

# Art Educators' Responsibility to Cultural Diversity: or "Where Are You Goin Wid Alla My Stuff?"

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The responsibility of art educators to recognize and study the art and context of as many populations as possible is examined in this article. Examples of how artistic expressions have been borrowed, used in different contexts and otherwise removed from their original cultural context are given, and examples of ways that art teachers can help to recognize origins and the artistic functions of many cultures are suggested. By placing art in its context and studying it as it changes, students may begin to understand the artistic source, appreciate the importance of the creative context, and begin to see multi-cultural dimensions to artistic appreciation.

i want my stuff back  
my rhythms & my voice  
open my mouth  
& let me talk ya outta  
throwing my shit in the sewer  
(Shange, 1975, p.53)

This powerful expression by Ntozake Shange responds to the cultural invasion she knows as an Afro-American woman. Her history has been silenced, her expressions devalued or used and owned by Anglo-American society. These kinds of statements of protest, anger and pride are easily found in Afro-American literature especially since the '60's. Other cultural groups including various ethnic groups, feminist women, unrecognized and devalued occupational groups and differently abled people are beginning to demand recognition for their artistic expressions. They ask that their expressions be seen and heard, valued within their own contexts and appropriately credited (Blandy & Congdon, 1987). Speaking about ethnicity, Toelken (1981) reports:

Probably no other country in the history of the world so dramatically accommodated so many different ethnic groups in such a brief time period. The results have been both exciting and traumatic.... It

is very likely that our ethnicity is exactly what helps us to keep our sanity in a multicultural country. In any case, we know that ethnicity is difficult, if not impossible, to eradicate. Hitler tried it, and failed. We have occasionally tried and failed: Hispanic students were kept after school for speaking Spanish even on the playground until very recently, and American Indian students were beaten for being caught using their own language. Eskimos and other northland peoples were required by educators and missionaries to burn their traditional masks and give up their traditional dance. Immigrants from Asia were exploited, tortured, excluded, murdered" (p.10).

It is not only the minority's art works that the larger society has often misunderstood and misrepresented. In addition, the manner in which they can be most appropriately appreciated has often been ignored by the overriding use of the formalist approach and formalist language in our criticism structures (Hamblen, 1984; Congdon, 1986). In fact, Albrecht (1968) goes so far as to

say: "This process represents not a military or political invasion of the world, but an artistic one" (p.393).

Art education, in large part, reflects the established art world's values and the educationally accepted theory of the day. Because of an adherence to the often narrowly defined views of acceptable art and art criticism structured by the art world, and so-called "correct" educational methodologies proposed by educational institutions, art educators have for the most part, often done a disservice (to put it mildly) to the culturally diverse populations of the world.

It is the responsibility of the art educator to recognize the art and content of as many populations as possible, including the critical approach taken to appreciate it. Students should learn respect for themselves and their neighbors in schools and other educational institutions by recognizing and appreciating quality works of art from diverse cultural groups. The lives of all students will be enhanced if they can view art from a variety of cultural perspectives, art criticism structures, and diverse approaches to aesthetic valuing.

Art teachers should attempt to identify the origin of the form and content of an art work, and give credit to and attempt to gain an understanding of its function. Often, work is "taken" from the minds and hearts of others, and those individuals and cultural groups are now asking for their deserved recognition. Just as secretaries in the movie 9 to 5 demanded credit for their creative energies stolen by their boss, Afro-American women justifiably want recognition for Bo Derick's cornrows. (Art educators often overlook these kinds of art expressions in their curricula). Matthews (1982) points out that many women will no

longer "silently let Kenneth Nolan and Frank Stella be applauded for paintings that used quilt and Navajo motifs without insisting that these women-made artifacts be treated as seriously as man-made paintings" (p.6). The recognition of these ignored and undervalued art forms demands responses that focus our attention appropriately on their aesthetic value and meanings within their cultural context.

Talk about art is increasingly being recognized as an important means which enables us to see. When we begin to understand the power of speech, we can begin to acknowledge its importance in portraying meaning. J.E. Brown (1976) believes that the greatest disaster to happen to Native American groups has been the loss or weakening of their respective languages. This trend should not be allowed to continue with Native Americans or any other cultural group. Not only should art educators do our best to understand the perspectives embodied in varying languages, but we should acknowledge and utilize words, phrases, and dialects in the English language which may help to expand our perceptions (Congdon, 1986). "Language determines what we see and how we see it. Before we have a word for something, we can hardly see it at all. Once it is named we see it everywhere, in abstract as well as concrete things" (Bernard, 1981, p.375).

Two instances in which I was unable to understand a communication because of lack of language structure come readily to mind. The first came while videotaping an Afro-American furniture refinisher in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. On camera, and in conversations with me, the artist was articulate and clear (based on an evaluation from someone with academically trained standards for communicating). From time to time throughout the four-day shoot, he would turn to his family

and shop workers, speaking to them quickly in a dialect I could not decipher. John Mason was not being rude; he was simply being himself.

In the second instance, the speakers wanted me to understand them, but I did not have the necessary experiences to do so. During the late 1970's, while I was working in the Women's Section of the Milwaukee County Jail, the inmates and I jointly decided to produce a videotape on drug use in the inner city to show to the predominantly Anglo-American suburban audiences supporting our educational program. The women had loosely written a skit on which they improvised while they practiced. It involved a few people obtaining a variety of drugs from pushers and using them. The words, the phrases, and the dialect they used confused me. No academic course in drug use could have prepared me for this experience. This was a group of women with whom I had good rapport, and yet we became so frustrated with each other over issues of authenticity and communication that the video was never made.

But I learned something valuable: the means of expression is important. Learning to translate, to extend our perceptions, and to stretch our world views is a necessary part of good learning. The performers in this jail video should not necessarily have changed what and how they spoke. Doing so would have compromised their reality. In this case, other ways should have been found to get the message across (handouts could have been made with words, phrases and definitions; subtitles could have been used on the film; a workshop could have taken place) before the video was shown. The goal of communicating the drug reality could have been accomplished without taking away from the expressive reality of the participants. The two cultural groups could have found a way to

talk and listen to each other without "being" all one way or another.

In the case of John Mason, and for many of the women in the jail experience, it was second nature for them to move from one very different way of speaking to that of the established Anglo-American world. Many Afro-Americans, Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans, and others have learned to make two (or more) worlds come together by taking Anglo-American forms of expression and creatively making them their own. For example, in what has become to be known as Afro-American folk art, distinct styles have been identified where "white forms and techniques become conduits for black ideals" (Vlach, 1978, p.150). Examples of these kinds of expressions may be found in quilts, walking sticks, ironwork, jugs and crocks, the banjo, shot-gun houses, concrete grave markers and modern coiled baskets. Anglo-American's use of Afro-American communication forms has often been exploitive, discrediting Afro-American people rather than respecting their contributions. The established art world needs to try harder to understand, for example, Afro-American expressions within their own context. When these contributions are understood and utilized in the dominant culture, such understandings convey dignity and respect for the place and people of origin.

For example, a class could study the metaphors of voyage and vision which are expressed in much Afro-American art.

The voyage represents both a desire for deliverance from the physical limitations of life--and an affirmation of belief that the world is full of majesty and mystery and worthy of scrutiny. It is a voyage from and a voyage to, a poignant yet proud expression of hope for temporal salva-



tion; the vision, too, promises redemptions and deliverance and is seldom primitive or moralistic, but is based on the hope of the salvation and even apotheosis of the maker in another more perfect world. (Livingston & Beardsley, 1982, p.51)

Based on that statement, the student could study the work of Minnie Evans and her "visions" (Johnson & Ketchum, 1983); James Thomas and his "futures" (Ferris, 1975); or Philip Simmons and how he "arrives" at designs by "getting futures" (Vlach, 1981, p.91). One can study the Afro-American tendency to reveal in sculptural form what already exists in the carving materials, as with Jesse Aaron (Livingston & Beardsley, 1982) and Harmon Young (Johnson, 1978). A teacher could then talk about how this approach is similar and different from that of Rodin, who said, "I don't make the hand --it's there inside. I just cut away everything that isn't hand" (quoted in Horwitz, 1975, p.22); and of the traditional Eskimo Approach to carving, which is like singing a song that is within you: "When you sense a form emerging from ivory, you release it" (Carpenter, 1961, p.362). There are likenesses here, but there are also expressions of differing cultures, of varying languages and world views.

These approaches should not be too easily simplified, and their origins should be remembered and understood. The way Julian Schnabel has used cracked plates is different from what Zora Neal Hurston's character, Grandma, means when she says to Janie, "Have some sympathy fuh me. Put me down easy, Janie. Ah'm a cracked plate" (1937, p.37).

I want my callused feet &  
quik language back in my  
mouth  
fried plantains  
pineapple pear juice  
sun-ra & joseph & jules

I want my own things  
how i waz when i waz there  
you cant have them or do  
nothing wit them  
stealin my shit from me  
dont make it yrs  
makes it stolen  
somebody almost run off with  
alla my stuff

(Shange, 1975, pp.53-54)

Stealing, misplacing, misunderstanding, and ignoring a person's art, aesthetics, and expressions about them is debilitating. As art educators, we need to work much harder to broaden the scope of the art works we study in order to increase and celebrate the varying approaches that can be taken to art criticism, and to embrace the many functions art has for humanity.

A lengthy unit could be developed on art within a traditional Navajo context. Sandpainting could be done by males and weaving by females (Witherspoon, 1977), and this gender separation could be discussed in both the Navajo and the classroom context. Parts of the Navajo History textbook (Yazzie, 1971) could be read and Navajo curriculum guides (e.g., Chacon, Begay, Huenemann & Begay, 1978) could be followed, for example, to learn about weaving tools, looms, the function of weaving, and Spider-woman, long before the actual weaving process is begun.

The emphasis on meaning and preparation in art rather than actual doing of the project could be emphasized with the Navajo-made films instigated by Worth and Adair (1972). The language of the Navajo, which makes it difficult to talk in anything but the present tense, should be discussed (Witherspoon, 1977), and children could attempt to see the world in a continual process of being and becoming, rather than placing so much emphasis on the past and future.

The cat's cradle string designs could be studied in terms of Navajo

stories and their relationship to the stars, the sun, the animals, and all of nature (Toelken, 1979), and the importance of repetition (as opposed to the valuing of innovation) can be proposed as a valuable characteristic of life and art. Since Navajo culture stresses a learning-by-observing rather than a "trial and error" approach (Saville-Troike, 1984), a teacher could represent the lesson in this fashion. For the Navajo, all knowledge is already present; it must only be learned. In this respect, education is more like cultural preservation than "changing truths."

A teacher could also explain how the Navajo are more careful about speaking than are most Anglo-Americans. This can be demonstrated by the teacher by sitting silently with a child before asking a question. Since traditional Navajos do not believe in saying their own names, because it violates "a sociolinguistic constraint...[and] a religious taboo" (Saville-Troike, 1984, p.47), a teacher could model this world view and attempt to explain it to the students, thus better assisting them in understanding other ways of approaching reality, values, and art.

Color theory can be taught from the Navajo perspective by using dyes rather than tempera paints, and by making blue and green one category while dividing black into two. During the winter months, while animals are hibernating, Navajo stories may be told. Students could study hogans, their shape, and the single door facing the rising sun (Hurdy, 1970). They might envision how living in a hogan would be different from their own homes, and what it would be like to be raised as a baby in a cradleboard, perpetually feeling securely hugged and placed in a vertical position rather than lying horizontal in a crib or on the floor (Toelken, 1979). One could discuss how the visual world

and one's thought processes become more circular, rather than linear.

If art educators can present art to our students in a manner where both the context and the object are studied, the lessons will be more valuable. No one will be running off with anyone else's "stuff," and we will be creating an atmosphere in which learning about varying cultural groups can take place in a celebrative and respectful manner. Ridington (1981) paraphrases anthropologist William Duff: "The form of images from another culture may satisfy our eyes, but to satisfy the mind we must relate them to meaning in our lives" (p.246).

Students can study how something presents itself visually, why it is presented in such a manner, and how it relates to them as individuals and members of varying cultural groups. For example, students can learn how the Chilkat blanket expresses the Northwest Coast Indian idea that two figures can exist in the same place at the same time (Celebration, 1982; Holm & Reid, 1975). They might study how and why the art from these Northwest Coast Indian cultures varies only slightly (Holm, 1981), and how one piece can tell a story, placing something seemingly static in motion. One Tsimshian spoon, for example, is described by Duff (1981): "The figure in the centre...seems to be Raven who has become voraciously hungry, and wanting to eat the bait off the halibut fisherman's hook turns himself into a halibut, gets himself caught, and then when he is cooked he comes out of the halibut again" (p.211). As critics, students can question how these expressions relate to them and expand their worlds.

Teachers might also sensitize students to the artistic concerns of feminists, therefore engaging them in one of the more critical issues of our times. The recent activities of the Gurrilla Girls, their art,

and their motivations can be discussed (Heartney, 1987). Women's art at Greenham Common could be studied (Brett, 1986), and the class could discuss how that art might be different if the peace activities were instigated and owned by men.

A teacher could present the idea that the American English language is hostile to women (Bernard, 1981), and guide the students into speaking with language that more closely respects women and places them in equal partnership with naming the world. A Feminist Dictionary (Kramarae & Treichler, 1985) could help set guidelines and inspire discussion.

Students could attempt to develop a female model of creativity which "would emphasize sensitivity, nuance, openness, holism, and intuitive taking-in behaviors" (Collins & Sandell, 1984, p.34). Lessons could then be taught in this mode, and art criticism structures could follow. Art as collective purpose, as expressed in quilting bees, could be discussed and tried by all students (Dewhurst, MacDowell, & MacDowell, 1979; Holstein, 1977). Women's art as biography in quilts, needlework, and denim could be studied, and then that theoretical approach could be applied to art expressions dominated by men. Kachina dolls, Eskimo dolls, and Anglo-American dolls could be compared visually and in terms of cultural functioning, keeping in mind gender expectations in the various cultures. If women and girls have their own "stuff," they can begin to determine what they want to own, what they wish to identify with, and which things they will care to disown. If viewed within their own cultural context, meanings of art forms will be more readily understandable to all students.

Teaching about art in its context may easily be extended to

include political/cultural issues regarding museum exhibitions. Jones (1986) implores us to consider the museum's response to the Eskimos, who traditionally use art as a verb, as something to be carved and not saved. If it is an act, rather than a product, should it not somehow be presented as such? For many Native Americans whose aesthetic values are identified more with process (motion) than product (lack of change), attempting to preserve art works compromises the impulse to re-create, to make something reoccur. Jones asks if we should not listen to the Tlingit woman who says that totem poles should be allowed their traditional fate which is to decay and return to the earth.

Issues should also be raised over who owns certain stories, masks, and songs. For example, several cases have recently been brought to court in Alaska challenging an individual Tlingit who sold clan objects (Jones, 1986). The same problem exists with stories that have been published by Anglo-American ethnographers. If students know about the context of art objects they can ask when it is not in the best interests of the community of origin to place them in a traditional museum which may often substantially change their meaning.

this is mine  
this aint yr stuff  
now why dont you put me back &  
let me hang out in my own  
self

Art educators cannot ignore art's context. If we do, we ignore humanity and deprive students of many opportunities to expand, to imagine, and to dream: history is denied, language ignored, and stealing overlooked. There is a richness of expression within all cultural groups. The recognition of that creative spirit within its context will result in an enriched society for everyone.



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#### Author's Note

The theme of this paper and some of its narrative, as well as the last part of the title, come from Ntozake Shange's book, For Colored Girls Who have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf. The title comes from page 52.

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