

ART HAS POWER

One adverse effect of intensive development and thorough specialization within different areas of expertise, is that people, in their quality of experts, sometimes consider matters entirely within their respective areas of expertise.

Not seldom are the most passionate people among them so fully absorbed by the intricacies of their area of expertise – a world on its own – that they sometimes overlook the large-scale and long-term effects their pursuits might have on other areas of expertise, society, and the whole of the world. This is a fatal error.

The scientist who invented the combustion engine was no doubt amazed by his own achievement and its wide array of implications. Experts in every field, be it industry, transportation, navigation, robotics, ... all had a use for it. Only after the invention had been fully integrated into most every facet of our world, did we consider the effects exhaust fumes have on our health and environment.

Polystyrene is another example. Seventy-five years after its invention, it is now found in the food chain, impossible to remove, harming everyone's health. Within that time-frame, surely a safe alternative could have been found.

Was there really not one expert able to foresee these things? Did no one have vision that reached beyond the euphoria that accompanies a new invention?

Passion is a requisite to become an expert, but passion is inebriating and can lead to a lack of sobriety. A too narrow or too complete immersion in one's area of expertise has people overlook how things are connected to the outside world, leading to sometimes disastrous results.

Furthermore, the mechanisms that interconnect any specific area of expertise with the whole of our world, tend to operate subtly, quietly and slowly – making them hard to spot, but not entirely imperceptible, nor unpredictable.

A strong holistic view, that emphasizes the correlation between areas of expertise and our entire world, is mandatory to guarantee that any development will not unwittingly end up harming humanity, as it did in the examples above.

The phenomenon of over-focusing on one's own area of expertise can also be found in the art world. In recent decades many experts have begun to see the field of the arts as an experimental laboratory where anything is permitted and should be permitted. Their reasoning is that art is harmless and fun and could not possibly have a negative impact.

But art does not exist within a vacuum. It is promoted, exhibited, sold, adored. Though the monetary value that is attributed to art remains a subject of scrutiny because part of it depends on clever marketing and even straw-man techniques, it is much harder to negate the role art plays on account of being adored.

There is no denying that mankind admires its arts. The more mankind looks up to a piece of art, the more we can say that it is art. If man doesn't look up to a piece of art, it is fair to say that it is not art, or bad art. Perhaps one could define art as the products a civilization admires the most.

There are three facets to this admiration. The first is a comparative aspect, relating to the intensity of preferring one piece over many others (the matter of perceived quality). The

second is appeal in terms of the number of people it appeals to (its popularity). The third aspect pertains to whether a specific artwork's admiration can stand the test of time.

By mere virtue of receiving admiration, art possesses a culturally leading role. Psychologists have observed that man adjusts his actions toward that what he admires. Art operates in a similar manner. The greater the admiration, the more a person will absorb from a piece of art, change his viewpoint and his understanding of the world. Thus, he is transformed.

This, is the power of art.

It is most blatantly observable during puberty, but it is a mechanism that remains – in tempered ways – operative throughout all our lives.

As is well known in history, people with ulterior motives have used this transformative power of art also for political purposes. This reached deplorable peaks in the mass propaganda put out by both European and Asian communists and Europe's fascists in the 20th Century. These groups intentionally used art as a means to amass worldly power, wage wars or even take out entire layers of society. Though it is a negative example, it illustrates the transformative power of art. Would Mao or Hitler have been equally successful without the arts? The music, literature and imagery created a culture and environment that greatly facilitated the realization of their agenda.

Just a few decades earlier, the horrors of the first World War had dealt the Europeans' self-image a fatal blow. In reaction to that, artists themselves threw out any ambition they might have had towards the well-being of man: Dadaists, and others, wished to showcase the stupidity and absurdities inherent of mankind. This idea – criticizing, expressing disgust, shocking and ridiculing one's own species – resonates to this day at the core of so called "contemporary" art.

Even though these artists' sentiments are somewhat understandable in the context of history, such a course of action can't be called constructive. Naturally, they considered their actions to be breaking new ground and developing their area of expertise, yet in essence, they were sublimating – both in terms of content and execution – a sense of defeatism, rather than offering solutions. Defeatism contributes very little to the well being of any civilization or individual for that matter. Psychologically, defeatism is the antithesis of development.

But it is a much more serious issue than simply a philosophical one. Developmental psychology concluded that incessant criticizing coupled with a constant exposing of weaknesses and stupidities, is the worst way to rear a human psyche. Now that happens to be exactly what art does: rearing our psyche, shaping our vision. Children who have been reared in such negative ways grow up to be unhappy and are prone to develop mental illness.

Nearly every art academy today is teaching their students to be 'critical', but it is an approach that is psychologically ineffective at fostering true development.

We artists need to become aware of the psychological impact our art will have – in the long run – on the self-image of a people or a civilization, for people will absorb what we present them and be transformed by that in turn. We can never lose sight of the fact that the arts, being a recipient of admiration, are a shaping factor for our society. People make art, art creates a culture, culture shapes a society, and a society produces a certain type of people – that's a frightening responsibility when you think of it. This mechanism will continue to operate regardless of the artist's agenda, regardless of whether there is an agenda at all.

But none of that is taken into consideration in the art world nowadays: it's innovation for the sake of innovation, development for the sake of development, smashing barriers for the sake

of smashing barriers. It has reached a level where much of it has become a pointless affair to the outsiders: mankind at large.

Art is made mainly for the experts: artists, critics and philosophers, dealers and collectors, but audiences have shrunk until only the experts remained, the only ones left able to relate to the next new thing. But even their admiration exists often solely for the sake of their field of expertise (e.g. collectors buying art as an investment rather than out of heart-felt admiration, philosophers praising art because it fits their theories rather than because it has the potential to augment or safeguard mankind's well-being, etc.).

The notion that for art to be adored by society at large, it would have to be corny or commercial, is incorrect.

People need a reason to look up to art, and that reason needs to be relevant to all, not just to a handful of experts. If art truly succeeds in fostering the well-being of mankind and civilization – or even increase it – it will naturally have a wide appeal and will be cherished and adored. It will have a positive effect on our culture, our civilization and even the quality of our society. It will be grand. This art will be held in high esteem by all layers of society, not just a handful of experts, because everyone will be able to relate to it. Such art will forever remain relevant as it is linked to our well-being, man's only never-ending concern.

A holistic take on art furthermore imposes demands on artists, art philosophers and art critics that far transcend the boundaries of their respective areas of expertise and go straight to what is essential: improving and safeguarding mankind's well-being. Development which does not contribute to this goal, is no true development, it is a failed experiment at best, a disaster at worst.

A holistic view is quintessential to ensure development guarantees our well-being. A sound holistic view will foster a dialog between experts from all sort of areas of expertise (spirituality, arts, psychology, sociology, ecology, philosophy, medicine, sports, business, military, government...). This will contribute to experts being broad-minded in both vision and heart, and enable them to create a culture that has the ability to nourish, strengthen and lighten the human heart and truly advance mankind's well-being.

– Wim Van Aalst 2015

©