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Author(s): Beverly Naidus

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The Artist/Teacher as Decoder and Catalyst

by Beverly Naidus



The study of art in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's was in many ways as affected by the McCarthy era as other areas of education. Art was reduced to form and technique, a decoration for the wall or the mall. Art was understood to be an expression of a feeling—perhaps a feeling so abstract and rarefied it needed an interpreter so that the feeling would be appreciated by the general audience. It seemed that critics, curators, collectors, and artists themselves conspired to hide the art of the 1920's, 30's, and 40's—an art often filled with messages about social injustice, contradictions in everyday life, and the paths of the human condition. Often referred to as social realism and critical realism, this art used methods and styles to reinforce meanings rather than the paradigm of modernist art in which the method often becomes the meaning. One would often find art specialists referring to the low stature of art that communicates—it's didactic, propagandistic, and too direct, they claimed, unlike "high art," which takes us to new heights, inviting us through innovative form, to some mystical realm. They would say "visual communication is the business of designers."

It was also rare in the 1950's, 60's, and 70's for art to be taught as having values. One was not asked what it meant to make art in our society and who one made it

for—it was considered self-evident that one made art for oneself and was so obsessed in the making of it and/or the promoting of it that one didn't ask too many questions. Hence we learned that artists, working only for themselves (of course, there were crude ones who made art for their dealers), were alienated, deviant, eccentric outsiders. No one ever discussed the responsibility an artist might have to his or her community.

While in graduate school, a colleague from New Zealand encouraged me to ask the questions: "Why am I making art? Who am I making it for?" He introduced me to the ideas of writers and artists who are rarely mentioned in standard art history classes, like Ben Shahn, George Grosz, Diego Rivera, most women and people of color—including Frida Kahlo and Jacob Lawrence. They talked about their lives, their communities, and the world. They talked about and created things which made people uncomfortable and disturbed—not the sorts of things one would hang in the living room and not the sorts of things that made those in power very happy. Much of this work had been given short shrift or had been omitted entirely by teachers and texts because, very simply, it threatened the status quo. It was enormously inspirational to find an art tradition that mirrored people's pain and struggle. It made me feel connected.

The idea that art can connect people was new to me; although I had experienced that sense of identification, I had never named it or known it as a goal. I began to see answers to "Why am I doing this and who for?"

During the late 1960's and through the 70's women began to create works which talked about their experiences as women. The sharing, questioning, and consciousness-raising which occurred in and through their art broke one's sense of isolation. The simple notion that one could make one's life experiences the subject of art and that others could relate to such feelings, thoughts, and images changed my whole perspective as an artist.

My teaching assistantship in graduate school was greatly affected by the changes I was making as an artist. In particular, some of the books my colleague introduced me to gave me tools I have used as a teacher ever since. John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* asks us to look at the assumptions we have about art and states, "...the art of the past is being mystified because a privileged minority is striving to invent a history which can retrospectively justify the role of the ruling classes..."¹ Berger decodes art-historical jargon that revels in stylistic innovation, and he talks about the context a work was made in, who it was made for and what it tells us about both the artist's and the patron's



values. He examines the idea of owning a painting as possessing what the painting represents. This latter concept is particularly useful to feminists reexamining the image of women in art. Berger goes on to discuss the role of advertising, another aspect of visual communication, and how it shapes and reflects our values today.

Another book that greatly influenced my work as a teacher was *Teaching as a Subversive Activity* by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner. I designed my first course using some of the issues raised in their chapter on “Languaging.” The students made art pieces in different media defining words that had many connotations—e.g., primitive, exotic. They learned about making images which communicate and about the problems we have using words to do the same. A central point of this book is that meanings of words (and images) change depending on the context and who is speaking (their age, experience, ethnic group, class, and sex influence the meaning). Through this book I discovered that art could be used as a tool for thinking about the world and who or what shapes our view of it.

After leaving graduate school I managed to find some part-time work teaching in museums. I was not prepared for this sort of work and I had no inspirational role models. My group experiences in museums had been painfully unimaginative guided tours with pretentious docents. As an art student I was awed by

museum environments. It was like entering some strange house of worship—it both attracted and repelled me. At the time, I did not understand that it was the intention of this type of museum to dwarf the individual, showing the omnipotence of the cultural institution. I was only aware that the meditative space allowed for the contemplation of some higher values. I did not realize that seeing works of art in such de-contextualized spaces altered and mystified their meanings. I had emotional reactions to individual art objects in a vacuum. As I gained more information, the art historical references would translate complex symbols into some sort of meaning and I would feel more secure. But it was still something separate from everyday life. Fortunately, I had encountered John Berger’s writings before I started teaching in museums. He gave me all kinds of questions to ask (more on this later).

Museum education programs have traditionally existed to raise the “quality of life” of the masses. There is a standard attitude that exposing school kids to “finer principles” will keep them out of trouble. There is a history of giving them arts and crafts projects to work on that would be “therapeutic,” irrelevant to their culture, conflicts, and interests. My students would typically have been patronized by some specialist in the field who would teach them to admire the niceties of this technique, the originality of that style, or the market value of that work. The artist/guide was supposed to act as

the interpreter with keys to special mysteries. He or she would line them up, tell them to behave and not to touch anything, to save their questions until the end, would bore them with a tedious discussion of art historical tidbits irrelevant to their lives, and then would go home feeling virtuous about having enlightened the culturally “underprivileged.”

My students would arrive at the museum already tired, requesting bathrooms, and eager for lunch. They were confused and intimidated by the monumental lobby, their eyes darting in every direction, seeking escape. Some came from inner city schools where the extension cord for the “antique” slide projector was a prized item and art supplies were non-existent (except for the ones our program provided). Often in these schools the art class was a refuge and the only place for students to safely express feelings of rage and despair (the art teachers in these schools were generally extraordinary people). Field trips were rare and seen as a chance to escape their physically and spiritually oppressive “prison.” Although students from more affluent schools had more art supplies, better equipment, and less oppressive environments, they generally were just as pleased to leave their classes. I was eager to provide them with an experience unlike their previous field trips.

As I only had the chance to work with students for 5-8 sessions (twice in the museum, the rest in the school), I had little time to get to know them or watch them grow. I usually started them off on a project, met with them midway through and towards the end (their art teachers provided followthrough). That frustrated me enormously at first, but I eventually saw my limited time with them as a chance to catalyze a change of worldview in a few. I decided not to take that opportunity for granted. I started by asking them what they felt like standing in a museum vs. standing in the street. And followed that with: what is a museum, why do museums exist, who owns them, how does art get there, who goes to museums, would they (the students) go there voluntarily, and what, if anything, can they learn from a museum? Students would respond by saying that they would rather be hanging out somewhere else (in their space). I acknowledged that that might be more fun, but we talked about the possibility of making the museum their turf—that it’s not just for rich people and tourists. We also talked about the people who had owned the stuff on the walls before they gave it to the museum and

how we could find out what made these people (the rich and powerful) tick by looking at their property (and hence their belief systems).

Here are some typical questions asked during a talk on American portraits: Looking at Painting A, we see a man standing with his hand on a chair surrounded by bookcases and plush drapery. There is a fragment of architecture and landscape in the painting. What do we know about this man? Is he rich? How do we feel about him? How does he feel about us? Are we part of his world? Is he looking at us or above us? How did this painting get here? Who made it and why and for whom? How does the artist's technique affect what he/she is trying to say? If you were to have your portrait painted what would you put in it and how would you look? Looking at Object B we see a mask from an African tribe that lived in the grasslands. What do we know about these people from looking at the mask? What is missing from the picture—the person wearing it, his/her costume and body paint, sounds of music, chanting, drums, dancing, smells of food, dust, plants, animals, people, the time of day and year, the climate, etc.? Can we know anything about the ritual this mask was used in without my explaining the whole story to you? Is it possible to understand this ritual without being there while it's happening? Is it like looking at a baseball in a glass case and someone telling you "this is baseball?" What does this ritual do for this tribe? Does it protect it from something or someone? Give it something? What kinds of rituals do we have in our lives? Do they give us something, protect us from something?

These are some examples of the questions I would ask looking at certain parts of the museum's collections. My themes varied, depending on the group: American Art and History, the paintings of fantasies and nightmares, Art from Africa and Native America, etc. During the 1-2 months we worked together, I would meet with them 5-8 times and discuss these questions in relation to their projects.

Students were usually quick to recognize that their culture (if they were not rich, white, adult, heterosexual males) was not represented on the walls of the institutions. Sometimes they shared the same values (love of beauty, nature, heroic moments) depicted in images and we talked about belief systems in general. We also talked about what was going on at that particular point in history that we were not seeing in the paintings on the

wall. For some students it was the first time they had thought or talked about these issues, and for some it was the beginning of a political consciousness.

During the five years I was teaching in New York City museums I was introduced to two books which had a profound effect on my perspective: *The Primal Mind* by Jamake Highwater and *The Necessity of Art* by Ernst Fischer. Both writers gave me fresh approaches to the art of other cultures and our own. Highwater says, "[for primal peoples] the relationship between experience and expression has remained so direct and spontaneous that they usually do not possess a word for art."² He also says, "Art is a way of seeing, and what we see in art helps to define what we understand by the word 'reality.' We do not all see the same things. Though dominant societies usually presume that their vision represents the sole truth about the world, each society (and often individuals within the same society) sees reality uniquely."³ Fischer talks about art's original purpose: "the great auxiliary weapon in the struggle against the mysterious power of nature."⁴ In bourgeois society, he suggests, art was originally a means of understanding social conflict, envisioning a changed reality, and overcoming the individual's isolation. But in late capitalist society, as the class struggle as become more intense, art has tended to be divorced from social ideas, increasing individual alienation, and encouraging an impotent egoism, turning

reality into a false myth surrounded by the magic rites of a bogus cult.⁵

Yet while both Fischer and Highwater critique the function of art in our present dominant culture, they both believe in the power art has to transform and empower individuals. And while I would spend a great deal of time with my students critiquing the cultural institution and its narrow view of history, I also tried to show them examples of art which spoke about their everyday reality and their dreams.

When I went to visit the schools my students got a chance to express some of their feelings about the world visually. I would preface the studio project with an examination of how advertising ("low" art or popular culture) works as visual communication. They would decode ads they had selected in magazines, picking out what was being sold besides the product. We made lists of the big sellers: sex, romance, glamour, patriotism, nature, prestige, and wealth. After that we would discuss ways they could express what they believe in—through clothing, posters, masks, murals, and drawings. Students who had looked at the art of "primal" peoples made masks. The faces of animals, supernatural creatures, and favorite objects represented power, beauty, strength, and other virtues. Another group made ads for themselves in posters, expressing their dreams and



ideals. A group of fashion design students told stories about their fantasies in their drawings of costumed models and the spaces they inhabited. It was most difficult for students to describe what they hated about their lives in a drawing—it made them too uncomfortable. Only a few took the risk of painting problems of urban life, contradictions in their lives, or personal nightmares. They were given many options and more often than not they chose to avoid depressing realities.

During the workshop we talked about the role of the artist and stereotypes the students had about that role: weirdo, eccentric, outsider, male, privileged, genius, poor, starving, glamorous, rich, and celebrated. We talked about alternative roles for the artist as provocateur, healer, transformer, and visionary. I stressed that artists with different economic backgrounds, cultures, and genders may have different needs they are trying to fulfill by making art. Some are seeking recognition, power, and/or wealth. Others are looking for answers to their personal pain, are trying to solve complex philosophical problems, and/or are exploring a private iconography. And there have always been artists, who rarely get shown in museums or whose work is hidden in a remote gallery (for obvious reasons), who are trying to challenge the status quo and get others to identify with their concerns. Many of them have forsaken the traditional routes for showing their work and have gone to community centers and the streets to get their work out. This understanding of art, as a way to connect with others and to empower has rarely been taught in schools, universities, and art colleges.

Many of my students were surprised by my whole approach to artmaking. They were used to art experiences which were either very formal—concentrating on line, texture, etc. and proper rendering—or they had been given art materials with no guidance and were told to “express” themselves. “Good” drawings were rewarded with a space on the bulletin board. The standards being set were very vague. Some of them were confused by the new standards in my workshops—good questions were valued more than “good” drawings or “proper” behavior. Also I’m sure some of them were baffled by all the thinking required in an art class.

While some of the art teachers I worked with in this program were exceptionally open and enthusiastic (they were also not given much support by their administrators and their programs were seen as

“decorative frills”), there were many who were threatened by all the talk about “the world” and complained that they had not expected a social studies class. My warmest reception was at an experimental high school (the Satellite Academy) where the Social Studies teacher also taught Art.

While it seems quite remarkable looking back on it, I never got any resistance from the institutions I worked for because of the content of my workshops. In all of them I was given complete freedom in how I used the collections. Administrators in the Education Departments either understood my approach and supported it (there are some progressive thinkers hiding out in elitist institutions) or they were pleased that I showed up on time for classes and didn’t look into the content of what I was doing very carefully. I eventually left an institution because either funding ran out or I was unable to implement changes in the structure of a program. My biggest frustrations were that I was unable to increase contact hours with students (unsympathetic administrators and granting agencies were the cause of this problem) and, in one case, I was unable to change the final exhibition of student projects from one night to a longer stint. (The museum didn’t want to have all the student work cluttering up their space.) I also would have liked to have created some more community-based projects (murals or site-specific pieces), but I was one of two artist/teachers interested in this sort of thing and we were unable to rally support.

Often I’ve been asked “just how successful do you think your programs were?” (and are, since I’m now teaching art from a socially concerned perspective on a college level). It is very difficult to measure this sort of thing. It’s like asking “how many people in the audience were affected by your art work?” A few, maybe only a couple, but that’s enough to make it all worthwhile. I’m sure some of my students would rather be making “pretty pictures,” learning formal skills solely, and not thinking so much. Many of them are already so cynical, by the time I work with them, it is sometimes difficult to break through—they have got the whole world worked out in their heads already. Yet there always has been enough positive feedback to keep me at it—and it can be enormously rewarding.

Also, as was previously mentioned, I only worked with my students for a very short period of time. I had no chance to see them grow and change over time. I tried to argue for a longer program with

each group and failed to impress my supervisor. She was more concerned with numbers of students reached than the depth of the experience for each group. This was one of the major shortcomings of the program.

Unfortunately art classes are disappearing from public schools all over the country. Budget cuts and an uninterested community are often the cause. But it is not hard to see why people have lost interest. When art is seen as a decoration, an investment, or a status symbol it has little value for anyone except the upwardly mobile and the ones on top (and they have private schools). My assumption and hope is that there have been and are a few artist/teachers working in the positive ways suggested here, scattered in all sorts of institutions (community centers, prisons, hospitals, etc. as well as in academic ones) across the country. We must find each other, provide each other with support, and inspire others to do this work. Hopefully more artist/teachers will go beyond the old models of teaching art and seek new paradigms. When people can see art as a tool for critical thinking and for sharing personal and social concerns it may become a more valued part of our lives and aid in the transformations so necessary now.

Footnotes

1. John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (London: Penguin, 1972): 11.
2. Jamake Highwater, *The Primal Mind* (New York: Meridian, 1981): 55.
3. *Ibid.*, 58.
4. Ernst Fischer, *The Necessity of Art* (New York: Penguin, 1963): 219.
5. *Ibid.*, 219.

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