



Observations on Art Education

A lecture by Robert Lenkiewicz 1987

I wish to talk about art and its relationship with people – in particular the young.

Human communication is a very rare thing; and it is becoming rarer. Talking ‘at’ is common enough – television – over the garden fence – nonsense talk – nothing talk.

To those who do not have children in schools and will not have – I will be talking to you slightly differently. But I believe my observations to be just as valid to them. To have a child can be an excellent way of avoiding the responsibility one has for oneself. This responsibility returns with a vengeance once the child has grown and left home. Then the mother undergoes all the identity stresses she should have been dealing with in the previous fifteen years. She then discovers that she’s bored with herself – and invariably has the good sense to be bored with her husband, for whom, as a general rule, there is no hope. He is after all, male; which I’m sure you will agree is a very great disadvantage for any human being.

Our century has been witness to some extraordinary developments, particularly in the mechanical and technical areas. This has naturally caused a shift in our social priorities and we train the young to function mainly in these areas of skills – areas that have little or nothing to do with that young person’s feeling for validating herself.

In other areas of investigation perhaps the major influence has been psychoanalysis; and it is the influence of this practical use of psychology on education, and in particular art education, that I want to say something about.

Many psychoanalysts are appalled at how education, and art teaching in particular, have responded to the insights of psychoanalysis. It is a response that shows confusion about art teaching *and* psychoanalysis.

It is especially hard to see how art teachers came to harbour the notion that giving the unconscious “free rein” can be of value, either as education or therapy.

People who are interested in art-therapy should observe that there is hardly a human interaction that cannot lend itself to therapeutic use. Some priests serve as therapists for troubled people; but this hardly makes religion therapeutic. Some art teachers endowed with personal skill have had a great therapeutic impact on this or that student while teaching him art; but so have some football coaches, and we do not class football as a therapeutic activity.

It might seem obvious that if artistic efforts could cure emotional disturbance, then the greater the artistic achievement, the more likely should be the cure. But this is not the case – indeed research shows that people who accomplish high artistic qualities in their work show no signs of extra stability or well-being over those who do not. For example, Beethoven, as he wrote his later compositions, perhaps the greatest masterworks of all music, was at the same time becoming plagued by delusions of persecution.

It is not the out pouring of the unconscious but rather the mastery of conscious tendencies, the subjection of creative ability to the greatest aesthetic discipline, which alone makes for works of art. Art teachers should know from their own creative efforts what tremendous discipline is necessary to achieve a significant work of art. How then can undisciplined outpourings of the unconscious be accepted as true creation, or as leading to it? What makes for creativity is not any unconscious impulse but the process whereby carefully selected and arranged elements of such fantasies are rigidly worked over by a critical mind in a most disciplined way within the framework of a well-understood tradition.

When the importance of the unconscious in art education was recognized, it gave art a unique role, because so much of all other education is designed to repress the unconscious. But to therefore conclude that the remedy is to simply let the unconscious reign in art teaching is a mistake; it is to fight the devil with the devil's grandmother.

Art teaching can show the student that the unconscious is not to be repressed, that it can become a source of great vitality – but only when it has been controlled by the forces of the intelligence and enriched by its contents.

An example of what I mean can be shown by an image that Sigmund Freud often used. The image of a huge dam erected to store water. We live and have experiences that force more and more 'water' – what Freud called 'repression' – into the dam. But our educational system fails to build sluice-gates into the dam. So the land below it lies fallow. Soil becomes arid, because the dam has stopped the river (of the unconscious) which used to flow through the land. The result of this educational storing-up and repression is, in the majority of cases, an explosive spilling of water that unleashes flood waters that drain away all its accumulated energy as they devastate the land.

Art educators using this simple example should be aware of the power locked up in this tremendous amount of energy. If they neither dam it up beyond what is best for a person, nor allow it to spill wastefully over and away, they can channel and guide it to carefully laid-out beds, so that a valley will blossom in a continued renewal of abundance and creation.

Freud and others have tried to analyse artists and their works and by and large talked nonsense. Psychoanalysis has nothing to say about aesthetics.

Thousands of people with the same lifestyles and emotional stresses roam this world and create nothing, or at best empty scribbles. Again and again Freud stated that he had no answers to why certain great artists could create works of art. Psychoanalysis simply cannot explain creativity.

Art education should realise that the value of teaching art to a child, and of all creative activity, does not lie in a freedom of expression that is often little more than regression, but rather in the chance, through art, to integrate and bring together – sometimes for the first time in a child's life – different parts of herself. This is doubly important because most of the pupils' other classes inhibit unconscious expression.

True art – in its strange and mysterious way – becomes one of the greatest forces binding people together without lessening what is uniquely personal to them. Art permits them to share with others what all consider something 'higher' – something that lifts them out of the everyday experience to a vision greater than themselves.

It is an experience that can give meaning to the tribulations of the daily round of existence. It brings the artist to his creation, and the person who experiences art to the very same creation. The experience of the beautiful awakens the best in us.

What is so special about it is that unlike other experiences that bind people together in something bigger than they are, the aesthetic experience does not ask us to forfeit or give up anything of our own personal uniqueness, but rather leaves us enriched. It is a trans-personal experience that does not infringe in or reduce, the personal. Art's unique role is to guide the individual to a personal vision of the world, and of his or her place in it.

A lot of people (and this includes philosophers like Plato) think that art is an imitation – a copy of 'reality'; either external reality or the inner reality of the unconsciousness. This is not true. Art is always a vision – trapped by the time and the influence of the society it is born into and an expression of it.

If art educators can make available to future generations the chance to create order out of the chaos of their unconscious, to create a visual image of the hidden aspirations of man – as we are told the Lord created order out of Chaos – then perhaps man will be able to shape reality in the image of his inner artistic vision.

This has already happened in history; human progress was achieved when reality began to imitate art. The Greeks, in their inner attitudes towards life and themselves, tried to emulate what the sculptures and poets had created from their visions of what man *ought* to be.

The Renaissance and Reformation also tried to show man a vision of the world as here and now, and of how to live in it with dignity. Man began to throw off the burden of original sin and guilt and feel himself a son of the earth – to feel that this was a good world in which to live.

This, in my opinion, is the calling of art: to create for each period a vision of higher integration to come.

If the art teacher can convey to his pupils the excitement which such a vision offers, the student should find it easier to value his own uniqueness which may well prevent him from embracing the narrowness and conformity of a mass society. It could also prevent students from being seduced – as some of the best and most sensitive often are – into seeking personal salvation by trying to escape from the 20th century. Drug misuse; the pretend rural settings of exurbia; and above all – from becoming bad teachers!

The visions of the great artists have, each in its own time and its own society, transcended person and place, leading fellow men and women or the next generations out of their confinements towards the not yet existent, not yet realized age and society. For it is this struggle alone that dignifies art over existence on earth.

That remarkable poet Rilke wrote that:

“Art cannot be helpful only by concerning ourselves with the distresses of others, but in so far as we bear our own distresses more passionately; give, now and then, a clearer meaning to endurance, and develop for ourselves the means of expressing the suffering within us and its conquest more precisely than is possible to those who have to apply their powers to something else.”

And here in essence is Rilke's vision, from the first of his 'Duino Elegies':

“For Beauty's nothing
But beginning of Terror we're still able to bear,
and why we adore it so is because it serenely
disdains to destroy us.”

Beauty, he knew, takes us to the very brink of our existence, forces on us the harsh knowledge of limitations, but at the same time opens up visions of a world where we shall transcend our limitations and win out over terror.

This is an experience that only a few of the greatest artists are able to make universal. But it can be shared by many, perhaps all of us, if we are taught to keep ourselves open. In this sense, great art is a learning experience.

To the art teacher falls the glory of educating his pupils to be able to experience within themselves subjectively what the artist has given life to in objective form.

I would like to mention one further misconception rampant at present about the role of art in life. It is one that has a negative influence on the art educator.

It is true that in our complex modern society art of all kinds is called to one of the essential services of freedom: to free man from the mass – that it must assert the value of the individual. Then we must be wary of making art merely one more aspect of mass living.

The number of people who paint means very little compared to *what* they paint and *how* they paint it. Yet all too often I find the correct notion – that the insight of the artist leads to cultural discovery for *all* of the people – perverted to mean that all people can, by dabbling in paint, transform their insights into art. The slogan that “everybody can paint”, which everybody certainly can, should never be taken to mean that everybody is an artist. But unfortunately, the conviction that art has something of great importance to say to everybody is often taken to mean that everybody who has learned to dip his brush into paint has something of importance to add to man's understanding of himself and the world.

An example from the field of music may illustrate this point: hundreds of thousands of people can only fumblingly play a piece by Bach on the piano. But through these fumbling efforts, they achieve a far greater understanding of Bach and his achievement than they would had they never struggled to recreate his music on their own.

Apart from the very few great musicians, the overwhelming majority know perfectly well that they are not artists, and that while they try to play great music, the sounds they produce are a far cry from great, or from being creative. But they also realize that their own efforts, non-creative and non-artistic as they are, provide them with a deeper appreciation of the achievement of the great artists, and a heightened trust in their own aesthetic experience of the great work of art.

In learning music, a student is often asked to write some music, perhaps a chorale. He usually is able to write a perfectly correct musical score. But his score is almost always so unmusical that it teaches the student an unforgettable lesson in what good music is really about. Thus his own efforts reveal, rather than bridges, the abyss between what he can do and what Bach achieved.

Applying this to painting, the fumbling efforts of the student are perfectly legitimate exercises, as scales are in music, and in some cases these efforts are of great value, if they lead the student to a

better understanding of great art. But such efforts must be correctly viewed by the student as exercises, showing him the tremendous gap between creative art and non-creative exercises in the same medium. His own painting is a harmless and enjoyable past time, and may offer him access to a better appreciation of great art, but with very rare exceptions it is neither art nor creative. Therefore art educators will have to make up their minds whether painting as a leisure-time activity for the masses is a price worth paying if it reduces art to a mild diversion from boredom rather than what lifts us out of it and challenges us to strive for a higher perception of ourselves and our society.

I do not think that art should be viewed as a leisure activity. It brutalizes the act of seeing, and renders a person unable to 'feel' the difference between a painting of a 'Galleon in a sunset' and a painting by Rembrandt.

Art can echo what in a religious age might be called the divine spirit – leisure-art does not. Art educators also often insist how practical art is – that it is rational and contributes to a more comfortable and better life. If we are after practicality, rationality, and comfort, it would seem to me that almost any human endeavour except art has a better claim to our attention. We shall have to give up the notion that art can be everything to everybody, because if it is, then it adds up to being nothing of real importance to anyone.

I believe that the whole of our education has grown much too practical and rational in a narrow sense, being far too concerned with what seems useful at the moment, as against a long-range view of life, art and humanity.

I believe that the arts, in the fuller sense of the word, can be far more effective in leading students towards a truly personal view of life and man, full of richness, imagination, and comprehension, going beyond what is 'useful'.

Whatever the chosen medium of a student, the main purpose of his efforts in the arts should be to accept the importance, first, of listening carefully, and trying to understand what is moving man from the inside, and then of making disciplined efforts to express it in eternal form, both to understand it better and for others to see.

But even if a student succeeds in his efforts, that does not make him an artist: it cannot make him an artist, because he is much too young for that; it takes a mature mind and a great deal of living to carry in oneself a vision of the better world which the real artist strives for and then embodies in his work.

The task of the student is to bring order and understanding to the chaos that reigns within him. In all his other classes he is asked to deny chaos, to repress it and consider it unimportant. Only in art teaching can one show him that from a child, expected to take in and learn what others tell him to, he can grow into a free person struggling with and expressing his vision of himself and of life. Like true philosophers and healers of the mind, art educators must be good mid-wives, trying to bring into being the personal visions which have not yet seen the light of the world. For a few they may encourage great artists, but for the overwhelming majority such midwifery may be the only chance they encounter in their lives to come close to the visions of the artists.

Our educational system exposes the art teacher to heavy stresses – his teaching has to proceed within a closed system. Within it our children and adolescents continue to be the victims of a cultural heritage of the domination and bias, of fears and anxieties, on the part of parents and teachers. These adults remain afraid of permitting children to think and act for themselves. The outcome of such domination is familiar to all of us: on the one hand we find a lack of motivation or else revolt, and on the other hand an empty conformity, submission, or in fact, total atrophy: a rigor-mortis of the spirit.

Our educational system is not concerned with originality or creativity: it is concerned mainly with acquiring a body of knowledge narrowly defined; with the temporary memorization of facts, the finding of ready answers to problems, answers that are already known to somebody, or the test could not be scored. Art, on the other hand, should eternally pose new problems of freedom and higher integration. To these new problems of creative freedom, each person can find his own unique solution, because no general answers are possible.

This, then, is my thesis: the teaching of art is the only subject where a member of the future generation can be offered the chance to truly find himself as a unique person: because only here are there no ready-made answers to tell him what he ought to see, feel, and think or in which way he ought to find his self-realization.

But too often in practice either the art teacher insists that he knows what is good and bad; or else, perhaps more damaging, there is an uncritical acceptance of any outpouring as being imbued with the artistic spirit.

Art must remain free of prestige, of success in the practical sphere of being viewed as a cosmetic extra social adornment. The student must be encouraged to learn from his own inadequate efforts, and to measure those efforts against the achievement of the great artists.

To end this talk I would like to say:

I was brought up within a Jewish tradition and my father was a rabbi. I recollect a saying from the Hasidic teacher Rabbi Nachman: “Just as the hand held before the eyes conceals the greatest mountain, so this earthly life conceals from view the vast light and mysteries of which the world is full, and he who can withdraw it from his eyes, as one withdraws the hand, will behold the great light of the innermost world.”