

HUBBARD COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
Saint Hill Manor, East Grinstead, Sussex

HCO BULLETIN OF 26 SEPTEMBER 1977R
Remimeo REVISED 30 DECEMBER 1979

(Only revision is series number.)

Art Series 5

ART AND COMMUNICATION

When a work of painting, music or other form attains two-way communication, it is truly art.

One occasionally hears an artist being criticized on the basis that his work is too "literal" or too "common". But one has rarely if ever heard of any definition of "literal" or "common". And there are many artists simply hung up on this, protesting it. Also, some avant-garde schools go completely over the cliff in avoiding anything "literal" or "common" - and indeed go completely out of communication!

The return flow from the person viewing a work would be contribution. True art always elicits a contribution from those who view or hear or experience it. By contribution is meant "adding to it".

An illustration is "literal" in that it tells everything there is to know. Let us say the illustration is a picture of a tiger approaching a chained girl. It does not really matter how well the painting is executed, it remains an illustration and it IS literal. But now let us take a small portion out of the scene and enlarge it. Let us take, say, the head of the tiger with its baleful eye and snarl. Suddenly we no longer have an illustration. It is no longer "literal". And the reason lies in the fact that the viewer can fit this expression into his own concepts, ideas or experience: he can supply the why of the snarl, he can compare the head to someone he knows. In short he can CONTRIBUTE to the head.

The skill with which the head is executed determines the degree of response.

Because the viewer can contribute to the picture, it is art.

In music, the hearer can contribute his own emotion or motion. And even if the music is only a single drum, if it elicits a contribution of emotion or motion, it is truly art.

That work which delivers everything and gets little or nothing in return is not art. The "common" or overused melody, the expected shape or form gets little or no contribution from the hearer or viewer. That work which is too unclear or too poorly executed may get no contribution.

Incidental to this, one can ask if a photograph can ever be art, a controversy which has been raging for a century or more. One could say that it is only difficult to decide because one has to establish how much the photographer has contributed to the "reality" of "literalness" in front of his camera, how he has interpreted it, but really the point is whether or not that photograph elicits a contribution from its viewer. If it does, it is art.

Innovation plays a large role in all works which may become art. But even this can be overdone. Originality can be overdone to the point where it is no longer within any possible understanding by those viewing or hearing it. One can be so original one goes entirely outside the most distant perimeter of agreement with his viewers or listeners. Sometimes this is done, one suspects, when one has not spent the labor necessary to execute the work. Various excuses are assigned such an action, the most faulty of which is "self-satisfaction" of the artist. While it is quite all right to commune with oneself, one cannot also then claim that it is art if it communicates with no one else and no other's communication is possible.

The third flow, of people talking to one another about a work can also be considered a communication and where it occurs is a valid contribution as it makes the work known.

Destructive attitudes about a work can be considered as a refusal to contribute. Works that are shocking or bizarre to a point of eliciting protest may bring to themselves notoriety thereby and may shake things up; but when the refusal to contribute is too widespread, such works tend to disqualify as art.

There is also the matter of divided opinion about a work. Some contribute to it, some refuse to contribute to it. In such cases one must examine who is contributing and who is refusing. One can then say that it is a work of art to those who contribute to it and that it is not to those who refuse to contribute to it.

Criticism is some sort of index of degree of contribution. There are, roughly, two types of criticism: one can be called "invalidative criticism", the other "constructive criticism".

Invalidative criticism is all too prevalent in the arts for there exist such things as "individual taste", contemporary standards and, unfortunately, even envy or jealousy. Too often, criticism is simply an individual refusal to contribute. One could also state that "those who destructively criticize can't do."

"Constructive criticism" is a term which is often used but seldom defined. But it has use. It could probably be best defined as criticism which "indicates a better way to do", at least in the opinion of the critic. Those who simply find fault and never suggest a practical means of doing it better rather forfeit their right to criticize.

Art is probably the most uncodified and least organized of all fields. It therefore acquires to itself the most "authorities". Usually nothing is required of an "authority" except to say what is right, wrong, good, bad, acceptable or unacceptable. Too often the sole qualification of the authority (as in poor teaching of some subjects) is a memorized list of objects and their creators and dates with some hazy idea of what the work was. An "authority" could considerably improve his status by using rather precise definitions of his terms. The modern trend of seeking the significance in what the artist meant is of course not likely to advance the arts very much.

Viewing and experiencing art on the basis of what one is contributing to it and what others contribute to it is a workable approach. And it would result in improved art and improved appreciation.

Such a viewpoint, interestingly, also includes some things into the field of art not previously so viewed.

L. RON HUBBARD
FOUNDER

Revision assisted by

Maggie Sibersky
LRH Comps I/C

LRH:MS:pat:dr
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