

Gilbert Clark

## Art Education's Future

### Three Views

*In our impatience with any present state of affairs the future always looks as if it could be better. It is perhaps another sign of spring (and an indication that it has indeed been a long winter that art education has been living through) that there has been a certain amount of speculation in the literature about just how things are going to get better. Clark, somewhat playfully perhaps, classifies such speculation under three heads. That which selects the future from what one admires in the past, or "past-future" prediction. That which projects the future from the trends of the present — whether feared or admired, whether electronic or humanistic — called "present-future" prediction. Finally, and presumably most realistic — though least knowable — comes "future-future" prediction, based of course on the unforeseen developments that will in actual fact come about. He illustrates this last concept, perhaps difficult to express in words, with a graphic figure — posing the Journal a challenge in reproduction that has proved quite the least difficult we have ever had to solve.*

I am not sure . . . there is any point in predicting the future of art . . . It may even be the duty of a small group of artists and writers to refuse to predict anything and to concentrate on getting from day to day with impunity . . . (Taylor, pp. 27-28)

I recall that, when I was a young boy, I would be intrigued when my parents drove past exotic little white cottages with signs that read "Clairvoyant," "Let me read your palm," "Amazing tea-leaf readings," or, even more intriguing, "Let me read your future in the Crystal Ball." Those words were accompanied with garish decorations, of stars and planets or of hearts, diamonds, and spades, that were painted on the walls of those road-side cottages. Such words and symbols piqued a curiosity that was never satisfied. I was too afraid of those mysterious places, and the even more mysterious people that I imagined to be in them, to ever venture near or go inside.

Today I am equally intrigued by the exotic skills and symbols of modern-day futurists. Their symbols, seemingly rational printed words, also pique my

curiosity in ways that have yet to be satisfied. Today's clairvoyants, or futurists, sometimes frighten me the way the road-side fortune-tellers did when I was young. The words of today's futurists have the same mysterious aura as the *Romany* of those Gypsy fortune-tellers that I remember from my youth.

As the United States and Canada enter the 1980's, there have been thousands of words written in both countries to review the discordant Sixties and the docile Seventies. Many of the January issues of popular magazines in 1980 featured amusing analyses of the most obvious failures of past futurists. Yet, in the same issues, modern glib futurists were called upon to titillate readers with their predictions and prophecies.

As we are reminded, *ad nauseam*, that Orwell's *1984* is soon to be, art education has not been spared the oracular augury of the futurists. A few brazen art critics and art educators have erected their own road-side cottages. Perhaps I can rectify my youthful failure to succumb to the clairvoyant's lure by entering and analyzing the unfulfilled promises of today's futurists.

I perceive three kinds of futurism to be read: past-future (future as past), present-future (future as present), and future-future (future as future). *Past-future* is future prediction based upon revival of materials, events, movements, and ideas that are selectively admired from the past. *Present-future* is future prediction based upon extensions of materials, events, movements, and ideas that are selectively admired in the present. *Future-future* (more difficult to define) is prediction of the future based upon hitherto unforeseen materials, events, movements, or ideas.

### **Past-future art education**

Past-future prediction is not a science. It has its origins in a romantic veneration of the past, or — more typically — of some particular aspect of the past. Past-futurists are those who view the past as stable and nurturing and, from fear of a future beyond control and predictability, want to revive selected elements and interject them into the future. The blatancy of back-to-basics is obvious; this is past-future wishfulness in the extreme. Such faith is founded upon a conception of art frequently mirrored in the art survey courses we all took in college, that began with cave paintings and stopped with French Impressionism as the end-all of art history. In art education, such faith is founded upon the feeling of security, so fondly recalled from the past, of knowing just what ought to be in the classroom. There are, however, two camps of past-future art education.

One group is portentously serious in its pursuit of back-to-basics; its members would revive the French Academy as a model for the art classroom of the future. Students would learn techniques and skills in rigidly prescribed and absolute instructional units. Revivals of type-solids (three-dimensional geometric forms) as instructional aids for the development of drawing skills, of mechanical

and free-hand drawing, and of industrial-arts projects mark these save-the-nation extremists. Thus, back-to-basics art education should be "rigorous and substantive and . . . produce measurable outcomes." (Down, p. 35) It is difficult to challenge such goals, but the means recommended for reaching these goals are out of phase with the educational present. There is a spirit of "rah-rah" for Meritocracy in this form of past-future art education.

Another group, with a different vision of back-to-basics art education, would create a future with the art classroom as therapeutic clinic. The creative child, the act of self-expression, and the fluent-flexible originality of a child — unfettered by the imposition of adult standards of art — are the foundation for this group's faith that "art is basic."

I believe that the greatest contribution . . . to the art of children is not to interfere with their natural growth. Most children express themselves freely and creatively if adult interference does not inhibit them. (Lowenfeld, p. 10)

Thus, the art teacher who teaches best won't teach at all in this vision of art education. Self-discovery and creative expression are the catch-words of this version of past-future art education in which *all* children are creative and every child can realize his or her potential Self. It would be undemocratic to challenge such goals, but the means recommended for teaching these goals are rather psychological than educational. These two visions of back-to-basics art education share wishful longings for answers that were found in the past, but fail to face inevitable questions about art education's future.

### **Present-future art education**

The typical futurists of today are much more of the present than of the future. They are "triumphantly rationalist," and their rationalism is based upon "the sweet orderliness of charts, graphs, and logical analyses." (Trippett, p. 92) Yet their rationalism and faith in the projection of trends is often distorted or thwarted by optimistic or pessimistic views of the present. Their hopes for the present, whether utopian or skeptical, blur their visions of the present-future.

Dour predictions (Illich, 1971; Lanier, 1976), starry-eyed prophecies (Leonard, 1976; Dobbs, 1976) and even what appear to be tempered predictions (Clark, 1975; Shane, 1979) are, more often than not, entertaining but futile. Many writers have predicted forces and events that have not taken place and will never take place. They believe that the present is a window into the future, but it is one that may be clouded by personal viewpoints or by a misplaced faith in incremental, predictable change.

One of the most frequently recurring beliefs of the present-futurists is that technology will, at long last, solve our problems. One of the most common predictions of educational futurists is that all past claims made for electronic

media will yet be realized in the future. Those who champion such futures must believe that electronic equipment will be available in all classrooms, that the equipment will always work, and that the equipment will be used as it was designed to be used. These beliefs are shaky underpinnings for such faith in a technologically functional future. We read, for instance, that television will revolutionize the delivery of learning systems to children and that it will almost, but for government intervention, wipe out the publishing industry "just as Gutenberg inadvertently terminated the careers of *scriptoria* writers in medieval times." (Shane, p. 243) We also read that media will make possible "asteroid sculpture and galactic light shows" and "huge screens in public places will replace the quaint movie theaters of the Twentieth Century." (Dobbs, 1976, p. 11) A commonly shared prophecy (Toffler and McHale, 1973; Dobbs, 1976; Lanier, 1976; Lewis, 1976) is that existing information-sharing systems will bring holographic, aural, kinetic, and optic images of all of the great Art of the past into Everyman's school, learning centre, or home; this will be, of course, all in credible colour and sonorous sound.

The education of an electronic, computer-dominated world of tomorrow seems to be a popular vision. Even the world of the arts has shared visions of an electronic computer-Mother who will nurture her children (art students) with "inputting electronic impulses," "patterned tactile stimulation," "weapons movies," and "a radically new techno-economic system with new, post-bureaucratic forms of organization." (Toffler and McHale, 1973) Such terminology *sounds* futuristic, but it is commonly found in the interfaces of computer-speak and in the low-budget science fiction movies of the present. Such talk has flowed freely from the pens and typewriters of art educators as well. Brouch and Kula (1979) foresee a series of educational probes and scenarios in which learners cope with alphabetically acronymed machines, computer programs, byte-a-disks, and behavioral tasks. Brouch and Kula's computer-dominated world is presented by Dobbs as a present-future description of "some of the specific skills which might constitute the content of a future art program." (1976, p. 196)

Another form of present-future is predicated more upon market analyses than upon technological innovations. In this pragmatic future, the artist and art educator will strive simply to anticipate and satisfy the most common demands of the public; galleries, museums, and theatres, as well as television, will offer art that has the lowest common denominator. Artists who best satisfy the pulse of the public will receive the greatest critical recognition and the totality of public funds available to the arts. In art education, this pragmatic present-futurism will be expressed in textbooks that consist solely of popular activities identified through market research. It will forthrightly support art classes in all forms and forums that may attract the greatest numbers of people and unchallengingly satisfy its pleasure-seeking clients. Just as the modern food industry "is skewed toward anything that can make a buck and away from anything that improves quality," (Serrin, p. 18) the pragmatic-future art and education industries will be

led by technologists who survey and satisfy the greatest possible public demand. All of the support mechanisms that might be needed to implement this projection of pragmatic, present-futurism exist today.

In what appear at least to be rather less romantic, less mechanistic, and less pragmatic visions of art education's future, certain present humanistic trends are also projected.

Any attempts to deal with the future, except perhaps those of science fiction and utopian literature, require that we view certain changes taking place as trends. (Anzalone, p. 16)

Smith (1972) predicts a future in which organizational, theoretical, and practical questions of policy have been solved. In fact the aesthetic education of the year 2000 is being used by Smith "as a bit of a ploy to elicit your interest in a contemporary intellectual development that is increasingly referred to as futurism." (Smith, 1972, p. 15) McFee (1974) describes a future in which today's environmental and ecological issues are taken seriously by schools and particularly by the schools' art teachers. Shane (1979) describes a utopian and humanistic future in which free, open education is available to *all* people, regardless of age or cultural origins, and 'technovations' that would make it all possible. The editorial staff of *Ms* magazine (1977) envisages a future in which women-artists dominate neighborhood poetry readings, women-artists are working seriously in many creative forms, and a feminist critical tradition is developed. Osborn (1978) describes a humanistically utopian future in which critically important people are trained by the schools to make such required decisions as the future will demand. Each of these futuristic visions has some appeal and each of them is easy to understand. They are easy to understand particularly because they are described in the capabilities of the present.

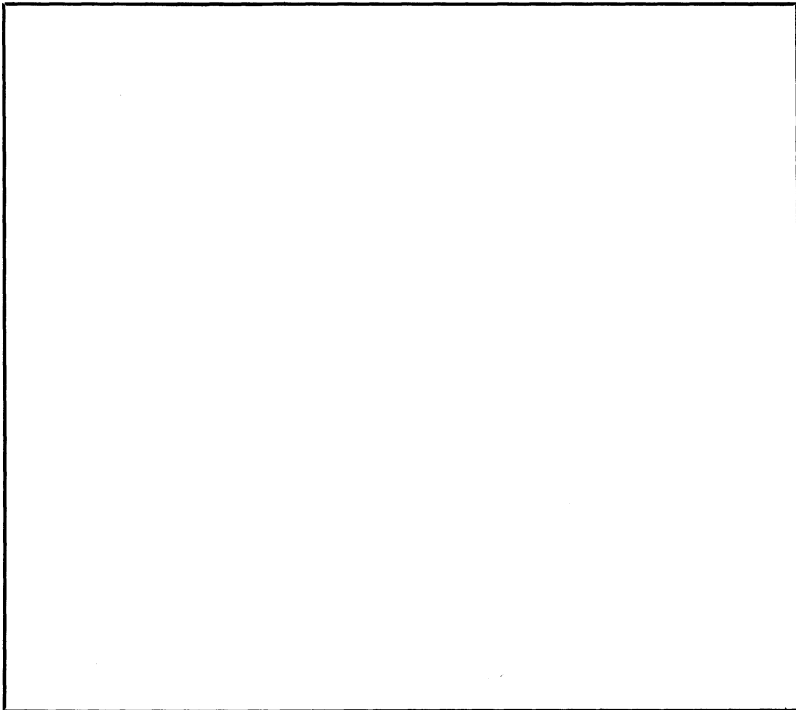
One last writer remains to be analyzed in this discussion of present-future projections. He is Vincent Lanier, whose writings are insightful and entertaining. He is sometimes serious (Lanier, 1974) and often times provocative (Lanier, 1976). In "The Future of Art Education, or Tiptoe Through the Tea Leaves," Lanier (1976) postulates art education's future as what he believes it should be. This is a future with (a) qualitative and demanding goals that are related to aesthetic aspects of the world, (b) immediate access to the world's storehouse of art objects accompanied by expert narrations in various languages and levels of difficulty, (c) art learning opportunities available to all people in all situations, open every hour of the day and every day of the year, and (d) the term "creativity" finally joining such terms as '23 Skidoo' in obscurity and oblivion.

### **Future-future art education**

This section is going to be brief. No one in art education has really dared to write a future-future projection of what art education may ultimately become.

Some general futurists and education futurists have shown their understanding that the future of education will reflect future social, economic, political, international, and human history (Eisner, 1976; Smith and Smith, 1977; Knight, 1978; Anzalone, 1979; Fantini, 1979; O'Donnell, 1979). Obviously, future-future prediction of art education is a demanding task. One particularly poignant, contemporary observer has described the effects of the honesty of the late 1960s as "a legacy of insufferable and interminable candor" and a future that will demand "self-control, self-discipline, stoicism, decorum, and even inhibition and a little puritanism." (Morrow, p. 86) Whether this, or any other, image of the future is correct remains to be seen. People may talk intelligently about the future as the past or as the present, but there is no crystal ball that will actually allow us to see the future as future.

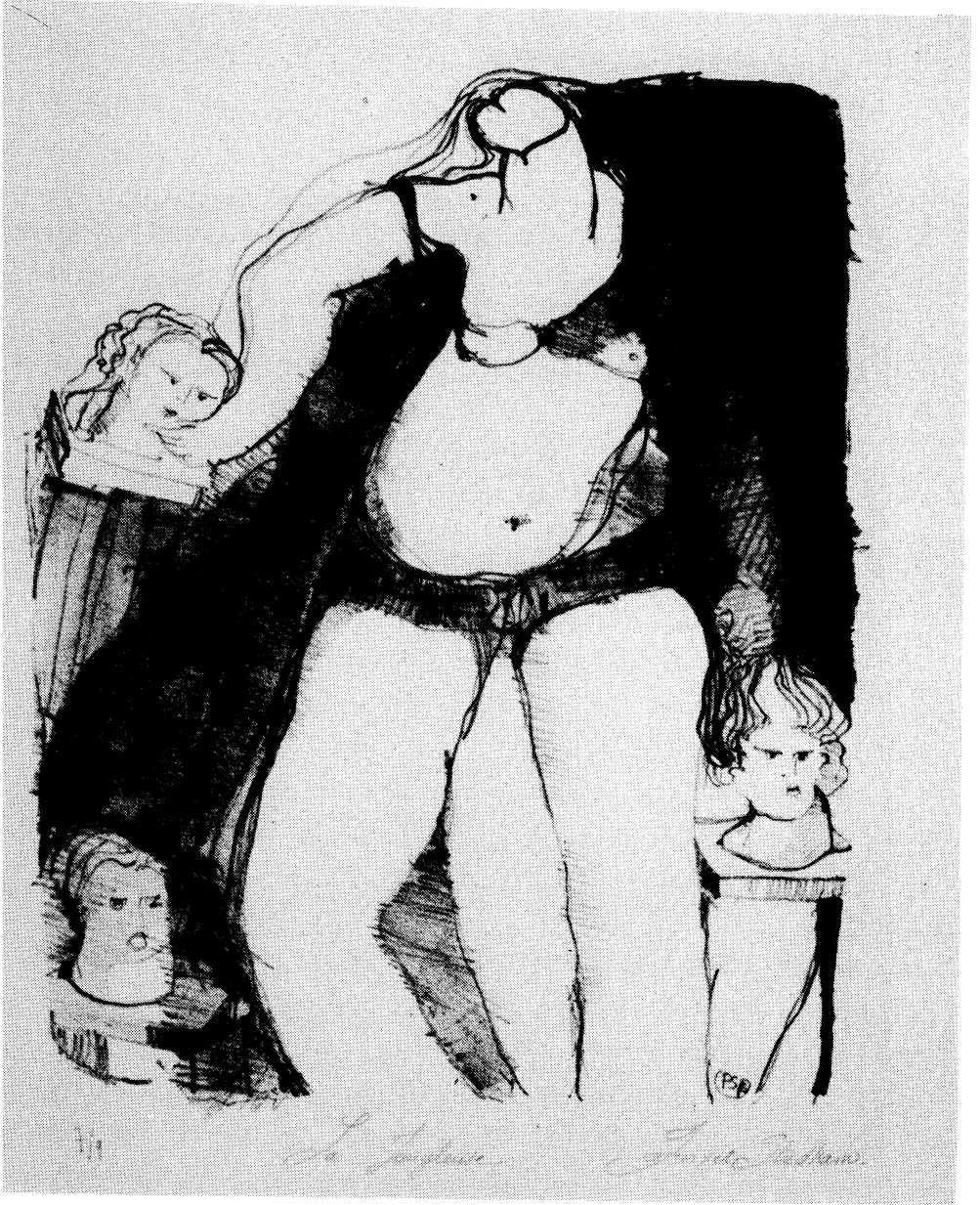
*Art Education's Future-future*



Obviously, we cannot write the future simply as we wish it to be. The future *will* be, regardless of our wishes. There are few things we can predict with knowledgeable confidence. One is that we, as art educators, will be subject to both criticism and acclaim, as education of all kinds has always been. Another is that art education has a future-future.

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