

PAPER MONUMENT

Draw It with Your Eyes Closed: The Art of the Art Assignment

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THE ART OF EDUCATION AND THE EDUCATION OF ART

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When I was twenty-three and fresh out of undergrad a woman in her fifties hired me to be her private art tutor. She was making oil paintings and struggling with the medium and subject matter. Together we searched for solutions to her stumbling blocks. However after a month or so of regular visits, I was told abruptly that this would be our last. My redundancy was illustrated through an explanation that she was currently in psychoanalysis and therefore “already had someone with whom she worked out her personal troubles”. I remember feeling stunned and embarrassed by this proclamation. From my perspective our discussions had been entirely in keeping with the type of discourse I had learned in the previous five years of training in art school.

The intimacy of the one on one conversation typical of weekly studio visits in a college art course draws a close parallel to the dynamic between an analyst and their analysand. The cathartic workings of the student artist are explored through a dialogue that develops over a matter of months or years. There is a strong potential for transference/counter transference projections due to the age differential – in undergraduate and graduate programs- of professor (parent) to student (child) as well as “mature” artist to “emerging” artist. The half-hour to hour durations of the studio visit recall the time limit of an analytical session.

Like many lessons in art school, the studio visit appears to have been modeled on –or gradually morphed to resemble- another form. Classes on art theory are often indistinguishable from the seminars of a liberal arts college. Foundation classes teaching basics in technique or the more recent business related coursework (teaching the skills of writing artist statements and compiling press packs for example) resemble the how-to of a trade school. The diplomatic assembly of students for group critique can feel like a political caucus.

Even with a rich history of pedagogical traditions spanning hundreds of years the standard as to how we design, determine and evaluate learning in art school remains in question and thus is prone to imitate other more resolved forms.

And while this may be a good thing - an opportunity ripe with the potential for innovation – many of the efforts to take advantage of this latent stage seem to miss a crucial point.

There is a redundancy in the combination of the terms *art* and *education*. In some respects art and education are near identical enterprises. Each seeks to develop or manipulate communication systems in order to affect the way its participants see, think, feel or behave. Artistic and pedagogic practices both assist in the cultivation of citizens and the reinforcement of institutional power. However when the two words are placed side by side it is their differences that become highlighted, not their similarities.

This distinction has forced a hiccup in the potential progress of the teaching of art and the cultivation of artists. The only way to avoid noticing this redundancy is to force each word to modify the other wherein one word represents a method and the other a subject. It is not just art, but art as a teaching tool. We will learn not just anything we will learn art. These sentences may seem innocuous, but the degree to which they restrict the aspirational depth of both fields is disheartening. When art becomes a “teaching tool” it is at best a prop, an index or a model. When we “learn art” we can learn a technique or a history but not the process of radical thinking – i.e. being taught how to think in order to think differently- with which art is engaged.

There are wonderful examples of efforts to consider the two in one frame. In the experiments of twentieth century artists like Joseph Beuys, Judy Chicago, Luis Camnitzer, Allan Kaprow, Anna Halprin, John Baldessari, or Joseph Albers this unity can be palpably felt. There are a number of contemporary artists and curators who have attempted similar critical innovations through symposia, exhibitions and alternative schools. However the most exemplary realization of this harmony that I can think of left an impact that has lasted the almost two hundred years since its introduction. Interestingly this was achieved not in the field of art but in a renaissance for early

education that passed through the hands of four radical thinkers.

Between the late 18th and early 20th centuries, visionary pedagogues Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi, Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori and Rudolf Steiner each developed tools and curricula to shape young minds. Not only did they devise philosophies around which their respective curricula were built, they also designed and constructed complex aesthetic systems that included languages, social games and physical objects. Pestalozzi was an innovator in pedagogical drawing. Froebel designed the first toys for hands on exercises that were organized according to specific stages of children's development. Montessori constructed teaching tools to translate math and grammar problems into colorful geometric forms and symbols. Steiner gave voice to creative thinking through unique methods of writing, painting and dance. Each of them designed entirely new ways of communicating – affecting not just how we organize what we communicate - but changing the language with which we do so. The methodologies of Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori and Steiner engaged the sensorial, the conceptual, the social and the individual as each part of the same activity. Their curriculum interwove the experiences of teaching and discovering, thinking and making and communicating. Art and education were inseparable.

The definition of art in times contemporary with the lives of these four pedagogues may not have been expansive enough to consider them artists. I make a motion for an historical revision to do so now. In order for art education to stop parroting the social dynamics and organizational frameworks of other institutions, it must recognize that the studio is a classroom, the classroom is an exhibition, the museum is a curriculum, the lesson is a social experiment, the artwork is a teacher, the artist is a student and so on. By considering pedagogues like Pestalozzi, Froebel, Montessori and Steiner as artists, we in turn consider all artistic practices as educational, and pedagogy as an art. Hopefully their example can assist us today in escaping the endless loop of redundancy rooted in the monikers teaching-artist and art-school.