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THE ARTIST LOOKS AT THE ADMINISTRATOR

An Address to:

The Sixth Annual Conference on School Administration
The University of Rhode Island

July 7, 1966

The inevitable professional schizophrenia of those of us who call ourselves art educators was impressed upon me once again when I read the preliminary announcement of this meeting a few weeks ago. In one place it said I was to speak with you about the new directions in which art education seems to be moving and at another, in the title of the talk, the emphasis was placed on the artist looking at the administrator. For better or worse, this is not contradictory; it is neither unusual nor inaccurate for art educators to be seen - and, in fact, to see themselves - as both artist and educator. There is a term which many art teachers use in describing themselves which emphasized this, it is artist - hyphen - teacher. I have never heard a biology teacher call himself a scientist-teacher, or an English teacher (however talented he may be) refer to himself as poet-teacher, or a gym teacher think of himself as an athlete-teacher. It is not unusual for an art teacher to use the term artist-teacher; however, and the distinction is not merely a semantic one. The simple, unvarnished facts of the matter are that art teachers, including many of the better ones, like to think of themselves as being both an artist and a teacher. It is not merely a matter of being a teacher from 8:30 to 3:30 and then a painter after that. The idea is that of an artist who teaches, not that of a teacher who paints. This is not intended to suggest that teaching is a secondary consideration; which would be an over-simplification. It does emphasize the art teacher's (or artist-teachers) conviction that his personal involvement with the business of "making" art is central to his effectiveness as a teacher; that he can better understand the problems a student might face at 10 a.m. if he had been involved with similar problems at 10 p.m. on the preceding evening; and that the behavioral model which he embodies as an artist can help his students to better know what happens to a person when a premium is placed on creative and aesthetic values. It reinforces the student as a maker of art and, theoretically at least, it helps him to understand that all art, from the most conventional to the most far out, has come into being because a man made it out of sweat and paint and love in approximately equal proportions.

This emphasis in many secondary school art classes on thinking like an artist is very much in tune with the most current educational thought and it was exactly this kind of an approach which led to the recent well-known innovations in science education. When Dr. Jerrold Zacharias of MIT brought working physicists and chemists into the schools a few years ago it was hailed as revolutionary and brought about a change of science teacher education that was widely acclaimed. And rightfully so, because science teachers recognized that the sense of excitement and commitment and inquiry which the working scientists brought to the classroom made their efforts seem feeble and pallid by comparison. So they did - and are

continuing to do - what any sensible persons would do under the same circumstances; they began to emulate the scientists, they reoriented themselves to think like scientists, and they tried to become as much as possible like the scientists who had been so dramatically effective in the experimental and pilot educational programs.

The artist teacher approach is not drastically different from this in concept except that it focuses on the artist. It may be quite a different think in practice (if not in theory) for a science teacher to try to behave as a scientist and to tell his students to think like scientists that it is for an art teacher to try to behave like an artist and to tell his students to think as artists.

I think that we are all aware, perhaps painfully aware, of the misshapen image of the artist which is commonly held. He is seen, at best, as an impractical idealist who does not realize comforts of conformity and, at worse, as a destroyer of goodness, virtue and perhaps even beauty. An interesting parallel can be made between this concept and that held of scientists not so very long ago. The old old horror movies seen on the late late show rarely if ever concerned themselves with the mad artist - but the mad scientist - that was a different thing entirely. They showed wild eyed scientists (rarely of an identifiable discipline) walled up in mountain top castles and suitably lit by the phenomena of perpetual thunderstorms. They distressed virtuous damsels unendingly, clanged around amidst shattering glassware and generally disporting themselves in an antisocial manner. Compare this, if you will, with the mental picture which we now have of a scientist. He is seen as probably young, well barbered, a family man to his shoe tops, a paragon of all the social, domestic and intellectual virtues and only rarely does Dr. Strangelove intrude to cast a momentary shadow across this happy scene.

I had not intended to go into elaborate detail on the social status of science - but I did want to point out that the dramatic reversal of attitudes which has almost deified scientists as models for educational enterprise has permitted the "think like a scientist" concept to revolutionize science education in many of the best schools of the Nation. By logical extension it would seem valid to suggest that the introduction of programs of art education based on the same premise, "think like an artist," would have a similarly salutary effect for this discipline. Unhappily this has not proven to be the case, even though the artist-teacher idea preceded the introduction of scientists into the classroom by at least ten years. The art teachers who see themselves as artist-teachers have, it is true, enriched the classrooms and studios in which they have taught but they have not succeeded in implanting the virtues of the arts in the total curriculum with anywhere near the impact which science teachers have known and, presumably, enjoyed. One explanation for the relatively weaker status of school art programs is to be found in art attitudes of those who make and implement educational policy, which presumably should reflect the attitudes of their community toward the arts. The critical element here is that there is overwhelming evidence that community attitudes toward the arts are changing rapidly but that schoolmen are not keeping pace.

The most dramatic demonstration of this change is, of course, the recent establishment of a National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities. In addition, almost all of the states have established state arts councils; community art centers are springing up like mushrooms in every part of the country; museum attendance is rising at an explosive rate; enrollment in adult courses in the arts is going up astonishingly; galleries which sell and exhibit art works are becoming common fixtures in most major cities; business and industrial firms are, at long last, beginning to assume their responsibility as art patrons. Even the government is beginning to understand that we cannot, as a nation, stand in position of world leadership on the basis of power and politics alone without looking like bullies, or fools, or both. Whatever other criticism may be offered against governmental actions abroad, no one has seriously criticized the cultural exchange programs; no student demonstrations have been seen calling on the President to ban art or to withdraw Van Cliburn; no columnist has sought to expose Calder as an unregistered lobbyist for a European museum; and the American Ballet Theatre Company has never been charged with intervention in the internal affairs of another government.

This, then, is the happy picture of the arts on the community level—regardless of how broadly one defines community, the arts are very lively. There is one rather grim element in the scene, however, and this brings me, in a round-about way, to the gist of my remarks. The schools are, in general, doing an abysmal job of supporting the arts and, furthermore, they are slipping further and further out of phase with the other community agencies and resources which are moving rapidly in the other direction. What is the evidence?

Nearly half of the secondary schools in the country (including junior high schools) offer no art courses or activities at all.

Almost two-thirds of the elementary schools offer no aid or supervision to the classroom teacher in her art teaching responsibilities and only one in six requires the capacity to teach art as a condition of employment or certification. In other words, up to grade six a child has about one chance in three of ever seeing an art teacher or of expecting that his teacher will have the chance to confer with an art supervisor, even though this child's teacher may never have taken an art course in her life. Beyond grade six it is about 50-50 that a child will ever be able to take an art course.

Fewer than five high school students out of every one hundred are taking an art course and in only one school in three, even where art is offered, is it possible to take a sequence of specialized courses in art.

There are, of course, a great many reasons for this, most of which seem valid but some of which do not stand close examination.

Item: College admissions requirements do not allow time for art courses in high school.

Most colleges will accept some art courses for admissions, particularly if they are structured in an academically respectable manner or as an element in a humanities sequence.

Item: There is no time in the schedule for arts courses.

The six period day, five day week are not sacrosanct; Japan, for example, has an 8:30 to 4:30 day, six days a week, 11 months a year. Pittsburg, in its Pittsburg scholars program, has a four day week for its core subjects and a fifth day for courses such as art.

Item: Artists cannot earn a living - or art is a subject suitable only for students lacking intellectual abilities.

There are a great many job opportunities in the art world, providing that art is broadly enough conceived to mean more than painting. Art is not, and has never been, a "skill" subject which is unsuited to the academically gifted. It has implications for developing creative abilities, for enhancing perceptual acuity, for sharpening aesthetic responses, for breaking patterns of conformity, for leading students into cultural history and foreign studies, and for its humane qualities in balancing an overly technological world. Even MIT has taken the latter position.

I could, at this juncture, begin to point the finger and say that school boards, or superintendents, or principals, or teacher training institutions, or State departments of education, or parents, or college admissions officers, or students, or art teachers themselves are at fault for the schism between school art programs and the bouyant, bursting-at-the-seams art world outside of the schools. In some measure all of these groups have been deaf, dumb, and blind. In some measure the full fault lies with each group and is not shared proportionally. There has obviously been much with which we can find fault. But that is not the point here today. The question today is what is being done about it. I cannot speak for any of those groups except the art teachers in this regard but what follows is a kind of memo to you as superintendents of schools from art educators.

Art educators have for years been instrumentalists; that is they have attempted to justify art in the schools as being a means of teaching self expression or creativity or perceptual acuity, or something such. Art teachers are abandoning this position in increasing numbers and are saying art belongs in the schools because it is important for its own sake. It may, indeed, open his mind to greater creative efforts or it may sharpen his senses but these are peripheral. Art is a central and continuing concern of mankind, it expresses his highest ideals, his grandest moments, his innermost spirit. It has historical precedents which transcend writing or number systems and it is an important element in the cultural heritage which belongs to each child in exactly the same way that great literature is important. Art is not a frill to be cut from the curriculum at every petty budget crisis. It has a kind of meaning which is essentially humane and it should not be seen only as an instrument to serve other goals. Art educators who take this position do not seriously object to the inclusion of these other justifications; they realize that it is often necessary to put things into terms which are comprehensible to the

artistically illiterate. But they are not about to pander to the culturally unwashed. They are bright, aggressive, unsympathetic to ignorance of the arts on whatever grounds it may be otherwise excused, and their standards are as high for themselves as for others. These are, in fact, the young Turks of art education.

The outcome of this fresh approach in art education is more revolutionary than it would at first appear. In the first place, the artist-teacher concept, for all its strengths, is seen as being inadequate because it concentrates almost wholly upon the making of the art object rather than upon providing the basis for critical and historical understandings. It does not admit the validity of the art historian or the art critic as an educational model but limits itself to the producing artist in this regard. Obviously this is perfectly in order for that small proportion of the student body who view themselves as potential artists of one variety or another, but it leaves the vast majority of students cold and completely out of it. The future direction which I think we can see for art curricula will be more in the line with that which literature teachers have long followed; teaching students to understand the meanings in art works, the social and historical contexts in which they have emerged, and the bases for aesthetic decision making. Obviously, this will involve retraining many art teachers and revamping the college art school programs from which they have obtained their training. It will mean that the transition period will be difficult both for art teachers and for the school systems in which they work. It may mean that open professional warfare will erupt between various factions in the profession. In the long run, however, if one believes that the study of art is important and has educational validity for all pupils rather than for the tiny minority who now enjoy it, the future direction of art education seems inevitable and school curricula, teacher training programs and patterns of research and, supervision, and all the rest will mold themselves to accommodate these new educational objectives.

The alternative is for art teachers to continue to fight a losing battle with the school administration, to continue to seek support for programs geared to 5 percent of the student body, and to continue to feel slightly paranoid, that they are virtuous martyrs in an educational world that does not love them very much. We have battered our heads against that stone wall long enough and are now ready for a new tack. As Pierre Salinger is reported to have said when the 50 mile marches were in vogue, we may be game but we are not stupid.

So, in the words of the announcement of this meeting, "whether or not you agree that we need more and better creative arts in our schools, you still must deal with the problem of its relationship to the curriculum." I say, in closing that it is more than a problem; it is a challenge. As art teachers, we are on the move and I do not think that we can be stopped by any of the road blocks and pitfalls which have plagued us in the recent past. We need the assistance of school administrators but with this help or without it, we are going to do some things to American education. The challenge to all of us, therefore, is to find ways by which these almost inevitable changes can be incorporated into forthcoming curricular patterns. At this time when community attitudes toward the arts are

changing so rapidly I do not believe that any right minded school administrator would want to remain isolated from this fresh challenge. Where this new community interest in the arts is ignored, however, we in art education are quite prepared to circumvent the local educational establishment and to make our move through whatever federal programs may be usable for our purposes. This, then, represents the core of the challenge I bring to you today. Will the school systems of this or any other State permit their arts programs to be stolen, seduced, kidnapped, or adopted by other agencies? Frankly, I feel that many art educators are becoming quite susceptible to the idea of transferring their efforts to a more receptive environment than the schools have provided up to this time. It would be regrettable if, at this time when the vitality of the arts is so inescapable in the communities of the Nation as a whole, the schools were to permit the loss of their educational prerogative to take place. If it is the only alternative to the present sorry state of affairs, however, it would, at the same time, be a completely understandable move for art educators to try to take.

So - do we all move together in the interests of education in the arts or must we go our separate ways? Certainly art educators prefer to remain within the traditional and familiar context of the schools proper. We are also willing to divorce ourselves, either wholly or partially, from the schools if that seems to be the only way in which we can do our job. We feel that we have an important contribution to make to the education of all students and we will go where we must to do it as well as we can. If it is within the schools that is great. If it must be in those community agencies which are more positively attuned to the arts - so be it.

Where do we go from here? I think that the next move is up to you.

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