

Manuel barkan and his contribution to art education

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Contemporary generation of young art educators are being introduced to significant figures in the history of art education in their programs of study. In today's fast-paced environment, it is natural that some of these figures are accepted without question and some are left languishing in history only to be revisited by those interested in revising that history. Manuel Barkan could be considered such a figure.

An individual who emerges as a pivotal force in the development of ideas now infused in contemporary art education is Manuel Barkan who in 1965 advocated a then new approach to the curricular content of art education: the use of the roles of the art historian, the art critic, and the aesthete as well as that of the studio artist. Today these ideas seem so commonplace that it's difficult to imagine just how radical they were when they were first introduced. The purpose of this paper is to examine Barkan's work and its effect on contemporary art education in order to understand current practice and philosophy of art education.

About half a century ago, Barkan (1962) addressed the importance of historical reflection in an article published in *Art Education* titled "Transition in Art Education: Perceptions of Curriculum Content and Teaching" and asserted that he believed the next decade would "bring some truly fundamental changes in the theory and practice of art education" (Barkan, 1962, p. 12). He went on to say that "when basic ideas are in the process of transformation, there is and must be an inevitable grinding of opinions one upon the other."

There must be inevitable controversy and debate, because old ideas by their very nature, cannot and do not change unless and until they are challenged by new ones” (p. 12). The transformation of which he spoke was the shift from the child-centered approach of the progressive movement to the disciplined-centered approach advocated for general education. Another essential Barkan’s point concerned the kind of behavior a person must learn in order to achieve understanding from the subject being studied. He stated that to learn through art, “ one must act like an artist” (p. 14).

Barkan (1962) also spoke of the need to treat children as artists and explained the characteristics of the artist as “ immersion in a medium,” and “ determination ... to achieve the discipline and the skills involved” (p. 18). He cautioned against organizing curriculum simply to give students experiences in a wide range of media, an approach he considered “ detrimental to the purposes which art education ought to be trying to achieve” (p. 17). Instead, he thought students should engage in some exploration of media so that they could discover a medium they liked and be able to “ use it to express their ideas” (p. 18). The art room should, in Barkan’s words in the 1962 article, re-create the “ atmosphere of an artist’s studio” (p. 18).

In 1965 Barkan proposed a research and development center for aesthetic education to the U. S. Office of Education; the plan called for a consortium of five universities each with research and curriculum development labs (Hubbard, 1971). According to Chapman (1993), the plan was not funded due to the federal government’s position that all of the arts must be

included, making the initial plan too complex. Barkan continued to refine the idea.

Barkan turned to television as a tool for disseminating resources and curriculum concepts for the teaching of art. By that time, he had begun to work with Laura Chapman, and together they developed Guidelines for Art Instruction through Television for the Elementary Schools for what became National Instructional Television. In 1970, he and Chapman published Guidelines for Curriculum Development in Aesthetic Education as a guide for educators working to develop curriculum materials in music, dance, theater, literature, and the visual arts. Elliot Eisner, writing in a 1971 issue of Studies in Art Education that focused on Barkan's work, stated that " throughout his career in art education, Manuel Barkan concerned himself with both the development of more adequate theory and the improvement of the art of teaching art" (p. 4). In fact, Barkan believed that art education could promote a more sensitive understanding of social problems.

His first book, A Foundation for Art Education, published in 1955, presented a synthesis of then " current concepts from psychology, sociology, anthropology, cultural history, philosophy and the arts" (Barkan, 1955, p. vi). According to Chapman (1971), Barkan was concerned with the growing number of sometimes questionable classroom activities that were being justified as forms of creative self-expression. He sought to better define the term in relation to " concepts about human behavior growing out of research in other fields" (Barkan, 1955, p. vii) and to develop " a foundation for art education that would rest on a synthesis of this information in the context of

operational problems in teaching” (Chapman, p. 40). Barkan’s book was an effort to develop a strong philosophical foundation for art education built upon research in other disciplines.

Today, the idea that the curricular content of art education should encompass artmaking, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics is generally widely accepted. Art teachers address these components of art education in a manner that takes into account the nature of the child and the importance of both making and responding to art. Art has become a subject for study, but it retains its ability to teach us about ourselves and the others with whom we share this world.

That art education is still engaged in transition is without doubt, and, is in fact, desirable. Postmodern thought, feminist perspectives, and multicultural concerns are but a few of the contemporary issues that influence today’s emerging art educators. However, an understanding of the history of our field and the work of key individuals such as Manuel Barkan can provide insight and guidance as we continue the ongoing “ transition in art education” that he addressed in 1962.

Works Cited List

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