

PLURALISM AND THE HARD SELL
HISTORICALLY UNIQUE INFLUENCES ON YOUNG ARTISTS TODAY

by

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A MASTER'S REPORT

submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree

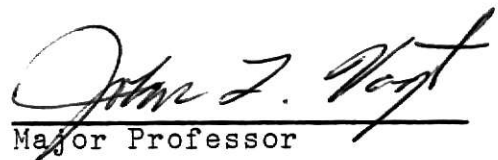
MASTER OF FINE ARTS

Art Department

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Approved by:


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Artists living in the United States today are subject to an unprecedented quantity of information. The volume and variety of image and supporting concepts delivered by electronic media and mass publications should provide fertile ground for an art unique to our age. Occasionally it does just that, if certain stumbling blocks of image and judgement bias are worked through. At a time when art should reflect the dynamic vitality of our age, much looks superficial and internally tentative or empty. It is as if the artist would rather quote than create. This art-self-consciousness is promoted by three factors unique to our age; a universal art education system with a strong analytical basis, a mass communications system promoting a particular image bias, and negative or confused feedback from art critics, who more or less follow formalist precepts.

In the November 1983 issue of ART NEWS, Kay Larson noted in her article, "How Should Artists be Educated", that for the first time in history most artists are formally trained by an extremely homogenous educational system. The young artist in the United States today educated in such a fashion displays two typical traits; a lack of passion and a strong art historical consciousness.¹ Perhaps the lack of passion in their art goes hand in hand with a predominately reductivist and analytical teaching system. The rise of modern scientific thought brought about a strong cultural bias for exacting dissection and analysis of any subject under scrutiny. When art training was institutionalized, it naturally followed that the system of instruction chosen would be based on these same footings of carefully plotted procedure. This application of scientific method to art training required a correspondingly biased art history. This bias implied art and art production could be charted in a linear/logical fashion and could be judged by standards of

purity and theoretical elegance established for chemistry and physics. Art could be improved by logical application of rationally developed procedural rules. This was a reasonable and useful system by the standards of the day. Problems arose, however, when the system remained after the standards changed. Art history, according to these principles, was a conga line of ever improving dancers who all moved to the same beat. The implication was that all future 'dancers' should and would continue in a predictable fashion. Any deviation, such as American scene painters in the 1930's, (if their work was too compelling to ignore) had to be designated an anomaly of little significance. International abstraction was the 'scientific' style providing the basis for interpretation of all work that came before and after. This formalist theory of art history, with its emphasis on logical sequence and purification of form, produced a deadly malady in art students which I will refer to as the Duchamp Syndrome. (Duchamp was not the only artist who was subject to formalist deification, but he will do as an example.) If all art of note fit into the modernist system and if that system of art was linear and logical, then it followed that at some point total refinement and purity would be reached. Duchamp was portrayed as a master of conceptual perfection. His process of elimination of 'extraneous' art technique and his exaltation of the concept over the visual reached a conclusion in hyper-obscurity and wry silence. Visual art was expected to demonstrate further aesthetic refinement but had to do it in a way that had not been done before.

Art history survey courses showed him what he could not do and implied what rules to follow. The dilemma became more and more acute as Process Art, Conceptual Art, and then progressively more obscure territories were staked out and analyzed. The system

crumbled when talent and energy could no longer be channeled into ever narrowing restrictions. It's perhaps no coincidence that the official art system stumbled at the same time it's scientific underpinnings were also called into question. In physics, improved equipment and technique exposed exceptions to most scientific theories. Absolute laws took on the appearance of helpful but arbitrary guides. By the 1970's it was apparent that past truths were actually scientific blinders necessary for dealing with the chaotic randomness of the universe. Darker ramifications of our technology also surfaced. Better living through chemistry birthed deadly waste and debris, threatening mankind with extinction. Artists developing in this environment saw exception take prevalence over rule. Proclamations of truth opened oneself to ridicule. Doubt and cynicism ruled the day and only the fool exposed his heart in his art. Art students were put in the curious position of having artwork from the past presented as having been 'right for it's time' while nothing seemed right for the present. Artists tend to be compulsive people. They have to make or do something and young artists in the seventies were no exception. Some abandoned image for action while others hedged by essentially rehashing historic art imagery with nothing added but self-conscious humor. It was a good time to withhold personal commitment and so it was withheld.

Problems in contemporary art are not solely the fault of our system of education. Mass communications certainly share in the blame. We live in a time of visual media domination of the information we receive. The speed and sheer volume of images broadcast and published today require a shorthand of sharply defined but superficial image and content. Each idea or viewpoint generated must vie with thousands of others for attention. This concern for brief notice but extended retention in an endless line of decision-

molding flashes has made highly stylized but superficial imagery the norm. In order to convincingly deliver a half-formed high speed concept, cultural preconceptions are relied on to fill out the image in the recipient's mind. What is implied but not fully stated must be stereotypical in the extreme so as wide an audience as possible will get the message. Any man-made image is, of course, an abstraction of the natural one. Our mind continually screens incoming stimuli so we can make 'sense' of our world. Making 'sense' also requires the creation of stereotypes. It is up to the mind to apply cultural bias when interpreting brush strokes or pencil marks as representations of grass in a landscape, the texture of a wall, or implied movement. Whenever such a shorthand is employed, it also reaffirms certain cultural biases. In the case of video shorthand, the bias reinforced is the medium's standard for sharp superficial definition. The 'quick look tells all' is raised to a universal truth. Looks count; not performance, not feelings, not thoughts. The initial image is all there is. Slide reproduction of art is indicative of wider ramifications of this phenomena in art in general. So much depends on slides in the artist's world today. Art students gain entry to advanced programs through them. Museums, galleries, and competitive shows rely on them for preliminary screening of work. Consequently, today's artist soon learns the necessity of angle and lighting for catchy/dramatic effect. Whether or not form and surface relationships crucial to the actual sculptural statement are revealed is immaterial. Subtlety loses out to flash. The slide image must get and hold attention in the same fashion as an ad does. It is the nature of the medium and the medium has redefined the qualities necessary in the original sculpture too. Sculpture is being viewed more and more through the biased window of the slide. The mind set induced encourages the viewer to

passively receive information from a sculpture in a camera-like fashion. Instead of experiencing the work as an undulating surface that leads around and back to a given point or points, the viewer now tends to 'click' out a series of images much like a photograph and quite often does so at a standard camera height too. The distinction between a sculpture and a two-dimensional representation of a sculpture has become blurred, just as our cultural preconceptions of the world has become flat, static and sadly stereotypical.

Art criticism was also influenced by early twentieth century scientific process and theory. The system developed promised consistent results and a clear-cut basis for interpretation of visual information. So attractive were these promises that the system developed retains staunch adherents today, even though it's premises and results are ill matched to current artwork. Clement Greenberg in a 1965 essay, "Modernist Painting", describes the system in question as formalism. This system emphasizes the elimination from an art any attribute that is more applicable to another art. Pictorial art by this definition must stress flatness both in ground and color application. No narrative or symbolic content should remain for that belongs to the realm of literature. Nothing should protrude from the canvas for that is the confine of sculpture.² This theory also narrowed possibilities within a given 'discipline', a situation often referred to as 'truth to material'. Art by this definition would arrive at a pure state wherein the artist would direct energy and insight into a closely defined system of refinement and purification. No notice would be taken of cultural flux or broader possibilities of reality. Formalist analysis is, as Leo Steinberg states in his book, Other Criteria, "an apparatus of quantification . . . with a self-righteous indifference to that part of artistic utterance which their tools

do not measure". It does have it's appeal though; it embodies a sureness of purpose and a certainty of outcome very attractive in our culture. Our society has less and less regard for the uncertain or subtle gradation. So insidious is this bias that art critics, who know better, employ these standards in a piecemeal fashion. The results are wavering and confused stands on current art imagery and a vague inarticulated distaste for the 'plurality' of the art world today. (For this paper plurality will be defined as an amalgamation of images from various cultures and times which are applied in a fashion the artist considers appropriate without concern for original context and at times with no new content implied. Plurality can be inferred as, but not limited to, a decorative application of anything ever recorded as having been seen.)

The aforementioned restrictions and pressures force developing artists to look everywhere for unencumbered ways of self-expression. Pluralism has become the basis for style. Conceptually cornered by the Duchamp Syndrome, some seek expression by freely quoting from art generally excluded from formal analysis. In the case of folk art or naive imagery, the synthesis has produced works varying from expressions of self-induced senility, in the worst case, to genuinely brilliant commentary of the American scene. Artists have also delved into the world of the insane for inspiration. Roger Cardinal's book, Outsider Art, with it's reproductions of artwork by people totally removed from the concerns of an art world has provided impetus for work secret in motivation but painfully open emotionally. It has also provided material for casually bizarre work by the (one way or another) uncommitted.

With all this imagery available for the omniverous American artist, every trend known is being reexamined and reinterpreted by the eye and mind. Unfortunately, noncommittal results abound and

so do some nasty exercises in greed-bred cynicism. Success today is culturally defined as the accumulation of wealth and goods. Little or nothing is said about putting oneself on the line or taking chances with the probability of intermittent failure. As a recent ad states, "You never let them see you sweat". The no-sweat road to success in art is scholarly but noncommittal reference to past styles. Historic notations give comfort to collectors and critics alike when they doubt their personal instincts. In the storm of babble and confused image, which comprises much of our culture, any hint of solid foundation is welcomed. The timid and those out of touch with their own heart are easily duped by their own fearful iconicity. What better way to get ahead then, in this crowded art world, than by grinding out work propped up by historic pretension?

There is an alternative that is more appealing and appropriate for our times. It entails the acceptance of plurality as style but with the following reservation: the use of close environmental blinders. By this I suggest the artists of today utilize any art technique or style or combination thereof to accurately reflect or comment on the actual life situation of the artist. The most natural thing for the artist to do is refine local image and content. Over-conscious reaction to outside pressure has given precedence to generalized formula over personal intuition. The personal gestalt and gut level intuition have become objects of manipulation rather than tools of insight and honest reflection. We are a nation of distinct regions. Despite the power of universal communications, popular concepts are always molded by geographically determined beliefs. Widely held cultural biases change in interpretation from place to place. A steel I-beam is a potent image of urbanization when seen in a city, but stick a minimalist sculpture composed of

such material in a prairie setting and it becomes an uncertain oddity or worse still a representation of spreading urban blight. A desirable image in one area becomes a sign of disgust in another. Worse still, concepts held in high repute in one place will be received indifferently elsewhere. Artists unwilling to share their true soul produce work that rings hollow. It is art mimicking television at it's worst, the product of the cynic, the faustian ad man-soulless blank faced and unfulfilled. We are a nation reaching maturity. This maturation will celebrate the cosmopolitan character of our culture, but not in a style of prepackaged uniformity. Let us raise art from the morass of confused motive and superficial cynicism. If art can lead society to a better concept of reality, now is the time to do it. The pressure to do otherwise will remain, for the alternative to the well mapped is always the unknown. Then, too, what is suggested defies easy quantification and the results of such labor require an infinitely flexible yardstick of judgement.

The artist and critic of art today must be sensitive to continual change. The soul must be searched each day and concepts never allowed to obscure the view. What is promised in it's rich eclecticism is an honest foundation for the arts of America. Let us reestablish the power and validity of visual art, not by seeking one shouting voice, but by producing a genuine and heartfelt chorus.

References

- ¹Kay Larson, "How Should Artists Be Educated," Art News (November 1983), 85.
- ²Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," Art and Literature (Spring 1965)

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AN ABSTRACT OF A MASTER'S REPORT

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Young artists today must deal with three new constraints on their creativity. For the first time in history, young artists in the United States generally hold advanced degrees in art. This educational background makes them art historically self-conscious; a situation that tends to limit personal commitment and observation in their finished works. These artists are also subjected to an all pervasive mass media marketing system that emphasizes superficial and high contrast imagery over subtle surface and form development and personal content. The art criticism employed to review the works of these artists is couched in formalist conventions. This style of criticism, with its emphasis on detached structural analysis, is inappropriate for current works of art. Its quantifiable standards and predictable results make it attractive for critics.

Artists react to these barriers in various stylistic ways. Some look to art outside traditional art history and criticism such as the work of the insane or of naive-folk artists. Other react beligerently by satirizing the systems of question and avoiding communication with the established art world. Another solution is the creation of personal bias favoring regional image and content. The artist would overcome misleading influences by concentrating on the immediate environment and personal reactions to it.

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