ABSTRACTIONS OF VISUAL ABSTRACTING

HARRY HOLTZMAN

THE TWO DESIGNS reproduced on the covers of this issue of the General Semantics Bulletin (see page 569) were made by Margaret Nelson, who classifies herself nowadays as housewife and mother, and Lillian Charney, Executive Secretary, Canadian Home & School & Parent-Teacher Federation. Both products emerged during the course of my workshop at the Institute’s summer seminar-workshop at Bard College last August.

It will be of some interest to those who have not attended these annual intensive sessions to realize that the designs are not the result of an emphasis on producing ‘art’ objects. Although this kind of association and appraisal is not irrelevant or undesirable, it is more interesting to know that the workshop is conducted directly as a laboratory for the application of GS methodology. Outside the context of the seminar-workshop itself, it may be difficult to grasp the relevance of these formings as the consequence of applying such principles as non-identity, visualization, silent levels, orders of abstraction, process of abstracting, consciousness of abstracting, etc.

The two works reproduced are results of a gradual displacement of the tendency towards identification. Here the exercise was to employ ‘letters’ as
shapes found in a magazine, and to use them as material for experiencing sensory-visual order, rather than as ‘words.’ In fact we are able to refer to the lab as a workshop in visual, non-verbal abstracting, and in this way the products relate to the general symbol-forming processes implicit in general semantics.

Very few of our students come from the fields of the arts, and most have very severe feelings about their abilities and limitations to express themselves with any form of ‘artistic’ mediums. (‘I can’t draw,’ “I can’t carry a tune,” “I can’t dance,” “I can’t ... ”) Thus the workshop becomes an elegant ground for applying the methodology from standpoints of self-involvement, self-discovery, and self-appraisal. It also permits the correlation of individual and social dynamics with learning processes and situations.

It has always been a pleasure to me, in my six years at these seminars, to be able to work with a group of people who have the common denominator of general semantics as an evaluative frame of reference. This mutual denominator seems to give the unusual ability to work simultaneously at two conscious levels: to be able to become individually and experimentally involved in the field of visual abstracting, and at the same time to be able to examine and realize the implications of this activity in a comprehensive manner.

General semantics makes a clear and sharp distinction between the ways we verbalize about the total process we call life, and the process itself — which is not verbal. Through this emphasis we become capable of communicating a new, inclusive dimension for understanding the forms and systems of human behavior. We can become free of the static stereotypes and dogmas characteristic of the linguistically naive. As we become clear about the structural differences between systems and means of representation and the events they refer to, blockages — both individual and social — quickly disappear. We become capable of evaluating the limitations of verbal and non-verbal forms of behavior and their effects upon us.

By establishing a consciousness of abstracting and scientific methods of representing and communicating the processes of abstraction, Korzybski provided us a common denominator of culture — that is, human behavior at its best. Insofar as this methodology is entirely generalized concerning human behavior and evaluation, it includes “modern art.” In this relationship it can be stated that most of the confusion, argument and prejudice in this field dissolve rapidly under analysis with the use of general semantics.

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