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Art as a Social Learning Experience: Art in a New Emerging World

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Abstract: The paper delves in viewing art as a communicative social learning experience as artists and their audience interact. Viewing art in such a holistic manner with all creative factors taken into consideration and guided by valid communication theories enhances our understanding of the relevance and importance of art given the development challenges people face today. Art works best by improving the quality of the shared social space from which values and ideals emanate and actualized through a social learning experience.

Keywords: art as communication; metacognition; art and asean challenge; art and the environment; creativity and communication; art and development; art education

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the study

The study of communication has made steady progress as developments in related fields of psychology, information technology and even the life sciences contributed to our understanding of human communication. As such, the traditional media of communication and expression came to a new light offering fresh views and insights on an old-age subject matter such art and its concomitant purpose.

It may be possible to re-appraise traditional ways of communication and expression given these new theories which are broadening and deepening our understanding about ourselves and about the world we share with the rest of humankind and other life forms co-inhabiting the planet.

It is the objective of the study to re-evaluate art given new insights in the field of communication.

Specifically, the study seeks to expound on the following themes:

1. Art viewed in a communication perspective can provide new and useful insights relevant to the cultural enhancement as a whole.
2. These new insights in art can have a profound implication in promoting art and art education in the country. Art effectively impacts on popularizing ecological, developmental and scientific education goals of the country, the triumvirate concerns facing our people and communities especially in the developing economies such as the ASEAN countries.
3. These new insights can help lighten up the challenges to artists and cultural workers involved in art promotion.

1.2 Theoretical framework

The constitutive view of communication views communication as “an ongoing process that symbolically forms and re-forms our personal identities” (Craig, 1999), a different view from the usual mechanistic model of communication wherein a sender sends a message to a receiver. Participants



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in a communicative event do not simply send facts and data to one another, but rather take facts and data and acquire meaning through the process of communication, or through interaction with others. Craig in his attempt to unify the academic field of communication theory suggests the whole field of communication as several traditions which have specific views on communication. This study uses a combination of traditions to view the process of communication. They are the following: the socio-cultural tradition which views communication as the production and reproduction of the social order and the semiotic tradition which views communication as the mediation by signs.

1.3 *Art as an expression, a form of communication*

Communication as it involves construction of meaning (Lukianova, 2015) necessarily operates at the meta-cognitive level wherein construction of meaning is codified prior to articulation .

Art as a way of communicating, by inference therefore, operates at the same plane as communication. Reality depiction, meaning construction and expression are readily recognizable iterative creative and social learning cycles.

To view art as purely for expression is an age old narrative for students of art and communication. Art is generally viewed as expression of feeling and idea using the elements of art and principles of design (Grey, 1964). The exclusivity of art (Sappir, 1957) as it usually ends up in galleries and as art collections of art patrons begs the question of whether art can or should be broadly communicative. Language which in itself is a symbol is no different from art as both are means for man's impulse to express and communicate symbolically. Language is the vocal realization of reality expressed in words whereas art is a non vocal form of signifying using images, music, and gestures (Grey, 1964). Language and art are both means of communicating with each form being more appropriate than the other given specific communicative events. For instance, art such as music can reveal nature of feelings with detail and truth that language can not approach. Paint may tell a story with immediacy and simultaneity of effects that would be impossible in words. Man is social and

has the propensity for 'cooperative behaviour,' an attribute of the behaviourally modern man along with other "universal patterns such as cumulative cultural adaptation, social norms, language, cooperative breeding, and extensive help and cooperation beyond close kins (Hill, 2009)." Man's cumulative cultural adaptation is what differentiates man's social learning from animals and it allowed man's rapid adaptation to many environments. Underlying man's modern behaviors such as abstract thinking, planning depth, and symbolic behavior (e.g. art, ornamentation, music), are cognitive and cultural foundations (Hill 2009).

1.4 *Views on what is art?*

There may be other views which run contrary to the major assertions of the paper one of which is that art should be viewed in the context of art as an expression, expression being its fundamental purpose. Thus, to view art as a communicative event may dampen the exalted position of art as for example, a testament to higher human faculties and ideals.

Philosophical discussions underpin the question of what makes a work of art (Wartenberg, 2011). Plato and Aristotle argue for art as being the faithful reproduction of the look of things in the natural world. The thesis of intentionality proposes that the intention of the artist is a crucial element in determining that something is a work of art. The thesis of institutional theory of art proposes that a work of art treated as art by the artworld makes it a work of art. Another view is David Hume's *Art as Object of Taste* and Immanuel Kant's *Art as Communicable Pleasure* which propose that what makes an object's being a work of art has something to do with its properties and not the way in which people regard it. Clive Bell's *Art as Significant Form* asserts the existence of a cultured elite, knowledgeable about the arts, and hence in a better position to pass judgment on such matters. There is also the question of whether the application of aesthetic concepts make something a work of art. Martin Heidegger's *Art as Truth* proposes the authentic mission of art as the revelation of the historical world that produced it, Nelson Goodman's *Art as Exemplification*, Arthur Danto's *Art as*



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Theory, Carolyn Korsmeyer's *Art as Feminism*, Adrian Piper's *Art as Fetish* views contemporary art as the possibilities for novel expression.

Nonetheless, viewing art in terms of communication concepts could greatly expand our understanding of art. Finding ways to incorporate art into the everyday and finding its relevance in the most mundane of human activities may greatly enhance our appreciation of art and the effort to popularization of the medium as an essential skill set in the fast changing and dynamic world.

1.5 *Communication theories may apply to understanding art*

Agenda setting and uncertainty reduction theories are used in this paper to situate art given current knowledge in the field of communication. Agenda setting is defined as the ability of news media for example, "to influence the salience of topics on the public agenda" (Griffen, 2008). It stresses the susceptibility of people to mind setting and dangers of social manipulation. If an item, for example, is given more focus and exposure, the audience could be conditioned to assume that the issue is more relevant and important. In contrast, other items which could be more essential but given less coverage could be dismissed or ignored in the public mind.

So, if a news item is covered frequently and prominently, the audience will regard the issue as more important.

Uncertainty reduction theory meanwhile posits the core logic of communication related behavior patterns to reducing uncertainties to reduce anxieties in a relationship development (Griffen, 2008). It stresses the importance of prior conditions before the actual communication process. For example, in the case of art, preparation for a public exhibit is equally important in effectively actualizing the goals of a communication exercise, which in this case is expressed in visual form.

The two theories form a basic construct of understanding in which art could be framed and evaluated.

2. METHODOLOGY

Different types of art forms, including visual art, music, and theater production were selected and evaluated to illustrate how art can be viewed and appreciated through a communicator's lens. The three mini-case studies were illustrative of using an artform as a medium of communication.

Kwok's (2016) "Five-Dimensional Approach to Conceptualizing the Interplay of Image, Emotions, and Senses" was adopted. Kwok's method used dimensions to gain a broader understanding and knowledge on the "interaction of emotion and cognition" as well as the "interplay of the senses in the process of constitution of meanings and feelings."

These five dimensions of Kwok are as follows: *expressed* or the general message understood by the viewer; *method* or the technique and approaches adopted by an artist to represent the expressed; *picture* or the painting itself as a denotation system presenting the pictorial cues; *the unfolding process* or that carried out by the spectator when unfolding the the pictorial cues and *the dwelling process or that* experienced by the viewer as induced by contemplating the painting.

For the purpose of the study three dimensions were selected but modified to satisfy the application criteria implied in the framework. The dimension "*dwelling process*," was modified to correspond to the cognitive process being undergone by a participant in an art event or exposure to a communication material and this dimension was used as the focal point in viewing music as in the case of the song of Joey Ayala.

The dimension "*expressed*" was modified to correspond to the message being conveyed by a communication material. While the dimension "*method*" was modified to correspond to the creative process and the devices used in the production of the communication material, in this case a theatrical production.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Case 1: The message as intended: the visual works of Manuel Garibay and Carlo Dimaano:



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The selected works of Carlo Dimaano and Manny Garibay, two visual artists, describe different themes. The untitled work of Garibay depicting a man with an outstretched arm over a young girl strikingly set in a church setting is an example of agenda setting. The power of art to direct to a particular set of items and possible meaning constructs can be illustrated in this image.

Carlo Dimaano's 'Hamburger' depicting runaway consumerism in society is another illustration of the message which an artist wishes to convey and can very well be another application of agenda setting.

Visual art as it depicts reality at a glance somehow creates an added dimension in how we seek to understand the world. It defies continuity and in some sense, negates sequential thinking which audiences are accustomed to do as far as for example, information seeking is concerned.

As Garibay and Dimaano aim for social relevance using their art forms to encourage social awareness, their artworks illustrates the agenda setting power of the art to influence their respective audiences. In one of the many instances wherein the author discussed art with Dimaano, the artist expressed his interest to highlight the relevance of history so he consciously uses for example, some Baybayin symbols as art elements in some of his works to convey his message to viewers of his works.

Garibay, considered one of the leading social realist painters, stressed in one his talks held at the New College of Arts and Sciences Auditorium, University of the Philippines held on February 9, 2017, that even though his paintings remain unaffordable to the poor and the oppressed, who are depicted in many of his art pieces, he is conscious of reaching out to these communities through direct interaction and public exhibitions of his works whenever opportunity allows. According to Rod Pattenden who wrote the introduction to the religious themed coffee book - *Where God is: The Paintings of Emmanuel Garibay*, "Garibay wants to wake his audience to the awareness that they are being held captive in their imagination to a form of believing that belongs to the colonial past."

Case 2 The creative process involved in a theatre production by Edward Perez.

"Friendship by Chance," a play written and directed by Edward Perez revolves on the issue of money laundering

and LGBT issues (lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender) which although may not be related exposes prevalent concerns in the same social space. The interweaving of events, characters, and circumstances is made possible given the communicative devices available to a thespian. In this play, Perez attempted a method which can be considered "experimental" to narrate the basic story line as the circumstances become more complicated during the progression of the play.

An interview with the client scene was employed to handle the characterization of one of the major characters, a defense attorney in a money laundering case. How the seemingly unrelated issue of LGBT with money laundering was revealed by showing the link between the defense attorney who is a closet gay and who later in the story was revealed to have had a previous affair with one of the accused.

The method employed in a play must not only satisfy the criteria of story-telling using the play as a medium but must be creative enough to keep the attention of the audience on how the play unfolds in the duration of the play until the logical ending when contradictions are resolved and questions which may be running in the minds of viewers following the progression are resolved.

Case 3: Cognitive process of the audience: a song of Joey Ayala ang a song of Tulsianes

A song by combining elements of music, poetry and preferences affords an artist to enhance his or her communicative prowess. The power of poetry to evoke imageries present views through the use of symbolism. This is further strengthened by the accompaniment and its almost narrative melodic patterns and rhythmic beats. A performance highlights the song as it is presented to the public.

Joey Ayala's "Walang Hanggang Paalam:" tackles the grim prospect of death and loss in a haunting manner. Ayala's message is more on the personal plane and tackles the anxiety due to uncertainties presented by loss of a loved one, the a priori in circumstances of entangled lives of people afflicted with the feeling of loss associated with death.

It may be noted that the song became popular in the 1980s in the progressive social sector identifying with the song as a result of separation anxiety in circumstances where loved ones left for the hills to fight against the dictator. In this case, many of listeners of the song missed



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the intended message of Ayala, using instead their prior association of what "Walang Hanggang Paalam" symbolizes.

"Bata" a song written by the group Tulisanes, a progressive organization oriented towards promoting pro-people and socially relevant songs, depicts a society coming to grips with the dire consequences of poverty and describes what life is to the "batang busabos" or street children who are left to fend for themselves in a hostile street environment. The song is straight forward enough living not much chance to misinterpret the intended message of the song. This straightforwardness is suggestive that confusion as to the message of a song could be avoided.

4. CONCLUSION

While there may still be contentions as far as viewing art under communication precepts are concerned, the outcome of viewing art as a communicative event do not at all blemish a work of art. On the contrary, artists, cultural workers, educators, policy-makers, and the viewing public may benefit more once the reason why art is essential to sustained social development is properly articulated. Art still works best by improving the quality of the shared social space from which values and ideals emanate and are actualized through a social learning experience.

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