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James A. Mirabito

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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Fine and Applied Arts
in Candidacy for the Degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

THE DREAM: ARTISTS WITHIN UNIVERSITIES

By

James A. Mirabito

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APPROVALS

Adviser: Fred Meyer

Fred Meyer

Date: _____

5/11/83

Associate Adviser: Robert Cole

B. Cole

Date: _____

3/3/83

Associate Adviser: Levon Shepherd

Levon Shepherd

Date: _____

5/10/83

Assistant to the Dean
for Graduate Affairs:

Fred Meyer

Date: _____

5/11/83

Dean, College of
Fine & Applied Arts:

Robert H. Johnston Ph.D.

Date: _____

5/11/1983

I, James A. Mirabito, prefer to be contacted each time
a request for production is made. I can be reached at the
following address.

James A. Mirabito

Date: _____

4/27/82

The Dream

David Ignatow

Someone approaches to say his life is ruined
and to fall down at your feet
and pound his head upon the sidewalk.
Blood spreads in a puddle.
And you, in a weak voice, plead
with those nearby for help;
your life takes on his desperation.
He keeps pounding his head.
It is you who are fated;
and you fall down beside him.
It is then you are awakened.
the body gone, the blood washed from the ground,
the stores lit up with their goods.

My problem is to determine what factors in any given period, and particularly my own, determine the success of an artist. We cannot begin with the assumption that it is simply a question of talent, for we know that many artists that are later recognized as great artists had no success in their lifetime, and that many of those who enjoyed success in their lifetime are later forgotten. It is also obvious that the success of an artist in his lifetime is often based on qualities different from those for which he is admired by a later age. There is, therefore, a very complex inter-relationship of several factors, among which it may not be easy to trace the operation of any definite laws, and chance may indeed play a great part in a field where so many of the factors are subjective or emotional. I would like to consider the maturation of talent. In painting, for example, asking what qualities in the artist and what conditions in society make for success. With qualities so various and conditions so inconsistent, any generalization will be difficult.

Let us begin with the artist. We shall assume an initial endowment, an innate sensibility which at the approach of adulthood manifests itself in the desire to be an artist. Here begins the first hazard, the choice

of a profession. It is by no means certain that the individual, on the basis of a diffused sensibility, will hit upon the right craft. Some will hesitate between painting and other fields. Others, in the belief that they were born to be great or even competent painters, will expend passionate energy and for a time be able to convince their contemporaries that they are; but in the end for lack of true talent, will fail. Let us assume that the aspiring artist does not make a mistake of this kind, that he makes the right choice of craft. The development of talent depends on several factors. The first being relative to physical and mental health. His sensibility is already shaped by hereditary factors and by early upbringing. The will to be an artist usually emerges from tremendous inner conflicts, and it is only when these have been resolved that he can face the still considerable hazards of an artistic career. 1

The first of such hazards is education (education outside the family). There is no doubt in my mind that most systems of education might have been deliberately designed to stultify the aesthetic sensibility of students. With rare exception, education concentrates on the inculcation of intellectual knowledge, which requires the development of such faculties as memory, analysis, enumeration, classifi-

cation and generalization. These are all factors that either directly deaden any artistic sensibility, or totally destroy it. Assuming that the would-be artist survives this situation, and still persists in the desire to become an artist, he will still have before him the prospect of the "Art Education"; art with a capital "A". This can be an even greater hazard, and talent can easily be disabled in the academic abattoirs. The conflict between traditional education and the individual is narrowed down to the problem of personal expression. The art student has to either accept the academic doctrine, which may extend to style and treatment as well as to questions of materials and composition or to rebel. His eventual success or failure may depend upon the resolution of this conflict. If the authority of the academy (contemporary art) is supreme, as it was throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth centuries, then success depends upon acceptance and exploitation of academic formulas, and yet, any pat repetition of these formulas does not guarantee success, and can even prevent it. The artist must appreciate the formulas, but must modify them to suit his personal needs. Within the past twenty to thirty years, there has developed an increased interest in art within universities, ending with them constituting a new art community or satellite. This situation has much to recommend

it as a path to intellectual stimulation, a sympathetic climate for the arts. At the same time there is also the chance that the artist may be utterly stifled within such a setting, that any creative impulse may be wholly obliterated by the pre-eminence of criticism and scholarship, nor is there perfect unanimity on the part of the university itself as to whether the presence of artists will be salutary within its community or whether art itself is a solid intellectual pursuit, and therefore, a proper university study.

The whole problem of creativity often reaches into basic educational philosophy, and into institutional policy itself. A number of observations can be made on the part of a student of art in these settings, not all of them optimistic; however, they are based on my familiarity with the artist/university setting. I make these observations in the hope that something of value may emerge; that perhaps a few of the misunderstandings be clarified. As a student one is caught in a situation in which there seems to be two impossible choices. They are, one: whether to gain a liberal education at the cost of losing his creative habits, or, two; to sacrifice this liberal education in order to gain adequate understanding and training in art.

When discussing this situation one must first reckon with the concept of the cultural and/or educated man. I

think we must be aware that the university philosophy breeds graduates who, although highly specialized, are something less than educated men and women. For one thing, these graduates are likely to lack perceptivity to and sensitivity for the fine arts, that which is credited in great part to the humanizing of man.

Nowhere do the limitations of graduates of American Universities become so conspicuous as in their contacts with Europeans of similar background and education. For the European, whatever his shortcomings in other directions, will be conversant with the art and literature of his own country, as well as of others. It is not at all improbable that he will know considerably more about American art than his American counterpart. Francis Mauriac has said of us; "It is not what separates the United States from the Soviet Union that should frighten us, but what they have in common...Those two technocracies that think themselves antagonist, are dragging humanity in the same direction of de-humanization, man is treated as a means and no longer as an end, this is the indispensable condition of the two cultures that face each other." 2

Jean-Paul Sarte has said, "If France allows itself to be influenced by the whole of American culture, a living and livable situation there will come here and completely shatter our cultural traditions." 3

In England, V.S. Pritchett wrote of us, "While they should not be originally creative is puzzling, is it possible that the lack of the organic sense, the conviction that man is a machine, turns them into technicians and cuts them off from the chaos, the accidents, and intuitions of the creative process?" 4

Many critics of American Society today seem to concentrate upon two alleged characteristics: one, shapelessness, under which characteristic we find recitals of loss of sense of belonging, absence of standards, loss of norms, uprootedness, destruction of traditions, loss of cultural continuity, and sense of history, and blurring of qualitative distinction in experience. Two, references to "existential nausea" or emptiness, loss of interest in work, alienation, diffusion of identity, total relativism, and generally a failure of nerve. Are these forboding diagnoses incorrect? If there is any serious truth in them, where, how, and to whom do they apply? In our national drive to "get things done" we have generated vast internal social friction and isolation. Similarly, the intense concentration upon political, military, technological, and economic attainments probably has severely strained the maintenance of some parts of the central system's beliefs and value criteria; this might be thought of as a kind of depletion of cultural capital.

In a field such as art, where vague discourse is no stranger, we must first establish the meanings of such key terms as belief, norm, value, ideology, and institution. To speak of values is to imply that a line can be drawn between values and other stuff that are not values. Values are manifest in human behavior, but not all behavior shows forth values; physiological activities are not values, nor are sheer reflex acts. On the other hand, a disinterested moral judgement of any policy is clearly an evaluative act. Between such situations lie numerous activities of appraisal, preference, selection, interests, aversions, attractions, desires, wants, needs, choices, likes, affections, pleasures, duties, moral obligation, and many others. To consider all selective behavior as "value" broadens the term beyond any usefulness; on the other hand, to narrow the meaning of value to "moral value" is to constrict its scope so narrowly that it, as well, is useless.

Values emerge "in experience"; indeed, where else? There is already at least an incipient value criterion in the child's first experience with hot objects. All value at some point developed as generalization from some experience with certain kinds of actions and their consequences. Once generalizations were established, they could then be taught and learned without the necessity of passing through the full experience.

It has become obvious that art itself in American is without what might be called a natural environment. Art and artist often exist within a public climate that is either indifferent or hostile to their profession, or, otherwise, they are concentrated within small colonies wherein they find a sort of self-protection, affirmation, importance. The art colonies are severely limited in the variety of experiences and opinions which they can contribute to art. They become almost monastic in the degree of their withdrawal from common society; and thus, their art becomes increasingly ingrown, tapping less and less the streams of common experience. By bringing art into the circles of humanistic studies, some of the universities consciously intend to provide for it a sympathetic climate, and one in which there will naturally be found sources of stimulation, of lore, of intellectual materials, and even of that element of controversy on which art thrives so well. 5

Such, I think is the university's view and objective in embracing the arts however cautiously it may proceed; however, the artist's view must also be considered and the question of whether the university will become his natural habitat and source of his well-being, or but an awkward waystation that could spell his doom. This question has implications for all; the artist-teacher, the artist in residence, and by all means, the artist-student.

The observation to be made is rather obvious, that art has its roots in experience of some value, or generally rooted in real life. Art may affirm its experience or values, or repudiate it entirely. It may mock as bitterly as did Goya, be partisan, as was Daumier, discover beauty with the sordid, as did Toulouse-Lautrec. Art may luxuriate in life positively like Matisse or Vermeer. It may foresee nebulous horizons of sense or perceptual experience as did the post-impressionists, the cubists, the various orders of abstractionism, but in any case it is life itself as it chances to exist that furnishes the stimulus for art; that is to say, any branch or section of life, any living situation for art. 6

While I concede that almost every situation has its potential artist, that someone will find material for imagery almost anywhere, I am generally mistrustful of contrived situations, that is, situations peculiarly set up to favor the blossoming of art such as trendy shops, restaurants, and equally trendy people. I feel that they may vitiate the sense of independence which is present to some degree in all art. One wonders how the Fauves would have fared without the bourgeoisie, how Cezanne would have progressed if he had been cordially embraced by the academy. Thus it is not imagineable

that art arises from stronger sources than stimulation or even inspiration, that it may take fire from something closer to provocation, that it may not just turn to life, but that it may at certain times be compelled by life. Art almost always has its ingredients, its flaunting of established authority, so that it may substitute its own authority, and its own enlightenment.

How many ponderous tracts have been written about those tangled, tortured drips, and threads of paint by which Pollock made himself known. If his peculiar decor has its human dimension, that does not lie within the "time", "space", the interplanetary stigmas so often ascribed to the work, but rather in the impudence of the setting put forth by such work; the boldness of recognizing the beauty which does reside in such a surface. I doubt whether in a completely benign atmosphere such an art as Pollock's would have been possible, whether Pollock would have produced the degree of shock and opposition which may well have been one of the most stimulating factors in its popularity.

I believe that if the university's fostering of art is only altruistic, it may prove to be meaningless. If on the other hand, the studio arts, art scholarship, are recognized as an essential part of education, hopefully

they will feel that degree of independence essential to them, and the studio arts will accept their lot to create freely, to comment, to outrage, mock, if need be. The movements of the true university setting must not be confused with the setting up of something not unlike a nursery school in which the artist may be spared any conflict, like some exotic plant; any need to strive quite intently toward command of his craft and image, to make choices among his own values and his wants, and to reject many seeming benefits. For it is through such conflicts that he comes to know himself at all. 7

It is only within the context of real life that an artist or anyone is forced to make significant choices, and it is only against such a backdrop of hard reality that choices count, that they affect a life and carry with them a degree of belief. For me, spiritual energy is the primary force in art. I don't know whether this intensity can exist within the institutional setting. It is one of the problematic situations which an artist must consider if he is to live and/or work within it.

Ideally, for an intellectual center, the university can provide background and stimulation to the artist, broaden him as an individual. This if one accepts the theory that art is an intellectual as well as an emotional process,

and that it thus profits by an expanded range of knowledge, and or, experience. Such scholarship itself should provide continuity and perspective for the artist, and should in every way complement the creative process.

While ideally we may conclude that the university holds great promise for art, in point of fact there are circumstances which render the prospect less pleasant or optimistic.

In too many cases, unfortunately, the artist-teacher gradually evolves into something else, the teacher who was at one time an artist. Too often the initial basis of the appointment is fallacious. In the university's desire to find an artist to "get along" with the university's policy and handle the art historical jargon, they have tended to acquire a colleague who got along well enough, but turned out to be neither much of an artist nor much of a teacher. In my opinion, few artists are sufficiently dedicated to teaching to make a career of it; however, there are exceptions to the rule. I cannot overlook artists like Paul Klee, Giorgio Morandi, Hans Hoffman, and Josef Albers, all who maintained a creative career as well as an educational career. Over time, the danger is that the artist will produce less and less art, while still preserving the attitude that his teaching is of secondary importance to it.

In support of my opinion, I will account the path many of my peers seem to idealize. Those pursuing careers in art often resort to an artist-in-residence post. They are "well-paid"; however, they tend to lose the things they profess to hold most dear; vigor, imagination, and daring. Their work tends to reflect what must be seen as polite good taste, a sort of decorator taste in the city in which the university is located. Such a change may certainly take place in a man or woman for a number of reasons and under a myriad of circumstances, and it would be unfair to attribute it to the academic situation were it not for other similar instances. As we progress in the artist-student complex, we are taught to aspire to prominence in the gallery world, and, as time progresses, to becoming a university professor. This aspiration usually leads the former artist to a role of primarily administrator and teacher. 8

With all this before me, it is small wonder that I have had misgivings as to whether my own present undertaking is a right one. Actually I am not deeply concerned about my persistence in remaining a painter. My real concern is for the whole prospect of the artist within the university, for increasingly, whether for good or ill, students of art pursue their quest through this setting,

taking the required courses, and usually emerging as something less than educated individuals, much less artists. The artist is today a familiar figure within the university environment, and the question of his ability to survive as an artist is not wholly academic.

On the basis of my undergraduate and graduate experiences, I have concluded that there are perhaps three major obstacles to the development of full fledged art, and to the artist's continuing to produce serious work within the university situation. Perhaps these obstacles reach beyond the boundaries of art.

The first of them is dilettantism. Dilettantism is the unserious dabbling within a presumably serious field by persons who are ill-equipped, or actually do not want to meet even the minimum requirements of the field. Dilettantism in the university is best observed in humanities requirement courses that give a "smattering" of a field, but it's by no means confined to such academic routine and is a fairly pervasive attitude throughout American society.

I concede the need to educate broadly, and understand that breadth of interest that impels a person in search of learning to investigate all sorts of divergent fields. Obviously, I'm forced to confront a contradiction here,

for to have acquaintance with a number of different studies means that at least some of these studies cannot be met totally. I'm sure that the university has met this problem fairly successfully in some fields, but not in art. For in the field of art, dilettantism governs the whole departmental attitude, whereas, in other fields of study the department itself is regarded seriously. However, little may be absorbed by the student whose main interest is elsewhere.

I like to believe that it is an objective within the greater university to make itself a center in each of its fields; so that individuals, and institutions in the practical world can look toward the university for the most advanced work and opinion obtainable. Students then, even those who do not expect to pursue a particular field, may still derive some sense of its stature and its real meaning, and the individuals who teach and who work under the university protection are actually working in the center of their field and not on its fringe. The university is therefore assured of gaining the foremost talent in fields such as physics and psychology. Members of these fields need not be disillusioned nor bored by the level at which his profession exists.

I cannot feel that this is true in the field of art

that is, of creative art. The university hierarchy is quite likely to look at its art department and its courses as somewhat frivolous. (It is not impossible that this great public blind spot toward art extends even to such high places.) I cannot understand why there should exist such mistrust of creative work. Is it to guard the student against an incautious degree of self-committal? If dilettantism pervades the whole atmosphere of art, to even the spot where it is taught, then this is far from the best influence upon the young artist, and may prove equally unfavorable to the artist-teacher.

The second major obstruction to the development of a mature art, and to the artist's ability to survive with the university environment is the fear of creativity itself. The university stresses rather critical aspects of knowledge: researching, categorizing, analyzing, and memorizing. The re-conversion of such knowledge into original work seems to have continually diminished throughout the seventies to the present. 9

The artist who is only a painter may well become intimidated by his degree-bearing colleagues. Under the charmed aura of their MA's, their PhD's, their accumulated honors

and designations, the scholars speak of art in terms of class and category, and under headings of which the artist may never have heard. While artists may have looked at scores of paintings, have dwelt upon them, and absorbed them, his interest has been a different one; he has absorbed visually, not verbally. The idea of classifying such work would never have occurred to him, because to him the work is unique. It exists in itself alone. It is its distinction from other art, not its communality with other art, that interests him. If the work has no such distinction, if it does not stand alone, he has no reason for remembering it, and yet, surrounded by abstract and learned discussion, his own vision may waiver and its reality grow dim. At the same time I feel that both art history and art theory are of immense value to the creative artist. All such material lends depth and subtlety to art, and it is definitely stimulating to most artists. Only when, in the verbalizing or the teaching process, the original creative necessity is obliterated does art theory or art history tend to suffocate the artist. Scholarship is perhaps man's most rewarding occupation, but that scholarship which dries up its own creative sources is a *reductio ad absurdum*, a contradiction of itself, and there is the loneliness and isolation of the artist upon the college grounds. Of course we know that

many artists have painted alone with great success, but of these we may say that they chose loneliness; loneliness was their theme and their way of painting. Theirs has been a different loneliness from that of the artist who, having safely cushioned himself within the most pleasant and most agreeable environment known to man, must at some point arise from the coffee table conversation, move off, and become involved in the unsure, nervous, tense, unsatisfactory business of making pictures which will have cohesion, impact, impudence, and sheer numbers.

The third obstruction to the successful functioning of the artist within the university is a somewhat romantic misconception as to what sort of man he is. The most venerable academic element still looks upon an artist as a mad genius. The university believes, and the public joins it in believing that an artist has no idea of why he paints, but that he simply has to. In accordance with this defunct avant-garde view, it makes little difference what an artist paints or what he himself happens to think; it is the viewer who really accounts for the meanings of the work, and even he would flounder about hopelessly were it not for the theorist or critic. In the critics' hands rest all the clues to art; he is the high priest of the art process. Some ascribe to the theory that the meaning of one form of art, the non-

objective, is a cosmic one, the artist as medium through which all sorts of ineffable forces flow. Any willing and intending on the part of the artist would be an interference and render the art produced impure, and, of course, art which is the product of willing is thus invalid, and impure. As criticism itself flourishes particularly within the universities, so does this particular critical view find its warmest advocates there. In several universities the critical circle has formed itself into a small cultural group which exerts a powerful influence, one not free of snobbery. It is a curious paradox that, highly as the university esteems the work of art, it tends to a dim view of the artist as an intellectual. Before the artist can be successfully oriented with the university environment, there will be needed a calmer view toward both the qualities of the man and the qualities of the work. No artist will be at ease with the opinion that holds him to be the handyman of art. If the artist, poet, or musician, or philosopher, seems somewhat unorthodox in his manner and attitude, it is because he has arrived only a little earlier than the average man at the belief that orthodoxy has destroyed a great deal of human good, whether of charity, good sense, or of art.

I do not attribute to the university an intentional undervaluing of art, nor do I believe that creativeness in

other fields is discouraged by intention. In an abstract sense, I believe that creative art is eminent in the university values, but teaching itself is so largely a verbal, classifying process that the merely intuitive kinds of knowing, the sensing of things which escape classification, the self-identification with great moods and movements in life and art and letters may be lost or obliterated by academic routine. 10 They are not to be taught, but rather absorbed through a way of life in which intensively developed arts play an easy and familiar part. For it is just such inexact knowing that is implicit in the arts. And actually I believe that it is toward this kind of knowing that the classifications of the classroom reach, if sometimes unsuccessfully. The dream.

FOOTNOTES

1. Sir Herbert Read, A Letter To A Young Painter: (London: The Camelot Press, 1962), p.193
2. John Gruen, The Party's Over Now: (New York: Viking Press 1972), p. 131
3. Jean-Paul Sartre, Essays In Aesthetics: (London: Peter Owen, 1963), p. 93
4. Sir Herbert Read, A Letter To A Young Painter, p.265
5. Ben Shahn, The Shape of Content: (London: President and Fellows of Harvard College, 1957), p. 109
6. Alexander Liberman, The Artist In His Studio: (New York: Viking Press, 1960), p. 279
7. Charles R. Simpson, SoHo: The Artist in the City: (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) p. 91
8. Charles R. Simpson, SoHo: The Artist in the City: p.87
9. Dan Flavin, "...in daylight or cool white, an autobiographical sketch," Artforum (December 1965) p.42
10. José Arguelles, The Transformative Vision: (London: Shambala, 1975), p. 100

Key

1. Blessed Mary, Ever Virgin,
72"x 60", Mixed Media
2. Sermon About....,
72"x 60", Mixed Media
3. Portrait of Chiang Ch'ing,
72"x 72", Mixed Media
4. Witness for Trout Fishing In American Peace,
72"x 72", Mixed Media
5. Enola Gay,
72"x 72", Mixed Media









