

ARTICLES

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THE "STRONG, SILENT" MYTH -
LANGUAGE AND ART TEACHING¹

Traditionally, language skill has not been seen as a central concern of art educators. The tacit assumption in most curricula is that art is fundamentally non-verbal and should, therefore, be taught primarily through the creation of artefacts. While some curricula, such as local syllabuses for high school art, include a section on art history and the theory of art, little or no time is set aside in these for what the aesthetician Arthur Danto considers to be the central principle of art-interpretation.

Interpretation, according to Danto, is the means by which art reveals itself, and by which we, the receivers, come to understand it:

The moment something is considered an artwork it, becomes subject to an interpretation. It owes its existence as an artwork to this, and when its claim to art is defeated, it loses its interpretation and becomes a mere thing Art exists in an atmosphere of interpretation and an artwork is thus a vehicle of language and reality partly because it is a language of sorts, in the sense at least that an artwork says something, and so presupposes a body of sayers and interpreters who are in position, who define what being in position is, to interpret an object. There is no art without those who speak the language of the artworld, and who know enough of the difference between artworks and real things to recognize that calling an artwork a real thing is an interpretation of it and one which depends for its point and appreciation on the contrast between the artworld and the real world.²

Danto's artworld is both theoretical and practical. 'The theory is the knowledge of possibilities, determined by history and culture, which is the matrix from which artefacts emerge. The cutting edge of this theory - and the educational means for transmitting the theory - is critical interpretation.

Theory is the means by which mere things are "enfranchised" into the artworld - made into art - and theory is transmitted not only in the presentation of artefactual examples, but in the language relevant to interpretation. In this way the artist, let us say Duchamp, can take an ordinary object such as a bottlerack or a urinal and, by invoking the power of a relevant aesthetic theory, "transfigure" the mundane article to the status of art.³

If one considers the central importance of language in actually creating art, ontologically-speaking, it is all the more alarming that art teachers are not discouraged from the romantic and misleading view of the artist and the artwork as "strong, silent types," unwilling or unable to make a coherent remark about art. This attitude means that the art teacher faced with the expressive richness of a Bonnard may perhaps eulogise in a vague kind of way about the "powerful effect" of the work, but when it comes to involving the learners in some kind of verbal activity, the chances are the teacher will encourage either an historical, or, at best, a formal-analytic description of the piece. Either way, the teacher fails to establish something of the way in which the work is special, expressive or sublime and the learners are not given the means for engaging the work on anything but a vicarious level.

It is here that specialized language skills are of central importance in the art teaching programme. Somehow the teacher must have developed the means of making the transition from the perceptual/affective response to the communicative mode of interpretive language. And it is here that the skills of an interpretive critic can serve as an exciting and appropriate guide. Consider the way in which the New York critic, Max Kozloff, tackles the enigmatic potency of a work by Bonnard:

. . .shreds and patches of porous colour - blonde pinks sieved by lavender blues, surrounding greens freckled by spots of orange - which only gradually reconstitute themselves into delicate lineaments of furrowed fields, truck gardens, trees, and maroon groves, at a moment of burnt-gold sunset. The substance of these images is open stitched and knit at apparently careless angles so that they boggle, molest, and yet dissolve into one another. And above all there emerges an unheard of miscegenation of touches - resembling peach bruises and handkerchief dabs - that characterizes the florescent watery spectacle as some slightly polarized and over-exposed colour film. . .⁴

This writing does more than describe the work in question. It recreates a specific, personal, idiosyncratic experience. Nor does it attempt to "translate" the art phenomenon into verbal language. It articulates a point of view and by so doing, invites the reader into what Hans-George Gadamer has described as an "horizon of meaning."⁵ The reader can share his peculiar experience of the artwork with that of the critic. The richness and aptness of the critic's verbal interpretation of the phenomenon can then add to the experience of the reader.

The important point here is that the critic uses an unashamedly poetic means for articulating his response and evoking responses in his reader. Since it is reasonable to reject the possibility of somehow transferring the holistic and specialized expressive power of the artwork to a verbal mode, the role of explicator should not be seen on this level. The teacher/critic needs only to develop those skills of evocation which will allow his pupil/reader access to a wider response to the work. Since the poetic means illustrated by Kozloff involves the construction of rich, conceptually-generative metaphor,⁶ the pupil/reader is invited into such responses as are appropriate to the reception of poetry. Meaning is created cumulatively, personally and imaginatively, yet no attempt is made to reduce the confrontation with the artwork to a kind of pseudo-scientific description or analysis.

The natural response to the suggestion that art teachers strive to use such language strategies in their teaching is to argue that special talents and skills are required in order to make a success of such an approach. While it is no doubt true that a facility with language on a general level will help the teacher to enliven the way in which he may approach the problem of interpretation, it is also true that most, if not all, disciplines require the acquisition of specialized language skills for learning. Because the art teacher is confronted with often inscrutable and enigmatic artefacts, he may feel that it is necessary for the language to be equally arcane. But such theorists as Nelson Goodman have argued that art language is at base no more recondite than any other kind of language,⁷ so another reason must be found for the hesitancy of teachers to tackle the thorny issues of art in a language which is appropriate.

In my opinion the difficulty arises from a lack of what might be called "Language traditions" in the art classroom. If teaching strategies from the grades onwards were to include using, and assisting pupils to use, increasingly complex critical-interpretive language, the advantages of habituation-enjoyed by all other disciplines using in specialized language - would quickly accrue to the traditions of art learning and teaching. There is no reason to assume that the creative and imaginative modes of language are learned more grudgingly than the more instrumental languages. Certainly, there is much that is enjoyable to make one's own poetic constructions in response to evocative objects, and much that is dreary in attempting to bring responses to artworks down to the level of a formal autopsy.

REFERENCES

¹These opinions are (somewhat drastically) abstracted from my doctoral thesis. "Hermeneutics and Art Discourse: Implications for Teachers," The University of Georgia, 1985.

²Arthur C. Danto, "The Artistic Enfranchisement of Real Objects: the Artworld." Journal of Philosophy (1964): 571-584.

³These are Danto's terms. See "The Appreciation and Interpretation of Works of Art." In Relativism and the Arts, pp.21-44. Edited by Betty Jean Craige. Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 1983.

⁴Max Kozloff, Renderings: Critical Essays on a Century of Modern Art. London: Studio Vista, 1970, p. 56.

⁵Hans-Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics. Edited and Translated by D.E. Linge. Berkely: University of California Press, 1976, p.xix.

⁶That certain kinds of "strong" (constitutive) metaphor are the base for the formation of concept is argued by, among others, Nelson Goodman, Languages of Art: An Approach to the Theory of Symbols. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968: repr. Hackett, 1976.

⁷ , Ways of Worldmaking. Indianapolis and Cambridge, Mass.: Hackett Publishing Co., 1978.