

The Social Artists

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I interfered – which wasn't the point. A day of disasters. Many times a day with the children – disaster upon disaster. I ordered them around. Assumed they would work with the material as I would myself.

But these young children had no need to be constructive. They experienced rather than created.

In the evenings I tried to experience the same materials myself. But because I'd set myself the task of 'experiencing' – or because I was only able to create – it was alienating daring to experience. It hurts to admit that you'd created without experiencing – or that there was a difference between experiencing and creating. Maybe forgetting entirely to experience what was new.

Redefining the artist's role

One reason for plunging into this experience is to try to understand why one reacts in a conformist way to an experience that is so concrete and straightforward.

I believe that it involves some of the problems that have created our situation as adults – and that the reasons for our attempt to change our conditions also lie herein. Our attempt to change is often uncertain and faltering, like an attempt to arrive at a different attitude to humankind. It is an attempt to describe, for ourselves and for others, pictures of what we would like to be able to do.

After all, we are in the same situation – faced with strange new materials, new situations, and we react spontaneously in a way that we would prefer to have had changed in us. Because we feel constrained to assume an insistent role, we feel we are directed to assign specific values to ourselves and others.

The fact that we react rigidly and try to prevent others from experiencing in order to meet our own needs is something essential – something fundamental – to our reactions. We are brought up in the shadow of a model of human efficiency.

Technical development, and the ideas about people's opportunities which it both created and was born of, have become our biggest problem. We cannot cope with the consequences. The development itself has re-cast our view of human nature in terms of effectiveness and production efficiency, even though we have had every opportunity to establish and create utopian visions of human relationships. But it didn't happen. The attempts we made were blocked, struck down, because the human being which increased production took priority over the utopias. There are several levels to this.

Even if we succeed in taking over the means of production, we will end up in a new situation with the same efficiency model for our actions. Our reactions are already established according to predetermined patterns, all of which are determined by the fact that we have to produce, be constructive and efficient.

This may imply that, sooner or later, and concurrently with the economic change, we have to apply ourselves to understanding our inability to experience situations and human relationships. At the same time, it may be that we are helping this change by working with ideas about real human relationships. By trying to halt the unconscious assigning of roles and replace it with new, conscious ones. Ones that we have freely chosen.

By working with ourselves, by wanting to understand, reshape and test out the new relationships we are groping for, we also give ourselves the right to want the same for others. If our new relationships can be an expression of the fact that we are experiencing – and daring to experience – we can become a model for others.

But it is this very work with ourselves that is hard and inaccessible, because we often end up in an apologetic role. It is tremendously difficult both to exist in a society of systematised pursuit of effect and image, to be mentally a part of it, and at the same time to change and become creatively socially engaged.

This is because it involves assigning new and completely different values to being creative, being an artist. Because they are privileged, with the right to give permanent form to their own dreams, artists become distanced by the many who are trying to experience and pass on their experiences: the many who are trying to live art instead of reproducing experiences.

“The Social Artists”

Let us take as our starting point the artist’s normal role now, and from this role (which the establishment values so highly) try to understand the ways in which roles are assigned and allow them to fall into place in a long list of arguments.

A creative situation is obviously a productive situation that has a constructive aim. If we assume that a construction is in itself a development, that an object created in our existing society is in itself a development and therefore part of a wider historical context, then this product has an intrinsic value, a quality that can affect the development of society.

But if you assume – as I did – that artistic construction is the consequence of an effect, and a specific, predetermined assignment of roles that makes the artist choose and allow his experiences to be channelled into a product, it implies that the artist cannot affect the development of society in his present role. This role involves taking account of all the products. What is more, there is a market for those who are prepared to sell them. This role simply follows the ordinary model of production and efficiency.

The artists are accepted and have accepted. The fact that the product has a market value is merely a reduction of our capacity to experience, because artists must first assume acceptance of their role when they begin reproducing experiences. So this implies that the artist is channelling his experiences already when he chooses his subject for experience. The product must

meet the expectations of the market.

And when the experience itself is systematically reduced and turns into a reproduction of habits, the artist is placed in a situation that parallels that of normal people, but which is more dangerous and more liable to preserve the system, because the decision-making section of the population both identify their need for experience with the artist's products, and use the fact that the artist has a role assigned to him as a security blanket and an excuse to those who are not allowed to make the decisions.

Unfortunately, the artist is not always interested in changing this situation as, by their very nature, the privileges he has been accorded imply a sense of qualitative ability, a dimension of their own – something ritualistic. But they are in fact only a platform that has been given to the artist on which he can present his 'independence' from the system, like a figure in an exhibition.

The existence of a connection between the roles assigned to artists and to the individuals engaged in production who are not able to make decisions provides an image of how a society organised wholly round production reduces people's ability to develop and experience.

As an individual in society, the artist is in the same manipulated situation as 'non-artistic' producers. Both are manipulated into taking on a very specific role, which robs us of the opportunities to satisfy the simplest of our needs: to be able to experience ourselves and others in a spirit of curiosity and experiment.

With romantic fireworks

The role assigned to us by the production mindset is absolutely specific. It is understandable. It is logical. What is more, it is socialising, assuming as efficiency the basis for this. Its assigning of roles involves a systematic logic. This systemising tendency has become the prerequisite for our material welfare.

Now, the question must be whether there is anything in these roles that is "right" for people. Whether, in this pattern of separate connections, there are built-in mechanisms that can support and develop fundamental needs that are concealed in the existing roles. Or are there such total changes in our view of human

nature that these needs are foreign to people? I maintain that these needs exist. And they are being developed with a power that will be capable of changing its own conditions.

People created society. And we liberated our institutions from ourselves, so we now exist independently of them, without the ability or the will to control them. And at the same time we made ourselves socially dependent on what we created, so that we now allow ourselves to be formed by it.

This happened at a time when we were malleable, as we were living in such wretched conditions that we accepted a society of efficient production and predetermined roles. But this great ability to adjust resulted in the belief that people create society, that in a later development the individual will himself be capable of changing the conditions that form it.

Let us turn back to the youngsters swimming in paint. The mere fact that they were swimming in the paint is a step towards a change in the structure of society. It is small. It is slow. But it is part of a movement made up of wishes and actions.

We have the starting points that could put us in a position to change our conditions if they are restricting us. We have been given a free gift of technical expansion that will bring us and has brought us large amounts of information.

Our knowledge has increased, as have our actions and our organisation; because we had to act, once we had discovered our own reality.

The rewards for work carried out are material – and yet we have needs that are satisfied by using our rewards as rewards for satisfaction. Furthermore, we can increase our number of needs by increasing our capacity to work – and so be more satisfied.

We can do this by being trained, that is to say, by receiving more information about methods of improving the efficiency of production. At the same time, we have a positive effect on the efficiency of production by being trained, because when we act, we learn more about the functions of society. That gives us an opportunity to learn and experience for ourselves, and to create situations for others, so they can experience themselves.

We learn from this. We learn that we will keep the roles we

have been assigned for as long as we take our actions seriously when we act. So we teach ourselves to dare to experience for ourselves. We have to act in order to release ourselves from our assigned roles. And we want to act because we have a purpose.

We are an end in ourselves. We emerge everywhere – from loudspeakers, from the television, from telex machines, from the front pages – because cracks have appeared in the empirical methods of efficiency.

More people will come after us. They will have goals. They will acquire more knowledge. They will form organisations with romantic fireworks in their hands. They will be the Social Artists.

A closing story

I had anticipated it, expected it – that was why there were four of them standing there. I had tried to imagine the situation: the aggression towards the petrol cans. But I had never succeeded in thinking through the course of action right to the end; every time, I had had a mental block.

I was astounded when it suddenly happened – and I reacted with my elbows twitching. Went over to him to try to change the picture – the lump that was stuck fast. And was met with animosity and savage hammer blows. I had got on the wrong side of him. Tried again, but aggressively – because I wanted to get rid of the picture of him and me. He reacted with a snarl.

I got very worked up. Found a bigger hammer and worked madly on another petrol can.

He reacted immediately – by stopping. Then I did a double-take. Seeing a whole storybook in three seconds was too much for me. A development: I had been blundering – carefully – incomprehensibly and I wanted to stop him in order to dispel my own weakness. Experience a defeat as an adult and transpose it onto the child – as a later basis for reactions like my own.

While I was destroying the petrol can, I saw the boy's face relax into a kind of introspective, understanding kindness. He suddenly walked over to my can and began to try to pick up my rhythm. And succeeded. I remember we grinned, and we grinned at the many expectant faces around us. ▲