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Art Education in a Mediatized World

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We live in a media-dominated knowledge society. This describes the situation that has prevailed in the Western world for some three decades. The laptop, the Internet, the mobile phone, the scanner and video camera have become integrated into and an extension of our physical and mental way of life. They dictate the way in which we experience and shape the world. At this juncture we exist as mediatized creatures. One of the consequences of the development and dissemination of new technological resources is that we have never before been confronted by and had such easy access to so many images. Technology has created relatively cheap and accessible means of production and reproduction, giving rise to new ways of dealing with visual material and new means of perception. Thanks to this, the social position of the visual arts has been transformed. The visual arts can no longer lay claim to a domain of their own; now, more than ever, they have become part and parcel of consumer culture and the entertainment industry. And this has eroded much of the romantic value and pretensions of the artistic image—in short, it is no longer regarded as the unique and eloquent expression of an extraordinary personality. What it does stand for, and the specific meaning of the artwork in the context of the media society, is no longer clear.

However, the Romantic notion of art that still largely predominates in art education excludes a clear grasp of this situation. Art education frequently envisages art in opposition to current society. Art is, for instance, considered the last refuge of social criticism, an exceptional expression of great insight and meaning, the touchstone of social freedom, or even an epiphany of truth and the absolute. The artist is expected to stand on the sidelines of society and, from this secluded domain, comment on the world. Isolation from society is elevated to a condition for developing new insights and wielding actual influence. The idea is that direct involvement in the ins and outs of social practices erodes the critical potential of the artist and compromises the purity of his or her work. Notions such as the art market, entertainment, and popular culture are avoided. They stand for the corruption of the high ideals of art and are barely touched on in art education.

The opinions widely held in art education fail to sufficiently articulate the changes that the theory and practice of new media, the interweaving of art and market, and the worldwide spread of popular culture have engendered. The crossing of borders in the arts that has become commonplace, the fusion of “high” and popular culture, and the emergence of new domains such as virtual art and artistic research underline the fact that these developments can no longer be considered within the traditional parameters. A theory of the artwork no longer suffices and will need to be replaced, or at least supplemented, by a theory of visual culture and visual experience. Furthermore, the broad arena of “the aesthetic” must become the starting point, which thus includes both experimental and “major” works of art and the artistic expressions of the culture industry and modern media. The aesthetic experience should not be confined to the familiar dimensions of beauty, the sublime, the shocking, and the abject, but will need to treat with the required gravity the reactions that these diverse expressions inspire. The aesthetic is not simply the manifestation of those profound insights and intense feelings; it is also the terrain of the everyday, the exciting, and the banal.

It is imperative that current art education sees itself as an explicit part of today's media culture. In other words, it must take as its starting point the interlacing of contemporary art with the world of commercial and everyday visual production. In contrast to the departure points of the majority of academies, this is second nature to most art students. They combine and mix images and media without applying a specific hierarchy. The author of the images or how they came into being is of little importance. Their interest lies in the eloquence of the images themselves, not their historical or iconic value. The sociocultural and political content of the images is of far greater significance in this process than the formal aspect. What is addressed by or through the image, and how can this be played with?

Of course, this does not mean to say that art education should surrender to the commercial and political agenda of the current media world. The acknowledgment that the visual arts have become integral to a broad and all-embracing visual culture and that they must define their position within this does not preclude them from assuming a relatively autonomous standpoint. An artwork can still be a critical factor in the continuous process of producing and circulating images, viewpoints and ideas. We do not mean critical in the radical sense of a total rejection of present-day reality and the design of a utopian reality; this type of critique has been rendered inert by the visual imagination of commercial media. The critical contribution could consist of making visible that which remains invisible or disregarded in the prevailing reality regime. The artist should be the critical conscience of contemporary visual culture, not from a position of splendid isolation but as specialist and stakeholder; not hampered by grand ideals but concrete, direct, and practical. The Modernist quest for the totally new should no longer be the driving force—artists should be driven by the desire to reveal the other and the discrepancies within existing reality.

For art education this entails freeing itself of the Romantic, elitist notion of art. If today's art student wishes to play any significant role as visual specialist, he or she must be immersed in the principles of mass culture, the power of the media, communication techniques, the information industry, and the art market. Knowledge of these social forces is equally essential for students who ultimately opt for a studio-based practice as painters. The lack of this knowledge in the curricula of art institutions in the Netherlands is partly attributable to the institutional distinction between colleges of higher education and universities. Art institutions are colleges of higher education; essentially, what this means is that they are institutions that place greater emphasis on the practical and vocational aspect of the program than on the theoretical or scholarly aspect. This applies both to the bachelor's and master's programs. Art colleges provide vocational education. Despite attempts at collaboration, colleges of higher education and universities are not natural partners. This is due in part to the art colleges' suspicion of the way in which universities monopolize their use of knowledge and their fear of the institutional power of these organizations. The art colleges are anxious not to lose the idiosyncratic position that they so cherish. And it is due in part to the difficulty the universities have with the more pragmatic, less academic approach to knowledge in an art college.

And yet the developments in the fine arts and in art education appear to necessitate a close interaction between both types of education. The term "knowledge society" refers to the new form of power represented these days by knowledge and technology. Possessing and demonstrating specialized knowledge has become essential in playing an acknowledged and key role in today's society. Practical know-how and experiential knowledge are no longer enough; knowledge that is weighed and recorded—in short, certified knowledge is what is desired. Contemporary forms of education are thus all embedded in complicated systems of assessment, norms, and evaluations to confirm and assure their mutual differences. Degrees and certificates create hierarchies and legitimize them. Nor can art education in the Netherlands evade this regulatory power. The relative autonomy that typified this type of education and was based on the idea that an artist's practice is a calling rather than a profession has been rigorously curbed over recent decades by government guidelines and periodical accreditations. To use a term coined by Foucault, the artist has become a "specific intellectual," someone who possesses controlled professional knowledge, a specialist in working with visual material and space, a relay in

the network of the creative industry.

To counter these developments and simultaneously introduce and apply the new position of art in society in the curriculum, the art college will need to be bold enough to open itself to far-reaching discussion. This does not mean that art colleges have no valuable standpoints and qualities to defend; it means that they must pay heed to the changes in the social constellation in which they function, and do so at a deep, fundamental level. They should enthusiastically embrace the potentialities offered by the current situation. The fact that art education is not a part of the university system must be grasped with both hands to create far greater awareness of the “knowledge” generated by art and design without falling back on obsolete notions of Romantic and Modernist art discourse. By working with universities, art colleges could become knowledge institutions where research is undertaken both practically and theoretically into (in the words of Jacques Ranciere) the “distribution of the sensible” that determines our sociopolitical media world.

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