

01 Art, Politics, Perception

Kaustuv Roy

Art instructors are used to the question, sometimes benign, sometimes inquisitive, sometimes disparaging, sometimes hostile, from myriad sources including parents, teachers, administrators, and certainly students, “What is the point of learning art?” This question of course rides on the shoulder of many other unstated underlying questions such as “Is not art a luxury or a middle class pursuit?” “Can we not leave art to those genuinely interested or talented in art?” “How is art practically useful?” “Is not art redundant in the age of digitalized production and reproduction?” And so on. Certainly, to my mind, these questions are askable, and I have not typically snapped back with the retort: “If ‘mathematizing’ of children’s thinking can be accepted without batting an eyelid, why not aestheticizing of the same?” In fact I have mostly received such pointed queries in a polite spirit. However, since every question has underlying presumptions, to be able to even superficially respond to the above question one must begin with, in this case, the image of art in the collective social mind from where it springs. So let us begin there.

When we think of art, not uncommonly, what comes to mind are canvases, watercolors, sculptures, and other artifacts. That is to say, the images evoked are mostly the end products of artistic endeavour. Contrast this with, say, the case of mathematics wherein we hear of mathematical reasoning or mathematical thinking and even mathematization. In other words, while value is placed on logical or systematic thinking, art, generally speaking, is measured mostly in terms of its visible end products, and not in terms of the aesthetics of thought and perception. It is no

wonder then that questions such as the ones above are asked. For if art is only measured by its artifacts and has no other ramification in schooling or in the social collective then of course it is best left to practicing artists who may be able to produce valuable objects. But let us inquire if art is something more and therefore we have to ask if there is some other significance to the learning and teaching of art that is not easily visible, that does not coincide with artifact, and if so what is its conceptual basis, how should we determine its qualities, and what are its practices?

The Politics of Art

Like mathematics, art is a distinct mode of apprehension of space apart from other things, and hence has the potential to be deployed for describing the world; and since any process of description of the world makes choices and selections, even minimally the language of art becomes political. Further, when art is introspective, as it often is, it probes and intervenes in the psychic theatre making art’s function micropolitical, that is, able to act at the level of individual relations. We know for example that the classical paintings sometimes played into the hands of vassal society and held up existing property relations just as at the opposite end cubism did away with single perspective view of the subject ending an epoch and beginning a new way of apprehending the world and subject relations within it. Both the above are political positions whether intended or not, whether conscious or not. Therefore I would like to argue that art, in describing and redescribing the world reconstitutes space whether through representation or abstraction, through difference or repetition.



So if art plays a significant role in the normalization of Power can it not also play a role in the de-normalization and demystification of Power in its various forms and at different levels? That is the question I want to address here in a very limited way. For if the answer is yes, then there is an artistic thinking that is just as relevant as is mathematical thinking apart from artifacts. And if education and learning is a groping toward freedom and self-knowledge then art will have as much to contribute as, say, mathematics or science to human destiny.

Cubism and Surrealism: Planes of Transformation

In order to demonstrate the above we will briefly look at two styles of art that emerged in the twentieth century and see what they can tell us about artistic thinking and reasoning and its impact on the socio-political domain. The first of these movements in art I will refer to is Cubism. Alfred Barr, the first curator of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, wrote



Jean Metzinger, Woman with a Horse, 1911

“Cubism was the invention of Picasso and Braque but it was inspired by Cezanne who pointed out that natural forms if simplified to **geometrical essentials** become cubes and cylinders. This was the first stage of Cubism. Having reduced the form to cubes and cylinders and spheres, it is not a difficult step to juggle them somewhat to combine in one picture the front and back of the same figure, to substitute the concave for the convex and to do all of these things according to the aesthetic sensibility of the artist.” (emphasis mine)

So what does the Cubist attempt? S/he analyzes lines and planes, abstracts and formalizes and essentially celebrates simultaneity and multiple perspectives. By altering uniperspectival perception Cubism disturbs the very background of spatial understandings making it possible for new thoughts to arise at an ontogenic level. This is always dangerous to the foundations of paternalism and politically entrenched positions. There are also advantages to understanding the human also as a formal projective geometry. That is to say when the image of thought is changed from the apparently unified object to its constituent geometries, plasticity is introduced by which extensions and new amalgams are possible. In other words, such projection makes it possible for new lines and planes and tangents to meet, intersect, modify and extend the existent subject (person). The narrow, delineated form of the self and its boundaries are left behind for a more fluid, porous and creative self that is more directly engaged with the world. All serious movements require grassroot reconceptualization of the geo-politics of the body.

Let us next consider a movement in art that came as a reaction to Cubism namely Surrealism or Superrealism. In Barr’s words again, “puritanical exclusion of all sentimental and ‘human’ values by the cubists of 1908...has induced in the last generation a reaction which has produced paintings of extraordinary originality...Surrealism.” Two inter-war intellectual figures and their works were central to Surrealism. The



first was Sigmund Freud and his famous book *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and the second was the poet André Breton and his *Manifesto of Surrealism*.

The surrealists understood the Freudian unconscious to be the real theatre of creative production and attempted to unite the world of fantasy and dreams to the everyday world of reality. Some of them attempted to do this through the Freudian technique of free association which was supposed to reveal the unconscious layer and its workings. The art coming out of it was thus often dreamlike. Surrealists believed in social and political revolution: if the mysterious unconscious that seemed to be at the root of human drives could be tapped human destiny itself could be changed; from being a mere subject of unconscious drives, the human subject could recreate her/himself by delving into the theatre of the unconscious through articulated means.

So although Cubism and Surrealism come from opposing camps, interestingly enough their political implications are similar; both indicate underlying structures that are pre-individual, one from a formal, geometric standpoint and the other from an affective, human viewpoint. Both offer the human subject the possibility of transformation.

Implications for Practice

So far we have attempted to show that art can be inherently political without politics being its subject. To put it differently, there is such a thing as artistic thinking that has important consequences for the individual as well as for society and therefore for education. But one question remains to be answered. What is the implication of all this for school practice? Surely we do not expect children, however artisti-



Pablo Picasso *Three Musicians*, 1921

cally inclined, to understand personal and political transformation, and if the foregoing is comprehensible only by the intellectual or the connoisseur of art what would be the point of this discussion? We have to answer this question in a convincing fashion if at all this is to be taken seriously by the educator. Let us begin in that direction by looking at certain practices and perceptions that can be associated with the above. I

will outline some practices and explain what implications these may have for developing artistic thinking and their consequences for our ordinary lives. In order to deal with the semiotics of art as a tool of thought at the grassroots level we have to develop some pedagogical angles that are transformative for the teaching-learning complex.

First, in art classrooms it is commonplace to find students given the task of copying pictures. This is imitation and is of little value other than reinforcing dead relationships without developing the capacity to judge and understand spatiality which is a primary purpose of doing art. Imitation breeds conformity and is not emancipatory. Therefore, the first principle



Albert Tucker *The Metamorphosis of Ned Kelly* 1970



in teaching art is that we must avoid imitation; children must not be made to copy pictures or work done by someone else. It defeats the very purpose of art and we lose our way right at the beginning. To mimic is to conform but the idea here is to encourage direct perception from the outset. To observe, to learn how to look quietly and purposefully is to be sensitive to the eco-environment and is the first step of a political being.

Second, in teaching art we must not look for representative correspondence or accuracy of reproduction in children’s work but look for angles, peculiarities, and nuances that describe the subjective truth. The artist emphasizes certain things and ignores others; children do the same spontaneously and this must be carefully acknowledged. The teacher must deliberately move away from evaluating the child’s work in terms of the usual adjectives such as “beautiful” or “bad” etc. and instead begin a dialogue between the work and the child in terms of what s/he saw and attempted to convey. This dialogue enhances the linguistic capacities and communicative competence of the student. The development of this capacity is the second step of a political being.

Third, and this may seem counter-intuitive and contrary to popular practice, but children must not be asked to draw from the imagination. Instead they must first learn to draw only what they see. Art is not fantasy; it is a systematic language that presupposes a grammar. Anything is worth drawing as long as one observes it carefully, understands its pattern. Distortions may be introduced later for achieving certain artistic aims. Drawing what one sees is not mere reproduction but a kind of reflective practice of looking. To be true to what one sees, or to the ‘what

is’ without compromise is the third step of a developing political being.

Fourth, children must be encouraged to draw and illustrate actual situations from their particular lives. In other words, their work should have a large autobiographical element if they feel comfortable doing it (With respect to children with known problems and troubled lives, specialists should be consulted before asking them to do anything of this kind). To understand and read the world autobiographically is the fourth step of a nascent political being.

Finally, there should be an attempt to make children aware of their dreams and if possible recall some of it in their work if they feel safe doing it. This is an extension of the autobiographical element. It is indirectly suggesting to the children to take dreams seriously and engage that aspect of their lives in a systematic fashion from early on. Engagement with the psyche is a holistic element that is critical for becoming a full-fledged political being, able to engage with the world consciously and meaningfully, and since the drives and impulses that guide our destinies are often seminally rooted in the psyche their articulation is an important part of self-awareness.



Max Ernst Men Shall Know Nothing of This 1923

While this is hardly an exhaustive list of what could be done to promote systematic artistic thinking in the young, one can begin here. The alert reader will see that there is a coherent thread running through each of the above points. It is building a platform for an artistic way of looking at the self in relation to the world. This way of looking takes the self as a starting point and not as ending point and makes the boundary between self and the world more porous and migratory. Further, it is slowly and surely developing a



language for doing so; this is description. It will eventually allow the individual to sharpen their points of contact with the world in much the same way as a battery's terminals or points of contact are cleansed of encrustation for better conductivity. Artistic thinking allows us to have a better sense of who or what we are and that is certainly one important aim of progressive education. Just as the discovery of math-

ematical objects and proofs are important but equally important is mathematical thinking, in much the same way, while artifacts are important, they are but one of the culminations of certain processes that have other vital ends as well that may be shared by those who do not necessarily become artists.



KAUSTUV teaches at the Azim Premji University; he is also a member of the Academics and Pedagogy team at the University Resource Centre. Under Kaustuv's guidance, the University will soon have a modest Art Studio that will serve the academic community both as a base for offering courses as well as for leisure learning of artistic expression. He can be contacted at kaustuv.roy@azimpremjifoundation.org