Mart" (Ramage, 1988), at work, at home, cars, doctors' offices and homes. Public locations in which they believed art could be located were: houses or buildings, natural surroundings of various historical locations, churches, sculpture gardens and "everywhere" (Shaw, 1988; Molaeb, 1988).

The question "Who determines what is art?" seemed to elicit some of our most interesting responses. Many were couched in negative terms. The answers fell under the headings of institutions and people. The most frequently mentioned institution was the gallery where "Art is shown and that is what makes it art" (Tizzano, 1988). In a few cases the institutions were spoken of in disdain, such as "...schools pushing thoughts about art...or maybe it's the media!? ...Museums in cahoots...with secret meetings going on" (Ramage, 1988).

Most of the interviewees stated that art experts decided what art is: "museum personnel who select works" (Tizzano, 1988), "people who collect and pay for it" (Shaw, 1988), "people who write books" (Ramage, 1988), "art historians...people who criticize the objects" (Miranda, 1988). One individual credited "society" with making the determination of what art is (Gatton, 1988). A popular answer was, "People dictate what is art, but individuals determine for themselves what is good art" (Darling, 1988). This sort of statement indicated a contradiction in thinking. One individual dispensed with the notion of a grand arbiter and simply stated that "viewers" determine what art is (Tizzano, 1988).

Other negative comments made when discussing the cultural determiners of art were: "I don't understand the big push to make people understand things they don't care for...No opinions are allowed...it's like *The Emperor's New Clothes*" (Ramage, 1988) and "Suddenly there are these critics, telling you what is good and what isn't good...Who died and appointed them God!" (Leptak, 1988). Ironically, the neighbor who made the latter statement is among those who listen to the critics. For example, she admits, "The Campbell soup can, to me, is ridiculous. But I'm not going to question these people" (Leptak, 1988).

The last question asked of our neighbors, "How is art a part of your life?," initially evoked answers which described "fine art(s)" activities they were involved in. This list included: piano playing, attending Music-in-the-Park Series, attending Columbus Symphony Pops, attending Marine Band performances, going to museums when travelling and listening to classical music on the radio.

After the expected accounting of high art experiences, the neighbors

then went on to relate more personal and popular types of art activities they enjoyed. "I enjoy art in the work environment, the layouts, the landscape to some degree, the building architecture is art; working in the yard to some degree is art, arranging flowers / flower garden, has some art to it, arranging a house, decorating it, involves art" (Darling, 1988). A few mentioned personal sketching activities such as doodling on class notes and drawing little pictures on birthday and greeting cards. Others mentioned the decoration of their homes as a form of art involvement: "The art over my fireplace..." (Shaw, 1988), "The art on my walls" (Tizzano, 1988).

The "How is art a part of your life?" question also exposed positive and negative aesthetic preferences. Examples of positive preferences were: "I like pretty things, graceful lines" (Tizzano, 1988), "...white and blond wood type of things" (Leptak, 1988), "I like real traditional classical lines" (Ramage, 1988), "I do like Georgia O'Keefe, whatever kind of art that is" (Shaw, 1988).

Some of the aesthetic criticism voiced regarding music were: a disdain for 20th century music which is usually loud and disjointed, loud boom boxes, and loud music of any kind. A few unfavorable comments regarding the visual arts were: "Creativity, is not in classic art" (Leptak, 1988), and "I don't like modern art, like abstract or surreal" (Tizzano, 1988).

Generally, the aesthetic experiences our neighbors thought *should* be valued were those taught in schools. However, their dearest personal aesthetic preferences were collected during their everyday lives, and they reflected upon and expressed these with gusto and intensity.

Class Discussion of the Study

Genuinely surprised by their research findings, the class was particularly amazed at how uniformly most of their neighbors responded to the questions. The fact that fine or high art and its accompanying worlds were always mentioned first, followed by discussion of more personal, lived aesthetic values, they felt was extremely informative. Many commented on how effective the aesthetic enculturation and socialization process in the dominant culture is (especially in schools) regarding the fine art world, despite the fact that we often hear statements to the contrary.

The art education students felt they learned the following from this study: 1) they should be more aggressive and open in allowing for an expanded definition of art; 2) they should be more considerate of the importance of this revised definition of art in their students' lives; and 3) they should be aware of the need to encourage these views in preparing students for employment in art education. It was also suggested that teachers and students should be encouraged to share their personal aesthetic experiences and preferences in art learning situations. Challenging and questioning the validity of the tenets of the dominant cultural ideologies on aesthetics was also seen as a positive concept to be employed in teaching art.

The students in the class were forced to confront their own art biases and reassess their roles as art experts through the research experience. The

biggest shock to the class was that the questions, which they thought were narrowly designed to ascertain their neighbors' understandings of the visual arts, also drew out their neighbors' understandings of other fine arts: music, dance, drama, and literature.

Almost all of the students found that being neutral and not playing the part of art experts was very difficult. The neighbors often put their interviewers on the spot by asking them for their opinions on the questions. It was difficult for the novice interviewers to maintain that they were only interested in their neighbor's understanding of art, and for that reason should refrain from a discussion of the questions. For some of the student interviewers, the temptation to act as experts in the area was too much. They often broke down and expounded their words of wisdom, biasing their research and requiring additional interviews.

Conclusions

In deducing our neighbors' understandings of art, we concluded that these understandings exist on multiple levels. Based on class reports, a hegemonic structure to the values and belief systems of the neighborhood interviewees in regard to their understanding of art was determined. Their understandings revealed both social and personal concepts of art. The social concepts, based in the dominant ideology of the established art world and its marketplace, had been learned through enculturation and socialization processes. These social concepts of art were valued above their own personal aesthetic experiences, which differed significantly and idiosyncratically from the social concepts. Often, conflicting notions between personal aesthetics and social aesthetics were expressed. This conflict appears to reflect the irrelevance which the established art world's values, based on the monetary estimation of art works and artists in the marketplace, held in their daily lives. Our neighbors expressed a more inclusive, rich and democratic view of what is to be understood and valued as art.

Adult educator Malcolm Knowles (1980), has commented that people in his field often discover the "deuterolearning" or "secondary outcomes" of previous education. While learning specific facts or skills, students also acquire values which "may well be the most important product of a learning experience" (p. 212-3). Our class field study was to some extent an investigation of "secondary outcomes" in art education, and we think most art teachers would be surprised to see what values the students have actually acquired, in contrast to the stated goals of the curriculum. To avoid undesirable deuterolearning (i.e., negative attitudes about art), we think it is valuable for art-teachers-in-training to see the full range of their potential effect upon student learning.

The class also learned that cooperation in a research study could be beneficial. When no one really owns the study, a far more critical stance can be taken by all of the researchers. It is also an advantageous way to conduct research when time is short. One final value of the study was that it gave all of the students a chance for hands on experience in conducting research employing ethnographic methods.

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POPULAR CULTURE'S REVOLT AGAINST THE NORMALIZING CONSEQUENCES OF TRADITION

PAT RAFFERTY

For several years there has been an ongoing debate regarding whether street art (graffiti) qualifies as art or could be more aptly described as vandalism. While this paper does not claim to resolve the issue, a discussion of the corollary of that - the extent to which we are willing to tolerate divergence from normative expectations, lends insight into the topic of the means and limitations of what is representable as art.

An attempt will be made to look at social processes by which active relations of domination and subordination are made manifest in the context of accepting and rejecting art. Street art will be described as one aspect of popular culture that has contributed to an active reworking of the means to and the boundaries of what is representable as art.

While faceless persons who leave unsolicited messages in public are seemingly despised, they attract a following who see promise in such initiative; for them the act reasserts the importance of alternative forms of human expression and regional differences in art. The act signals a kind of emancipation of the creative spirit away from the lifeless values of an overly prescribed mainstream art deemed as antithetical to the artist as an independent thinker.

The work found in Vancouver, British Columbia reveals several different subcultures linked by significant crosscurrents. In the late seventies, a series of provocative little remarks began to appear on downtown walls in that City. They taunted the pedestrian in a playful yet provocative manner: "Free Love: Can you afford it?," "Despise Authority" and "Post-Atomic Cow: Precooked." The work was socially as well as visually provocative - a level of sophistication that dispelled any notion of graffiti as banal messages suitable only for washroom walls. This kind of street art (after this *graffiti*) exudes social and political satire and as a tradition it can be traced back to the early seventies.

Concurrent with this, a proliferation of a second kind appeared and was labelled Tag Graffiti by its makers. Interpreted earlier as an outright assault on the urban architecture of New York, it spread to Vancouver with local teenagers writing their aliases in highly stylized form on every available surface in the downtown core. Making your signature visible around town seemed to help establish the identity of an individual or gang.

A third kind of graffiti grew out of a sustained interest in Tag Graffiti. As signatures were drawn increasingly larger and the artists became more adept at using spray paint. Diagonals, dots, arrows, spirals and highlighting techniques gave character to scaled-up letters creating an overall razzle-dazzle of vibrant colours appropriately labelled, "Wild Style."