WORK IN PROGRESS

by

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I

It is a legend that the Yankee artist is self taught. The notorious individuality of the creative people in our culture has produced an insulated art student syndrome.

Great artists have achieved distinguished and identifiable refinements of given visual languages, but it is a bit of a misunderstanding, I think, for artists to be pressed into the service of hoarding vision. Clear modes of visual language that have appeared in the past bear silent testimony to community sharing of a visual vocabulary.

Sharing seems to be essential to the humanizing process. Probably what we recognize as a high level of civilization at a particular moment mainly has to do with traits that were shared, not hoarded. I don't think it is part of the humanizing process for a counter force to emerge in a community which makes hostility to one another's grasp of the common language an attractive posture. Yet I believe that is becoming a surrogate for creativity and sensitivity.
I suspect the posture of diverting eyes from the common visual language is culturally retarding.

Visual language is an essential of image making that I am attempting to deal with in teaching the fundamentals of art.
II

Several years ago I introduced a problem in a design class which transformed twenty-three insular students into a tightly knit group that became excited about sharing ideas.

The problem involved using blueprint paper. The procedure called for exposing the paper for a few minutes in the sun, developing it in a solution, rinsing, and then stretching and drying the print. It was most feasible for the developing and finishing to be done by a few people working together. The class was divided into small working groups that took short turns working at the sink.

It soon became clear that the hustle, bustle and group interaction was stirring up an enthusiasm and mutual respect that didn't exist with problems that were done alone. When the class met for discussion of work in progress, I noticed that for the first time students seemed to be looking with interest at the accomplishments of others rather than being defensively critical of each other's production. This in turn stimulated them to explore and improve upon each other's techniques.
It occurred to me that the fact of working together made each member of the group feel that he was not on trial by himself which therefore gave him a detached view of what was happening.

I experimented tentatively for a couple of years with group-produced works in classes in order to examine the effects. It became increasingly evident that the few group problems given to classes in both design and drawing were very high moments for the classes and served as spiritual tonic for numbers of previously "uninvolved" students. I was curious to see whether a very high moment could be sustained for a semester by maintaining a program of group drawing.
The idea of building a program which would allow groups to work together suggested the creation of games that draftsmen could play.

It seemed necessary to establish certain ground rules that would serve as a starting point for the class. I wanted them to encounter and use certain simple principles that pertain to the interplay of marks and surfaces that are marked. I decided to observe what developed as the students encountered the ground principles and then to devise games that they could play.

On the first day of class when students had no materials, I introduced, without speaking, the meandering figure called a fret motif (Figure 1) by drawing that figure in the air. Then the class was asked to draw the meanderer in the air. Then working with pencil on paper for the next two weeks the exercise was sustained in order to firmly establish the idea of lines that are parallel to the plane of the page. In addition, it seemed appropriate at the beginning to offer an exercise which would strengthen a student's ability to measure page and line simultaneously. The second notion (Figure 2) was that of
bending or warping the surface of the page with lines (in contrast to the first exercise). Here again a student could soon achieve a unified visual experience by becoming totally absorbed in a rather simple line walking process.

The next step (Figure 3) required that the tiny transition from the notion of warping the plane to the idea of finding a series of folds on a neighboring student's clothing and representing that activity with a network of lines. Of course this also served as the transition from solo performance to group involvement. A variety of chance operation procedures was employed to bring about different combinations of students. These procedures were aids for stirring up the spirit of the group. A procession or ceremony of some sort before the task helps to get things flowing; however, the task has to be big enough to absorb the flow. When these halves of the game are rightly balanced, there is success. For the sake of anyone who wishes to play these games I am including numerous descriptions of preliminary spirit pumping rituals. These of course are detachable from the task part of the game, but I feel they will serve as useful models for the important matter of stirring up the class. Many students become sheltered from any new perceptions by becoming entrenched in a particular corner of a classroom.
For the following exercise, students were asked to bring a child's toy and a variety of drawing tools.

At the beginning of the class the entire group was arranged in zodiac order according to birthdays. Then the circle was divided into pairs of astrological neighbors (i.e., April 30th went with May 2nd, June 1st went with June 5th, etc.). Then they were asked to have drawing conversations by making lines that described a track the eye takes on a surface of the toy. The rules of the conversation required working in alternation. First one makes two strokes, then the other makes two. They were asked to share their drawing tools. The most important rule was that they were to be subtle about the surface they were describing. That is, they were asked not to give away obvious identification of the part of the toy being drawn (like the eye of Raggedy Ann) and they were asked to pay close attention to the mark the partner was making while he made it. Every ten minutes they were asked to switch from one partner's pad and toy to the other's (Figures 4 and 5).

The next toy game was played four handed. Quartets were formed by drawing lots from a hat. Each member of the quartet took a turn at the pad with the other three watching intently. They were asked to conduct their four handed conversation like a classical string quartet in the
sense that there should be both innovation and imitation between instruments. In the last three minutes of every twenty-minute quartet all instruments played simultaneously (Figures 6 and 7).

The class was asked to bring wax candles, India ink, white acrylic, white chalk, charcoal and a bouquet of flowers for the next group drawing which was a quintet. Groups of five were formed on the basis of the alphabetical order of class roll. Each member of each quintet had to select one of the five mediums listed above. The bouquets of each group were arranged and then a list was posted requiring the following order of media:

(1) wax
(2) ink
(3) chalk
(4) charcoal
(5) white acrylic

The class was advised to read the bouquet as if it were a musical score. Each instrument was to play a spontaneous flare of marks in the short space of time allotted each solo, which was regulated by a whistle blowing every few minutes. At the call "change" the members of the quintet exchanged mediums. At the call "switch" the quintet rotated to another pad belonging to the group.
The complexity of this game seemed to generate a great deal of friction at first within the quintets, but friction gave way in the wake of very unified group drawings that began to emerge (Figures 8 and 9).

In a final series of figure drawing exercises the emphasis was on making it more possible for students to openly imitate each other's work. Requiring rapid overlaying of one student's drawing on top of another seemed to open a way through the barrier to copying. One exercise began with each member of the class being given a different colored piece of chalk (so that various hands in a multiple drawing would be distinguishable). A model then took a walking sequence of short poses. The class was asked to make quick gesture drawings. When the short pose ended, each student moved one pad to the left. Sketch pad pages were turned after every three poses (Figure 10).

In a later exercise the matter of overlaying different colored drawings from slightly different points of view was explored in combination with two-party conversation drawing. At the beginning of this game each of the 24 students in the class picked a colored chalk from a hat that contained 12 pairs of different colored chalks. Three sets of partners (partnership was based on having the same colored chalk) formed a team. In each team the
partners were in three rows so that each pair had a different view of the model. They were asked to both imitate and innovate in their conversations. At the call "switch", partners switched to their other drawing pad. At the call "change", the rows exchanged pads (Figure 11).

In the last exercise, partners were asked to do portraits of each other. Then they switched pads and did copies of the portraits. This exercise seemed to engender rather careful duplication of technique (Figure 12).
In conclusion, I recommend this list only as an example of a way of getting art students to open their eyes to each other.

Here is an interesting comment by a student that was made in a discussion that followed the first toy problem:

The part that was fascinating was that although we purposely tried not to draw any lines that we thought would be easily recognizable—it turned out that no matter how minute the wrinkle in the cloth, or how seemingly insignificant a curve was drawn, we seemed to be able to follow one another perfectly. We were secure in our conversation.

In the development of the group drawing exercises, one objective was to keep shifting the contact between individuals in the class. At times I tried to get the entire class involved in the production of single drawings. At other times the focus would be on building a tight rapport between two individuals for an entire three-hour period. Over the entire semester a continual churning of the whole group produced openings for dialogue between students whom I'm sure would ordinarily make no contact.
As a result of observing groups working together I began to suspect that a taboo against copying tended to seal off the individual from the reservoir of visual language which resided in the group.

Immigrants are famous for standing awkwardly about because of language barriers. If one thinks of each art student as an immigrant in the new place of visual perception, it would matter that each one is carefully helped to gain an awareness of the vocabulary of the new place.
Figure 1
Figure 4
Figure 6