The Role of the Artist in Society

Matthew Maturo

Issues in Contemporary Art

Professor Gelburd

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In a world filled with uncertainty, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to identify fact from fiction. It is human nature to make sense of our circumstances by using logic and reason to define them and create order out of chaos by classification of circumstance into categories. We study our disciplines of interest, learning that they have distinction and are "unique," having nothing to share with the other. This concept has lead the global community to view the sciences as having a vital role in improving the human condition, society, and ultimately the world, whereas art is viewed merely as "entertainment." As diminutive as this sounds, the role of the artist in society and world affairs is larger than what is ascribed by dominant cultural tradition. Misconceptions such as these shape social function from behind the scenes to maintain the power and influence of the dominant culture on a global scale, as well as within individual societies. In order to bring true social reform to our society and the global community, an examination of art as politics is needed to begin.

In a single day, the average person is bombarded with "3,000 ads," many of which represent a worldview based on nothing but "false mirrors."[1] Advertising comprises "30 percent" of the mass media in the web of late capitalism.[2] If one learns how the latent, hierarchical interconnections work, the same power that oppresses and divides can be harnessed to resist and unite. The application of art in the mass media will enable audiences to decipher the truth for themselves, which is cleverly deflected and distorted through the entertainment industry.

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[1] Bray, Anne. "The Community Is Watching, and Replying: Art in Public Places and Spaces." *Leonardo, 35, No.1, (2002)* 15-21. found online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/1577070 [accessed April 6, 2012], 15.
[2] Bray, Anne, 15.

Artist Anne Bray attempts to influence and unite public opinion with her multimedia installations. She actively resists and counter-attacks the dominant culture through ordinary surroundings and occasions. Her artwork specifically targets the media, where she transforms public world view into her worldview of truth, in addition to product placement of "private discussions and images into public arenas."[3] One such example was a collaboration with fellow artist Molly Cleator, entitled *Easy Chair, Electric Chair,* which was first displayed in 1992.

Within a 5,000 square foot art gallery, two mechanized wheelchairs are electronically controlled via computer interface and sport a television monitor, each one displaying the likenesses of the artists themselves in discussion.[4] According to the artists, the topic of discussion centered on "communication and the mediation of information and imagination through mass media."[5] Form, oral speech, and physical movement portray the disillusionment one experiences as our worldview evolves with knowledge of manifest and latent social control mechanisms of the dominant culture. During the discussion, Cleator portrays the mass media as "a powerful and potentially communicative forum," whereas Bray counters that the "mass media blocked communication and inhibited self-knowledge;" however, both artists are correct as time passes.[6] The television monitors reflected Cleator's contention whereas the listless wandering of the wheelchairs reflected Bray's contention. The audience participated by sitting in 1 out of 165

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[3] Bray, Anne, 16.

[4] Bray, Anne, 18.

[5] Bray, Anne, 18.

[6] Bray, Anne, 18.

chairs that varied by type and position, which influenced perception and fostered critical thinking, in turn completing the artwork.[7] Spirituality can spark critical thinking as well, as seen in the art of Metadesign.

As technology advances, reliance on other humans for certain tasks diminishes with time. A spiritual renewal has been sparked in the technological aftermath, placing a focus on human characteristics. This focus has culminated in the rise of the "anthropodesigner" or "metadesign."[8] With relationships such as "designer and consumer," where the consumer is considered superior, metadesign advocates working together as equals to better understand the other first, before attempting to solve the problem at hand.[9] Language awareness grows with articulated "super-ideas" and "super-undertakings," where implementation of alternative procedure shapes perception of what awaits in the future.[10] In sum, it is an alternative to the formal framing that is engendered at the college level, viewed as monotonous and deficient in "any emotional or aesthetic flavor."[11] One artwork that reaches out for viewer connection is known as the *Artefor*. The *Artefor* is seen as an "innovative specialist," or advocate of art.[12] It harnesses the characteristics of being "a creator of images, a searcher for new aesthetic languages, and means of expression and influence," revealing the true extent of artists to shape public opinion on the national and international levels under the guise of entertainment.[13] The intricate components of

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[7] Bray, Anne, 18.

[8] Lazarev, Yevgeny N. "The Art of Metadesign." *Leonardo, 27, No.5, Prometheus: Art, Science and Technology in the Former Soviet Union: Special Issue (1994)* 423-425. found online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/1576101 [accessed April 7, 2012], 423.

[9] Lazarev, Yevgeny N., 423.

[10] Lazarev, Yevgeny N., 423.

[11] Lazarev, Yevgeny N., 423.

[12] Lazarev, Yevgeny N., 424.

[13] Lazarev, Yevgeny N., 424.

"dynamics, sound, and light" are the embodiment of "conditions and realities never seen before."[14] The operations of organic communications systems fall under a similar premise.

Just as metadesign focuses on human characteristics, organic communications systems focus on communal and biological characteristics. They are modeled after "physical communities" by change overtime and reflective of local culture, while their power is based on connections to other systems, like "physical organisms."[15] It is through connections to other systems that telematic art fosters spiritual awakening through the manifestation of latent behavior, which in turn facilitates change. *ACEN* is one such system; it analyses "interactive electronic communications media" in the process of social change one individual at a time, known as the "Art Com Electronic Network."[16] On the network level, the dominant culture is confronted with questions of aesthetics. Emphasis is placed on collaboration under the creed of "art = communication," where the basic yet appealing interface garners attention, while interaction with subsequent prompts and menus subconsciously changes perception on a given issue, under the guise of entertainment.[17] Telematic art is but one example of the increasing role of technology in artistic expression.

A number of contemporary artists view aesthetics as an issue of utmost importance. The criterion of what constitutes fine art and low art is ultimately blurred due to our social, economic, political, and historical positions influencing our perception. Following the postmodern ideal,

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[14] Lazarev, Yevgeny N., 424.

[15] Couey, Anna. "Artworks as Organic Communications Systems." *Leonardo, 24, No.2, Connectivity: Art and Interactive Telecommunications (1991)* 127-130. found online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/1575280 [accessed April 6, 2012], 127.

[16] Couey, Anna, 127.

[17] Couey, Anna, 127.

contemporary artists emphasize that perception "has to be continually updated."[18] Supposedly, it

is the artist who adopts and adapts to current aesthetic theory in their artwork, as new

methodologies are devised. In truth, the artist is the actual innovator of methodologies for

adoption and adaptation by aestheticians. This can be seen in the field of holography, where

holographic projections of artists are considered "theorizing through his or her practice."[19] The

lack of any iconic artists in holography to date is due to the inherent bias against women in the

art world; the founders of holography are all women, as well as many rising artists. The

stratification of women to be confined to the home works through latent social, economic, and

political mechanisms, therefore engagement in holography "is seen to be performing a political

act" of dissent in the view of the dominant culture.[20] Latent, hierarchical interconnections of

representation result in manifest exclusion of holography from museums and galleries. Lack of

distinction between scientific, artistic, and commercial representation creates further

misunderstanding. The social construct of art is reserved for the academics that are not sciences;

hence representations more focused on "technique than with content, concept or other art

factors" are excluded.[21] An awareness of these hierarchical interconnections will enable

holography to develop a support network that actively criticizes the dominant culture while

leaving ascribed aesthetics untouched. Examples of holography support networks include

"museums, artist-in-residency (AIR) programs, galleries, journals, educational courses,

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[18] Benyon, Margaret. "Do We Need an Aesthetics of Holography?" *Leonardo, 25, No.5, Archives of Holography: A Partial View of a Three-Dimensional World: Special Issue (1992)* 411-415. found online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/1575745 [accessed April 6, 2012], 411.
[19] Benyon, Margaret, 411.
[20] Benyon, Margaret, 413.
[21] Benyon, Margaret, 413.

conferences, and the holography industry."[22] An emphasis on support networks will bolster longevity, the key attribute of fine art. Holographers must be clear with meaning within culturally ascribed aesthetics to actively criticize the dominant culture. New technology, in conjunction with support networks, enables subversive subtlety and in turn provides holography with "access to the art market."[23] It is through the art market that holography will come to be recognized as a legitimate style in the art world. Digital Art uses support networks for maximum effect as well.

The aesthetics of the dominant culture continue to label artistic expression as it evolves with technology. As of 2000, the label of "new media" has come to be associated with the "digital arts in its various forms."[24] Over the years, many exhibitions were held to document the advance of technology and artistic expression. With the development of "video and satellites," the rise of "streaming media" enabled artistic oversight of social activity as it happened for instant, effective communication to a broad audience.[25] This served as the impetus for a defining attribute now inherent in digital art, where artwork can be delivered on the national or international scale via the internet while masquerading as entertainment. Digital art encompasses an eclectic array of styles with no defined parameters of expression. A given subject could be depicted to the point of being indiscernible from traditional styles, including "music composition and audio."[26] Physical mediation provides a proactive approach, where reality is defined by the

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[22] Benyon, Margaret, 414.

[23] Benyon, Margaret, 415.

[24] Paul, Christiane. "Renderings of Digital Art." *Leonardo, 35, No.5, Tenth Anniversary New York Digital Salon (2002)* 471-473. found online at http://0-www.jstor.org.www.consuls.org/stable/1577254 [accessed April 6, 2012], 471.

[25] Paul, Christiane, 472.

[26] Paul, Christiane, 472.

viewer or user at a moment's notice, or by numerous users. Digital art marks the transition to a

reality defined by the user, by emphasizing "a fluid interaction between different manifestations

of information."[27] Some major digital art forms include "artificial life and intelligence," "Net

art," and "Net activism or 'hacktivism.'"[28] Artificial life and intelligence are explored in *A-Volve*

(1994-5) by Christa Sommerer and Laurent Mignonneau. Through user creation, "digital

creatures" appear in the physical world, suggesting "a crossroads" into true reality.[29] Here,

emphasis is placed on "human manipulation of evolution in the digital realm."[30] The power of

Net art can be seen in Maciej Wisniewski's *Netomat* (1999-Present). The internet is perceived as

an information depot, through a "meta-browser" that collects and discloses information in an

alternative infrastructure from "the original," isolated and mobile "in space."[31] This piece

focuses on the complexities of distortion that we perceive as reality. The process of Net activism

or "hacktivism" harnesses the Internet's power of communication to raise awareness of latent

injustice, by the counter-manipulation of information that alludes to "questioning corporate and

commercial interests."[32] Endeavors such as duplication and combination of websites, as well as

engineering actual viruses, address the "political, cultural, and commercial" avenues of defining

reality.[33] This is the mission of the group known as "0100101110101101.org."[34]

Misrepresentation is rampant in today's technology, even of the dead.

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[27] Paul, Christiane, 472.

[28] Paul, Christiane, 473.

[29] Paul, Christiane, 473.

[30] Paul, Christiane, 473.

[31] Paul, Christiane, 473.

[32] Paul, Christiane, 473.

[33] Paul, Christiane, 473.

[34] Paul, Christiane, 473.

Photographic coverage of people leaping to abandon the trade center towers on Sept. 11, 2001 warrants closer attention be paid to visual aesthetics, due to the impact on the psyche. At times of dynamic climax, complex subjects like humans are prone to misrepresentation in the media. The potential of misrepresentation lies with one's bodily position. When considering the deceased, we should be aware of who the audience is; their likeness is just as prone to "posthumous distortion, neglect, and dishonor" as their mortal state was to death.[35] Sept. 12, 2001 saw the terrorist attacks summed up in one bodily image of a falling man. Taken by Richard Drew, the precision of dynamism captured the despair and terror of many in one climactic position. The sense of a prolonged, impending death, combined with bodily position, points to the uncertainty of life and of death. The sensory overload of aesthetics inhibits clarification of meaning, in turn leading to uninformed conclusions. Misconceptions lead to bias, which is given authenticity by the dominant culture via the media and in turn is presented as fact. The artist is able to use the media to counteract misrepresentation of the deceased, by using technology such as adobe Photoshop to portray a more accurate character while simultaneously employing subtlety in exposing bias, under the guise of photography. One must be aware of the power of photographs to latently misrepresent an individual or group, especially the dead, for "they are not in a position to claim or refuse names for themselves."[36] Monotony is also prevalent in urban aesthetics.

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[35] Fitzpatrick, Andrea D. "The Movement of Vulnerability: Images of Falling and September 11." *Art Journal, 66, No.4, (2007)* 85-92. found online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/20068569 [accessed April 6, 2012], 86.
[36] Fitzpatrick, Andrea D., 92.

Urban environmental education evolved from "postmodern theories and activism" to foster awareness in "issues of citizenship, equity, sustainability, pluralism and community."[37] Visual illiteracy is considered by many "art educators, architects and urban planners" to be a considerable detriment for making intelligent, informed environmental choices.[38] It is defined as an analysis of an object's literal meaning while neglecting to comprehend the deeper, figurative meaning. Proportion and unspecified space cause misunderstanding of structural integrity of one's surroundings. The human psyche subconsciously interprets environmental stimuli, formulating a certain perception of surroundings; familiar surroundings warrant automatic activity and quality is secondary.[39] There are three tools of awareness that have been cultivated by environmental educators to aid the general population in perceiving their urban environment, "a townscape survey, a visual preference survey, and a visual appraisal tour."[40] A visual preference survey "uses slides for helping participants develop aesthetic criteria for judging built environments."[41] A visual appraisal tour "consists of a map of the area studied, in which points of observation are marked, accompanied by an appraisal form for each point."[42] The townscape survey "provides a method for recording visual experiences."[43] For an accurate environmental interpretation, two or all three instruments must be employed, emphasizing collaboration. In so doing, the goals of "visual awareness" and an "understanding" of how "aesthetic choices" are influenced by "ethical, cultural, and socio-economic issues" are promoted under the façade of

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[37] Sousa-Vianna, Rachael de. "Art Education and Urban Aesthetics." *Leonardo, 35, No.3, (2002)* 255-260. found online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/1577114 [accessed April 7, 2012], 255.

[38] Sousa-Vianna, Rachel de, 255.

[39] Sousa-Vianna, Rachel de, 256.

[40] Sousa-Vianna, Rachel de, 257.

[41] Sousa-Vianna, Rachel de, 258.

[42] Sousa-Vianna, Rachel de, 258.

[43] Sousa-Vianna, Rachel de, 258.

ordinary social activity.[44] These issues must be addressed in multicultural educational discourse to erase the social construct of authenticity.

The chief aim of multicultural art education is to teach the cultures of minority groups not only in the United States, but around the world as well. The current model of multicultural discourse "overlooks the politics of location and positionality," which latently categorizes cultures.[45] Depictions of cultures are true, but are only fragments due to the social, political, economic, and historical status of those constructing them. To truly understand a culture is to have knowledge of how political mediation of information affects meaning in art education. By specifically employing social and political status as a factor in cultural information, students understand it from the perspective of "domination and subordination."[46] Legitimacy in cultural information is false; bias exists in visual, textual, and verbal form. These forms, among others, construct world view latently through perception and manifestly through action. Social and political status determines the potency of perception, and subsequent action, of groups among themselves and in relation to others. "Western aesthetic standards" supersede those of "non-Western art forms" due to political positioning on the global stage in formal analysis.[47] This works in conjunction with other social constructs to classify minority cultures from abroad as being low art in comparison to American high art and low art. The art of minority cultures deemed authentic is further classified as authentic within the culture, excluding the low art of that culture. However, late capitalism on the national and international scale can be harnessed to

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[44] Sousa-Vianna, Rachel de, 260.

[45] Desai, Dipti. "Imaging Difference: The Politics of Representation in Multicultural Art Education." *Studies in Art Education, 41, No.2, (2000)* 114-128. found online at http://www.jstor.org/stable/1320658 [accessed April 6, 2012], 114.

[46] Desai, Dipti, 115.

[47] Desai, Dipti, 122.

combat hierarchies and even eliminate them if we learn how they work. To learn how they work, we must think of multiculturalism as "the politics of who speaks, how, and to whom."[48] Information from another culture will be interpreted by audiences from various historical, political, social, and economic positions. Multiculturalism must incorporate "incommensurability" as the key tenant of the curriculum.[49] In so doing, academic studies are accurately placed on the mechanisms of dominance and subordination that are the source of societal strife around the world. The artist is given the correct tools to reveal the true state of affairs that transpire on the national and international stages, in a manner that dominant cultural tradition unwittingly approves.

It is human nature to make sense of our circumstances by using logic and reason to define them and create order out of chaos by classification of circumstance into categories. This concept has lead the global community to view the sciences as having a vital role in improving the human condition, society, and ultimately the world, whereas art is viewed merely as "entertainment." As diminutive as this sounds, the role of the artist in society and world affairs is larger than what is ascribed by dominant cultural tradition. The application of art in the mass media will enable audiences to decipher the truth for themselves, which is cleverly deflected and distorted through the entertainment industry. Metadesign incites spiritual renewal by providing an alternative framework to that provided at the college level, reminding us of the human element within technology. Art in Organic Communications Systems expands on metadesign to include the human element of communities and biological concepts of operation for effective

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[48] Desai, Dipti, 127.

[49] Desai, Dipti, 128.

communication. An awareness of social hierarchy in the art world will enable holography to develop a support network that actively criticizes the dominant culture, while leaving ascribed aesthetics untouched. Digital art encompasses an eclectic array of styles with no defined parameters of expression. At times of dynamic climax, complex subjects like humans are prone to misrepresentation in the media by the dominant culture, especially the dead. Visual illiteracy is a major problem in urban aesthetics, where the three tools of a townscape survey, a visual preference survey, and a visual appraisal tour were designed by environmental and art educators alike as a viable solution. To truly understand a culture is to have knowledge of how political mediation of information affects meaning in art education. The role of the artist in society and world affairs is greater than what has been ascribed by the dominant culture, delivering an enhanced communication of the truth to facilitate social reform on a national and global scale, using the label of "entertainment" as a present-day Trojan horse.

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