

FOLK ART IN ART EDUCATION: TOWARD A GENERAL THEORY OF ART AS A SOCIAL INSTITUTION

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Art may be understood by considering it as a social institution in which particular artifacts are presented as candidates for appreciation. This institution includes the domains of production, distribution, and consumption, all of which are regulated according to rules and standards relating to both art objects and behavioral roles for those people involved. In the paradigm case all participants in the institution are of the same cultural group. This is important for art educators to understand because of the diversity of cultures represented in the classroom. Because a person's greatest opportunity for meaningful involvement in the arts comes from within his or her native culture, art education which is excessively tied to the fine arts represents a form of cultural imperialism which alienates most students as potential participants in the arts.

Introduction

This paper is intended to outline (1) the importance of social theory in art for art education, (2) a unified conception of art which defines all art as the products of a genre of social institution in which artifacts are produced, distributed, and consumed within a particular folk group, and (3) some implications for art education of this position. The social institution being defined is necessarily tied to a single cultural group and is further defined by (1) a set of rules regulating the domains of production, distribution, and consumption of art objects, and (2) a set of role expectations for the individuals involved in the institution.

A relationship between art and society is recognized in art education literature. Art's impact on people is considered (Feldman, 1970), its function in various aspects of other cultural and social activities is considered (Chapman, 1978) and it is considered as a communication system (McFee and Degge, 1977). Although he does not take issue with these writings Bersson (1986) contends that art education still lacks social relevance. An assumption in this paper is that the lack of social

relevance in the art education literature is due to an inadequate theoretical base within which to organize the many social phenomena discussed. In order to clarify the relationship of art, society, and education this study is focused on how art emerges in a culture and the implication this has for education.

The Importance of a Social Theory

The artist is not a person with a particular complex of personality traits, but one who, within a culture, is acknowledged to be an artist (or its equivalent) by other members of the same culture. To paraphrase what Worsley (1968) has said of charismatic leaders, (1) artists can only be identified in social context, (2) artists only have in common a certain relationship to a group of other people, and (3) artists from one group may be met with indifference in other groups or at other times. Being an artist is not a quality of the person *per se*, but a phenomenon of the relationship of an individual to a constituency.

An example of one recognized as an artist in her community would be Almeda Riddle of Herber Springs, Arkansas, a singer of Ozark ballads (Abrahams, 1970). She is a woman

passionately concerned with the arts but with no apparent interest in the fine arts. She is concerned and knowledgeable about matters of expression, style, performance context, critical standards, meta-criticism, and the philosophy of the Ozark ballad. This raises two questions. First, how can her sophistication be reconciled with a body of aesthetic theory which ignores, or patronizingly romanticizes her art? Second, how can we even be sure that art exists in other cultures in light of Merriam's (1964) putative proof that it does not exist in certain tribes which are acknowledged to have songs which are generally considered in other contexts to be art?

No work of art can be either identified or evaluated without reference to its broader cultural position. It is hazardous even to classify a particular object (ballad or painting) as art without knowing first what other things are considered art in the culture in which it was made. Art may be defined in terms of a class of objects, therefore, if it is first known that either (1) there is a recognized class of objects which are considered art works, or (2) that a social institution exists which is analogous to that through which we produce such a class of objects. In the first case such a class of objects implies a social institution through which members of the class are produced. In the second case it will further be necessary to determine what objects are produced through this institution regardless of whether or not they are categorized as a class of objects known as art.

A social theory approaches art as the manifestation of genre of institution. It is not intended to supply a definition in terms amenable to a particular political agenda, as it often is in Marxist literature such as, for example, in Vasquez (1965). To posit a social theory

which overemphasizes revolution (Ruz, 1980) or class struggle (Hadjinicolaou, 1974) is to ignore the intra-group (intra-clas) or esoteric (Jansen, 1965) nature of art. Neither is a social theory simply a populist attack on artistic standards of judgment, as Smith (1983) has suggested. A social theory of art should guide the researcher to focus on the mechanisms through which art arises in a culture.

Although art is a social phenomenon, the individual is by no means unimportant. Mukarovsky (1964) suggests that a continuum may be drawn between the individual aesthetic and the structured aesthetic. The individual aesthetic is related to what one person may find pleasing, as in the fortuitous combination of paint splashes on a wall. The structured aesthetic defines the genres of art, as in the structure of poetry as it is understood in a particular time and place. All works of art fit some point between the extremes of the continuum. While the individual aesthetic is an important psychological phenomenon, it is the structured aesthetic which defines a work of art as such in a socio-cultural context.

A Social Theory of Art

The minimum information required in order to state that art exists in any culture is the presence of a particular genre of socio-cultural interactions among people. This requires an etic (Pike, 1954) point of view, that is, one which stands outside of any one culture. The emic (Pike, 1954), or intracultural, point of view of art may seem irrelevant to an outside observer. The Abelam people of New Guinea, for example, have criteria for good art which have to do with traditional correctness and magical efficacy (Forge, 1971). This may indeed be irrelevant to art in general while remaining a valid frame of reference for those familiar with it. Similarly, the history of

Western aesthetics shows the development of an emic philosophy. From a folklorist's perspective it is incorrect to generalize from one emic conception or to apply that conception to another group (Pelto and Pelto, 1978). From this it follows that Western aesthetics is an inappropriate base from which to develop a generalizable concept of art which would be applicable to other peoples. It has the function of a theory of art to account for the phenomenon despite the variety of emic forms it may take.

The Locus of Art in Culture

An emic theory may, for example, associate art with something like expression, but one is then faced with the problem of locating that expression in the art object, the viewer or elsewhere. To locate it in the art objects themselves leads to formalism as in the work of Bell (1913). To locate it in the reaction of the perceiver leads willy nilly to making art a matter of personal psychology as in Collingwood's (1938) discussion of expression as a personal imperative.

In ethnographic terms all that is in art is located within the complex of shared ideas which are called culture. Culture, in this sense, is a non-evaluative term which has been defined in at least eleven ways (Gould and Kolb, 1964). These definitions have in common the concept of a sharing among members of a group. A list of cultural phenomena would include stories, dances, rites, festivities, ideas, beliefs, legends, language, ways of eating and sleeping, and so on. Like a personal opinion, the unstructured aesthetic may be little influenced by culture, but, like the wisdom of a proverb, the structured aesthetic is a shared construct. The sadness (or other expression) in a painting is to be found in such shared ideas.

Art and the Folk Group

Groups of people may be

variously described. Alan Dundes (1980) defines a folk group as, "...Any group of people whatsoever [sic] who share at least one common factor" (p.6). The folk group is, as Ben-Amos (1979) suggests, a small group as compared to the complex interlocking groupings in a society such as that of the United States. The common factor of the small group may be language, religion, occupation, or an interest in art. To define all art in terms of the culture of the folk group implies that to the extent that a particular group has developed some esoteric (Jansen, 1956) lore which it considers its own, it may be a cultural unit or sub-unit within, but distinguishable from, the broader society.

Definitions of art have turned upon a variety of attributes of works, all assumed to be manifested in the object. The difficulty of such definition caused Wittgenstein (1979) to suggest that a group of objects may be conceptualized as a set without having any one thing in common. They may exhibit a family of resemblances. Mandelbaum (1979) suggested that all works of art may have in common some non-manifest attributes. George Dickie (1974) took this suggestion seriously and offered a definition of art in which all works are (1) artifacts (2) some aspects of which have had conferred upon them the status of candidates for appreciation (3) by persons acting on behalf of a social institution. This definition has been developed in various ways some of which may be found in the work of Aagaard-Morgensen (1976).

Appreciation is prominent in this theory because it implies some affective responses to works of art. Surely art works are valued, in large part, because of the appreciation which we have for them. This response is the fuel which drives the processes of production, distribution and consumption of art. The process could be described, as it is by

Peckham (1978), as one in which art works are considered, "...occasions for a human being to perform the art-perceiving role in the artistic situation" (p.97). Perception seems, however, to be a fairly neutral act and while it may be a necessary part of the role of the person to whom an art work is offered, appreciation, in the sense of an evaluative response, is the presumed goal of the perception.

What is necessary for an institution of the kind under discussion is a relationship among individual members of a cultural group such that some produce art works, other present the works (although the presenter may be also the producer), and others appreciate them. There are, thus, three domains in the institution which are identified by the Mexican philosopher Acha (1984) as: (1) production, (2) distribution, and (3) consumption. In the ideal case different members of the same folk group fill each of the three roles. If the process involves persons from different folk groups there is less relevant shared culture and therefore appreciation is less likely to occur.

There are rules or standards governing the art institution. Although adherence to standards and strict genre expectations are common in many artistic traditions the existence of rules does not condemn the entire process to simple mechanistic adherence to formulae. To understand the rules, consider the proper functioning of the institution. When all goes well and a valid art work is produced, offered, and appreciated, the process may be considered "felicitous" (Austin, 1965). The rules for the felicitous production of art (regardless of its quality) may be derived by paraphrasing Austin's rules for felicitous verbal acts such as marrying: (1) there must be an accepted social procedure for the production of artifacts and for their being offered for appreciation; (2) the persons and

circumstances for offering for appreciation must be appropriate, that is, not just anything may be offered by anyone at any time, there are particular persons and situations involved; (3) the procedure must be followed correctly; and (4) the procedure must be executed completely. An infelicitous example of an art work might be a hammer left on a pedestal by a gallery operator who had not intended it to be considered a sculpture, but which was taken as such by a visitor. The particular rules would vary from group to group and from genre to genre of object, but the particular rules will all be related to these four general principles.

Clearly, what we are seeking in this theoretical orientation is a useful common description of all art which will guide research and instruction. It is specifically proposed, therefore, that distinctions such as those made by Acha (1984) among artizenry (las artesanias), fine arts (las artes cultas), and design (el diseno) be disregarded until such time as specific rules can be formulated for particular varieties of the art institution. The paradigm of art should be drawn from folk art rather than the fine arts because the folk cultural experience is more basic than that of artworld as defined by Danto (1964), which has as its principle constituency those with an interest in the arts. From this point of view, the fine arts in the galleries of New York or Chicago would be a folk art for the members of the artworld, which is, in turn, defined as those involved in art. This reflexive character of the artworld in no way bars it from consideration as a folk group in its own right. Its various claims to uniqueness are emic cultural elements, the simple ethnocentricity commonly found in primitive culture. Broudy's (1964) insistence, for example, that there are experts who are qualified to make judgments about

what is good art carries no weight whatsoever outside the artworld if, as he seems to imply, these experts are a definable group of Western artists and critics enculturated into the fine art tradition who apply what they have learned among their own folk to the rest of the world. We could equally select as experts the elders of the Tiv in Africa. After Bohannon had told them the story of Hamlet they informed her that she had made a few mistakes and that sometime they would instruct her in story telling so that she could return to her own people and show them that she has, "...not been sitting in the bush, but among those who know things and have taught you wisdom" (1982).

Art Education

The implication for art education is that what one has to learn to participate in the arts has to do with the various role models in the domains of production, distribution and consumption. These may be partly learned though participation in a folk group, but even in primitive societies we find that art must be taught. According to Hart (1974), the education of young children in primitive societies is generally concerned with practical matters of making a living and getting along, but adolescent or adult education -- particularly in initiation rites and other formal schooling -- is concerned with cultural subjects including philosophy, art, and music. To assert that all art is folk art is not, therefore, to assert that everyone will learn without instruction, but to focus on the relationship of art with particular cultural contexts.

From a folklorist's perspective fundamental learning in the arts would, in part, consist of (1) learning about production of particular types of things which are valued by a folk group (particularly the student's), rather than things which are only made in schools, i.e. "school art" (Efland, 1976); (2)

learning about such things as how art works are distributed, to whom, by who, and for what reasons; and (3) learning about the appreciation of art works including how they are evaluated in our culture and in others. This last area of learning would probably be the largest because the domain of consumption is the one in which students will be most extensively involved. The distribution of art may, however, be of particular interest because as Acha (1984) suggests, that is the arena in which the dialectic between the interests of the producers and consumers is played out. It is also the domain in which the intervention of monetary concerns can influence, even determine, the judgment of the nominal experts.

The critical implication of the point of view outlined here is that a person can most fully be involved in the arts in his or her own folk group, in which the greatest cultural sharing takes place. Appropriate education would enable students to learn more about their own cultural inheritance and make them aware of other cultures through learning about the kinds of social interactions involved in the art institution. To speak of other cultures, however, is not to speak of broad groupings like American, black, working class, or urban. A person may participate in many cultures. Catholic culture is different from protestant, male from female, right wing from left. Three general statements should be made about the implications of such a social theory for art education.

First, to focus exclusively on the fine arts is to represent a form of cultural imperialism in the schools, ignoring the fact that students come with rich traditions of their own. The fine arts represent a form of art which pertains to a particular constituency of people. To present it as the only correct concern of all who have an artistic interest is to imply that this folk

group is the only one to which all people should aspire. In its extreme form this elitist position claims that art is a rare thing with which few people come into contact and that the bulk of the art work available to the common person is inferior and unworthy of attention. This suggests that a teacher in a remote town should tell students, "You will probably never see real art unless you go to New York. You will never own real art and will not become real artists. You will probably never really understand art. Now, let's begin our study of art." That teacher could hope for little more than to make aesthetic peasants of the students, watching what happens in New York so that imitations of products and attitudes can be made.

Secondly, a teacher who wishes to teach successfully should become involved in the student's community. Community involvement would lead to an understanding of the culture of the students. This is an important implication because community involvement may not be perceived as important for teachers. A study by Crow and Crow (1951) indicated that interest in community was ranked as least important of 40 teacher traits by both high school seniors and college seniors. Teachers, in other words, are not thought of as having an interest in the community, but as rather as agents (Cartwright, 1965) of their subject field.

Finally, if the fine arts are

only comprehended and appreciated by an elite few then they are irrelevant to the lives of the children except for those who either are brought up in the artworld folk group or aspire to membership in it. The habitual mystification of the arts found in Western aesthetics, if accepted, simply puts them out of the range of serious consideration for education in the schools. The fact that members of the artworld become engrossed in contemplating a painting might only indicate (to the students) that they were involved in the art "...as a plumber might be engrossed by the technical aspects of a bathroom" (Mencken, 1949, p.551).

This analysis suggests that any fundamental unity found in the arts is in the fact that they are all based on analogous social institutions in which art works are produced, presented, and appreciated according to rules of the institution and role expectation for various persons involved in it. It also suggests that, as Glassie (1983) found in Ballymenone, Northern Ireland, people have rich and complex aesthetic lives which they discuss if one learns to listen properly. Because art is a common part of life, the curriculum in art should deal with these roles and rules in order to increase the sophistication of the students as participants in any aspect of the arts in which they may become involved.

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