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THE UNIVERSITY ART STYLE: AN PHENOMENOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF DOMINANT PAINTING STYLES AND THE EFFECT OF IDEOLOGY ON M.F.A. CANDIDATES IN SELECTED DEPARTMENTS OF ART

Laurence Montalto

As the title suggests, the focus of my research is to see whether selected departments of art may be identified by a distinctive art style; to establish whether selected departments of art may be identified by a distinctive ideology; and to what extent the art styles and ideologies are reflected in the works and beliefs of Master of Fine Arts candidates in painting. As a result, my study will examine the nature of the education of the contemporary American artist and answer two underlying questions: are college and university M.F.A. programs distinguishable by the kinds of students they produce and are there distinctive, identifiable qualities among leading programs that generate success for a large number of their graduates.

My research interest was generated by both informal observations of Master of Fine Arts programs in general and as a faculty member at several universities in the Northeast in particular. Hilton Kramer (1959) identified part of the problem when he wrote:

> . . . when one has the occasion to see the work being produced in some college art departments nowadays, one cannot help being struck by the fact that a roomful of such painting often looks like last month's gallery pages come to life. . . (p. 15)

All one has to do is visit a few college art departments to bear witness that Kramer's arrow may have hit the mark. But is this really new? Most students appear to be aware, at a very early age, that they are to produce a kind of art on demand. It is possible that the real impetus for this investigation began many years ago when, at the suggestion of my elementary school teacher, I changed the color of the dog, just drawn, from blue to a more reasonable brown. Little had I known, but at the early age of five, I received my first commission in the world of art.

Further development of this as a researchable problem was fostered by the realization that this phenomenon is not limited to any particular level of education or department and is characterized by many nicknames. In the lower grades, Arthur Efland (1972) discusses "school art" and describes it as a game-like, ritualistic, rule-governed process that uses conventional themes and materials. In addition to producing an art different from what children would do on their own, it creates artifacts that serve the rhetoric of a particular institution which take the form of free, creative, and humanistic looking works.

On the college level, Henry Raleigh (1964) has suggested that the study of art is quite a frustrating experience for, in spite of all good intentions, the modern student copies from his immediate environment and "style milieu" resulting in "less" accomplished works of his moment in

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time and space." It should be noted that the students' alternatives, e.g., borrowing clues indirectly from their teachers own work; using the style preferences of the institution; or adopting the forms that exist about them, lead to equally frustrating conclusions.

McNeil Lowry (1962) observed the graduate level in which he identified the "new academic" style.

> . . . this style in painting particularly lends itself to intellectual and technical imitation . . . The result is that we now have a "new academic" style that has spread throughout college and university studios almost without check. (p. 236)

This phenomenon is undesirable, not only because it excludes the student from the decision making process in education, but also because it reduces the educational experience to training. Of course, some amount of training is essential, but any program based upon training, by necessity, leaves out education. This would be comparable to the apprenticeship system, where imitation of the master was desirable and artists were trained in the "tradition" according to doctrines associated with each institution.

If the education of the artist, in view of all the research in art education theory and practice, has been reduced to training, then the M.F.A. degree has become, inadvertently, one in vocational training rather than education in the fine arts. These practices may be instructional, but surely not educational.

By virtue of what will be examined, my study cannot be scientific in the formal sense as Elliot Eisner (1981) described elsewhere, but qualitative and will employ procedures that are both aesthetic and descriptive. Accordingly, my research methods must be formulated qualitatively, and since within aesthetic inquiry all aesthetic knowledge must derive from an accurate description of our responses to art objects and events, a critical analysis will be used drawn from a taxonomy for aesthetic inquiry outlined by David W. Ecker and Eugene F. Kaelin (1972). They introduced a model in which the creation or appreciation of the object or event is at the first level of inquiry; criticism of the object or event is at the second level; analysis of the criticism (metacriticism) is at the third level, theory is at the fourth and analysis of theory (metatheory) represents the fifth level. The Ecker/Kaelin model is appropriate for my study, since the research will focus upon objects and events and a critical examination of those events.[1] Metacritical techniques will be employed to determine from the data, ideological convictions.

The method of criticism will incorporate aspects of phenomenology, notably phenomenological description based upon the ideas of "bracketing," "phenomenological reduction," and "counters" (1970). This technique, consistent with Husserl's advice to return "to the things themselves," avoids to the extent reasonably possible, the predispositions of the researcher, and suspends dogmatic attitudes of prior philosophies,

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historical and possibly irrelevant knowledge.

In looking at the data relevant to art styles, phenomenology in conjunction with a comparative method of noting similarities and differences is well suited for my study. A method of comparison alone, which requires "a priori" criteria, is not solely sufficient for our purpose. While this method may be appropriate for the art historian in seeking a common denominator to discuss works of art, it reduces each piece to less than what it is and cannot be an aesthetic judgment. Ecker (1967) argues that comparison may be used as a secondary judgment, but that such comparative judgment must always be ". . . dependent upon initial aesthetic judgments of particular works of art" (p. 8). He goes on to state that ". . . to reduce the meaning of aesthetic judgments to those of secondary and comparative judgments is to reduce the aesthetic to the cognitive domain and thus to violate the primary significance of particular works of art" (p. 8). Therefore, since phenomenology is an adjunct method to that of comparison in this study, the results and conclusions will be grounded phenomenologically by describing each artwork autonomously and then comparing the results to determine their similarities and differences.

In conclusion, any artists' education that leaves out experientially based aesthetic inquiry, reduces the creative spark that is at the root of all works of art. This can only produce less accomplished works which derive from taking already existing answers and is not the result of autonomous inquiry into real problems and issues. My study may not only support the foregoing ideas, but will examine some of the basic notions of art education on the graduate level. It may also help to identify sound educational practices that a department would want to pursue in an effort to strengthen its program. Moreover, I hope my study will contribute to initiate further research of M.F.A. programs, which at the present time is considerably lacking.

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FOOTNOTE

[1]For a discussion of the problematic nature of other modes of inquiry see Ecker and Kaelin, "The Limits of Aesthetic Inquiry," Passim.

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