

mission impossible?

## SAVING THE VISUAL ARTS

printed in Vol. 7, No. 4, 2008~ -Arts and Opinion Magazine, August/September

by

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*This article is directed to artists, art educators and appreciators who are concerned about the increasing trivialization and irrelevance in the field, its lack of defining characteristics, its alienation as an academic discipline from the greater intellectual community and the resulting failure of art education to maintain a significant presence in the curricula of American schools.*

***Art is whatever I say it is. --Marcel Duchamp***

***Art is nothing. --Flavio Sciole***

### **DIRECT-PERCEPTION: TOWARDS AN OBJECTIVE FOUNDATION FOR THE VISUAL ARTS**

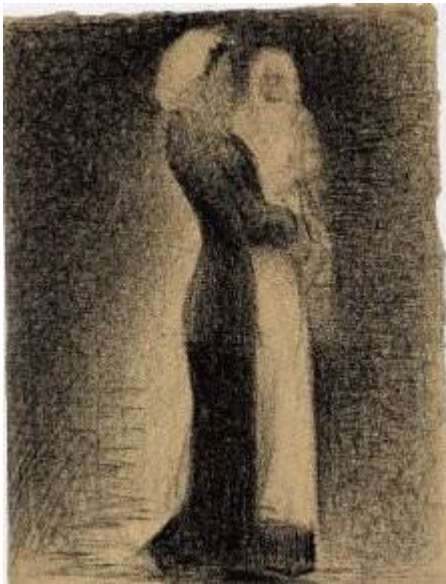
After nearly a century, modern and postmodern artists, critics and art educators have so liberated the term art from its traditional meanings and applications that in both the popular and professional senses of the term, it has lost its capacity to function as a word – that is it can no longer distinguish itself from what it is not. In both theory and practice, art is anything one chooses to make it; an artist is anyone who makes the claim. The lack of focus of the visual arts is due not only to its theoretical ambiguity but to its related lack of instructional coherence and measurability. It can be safely stated that art education is the only performance-based field of study that has neither a viable system of standards nor an established technical foundation. It is a field with no clearly defined, generally accepted goals, no established methodologies and no meaningful way to measure the progress of its students.

A field that fails to maintain its technical base and is at war with itself on the very issues that define it -- on its very nature and purpose -- is a field in crisis. The resolution of that crisis will require foundational changes in the way art is thought about, produced and taught.

I will attempt to make the case that in both the visual arts generally and art education specifically, the cause of decline is the same: the neglect of direct-perception drawing and painting -- rendering what one sees as one sees it, in the immediate present, without recourse to memorized formulae or the influence of other artists' styles. This practice, which had been the pedagogical foundation (although seldom the direction) of the field from the Renaissance to the turn of the 20th Century, was overturned in a matter of three or four decades by the abstraction-based modern art and art education movements.

There are two reasons why the visual arts field abandoned its technical traditions in both the practice and teaching of art over the past century. The first is its acceptance of the modernist notion that the imposition of technical rules inhibits creativity. The second is that art education came under the influence of the progressive movement, as did education generally, which advocated turning away from the teaching methods and goals of the past and embracing speculative experimentation as a means for educational reform. These trends, in company with the abandonment of strict performance standards in the foundational skill of drawing, destroyed the technical consensus that had held the field together since the early Renaissance.

It is for this reason that “the elements and principles of design” have been the only theoretical constant in the field for the past 70 years and why those principles -- balance, unity, movement, proportion, rhythm etc. -- have become almost meaningless. They are meaningless as currently applied because they are not supported, as are the principles of music education and sports training, by rigorous performance standards -- and are generally not binding. In practice, they are not really principles at all but loosely defined tools of personal expression that are available to the artist and the teacher who may use them as they wish, break them as they wish and ignore them as they wish. It should be obvious that no new pedagogy worthy of the name -- and certainly none that would be accepted field-wide -- can be developed within the current modernist/postmodernist theoretical framework. This is not to suggest that all art teachers and art departments fail to emphasize accurate drawing, but those that do are exceptional and do not significantly influence the field.



The departure of the art education field from its strict adherence to visual truth in the training of artists was theory driven and intentional, facilitated by two dominant instructional strategies: encouraging students to draw and paint abstractly -- to willfully distort or abandon perceived imagery -- and encouraging them to adopt the stylistic characteristics of other artists. So at its very outset, the modern art education movement was fatally conflicted between its intentions and its methods. It adopted the abstraction principle for purposes of self-expression (and as a political weapon against traditional art institutions and practices). It adopted its mannerist teaching techniques out of necessity. Most new art students had difficulty comprehending abstraction in principle and were generally not inclined toward it in practice. Their reluctance was understandable: willful abstraction is counter-intuitive and un-natural by definition.

To get students to draw and paint abstractly, teachers first had to convert them to the ideology of self-expression, then to the companion idea that self-expression required abstraction. The gist of the message was this: to draw an apple as you see it leaves you out of the picture and you are what art is all about. To put yourself in the picture you must change (or ignore) the apple and do so in your own unique way.

The modernists further assumed that the self is autonomous and foundational and that individual artists have the potential to plumb the depths of Being to reveal universal truths of benefit to us all (the genius theory). The postmodernists disagreed. There is no autonomous self; there are no Universals; there is no Truth. The individual is a social construct. Art is political.

In any case, this directive to express the self through abstraction created a pedagogical problem that has never been satisfactorily resolved: teaching students how to draw and paint something that they do not see and cannot visualize. The problem was solved on the instructional side by pre-programming the visualization process, which is to say, by showing students examples of abstract drawings and paintings. However, this practice created another problem on the learning side: that of originality. How do students who gain their understanding of abstraction by looking at other artists' abstract pictures, create their own pictures without mimicking those examples? The answer, as every art teacher knows (but few will admit) is that they cannot. This is true, not only of newly-initiated art students, but of accomplished abstractionists as well. Picasso and Braque, during their early Cubist period, made regular visits to each other's studios and ended up producing pictures so similar that they were later unable to identify them as their own.

In order to follow the new path of mannerist abstraction with at least the appearance of a clear conscience, artists and teachers had to deny the obvious: that the practice of mimicry is contradictory to creativity -- and to boldly advocate its use as an important part of the creative process. One does not mimic, one is influenced or inspired by the work of others. This is now a thoroughly institutionalized notion which has yet to be seriously challenged, although a theoretical basis for such a challenge has been on the table for over 2000 years.

***“The imagination cannot create,  
it is composed of memories.”*** -- Aristotle

Aristotle may be overstating his case, but the dependence of the imagination on memory cannot be refuted. Whatever else may be happening in the imagining process: mixing, exaggerating, simplifying, distorting, etc. -- and a case can be made that some sort of (non-original) creativity is involved in these activities -- memory is the primary source of the material on which it is working. More importantly -- and this gets to the very heart of the problem with imaginary invention and modern art generally -- the dominant content of memory for the artist, with respect to its mental staying power and retrievability, is the work of other artists.

The Picasso/Braque episode is a case in point, which I make, not to repudiate imaginative art, but to establish the foundational importance of perceptual drawing and painting -- both as ends in themselves and (secondarily) as a foundation for invention. The best imaginative artists (Picasso, Matisse, Dali etc.) were classically trained. Although it is not possible to be clinically specific about the relationship between classical training and imaginative creativity, one can assume that those trained to see real objects with the eye and render them with the hand have a broader range of memories, better memorial access and better manual response to input from either the eyes or the memory than those who learn to draw only from their memories of other people's pictures.

As a teacher in his Académie Matisse (Paris), abstractionist Henri Matisse insisted on strict visual accuracy from his beginning students. “Many of the students, knowing Matisse only through his work, expected to find that they could do just what they liked in his classes. On the very first morning, for instance, they welcomed him by festooning the classroom with canvases daubed in the loudest, strongest colors on their palettes. Matisse, walking in, exclaimed, ‘What’s all this rubbish? Take it down at once!’ Then he put them through a series of academic exercises that must have made some of them wish they were back in the Beaux-Arts. He insisted on exact measurements and on the use of the ruler and the plumb line.” (John Russell, *The World of Matisse*, Time-Life Books, 1969.)

The common assumption that creativity is exclusively a function of the imagination fails to take into account the superior and more fundamental creativity of perception. Researchers in the perceptual sciences -- like Charles Solley and Gardner Murphy (*Development of the Perceptual World*, 2006, Kessinger Publishing, 2006) -- are in general agreement that seeing is not, as commonly assumed, a straight-forward, purely receptive process. We do not see and then think about and have feelings about what we saw. Thinking and feeling are part of the perceptual process. What we actually experience as a result of looking at a tree or an apple on a plate is not the tree or the apple, but a percept, a picture in our own brains. This picture is formed in the visual cortex at the back of the brain, and is only partially composed of retinal data (which is already pre-filtered to admit only a portion of what is actually out there). This remaining retinal data is combined with the memories of past perceptual, intellectual and emotional experiences into an image that we mistakenly assume to represent the outside world. In fact, it is a composite of two worlds: the external and the internal, the present and the past. So to abstract -- to willfully distort or ignore the images of direct experience -- is to depart, not only from the world at large, but from ourselves as individuals. Thus it can be argued against the self-expressive assertions of abstractionism that the most creative human function is seeing and the most self-expressive artistic act is painting truthfully what one sees.

The most serious problem with art programs based on the invention principle is that they have no objective basis for claiming creativity or developmental value or for judging their own effectiveness or the progress of their students. Teachers in such programs cannot determine how successful their students are at working from their imaginations because they have no way of knowing what their students' imaginations actually contain. The only imagination teachers have any direct knowledge of is their own -- which explains why art instruction today is so heavily influenced by the personal tastes of the instructor and why such programs vary so widely from school to school. Perception-based art instruction, on the other hand, draws upon objective rather than personal references: the objects of the visible world. Whether the subject is a simple cartoon picture or a complex still life, the teacher and the student can judge the student's performance by simply comparing his or her artwork to the original -- something they both experience in common.

To advocate for direct-perception in the training and practice of art is to confront the inadequacies and ambiguities of the language of art theory, both traditional and contemporary. The practice of perceptual drawing and painting does not fit any of the commonly used terms relating to recognizable imagery. Representational art, figurative art, realism etc. refer to what a picture looks like. They imply nothing about the methods used or the artist's intentions in making it. A realistic picture can be done entirely from memory, formulae (steps that one follows to make trees look like trees, clouds like clouds) or photographs.

A direct-perception picture is done for the purpose of gaining perceptual knowledge and improving one's manual response to that knowledge -- to learn to see more clearly and substantially and to paint more truthfully and skillfully. The goal of realism is precisely the opposite; its purpose is to create convincing illusions. This difference in intent is reflected in the way the products of the two methodologies are evaluated. The technical success of direct-perception is measured against the actual object perceived, while the success of realism is measured against prevailing conventions -- by how well it satisfies the pictorial expectations of the general public.

Although direct-perception is process-centered by definition, the argument for adopting it as the guiding principle of art and art education also rests on the quality of the product, about which I will make the following general claim: No picture produced by image-making or image-bending technology, painted from the imagination, by formula or by means of the willful approbation of the styles and imagery of other artists can surpass the quality, subtlety and depth of feeling of a truthful, skillfully hand-rendered picture done directly from life. And nothing in the field could be more personally beneficial and fulfilling than acquiring the skills and personal qualities necessary to draw or paint such a picture.

There is no objective way to prove this claim of course, but it is self-evidently true to those who have experienced it personally, either as artists or appreciators. It can also be supported by reference to those inexplicable, but almost always significant, occasions in art history when perception was pursued for its own sake (as opposed to being used for the illustrative or decorative purposes of the day): Leonardo's Mona Lisa, Rembrandt's self-portraits, Velazquez's portrait of Phillip IV, Gericault's Madwoman, Monet's haystacks, and the "incredible apples and pears by Paul Cezanne" (from Woody Allen's Manhattan). I cite these artists, not to advocate a return to the art and theories of the past, but to make a case for a return, with new eyes, to the realities of the present.

This will not be an easy case to make. It is one thing to advocate for direct-perception as an instructional tool; it is quite another to advocate it as an aesthetic direction. One of the problems is that direct-perception and realism, while theoretically opposed, are formally indistinguishable. Another is the early modernists' misappropriation of Paul Cezanne as a fellow abstractionist when in fact he was a dedicated champion of direct-perception. But these problems are beyond the scope of this article and are not central to its point: that direct-perception is the inescapable foundation of the visual arts, is responsible for most of the celebrated masterpieces in art history, and is the only conceivable option left open to us.

The end cultural result of the double-barreled assault of inventive abstraction and mannerist pedagogy on the fields of art and art education over the past century has been the loss of the artist's connection to nature, the hand's connection to the eye and the decline of the individual -- the very source of art and creativity. But there is some hope to be found in the direness of our straits and the persistent patterns of history. When a culture loses its interest in the pursuit of truth; when its emotions and ideas are exhausted, standardized, calcified, incapable of producing personal and cultural renewal, art makes its periodic turn toward the outside world.

***"All great movements in art history  
began with a return to nature." --Kenneth Clark***

It is not possible for us to imagine what the world will look like when art instructors and artists finally return to their jobs: the former to teach us how to draw, the latter to teach us how to see. We have nothing with which to build such a vision. Our minds are filled with the images of a century of art dedicated to the deconstruction of the past -- the very stuff that the next generation of direct-perceivers will have to fight their way through to the truth.

It is a significant feature of our times that we cannot even conceive of a plausible future for art that is neither an extension of an already exhausted present nor a return to an irretrievable past. We are clearly at the end of an epoch, with only an apple on a plate in front of us. We have no traditional boundaries left to break, nothing more to lose and nowhere else to go.

***"Doubtless there are things in nature which have not yet been seen. If an artist discovers them, he opens the way for his successors. If I have left something unsaid, they will say it." --Paul Cezanne***

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