The Arts for the "Now" Generation: Perspectives on Aesthetics and Aesthetic Education

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Not long ago I was at a social gathering. It was a crowded room with people who engage in varied professional and business activities. The conversations were many—women spoke of their children or the bridge club or the local political campaign; men were in clusters speaking of their golf games or the stock market or the Near East situation . . . For my own part, I was content to join in whatever was being talked about . . . Then, one man asked me about the kind of work I do? "I'm a university professor," I responded. It seemed no time at all before the conversation in my group turned to "education." "What's happening to our schools?" "What about campus unrest and the drug problem?" It seemed to be no time at all before other conversations in the room stopped and attention turned toward the group of which I was a part . . . the discussion of education seemed to envelop and capture everyone . . . the opinions expressed were by no means in agreement or complimentary to the current state of affairs. Clearly, people were deeply involved (and in many cases profoundly disturbed). Somehow, the pat phrases used for setting aside issues no longer seemed adequate, even for cocktail party exchanges. When it's your own son that is protesting the armed forces' or chemical company's recruitment staff or when it's your daughter that seriously questions attitudes toward drugs or sex or morality; when you suddenly look about you and sense a new openness for ideas and action and reaction, it just isn't enough to pass it over by saying, "Oh, that's the generation gap;" nor does it seem adequate to observe that this is another of the "passing fads" that we have come to know so well. The schools today are facing a state of fundamental and far-reaching unrest. Writers such as Ivan Illich have raised questions pertaining to the very assumptions underlying our educational practices, which implies a challenge so basic as to threaten the institution's very survival.

It has long been a truism that the continuity of our democratic way of life is dependent upon an educated and informed electorate. What is now being brought into question is the very process by which our children are to be educated as well as the knowledge considered appropriate as part of that education. Given the fantastic shifts taking place as a result of technological, political, and social change, given the seeming contradictions of lofty ideals and human frailties, given the apparent confusions of means and ends and I think that one can begin to sense the basis for current unrest and despair. No wonder that the conversations in the room turned to talk about education.

Talk *about* education and finding solutions adequate for our times are very different things. "Talk is cheap;" indeed, if there's anything that our younger generation is telling us, it is that they're interested in "where the *action* is." The "turned-on" generation is looking to an educational leadership that is itself "turned-on" and ready to act!

Make no mistake about it. The changes being wrought in our times by its youth promise to be far-reaching. What we can now observe is not a limited phenomenon. Campus unrest has sent administrators scurrying at Columbia, Harvard, Cornell, Berkeley, and many other schools. There have been the disastrous events at Kent State University. Disturbances on college campuses have received more attention than has unrest in secondary schools, but there are three times more secondary school students of a younger, more volatile age. They have increased their pressures upon the "establishment". The momentum of our times is such that young people are seeking greater involvement in the decisions that influence their lives.

Seen from another perspective, when 400,00 young people congregate in the small town of Bethel, New York, for a rock music festival, there's something more happening than a concert. When the French

students help in bringing down the de Gaulle government; or when Spanish or Japanese students attack the Franco or Sato governments; or when the Czech youth rise against their Russian invaders—there's further evidence of a rising tide of young people that is calling for a new accountability on the part of the institutional structures and values that have been so dominant in the lives of their parents.

To address oneself to the task of expanding awareness of Aesthetics and Aesthetic Education runs the danger of falling into an academic trap. The literature pertaining to aesthetic inquiry is indeed impressive. It is important that students pay attention to the philosophical issues involved in making value judgments. It is also important that judgments pertaining to contemporary art be seen in the setting of today's world. I have come to feel so strongly about the larger context of what's happening to the very persons that will assume (or already have assumed) leadership responsibilities. The problems of our time (overpopulation, pollution, alienation, etc.) are of such a magnitude and are so urgent that they will have to be solved by persons alive today or we will suffer dire consequences. I would want to make the point that art educators can have a crucial role to play in relation to these larger dynamics. Necessarily this role will have to draw upon interdisciplinary ties. We have long argued that the arts should be seen as an integral part of education. Now more than ever, the logic of events dictates and supports this argument.

First, let me make some observations about what has been happening to the visual arts themselves. Even the most casual viewer would recognize the dramatic and sometimes startling changes taking place in the forms of contemporary art. One might even say that the developments in Modern Art have been barometers or indicators of the larger social-political forces now so clearly evident. The Surrealists aimed at the reconstruction of a new imagery based upon subconscious feeling and insights; the Dadaists brought into question the stable, fixed, and comfortable notions of "art". As was asserted by Richard Huelsenbeck: "Dada is forever the enemy of the comfortable Sunday Art which is supposed to uplift man, by reminding him of agreeable moments." The Cubists focused upon simultaneity of events and the idea of structure. Art was freed of the obligation to report or describe; it dealt with a new reality—the art form itself. The Constructivists and others concerned with pure plastic form turned toward the vision of art as being inseparable from environment. It was Mondrian who observed, "This consequence brings us, in a future perhaps remote, towards the end of art as a thing separated from our surrounding environment, which is the actual plastic reality. But this end is at the same time a new beginning. Art will not only continue but will realize itself more and more. By the unification of architecture, sculpture, and painting, a new plastic reality will be created." And it was the Abstract Expressionists who saw their paintings as arenas for action. As was observed by Harold Rosenberg: "At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act—rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or 'express' an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.

The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter."

One could go on and on—documenting the dramatic changes in art leading to the present: Pop art, minimal art, environments and happenings, experiments in art and technology, earth forms, etc. One could list the new media possibilities (plastics, film, light, metals) to go along with the ideational freedom afforded artists. *New* ideas, *new* materials, *new* possibilities—these have given rise to an enlarged vision of the artists' role and function. We can no longer think of the artist as the lonely figure, suffering in his garret, painting still-life pictures. Today's artists are film-makers, designers for industry, architects, city-planners, people involved in mass-media for communications, as well as painters, sculptors, printmakers, and craftsmen . . . and today's audience for art is no longer the select few, seeking aesthetic titillation of the senses. When we look to the forms of popular art, when we think of the aesthetics of environment, we are confronted by a mass audience. Just to use one example drawn from writing about film as an art form: In an article entitled, *The Now Movie*, the Reverend Anthony Schillaci observed: "If we're looking for the young audience between 16 and 24, which accounts for 48 percent of the box office today, we will find they're on a trip, whether

in a Yellow Submarine or on a Space Odyssey. A brief prayer muttered for Rosemary's Baby and they're careening down a dirt road with Bonnie and Clyde, the exhaust spitting banjo sounds, or sitting next to the Graduate as he races across the Bay Bridge after his love. The company they keep is fast; Belle de Jour, Petulia, and Joanna are not exactly a sedentary crowd. Hopped up on large doses of Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In, and Mission: Impossible, they are ready for anything that an evolving film idiom can throw on the screen. And what moves them must have the pace, novelty, style, and spontaneity of a television commercial."

My point is a very simple one: the dramatic changes taking place in Twentieth Century art should be seen against the background of larger social and political shifts. Today's art is intimately related to today's living. It is an art characterized by variety alternatives, and continuous change. Teaching art, at any level, must be responsive to ideas and values of art itself. Teachers of art need to be knowledgeable about and sensitive to what artists have done (and are doing) as a key to their own actions.

Artists of the Twentieth Century have broken with tradition. They have been willing to explore new possibilities (even to the point of redefining art). This is what Harold Rosenberg referred to as "the tradition of the new".

Whatever the shifts taking place in contemporary art, there remains a continuing thread of human choice and concern for quality in the forms created. I am much taken with Rene Huyghe's assertation: "The more insight the history of art gives us into the necessities that form the artist, the more nearly it liberates us from the temptation of formulas, theories, and fashions, because it shows us that these things being subject to perpetual change, are relative and vain. The only permanent thing is quality, which cannot be reduced to a formula or a definition . . . "

Herein rests a key argument in behalf of the artists in education. Whatever the form or style, responding to a work of art raises questions of value; creating a work of art requires focused attention upon an idea and ways of giving form to that idea. Whether one looks at a Rembrandt, a Renoir, or a Rauschenberg, there is the problem of looking at a form conceived and created by a man. Each work embodies particular qualities: in the Rembrandt, a rich sense for supernatural light bathing a figure, the balance of darks and lights as they help to define a subtle, yet elegant reality; in the Renoir, the soft play of color as it radiates from a figure or a still life, the sensuous curves of natural form as they convey a feeling of serenity, happiness, and comfort; or in the Rauschenberg, the simultaneous and successive images as they are thrust upon our consciousness, the rash and daring juxtaposition of the unexpected toward creating ambiguities and multiple meanings. Each work *is what it is;* each requires that we turn to our own understandings and values in its encounter. Thus, the work of art turns us upon ourselves in an effort to discover value. Young children can be helped to see the imaginative and poetic aspects of what a painting is all about. They can look, describe, imagine, compare, and evaluate forms from their own point of view. As they grow older they can become better informed about particular artists, events, movements, and connections among art forms. Art can be seen as an invitation to explore one's own feelings; the structure of the work of art can give intensity and depth to the possibilities for understandings and insights.

A major direction in contemporary art can be found in the blurring of distinctions among art forms. Some sculpture has started to move, it is leaving its stationary base; some canvases are no longer rectangular, nor are they flat; environments and happenings are merging theater and the visual arts; experiments in art and technology are using sound, movement, light, and form; films are forcing us to a new critical language that deals with a dynamic space-time organization of photographic elements. When we look to environmental art forms—architecture, city planning, industrial design, or our mass media we are confronted with problems involving utilization and casual effects as they are inextricably linked with aesthetic response. The arts are reaching out to embrace wider realms of concern. To that extent we need to rethink and reconceive of the place of art education in the schools.

Thus far, I have paid attention to the importance of critical, judgmental factors in helping students to recognize, describe, understand, and evaluate the fantastically broad range of visual forms in their experience. I trust that it is also clear that understanding and appreciation are related to a base in one's direct and personal encounters. This is especially the case with young children where it is neces-

sary that they engage in the shaping of materials to make aesthetic form. Young children do not need *talk* or theories; they need the direct experience out of which theories are made. Of course young people can talk about their art; but their more meaningful and significant learnings are more likely achieved through the very actions in which they engage. Painting a picture of a man can become the vehicle for self-discovery and insight; modeling a clay form can provide a sense for structure and articulation; printing a woodblock can be instrumental in grasping the significance of graphic processes. Developments in motion picture photography make possible young children creating films—they can do animated sequences, short documentaries, or more elaborate films; inexpensive cameras and film processing techniques suggest means toward student-made photographic essays; xerography, tape recorders, slide projectors, etc., force us to think in terms of new images, more importantly, they force the exploration of new ideas. Teachers of art have new bases for working with their colleagues from other disciplines—the physical sciences, social sciences, and the humanities. If art is reaching to engage our environment; then, the teaching of art must reach to engage other disciplines that bear upon that very environment.

I began by referring to the state of massive unrest in our schools. Young people are being moved to adopt radical methods to confront us with the glaring contradictions of our time. Pious ideals and lofty statements of value are just not "cutting the ice" anymore. The thoughts of our young people are expressed in simple, poetic statements such as one by a 12-year-old boy who wrote: "Sore thumbs, Tired minds, Stuffing hoards of Information into a small skull." Or an 11-year-old girl: "People are too busy Even to ask A simple question, like I wonder what's happening in Vietnam? . . . or . . . Are they still rioting in Chicago? . . . But I guess People have more important things to worry about Like Are we having steak or roast beef for supper." Perhaps, the feeling and tone of what things look like to the younger generation is expressed by Arlo Guthrie in "Alice's Restaurant". As you know, it's the tale of some young people and their encounter with what's proper, right, and respected. They visited Alice's Restaurant, a warm, hospitable, but somewhat disorganized establishment. "We got up there; we found all the garbage and then we decided that it would be a friendly gesture to take the garbage down to the city dump. So we took the half-ton of garbage, put it in the back of a red VW microbus, took shovels and rakes and implements of destruction and headed out toward the City Dump. Well, we got there and there was a big sign and a chain across the dump saying, 'Closed on Thanksgiving' and we had never heard of a dump closed on Thanksgiving before and with tears in our eyes we drove off into the sunset looking for another place to put the garbage—we didn't find one."

Now get the imagery: not a young, clean-cut hero out to do something ideal and beautiful—all he wants to do is dump the garbage. With "tears in his eyes" he drives "off into the sunset" looking for another dump, only to be frustrated because they're all closed—it's Thanksgiving! Of course, subsequent events only served to complicate matters—his encounters with the "establishment" that espoused one set of values in what was said but demonstrated another set of values in what was done!

The nice neat separation that could contain and pacify people in their lives are crumbling before the onslaught of new hopes and visions. Guthrie's metaphoric rejoinder is that "You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant, Just walk right in, It's around the back, just a half-mile from the railroad track, You can get anything you want at Alice's Restaurant."

Alice's Restaurant becomes symbolic of a place where you can muster the insights and courage to "do your thing". In a world fraught with excitement, possibilities, and danger, there is no room for timid inconsistencies or blatant contradictions. We live in a world that demands and requires attention to operations that are inseparable from values.

I know of no more difficult, challenging, and exciting time for teaching. There are limitless possibilities for the teacher who gets "turned on" in building an art program. Like any artist, he must work with the givens of a situation: students, teachers, administrators, building facilities, equipment, community resources. But, whatever the personnel and physical limitations, there are also the possibilities: ways to draw upon teaching resources, help from fellow-teachers, community artists, and other sources. The arts can be linked among themselves and with other disciplines via team teaching, flexible scheduling,

or the use of media possibilities. Teachers of art need to be willing to forego more comfortable roles and expectations to risk new approaches. Freed of a single academic standard, the teaching of art is now open to multiple possibilities in which the arbitrator is depth of commitment, insights, understandings, and continuous learning. Since no person can teach all that there is to know about art, he can teach to develop a sense for what art is all about. In the end, the teacher becomes the model of the very values, attitudes, and understandings that he is teaching for. We have long known that our best teachers are our best models. There are no separations (or contradictions or confusions) between their theory and practice. What they say and do are fully consistent.

All of this suggest some general points for an orientation to curriculum planning:

a. the arts must be viewed as an integral part of the curriculum; they provide as vital an area for study as do the sciences, mathematics, foreign language, etc.

b. there is the need to involve *all* students in studies of the arts in a way that affords continuity and coordination.

c. art forms involve differing sense modalities and hence offer many possibilities for understanding and insight. There should be the readiness to deal with the visual arts, music, dance, drama, multimedia, etc., in a manner that relates these understandings.

d. the content of the arts may be realized through differing teaching contexts:
   - studio or form-making laboratory experiences involving the shaping of materials, sounds, movements, etc.
   - critical or appreciative type activities involving the responding to works of art (dance, films, paintings, architecture, music, etc.)
   - environmental studies involving the apprehension of forms and events in one's surroundings—living spaces, work patterns, mass media, etc. This area provides many possibilities for relating the arts to other disciplines.

e. each component should be seen for its aesthetic potential. Affective learnings should be seen as one of our primary considerations; hence, close articulation should be sought among learning activities (we should look for the "arts possibilities" in the sciences, reading, etc.)

f. wherever possible program developments should be conceived for their maximum impact through related and supportive studies. This might be accomplished through adopting common general themes, planned cross-references, etc.

g. the designing of curriculum and other teaching materials should be conceived with a sense for aesthetic value. Teacher and student teams should participate in the development of learning materials; means and content should be reflective of our aesthetic concerns.

It may be that we can get anything that we want at Alice's Restaurant (except Alice). We can't get anything we want in schools; but, we can get more than we've had and do a lot more with it. More importantly, we can muster the insights and courage to do our "thing" (which is the teaching of a new and expanded concept of art). This is one of the important ways of getting at the values that our young people feel to be so lacking in their education.

So long as art teachers maintain their ties with the spirit and vitality of art, they will always be a force toward facing problems, finding new ways, and seeking the inventive and poetic aspects of life. This is what art is all about; this is why it is crucial that we face up to our task in today's world.

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