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by

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Principles of Teaching

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THE ARTIST AND SOCIETY

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## The Beginnings.

In the early days of human history the artist was viewed as a magician, credited with controlling the natural elements by means of reproductive skills. He or she was at the centre of society. As communities became larger and more diversified, specialisation set in and artists lost their priestly states, but they continued to place their creative powers at the service of the secular and religious rulers of their day. Up until the Renaissance, sculpture and painting were the chief vehicles through which the dominant ideology of the ruling classes was transmitted. Egypt kept its traditions intact through the use of monuments and murals. Greece glorified its ideals through marble. Christianity influenced the masses who passed through the portals of its cathedrals with stories told in stone. Painting and sculpture were the mediums. The artist was essentially a message maker.

During the Renaissance, with the advent of intensive scientific enquiry, the artists skill continued to be employed as a tool with which to reach out and embody the fascinating technological discoveries taking place, e.g. the inventions of Leonardo Da Vinci and Michelangelo. In addition artists continued to serve the rulers of society up to the nineteenth century, by creating monuments church murals etc., which reflected their ideologies and by decorating exquisite palaces as symbols of their majesty.

With the appearance of modern technology, the productions of the artist were no longer essential to these people who controlled the functions of society. Technology could give even more substantiation to their ideas on an even vaster scale, as a medium for disseminating propaganda whether religious nationalistic or economic, painting and sculpture could not compare with film or television.

But the emergence of the modern artists role, though based on that particular factor was instigated by a number of complicated factors other than political redundancy.

Nineteen fourteen put an end to a very clearly defined epoch of the balance of power in Europe. The diplomatic and military struggles of the powers, their alliances, their economic rivalries, their colonial expeditions, the resolving of their conflicts by negotiation, their nationalist and imperialist urges, their anxiety to strengthen the unity of their states and to stamp out any claim that might be made by small nations; all this resulted in the sort of tension which both sowed the seeds of war and kept it at bay.

Between 1884 and 1914 was a time of peace, and public opinion felt at home in it. No one thought of anything but peace time works, the formidable progress of technology and industry, the use and perfecting of new discoveries, the telephone the telegraph, the motor-car the aeroplane, the exciting example of the United States, were all collectively and individually good reasons for believing in the fabulous powers of human genius.

In practically every country in the world capitalism had reached the zenith of its power. The bourgeois societies lived in the present and felt satisfied with the way things were. They settled down in comfort with their plays, operas, salons of painting and sculpture. The poetry and art that appeared on the fringe of official commerce were 'maudits.

The divorce proceedings between the genius and society began with the case against the Fleurs du Mal and against Madame Bovary in 1857. The divorce continued with the exclusion of Courbet and Manet from the

sacrocant portals of the Universal Exhibition. It continued with the scandal of the first exhibition of the Impressionists in 1874, and the Vaillabotte bequest in 1894. Hugo Von Tschudi was forced by Kaiser William II to resign for having housed some Impressionist paintings in his museum, the National Gallery of Berlin. It was the beginning of a new notion the 'avant-garde'.

## The Genesis of alienation.

Retiring from public altogether the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high levels of his art both by narrowing it and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relations and relatives and contradictions would either be resolved or be beside the point. 'Art for arts sake' and pure poetry appear and subject matter or content become something to be avoided like the plague. The avant-garde poet or artist tries to create something valid on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid; something given, increate, independant of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything but itself.

Yet the nonrepresentational or abstract, if it is to have aesthetic validity, cannot be arbitrary and accidental but must stem from obedience to some worthy constraint or original. This constraint, once the world of common extraverted experience has been removed, can only be found in the very processes and disciplines by which art and literature have already imitated the former. these themselves become the subject matter of art and literature.

The excitement in the art of Picasso, Braque, Mondrian, Miro, Kandinsky and Brancusi lies most of all in its pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, etc., to the exclusion of whatever is not necessarily implicated in these factors. The attention of the poets also, e.g. Rimbaud, Mallarene Pound, Hart Crane etc., seems to be centered on the efforts to create poetry and on the 'moments' themselves of poetic conversion rather than on the experience to be converted into poetry. The changes that have occurred in the visual arts this century have been so great that works of art now being offered the public by serious artists often leave  
~~the uninitiated~~

uninitiated confused and sometimes antagonistic. A contemporary observer confronted with the profusion of approaches used by the present day masters may question the values and intentions that allow such a wide variety of styles and techniques.

Art as communication has much that is common to all systems of communication; symbols that are developed, ~~are~~ divided into groups of symbols which are combined in structured relationships to achieve equivalents for human experience. The symbols that are developed are separate and distinct from the actual objects and experiences they represent. Often these symbols and their organisation are based on a previous tradition, but just as often they are the result of the individual artists attempt to find the means of communicating those aspects of his experience he feels cannot be expressed with the visual language of his heritage. Because of the new breath of the subject matter, now part of the environment in which man lives, because of the relatively recent emphasis on one's subjective attitudes and responses to experiences, there is a continuing search on the part of the artist for visual equivalents expressive of his inner world and of his consciousness of the world he perceives around him.

It is not possible to simultaneously extend the form of language and to appeal to a mass audience. With new forms of communication come difficulties of understanding the problem of a confusion of symbolic meanings. New language may give the artist the opportunity to intensify the content of his message, but at the same time they restrict his audience and he must choose between an expressive vocabulary and a large public. In times of crisis the choice has often been the latter. Today, however, with photography serving as an active efficient art for the communication of ideas to a mass public, the painter and



The Historical bridge. (An American experience).

Up until now no attempt has been made to deal with the socially critical content of contemporary art. Those who call themselves critics have avoided dealing with this content at all costs, whether by condemning the works as rubbish or by discussing only its formalist aspects. Art approached exclusively as an occasion for purified aesthetic experience not only wrenches it from a good part of its human import, but all the while it touts the spiritual sustenance of art, it misuses its accessibility to only a small and privileged circle of consumers.

The artist, the individual endowed with exceptional sensibilities and exceptional faculties of expression, stands in psychological opposition to the crowd, to the people that is to say in all their aspects of normality and mass action. That very acuteness of perception which distinguishes the artist is purchased at the price of maladaptation, of nonconformity and revolt. Plato recognised that the artist is an eccentric element in any well ordered or egalitarian community. He is an exception, and because he is an exception he becomes in a sense a parasite, not of the people, but of the elite whom he can flatter and amuse and who will in turn give him the means of sustenance. In America after World war two abstract expressionism made its appearance and Pollack and others saw in it a reaction against the great upsurge in technological capitalistic power. They saw in the take over of the computer the denial of the individual and the down-grading of natural life. Pollock, Still, Tobey, Rothko and Newman withdrew to their private inaccessible worlds, places where they could be more secure, where they would not have to confront the ugliness that was coming upon them. Everything that has followed the abstract expressionist movement, in a sense, has been more of the same kind of critical opposition. The happenings, full of bizarre acts and incomprehensible events,

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incomprehensible events, the vulgarity of Pop, the icy isolationism of geometric field printing and minimal sculpture. The obstrusiveness banality and wastiness of much conceptual art and even the strict sterility of photo-realism have been the artists way of fighting back against societies attempt to maim and control them. Art is the communities medicine for the worst disease of the mind, the corruption of consciousness.

The world is a place of suffering and pain. It is a place of death and destruction. It is a place of hope and despair. It is a place of love and hate. It is a place of beauty and ugliness. It is a place of life and death. It is a place of joy and sorrow. It is a place of peace and war. It is a place of freedom and slavery. It is a place of truth and lies. It is a place of good and evil. It is a place of light and darkness. It is a place of life and death. It is a place of hope and despair. It is a place of love and hate. It is a place of beauty and ugliness. It is a place of life and death. It is a place of joy and sorrow. It is a place of peace and war. It is a place of freedom and slavery. It is a place of truth and lies. It is a place of good and evil. It is a place of light and darkness.

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Poetry and Ulster today.

The artistic efflorescence of the sixties in the North; her poets 'breeding lilacs out of dead land', made valid and useful an artistic vocation where the artist is conscious of and concerned with tragedy in his own community. The sixties began and continued with a surge of creativity which might have prevented and certainly suggested the upheaval with which they were to end. The warnings came from all quarters. They came from Sam Thopson's play about sectarian division in the shipyard, 'Over the Bridge'; in Gerard Mc Larnons apocalyptic vision of violence 'The Bonfire'; in in John Howitt's long poem 'The Colony' written twenty years ago, which explores the position of the planter; in many of Louis Mc Nieces ambivalent poems about Ireland; in the novels of Brian Moore and Mourice Leitch. In his poem 'In Belfast' Derek Mahon writes;

'One part of my mind must learn to know its place-  
The things which happen in the kitchen houses  
And echoing backstreets of this desperate city  
Should engage more than casual interest,  
Exact more interest than my casual pity!

Warnings generally go unheeded. Art seldom changes things.

'Art is not life, and cannot be  
A midwife to society.'

W.H. Auden. (New Year Letter).

## A Modern Masterpiece:

All great artists have a view of the overall pattern of creation and it is this which makes great art of their efforts. It is said that Mozart could visualise his music as though if were a painting, could see the whole in one moment of time while other composers conceive their work within the passage of time. To see the plan one must have a perspective a distance of vision so that one is not lost on detail. This vision of the overall pattern of creation Cezanne tried to achieve in his painting. He needed the perspective given by meditation and faith to unravel the complexity of sensation. Artists are great because they express some kind of universal truth or make tangible some elusive nuance of reality common to all men.

T. S. Eliot was great because of that very fact. He concerned himself with the broad and real subject of the decay of civilization. In the 'Waste Land' the picture unrolls. First the rich, the idle man and his idle mistress, surrounded by all the apparatus of luxury, but in their hearts there is not even lust, nothing but fretted nerves and the exasperation of boredom. Then the public-house at night; the poor no less empty-hearted; idle recrimination, futile longings for a good time, barren wombs and faded fruitless youth, and an awful anonymous voice penetrating the chatter with a warning, 'Hurry up please its time'. Time for all those things to end; 'times winged charriot, the grave a fine and private place, and mad Ophelias good night the river waiting for her.' And then the river itself with its memories of idle Summer love making, futile passionless seductions, the lover whose vanity makes a welcome of indifference, the mistress brought up to expect nothing, with contrasting memories of the splendours once created by Sir Christopher Wren, the Pageantry of Elizabeth and Saint Augustine for whom lust was real and a thing worth fighting.

The poem depicts a world where the whole-some flowing water of emotion, which alone fertilizes all human activity, has dried up. Passion that once ran so strongly as to threaten the defeat of prudence the destruction of human individuality, the wreck of mens little ships, are shrunk to nothing. No one gives, no one will risk himself by sympathy; no one has anything to control. We are imprisoned in ourselves, caught in a mindless self-ish-ness. The only emotion left to us is fear: fear of emotion itself, fear of death by drowning in it, fear in a handful of dust.

The poem is not in the least amusing or magical. It is not satire or an entertaining discription of vices. It is neither propoganda nor exhortation to get up and do something. It contains no individual inditments or proposals. To the amateurs of literature, brought up on the idea of poetry as a genteel amusement, the thing is an affront. To the little neo- Kiplings who think of poetry as an inditment to political virtue it is waste; for it describes an evil where no one or nothing is to blame, an evil not curable by shooting capitalists or destroying a social system, a disease which has so eaten into our society, our civilization that political remedies are useless.

The 'Waste Land' is an indication of what poetry can be. It is an indication of what art should be if it is to forgo both entertainment value and magical value and draw a subject from the audience themselves. It must be prophetic. The artist must prophesy not in the sense that he fortells things to come, but in a sense that he tells his audience, at the risk of their displeasure, the secrets of their own hearts. The artist suggests no remedy, the remedy is the work itself.

The Artist teacher

When the student's intention to become an artist is discovered the parents usually make very strenuous objections to the desire. The first is that the painter cannot hope to support himself solely from the sale of his paintings. The second is directed at the bohemian stereotype of the artist which the family wishes to avoid because it violates the professed mores and values of our culture.

Contemporary industrial culture stresses conformity, respectability, vocationality, practicality, and security. These are a few of the essential values incorporated in the cultural complex that Max Weber called 'rational bourgeois capitalism'. Art and life of the artist are the opposite of this. Fine art is non-utilitarian. Moreover the artist tends to be non-conformist and to violate many of the behavioral patterns prescribed by society.

Having spent three years or more in the cocoon of art school the student's concept of the professional artist emerges. The professional artists are men who devote their time and psychic energy to creative endeavours or would do so if circumstances permitted. Their primary work is directed to exploring the 'fundamental categories' of human existence, the attempt to assault or to denigrate authority, to explore and explain the universe, to understand the meaning of events, to enter into contact with the sacred, or commit sacrilege, to affirm the principles of morality and justice and to deny them, to encounter the unknown, to stimulate the senses by the control of and the response to words, sounds, shapes and colours. It is at this point in the student's life, when he is leaving art college that the philosophies to which the student has been exposed in his intellectual growth as an artist begin to bear fruit or disintegrate.

If the artist decides to teach it will take a great amount of integration and compromise. The problem facing him as a professional artist will for a time be overshadowed by the problems facing him as a teacher of art in a Secondary or Vocational school. The role of the traditional style art teacher as one who was concerned primarily with the handing out of materials has changed greatly. The teacher needs to be aware and perceptive of the psychological social and physical development of his pupils, if he is to be of any help when the 'psychological moment' in the educative process occurs and the consciousness of a need to express or create arises in the child's experience. An awareness of this psychological moment embodies the freedom of the child the freedom which consists in absolute obedience to the laws of development of his own nature. It is through the teacher too that the direction and atmosphere for learning takes place. He must organise and develop a course of action, a course of sequential learning which will allow students liberty and spontaneity and at the same time give them the means for the constructive outlet of their emotions, develop their creative powers of thinking and enrich and cultivate their aesthetic awareness.

The factor which allows the artist to both practise his craft and teach is the magnitude universality of the subject itself. In the words of Joyce

'To speak of.....things and to try to understand their nature, and having understood it, to try slowly and humbly and constantly to express, to press out again, from the gross earth or what it brings forth from sound and shape and colour, which are the prison gates of our soul, an image of the beauty we have come to understand.....that is art'.

Significantly:  
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The Book of the East - J. H. Prynne - Plato  
The Use of Poetry - Richard Payne - Plato  
Poetry of the East - J. H. Prynne - Plato  
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The East - J. H. Prynne - Plato  
The East - J. H. Prynne - Plato

As a supporting element to this thesis, there are a series of  
nine woodcuts executed at the same time as this thesis was  
being written.

They are a personal subjective expression of a particular elusive  
emotion. They are a small reflection of my own work.

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