

## The Artist's Voice

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*People say that the trees can impede the vision of the forest but the wonderful time of research is the time when the historian can barely imagine the vision of the whole, while the mist that covers the distant horizon has not dissipated yet, while he still hasn't developed the distance from the details of the unrefined documents, and they still maintain their freshness (ARIES)*

Here, I would like to share the mist I'm involved in at the moment, the research I have been doing, which I call, temporarily, *The Artist's Voice*.

Starting with the idea that art is not something to be taught but **to be learned**, I have been asking myself how to come up with a methodology for art teaching. I think that we may be able to find some clues if we go to look for them at the very voice of the artist, or to be more specific, the voice of the artist when it has been turned into a piece of art — the voice of the artist at the moment when it is transformed into image; to think in visual arts terms which is my field of research.

When in 1997 I started teaching methodology of the teaching of art at the University of Campinas, I approached an interesting challenge, to teach how to teach something *unteachable*. I had never imagined that my role would be in the Education Department. I have a degree in painting and visual arts as well as a Ph.D. in Psychology and I have always worked in between art and psychology.

My professional experiences, previous to the University of Campinas, had been the implementation and coordination of art schools for children, public service for the cities of Sao Paulo, Santo Andre and Diadema. In all these projects, I worked with artists interested in education. We were, however, always careful enough not to turn art into some sort of pedagogy, for we knew that in this case we would lose touch with the transgressive nature of art.

Starting to think about how to propose a methodology for art teaching, I went back to my doctoral thesis, which has been my main source so far.

That thesis was born from the question: How does one artist initiate another?

To answer or rather to attempt to answer this question, it was necessary to find artists who would acknowledge that they had been initiated by other artists.

It is a fact that artists do not necessarily come from art schools or universities. It was also difficult to find an artist who would call another his

master or tutor, in the sense that artists usually do not see their learning processes in those terms.

I ended up choosing to work with a Brazilian contemporary artist — Tuneu — who considered Tarsila do Amaral, the modernist painter, his master. I was surprised by this fact for it is impossible to trace influences of her style in his work. At the same time, I was intrigued with her style of teaching for she had allowed Tuneu to be Tuneu and not some sort of clone of herself.

Given the nature of the problem, the method of qualitative research was found to be the best to use and, through non-directive interviews, I managed to trace Tuneu's artistic initiation history. Throughout this process, my main focus was on his artistic life, how he turned his images into works of art and what was Tarsila's role in this matter.

It became clear that Tuneu saw her as the great mother, the sacred womb, a fertile continent for his work. He did not see her, at any moment, as the terrible image of the *exterminator angel* — often associated with the masters in mythical stories. He saw her as someone who, by observing the tendencies of his natural style, would facilitate the perception and realization of those very tendencies as his artwork.

Then I moved to a reflection on the fact that **artists are initiated by their own works**. It is the work of art to be made that requires sacrifice and self-abandonment; and that ultimately leads to rebirth and regeneration.

This idea — which came with all the power and brightness of a visual image at the beginning of my work — demanded two years to be understood and made visible in words. It also guided my understanding in the role of the master as **someone who helps the disciple to see that which will later become his artwork or style**.

Tarsila placed Tuneu in front of his own artwork, revealing to him, step by step, the path he had unconsciously chosen.

I now think that this is the approach we should adopt and sustain in the universities: to allow and help the student in finding his own vision, his own voice.

Therefore, I choose to study the voice of the artist as an image or story for those are the things that challenge me.

My field of research is in the visual artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. I am particularly interested in the observation of the period when they freed themselves from the necessity of representing reality — the moment when the works of art gained their autonomy as objects.

Despite the fact that I work in between art and psychology, I want to make clear that I do not see artworks as symptoms. It is not my interest to try to explain artworks by analyzing the artists' life's' histories. It is, actually, quite the opposite. I feel much closer to Merleau-Ponty's approach when he, referring to Cézanne, said: *the truth is that this artwork required the life of the artist, to be*

*made*. Therefore, I do not intend to look for the roots of the artwork inside the life of the artist but rather to look for the life of the artist throughout his artwork.

Thus, although the artwork is my main focus, I am also interested in finding out more about the desire to create, for I believe artists create because they desire to do so, they need to. They do not create to get more money or success. I would say that they respond to some sort of inner pressure, a pressure that cannot be imposed on them. Like the poet would say: *artists are like gold diggers — they are always looking for something they haven't lost*.

This necessity appears like a bridge that takes me to the realm of yet another old idea: the mythical idea of destiny and fate.

The role of myths in psychology is not to describe or number different types of behavior but rather to broaden our view. They can help us to overcome the boundaries of our understanding far beyond the conditionings of our time and culture.

To understand the issues of my work, I am allowing myself to be guided by poetry and myth. I am looking for the possibility of finding poetry in psychology.

The psychology I am interested in is the one based in the imagination of people rather than in their statistics and their diagnoses. If we apply the poetic mind to the patient's stories, we will find — like James Hillman says — modern forms of fiction, and not scientific reports.<sup>1</sup>

By looking inside the artist's works *from* the very moment when it is defined, my will is to identify the turning points — those times when the artists put everything at risk to find their way. In some cases, the works that have been less understood at their times, appear to be the most important ones for defining the artists' voice. I am looking therefore, at the very edge of creativity, which is expressed in the images produced by the visual artist. Analyzing interviews, biographies and self-biographies, I try to understand how the artists see their own creative process.

Hillman also teaches us how to review the psychology of biographies: *We need a new prism to look at the importance of our lives. I am intending to assault the conventions of biographical perception, which insist that time and the past determine your day.*<sup>2</sup> *Of all psychology's sins the most mortal is its neglect of beauty. There is, after all, something quite beautiful about a life. But you would not think so from reading psychology books. Again, psychology fails what it studies. Neither, social psychology, experimental psychology, nor therapeutic psychology, find a place for the aesthetic appreciation of a life story*<sup>3</sup> *... each life is formed by its unique image, an image that is the essence of that*

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<sup>1</sup> HILLMAN, James – *The Soul's Code*, p. 33

<sup>2</sup> HILLMAN, James – *The Soul's Code*, p. 33

<sup>3</sup> Idem, p. 35

*life and calls it to a destiny. As the force of fate, this image acts as a personal daimon, an accompanying guide who remembers your calling. The daimon's "reminders" work in many ways. The daimon motivates. It protects. It invents and persists with stubborn fidelity. It resists compromising reasonableness and often forces deviance and oddity upon its keeper, especially when it is neglected or opposed.*<sup>4</sup>

I think that we could understand the turning points in the artist's artwork as meetings with his *daimon*, the master of his personal fate. To accomplish such a new vision it is necessary to read their biographies from end to beginning, with no intention of understanding or finding explanations to anything, and having the imagination as our only guide.

Calder was the first artist whose biography and testimonies showed me clues on the actions of the *daimon*. He always said that all his work came from the vision of both sunset and moonrise happening simultaneously. Such image was imprinted in his memory during a boat trip from America to Europe when he was very young. Therefore, when questioned about his main influences Calder says: *The basis of everything for me is the universe. The simplest forms in the universe are the sphere and the circle. I represent them by disks and then I vary them. (...) Even my triangles are spheres, but they are spheres of a different shape.*<sup>5</sup>

We could go ahead and think that all his mobiles sprang from that vision, although it is not that simple. The process cannot be reduced to ordinary "cause and effect" relations. It is based on something much more subtle. It is necessary to look closely at the role of the *daimon* in Calder's case.

Even though he was born in a family of artists, Alexander Calder decided to go to engineering school. When he was a child he had his own workshop where he would spend days and days designing original toys. Asked about whether he thought that engineering had any influence in his artwork, Calder answered: *it made things simple for me that seem to confound other people, like the mechanics of the mobiles.*<sup>6</sup>

We could have thought that choosing to go to engineering school was a mistake. It was clear that his imagination would not fit that profession. However, if we read that choice through the *daimon's* intentions, Merleau-Ponty's idea would become evident : the artwork yet to be made required an education as an engineer.

When Calder quit working as engineer and surrendered to art, he started by making action figures with wire. It was a simple hobby, he was just playing with toys. Then his observations of a circus led him to recreate them, first by drawing and latter by working with wire. That work, which started as a game,

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<sup>4</sup> Idem, p. 39

<sup>5</sup> Kurt, Katharine – Op. Cit. 2000, p. 39

<sup>6</sup> Idem, p. 41

was caught on film by Carlos Vilarebo and remains as an exhibition at the Witney Museum in New York City. After that, Calder kept doing artwork in various forms. He will always be known, however, as the inventor of mobiles.

It is interesting to see that the invention of the mobiles came from the observation of a rather static artwork: Mondrian's painting. As Calder said : *The mobiles started when I went to see Mondrian. I was impressed by several colored rectangles he had on the wall. Shortly after that I made some mobiles; Mondrian claimed his paintings were faster than my mobiles.*<sup>7</sup>

Records of such aesthetic leaps are not easily found in artists' words, but those are the very leaps – which I call *perceptive short-cuts* – that I am interested in finding. They are something that cannot be controlled or guided and that is why they are so intriguing.

Back to the search of a methodology for art teaching, it might be possible that the images I am researching may start feeding the imagination of my students who pretend to become art teachers. I hope that the encounters of the artists with their *daimons* may inspire the students to look for different ways of teaching their future students. We might then, find a way to teach art, that is based on the imagination process.

There is today, in Brazilian schools, the practice of making the students do so-called *re-readings* of artworks but these *re-readings* are just copies. Students have been forced to copy the works of Miró, Paul Klee and etc. The teachers have replaced colouring books with Donald Duck and Mickey Mouse with reproductions of artists' work. But the *daimon* does not respond to patterns. I cannot understand how such practice could possibly promote *perceptive short-cuts*. Maybe they can help some children who, for some reason, are able to find in those images some of their own inner images. But to help a broader number of students, the teachers should present them with a larger number of diverse images from different artists. And for that to happen they – the teachers – have to be as curious as their student's imaginations are.

Every time when I work with teachers that are not specific art-teachers, I try to show them as many different artists' images as I can. I ask them to observe and perceive what the images are saying. Quite often they say: *Oh, the artist was doing something so interesting* – meaning: figurative or literal and then when the artist uses abstraction– they say: *Wow! Now, he messed up!* However, I have been noticing that – even after making remarks like these – their drawings change after their encounter with the new images. They start drawing beyond the “house with child and sun on the sky”.

At the beginning of my presentation I referred to Aries. The point in time when the historian can barely imagine the vision of the whole... a point when we have not developed the vision that comes from distance. Although it is

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<sup>7</sup> Idem, p. 41

not always easy to pinpoint *quantum leaps* in the works of artists, I have my vision in focus – despite the mist – searching for those important moments.