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Visual Culture Art Education:

The Means and Ramifications of the Postmodern Pedagogy for Teaching Visual Art in the
Contemporary Classroom

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Within the last few decades, the social culture within the United States of America has been engulfed by advancements in the ever-evolving field of technology. The birth of this technological age has reshaped the manner in which we, as a society, understand and inform our daily routines. The informational surge begins during childhood with exposure to the limitless images displayed on television, computers, video games, and most notably the Internet. Put into perspective, technology once a rare commodity, has now become a staple motivator in the visual assault of many North Americans who unknowingly subject themselves to the influence of socially produced and mediated imagery. However, this influence of visual imagery is not simply contained within personal routine, but rather also permeates the public space of the classroom resulting in the expansion of curricular opportunities within the discourse of visual art education.

As the technological domination came to fruition during the 1990s with the introduction of the Internet, the field of art education searched to adopt a contemporary approach to teaching that reflected the image-laden world in which we lived. This search resulted in the introduction of the postmodern pedagogy currently recognized as visual culture art education (VCAE). The model not only stimulated critical thinking through visual investigations by combining traditional art practice with technologic innovation, but also allowed contemporary art educators to expand curricular possibilities for their students. As a ramification of its inherent connections to social culture, the visual culture pedagogy is critical to ensure the continuation of art education as it reinforces the importance of the discourse within academia. Moreover, visual culture pedagogy becomes an arena for fostering integrated learning. In other words, I believe visual culture is the means through which the field of art education can make a positive impact in K-12 schooling because it serves as an advocate for the visual arts to no longer “simply survive at the margins of education,” but rather become an indispensable division of the school curriculum

(Rabkin & Redmond, 2006, p. 60). Visual culture art education brings the school art curriculum into the 21st century making the discourse more competitive in relation to traditional fields of study by realigning its content with the postmodern character of our social culture.

To better understand how the teaching of visual culture aligns with postmodern thought as it pertains to the field of art education, it is important to first define the term and later apply this definition to a discussion of pedagogic practice. The term postmodernism is perhaps best understood when compared to its former modernist movement. Barrett (1997) characterized modernism as beginning with the Enlightenment and culminating with the work of individuals that included Isaac Newton, Rene Descartes, and Immanuel Kant. He wrote, these individuals “shaped the age intellectually by the beliefs that through reason one could establish a foundation of universal truths” (Barrett, 1997, p. 17). This notion of the universal truth embodied the rationalism of the period’s key thinkers, including at the forefront of this claim, Kant himself. Siegesmund (1998) stated that “the 18th century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1790/1987) posited a faculty of taste as governing aesthetic judgment” (p. 204). Sturken and Cartwright (2001) argued:

Kant believed that pure beauty could be found in nature and art, and that it is universal rather than specific to a particular culture of individual codes. In other words, he felt that certain things inevitably and objectively are beautiful. (p. 48)

In other words, “Kantian good taste was grounded in bourgeois disgust and horror at vulgar pleasures” (Duncum, 2008, p. 124). Duncum asserted, “aesthetic perfection in the Kantian tradition meant the rejection of the unpleasant, crude, and rude—and instead focused solely on the pleasant and the sublime” (p. 124). What is more, Barrett (1997) claimed that modernist thinkers upheld several predominant aesthetic beliefs about art which included “creativity,

originality, and artistic genius; a respect for the original and authentic work of art and the masterpiece” (p. 25).

In addition, modernist concepts also included a focus on “democracy, capitalism, industrialization, science, and urbanization,” all of which were recognized by the “rallying flags of freedom and the individual” (Barrett, 1997, p. 17). Put differently, the notion of the individual was protected at the core of modernist philosophical thought. These ideas not only effected modernist art previously created, but also served as a catalyst for the subsequent, contemporary postmodern movement.

The term postmodernism is complex and “evolving with the speed of other relatively new concepts, and a single, generally accepted definition has not yet emerged” (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996, p. 27). Barrett (1997) explained, “there is no unified theory of postmodernity,” in which he described the model as lacking any sense of unanimity (p. 17). Originally used to describe the realm of the aesthetic, Efland et. al (1996) explained that:

The term “*postmodernism*” (or “*post-Modernism*”) was first commonly used in the art community to describe a style of architecture that is disjunctive and open, in contrast to the conjunctive and closed spaces often seen in modernist buildings. (p. 27)

When it was later applied to other art disciplines beyond architecture the term postmodernism expanded to include a larger sphere of aesthetics. In contemporary usage, the term is noted “to signify the whole sociological climate and phenomena that makes shifts in the arts possible” (Efland et al., 1996, p. 28). In other words, postmodernism involves “the aesthetics of the everyday” (Duncum, 1997, p. 155).

In addition, as a reaction to the aforementioned philosophy, postmodernist thought is void of a universal truth and rather emphasizes “multiple perspectives” (Efland et al., 1996, p. 27).

Postmodernism lacks a linear movement and according to Barrett (1997) “might be better called anti-modernism” (p. 17). For example, Efland et al. (1996) wrote, “the postmodern condition involves a focus on process” (p. 28). This condition not only creates a sense of fragmentation but also simulates “the chaotic character of life” (Efland et al., p. 28). Efland et al. (1996) state:

An important message of postmodernism for general education and art education is that teachers should make their students aware of the many layers of interpretation that exist, that continual flux influences and shapes understanding, and that this flexibility of knowledge is vital because it enables creative thought. (p. 46)

In other words, our contemporary, postmodern society is a complex system of instability and resembles what Wilson (2000) calls a rhizome.

As defined by Wilson (2000), the term rhizome “refers to a continuously growing complex underground system which puts out lateral shoots or roots or tubers at intervals” (p. 31). To clarify, the rhizomatic approach reiterates the postmodern value to “decenter the individual,” and instead substitute emphasis on the collective (Barrett, 1997, p. 20). In this definition, Wilson applies the term “metaphorically to describe all sorts of complex non-hierarchical systems,” which is inherent in postmodernist, visual culture art education (p. 31).

Visual culture art education (VCAE) is a multipart, critical pedagogy aligned with the aesthetic theories and philosophic thought of postmodernism. Duncum (2001) wrote:

The shift from art to visual culture appears to represent as fundamental a change in the orientation of our field as the shift from self-expression to a discipline base in the 1980s. Arguably, the present shift is more fundamental because the previous shift involved a different approach, not of subject matter. (p. 101)

The visual culture approach submerged students into a plethora of images “plucked from everyday life experiences” (Duncum, 2006, p. 15). In VCAE these images become the root of critical thinking exercises guided by the postmodern concepts of art and design. In other words, images from daily life become the scaffolding from which students construct and interpret meaning through visual exercises. Visual culture art education engages students in high-level, cognitive explorations of cultural images by challenging them to critically evaluate the content. Hicks (2004) stated that interaction with “such aesthetic forms enables students to engage key features of their lived experience while at the same time, reaching into realms outside the familiar” (p. 287). The curricular goal of VCAE is to instill in students the ability to construct their individual understanding of society through in-depth and meaningful engagements with everyday images. Toward this goal, the classroom becomes a space to “widen and deepen student understanding of the cultural landscapes we inhabit” by preparing students to respond to the images of popular and material culture (Efland, 1992, p. 118).

Material culture is a term that is broad-based in its meaning and application, and according to Bolin and Blandy (2003), “describes all human-made and modified forms, objects, and expressions manifested in the past and in our contemporary world” (p. 249). Material culture is then, “a descriptor of any and all human-constructed or human-mediated objects, forms, or expressions, manifested consciously or unconsciously through culturally acquired behaviors” (Bolin & Blandy, p. 249). That said, I see material culture as means for students to make interdisciplinary connections, and ultimately allow art educators to prepare informed citizens and consumers. Bolin and Blandy (2003) contended:

Art educators can uniquely contribute to this preparation of citizens by promoting the investigation and appreciation of the broadest possible range of objects, artifacts, spaces, expressions, and experiences. (p. 246)

In other words, the visual culture curriculum strives to involve students in their own cultural landscapes by providing them with images from a variety of sources, including the mass media.

Duncum (2001) wrote:

Since, as Postman (1985) argues, “the clearest way to see through a culture is to attend to its tools for conversations” (p. 8). Television and now the Internet are our dominant tools, in educating in and about images has become a critical manner. In a society where, for example, mass media is concentrated in only a few hands, and television news presentation is like a vaudeville act, the seriousness, clarity and even the perceived value of public discourse turns, as never before, on understanding visual images. (p. 103)

This use of mass media generated imagery as inspiration for a classroom curriculum is exemplified in the work of University of Illinois alumnus Sherri Polaniecki.

In the classroom, art educator Polaniecki and her students’ investigated how visual imagery is socially consumed via the culture of mass media. With this, Polaniecki’s visual culture curriculum encouraged students “to learn, respond, and reflect on the images that impact their own lives directly” (Duncum, 2002, p. 132). For example, in the unit entitled “Teaching Through TV: Transformative Encounters with Constructed Reality,” students watched clips from popular television shows through a lens of critical inquiry. Afterwards, together the class dissected the imagery presented in the clips through an investigation of the elements of art and design including: color, balance, scale, composition and etc. Polaniecki’s students critically examined the aesthetics and the ideology of such images, paying acute attention to how this

information is visually conveyed to the audience. Included in this nine-week unit was an assignment during which students investigated *The Osbournes*—the popular MTV reality show that documents the domestic life of singer Ozzy Osbourne and family. The goal of the assignment was for students to question whether or not this was the portrayal of a “typical” family. Duncum (2002) maintained that this inquiry easily lends itself to discussions of family types, societal stereotypes, and television censorship issues, which all become important topics for further investigation, reaching beyond the walls of the art classroom, and allowing for interdisciplinary educational opportunities to materialize.

For example, in Polaniecki’s art room, students engaged in discussions not only about the aesthetics of the television show but also discussed the broader social issues presented with the series. This sample VCAE curriculum illustrates how visual culture art education provides students with opportunities to move beyond conventional classroom content and tap into explorations of real-world issues. Moreover, because the VCAE curriculum promotes open classroom discussions of social issues in manageable pieces, students are able to construct their own understandings, values, and ideas about the world at an early age. Bolin and Blandy (2003) explain that:

Because of its association with critical theoretical perspectives, visual culture studies links easily with critical pedagogy and social reconstruction, both of which have been researched and implemented within art education. (p. 247).

However, in the postmodern classroom, art educators grapple with the challenges associated with designing and implementing a curriculum that “embraces a multifaceted landscape,” which can allow art education to compete for funding and its place within K-12 schools (Lackey, 2003, p. 201). In other words, with the bounty of resources available to enhance the art making

experience stems the need to make effective and deliberate curricular choices, which integrate art knowledge with the current social issues as explored in the vein of the visual culture pedagogy.

Today, I believe art educators need to consider and re-evaluate the means and ramifications of the effective integration of cultural imagery as prescribed by the visual culture pedagogy, in order to enhance student awareness of the visual world we live in.

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