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THE UNIVERSITY STUDIO

by

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INTRODUCTION

Educational philosophies are constantly changing, in all disciplines. This is especially so in the fine arts. Having witnessed many such changes over the past six years during my undergraduate and graduate education, I am inclined to believe that more often than not these changes are very slow in developing. It is in a spirit intent on speeding up some of these changes that I have written this thesis. Its purpose is to examine the current status of the studio-oriented arts program within the university and to determine particular difficulties faced by the artist-student working within that framework. Suggestions will be made for restructuring college fine arts philosophies, as well as for activating the artist-student's response to the off-campus environment.

The future for the art school graduate today is a very uncertain one. Each year, thousands of students disciplined in the fine arts pass through the doors of innumerable undergraduate and graduate studios into a society which, in large measure, has only a minimal interest in their talents and an even smaller demand for their services. Whereas teaching was at one time taken for granted as the profession into which most young painters, sculptors, and printmakers poured the major part of their energies, it no longer is so regarded; and it now has become a rare instance indeed that a young university art school graduate is able to secure a position on an art school faculty. Obviously the dilemma facing the young painter or printmaker today similarly confronts the young historian, the young poet, and even the young physicist; the job market in education is so saturated that it is apparent that this once reliable source of employment for the advanced degree holder can no longer be regarded as holding the placement potential which it once did. A problem has developed which is being intensified annually at hundreds of campuses across the country: students educated in the visual arts and encouraged to fulfill themselves working in the field of higher education, find that the possibilities of securing a teaching position upon graduation are minimal. Most of them, then, never having considered that they might make a living as professional artists (though this option, except for a very few, might forever

remain a completely unrealistic expectation) and never having been encouraged in art school to do so, end up filling positions far removed from their background and training.

In most cases, studio-oriented university fine arts courses are indirectly yet unmistakably geared to the supposed needs of future artist-professors and educators. The approach is most evident in the undergraduate studio, where the individual instructor's own method and technique of "enseignement" has become something for the student to assimilate as technique to be used in his or her own classroom. The critique, for example, is no longer important as much for what is said in it, as for how it is conducted and in what manner questions are posed of the student. It is commonly expected that in the university studio one should always be able to explain and understand what he is doing; and the critique has become a particularly important arena in which the instructor can carry out, as demonstration, an investigation into the student's ideas and motivations. Group scrutiny of and comment on the student-artist's work becomes second to a subconscious group analysis of the instructor's devices and methods.

As an undergraduate, I studied under a painting professor whose unflinching approach to weekly critiques consisted of a moment's silent meditation on the entire group of work followed by the inquiry: "So and so, what do you think about that piece?" After the student's usually reluctant response, he would ask two other students whose viewpoints would generally be regarded as opposite to give their opinions, after which he would sum up with his own observations. Midway through the semester,

in an attempt to give variety to a boring weekly routine, he began asking individual students to conduct the critiques. Almost unfailingly the students imitated his approach, asked the same questions, and elicited similar responses.

This instance is not unique, yet it does serve to illustrate a point. I think that the situation for the artist-student in the university studio is very confusing. He expects to study "art," to find out what art is, and what it is to be an artist; and yet, in the same breath, he is told that art cannot be defined; it cannot be taught. Furthermore, he is told that to be an artist he must be willing to devote much of his time to his art, but that in order to make a living he must also hold a teaching position, which generally precludes spending large amounts of hours at creative work. (Most university level instructors with whom I have spoken indicate that save for summer months they find precious little time to give to their own work.) Yet, in the university studio, emphasis is placed on the presumption that upon leaving school the young artist will seek a career in teaching. True, many students embark on the study of studio arts with the intentions of pursuing a teaching career. With the need for teachers down, however, fine arts departments must restructure their attitudes and philosophies away from the needs of future educators and over to those of serious students concerned about discovering meaning in art and personal direction in a creative field.

(I do believe that one can be both a functioning and productive artist as well as an educator. However, the partially subconscious emphasis placed by the university art school on

the duality of the two is no longer a viable criterion upon which to base philosophies and curricula.)

Perhaps part of the responsibility for the existing problem lies also in the fact that on most university campuses fine arts programs are seen as being closely akin in purpose to liberal arts programs. The intention is to broaden the student's outlooks and capabilities, to deny the professional specialist in favor of the well-rounded intellectual. Thus, university art school curricula become heavily diluted with liberal arts courses not directly related to the content of studio courses, yet required as necessary for the completion of an undergraduate or graduate degree. In "Art in the American University: Fact or Facade?" Rob Roy Kelly, former chairman of the Design Division at the Kansas City Art Institute, notes:

The liberal arts program has justified itself as a corrective to over-specialized education, and it has been inserted into most professional programs as a broadening agent. But for many art students, the degree requirements of a liberal arts institution may prove to be as detrimental as the programs that liberal arts were designed to counteract!¹

The artist-student faced with the necessity of expending energy on work extraneous to studio activity, forced to compromise in terms of concentration and production, often finds himself frustrated in regard to his actual place in the university studio framework:

The ideal education should be an opportunity for either a specialized or generalized experience,

¹Rob Roy Kelly, "Art in the American University: Fact or Facade?" The Art Journal, XXXII (Fall, 1972), 27.

or both at different times, and the qualifying factors should be the individual student's capabilities and interests rather than arbitrary requirements.²

The problem of how to provide that specialized experience within the university framework is one of the major concerns of this thesis. It is one which necessitates an inward examination of intents and purposes on the part of the art department, a re-ordering of attitudes which must take into account the nature of the relationship between the artist-student and the studio in which he works. Philosophies must be realigned so that the student can develop thought patterns which will allow him to expand and develop beyond the awarding of the degree.

²Ibid.

II

The fine arts curriculum in the university has always been recognized as being highly dependent on art history and related studies for the bulk of its material. Not only have explorations in the history of artistic styles and mediums been conducted in the formal art history arena, but also these have for many years been part of studio investigations, both through the use of slides and photographs as well as in the unfortunate but widespread practice of encouraging students to explore (imitate) the styles of past masters. Few art students in the course of four or six years of study at the university level have not come across at least one instructor who regularly encouraged his students to "do an Impressionist canvas" or "paint a Cubist nude." (I recall a "Cubist" portrait I completed as a sophomore in college at the encouragement of one such instructor.) The questionable value of such a practice becomes even more so when one considers the likelihood that several of his students, later to become teachers, will probably employ a similar method of investigating "artistic" problems. In an article entitled "...on an American artist's education..." Dan Flavin writes

So many of the young men and women becoming new faculty for maintaining the formal indoctrination of art historical media are former student products of the process. Frequently, their educational "schizophrenia," evolved in the delusions and diversions of the implied Master of Fine Arts assembly line, prompted them to believe that they, too, could become so-called art teachers on the basis of their own professionally institutionalized technical vocational training and nothing more, or that they could support themselves for their own art effort likewise by instructing trade courses such as design,

lithography, or art history within art departments at the college, university, professional and secondary school levels."³

If the formal teaching of art is to remain a function of the university art department or professional school, new faculty members capable of avoiding the use of such ineffective and irrelevant systems of indoctrination must be found. These faculty members should reflect unmistakably contemporary and distinctive viewpoints. This is not to say that the university must concentrate on seeking artists affiliated with what is most currently fashionable or avant-garde in the world of art. I suggest, rather, that a conscious attempt be made by the university art school to supply its studios with individuals who reflect in their thinking and work original attitudes which are both culturally and educationally responsive. This is hardly possible, for instance, when a department admits to its faculty one of its former students. Though most art departments attempt to avoid this most blatant cause of philosophical inbreeding, many, whether for lack of time or finances, rely on the practice. This particular problem is intensified by the fact that philosophies of art and art education tend to parallel each other more often and stagnate at a faster rate now that many universities have moved their campuses away from urban centers. What the student needs is original direction into a system of aesthetic consciousness which can be both personally and culturally oriented, and which need not be bound by a narrow and formally defined historical perspective.

³Dan Flavin, "...on an American artist's education..." Art Forum, March, 1968, p.28.

This guidance might best be provided by individuals whose educational attitudes reflect that consciousness, and by faculties whose compositions aesthetically and educationally represent varied and diversified opinions yet solidly based on contemporary philosophies.

For the university the problem of supplying teachers whose attitudes reflect the aforementioned is a most difficult one. Perhaps, at least in the fine arts areas, the concept of a short-term tenure, in which individual faculty members remain in the department for possibly two years, might best be suitable in establishing an atmosphere in which the student is regularly exposed to new artistic attitudes. For those schools neatly tucked away in suburban countrysides, a conscious effort to introduce productive and respected artists from urban art centers for similar short-term periods might serve to eliminate part of the cause for ~~the~~ attrition of creative awareness that is frequently evident today in the isolated university studio. A system of exchange between different art departments of particularly gifted artist-teachers who have the capacity to evoke distinctly honest and original creative responses in the artist-student might also serve to broaden philosophical and technical horizons in the studio. The university should also be ready to acknowledge the recommendations of panels of such "visiting" artists on matters pertaining to curriculum structure and development.⁴

With general reconsiderations given to such matters as educational and instructional philosophies, and the selection

⁴Ibid., p. 32.

of individuals to fill faculty posts, some of the problems faced by the university art department might begin to be resolved.

III

If the particular question of who is to teach studio arts courses is a significant one, then the question of what is to be taught and how is of equal if not outstanding importance. It is readily acknowledged that a strong division exists between what can be taught as information (primarily technical and media-related) versus what the teacher can suggest to stimulate the student to creative self-awareness. Any number of teachers can elicit from their students relatively passable, albeit mediocre, artistic responses through the use and re-use of such technical devices as contour drawing or action drawing in the formal study of the nude, scumbling or glazing in the presentation of a canvas-bound still life or landscape, vacuum imprinting, or photographic silkscreening. As technique, these and others are definitely of indispensable value, but not in and of themselves. Their use must be preceded by the development of an artistic concept based on a personal vision of how the artist-student sees himself in relation to contemporary artistic development as well as to culture and society in general. (Perhaps with the development in the student of this abstract and indefinable concept of artistic awareness, the necessity for the use of some of the devices mentioned above might be completely eliminated.)

Much of what can be classified as pertaining to abstract concept is founded in the student's perceptions (sensual and instinctual) of the physical world as well as in his perceptions (learned) of time and space. It is understanding of these perceptions which must be developed in the student through

the use of visually-oriented inquiries proposed by the instructor and explored by the student with the use, if necessary, of traditional methods of execution. Any given technique, any given medium, if it expresses the student's artistic intention and creatively interprets his original response to the problem, should be encouraged by the university. This should be a guideline whether the problem is proposed by the instructor or perceived by the student. The strict divisions which have heretofore characterized fine arts curricula must be relaxed so that systems of thought responsive to interchangeable technical resources may be allowed to evolve.

The promotion of the growth of these interrelated systems of artistic thought in the studio can also be encouraged through the exploration of concepts separate from what has traditionally been considered artistically relevant. The introduction into the studio of persons active in the non-visually oriented fields of poetry, music, biology, physics, etc., can serve to free the artist-student from the bonds of what can easily become a narrow, self-indulgent field of vision. This interdisciplinary exchange would open to him concepts perceptually oriented in ways distinct from the visual yet just as closely tied to important social and cultural phenomena. In "The Education of Vision," James Ackerman describes just such a program, one in which "an anthropologist presents the art and artifacts of two or three different cultures, bringing out the relationship of the societal structure to the objects it produces..." and giving rise to studio explorations into "the concept of producing artifacts related

to the society of our own time;" and in which "a natural scientist offers a series of lectures, demonstrations and...discussions on structure from elemental particles to complex minerals" encouraging students to explore in the studio "the implications of natural structure for the making of structures in various media."⁵ The potential for liberating the artistic spirit (in the traditional sense of "inspiration") in a much more sensible and relevant manner would be enormously increased.

Effecting a response in the artist-student to the society in which he functions requires the stimulation of a response to that manifestation of society which is most obvious: the immediate community, both within the university and without. Especially in urban centers, where environmental decay is a common problem, the talents and abilities of the art student can effectively be given a wide audience which might otherwise not be available. Unattractive and uninteresting outer walls of large buildings can be transformed into expansive visual scenarios presenting to the viewer contemporary artistic communications. (This has been done with much effectiveness in the downtown area of Syracuse and in the Roxbury section of Boston as well as in Chicago, San Francisco, and in other major American cities.) The artist-student working with local symphonies, operatic and dramatic troupes, may be afforded the opportunity to collaborate in the visual presentation of works of art in other media:

⁵James Ackerman, "Education of Vision," in The Arts on Campus (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, Ltd., 1970) p.76.

They would themselves take on responsibilities of education, not only of each other, but of the community, particularly of the young, who might be taken on as apprentices; and they would be testing their social and political concepts and influence, in improving the physical environment..."⁶

What must finally be realized in the university studio is that the production of art objects need not be the sole purpose of the artist-student's education. The generating of ideas and concepts about art and objects, whether or not this generating gives rise to the creation of tangible artistic by-products should replace the blind pursuit of productiveness which has marked many university studios up to this point. This generating of ideas should also be accompanied by the development within the student of an artistically sensitive world view. As was stated in a recent article on the problems faced by the university art school,

...artists frequently engage in blind, purposeless artistic labor in the effort to generate momentum for real work. They also hang around a lot and make mistakes. Artists don't necessarily know what they're doing while they're doing it, but if they couldn't at some point see what they'd done, they couldn't be artists. This isn't a much easier thing than being an artist, but it's distinctly a different one, and teaching it would require a different kind of education."⁷

It is time that a conscious effort be made by the university to provide that education.

⁶Ibid., p.78.

⁷Amy Goldin, "The University Art School: Limbo for Alienated Youth?" Art in America LXI (May-June, 1973) 46.

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APPENDIX

The five paintings reproduced on the following pages were all executed in acrylic stains on canvas. These and the two silkscreens represent the major body of work for this thesis. They do not bear directly on the content of the written report, except that they were completed in the atmosphere of a graduate studio.

The images were all drawn from landscape ideas. It is hoped that the works will speak for themselves.

Fig. 1 -- RIVER VALLEY acrylic on canvas 66" x 96" 1973

Fig. 2 -- OASIS acrylic on canvas 66" x 96" 1973



Fig. 3 -- NIGHT GARDEN acrylic on canvas 60" x 66" 1972

Fig. 4 -- MEADOW acrylic on canvas 66" x 66" 1973

Fig. 5 -- ROCK GARDEN acrylic on canvas 48" x 54" 1973

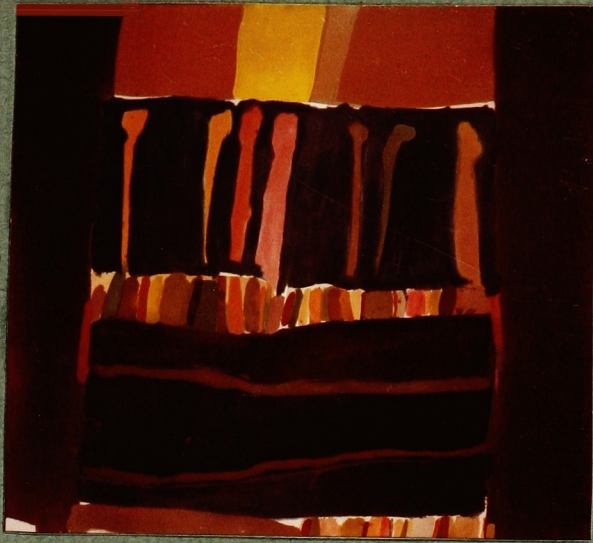


Fig. 6 -- MEGALITHIC MOONRISE silkscreen 19" x 25" 1972

Fig. 7 -- INLAID MOONRISE silkscreen 20" x 26" 1972

