

## **Reverse Pedagogy - An Art School For Artists**

### **- Paul Butler - Canadian Art - Winter Issue**

Dear (Richard Rhodes) Editor,

My apologies for disturbing you at this late date with a response to the above mentioned article. I felt it required some reaction. My studio hours are keeping me busy (luckily), so sitting down to read the winter issue has just now become possible.

## **Reverse Pedagogy - An Art School For Artists**

*Reverse Pedagogy* is a fascinating read. The lack of depth and life experience in Mr Butler's comments is palpable. Within the 10 paragraph high school essay "*one*" (to quote Jacques Rancière) must conclude that adolescent rants can easily be masked as informed logic - if you have an already convinced audience.

To have as a goal "*to not be influenced by the explications of teachers*" is rather a teen-aged concept based on ignorance and a heady belief that we are invincible. God forbid that anyone be considered more experienced and knowledgeable than our lowest common denominator "explications" of who we are. That would mean we are "less than", in need of learning, not up to snuff. . . that we are still kids in the area of knowledge!!!. But then we do live in the 21<sup>st</sup> century - a time when the independence/dependence factor of our adolescence has been extended to our 30s and 40s and beyond. So being immature should be considered normal? Right?

The article postulates, through Rancière's rather pedantic *royal we* style, that: "*One could learn by oneself and without a master explicator when one wanted to, propelled by one's own desire or by the constraint of the situation*". Now, if that isn't invincible teen-age thinking than what is? The concept of forming identity groups to teach each other what the other knows (to the exclusion of "explicators") is rather "cute" in its cub-scout activity worldliness. While it belittles learning at its best it promotes each person to the level of teacher. . . (!) And all within the symbiotic and hermetically sealed realm of like or same-minded thinkers. . . Hmmm. "One" would hope that Rancière's influence wanes soon. Incest is badly perceived in most nations.

As Butler's article revolves around a discussion on "The Ignorant Schoolmaster" am I to assume that knowledgeable teachers of the past (who actually knew how to impart skill sets and did not manipulate the creativity of their students) are not the ones being spoken of by attendees? I can only come to the conclusion that Mr Butler speaks of today's teachers. . . If so, then I do agree with parts of his analysis.

But then again, using Rancière as a valid theorist to promote this discussion rankles somewhat. To those of us who have been in the profession since before Butler celebrated his first birthday, Rancière would not even figure in the top 100 philosophers and theorists on the topic. To add fuel to the fire, Butler also proposes a no-end to learning concept. . . Now that idea is one which should be seriously promoted. But then again I am bewildered. With "explicators" out of the way perennial students would be taught by whom, pray tell?

As to being emancipated from the totalitarian hold of experience and knowledge based education,

one must first presume to have been educated. . . I cannot free myself from something which is not responsible for restraining me. Skill set learning is not restrictive to those who have a creative mind. Nor is it totalitarian. The assimilation of skills actually frees the mind and heart and soul of an individual to create. But then, this assumes that the apprentice is creative.

But is creativity not what students learn in school? No. Individuals cannot be induced to create. Though what is there can be encouraged, if it is present. That which can be learned are the basic to advanced rudiments of a selected language of expression. An apprentice uses tools to more clearly express him or herself. And with skills acquired, a visual artist doesn't have to spend their whole life wondering at each turn which red or blue or chisel cut to use to get a specific point across.

But then, can't an individual teach him or herself the required skills after they have spent their \$50,000 or so getting a degree which demands no skills be assimilated? Certainly. But there are very few geniuses in this world. Most of us, as Chuck Close indicated are the usual types. . . those who just go to work - inspiration being for amateurs. Also, the blind leading the blind always leads to a blind alley and from there it is rarely possible to achieve anything more than collective navel-gazing. If any advice should be shared with the disciples of Rancière it should be: Beware your newly minted "teachers". What you see may not be what you get.

Learning, also, cannot simply be relegated to an "oops", "fuck up" or trial and error process, as implied in the article. Trial and error is but one component of a more complex process which includes greater segments of listening to, discovering, repeated imitating, and the honing of conceptual, actual, definition and experiential skills. Craft must precede creativity if it is ever to have a chance at becoming "art". Learning is also impossible at a higher level if it ignores the past, the masters, and those in the present who are looked upon as having (ugh) "succeeded" professionally and/or financially. In essence, visual artists should not be a gaggle of excluders who wish to dictate what is or is not "art" to the rest of the world. Such collectives can never be taken with any degree of seriousness as adolescent posturing is more akin to a groupie mentality than it is to a professional stance.

Denying or belittling the idea of training by master craftsmen/artists promotes both a lack of respect for excellence (a seemingly elitist quest) and elevates lowest common denominator expression to the lofty position of art. When there are few if any restrictions on who and how an artist is crowned not far behind are those who bestow upon themselves the title of official "*non-masterly visual-arts philosophical sources*". And when that occurs society as a whole can only suffer.

In our quest to become fore-runners rather than harbingers we contemporary visual artists are sealing our own coffins. Our world of expression and our world of influence is shrinking. Having no other reference than the self or the like-minded is tantamount to looking in the mirror and being satisfied with the positive response.

All of the above notwithstanding, what the art world needs is more controversy - so thank you to Butler for that. Though it may have appeared to be so, I am not implying that drawing and painting are the only required skill sets. The visual arts are not totally encompassed by these two fields. But what I am eluding to is that master training and mentoring in the arts - as in all professions, are vital. There also needs to be historic reference to the evolution of creation not reliant on revisionism by those who take themselves much too seriously in this era of self-delusion. We owe the world more

than thinly disguised disdain. Let's clean up our act.

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