

Living Art

by

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Dedicated to the Memory of my Parents Isaac and Sofia Soyer

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I. An Invitation

1. Opening

1.1

Writing is surprisingly different from face-to-face art teaching: no colors, gestures or voices. One must “spell it out”.

I write because I love art and because I noticed I am old.

1.2

I teach at The New School and The Educational Alliance. I also teach recovering drug addicts and people who have been diagnosed mentally ill (i.e., “the officially sad”). Most of the officially sad I teach are homeless.

Over the years my students and I created rooms devoted to art in the heart of practical existence. I want to help such rooms exist wherever they are desired.

1.3

This is a practical essay on art and art teaching.

As art is not a craft, a book on art teaching cannot be a “how to” compendium of rules. - It is necessary to wonder, “What is art?” and “What is the path to reach it?” It is necessary to locate obstacles and suggest a passage through them.

There is something else.... Some say, “Art is dying from natural causes.” They are wrong. Art is ill from loneliness. - Those who would approach are given faulty maps.

1.4

I want every student to create a work of art.

There is a prejudice that there is no middle ground in art, either a work of genius or nothing. In carpentry class one does carpentry. No one says that only grandmasters play chess and only major leaguers play baseball.

In art class students should create art.

1.5

1.51

Once one attempts to actually teach art the following prejudices shadow and threaten every step.

- a. Art as an autonomous creative project has no inherent standards of excellence. It is “all a matter of taste.” There is no arguing with taste.
- b. Art is entirely about feelings, and feelings are entirely thoughtless. Intellectually art is derivative or empty,

- c. Because there are no authentic standards, quality depends on social recognition. If you “make a living” from art you are an artist. If you are represented by “a major art gallery,” you are a good artist.
- d. Art, entirely a matter of taste and intellectually limited, cannot be differentiated from fashion or entertainment.
- e. Art is not necessary to human existence. It is a luxury.

The crucial prejudice is denial of “relevant standards”. Without relevant standards one cannot dependably distinguish better from worse... The infinite aesthetic distance, and the innumerable achievable gradations, between Rembrandt and a talented beginner collapse... There is nothing to strive towards or hope for. One cannot distinguish progress from regression.

1.52

To find a path past this danger we must examine it.

The term “standards” can summon further prejudices. Art standards are rarely explicit rules with routine applications. They are normally communicable disciplined sensitivities and orientations that enable one to distinguish art from nonart and, within art, to discern excellence. The order of art is “a logic of freedom”.

2. Traps and Misdirections

2.1

Many who are drawn to art accept these prejudices yet find an activity without standards, and thus without the possibility of improvement, empty. Many try to escape this tension by substituting routine technique or undisciplined emotional outburst for art. The results are banal and artistically irrelevant.

Within these prejudices art as an autonomous creative soulful project has no inherent standards. Yet there appear to be relevant craft tasks. Crafts have standards. They can be learned.

This is often expressed in terms of drawing (e.g., “At least Picasso could draw.” “I won’t try to express myself until I can draw.”). In this context good drawing has nothing to do with expression, vitality and grace. To draw well is to efficiently and dependably “get” an accurate likeness

Accurate likeness is a feat of hand eye coordination. The quicker and more facile the better (as in juggling). There are, as yet, no official “speed art competitions.” Yet such comparisons are central to the identities and mutual “pecking order” of many of veteran “art students” (It’s all they have to hang on to).

Some argue that because art is emotional and emotions are thoughtless the more “raw” emotion the better, as though only screaming is fine singing.

Some students accept these prejudices yet know art intuitively. They see correctly but imagine they are dreaming. Their understanding is beyond their language and thus silent. Within this silence the ability to create appears as an unalterable dispensation (a gift from God and/or one’s genes). They are locked away from the natural development of their gift through education.

Within these prejudices all paths misdirect.

2.2

We need an image of the trap that I've described.

A locked door? There are more alternatives than in or out.

The search for a way out suggests "a labyrinth." A labyrinth can be solved "in its own terms." Here every turn is a dead end.

Wittgenstein refers to a fly bottle. A fly bottle is not closed and yet the fly is trapped. The way out is obvious to us but beyond the understanding of the fly.... If there is the human equivalent of a fly bottle no human could discern it.

The obstacle between art and ourselves is a locked labyrinth that supports and is supported by our culture. It cannot be resolved in its own terms. It is a trap that we can recognize and move beyond.

2.3

"The culture wars" strengthen antiart prejudices.

Some who assert standards misuse the achievements of "western old masters" to discourage the aspirations of people whose ancestors were not European and of all women to creative excellence. – This is a pathology of commentary projected onto art. Creativity resists infection.

Many of the greatest western modern artists were pioneers of "multi-culturalism". Manet, Lautrec, Gauguin and Van Gogh were inspired by the elegance of Japanese woodcuts. Through Gauguin_ even more in his pottery and sculpture than his paintings _ European myths and figurative traditions entered dialogue with tribal patterns. African sculpture helped Picasso move decisively outside Greek derived idealizations...If North America is within "the west" so is the profound Mexican dialogue between European and Native American "visions".

Others claim that all attempts to distinguish between art and nonart are necessarily sexist and racist (visions of white male vampiric ghosts).

If all it takes to be an artist is self and/or group assertion then the distinction between artist and nonartist is mere vanity. Such "assistance" is insulting. No group needs it

Art standards should be open to personal uniqueness and cultural diversity. Art judgment should be fair, passionate and empathetic.

2.4

We need not formally refute prejudices to move beyond them. Yet it is helpful to note that two assumptions, "quality depends on social recognition" and "art is...not necessary to human existence" are obviously flawed.

If social recognition distinguishes among painters between artist and non-artist then Van Gogh (who sold almost nothing in his life) was not an artist while alive but only after death. The posthumous honors accorded to Cézanne and Van Gogh are literally recognitions (they state that which, noticed or not, exists).

It is shameful for an artist to rely on labels to include or exclude. The test is one's own disciplined judgment. For example, I recognize as an artist that a resident in a substance abuse program who never went to college or sold a painting is a colleague. (Connoisseurs don't need labels to know what wine they're drinking.)

It is through art that an individual or group can survive in historical memory as a soulful presence.

The artist bears witness. People faced death to sketch and write the truth of their existence in the concentration camps. It is in part through the Mandelstams, Akhmatova and other artists (mostly literary) that the complex historical dialogue of Russian existence was not entirely broken to fit the brutal simplifications of communism.

Art is open to the whole person: feelings, moods, intuitions... parts of us there are no names for.

3. Taking it to the Room

To live the soulful life of art contradicts prejudices that would make that life impossible.

For a long time I saw movement beyond the trap of common prejudices as a mere prologue to exercises that develop the basic sensitivities of visual art.

Yet over the last seven years I've taught where many of these exercises are impractical. Student work is wonderful. I recognized that to move beyond received prejudices and enter dialogue with art is the crucial passage.

Initial rejection is normal.... A student at the women's shelter, publicly criticized me for not teaching and added, "Why don't you give demonstrations like the craft teacher?" I answered, "Art is not an external task. It is about you. I can't tell you who you are, what you see and what you want to say in paint."

A few weeks later she was different. Her work is unique, beautiful and extremely complex. There is a tiny angel hummingbird playing a harp on the high branch of a tree. There is a tree that turns and twists in and through itself in Celtic complexity.... At a class show several months later she said, "I never imagined this was in me. I never knew that this existed and that I could do it".... Working on a painting she said, "It is passing through a tunnel all fragmented and lost." I wasn't sure if she was speaking of the shapes in the painting or her experience of painting it...or her life.

Class critiques can help. I say, "Please choose a painting by another student that attracts you. Let yourself feel something. Share with us how what you are seeing opens this feeling".

Students are surprised how much agreement there is about what paintings are "alive" and therefore art, and about the meaning of this art.

Initial rejection may persist. Once an entire New School class "voted with their feet" and left.

The normal outcome is mutual appreciation. We share the pleasure of creation

For most students acceptance that art has relevant standards is a temporary suspension of disbelief... It holds in class then dissipates.

Many ex students are vulnerable to misdirection. Some regress.

Perhaps we can get further than that here.

II. Teaching Pattern

Reconstructing the Human Figure as a Unity, and Sensitivity to Implicit Movement

1. Opening

Most of these exercises apply to both painting and drawing. I usually begin with drawing because one can't learn everything at once. Yet I found that if one waits more than three classes to introduce painting some students implicitly identify the practice of visual art with drawing. They resist color.

The first step towards art is to move from fragmented details to the interplay of patterns.

2. The Single Figure

We begin with one model.

We move quickly from recognition of organic harmony (each imbalance initiating a new balanced position) to awareness of the visual figure as a constellation of forces.

The drawn or painted image is necessarily static. Yet it is a stasis of implicit motion.

Motion in one direction, however powerful, is always compositionally banal: a person standing on tip toe body vertical and stretching upward, a voice rising higher and higher, a plot in which a protagonist moves unchallenged from victory to victory. Tension is required.

The interplay of tension and resolution was beautifully resolved in the basic standing male figure of Egyptian sculpture.

The triangle of the legs visually communicates horizontal motion. It also suggests a first step, the most powerful image-symbol of forward motion.

"The first step" is countered by the powerful vertical of stiff tapering torso and down thrusting arms, as though a nail was hammered down into the earth through rock.

We always begin with this pose. Thus from the beginning we are in dialogue with the history of art.... Later the body swivels at the waist, turns and moves freely (as in Greece): we seek implicit movement, lost and regained balance, tension and resolution, in complex poses.

3. The Face

The face is extremely difficult to draw or paint as a unity. It resists connection to the body. It tends to fragment into its features.

One problem is language. Face language is extremely analytic. It separates.

It doesn't seem as strange to say, "First I painted his face and then his body" as to say, "First I painted his arm and then his body."

If one asks, "What comprises a face?" the answer is almost always "eyes, nose and mouth."

The face is structured through its planes... A crucial pattern, with personal and archetypical resonance, is temples, cheekbones, setting of the eyes, hollow beneath lips and shape of chin. One develops each feature through the pattern of "the whole."

Blood and neural impulses flow, as water through a river, through the neck. The body including the face should be painted as it exists, in dynamic organic interconnection.

4. The Figure in its Setting

I began art teaching by substituting in a class where many students felt that they succeeded once they "did the figure." They didn't care where they put it. - I would say, "What about the rest of the canvas?" Several answered, "That's O.K. I'll put in curtains." Next to a carefully worked through figure appeared rudimentary sub-cartoon muddy colored "curtains."

I promised myself that my students would learn to place the figure where it expressively organizes the space it inhabits.

The project is to make a painting not to "reproduce a figure."

Many students go through a period in which figures are well placed but dynamically relevant parts of the setting are excluded. For example, they would paint a seated figure and omit the chair. Figures float in air.

If I comment they usually try to slip a chair underneath. Yet once something is left out it is extremely difficult to add it later... Some decide it would be easier to seat the figure on a rock. (The rocks come from the same prop room as the curtains.)

Everything, not only the figure, should be developed together in an expressive coherent composition.

5. Multiple Figures

It is natural, for beginners almost unavoidable, to believe that drawing many figures is qualitatively more difficult than drawing one figure; complications are multiplied: not ten hands and ten fingers, which is difficult enough, but multiples of ten.

You, on the other hand, are no longer outsiders. Thus, with at most a brief reminder, you know that this apparent qualitative leap in difficulty is illusory. In art details are not engaged one by one. They are included in patterns. Composition emerges as an interplay of patterns.

In the beginning models are encouraged to pose close together in flowing mutually unifying lines of implicit movement. Then we develop poses focused on unity in difference.

Awareness of two or more figures as a unity should recognize the uniqueness of each figure. One-sided subordination of part to whole is banal.... The unity of multifigural compositions is "dialogical": it accepts and works through interplay of differences.

Two Figurative Approaches

1. Opening

I am uneasy about sharing some highly specific and detailed techniques. They can be very helpful in seeing and sensitively articulating patterns. Yet unlike most suggestions in this essay (e.g., drawing the figure as a unity, sensitivity to warm and cool colors, openness to archetypal themes) they are not relevant to every painter.... Here are a few examples.

2. Building a Painting from a Light Sketch

Begin by making a light sketch of the whole in paint. Do it as well as you can: alert, open, “in the moment”. Then step back. Move your eyes and mind back and forth from picture to model to picture (again and again). Then correct your work while adding middle and dark tones to mold form and for emphasis.

The “logic” here is simple and, as far as it goes, correct. A light line is easier than a dark line to change.

Let us specify a twenty-minute pose. Almost every student who has passed the point of laboriously copying a figure piece by piece will, at least once, make a harsh black contour line in five minutes and spend fifteen minutes trying to escape. Working from a light sketch preserves sensitive response. It enables cumulative development through the entire pose.

This is not for everyone. As a teenager I required sharp dark/light contrasts. Beginning with a light sketch did not speak to my imagination. It would have hurt me.

3. Working with Local Color

3.1. Section Opening

In traditional “figuration” each area has a basic color, the conventional designation is “local color.” Yet local color is not impervious to influence. Light and shadow touch it. Each color is modified by those surrounding it (as though in an ecology).

3.2. Skin Color

“Skin color” is the most important instance of local color.

The basic formula for Caucasian skin tone is white, yellow ochre and a touch of red. (This is more accurate and more “alive” than the pinks or dead earth tones students often grab.)

Brown is the basic Afro- American skin tone. Brown is constructed from red and green. Brown is darkened almost to the point of black by blue. Brown is exceptional in that it mixes well with black.

Looking carefully, sensitively, at the model, mix a basic skin color. Divide it on your palate into three piles. - The unmodified color stands as middle tone. - Add more white and a touch of yellow to the second glob [The yellow is to avoid chalkiness and enhance liveliness (i.e., brilliance)]. If skin is brown

then yellow ochre can add light. - To the third pile add the shadow color (usually blue, green, brown or purple). That will be your dark...In very dark shadow a touch of pure color may increase vitality and beauty.

3.3. The General Case

As with skin, so with all “representational areas” (shirt, pants - tree, sky, grass). There is a basic local color and its value (i.e., light and shadow) variations.

Each color is modified by its color field ecology.

I suggest that you put each value (i.e., dark, middle and light) through all relevant points at once to develop patterns that move through all local colors.

3.4. Section Conclusion

Here again “the logic” is simple, and as far as it goes correct. These techniques respect both the autonomy and the ecological relationships of local color. Clear accurate flesh tones increase vitality and precision. Applying each value at once contributes to the integration of the whole.

Here, again, there are limitations. - Impressionism, with its movement towards a pure visual phenomenology free of all presuppositions, breaks traditional boundaries between local color and the total perceptual field: patterns of relatively pure color flow between areas. - Van Gogh, Gauguin, Soutine, fauvism and expressionism (e.g., Ludwig Kirchner) divorced color from area-by-area conformity of painted to perceived object.

III. Art Words

Opening

In class, with its speech, gestures, charcoal, oil paint, oil pastel, flowers, naked bodies and paintings, one can leave implicit much that in writing should be “spelled out.”

Some of the concepts and terms here have long complex interdisciplinary histories. Yet our only concern is to clarify art teaching. If we hold fast to this line of relevance we can be clear, brief and “to the point.”

Art, Inwardness

1

When I was young, some envisioned visual art as competently accurate figuration. Others found all figurative work repetitive and banal

The vitality, richness and intensity of Ensor, Munch, Orozco, Picasso, Soutine - so many great figurative artists - challenge “representational” accuracy.

There is wonderful personally expressive archetypically resonant nonfigurative work (e.g. Baziotes, Kandinsky, Styll).

Art cannot be identified with any particular style.

2

What is art?

Is there a fundamental necessary human project that is neutral between styles and able to support the project of art? There is.

Art rests on and is supported by the fundamental necessary human project of intimate communication.

Art is the embodiment of “inwardness” in interpersonal media.

3

Inwardness is the world as it is experienced. My inwardness is the world as it appears to me.

We are barely similar enough to dependably coordinate for practical purposes in routine situations. (If you’ve ever worked in an office you know that even the most standardized connections are fragile and complex.)

Many years ago there was a model whom most students and I found very beautiful. We were doing archetypical exercises. She posed, by popular demand, as spring and joy and Aphrodite.

There was a very talented middle-aged woman in the class. She said (out of the model’s hearing), “You are all always saying how lovely and graceful she is. I’m a mother. I find her frail, undernourished. I worry about her.”

There is a story my father told me. His sister’s fiancé arrived in America. She asked my father to meet him at the boat. He said, “What does he look like?” She said “Apollo”. My father waited until everyone had gone except a tall thin man, handsome...but not, to his mind, Apollo.

The transforming glance of love is proverbial. Everyone else sees a gawky adolescent. The lover is entranced by a beautiful creature. Or every surface glance is enchanted by the polished mask while the lover is open to complexities and secrets that artifice conceals.

I returned fascinated again and again to a Japanese ink brush painting of a tiny female figure in a garden.... Sudden awareness, the woman is also garden and the garden also woman.

4

Inwardness is not limited to the individual. One might also speak of the inwardness of a group, a discipline... an order of life. We exist in history.

I know only fragments of the world in which my parents lived....I know, for example, that when my mother as a little child was ill her beloved grandfather took her to a folk healer who broke an egg and rubbed the yolk on her face. I see her telling me the story, the frightened expression of a little child revisiting her face that was transformed by age, and is now bone. I know that her grandfather was a Hassid and danced and sang his love for God.

Now only fragments remain.... "So much is lost despite love."

5

Almost all intimate communication is "one-on-one," normally between people who are chosen (e.g., "blood relatives"), or have chosen each other to love. Yet lovers are mutually vulnerable. Thus the love that opens also limits communication.

Art, uniquely, is direct intimate communication between self and species.

5

The artist feels and thinks directly in intimate dialogue with visual meaning: composition, line, shape, color and texture.

Before you begin, or basically transform, a painting, give yourself time to experience "your model" [i.e., to see "the figure" (e.g., person, tree, flower) to hear the music, to recall an experienced scene (from waking life or dream), to contemplate a theme etc.]. Then ask yourself:

- a. What is my experience in the presence of the model? (i.e. What is your "take" on the model? How does the model "register" in your inwardness?)
- b. What do I see that evokes this experience?

Do not paint anonymously.... Medium and image should be saturated with yourself. They should be drenched in inwardness...Become yourself in paint, inhabit paint.

Processes and Procedures

1. Awareness in the Act

The artist dances with the act of painting, the emerging image and the world.... One is aware of the directionality of every stroke. One is open to each touch of charcoal or brush and every compositional inter-play of color and shape. There is an expansion of consciousness that can inspire sensitivities beyond the act of painting.

Beginning a painting, one seeks the first moment of dawning individuality. Once the painting is alive it tells the artist what it needs. Only that which contributes to its emerging personality should be accepted in the work.

Each creative moment is open to the world. One paints in moment-by-moment dialogue as in intimate conversation.

In the strange and wonderful realm of art, the intellect is not a detached “calculating machine” ... Thought is passionate. Emotion is thought saturated... The universal is transformed in personal voice as Monet’s cathedrals melt in light.

2. Being There

My basic unit with beginners is the twenty-minute pose.... I began teaching by substituting in a class where students had three weeks to make one painting of a single figure. I remember telling a student, “These flesh tones are not precise. They ‘represent’ someone’s skin but not this model’s at this moment in this light.” He answered, “That’s O.K. I have two weeks left to finish.” Many students worked as though house painting.

Be present in the act of painting. Never work mechanically. Routine is the enemy of art.

3. Action and Critique

3.1

On stepping into an art class and without looking at the students work one can usually tell if it is a beginning or an advanced class. Beginners remain right up against their easels in constant activity. Advanced students (if well trained) move towards and away from the painting. [I am giving away a professional secret of art teachers It is much easier to judge the integration of parts within a visual unity (e.g., composition, proportion, color harmony) from a distance than close up. The teacher when commenting on your work stands behind you.]

The physical alternation of closeness and distance is interplay of engagement and critique. ...Both are passionate and thoughtful.

3.2

As a teenager I briefly studied with Harry Sternberg at The Art Students League. He stopped by my easel and asked what I thought of my painting. I said, “The hand is wrong.” (I wanted to demonstrate seriousness and identified seriousness with “being tough on myself.”). Sternberg answered, “It is as though I introduced you to my wife and asked, ‘What do you think of her?’ and you answered, ‘Her hand is wrong.’”

Critique engages the work as a unity. Proportion, in every sense, is crucial. Criticism is normally identified with finding something wrong. In art, appreciation is the heart and foundation of critique.

Visual Meaning and Prisms of Language

1.

Painting directly explores visual meaning.

We live directly in our senses. Yet we do not exist in isolation, cut off, in a vacuum. No one creates the world anew out of nothing. All personal experience is a variation on human universal themes.

Each person's experienced world is inexhaustible. - Nuances of light and shadow are infinite, and are along one of infinitely many lines of variation.... Images stand out sharply or merge into their backgrounds.... Love and anxiety mute or sharpen colors. - Inwardness is haunted.

The brain but not the mind is locked within the skull.

2.

The inwardness of animals is nonlinguistic. In human inwardness linguistic and prelinguistic awareness interpenetrate. ... Human sight, touch and sound is each an interplay of meanings with an infinite potentiality for communication. We call such constellations "sensory languages" and languages composed of conventional symbols (e.g., English, Russian and French) "pure languages."

Our senses are drawn to the abstractions of pure language (e.g., "good," "wisdom," "beautiful") as the ocean to the moon. Pure language is wounded when deprived of sensory richness (abandoned by the ocean and the moon).

3.

Gesture is crucial to visual meaning, thus to painting and acting.

One is not necessarily limited to one's native "language of gesture" My Russian Jewish background encourages direct expression. My wife was born at an intersection of traditions emphasizing reserve, self-containment, and silence: part Native American (on her father's side), part northern Europe protestant. - At first I experienced her stillness as a wall. Now I am tuned to its variations. I hear it as passionate and articulate, "a speaking silence."

Gesture is rooted in yet transcends the interpersonal: wind blown trees "dance".... waves advance on and embrace the shore.

4.

"Style" is a meaningful way of experiencing and creating in and through one or more pure and/or sensory "languages".

Because I don't understand French, Rimbaud in the original is almost silent. Yet my experience of Ingres, Delacroix, Monet and Van Gogh is undiminished.

Figurative, Nonfigurative

1

In art, unlike psychology, “figure” is a *not* a name for “that which can be perceptually distinguished against a “ground”. We designate that category “shape”.

“Figure” is *not* a term for everything external that guides us when we paint. We designate that category “model” ...It is crucial to recognize “nonfigurative” models.

In art, unlike everyday speech, “figure” is *not* limited to “people”. Everything perceptually given that we can together dependably recognize and name (a rose, a cypress tree, the Brooklyn Bridge, a naked body) is a figure.

“Figuration” is a stylistic art language. Figurative artists include “and take responsibility for” figures in their work.

2

2.1

The three main species of figuration are “idealizing,” “particularistic” and “expressionist.”

In “idealizing figuration” figures and their relationships are modified by ideal forms. Idealizing “western” art is normally “modeled” on the Greek (i.e., it is “neoclassical”). There are other formal conventions (e.g., the severe hierarchical frontal orders of Egypt, the rhythmic interflow of India).

Particularistic figures are “for their own sake.” A woman poses. If there are stretch marks on her body, if she is pale and tired this is all included.

The poor, rejected and oppressed are accepted subjects.

In expressionism the figure is modified (a.k.a., “distorted”) in the grip of powerful moods and passions.

There are exalted joyous passions. Yet anxiety, tension and pain dominate expressionism.

2.2

Nonfigurative art begins when all obligation to recognizable figures is abandoned...They may be suggested, yet the artist is not responsible for following up resemblances: there need not be identifiable human arms or legs, or flowers.

Nonfigurative art is usually designated “abstract” and “nonobjective.”

All art abstracts.... Figuration includes extreme abstraction (e.g., the last landscapes of Cézanne and the work of Georgia O Keefe).

All art is in dialogue with the world and thus “objective.”

“Nonfigurative art” free of all representational responsibility, throws itself on the mercy and potentialities of line, color, texture and form. We will designate nonfigurative art “directly medial”. There have been fine directly medial artists (e.g., Poussedart, Stamos).

.3

Actual art styles are rarely pure. All art is expressive and medial. All visual art suggests figures.... Every shape is resonant of and haunted by the world.

Idealization risks “anemia”. Yet often, as in classical Greece and the Renaissance (e.g., Michelangelo), ideal work is profoundly expressive and shows unsurpassed understanding of particulars. - Modern “Western” directly medial art developed from the innovative figuration of Cézanne, Gauguin and Van Gogh.

4

In the second half of the twentieth century painting split into mutually exclusive figurative and nonfigurative camps.

I was brought up on one side. My father Isaac and uncles Moses and Raphael were figurative painters.... Moses and Raphael did not recognize the possibility of nonfigurative art. (They found the juxtaposition of these words a contradiction.)

I remember the first time I made a directly medial painting. My father was napping in the bedroom. I felt like an orthodox Jew eating ham while his devout father slept.

The patriarch awoke, walked silently on slippered feet. He stood behind me unnoticed as I worked. Suddenly aware of him I turned. Fear and shame were on my face. He said, “It’s alright. Don’t be upset. Don’t worry...It’s interesting. I wouldn’t paint this way, but it might be right for you...Each artist must find his own way.”

Renewed dialogue between figurative and directly medial traditions is a crucial project now.

Structural Distinctions

1. Drawing and Painting

1.1. Opening

The usual distinction between painting and drawing is presence or absence of color. I accept this as a minimal distinction. Yet the artist needs more.

Drawing and painting both create shapes. - Pure drawing outlines. It translates the idea of boundary into black line. - Painting works from inside. It fills in.

In so far as a black and white work is textured and its areas are internally elaborated it is “painterly.” Painterly drawing explores shades of gray.... Rembrandt’s drawings are as atmospheric as Chinese landscapes.

In so far as a painting subordinates texture, color and “the material substance of paint” to linear design it approaches the condition of drawing. Botticelli’s wonderful paintings are colored drawings.

1.2. Line

Line can be dark or light, continuous or discontinuous.

In drawing, as in piano and violin, there is the mystery of “touch”. A decisive sudden slash expresses differently than a line of the same length width and darkness drawn cautiously.

The sensual calm of curved lines borrows easy flow from waves and swell of orange and hip and breast.

Line expresses through the shapes it traces and recalls, and through the stored energy of creative touch.

1.3. Color Notes

The primary colors are blue, yellow and red. In principle all other colors can be mixed through them. Yet some colors (e.g., yellow ochre and alizarin crimson) are autonomous “visual idioms.”

Primary colors are intense (Usually the more mixture the more subdued). - Primary colors are harmonious together.

Green and red are “dissonant” together (a visual equivalent to a lemon’s sharp sour taste).

The gray that is composed of black and white is neutral. It can separate areas of color. It does not mix well.

There is a gray born of blue and orange. It dilutes color cleanly (e.g., “grayed” green and red remain dissonant yet their conflict is muted).

The distinction between warm and cool is crucial. Blue is purely cool. Yellow and red are warm. Green is classified cool yet yellow enters it. Brown is counted as warm yet green is an ancestor.

Spatially, warm comes forward, cool goes back.

Emotionally the distinction between warm and cool parallels music's major and minor key. - Warm is sunlit. There is a resonance of earth, fire and blood. - Cool is moon lit, sad and tender sky.

1.4. Black and White Among the Colors

Black and white have their own world of drawing. They enter the realm of color from outside.

White mixes with all colors. - Black is aloof, yet harmonious with brown and intimate with blue.

In Mardsen Hartley's wonderful memorial celebrations of his dead Prussian officer lover, brilliant intense colors glow against pure black. Here black is a death that does not swallow or diminish life. White plays cold death in the sharp light of Charles Birchfield's icy winter scenes.

Both black and white are purity and rest.

Black's "home" is night. There is a resonance of moon and stars. -White's "home" is snow and ice. There is a resonance of lilies and of clouds.

Colors are jewel like in a field of white. Colors glow as torches in a field of black. Black and white transcend.

2. Focal Image and Background/World

2.1

A "background" is an area against which focal images appear.

Often students sensitively paint a figure then throw in an arbitrary color as background. Yet a background often occupies more than half the space.

Every area in a painting is important.

2.2

If you construct your focal image against one background you should if at all possible complete with that background...If you change all colors must be readjusted.

Background and focal colors should develop together

2.3

What is perceptually a background is existentially "the environment" and "world" in which the focal image "lives."

A world limits that which can intelligibly appear within it. If the world is two-dimensional then a three-dimensional image cannot coherently appear. It would be experienced in endless fall.

A world supports its objects. In Munch's "The Scream" the central figure was human but is now only and entirely what it is to scream. This metamorphosis requires the urban ghost world that surrounds it.

In a particularistic painting one can safely paint the background that one sees... Yet art is not limited to what we actually see. What are the environments of angels, vampires and Bodhisattvas?

Working with environment is not limited to choice of color and image. Brushwork is crucial. The focal image can emerge from a smooth or stormy surface. Paint rhythms can struggle or can "dance together."

3. Composition

3.1

Composition is the relatedness of shape, line, brushwork, color, value, image and mood. Working as a unity is a principle of composition.

3.2

We have already used the word,

Motion in one direction, however powerful, is always compositionally banal: a person standing on tip toe body vertical and stretching upward, a voice rising higher and higher, a plot in which a protagonist moves unchallenged from victory to victory. Tension is required.

I promised myself that my students would learn to place the figure where it expressively organizes the space it inhabits... The project is to make a painting not to "reproduce a figure"... Everything... should be developed together in an expressive coherent composition.

In art details are not engaged one by one. They are included in patterns. Composition emerges as an interplay of patterns.

One-sided subordination of part to whole is banal... The unity of multifigural compositions is "dialogical": it accepts and works through interplay of differences.

3.3

A general principle of composition is that the glance be encouraged to move through the entire space... No area should be disregarded.

All included patterns should coordinate. It is an ideal, rarely attained, that each color would, were all other colors removed, constitute a coherent painting.

There can be great or minimal difference between object and background. Shapes can touch or be mutually isolated. They can melt into one another.

Compositions can be firmly integrated by a central mass reinforced by repetitive subordinate masses on either side.

Integration can be snatched almost miraculously from disequilibrium. A small area of bright intense color or an iconographically crucial figure on one side can balance a large mass on the other. A shape that suggests movement can carry vision into empty space.

Compositions can be flowing and gentle. They can be harsh and jagged. Composition is open to all moods and weathers of human existence.

3.4

Composition is crucial to all art. Yet there are differences between design in figurative and in directly medial work.

Figurative art must respect the given shape of things. Arms have bones and thus cannot bend in the middle to complete a pattern.

A figurative painting should be seen in one position (top to bottom). In directly medial art no one position is pre-given as dominant. It is an ideal of directly medial art that a painting should be complete when seen from all positions: every point and area should cohere in a multidirectional design.

3.5

Composition is “the soul of art”

V. Teaching Creativity

Opening

An artifact is a work of art in so far as it sensitively, vitally and intensely embodies inwardness in an interpersonal medium... Inwardness is the world as it is experienced. My inwardness is the world as it appears to me.

Every thing visual is soulful.

Direct comparison with the model and awareness of pattern enable the teacher to point out and clearly demonstrate achievements and errors in proportion, anatomy, color, form and dynamics. Yet if left alone even for a few weeks this can enclose and limit.

I want to be able to say and show that "This painting, for all its technical flaws, is personal, original and vital: thus it is a work of art." and "This accurate figure composition is an anonymous instance of competence. It has no life or individuality. It is not art."

Art teaching should directly assist vital medially sensitive communication of inwardness.

Painting Non-figurative “Objects”

1. Opening

Art is direct intimate communication of inwardness between individual and species. Inwardness, thus art, is always in dialogue with “the other.” In this sense all art is “objective” (i.e., there is no “nonobjective art”).

Yet the object need not be “a recognizable thing” (i.e., a human body, a vase of flowers)... It should be definite enough to offer guidance. It should be “open” enough to invite personal interpretation and free play of imagination. We select themes and musical compositions as nonfigurative “models.”

In class, where work must be publicly evaluated as moving towards or away from art, this “model” should be publicly specified.

2. Painting Themes

The first approach to directly teaching personal creative expression translates pure language into visual images.

I let down a net of words into “the ocean of voices”, strands tight enough to select yet open to personal variation.

I say, for example, “Paint something strong in relation to something delicate.”: I don’t say “fragile,” “weak,” “harsh” or “tough.”

To weld “vulnerable” and “sensitive” to delicate would deny it to strength. To weld “harsh” and “tough” to strong would have forbidden the “embryos in their mother’s wombs”, “birds in sheltering trees” and “children cherished by parents” some Phoenix House students painted.

One tries to open not to trap.

3. Painting Music

3.1

In teaching “painting music,” the crucial problem is to become aware of processes normally taken for granted.

When I was with The New York City Health Department my work often brought me to a child health station in Chinatown. Every year there was a Christmas party. There was home cooked food from many cultures: Chinese noodles, southern fried chicken, chicken vendeloo, curried goat, tamales, enchiladas, spaghetti, veal parmigan, Native American corn bread, beef stew, etc. After we ate, tapes were played on a boom box: soul, reggae, rock, pop, salsa.... We danced around long tables.

At one of these parties I recognized that in America we naturally express our personal uniqueness, our group connection and our shared humanity through dancing. - Years later I realized that as music translates into movement it could translate into paint: I “saw” equivalences (e.g., line is like melody, colors and textures resemble the sounds of instruments and voices).

3.2

There are recurrent problems in painting to music.

We can be trapped by the machine augmented lowest common denominator visual clichés that surround us.

One can be overwhelmed by the richness of music in time... A resonant pattern emerges on the canvas. Yet the music continues and changes.

There are solutions.

It helps to avoid cliché if each line - each movement of brush on canvas - is “with the music”.

Look at your image (in your mind or on the canvas). Let it sink into you, deeper and deeper...as a stone in water... until it becomes unique and personal.

Once you have a living coherent image, take from the music as it flows past you only what nourishes and completes that image...Let the painting tell you what it needs.

3.3

Painting to music frees the student from the rigidities of given “figurative objects.” It invites - and requires - focus on medium, archetypical resonance and composition.

Dancing with the Figure

1. Opening

After a few weeks “teaching pattern” most students draw and paint the human figure as an organic and dynamic unity. Yet their work is relatively anonymous and unexpressive.

For most students, movement to the nonfigurative model is a qualitative leap: paintings become vital, personal and intense.

Return to the human figure as model is normally a regression. - Why? I’m not sure....The figure is a complex given shape. Yet a Mozart concerto is also intricate....We are profoundly conditioned to respect the human figure. It is who we are.

I am exploring ways of avoiding this decline.

2. The Moving Figure

The power of the stationary human figure to compel attention is irresistible to beginners. Thus we introduce the figure in the presence of music, and in motion. - I explain the situation. “We are trying now to open your figure work to the wonderful intensity you’ve achieved in your directly medial compositions. At the moment of painting the world is there for your expression: music and figures, and your memories. Look at the model. Lean back into the music. Your act of creation is the center.”

I start with music first. At first the music plays alone until they are deeply involved in their paintings. Then I signal the model to appear.

I ask the model to subordinate him/herself to the music. Almost always s/he enters dancing... Sometimes I join the dance.

Little by little I introduce the model earlier until pose and music begin together.

3. Painting Gesture

I enact as well as explicate languages of gesture...“You walk into class on the first day. You see your teacher. This is what you see.” I slump on the model’s stand as though my bones were butter and the butter melted: as though I were a lump of weeping clay and a puddle of soft ice cream.... “Or this.” I leap up as though full of lightening: straight, rigid...movements sharp, over energized...eyes wide open, pupils dark hot coals in snow. “Or this.” I strut like a wind up Mussolini. All this slouching and leaping is consciously ham acting. (In everyday life gesture is of course more subtle.)

Returning to the human figure, we paint to the “music” of gesture.

Painting Archetypes

1. Opening

1.1

Art is personal. Yet it is crucial to avoid the stereotypical notion of inwardness as entirely idiosyncratic. - First as an artist then as a teacher I began to work through “archetypes.”¹

1.2

Looking at the European “old masters” you were probably first struck by their perceptual accuracy. Yet for the artist and his/her audience this precision was often not the primary concern. Read the titles, not “Louise and Baby Jacques” but “The Madonna and The Infant Jesus.”

Even portraits reached beyond the individual towards archetypal existence (e.g., as ruler, aristocrat or craftsman)... Even Vermeer’s precise notations of the visually given are spiritual constructions, the prosaic blessed by grace of light.

1.3

Many experiences helped me recognize the artistic relevance of archetypes.

In The Frick Museum I always stood for a long time in front of Goya’s “The Forge.” - Suddenly insight.... I had seen many “American Scene” paintings of workers. Here in the simplicity of form, the powerful rhythmic strokes of paint, the enclosed obsessive focus of all figures on the task, was work itself.

A young man told me a story.

He and a woman grew close.... A language of love grew between them. Then she became pregnant. A cold wind froze and blew away these words, this softness. They turned on each other. I have also known a “cold light of morning death of dreams.”

One afternoon I saw Brighton Beach in winter: there were gulls, white and gray on white.

Randomly spaced
On a deserted beach
Gulls stand still in snow
Only waves and their hearts move.

Sitting in the cold, almost in a trance, I saw this scene - thus every scene and season - as an emblem of a mood.

2. Presenting Archetypal Themes

¹ I am gratefully indebted to the work of Karl Jung for the term, but am not committed to his interpretation.

2.1. Opening

We begin explicitly archetypical work by suggesting an image, from myth (e.g., Virgin Mary, Apollo, Mary Magdalene, Aphrodite) from popular culture (e.g., the vampire, Xena the warrior princess) or from everyday life (e.g., the lover, the fighter, joy, sorrow).

The model transforms word into frozen gesture...a tableaux vivant. (Fortunately many of the models at The New School are “moonlighting” actors and dancers.) The students transform words and gestures into painted figurative or directly medial images.

Over the last ten years we have explored relational as well as single figure archetypical patterns ...One of the earliest was master/slave. - One of the most popular is “a natural history of love,” beginning with the first “meaningful glance” and ending with estrangement (“all passion spent”). Often through tenderness, or lack of time, we leave our lovers in eternal spring or summer.

I seek enough specificity for rich creative interpretation without imposing my own vision. This “scaffolding” should be a co-creation with my students. This does not always happen.

2.2. Presenting Mary Magdalene

Avron: Who was Mary Magdalene?

There are three stages in her story, before and after she met Christ, and the meeting. Who was she before?

Student: A prostitute

Avron: What is a prostitute?

Student: Someone who has sex for money

Avron: Was she a prostitute? I’m not certain...She had sexual relations with many men. I don’t want to specify that it was for pay.

Even if money changes hands it might not be “the point”. ... Money may, for example, lend an illusion of calculation and control to essentially irrational impulses.

It might loosen our assumptions to recall that the prostitute is not the only one paid for services that are normally personal. Psychotherapists, for example, routinely receive intimate revelations withheld from spouses, parents, children and friends.

I don’t deny that the stereotype is supported by experience. Street prostitution is mass servicing and permits little self-expression. Yet even the most constrained situations admit exceptions, even elevator operators and supermarket cashiers can find time for kindness.

Let’s assume that if she was a prostitute she was a high priced call girl with time and space for extended “private sessions” and personal expression.

Yet we are not bound to every historical detail. Mary Magdalene is not an archetype but an archetypical character, a guide to potentialities. The story, as the model’s pose, is offered as material for our performance. – Magdalene as prostitute is optional (an interesting line of interpretation).

We can interpret Magdalene as she was before meeting Jesus from knowledge of who she became.

William James explains that conversions which appear sudden are often small shifts in balance between nearly equal forces.... A man lives as a drunkard yet helplessly hates his addiction. There is a traffic accident. He was driving drunk. Luckily no one was hurt. That night he attends his first A.A. meeting.

If the intense focus that fuels addiction is freed it can propel spiritual growth.... Extreme promiscuity both reaches out for and rejects the other. It is sometimes a misplaced striving for the I-Thou unity of love.

From a religious standpoint love of God is the origin, model and highest realization of love. Even from a secular perspective the concept of God can be interpreted as “representing” the benevolent potentialities of the world, so that in loving God one loves the world.

One can conceive Magdalene before meeting Jesus as a lost, passionate and frightened woman longing for a transcendence she cannot imagine.

You're all very quite. Somebody say something. Please.

Student: She was a prostitute. - You are unrealistic. You are complicating something simple. She was a prostitute. Prostitutes have sex for money. That kind of life defines one completely. The rest is liberal nonsense. Prostitutes don't have hearts of gold. Their hearts are cash registers.

Avron: If Magdalene was entirely a prostitute as a stone is a stone she could not transform: Christ could not reach her.

Yet your emphasis could inspire interesting art: I can imagine her painted as half animal half machine.

I am not trying to establish a definitive interpretation of Mary Magdalene. I just want to open some alternatives.

There are many possibilities...Was she Jesus' wife? ... Was she a wonderful, sensual, fun loving young woman corrupted by a charismatic cult leader?

Or one could paint the scene cynically from the outside as “a set up”: the model pretending against a gray wall...Variation after variation on and on.

2.3. Presenting the Vampire

Avron: Doing archetypal work in class takes a sounding of our shared memory. The gods and goddesses of ancient Greece have lost their hold on our imagination. What I found amazing, and would never have predicted, is that our hold on Biblical characters is weak and shaky....We went through this with Mary Magdalene last week. Yet term after term in this class the vampire lives, or at least remains vividly undead. (I don't know what this says about our society and ourselves?)²

Who is the vampire?

Student I: They suck blood

Avron: What else?

² This is before *Interview with a Vampire*, *Forever Knight* and *Buffy The Vampire Killer*.

Student II: They live forever.

Avron: Necessarily or only potentially? Can a vampire be killed?

Student I: Yes, sure...stakes, fire, daylight.

Avron: Beheading...Some say vampires dissolve in flowing water...There are other allergies and limitations, painful and...inconvenient, but not fatal.

Student I: Holy water, crucifixes.

Student II: They are hurt by garlic.

Student III: You can't see them in mirrors. They have no reflections.

Student I: Do they have shadows?

Avron: We do not.

Student III: Come on, this is a morning class...The room is full of sunlight.

Avron: I am ancient.... I grow endlessly stronger with age. - My powers are great, and I wear makeup.... After a thousand years I still mourn my shadow.

What are our - excuse me, their - special powers?

Student IV: They can hypnotize anyone, willing or unwilling.

Student III: Almost anyone. Not Von Helsing.

Student I: They are stronger than people. They can fly unaided.

Student III: They can become bats, and summon wolves to help them.

Avron: Yet this powerful being is frightened.

Student IV: They are afraid to be caught out in sunlight.

Avron: Yes.... What might it do to you to be afraid of sunlight, moving water, crucifixes, holy water, etc? How would you feel? Who might you become?

Student I: I'm not sure what you are getting at.

Avron: If I'm allergic to religious symbols I'm probably damned.... A subtler, to me more interesting version: the vampire is not affected by crucifixes and holy water yet thinks "If I exist then perhaps all of the old stories are true. In the Christian story in which I was brought up I am damned."

Sunlight and water are of course necessary to life. They are also crucial symbols of life: the original scientific elements were earth, air, fire and water, running water represents the Tao, and the first monotheism (Akhnaton's) was sun worship. To burst into flame in sun and dissolve in moving water is to be estranged from nature.

To be powerful and potentially immortal yet vulnerable, outside nature, and probably damned, would be frightening.

The powerful vampire freed from the necessity to die is trapped in dangers and taboos. S/he is also trapped by hunger...Is there such desperate obsessive compulsive life or death craving in the mortal world?

Student I: People die of hunger and thirst.

Avron: Yes....These are natural needs shared with all animals, even with plants. They connect and unify all life. - I'm thinking of addiction, with its desperate, secret isolating passion, the vampire as addict.

Mortality is a bond.... Perhaps it limits brutality that both tyrant and victim will soon die....On the other hand, some cruelty is a magical attempt to deny one's own vulnerability (i.e., to experience oneself as always agent never victim of pain and death).

The vampire's addiction to human blood requires constant murder.... Vicious exploitative aristocrats are a source of the vampire....The original of Dracula was a Hungarian king called Vlad The Impaler. There was also a countess who slaughtered peasants and drank their blood: it was supposed to restore youth (a nutritional supplement).

The vampire has attained the status tyrants long for, membership in an immortal predatory species.

3. Art, Archetypes and the Crises of our Time

3.1

In the 15th century each group was within its order of life almost as a child within its mother's womb.... In Europe artists painted Christian or classical Greek themes. In India they painted Krishna and Kali.

Unquestioned faith may still exist for some. Yet cultures now flow into one another.... Explicitly archetypal art arises when, as in the Greco-Roman world and now, received images appear as human constructs.

3.2

All visual images from all cultures and all historical periods are now present together. Yet they do not form an integrated constellation.

We awake from one dream to enter another (mirror in mirror). - Afloat in the body of our species no space is particularly ours...Archetypal work assists the struggle for vital resonant intense images in crisis and breakdown.

V. Painting the Scene

I remember walking across The Brooklyn Bridge with my parents when I was a young boy. We looked down at the old stained worn wooden piers. I was surprised when my father said, "They would be wonderful to paint."

It took a great leap of imagination for his and the preceding generation (e.g., among so many others, Bellows, Bishop, Curry, Henri, Luks, Marsh, Shahn and Sloan) to conceive factories, bridges, gray repetitious flat Midwestern towns, gas stations, "open all night diners" (the normal scenes, operations, interactions and debris of urban America) as appropriate for art.

2

Paintings of a "contemporary scene" may have profound personal, medial and archetypal resonance.

"The Employment Agency" and other paintings by my father synthesize uniqueness, common humanity and socio-cultural specificity. In his painting of the Spanish Civil War a dying loyalist fighter rests his head on his mother's lap. It translates "The Pieta" into modern terms (as Christian art translated Greco-Roman images and themes).

Hopper's work is as much about interplay of shadow and of light as about urban life... In a late painting of an empty room the theme of "being" and "nothing" - always present in his work as subtext - is directly beautifully addressed.

Burchfield developed his own effective visual vocabulary of archetypically significant forms in which he "spelled" each particular closely observed scene.

Jacob Lawrence's paintings depend on brilliantly abstracted figurative drawing. They work as flat interlocking patterns and as closely observed scenes. - Through these beautiful and expressionist designs, Lawrence traces present and historical Afro-American life.

In Stuart Davis' work, objects and letters join in abstract interpenetrations within a strange flat artificial brightness. It is so complete - so personal - so perfect of its kind - that he could have no major followers... There are limitations, there is no dirt in Davis' urban scenes.

I experience the graphic artist Louis Lozowick as an "American futurist," yet more respectful of received particulars than the Italian movement: figures and buildings are integrated through not dissolved in abstracted, intensified urban rhythms.

Romaine Bearden celebrated Afro-American existence through powerful eloquent syntheses of collage and direct painting. - Louis Guglielmi seamlessly integrated an authentically observed deeply felt urban particularism with "surrealism." - In "The Brooklyn Bridge" Joseph Stella, an explicit futurist, created one of the most powerful urban emblems in world art.

There were so many fine artists, many almost completely forgotten. Yet this is a topic for another time. Images surround me as I write: the beautiful color and sensitivity to light of Alexander Brook, the long complex careers of Bernard Karfiol, Walter Stumpfig and my teacher Stefan Hirsch. - I'm glad to see that Aaron Bohrod, Alexander Hogue and Joe Jones have returned.

3

The urban world is different now than in the 30s and 40s.

There are broken ruined neighborhoods, as though we had been bombed out in war: buildings so dirty, worn, peed on, shat on - saturated with human touch - that they are almost alive.

The light now in a city at night never existed before.... Visiting the country I was shocked... a little frightened.... to feel true darkness.

We have built "a new nature"... Original nature repressed threatens to return in nightmare forms: cockroaches, rats in subways.

Homeless people - more abandoned to nature than the earliest Neolithic tribe - exiled from the crowds they walk through - wander through the streets.

There are few artistic paintings and drawings emerging from this urban scene (yards and yards of banal paintings imitating photographs but they "don't count") ... No one captures our new light.

There is inspiration in the recent past.

Philip Reisman continued all his long career to interpret New York street life. His late work - rough... at times crude - captures in acid bitter blues, greens, yellows and purples, glimpses of this new scene.

George Grosz created in the pre-Nazi chaos of the Weimar Republic permanently contemporary images of urban decadence. - The American, Richard Lindner is often labeled a "pop artist." Yet he was not trapped within commercial forms. He transformed images from popular culture into a personal, sharp, hard, mysterious vision In Grosz all masks are removed, as though one turned over a rock. Lindner's cold metallic painted figures are ritually stylized as "Kachina dolls."

The recent fruitless chaos of visual art has left this new urban scene almost untouched for you to translate into art.

VI. Answering My Students

Student: What shaped you as a teacher?

Avron: My personality as a teacher is rooted in my childhood....My father Isaac, mother Sofia and two of my uncles Moses and Raphael were painters.

Isaac, Moses and Raphael were well known. They are characterized as “urban realists,” “painters of the American scene” and “New York artists.”

I’d bring my little scribble home from second grade. Their beautifully painted accurately representational art was on the wall. It was overwhelming, especially because I was not producing precociously accurate likenesses [Now I often do a series of different images from one model (as though they were of different people each with their own “aura”)].

I saw that my first attempts would not lead to the style of my father and uncles. Yet I loved to paint and my work was lively. I could either reject myself as a potential artist or learn to hear and respect “my own voice.”

My mother never exhibited. Her work is particularistic, yet open to expressionist distortion. There is a painting in red and black of a homeless woman in a doorway. Another is of a nude middle-aged woman seen from the back on a gray urban street.

A workingman with a broom stands near a naked mannequin. - Two plainly dressed women in winter coats look through a department store window at two female mannequins in evening clothes.

There are three powerful expressive drawings of a woman in a net. No model. All are constructs. One appears representational. In another the woman resembles a maimed doll. None are wide-awake and fiercely struggling. Are they aware of their condition?

There are few paintings, some unfinished.... I was influenced by her work, and also by her “situation.” Her painting offered me an alternative path into art. Yet I sensed that she was not unambiguously on her own side.... I think that if she could have forced herself to paint as she consciously desired it would have been like Raphael (the most famous of the brothers).

My father and his brothers had a perspective on art that supported their work. She was balanced uncomfortably in an intermediate position.... Her “vision” was too strong and authentic to be entirely submerged. Yet her conscious orientation did not adequately support her intuitions.

I wish that my mother had exhibited. I hope that her work will enter “the blood stream of art”... She worked before the emergence of the new feminism when, even among artists, Freda Kahlo was almost unknown, the wife of Diego Rivera who “also painted.”

I am aware of the danger of identifying the potentialities of art with any particular approach. I am on the side of open creative dialogue between person and discipline.

I want to accept and encourage. Yet I also want to help students move closer to art. Thus I cannot uncritically accept everything they draw and paint. This is a basic tension in which I work. ...I don’t know whether this comes through.

Student: Yes, yes. This is your style...I felt that I could do what I wanted but that I had to follow the rules.

Avron: Not from my point of view rules.... Art has standards and techniques, but they are predominantly orientations and sensitivities and only secondarily, peripherally, rules.

A young artist recently told me that she is tired of the rules that art teachers insist are essential to art. If one has been in contact with many such teachers one finds their rules contradictory. One says, "You shouldn't draw. You should construct paintings by juxtaposing areas." Another says, "Draw the figure in charcoal before painting." Some insist on detailed "underpainting." Others demand thick bravura direct paint application. Some insist, "Put in the darks first;" others say, "First do the lights."

It's worse than this. I've seen student exhibitions in which everyone painted like the teacher. I said in class today that it is fine for everyone to paint like the teacher under one condition. They have to look exactly like the teacher... A whole class of fat old Caucasian men with curly white hair painting the same way is fine. (Well...actually...my own work is quite diverse...I'm thinking of titling my next exhibition "Avron Soyer, A Group Show.")

My teaching has been influenced by acting.... Actors take for granted that their unique humanity is their instrument, and thus that "technique" is primarily the discovery, opening and education of sensitivity.... The teaching of painting has not yet had its Stanislavskian revolution. Sensitive practice exists, but its insights are not publicly articulated. In the absence of theoretical self-knowledge, arbitrary rules and the teacher's own idiosyncratic way of painting are often confused with disciplinary necessities.

It is crucial to distinguish standards and techniques applicable to a tradition (e.g., Chinese, Indian or "Western" canons) or a style (e.g., neoclassicism, spontaneous ink play, abstract expressionism, fauvism) from those required by all painting, and/or all art.

All painters should, for example, learn sensitivity to the expressive qualities of line, shape, texture and color [e.g., to the interplay of "sharp" with vague ambiguous areas (as a ship emerges out of fog) and to cool and warm colors (as in Picasso's blue and pink periods)]. They should learn to draw the "figure" (e.g., person, tree, flower) as an "organic unity" and to explore the relationship between focal image and "background." They should learn to compose expressively and coherently in space.

To become an artist in any medium one should learn open and sensitive dialogue between spontaneity and tradition, between theory and practice, and perhaps most fundamentally, between inwardness, medium and "creative process."

Student: How do you understand the difference between your work as an artist and as an art teacher?

Avron: As an artist I try to create the most vital, personal, intense, articulate original images I can. As a teacher I am here in support of you. Your achievement as artists is my fulfillment as a teacher.

Student: How does one know when to leave a painting alone? You always warn against overwork.

Avron: We change. The world changes around us, light and mood. A painting should seize a vital intense image from the flow.

You may begin a painting in summer. You are happy. Full of life. Perhaps newly in love. You may return to it in winter. Lonely...The mind can shift from summer to winter in a moment.

In overwork one weakly compromises incompatible visions that could have inspired fine distinct paintings.

Listen to the work. When hints of a coherent strong personal statement appear on your canvas take it further “ in its own terms” then stop.

Student: Apparently you insist that in order to be taught “art” has to have an inherent definite meaning and definite standards. Why is this important? Why can’t art be whatever we want it to be? What do you think art is?

Avron: I am very uncomfortable with arbitrary authority. For me to claim that “I am right because I am the duly constituted teacher” is constitutionally impossible. I could sooner spread my nonexistent wings and fly around the room.

Responsible teaching ends where there is no coherent way of distinguishing progress from regression.

Disciplined standards and sensitivities enable art to continue. They enable artist, art teacher and student to struggle against external domination and to escape cliché.

If the term “art” becomes only an infinitely expandable conventional designation then art is dead. People may still be hired to teach “art.” Mass produced toy submarines suspended from the ceiling and plaster casts hung about with ropes on which T.V. sets are attached may still - as in one Whitney Biannual - be exhibited as great American “art.” Yet it will be “a corpse dance.”

Art is the vital intense embodiment of inwardness in an interpersonally accessible medium. It is direct intimate communication between individual and species.

There is a borderline. Yet art isn’t “all or nothing,” Michelangelo or “kitsch.” When I was fourteen I painted a self-portrait. My father and mother took me aside (isolating the moment from the normal flow of life as a special occasion). They said, “This is a work of art. You will do others. You will do better. But this is a work of art.” In this minimal sense every student in the class crossed the border at least once.

In the second stage - which some students who have been with me two or more terms are beginning to enter - one struggles for artistic self-knowledge and to produce “a body of work.”

Towards the end of his life I posed for Moses who was a wonderful artist, one of the most fluent draftsmen and colorists in America. At the first session he worked for three hours then wiped it off. I said, “I thought that for you now it is easy.” He replied, “If it ever becomes easy one is no longer an artist.” At every stage difficulties even failures are normal and necessary. They are a sign that one is not “playing it safe”, that one is stretching, growing...reaching out.

Because we are each unique, originality is natural. No tricks or gimmicks are required. You need not be the first person to glue bread on a canvas, or the first to pee on the bread. Nothing external. Only learn to be yourself in paint.

Student: Painting I become aware of what I feel and who I am.

Avron: Wonderful

Student: *I am just there. With my brush. My fingers. Minute by minute. Nothing else exists.*

Avron: Wonderful

Student: *You begin to glow*

Student: *She always glows: when she paints the wattage rises.*

Student: *John should teach a class in flirting.*

Student: *I hesitate to shadow your bright colors.... I want my paintings to be strong and intense. Yet it is painful to summon and experience powerful emotions as I work.... I feel like Hans Christian Anderson's mermaid. At every step I bleed.*

Avron: If you are comfortable with your process and it works for you that is wonderful. If not lets try to find your natural path.

It is fine to paint close to ones feelings. It is fine to paint at a distance from ones feelings.

It is the painting that embodies inwardness .It isn't necessary while painting to be conscious of the intensities one captures.

Some artists like to feel excited as they paint. Others paint in a calm focused open inner space.

Reticences and hesitancies are part of inwardness. An art teacher should not try to break down students to extract visual confessions.

We are born communicating.

The visual is soulful.

The artist grows increasingly sensitive to the existential resonance of line and color .The artist dances to stylistic languages.

Painting becomes "a way of moving", natural as walking.

People are infinitely valuable. Each person is an end in him/her self. Do not strip mine yourself.

Student: *I am glad you are saying this. I studied acting many years. Sometimes they went pretty far.*

Student: *You say art is expression. Babies express. Is every doodle art?*

Avron: "Express" suggests immediate "gut reaction". Human emotion is naturally thought saturated.... I prefer "embody inwardness" to "express".

Student: *Express or embody. Feelings or inwardness. Every one does it. Thus it can't be art.*

Avron: Every one thinks logically: they can go from premise to conclusion and from the particular to the universal. Every one counts objects. When you boil water to cook an egg you control and predict nature. There are disciplines of science, mathematics and logic...Every discipline is rooted in human existence and basic human capacities.

Student: Science, logic and mathematics are objective. Art is subjective. One can distinguish more from less logical and more from less scientific. One can't do this in art.

Avron: You want to improve in art. You want me to help you improve. How can I lead if I am lost?

In seeking a path it helps to know the destination... What is art? I suggest that it is the embodiment of "inwardness" in an interpersonal medium: a direct intimate communication between self and species.

Student: I paint what I care about...I love water...Everything from a shower to the ocean. On our last vacation my husband sat like a plant in the hotel. I wandered the beach alone.

Student: Entirely alone?

Student: Light summer flirting.

Student: Light summer flirting.... Lovely way of speaking.... Brings me back. - In my youth there were courtship rituals, like the birds on animal planet.... Except God willing nothing hatched.

Student: Kissing, Light petting, heavy petting,

Student: Petting until you lose consciousness

Student: I thought kissing was light petting

Student: Light petting was above the waist

Student: When I was with a boy nothing spoke below the waist. I might have been pure marble.

Student: Slowly I learned what it was I felt. A different body The body of night.... My first love told me that my face would change.... I pity the young women now. Thrown into the water sink or swim.

Student: So many years of life together now. First thing in the morning last at night...There was a time there in the middle we felt... repetitive.... stale. _ Avron, you are always saying, "routine is the enemy of art". It is God damn sure the enemy of love.

Student: "Going through the motions". Well I know.

Student: Like the story Avron told about being sent to Arthur Murray's to learn dancing and being taught "the box step" without music

Student: For us for a while the music stopped. Thank God we got through it. Many of our friends were lost.

One guy actually went crazy: his girl friend aborted and got sick. Usually there were divorces. We were luckier.... We got our second wind.

Avron: I learn from my wife and our life together...

Student: You quote her, "If one doesn't listen now it doesn't mean that one will never listen".

Student: I enjoy getting to know one another.... Yet its getting late. Please lets get back to art.

Avron: Students often have a hard time with the idea that art can be learned and taught: that one can dependably recognize progress and regression.

A student in my class at Phoenix House turned towards a gray garbage can. "Until I met you I believed that to be an artist is to copy what you see. If I can copy this accurately then I am an artist." He later told me that his dreams were full of fantastic visual images (I remember he said flying animals) saturated with color, as though he lived at night within a brighter richer world. Yet this to him had nothing to do with art. I remember saying, "Art is personal. One listens to one's painting as one creates it, as though it is a person."

He said, "If art is personal one can't learn or improve." I answered, "Learning is not limited to the external and 'objective.' We are learning to listen to one another. People learn to be friends. Hopefully one slowly learns to understand oneself. You are working to recover from addiction...Learning to listen, understand and change resembles learning art."

Student: You mentioned your work at Phoenix House. What is it like? What have you learned?

Avron: Some students in recovery deny their talent. If they are who they think they are they cannot have the wonderful potentiality for art. If I work with them carefully most talented residents slowly, with many doubts and backslidings, move past this denial: recovering talent helps recover hope.

I teach creative writing as well as painting. My students speak about the honesty of the class.

This seemed strange at first. In "program" they talk about the most harrowing experiences. What could they say _ what could they confess _ that they hadn't said a hundred times before?

Then I saw it. A student was speaking about his ex girl friend. His face was tense. His voice was strained. He meant it. Hearing him in creative writing workshop we urged him to let us see what he saw and feel what he felt. Someone said, "I would like to see her face in front of me." He spoke again. I was amazed. A door had opened. He was present. She was present... I never imagined who was there behind the monosyllables.

Student: Why can art do this?

Avron: Art is disciplined and naturally joyous... One works personally yet the focus is out side oneself. One is in movement towards an autonomous form

The notion of pathology is foreign to art. Art accepts whatever gifts you bring. Art is in this a fragment of the Garden of Eden and a foretaste of paradise.

Student: Art is “all a matter of taste.” There is no arguing with taste.

Avron: In our class critiques there is general agreement about what paintings are “alive” and therefore art, and about the meaning of this art.

Student: We all live in the same culture... You influence our responses...

Avron: There is denial cut off from the rest of life like a game closed in upon itself.

Perhaps nothing can be proved decisively...I am not sure if we can prove that we exist, or that we do not live within a dream.”

This conversation is not within a game. You care enough about art to take a class. I have given it much of my life. As a teacher I am responsible to the ancestors.

We don't stop living because we can't prove we exist. The struggle for art must go on.... More than art will be lost if people cannot share, learn and understand inwardness together.

Can you think of anywhere in life outside art class where it is crucial to communicate inwardness and where there is real learning?

Student: I don't know what you mean.

Student: Hold the thought. Its getting late.

Avron: If one doesn't listen now it doesn't mean that one will never listen.

Student: One more question before we go... What is your favorite thing about teaching?

Avron: I especially enjoyed class today. Many of you used “oils” for the first time. We worked with music. I enjoyed moving from Mozart to Burning Spear to Nusrat Ali Kahn to John Lee Hooker to Nina Simone. You all did wonderfully: line, shape, color, texture, and image moved expressively with and against the music as though you were dancing.

Each student focuses on his or her own work. Yet you support one another. Not automatic clichéd praise without looking or listening. You pay attention to each other's work and hear each other's comments.

At the first class every term I say, “You'll be surprised at what you'll be doing in three months. Your work will be exciting and personal.” First time students look at me as though I'm crazy: perhaps thinking, “Yeah, maybe I'll be able to draw a straight line.” (How did that cliché get started?)

Year after year within three months most students are doing personal interesting work. For the last three terms everyone entered the realm of art (i.e., did at least one minimal work of art). All returning students continue to progress. Their work is progressively stronger and more consistent. Thus teaching is more exciting to me than ever before.

My experience as an art teacher has changed my life. Every term people “come in off the street” and soon surprise themselves, each other and their teacher with unique vital interesting work. In everyday life

I've come more and more to look at people with wonder. What exciting thoughts and images fill their world? What might they create if given half a chance?

What I like best about teaching are my students.

New York, 11 -30-2006

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