

## Education in the Arts: In Need of Renewal

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Today, art education at the University level faces the enormous challenge of redefining its primary goals and objectives. While the traditional aims of technical competence, aesthetic awareness and a broad humanistic perspective remain valid and necessary, they are clearly by themselves inadequate to meet the needs and responsibilities of art making in the modern world. New demands are being placed on art education from a variety of sources: critical theory and dialogue, rapidly changing technologies, the need for inclusive representation, a deep seated questioning on the part of many artists and teachers on the role and nature of art, and a changing global, social and economic climate.

As educators, how do we proceed? How do we define and balance new curricula in light of new understandings? What do we bring to the classroom and how do we measure the results of our efforts—always keeping in mind that it is other human beings we are affecting—as we attempt to move forward? I believe that we must approach these questions together, as an educational community, and that we can find a balance between traditional approaches and the need to incorporate new understandings. We need to expand in several directions simultaneously: toward a renewal of our commitment to core academic disciplines, toward the expansion of curriculum & embrace of new technologies, and (especially here in Hawai'i) toward a true multi-cultural learning environment populated by faculty and administrators who strive to understand and implement teaching strategies that incorporate a greater emphasis on regionalism and cross-cultural learning patterns.

The role of education is to prepare the student for a life, to convey the accumulated understandings of the past and impartially examine the present, to help them think for themselves, come to their own understandings and discover the resulting expression of that understanding. To that end, I place a great value on a comprehensive, pluralistic education in the visual arts, including a thorough exploration of culture through the liberal arts and art history, exposing students to diverse points of view and a wide range of cultural and artistic concerns. The aim of an undergraduate education in the arts is to provide a structured learning environment that engenders commitment, concentration and thought, and at the same time, to allow some measure of exploratory freedom out of which arises the student's creative work.

How do we help facilitate these broad educational goals? The need for curriculum development in many of today's institutions is pressing. Traditional studio explorations are now being enhanced by new technologies that we cannot ignore. Computers, multi-media, new forms of expression and new thinking about art are rapidly making connections between the formerly disparate disciplines of photography, film, video, design, illustration, drawing and painting. Interdisciplinary studies are becoming increasingly important as are examining the contributions of non-European art. Critical theory and dialogue, performance and installation-based works have spawned entirely new approaches to the practice of art. Revisionist social and art history is expanding our understanding of the past and re-contextualizing many long held assumptions and attitudes. Collaborative projects give credence to artistic production that grows out of joint efforts, shared questions and mutual discoveries. Our possibilities as artists are broader than ever before, and our evolving educational system must reflect these changes. Additionally, if we are to be responsible, with art schools turning out MFA's in unprecedented numbers, we must provide in some capacity, the necessary preparation for a student to make a contributing and satisfying career in the visual arts.

If we are to approach these ideals, an examination of some of the failings of the current educational system in the arts is in order. There are several major inadequacies and contradictions that need to be addressed: the most urgent being the growing lack of any historical cultural continuity. Many students today are immersed in

contemporary culture and are largely unaware of the past, even the most recent decades, and are correspondingly ignorant of how past events and attitudes have shaped the present. In spite of our current cultural understandings and the revisionist efforts toward expanding our knowledge and awareness, perhaps more than ever before, many of today's students are unable to formulate a perspective on the present in a historical context. We are sadly in danger of forgetting the past. One of the primary aims of education must be the provision of continuity and cultural literacy; keeping in our minds and hearts the lessons we have painfully assimilated over many years.

How has this trend evolved? To what do we owe this crisis in cultural continuity and awareness? There are certainly many contributing factors, but I believe there are two interrelated, primary reasons. The first, as we all recognize, is the tendency in mass media toward oversimplification, over stimulation, the extreme reduction of one's attention span and the proffering of outdated, dehumanizing cultural attitudes. The second is the prevailing trend in education toward an over reliance on subjective thinking, and the premature development of an individual point of view over the discipline of objectivity and the ability to see things from many angles. F. Scott Fitzgerald once said that the sign of true intelligence is the ability to entertain two opposing ideas in the mind simultaneously. Yet, in our culture, from an early age, we are taught to judge the world by our own standards, our own background and our own specific circumstances, rather than learning to truly consider and contemplate the realities of other people, other epochs and other circumstances.

The tragic fact is that any depth of inquiry, or evidence of interests that run counter to the accepted, secularized values of Western culture are often ridiculed—sometimes even from within the educational environment. What many contemporary students lack is any form of a durable connection to a larger dimension—social, cultural, historical, psychological or spiritual—and the discipline required to maintain and deepen that connection. Current thinking in some segments of the arts and education community strenuously denies the credibility of the heroic quest, the sustained lifetime commitment to an ideal and the paradigm of the artist as a seeker or purveyor of cultural identity or moral truth, treating these aims as the residual vestiges of modernism and outdated artistic/social modes of interaction. To the other extreme, there are art departments that reduce art to simply a commodity, emphasizing the strategies of professionalism and the business of art. We must assist our students in transcending the purely subjective point of view and raise the question repeatedly: what does it mean to be fully human, to unabashedly explore the depths of our own existence and that of our fellow human beings, to have a real exchange of ideas, to encourage students toward a critical examination of themselves and their culture, and to find a mode of understanding and expression that integrates the paradoxes of opposing ideas and forces in their lives?

With ever increasing communication systems, the phenomenal rise of the internet and cross cultural influences, it is global thinking that will prevail in the 21st Century. How do we prepare for these changes? In our region (which I am defining as the Pacific Rim), several global events and changes have had major repercussions, notably the massive economic development and cultural change experienced by a number of Asian countries with which the Hawai'i population has significant ties, and repressive regimes resulting in atrocities such as the Tiananmen Square Massacre. Artistic practice in this region cannot be evaluated solely through the standpoint of what has been deemed the "Euro-Americentric perspective". The arts of our region are incredibly diverse. "They are often intensely locally specific while, at the same time, maintaining a connection with international art practice. There are common themes which emerge. Among these are: national identity and the place of tradition within rapidly changing societies, strategies for practicing art in highly repressive societies, religion and spirituality, the role of women, and especially ecological issues and the world-wide problem of environmental degradation." <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Exhibition Catalog: Asia-Pacific Triennial Exhibition, Brisbane, Australia 1993

Through recent contact with Eastern European artists and the arts of rapidly developing Asian nations, I have been deeply impressed with the courage of these artists working in extremely adverse conditions (where death or imprisonment was a potential penalty for free expression) and overwhelmed by the power and grace of their work. It is clearly the domain of education to provide us with an increase in global awareness, to broaden our perspective, and help us see ourselves with greater clarity and insight.

In today's classroom, diverse representation—incorporating multicultural perspectives, encouraging traditional artistic practices that grow from ethnic identities, exploring the contributions of those with different backgrounds and beliefs than our own— must become central to our evolving goals. Yet we seek balance. In our zeal for revisionist histories, it would be an arrogant mistake to ignore the great minds and stunning insights that have emerged from the European traditions. As educators, it is our responsibility to help anticipate and build toward the future, expand boundaries, and offer students a contemporary global perspective while not losing sight of the lessons that the past centuries have taught.

If we dare to be educators, we must make a commitment to the highest ideals of teaching. We are a link in the great forward motion of history, where eventually our students will further, and even surpass our greatest achievements, and we must attempt to give them the means to do so. We are teaching students who must face an uncertain future and its challenges; who have come of age in a different time, with different conditions and different influences than our own, and whose mature forms of expression are still unknown. It is our students that will shape the artistic future. Our world as artists is widening immensely. Our challenge as educators is to make available to the student the traditional tools, the changing techniques, and the creative, intellectual and moral *rigueur* to help them make informed choices for tomorrow. Education, if it is to be effective, must promote a thorough exploration of differing modes of thought and expression, and provide a critical base to engender lifelong learning and continued growth. We must help encourage a vision for the future, and assist our students in embracing complexity and finding the courage to confront the difficult issues that we must face in the modern world.

Throughout these remarks, we have not yet arrived at what is one of the most crucial factors in the educational process, and what we must pay close attention to — and that is the individuality of the student. Carl Jung once wrote “ The individual is the only reality. The further we move away from the individual toward abstract ideas about Homo Sapiens, the more likely we are to fall into error. In these times of social upheaval and rapid change, it is desirable to know much more than we do about the individual human being, for so much depends on his mental and moral qualities... Psychology (or teaching) inescapably confronts you with the living relations between two individuals, neither of whom can be divested of his personality, nor, indeed, depersonalized in any way.” No matter how we hypothesize about the needs of the educational process, the undeniable fact is that teaching takes place between individuals, and the teacher can only function as a catalyst for and mediator of another's experience.

Our role as educators is to share our knowledge, our understandings, and our explorations—to engage in our own inquiry in public. Education is ultimately a paradox. We must remain committed to our own evolving point of view and have the courage to vigorously express our convictions, yet be willing to look beyond ourselves and hear the ideas of others. This is the meaning of dialogue. We must always strive to remain unbiased—a formidable challenge—and avoid the subtle prejudice often extended toward those whose attitudes, beliefs and expression are different than our own. In this respect, while our attitudes today may be different and (just maybe) more enlightened, it has been my experience that some of today's faculty members are as deeply entrenched in their own personal beliefs and individual commitments—with a frightening degree of self-righteousness — as are

educators of past generations. We must avoid imposing our beliefs and instead work toward empowering the student through simply offering the results of our discoveries. The goal of education must be to assist the student discover something *of* themselves and *for* themselves.

We must bring teaching to the level of a creative act, use our intuitive capacity and synthesize our response to the student; to know when to be supportive, when to challenge, when to stand back and merely observe, and when to let go. In short, we must be willing to give of ourselves and avoid the routine, the teaching by formula. We must, through our encouragement and our example, promote critical thinking: a process that extends beyond the mere intellect to the understandings achieved by observation, reflection, compassion and a true responsiveness of feeling — thinking and feeling simultaneously. We must invite hard work and creative frustration, the ability to work things through, no matter what the level of difficulty. We must encourage the freedom of experimentation and risk-taking within the context of a sense of discipline and a committed approach to one's work. The mark of an outstanding educator is the ability to embrace these paradoxes and to integrate often opposing forces and ideas.

We must also examine the relationship between the arts, the educational institutions themselves and the communities which support their existence. There are many challenges facing the arts: the decline of public funding, heated controversies surrounding artistic content in publicly funded projects, the widespread view of art as a commodity, the dominance of the “Euro-American perspective”, the notable absence of the sacred and of deeply rooted cultural traditions in much contemporary art, and the marginalized relationship of the artist in society. Perhaps the most crucial of these issues facing the arts and education today is the lack of a meaningful pro-active involvement of the artist in the community. The prevalence of the university-trained artist, often receiving their education in a place unfamiliar to them, the all too often cynical attitude harbored by many artists toward the community and its members, the inability, unwillingness and disinterest on the part of many artists to adequately educate their communities (which sadly extends even to the schools and children) about the arts— these factors have resulted in a shortage of what would be considered relevant artistic experiences for many members of our communities.

Suzi Gablik points out, in her introduction to an interview with Carol Becker, Dean and Vice President of Academic Affairs of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, “Students need to think about their work ... not in isolation, but in relationship with an audience and a larger societal context. The artist's relationship to the public and to an audience has not been addressed in art-school pedagogical situations. American art students, like most American college students, Becker claims, have not been trained to think globally or politically about their position in society. ... The mutual alienation between artists and audience is a matter with serious consequences for society, but in the nineties this is beginning to change, and Becker feels that the goals of the art world will change as well. Many artists in this country now appear to be refusing the place of isolation and marginality they have been given, which they themselves have often romantically confused with freedom.”<sup>2</sup>

Higher education, and the university in particular, having assumed a leadership role in the arts and art education, must review its institutional goals and objectives in the context of societal responsibility. If the university is to be effective, we must enter into a more deeply committed reciprocal partnership with the communities that we serve. We must define curriculum to assist in this process and encourage students to find points of intersection with the world surrounding them. As artists and educators, we must honor, acknowledge and help perpetuate the many cultural traditions which enrich and diversify our island communities. We must assist talented, but

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<sup>2</sup> Conversations before the end of time, Suzi Gablik, Thames & Hudson, 1995

underprivileged young people, by providing them with an opportunity to study art, if they so desire; and we have much to learn from their experience and outlook. We must provide meaningful creative experiences to many members of our communities, including school children and the underserved segments of the population. We must participate in our communities through educational and volunteer activities, sponsoring and participating in artistic projects which benefit our friends and neighbors, and lending our expertise where needed. And, of course, we must continue to develop one of our most indispensable roles, that of providing passionate and critical commentary on the ills, injustices and disparities of our society —and we must learn to do so with compassion and caring.

Finally, I have come to believe that there is a moral imperative to the educational process — that making and teaching art brings with it some measure of responsibility. The artist has a place, an evolving role to play in the life of the community by helping to shape and understand culture. The arts *do* bring something of real importance to the community. They offer knowledge, insight, beauty and humor, and provide a means of understanding ourselves with greater clarity. They teach us about peoples of varying backgrounds and help us live together with greater understanding and compassion. They hold a mirror and challenge to the society from which they arose, and offer a means of questioning the world around us. Finally, they hold the potential of providing hope and inspiration in an unsettled world and deeply enriching the lives of people. I believe that the creative impulse is needed in modern culture, perhaps as never before, to build new social structures, new forms of thought and expression, and new ways of collaborating to address the many challenges and opportunities of our times.

In this context I am reminded of one of the most significant and stirring speeches that I have ever heard, from Vaclav Havel, the playwright President of the Czech Republic, in an address to the joint session of Congress in March, 1990: “ ... the salvation of this human world lies nowhere else than in the human heart, in the human power to reflect, in human meekness and in human responsibility... Without a global revolution in the sphere of consciousness, nothing will change for the better in the sphere of our being as humans, and the catastrophe toward which the world is headed — be it ecological, social, demographic or a general breakdown of civilization — will be unavoidable. If we are no longer threatened by world war or by the danger that the absurd mountains of accumulated nuclear weapons might blow up the world, this does not mean that we have definitely won. We are still incapable of understanding that the only genuine backbone of all our actions, if they are to be moral, is responsibility. Responsibility to something higher than *my* family, *my* country, *my* company, *my* success — responsibility to the order of being where all our actions are indelibly recorded and where and only where they will be properly judged.”

I can only wish that we, as artists, educators and students, might begin to understand and feel the meaning and challenge of these powerful words and ideas.

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "David Ulrich". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.