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AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF Harold Louis Johnson for the
Master of Arts in Teaching presented August 9, 1973.

Title: Increasing Visual Sensitivity in Urban School Stu-
dents: A Strategy for Involving Students in Aesthetic
Concerns.

APPROVED BY MEMBERS OF THE THESIS COMMITTEE:

James S. Hibbard, Chairman

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The purpose of this thesis project was to investigate a way of fomenting greater student involvement in visual aesthetic concerns through the teacher taking on a partial role of artist-in-residence in order to give students direct contact with his creative ideas. A group of approximately one hundred fifty students at John Adams High School were presented with a week-long display of abandoned automobile mufflers accompanied by drawings of the mufflers in various media.

INCREASING VISUAL SENSITIVITY IN
URBAN SCHOOL STUDENTS: A
STRATEGY FOR INVOLVING
STUDENTS IN AESTHETIC
CONCERNS

by

HAROLD LOUIS JOHNSON

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS
in
TEACHING

Portland State University
1973

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Teacher involvement, practical as well as theoretical, in visual aesthetic concerns is the basic requirement for success in the approach described in this project. For his own growth as well as that of his students, the teacher should be willing to inject himself into the learning process as example number one. By displaying his own creativity and involvement with aesthetic values, the teacher of art can effectively help students focus on these concerns. The resulting dialogue can be broadening to student and teacher alike.

The teaching of art necessarily involves demonstration by the teacher of the very values and attitudes that are being encouraged. The willingness to be "involved," to venture into the unknown to seek the poetic and the unusual, to tolerate ambiguity....¹

This approach and particular presentation are founded upon the belief that emphasis upon the aesthetic qualities of experience is an appropriate and meaningful emphasis for students today. Its main purpose is to develop in students a critical attitude toward visual experience. Hopefully, this critical attitude will carry beyond the visual arts to all

¹Hausman, Jerome, "Teacher as Artist and Artist as Teacher," Art Education: Journal of the National Art Education Association, XX, Number 4 (1967), 13-17.

areas of the student's activity so that he will acquire the habit of seeing his experience in its aesthetic aspect as well as in other ways. For purposes of this discussion, Kern's description of aesthetic experience will do:

Whenever a person attends to an experience, whether it be listening, participation, or watching, he is involved in an aesthetic experience....More precisely, to attend to an experience implies that there is an interaction between the person and an aesthetic object. The interaction is controlled by the sensuous and (when present) representational qualities of the aesthetic object, that is, qualities perceived through the senses, e.g. colors, movement, warmth, etc., and representations, ideas, and images resulting from the structuring of these sensuous qualities.²

Such attention to experience is a natural human tendency, but experience shows that it is a tendency which needs continuous cultivation if it is not to go to seed. Art, in general, has been the great instrument by which cultivation has taken place. This project is a small particular example of how growth in appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of experience can be encouraged.

It is hoped that, along with growth in appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of experience, there will be growth in the habit of thinking critically. This is probably the greatest value to be gained from any educational experience, and it is effectively served by an open, creative experience of art. If the student should develop into a connoisseur of experience, one who is capable of making judgments for himself,

²Kern, Evan J., "A Proper Function for Art Education in the Seventies," *Studies in Art Education, NAEA, a Journal of Issues and Research in Art Education*, XII, Number 1 (1970), 7.

and one who actively seeks to make his environment life-supporting and attractive, the fruition of critical thinking will have been attained as well as the goal of art education in the schools.

CHAPTER II

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The subject matter chosen for this project--abandoned automobile mufflers collected from streets and highways--was selected for its status as a usual and bizarre form of environmental pollution, and because it relates to an object of endless fascination to American teenagers: the automobile. The project was installed at John Adams High School in the area occupied by the Quincy School, a general education agency of approximately one hundred fifty students within the high school. Some of the students were presently taking art courses; others were not. Eighteen drawings were displayed along with twenty-five used mufflers. Each muffler rested upon a rectangular piece of canvas of appropriate dimensions (Figure 1). The drawings occupied a bulletin board area on the north wall of the approximately fifty by fifty-foot room (Figure 2). On the floor the mufflers were aligned in rows so that they moved somewhat into the space usually trafficked by the Quincy population. Students moved through and around the exhibit and worked in proximity to it throughout the period of its display (May 18, 1973, to May 25, 1973).

1. SUMMARY OF STUDENT WRITTEN IMPRESSIONS

A five-foot strip of butcher paper was placed on the

Figure 1. Placement of mufflers upon rectangular pieces of canvas of appropriate dimensions.

Figure 2. Section of drawing display on bulletin board.

floor among the mufflers soliciting on-the-spot comments upon the display (Figure 3). A questionnaire containing six items prepared in cooperation with a member of the Adams research staff was also available to students who wished to respond more fully. During the week of the display, two discussions were held with Quincy students regarding the nature of the presentation. Numerous other one-to-one discussions were held with curious students during and after the week of the display.

Figure 3. Five-foot strip of butcher paper used to record on-the-spot impressions.

Spontaneous written responses grouped themselves according to those who saw the display as a reaction to environmental pollution and centered their attention on the mufflers, those who reacted to the drawings with little or no mention of the mufflers, and those who were surprised and, in some

cases, happy to find out what a muffler looked like. Most students responded in a straightforward manner; however, a few took the opportunity to exercise their predilections for humor: "It'll never fly, Orville." "Where have all the cars gone?" "Silence, please." "Looks like a job for Midas Mufflers!"

The following comments are characteristic of those which made the ecological connection:

Somehow I feel uncomfortable standing in a display of decaying metal that is presented in such an orderly way. I feel like throwing them into a disorganized pile.

My first reaction was, "God, these are ugly!" Now that I look at these mufflers, I think they are kind of neat. I didn't know there were so many kinds of mufflers. They do bring up some depressing attitudes of the American people--Everyone should each own a car, T.V., radio, stereo, boat, etc. Each of us wasting incredible amounts of energy, materials, and polluting our environment.

These comments proved rich in suggestions for follow-up discussions with students.

Students did not readily connect the drawings with the mufflers. Comments tended to be of the either/or variety--about the mufflers or about the drawings. Comments on the drawings did not show notable range or involvement though expressions about them were frequent: "Good job with the paintings." "Did you enjoy drawing these ugly critters?" "The real mufflers are ugly but the drawings are good." "Mufflers are a very strange thing to paint. Good job." The "paintings" referred to by some students were actually watercolor drawings.

A surprising number of students disclosed that this was their first experience of recognizing a muffler.

At first I thought it was kind of ugly, but I never knew what a muffler was before and now I know. I also didn't know there was all different kinds; it's a very good and original collection.

First time I've ever seen a muffler. It kind of makes me mad 'cos for every muffler lying around there is a car riding around without it making a hell of a lot of noise! and pollution!

While this last comment perhaps concludes a bit too much, another thoughtful respondent, reacting to the placement of the display in his classroom, summed up (perhaps unwittingly) the basis of the entire production in these words: "This is a thoughtless amendment to our environment."

The above student comments are representative of the more than fifty which were written on the putcher paper provided for immediate impressions. Students appeared to enjoy recording their critical impressions of the display, and the process contributed to much opening up between students and teachers on the subject of art and environmental pollution.

2. SUMMARY OF STUDENT RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS FOR REACTION

The questions used to gauge student reaction to the display and to evoke critical responses were designed to be as unobtrusive as possible while encouraging students to answer as freely as possible. Mention of environmental pollution or ecology in the questions was purposely suppressed. Twenty-four individuals responded to the questions. The six items and a brief description of student reaction to them follows:

Describe briefly what it is you are (or have been) seeing in this exhibit. Students responded uniformly that they saw twenty-five old and dirty mufflers. A few expanded their comments to notice that the mufflers were "laid out in rows," that drawings accompanied the objects, or that the objects each rested on a piece of canvas. Two responses suggested environmental concern: "Pollution by man," said one, and, "I see twenty-five unrecyclable mufflers which really bothers me."

What do you think, see, or feel as you look at these objects on the floor? This question was intended to develop the direction indicated in item one. To give students the experience of viewing an art display elsewhere than on a wall or pedestal was also an objective embraced by this question. Perhaps the notion or experience of having such objects underfoot accounted for the several responses which expressed some degree of anger: "My mind has to think in terms of ecology and I feel upset and have a feeling of anger." "Bork! They are ugly! They look like army ants ready for attack!"

The theme of militance in the display, characterized by the comment immediately above, was assumed to relate to the kind, number and arrangement of the mufflers. The following response attacked the question more massively:

I don't think there's anything 'beautiful' about it. I'm amazed at the variety of shapes and colors. The only thing that makes this part of the display appealing is the amount of objects and their layout (and their mere existence in this place is a very welcome addition and change). It feels noisy!

The notice here and elsewhere of the issues of scale, exten-

sion, pattern, shape, color, and space would seem to support the idea of the aesthetic-educational potential of such a project. One respondent offered the suggestion that the muffler display "would be better if they were not in rows."

What do you think, see, feel, as you look at the drawings of these objects around the exhibit? As indicated above, the question was designed to give students maximum latitude in responding. However, as on the sheet for immediate responses, the range of comments was not great, with most of them making a more or less complimentary remark and moving on. Most often the drawings were seen as "nice," apart from the "ugliness" of the mufflers: "The shapes and colors are nice, but the actual objects...." "I think they are very good drawings of the very ugly junk." Three of the comments indicated appreciation of the drawings and mufflers together: "The drawings seem to bring out the rustiness of the objects." "Old mufflers have a fair chance of becoming art forms."

The drawings make me like the objects; if a piece of junk can have someone create an interesting picture, I'll accept it. I can enjoy looking at the drawings for a long time.

One student commented that he did not see why the drawings were necessary for the exhibit, implying (perhaps wisely) that the mufflers were enough by themselves.

What kind of person might construct this kind of exhibit with the objects and drawings that you see here? Right students answered that they saw an art or ecological interest, or both, as a basis for the presentation. The question re-

presents an attempt to lay a foundation for dialogue on the subject of art-awareness beyond classroom activities of painting, drawing, weaving, ceramics, etc. Students did make comments and ask questions about the display until the termination of school for summer vacation.

Have you seen these kinds of objects anywhere else?

Where? Often? "Junk yards, car shops, streets, under cars. Not often." Four people said they had never seen an abandoned muffler before. One expressed surprise that all of the mufflers could have been found on Portland-area streets. The question was intended to bring the objects closer to the experience of the students, and, again hopefully, to help sensitize them to anomalies in their environment. It would be hard to imagine most of the people who experienced the display not more readily than before noticing automobile junk left in the streets.

If you were asked to do something (anything) with the objects of this display, or similar objects, where would you go to find them, and what kinds of things might you do with them? Most of the people were stopped by this question as might have been expected since their experience with such materials was quite limited. Several answered easily that they might collect things from a junkyard and make sculpture or "modern art." One student who tried hard said, "Well, if you wanted to make some bizarre sculpture, weld them together and send it gift-wrapped to Georgia Pacific to add to their collection."

To conclude this survey of student reactions here is a brief essay one student wrote in response to the six items:

I see a bunch of junk on the floor but it looks better on the floor than on the street. All of these came off of the cars that drive our streets and highways. I think the people could of took these to the dump or just put them in the garbage can instead of the streets. All I see on the wall is a bunch of drawings of broken down old mufflers and they are bad drawings of them anyway. I feel they should put a deposit on old mufflers so people don't just throw them away. I think the person is concerned about the city we live in but is also concerned with old mufflers. Yes I have seen these objects on the streets and on the back roads and quite often. I would probably go on all the back roads and collect them and once I got them I might recylce them (sic).

CHAPTER III

CONCLUSION

Student response to the presentation suggests that this approach has great potential in a number of areas. In giving students a chance to express themselves about the work of the teacher-artist an open climate was fostered. Students readily received and sought information. Through confrontation with the display, they gained fresh ideas about the subject matter of art. A natural embellishment to a project of this type, and one which would lend interdisciplinary force to it, would be to have students log their findings, collectings, problems, or whatever, when doing their own projects. (See Appendix A.) The dialogue that ensued as a result of this self-exposure on the teacher's part was rich in opportunities for the development and practice of critical thinking.

Teachers who are willing and able to approach students in this manner from time to time will be giving students an experience usually reserved for programs where an artist-in-residence is present. The frequent use of artists-in-residence in schools, emphasizing the artist as a model for art education, is a recognized technique for enriching the experience of art students.³ It seems reasonable that where the

³Art Education: Senior High School, Written by a Task Force of Specialists in Senior High School Art Education. Chairman: Angela G. Paterakis (Washington D.C., 1972), p. 19.

artist-teacher can periodically perform the service himself he should do so. Archibald MacLeish's comment about poets will do as well for artists:

Every poet learns, I suppose, what Virginia Woolf had learned by her middle thirties, that the creativity of others will release his own, if they are the right 'others' and if he himself is right to receive them at the moment when he comes to them.⁴

The artist-teacher who has a relatively intimate knowledge of his students has an excellent chance for being the "right other" through the judicious display of his creative output. That students will respond positively to such an approach has been suggested by the present study.

While the project centered upon sensory awareness, visual expansion, a significant amount of factual information was exchanged, from discovering the nature of mufflers to learning that art does not have to deal with the sweet and the beautiful. Readiness to build upon these information opportunities could add depth to a similar project.

Possibilities for dialogue with students, based on the display, appear to be manifold. Such an event becomes a long-range point of identification for students. Teachers in the Quincy School reported that questions and discussion of the muffler display were continuous. It seems reasonable to assume that students could be similarly involved in any creative project stemming from an artist-teacher's contemplation of life.

⁴MacLeish, Archibald, Art Education and the Creative Process, Published for the Committee on Art Education by the Museum of Modern Art (New York, 1953), p. 5.

During the course of the display, students readily asked questions about its creation and possible meaning. The disposition to attempt reasoned judgments about their experience of the project hinted at the promise of this approach as a way of involving students in critical thought about aesthetic experience. An ideal outcome of this project would have the student growing ever more skillful and independent in the making of aesthetic judgments and finding a need to surround himself with sources of aesthetic experience. Ultimately this attitude would express itself as concern for aesthetic values in the community. A few students in the responding group seem to be near this point already. Many more could be brought to the beginning of such awareness through experiences which call upon more of the total person--from teacher as well as student.

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APPENDIX A

MUFFLER LOG

Number 1, May 13, 1972

The defective muffler from my own 1963 Rambler started it. The mechanic warned me in oblique but no uncertain terms of the hazards of driving to Los Angeles with a muffler in such condition. Doubtful at first, I later noticed that some areas in the muffler had the consistency of oatmeal.

Number 2, Sept. 3, 1972

This one was found on the side of St. Helens Road near the city limits sign at 8:00 a.m. I soon discovered that on any day I could drive randomly for two hours or so and find at least three or four abandoned mufflers. Early morning is best for collecting. As I pulled up to retrieve Number Two, a big long-eared sand-colored dog came loping up, barking, to let me know that I was invading his territory. He kept a fair distance, but I felt better once I got the muffler in my hands.

Number 3, Sept. 3, 1972

Coming in the First Avenue cutoff to Corbett Street, I found the first of three mufflers that were located near this spot.

Number 4, Sept. 3, 1972

Four was found lying in back of a house at Southwest Curry and Water Streets.

Number 5, Oct. 14, 1972

This one was sprawled across the parking strip on Southwest First and draped into the gutter. The young man at the house said that his brother had abandoned it there and that it was free for the taking, though he couldn't imagine....

Number 6, Oct. 14, 1972

At 6:30 a.m., Number Six was picked up on Southeast Eighty-Second Avenue.

Number 7, Oct. 14, 1972

Roadside debris on Northeast Columbia Boulevard yielded Number Seven.

Number 8, Oct. 14, 1972

Not long after the previous one, I found this muffler in the middle of North Columbia Boulevard. A flock of starlings rose in a cloud from a roadside field as I picked up Number Eight.

Numbers 9 and 10, Oct. 14, 1972

Coming off St. Helens Road, I found these two abandoned in the weeds beside the Montgomery Ward employees parking lot. In a little over two hours this morning I found six mufflers. It began to seem akin to fishing.

Number 11, Oct. 21, 1972

This one had been abandoned on the Washington side of the Columbia River just west of Stevenson.

Number 12, Nov. 30, 1972

Twelve was perched on the curb of an underpass exiting the west end of the Ross Island Bridge. Dangerous retrieval.

Number 13, Dec. 2, 1972

Thirteen was picked up on Barbur Boulevard on my return from a visit to Fred Meyer's.

Number 14, Dec. 19, 1972

As I returned home from work, I discovered this muffler on I-5 near the Weidler Street exit.

Number 15, Dec. 22, 1972

Fifteen was lying in the gutter on Northeast Fifteenth near Killingsworth Street. People are starting to tell me about mufflers they have passed lying in the streets.

Number 16, Dec. 26, 1972

This one lay near the Barbur Boulevard exit to Front Avenue. On another occasion, a big one got away at this spot because the traffic was too fierce for stopping.

Number 17, Feb. 17, 1973

After watching it for four days on my way to work, I was able to retrieve Seventeen early on this Saturday morning at the entrance to SON. I had misgivings. A person had been killed there (changing a tire or some such thing) only recently.

Number 18, Feb. 17, 1973

I was back on Southeast Eighty-Second again.

Number 19, Feb. 17, 1973

Near the same spot as Number Twelve. I had earlier considered patrolling the same area each time I went out on a search.

Number 20, March 3, 1973

On the way to a friend's house for breakfast, we found Number Twenty on Barbur Boulevard just north of Tigard.

Number 21, March 13, 1973

Twenty-one was lying along I-5 south of the Alberta Street entrance as I came from work.

Number 22, March 24, 1973

This rusty specimen was peeping up from the side of the Columbia River Highway near Hood River.

Number 23, March 27, 1973

Barbur Boulevard again, just south of Lair Hill Park and practically on my doorstep, was where I found this muffler. I had been wondering when I would find one this close to home.

Number 24, April 18, 1973

This was found on the Bertha Beaverton Highway while traveling out to the Xerox headquarters for Business-Education Day.

Number 25, April 29, 1973

Twenty-five was found on Highway 80N on the way to work, just short of the Thirty-third Avenue exit. It was a little bit exciting with all the morning rush-hour traffic zooming by.

APPENDIX B

DRAWINGS AND PRINTS BY HAROLD JOHNSON

Number 2, Watercolor. 16" by 18"

20 & 21, Conte Crayon. 19" by 24"

Number 1, Watercolor. 19" by 27½"

Number 7, Oil on Paper. 19" by 24"

Figure Study, Oil on Paper. 19" by 24"

Hand Study, Ink. $10\frac{1}{2}$ " by $13\frac{3}{4}$ "

Figure, Oil on Paper. 19" by 24"

Horse Harnesses, Pencil. 20" by 28"

Mortar and Pestle, Etching. 5 7/8" by 5 3/4"

Crux, Etching. 13 3/4" by 17"