

Spring Water or Cocktail?

Postmodern challenges in arts education

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Abstract

The author writes about the necessary changes in the aims and methods of arts education (understanding arts in the widest sense, including all creative arts, literature and music) that are brought about by the changes of the role and function of art in contemporary society. In a postmodern environment, the significance of certain values increases. Trencsényi refers to these values as the five C's: Creativity, Complexity, Community, Communication and Canonlessness (i.e.: instead of one prevailing canon, having multiple canons alongside each other).

Key words: arts education; multiculturalism; postmodern society; primary and secondary school public education

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When trying to make sense of certain historical conflicts, we Hungarians often quote a line by the modern Hungarian poet, Attila József: *“The great battle which our ancestors once fought resolves into peace through the memories...”*¹

In our ‘postmodern’ world what is important to me is not the battles that our ancestors fought but the cultural ‘battles’ we are involved in now; that they resolve into peace, that they mustn’t develop into a war. This is the most important message of the postmodern era: that the fight for pure culture against opposing forces whether of kitsch or pop culture etc. is appeased in postmodernism.

A big question for art theory has always been whether art can give meaningful answers to existential questions. In his poem *On “Archaic Torso of Apollo”* Rilke describes an antique statue whose beauty demands of the viewer that he must change his life. Does art still retain this function today?

According to Antal Bókay, Hungarian literary theorist it does not. It is very interesting that he almost repeats Rilke’s words but in reverse. He says that the aim of art is to teach humankind to answer the world’s questions.

The difference is enormous. Does art answer, or does art teach us to answer? If the latter is true this will affect the way we perceive and value art.

So how does this impact on art pedagogy? It is interesting that we find the same question in teaching theory only phrased differently: is the aim of teaching to impart knowledge or to develop the skills with which to acquire it?

I am going to mention a few familiar cultural dichotomies; however, in my opinion they only *appear* to be dichotomies. When I mention them, I would like to empha-

¹ Attila József (1905-1937) *By the Danube*, translated by John Székely.

size that it is not their remembrance that resolves them into peace but their peaceful existence alongside each other here and now.

- *Popular culture vs. elite culture.* How do we most commonly consume art today? Is it by going to exhibitions or noticing bill posters on the way to school?
- *Media vs. inter-personal relations.* How should the aesthetic experience reach us? BBC Proms live or on television?
- *Traditional vs. modern.* What is the function of art? To be the memory of human kind or to be a vehicle for exploration and innovation?
- *National identity vs. multiculturalism.* How relevant is an artist's national identity when operating in a global culture?
- *Freedom vs. commitment.* What is art for today? To help us find our freedom, or to find where we belong? It is not easy to answer this. If we look at the history of any art form, we'll find examples of both.
- Finally, a longstanding dilemma in arts education is whether we are training students to appreciate art or make art? To be *receivers* or *creators*?

Although I have presented these notions as oppositions, our job as teachers, and art pedagogues is not to kindle these oppositions but rather establish how we can integrate them in a coherent pedagogical process. Maybe in earlier times they were seen as opposites, but nowadays they all have an equal place in our world. The question is: *how* to integrate them?

My answers to this art pedagogical question are the five C-s:

- Creativity – through the creative process of making art we also learn how to appreciate art.

By the principle of Creativity I mean that in order to help develop understanding and a perceptive audience for art, it is important that the relationship with art is developed through the creation of art as well (especially in childhood). The child should be encouraged to create aesthetic objects: pictures, performances etc. and should be encouraged to experience various creative processes. This way his/her empathy can develop towards appreciating and enjoying other people's (including professional artists') work and expression.

Throughout these creative processes, as well helping his/her empathy grow, the necessary skills and competences that are essential for the child's appreciation of art develop.

- Complexity – the intermingling of different art forms. The presentation of various art forms together, especially in today's artistic climate where it is sometimes difficult even to say what art form a given piece of work belongs to.

By the principal of Complexity I mean that in modern arts education the significance of those complex aesthetic experiences (the creation as well as the reception of art) grows which can only be connected solely to one separate art form with

difficulty. This complexity can remind us of the complexity of the 'primeval', archaic art forms as well as a child's aesthetic experience. (It is well documented and researched that children do not divide their aesthetic experience into various genres and components – say, literal, visual or musical – but receive it in its complexity.) The realisation of various projects and events that are similar to those festive celebrations or rituals that address several senses at the same time, in the curricula of arts education can be very effective, especially at the early stages of arts education.

The principal of Complexity is also in effect when we recognise that our pupils are susceptible to the language of different art forms at various levels. Why shouldn't we accept and embrace these differences? In a complex art experience every child can find a message best suited to him/her.

László Vidovszky, a contemporary Hungarian composer has an interesting piece. It comprises of a large installation on the stage where two poles are erected with many strings stretched between them. On these strings are various metal and glass objects hanging.

The production comprises of an artist entering the stage and cutting the string at what appears to be a random point. As the string unravels, the sounds and harmonies created by those falling metal and glass objects constitute the piece.

In fact it is not random. It has been meticulously planned beforehand. The sounds happen exactly when the composer wants them to, yet it is happening here and now in front of us. Is it a piece of fine art? Is it object puppetry? Or music? This is what I mean by complexity.

- Community – With due respect to our personal freedom it is in the community where an aesthetic experience can successfully happen. This is especially true when it comes to the aesthetic experience of children and young people.

By the principal of Community I mean that those art-related events and projects become significantly important where children take part together, in groups. During these projects they learn to cooperate with each other, appreciate each other, and interpret together the artwork they have created or experienced together.

- Communication

When it comes to communicating art to young people I don't mean it only in the sense of an educated adult sharing his culture with an uneducated young person; this is only one type of cultural transmission. I think that successful art-mediation is about creating a dialogue between the different cultures and backgrounds of the children. The art pedagogue is not the speaker at one end of the 'telephone of art' but he/she is the wire of the telephone itself. This is what our profession is about! To help and facilitate the exchange of cultures between two people, "from soul to soul".

- Canonlessness – In our multi-faceted world we can only feel at home if we

understand that there isn't only one valid artistic canon. But there are several co-existing canons. The task of our art pedagogy is to accept this and help children to understand this.

The principal of Canonlessness (I just call it this to keep the alliterating 'c'; what I mean is the principal of having a Multitude of Canons) is that one cannot and should not interfere with the normal functioning of a pluralist, multicultural society through using pedagogical or (artistic)political means to try to establish one sole canon.

There are several canons living next to each other, peacefully influencing each other and having dialogues with each other. Each single one of them carries values. To be precise, each canon's value system belongs to a social group that accepts and acknowledges those values as values.

The school's role is to be the place of the dialogues between these various cultures (ethnic, class, generational, gender-related, 'sub-cultural'/alternative etc.). The school's role cannot be other.

It is worth paying attention to the exchange of cultures and being present there. I repeat that the key is that there is no canon any more.

This is happening now in the Hungarian culture, the difficult and complex history of Central Europe created this multiculturalism. We have many artworks that display these multiple cultural layers. In a way it is following Béla Bartók's model. What I have in mind is the Bartók who composed his *Contrasts* featuring a jazz musician alongside a symphonic orchestra, or who weaved a hit from an operetta into his *Concerto*. I would like to put these sorts of artworks at the centre; the sort that in the beliefs of the artist and the sources of the work can address and present several cultural layers at the same time.

Bartók was once asked from where an artist should draw his inspiration. He replied: "only from a pure spring". I would modify it to a "cocktail", but not a poisonous one.

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