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The Challenge of Art to Psychology. Seymour B. Sarason. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990, 188 pages, $25.00.

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Seymour B. Sarason argues convincingly in *The Challenge of Art to Psychology* that "the capacity for artistic expression and development is universal," but for most people "artistic activity is extinguished relatively early in life." Creative fires are doused for many reasons, reasons which Sarason examines, contemplates, and probes productively. The implications of Sarason's explorations of the ubiquity of the creative impulse and its pervasive annihilation are sweeping: ultimately, in fact, he contemplates how "worldviews constrain our thinking about what people are and could be."

Sarason's prose is admirably lucid, his argument is clear, and his presentation is straightforward. This is no jargon-laden psychological treatise whose purpose is primarily to dazzle colleagues and to inflate the author's intellectual currency; rather it is a work intended to convey its thesis to readers as effectually as possible. Sarason recognizes that the impact of his book will no doubt be minimal, but his argument also makes it clear that, although worldviews change slowly, as long as "the gulf between what is and what can be, what is and what should be, seems unbridgeable," the recognition of symptoms "will shed light on changes taking place in a world our society hardly understands." This book facilitates the recognition of symptoms.

The Challenge of Art to Psychology opens with "The Argument in Summary." The argument is then fleshed out, bolstered, and expanded in subsequent chapters. An open-minded reader would have to work very hard at not being persuaded, for this book is extremely persuasive. It is as persuasive in its implications for all disciplines as in its challenge to psychology, and Sarason does cut across disciplines. He supports his theses with evidence from a number of realms: pedagogy, film direction, film music, poetry, writing, acting, translating, gardening, the world of prodigies, and even the aesthetic arrangement of a home's furniture. He moves with ease across disciplines not only because he is widely knowledgeable, but also because his definition of the artistic impulse is not narrow. He recognizes that the impulse to artistic activity seeks outlet in many areas; in fact, Sarason argues that the current limited view of what is "art" and what is not art contributes to the destruction of the impulse to create.

Sarason, indeed, deals immediately with the usual reaction to the word "art," that which is housed in museums. In fact, in "The Unfolding of Artistic Activity," a chapter

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devoted primarily to the remarkable work of Henry Schaefer-Simmern at Southbury (Connecticut) Training School for mentally retarded individuals, Sarason first says something about the school itself as a work of art: "We are not used to thinking about and judging a complex set of physical structures, especially a state insititution, as a work of art . . . ." Nor was Sarason predisposed to do so when he arrived at Southbury in 1942. He was "a victim of the pervasive educational and cultural bias that not only told us what was art and where we could find it, but rendered us conceptually blind to the countless ways in which people engage in artistic activity."

Sarason's eyes were opened by Henry Schaefer-Simmern, who demonstrated that "institutionalized, mentally retarded 'children' could develop as artists." Sarason includes a sampling of work by Southbury residents, by residents of a New York reformatory with whom Schaefer-Simmern had worked, and by a social worker. These, and the narratives which accompany them, are eye-openers. They make concrete Schaefer-Simmern's focus on *process*: the created work as a realization of an "internal visual conception," a created reality that transcends mere copying. Sarason is adept at explaining Schaefer-Simmern's notions to the non-artistic, as the bulk of his audience may well think of themselves. He has wisely included representative Schaefer-Simmern narratives with the visual samples from the studio. Selma, for example, was a thirty year old with an IQ of 49. Her first drawing is shown on the same page as a drawing by a seven-year-old child, and it seems comparable in style and achievement. Her second and third drawings, at a glance, are little changed. But Schaefer-Simmern is no ordinary viewer. "Selma's creative activity," he wrote, "may appear to many observers as insignificant. But these tiny signs of creativeness become of great importance if they concern individuals who are usually thought of as creatively sterile. Although the results achieved will always, in terms of normal potentialities, remain comparatively modest, their effect upon the feeble-minded producer may be of decisive consequence." And Selma, over the months, struggled with the problems of the artist. She developed "better" blossoms and leaves for her trees, she worked to adapt parts to the whole in order to fit her conception to the size of her "canvas." Schaefer-Simmern explains how she met creative difficulties, and his narratives are simple yet perceptive accounts of the developing artistic impulse: "It is interesting to note that the alternating color rhythm found in the blossoms and leaves previously drawn is applied in the pictorial realization of her fish. Again the same principle occurs: a visual cognition reached by the creation of a previous configuration of form is applied in the formation of another, similar, structural order."

These narratives, in conjunction with the pictures, help convince the reader of the validity of Schaefer-Simmern's "one belief and one 'theory.' " "The belief was that artistic activity was a universal human attribute. The theory was that artistic activity developed in stages, each of which had a governing cognitive principle of visual conception, beginning with scribbles and circular forms and proceeding to stages requiring the use of perspective. The process by which an individual creates visual forms in accord with his or her state of development is also the process by which the individual gets formed in some respect. It occasioned no surprise in Schaefer-Simmern that this process and development altered people's conception of themselves and how they looked at their world."

No matter how cogent a theory, it can have little effect if, at some point, it is not presented lucidly in words that encompass all disciplines, words that are accessible to virtually any reader. Sarason the writer displays this virtue, and obviously, so did Schaefer-Simmern. It soon becomes clear that while Sarason was open-minded enough to be receptive, Schaefer-Simmern's manner of presentation must have played an important part in his conversion. At any rate, it is easy to understand how Sarason eventually came to see that the arrangement of buildings Southbury was absolutely "art," and that Mr. Roselle, the Director of Southbury was certainly an artist. Sarason learned to go beyond the response "I like it. It seems beautiful"and to think of product as the result of a process, and the man whose internal vision was imposed upon outer reality as an artist. "Mr. Roselle was an artist who in creating Southbury as a visual form remade himself and his world. It was not that he had a 'special' gift but rather that I (we) had the narrowest conception of who is an artist and what is artistic activity."

Taking this new view of artistic activity seriously, agreeing that the artistic impulse is universal, leads to an examination and reevaluation "of the emphasis placed on the development of logical-scientific thinking as a preeminent goal informing the socialization and education of children." Sarason makes some startling connections, pointing out that while B.F. Skinner's emphasis on "the acquiring of logical-scientific modes of thinking and investigating" is obvious, almost unnoticed Skinner places "coequal value . . . on artistic activity from a developmental and social standpoint." Skinner finds the neglect of the "atrophying" of the artistic impluse in children especially puzzling at the hands of psychologists, whose curiousity has been stimulated by Piaget's attention to the phenomenon. If great thinkers whose bias is logical-scientific have not investigated this phenomenon which, undeniably, they have observed, and if their disciples have not been moved to make the investigation, could it be that the accepted logical-scientific bias in the current worldview makes such an investigation nearly impossible? Probably. Consider the vast amount of time that passed before serious investigations of that ubiquitous medium television began. Although Sarason does not specifically suggest the possibility, other researchers have pointed out that television appeals primarily to the non-linear "right brain," imagination, if you will, whereas any examination must be made through a linear, logical, "left brain" approach. To oversimplify, somewhat, the current logical-scientific worldview is essentially negated by those things it does not deal with effectively – or it negates them.

According to Sarason, Schaefer-Simmern's uncompleted "magnum opus" contains " 'visual data' . . . from scores of societies: in the present, the near and far past, so-called primitive and otherwise." The diminished artistic impulse is not characteristic of "societies in which over a lifetime the members engage in some form of artistic activity." And, obviously, such societies must also value artistic acitivity to a degree that our own does not.

Sarason makes a number of exciting inductive leaps. He points out that question asking, like the artistic impulse, is ubiquitious among humans. Question asking, and surely this is not mere coincidence, suffers the same fate in schoolrooms as does the artistic impulse. Sarason, writes, "It took me a while to become aware of the obvious: the classroom was not a place where children asked questions. They answered, they did not ask questions." Why, Sarason asks, have so few studies of question asking – as obviously critical to cognitive development as it is – been made? Oddly, like the artistic impulse, it has not been taken seriously. In fact, it is a part of the artistic process, "albeit one that has hardly been noted or studied." Sarason expresses the connection well: "Precisely because it is a process that requires the choice and use of materials to produce a configuration appropriate to an internal visual conception, it engenders problems, and therefore questions, about how to achieve the sought-for configuration. It is quite the opposite of 'copying' that conception." Both learning by asking questions and art, in short, force an individual to construct a reality. The logical-scientific approach to teaching seeks the "correct" answer to a question, and the logical-scientific approach to art encourages a near reproduction of reality as it forces children to judge their art by one standard: how nearly it approaches reality. The implications for pedagogy are astonishing; the system fails students because, above all else, it is backwards.

It is difficult to summarize Sarason's book, for although he restates, recapitualtes, and reiterates his thesis at regular intervals, his thesis constantly accretes meaning and implication. The turmoil of adolescence, for example, is often characterized by attempts to put a personal stamp on existence. Creativity resurfaces as adloescents try to forge an identity. Why, Sarason asks, have psychologists not been engrossed by this phenomenon, and why has it not been connected to the artistic impulse which is, certainly, an attempt to put one's individual stamp upon reality? Unfortunately, artistic activity is often seen as the antithesis of science, and science is the cornerstone of the current worldview.

Sarason devotes an entire chapter to John Dewey's *Art as Experience*, which attempted to destroy "traditional dichotomies." Readers with a literary bent may be surprised to see how closely Dewey's view approaches that of the great innovators of twentieth century literature: Eliot, Yeats, Synge, Beckett, and Joyce, all of whom attempted "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience." Because our society has removed art from everyday life, placed it within the walls of institutions, and made it the exclusive purview of an elite few, the quality of life has diminished. To intensify the problem, as Sarason notes, "The ahistorical, culturally socialized theorist, no less than almost everyone else, is unaware that putting art to a realm of its own has been conditioned by a particular social-economic-intellectual history. And that unawareness permits the theorist to assume that he or she is dealing with 'the nature of things,' insensitive to how 'the nature of things' has undergone transformations."

And this is the Sarason method: gradually expanding what seems to be a very narrow and specific argument until he has called the very worldview we absorb into question. Most people have been "consign[ed] . . . to an impoverished psychological existence" by the current worldview in western society. While the causes may be social, historical, intellectual, and even economic, Sarason does not, for a moment, let psychology off the hook: "A psychology that begins and ends with what people are, with what they appear to be, and only minimally and unimaginatively faces up to what people can be is at best an unproductive psychology and at worst an unwitting colluder with other forces in the underestimation of human potential. Artistic activity is special because of the challenge it represents to our conception of how human nature and nuture transact."

This is a magnificent book, one that even in its brevity (188 pages, including references, index, and pictures) explains a great deal. It is a book the reeducates its reader, forcing him or her to view art from a new perspective, and to view "reality" with the question-asking impulse reactivated. But it is a book that must be rewritten many times and in many ways before its effect begins to be felt, just as it has been written now and then in the past. Surely Sarason is in the grand tradition of Swift, Blake, and Voltaire, who presented this same theme, albeit differently. Although Sarason himself is less than optimistic about psychology, seeing artistic activity as "a symptom whose explanation will shed light on changes taking place in a world our society hardly understands," had he not written this book, the rest of us would have even less cause for optimism than he.