

## Myth and Mystique in Art and Design Education

**A review of the confused state of visual art/design education in the Art and Design Departments in the Polytechnics and some of its implications for the schools.**

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Art and Design Departments in Polytechnics are obliged, through the Royal Charter given to CNAAB, to apply practical research, as opposed to the more pure research of the Universities (what is the difference?); in the Polytechnic gallop to Supertech the so-called 'exceptionally able' student is being squeezed right out of the market; the vocational courses are receiving relatively less and less money; sixth-form Colleges are emulating art schools in their foundation departments; in many cases a secondary visual education is unrelated to tertiary visual education, and no-one seems very concerned; and the infrastructure becomes more a remedial expression centre than an applied cohesive part of the whole. A brief glimpse into the disorganised system of art/design education reveals an insular structure travelling both vertically and horizontally. There is no generally accepted concept of art as anyone involved (e.g., the man-in-the-street, the teacher, the student) could recognise: it exists, or non-exists, on too many levels. It is shrouded in myth and mystique; it is too easily influenced by whim and fancy; its infrastructure is filled with contradictions. Often public consumption is dictated by the voices nearest the microphone, they not realising in the publicity-ridden hierarchy voices out of earshot could be much nearer the truth. Any supernova exponential soon dies out in the vastness of traditionalised, ritualised space—space occupied by non-reference bodies totally out of proportion to their educational worthiness to the general public.

Each level is distinct from the other, but any attempt to reconcile them is futile, as each demands the right to its different role; a right borne of this traditionalising and ritualising, but endorsed by a mass media communication system which is concerned only with the newsworthy and not the education-worthy. Often the two are poles apart, and even when they are parallel or conjoined the context negates any educational effectiveness. Through the magnet that London is, for example, art schools there enjoy an enormous catchment from which selections are made; in turn the inference being that the selected few are some sort of freak elite; whilst all the time provincial colleges advertise for students. This advertising is no reflection on the college's worthiness to educate its members; rather it manifests an imbalance borne of superficial publicity, and a public ignorant in the very rudiments of educational technology. But what grand strategy oversees this? What about the substructures? What about the art teachers? Through this fight for places, fight for students, bandwagon-jumping, consumer hard over-sell, polytechnic leap-frogging, educational technology over-kill does anyone give a thought that the student trying to obtain a place on a Dip AD Fine Art Course in Summer 1973 may, in all probability, after all his big seas and little wishes of aspiring

Rauschenberg, turn out to be teaching general art in a secondary school he does not like in September 1977? He wanted to be a painter, but that fell by the wayside of Dip AD; he wished to work freelance in industry, but his art education did not cater for this at all; he does not enjoy teaching and does not fit in with his fellow staff; there is no connection with his subject to any other subject in the school; he teaches in an insulated 'cell'; he meets few if any other artists; there is no art advisory centre to which he can refer ideas, projects, problems, schemes; he is landed with the 'awkward' pupil because the art room is thought of as more remedial than anything else; his capitation allowance is ridiculously low; any schemes he has for relating art to other subjects is viewed with deep suspicion by the more 'academic' staff; he finds art, as such, has a galvanised inferiority complex in the school at large; but the greatest tragedy is that he does not conceptualise the visual educational technology akin to secondary level in relation to tertiary demands because he has spent a mere ten months of the last five years preparing for a profession of formal visual education, and this preparation has a certain lack of commitment because it is based on a remedial strategy. His commitment changed course somewhere in the past five years, but the change was never recognised nor developed because he was pursuing a syllabus which was never designed to cater for educating an attitude of impartation of visual logic. And this is only one critical aspect of his syllabus.

The root of the problem has been missed by a mile, back in the foundation courses, and even further back into the secondary level. But let us not blame the foundation courses, because here the Dip AD folio—interview tail is wagging the educational dog. Foundation courses should be wider in reference and longer in duration. They should be geared not only to the Dip AD course, but also formal art teacher—training in Colleges of Education; and also to a much widened ATD Course, entry to which should not be determined by the degree—equivalent qualification, but that this can be gathered on the way to a broad visual education. Interception of the problem at root would dissolve many of the present hierarchical and stratification 'cells'.

In order to give another perspective to the confused state of visual art/design education, let us attempt to approach it through the eyes of the general public. Nowadays, when the professional gallery scene, especially in the large cities, shows work which is either aimed at the collectors, or at the trendy bandwagon of 'glossies' acclaim, the viewing public gets very little opportunity to see work which directly influences their everyday lives, their environment and, most importantly, their education. Even if the desire is present, the astronomical prices asked for these commodities makes an attempt by the average man—in—the—street to introduce it to his household quite abortive and he feels that if he priced—out then he is also intellectualised—out. It accelerates a two—forced divergence, the myth takes root. Now for the mystique. Most of that which is seen is carefully screened for image, advertising and publicity purposes — but for the benefit of the commercial results, not the public's intellect — and public consumption is therefore being controlled by agencies which really have not got the public interest at heart; but create the belief we are getting what we want; whilst all the time we are being conditioned into believing we need what we are being given. This is not to say that no good design comes from the gallery scene, but a cross—section of its virtue would reveal much introspective self interest, and aloofness to public opinion bordering on applied bad



manners; and a suicidal disregard for Colleges and Departments of Art Education and their protégés. The public's view of the protégés is the skin of the orange, which in many cases does not manifest anything untoward with the fruit beneath.

Examples? There are too many, and one is apprehensive about listing them as a checklist for fear they automatically become axiom of the argument, which unfortunately is much the case in visual education. What is required is a detachment from the specific objects and a re-analysis from a purely objective point of view. For instance, to blame the fashion houses for a lack of concern over national design awareness would be as oblique a charge as placing the blame for slums at the doors of architects. But there is a vein of truth there: the scene—stealing garment is a carefully nurtured ritual which bears little or no relation to the reality of buying and wearing. Any change is the brainchild of the individual, but in this age of mass expresso—communication the individual gets lost and wears, sometimes reluctantly, what the idiom dictates as the latest trend. The information flows all too easily providing a breakthrough for trendsetting — with a temporary blindness to past preferences. Hypnotically the trendsetter is lulled into decisions supposedly taken by himself, the lack of a positive visual education allowing this subject to be a walk-over.

Certain areas of an automobile are pure function, whilst others are pure embellishment — there are parts which are designed but likewise there are parts which are styled — yet we are all aware of the jargon which surrounds the unveiling of a new model. Notice the word 'unveiling': even this connotes some atmosphere of mystery and exclusiveness. It is true that the car manufacturers carry out expensive market surveys; and on the consensus of opinion produce what they assume should be a bestseller; it turns out to be an expensive flop; and so they revert to their stylists again for a commercially viable answer. But the main problem is that the public is not really educated to know what it wants: all any survey would do is to trigger the veneer which is uppermost in the mind and eye. But answers are given too lightly too soon and too thinly; it is all too easy, and such horrid propositions as visual thinking and art/design logic are skimped.

The 'precious' attitudes an artist holds to his paintings — distorted into a myth out of all proportion to the public usefulness of the produced objects by being upheld by the mass media — is a handy banner to carry; but it widens the chasm between the painter and his viewing public. We were weaned on this nonsense: It romanticised the artist as being some cultural quasi-god of an elite tribe—in—the—sky, and expounds in a form of camouflage jargon which leaves the man—in—the—street in no doubt he is the next thing to an idiot. There are too many artists, in teaching positions, who believe this; and who can blame them? They enjoy being in a society of elite minority, which is never questioned by anyone, let alone exposed to the light of day and analysed on the same basis as a doctor or a dustman! Why is this myth perpetuated? Why are we forced, through circumstances, to accept as final and unquestionable the stroke of an artist's brush, the thrust of a re-hashed typeface, the cut of a designer's scissors, the stroke of critic's pen?

Why? Because the majority of us are not in any position to question these undertakings. Because the majority of us do not know anything about the working of this scene. And it is in the interest of the artist/designer/critic to perpetuate this myth as long

as possible. It is in their interest to create a bigger and better mystique which will eventually cloud the issue out of public comprehension. It is not in the artist's interest to evaluate his social contributions in terms that are understandable by the man-in-the street. If this were so he would have to revise the whole programme from the start, and to re-evaluate his own visual education on these terms. This would expose that we are now looking at the camouflage which has become the artefact, and realise the terrible absence of the image. And this is a test which too many artists/designers are not prepared to face; thus if they can avoid this by the propagation of a little nebulous mystique, who can blame them?

The majority of us are never given the opportunity whereby we can judge for ourselves the various functions and values of this artefact or the image; nor are we given the opportunity of assessing the transitional values attained at the critic's image of the public's artefact, because there is no big arbiter to which one can refer. Nor can we assess for ourselves the best designed this, or the most attractive that (without recourse to the publicity image) or the coolest colour scheme for such and such, because never are we confronted with the real problem of applying visual logic to the multitude of factors which make up our everyday designed environment. Worse, we are never given any formal training at the secondary school level in visual education and visual thinking in order that we can make these judgements with any authority; but even if we have, and here is the rub, we are such a minority that we are never in any position to influence the type of subject-matter that is mounted in our municipal art galleries. In essence, the general public has too little experience with the basic 'tools' of the artistic/designed/visual environment to be able to make statements with any authority concerning the acceptance or rejection of aspects of the art scene. A criticism then, is the lack of mandatory control of syllabuses in secondary schools: the syllabuses could still be broad, but with built-in priorities.

The reality of artefacts as simple tools for investments is distant from the art room, yet we are conditioned into thinking that this art is the same sort of stuff that happens in art colleges. How wrong can we be? Big business in Fine Art is like big business in anything else: the people concerned are honest financiers whose main knowledge lies in a work's investment potential. The layman stands little chance of comprehending or making a kill, unless he is prepared to devote his profession to the business. In fact, the layman sees, once again, the veneer which becomes the artefact. But the collector's attitude is not bent on confusing the layman; neither are the Fine Art clearing houses and investors: they are in it strictly for the money. It is the layman himself who confuses the values of these works with their aesthetic/intrinsic value; and gathers a completely disproportionate and wrongly-focused image of what art is really all about. And so we are describing a circular argument, for we arrive once more with the pressing and depressing problem of art/visual education.

There are fundamental underlying contradictions at work in art education. On the one hand we have the art department which is rooted in tradition such as the perpetuation of old 'skills', techniques and crafts, with an ostrich headed attitude towards the real problem of visual education; and on the other we have an attempted up-dating of the syllabus by emulating the trendy art gallery scene, turning the students into confused



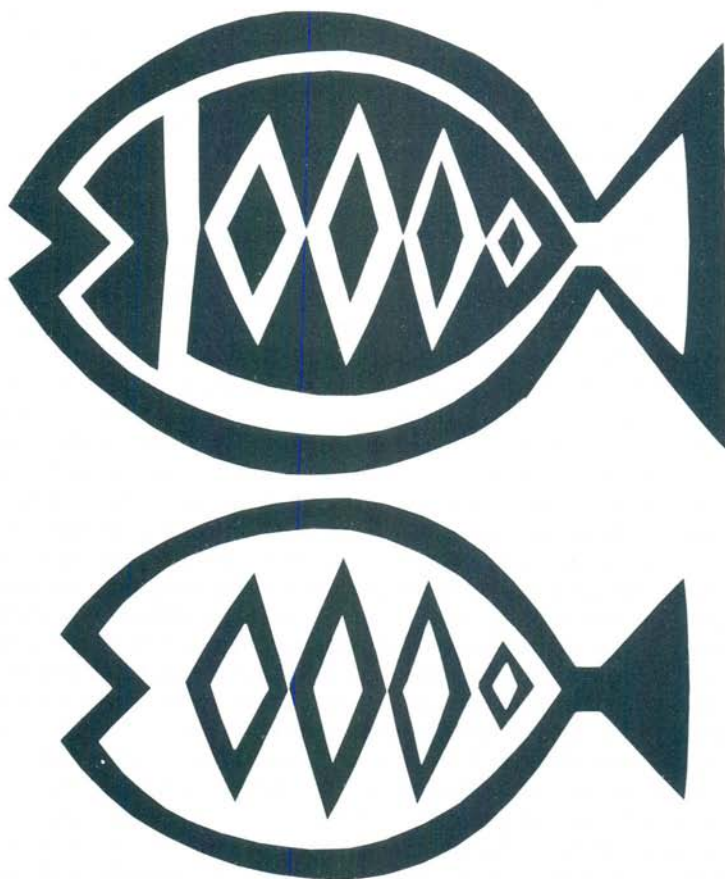
mimetics: they will be searching with the wrong equipment for that elusive 'recognition'. Under this second category art, as such, is treated as being far too precious a subject to withstand any analysis; the artist (or embryo artist) is seduced into thinking that he never has to justify what he does: the die is cast for another aspect of the mystique.

But both areas are missing the point by a wide angle: art/visual education cannot afford to entertain either of these attitudes for much longer. We need visual educationalists to construct an art/visual educational technology that will co-ordinate programmes from junior school right to the termination of tertiary training; the syllabuses will have to be pyramidal and cumulative, with a strong thread of visual logic and application of visual thinking woven throughout. An art advisory body set up by DES should overlook this far-reaching syllabus; it should have powers to augment mandatory educational technologies, with all of the educational technology ramifications. It should have powers to demand the incorporation of art education with the academic subjects, and that is becomes a viable part of the whole. Visual thinking and visualising is the core of the sighted person's conceptualising and intellectualising, yet as an aspect of art as a subject it is arbitrary, peripheral and many times forgotten. Worse, visual education is considered more by accident than by design. There should be no step between junior school and secondary school, and between secondary school and tertiary education. In many instances teachers in art colleges talk about 'clearing' the student's mind, 'starting from scratch' and 'preparing' them for a proper art education, when the students first enter. On knowing some of the reasons that prompt this attitude one can sympathise with the background sincerity, but, surely, does it not denote a waste of time in the secondary sector? The art advisory body should ensure that this time is not wasted relative to art colleges (or, for that matter, colleges of education and universities) by instigating a broad umbrella syllabus commencing at about the age of ten. The centre of gravity of this syllabus should be visual logic, expression, communication, presentation, creativity—the various skills, techniques and crafts as an incidental part of this make-up. Too much importance is given to skills and crafts. That aspect of art education is out of date. New technologies, machines, computers and communication techniques can now do much better what used to take a person years to learn to do half as well. Today man should be a thinking designer, and that is what the art/visual education should be aiming for. There is an awful lot of nonsense perpetrated under the cloak of present-day art education: what other subject would stand up to such a nebulous interpretation? Would mathematics? English? Would physics? It seems very doubtful.

Art and visual education, then, is in a confused state of health at present. One is tempted to list 'ideal' syllabuses as the answer, but these would merely be the small cogs in a gigantic machine, and it is really the function of the machine which needs looking into. There must be more positive thinking on the relationship of all levels of art education; an art/visual education advisory body should be set up by the DES to ensure, amongst other things, this smooth transition. Art as a subject needs to be involved more with the general curriculum in secondary schools; and art teachers should be encouraged to practice more of what they preach. There are many ways of initiating this: art advisory centres should be set up throughout the country, as part of the LEA, to be used as consultative centres, and also as a place of learning for a mandatory sabbatical year every,

say, five years. This would create a reference point for a subject which changes more than any other in physical manifestation, direction and values. There must be a stronger link with music, literature and drama — music stage acts are as yet an untapped artform which is transient, spontaneous and anarchistic, yet art education simply mimes it, years behind, instead of dictating to it. As a common strategy modern technological machinery must be introduced into art education syllabuses.

But most important of all: the problem could well be intercepted at root if art teacher—training became a structured part of the Art College, integral with all levels, courses and disciplines instead of remote and ‘tacked on’ as exists with ATD at present. We need committed visual educationalists, not art teachers capable only of imparting a little knowledge of their own specialisms.



From *Introducing Graphic Techniques* by Robin Capon, Batsford, £1.70.