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The War of Labels: An Art Educator in Search of A Sign

jan jagodzinski

I recently had the occasion to go shopping with my twelve year old son Jeremy who is now finishing grade seven in a Canadian public school. He had somehow (mysteriously) saved twenty dollars and was determined to buy a T-shirt. Coming from the boomer generation, T-shirts for me were either those funny Stanfield undergarments that my dad wore under his dress shirt (to absorb the sweat during hard work, I suppose?) or what gang members with duck-tails in the '50s wore under their leather jackets to look cool - like the 'Fonz' of *Happy Days*. During my college art school days, the days when you had to 'smoke' to find yourself in your art, the T-shirt changed into psychedelic colours as we flower children began to tie-dye them. They became a sign of protest against the plastic world, hand made and, of course, "authentic." From that point on, T-shirt culture seemed to have vanished from my consciousness. I was dimly aware that they were worn with all kinds of humorous sayings, or by runners who unwillingly wore all kinds of sponsor logos on the sleeves and backs of their 'free' T-shirts. And, oh sure, grade school art students would often paint their own designs on them; you know, the usual album

cover paraphernalia or comic book hero characters. A white or black T-shirt without a logo was almost a novelty. It either looked cheap or dressy depending on the material it was made of. But apart from that, a T-shirt was just a T-shirt. (A friend of mine recently told me that T-shirts of the late '60s can be read as graffiti and vandalism, a form of non-membership and anti-establishment in contrast with the days when "bomber jackets" became stylish. The bomber jackets were an extended identification of the pilots with their planes; their plane's name appeared on the backs and sleeves of their jackets. Both motorcycle jackets and T-shirts poached this style.)

After an hour and a half of walking through the mall I was becoming tired. At first I walked briskly with Jeremy, side by side, thinking his shopping wouldn't take long. But, in a very short time, I realized that it was going to be very hard to please him. He went from store to store, checking here, checking there. I soon fell off pace and began to walk behind him, protesting loudly (but not in anger) that he should make up his mind. Nearby shoppers snickered at this. Obviously this is a common experience for many parents. It didn't take long before I was envious of those seniors who were sitting on benches, asleep or mesmerized by some distant memory as they stared into space. Eventually one store looked very promising. (We were to return to it three times.) The first time I pointed out T-shirts which were a little over twenty dollars. I told him I would throw in the extra couple of dollars just so that we could leave. It didn't work. The "Guess" T-shirts were too common. When I asked, "what's the matter with them?" he told me I wouldn't understand. His eye then caught the Mondetta T-shirts. I looked at their price tag, a whooping thirty-seven dollars! Their label had been embroidered with silk, embossed. It felt bumpy to the touch. Mondetta, written three different times with three different colours appeared on the front. Would I give him the extra seventeen dollars? he pleaded. He would do anything for those seventeen dollars - wash my

car, rake the lawn for spring - anything. I was firm. "No, Jeremy. I can't afford that." We left for home, Jeremy mumbling something about needing to save up more money.

I came home the other day from university. "Like my shirt?" Jeremy asked. "It's a Cross shirt." "Very nice," I said, not knowing what a "Cross shirt" was. In the past years I had been subjected to his Varnet and Chip and Pepper T-shirt craze, his "Guess" jeans and "Gap" clothes and, of course, who can forget "Doc" shoes and the "pump" basketball shoes that made him look like he was wearing shoes which were four sizes too big for him to give others the impression that a seven foot 2" giant rather than a five foot 1" 'midget' occupied them (all parents of pre-teens and teens must know this by now). Almost all junior high boys now wear their pants below their hips, as if they are almost falling off. (I asked my "informants" from where did such a fashion statement start? One twelve year old girl insisted it was *Madonna* who started this fashion by wearing her jeans as if they were bikini bottoms. Whereas Jeremy insisted it was *Kriss Kross* who had started the style; they had even worn their pants backwards!) Hats, displaying every known football, baseball and ice-hockey team imaginable, have become such a sign of resistance now that most schools have forbid them. Last year a doctoral student and I interviewed both jr. and sr. high school students about their locker spaces. We found Calvin Klein advertisements by the bucket loads. The "Poison" perfume advertisement appeared everywhere. But a "Cross shirt," that's a new one.

My shopping experience with Jeremy is certainly not unique and his fashion statements are certainly not *unique*. What was *unique* is the changed cultural scene/seen from the nostalgic anti-consumerist "hippie" days of my high-school to the avid consumerism of today. It has been pointed out, quite recently, that a tremendous "gap" (allusions to the clothing chain aside) exists between the baby boomer and baby buster

generation — both physically and mentally. While my parents could still halfheartedly simulate (fake) doing the “twist” and gyrate their bodies to rock ‘n’ roll music so that they could feel somewhat contemporary and “not out of it,” few forty year olds today have the ability to sustain the high energy style of hip hop. They *do* feel “out of it” on the dance floor. Now it’s their turn to sit down, like they sat down when a waltz, tango or a fox trot was nostalgically played for their parents. While they ski, their sons and daughters snowboard down the hill, and while they madly peddle on their bikes (stationary or otherwise) to stay fit, their sons and daughters are skate boarding and mountain biking (literally). While many of us baby boomers were from a pre-TV and a pre-computer generation, our children have been raised in an electronic age where video games and video rentals are a weekly meal of visual digestion. While art educators continue to teach a gaze aesthetic, praising the distinction between “looking” and “seeing” in their classrooms, reminiscent of the time and space of their generation, the baby busters live with a glance aesthetic, a continuously changing kaleidoscope of ideas and fashion which are analogous to the “continuous flow” of television. The “look” that catches the audience’s glance is what is important — all surface and no depth. This generation gap between the baby boomers and the baby busters has been widely explored and theorized (Howe, 1992). The anxieties of the baby boomer generation are played out during this postmodern moment as different attitudes towards sex, feminism, and authority continually challenge their status quo leading to conservative educational proposals.

The consequence of this has a great deal to do with the crisis of (art) education. It is quite possible to make a case that the standardized print culture that solidified itself in the nineteenth century (i.e., standardized dictionaries, objective knowledge, reproducible books and images through lithographs) has been undergoing a continuous change,

replaced right under our very eyes by new means of communication based on the circulation of signs. This shift can be identified from the *fin de siècle* of the electric age to the *fin de millennium* of the electronic age. The first half of this century ushered in modernism and the avant-garde while the second half has been characterized by the melancholia of postmodernism and a post-avant-garde (Jencks, 1992). Parents and baby boomer teachers alike find themselves involved in cultural wars (Hunter, 1991) which they believe they can win by going “back to the basics” or “back to the future” as in the case of Discipline Based Art Education.¹ How far the means of communication have changed can be quickly illustrated by comparing advertisements at the turn of the twentieth century, which were usually filled with all sorts of printed information — the image playing a subordinate role — to a recent Benetton advertisement of a computerized image of the Queen Elizabeth of England, appearing as if she were “Black”! with lips thickened, hair just a little bit more curly, and her skin a shade of brown-black. Remember, Benetton engages in no production directly, but operates simply as a powerful marketing machine, which transmits commands to a wide variety of independent producers; the only “true colours” of Benetton are the green of their profit dollars. They advertise no product, only their name through controversial images which gives them a multiplier effect because they tap into the most controversial social issues: racism, AIDS, abortion, pollution. Their image of the “Black Queen” is a telling commentary on Britain’s population. With a little photographic digitalization, the question of what is a “true” image quickly emerges. Is this hyped up image of the Queen more “real” than the “real” Queen, given the changed social conditions in England? In other words, is her doctored up ironic image more representative of the changed “reality” in Britain than the image which appears on British currency? By presenting a fictive world of computer generated photographs the modality of the referent is put into question.

Not only do bodies and heads change places, as in the recent *Pretty Woman* incident where Julia Roberts' head appeared on someone else's body, but it now becomes possible to "fake" photographs and films, literally creating fantasy representations which are easily mistaken to be "real" or "true." Children at a very early age are able to distinguish modalities (Hodge and Tripp, 1985). The nightly news, for example, is more "real" than say, *The Cosby Show*. Children can easily decipher "real" violence from "fake" television violence. The violence of an abusive household can always be separated out from any countless number of simulated deaths on television or film. (The exceptions to this are the pathological individuals who are *unable* to do this. They take media violence literally.) Yet, introduce a series like *Top Cops* and all of a sudden the codes are flipped around. Children's certainty levels are put on a holding pattern. "Postmodern" wrestling is another example. With its carnivalesque cast of characters, they look like they can do *real* bodily damage. For kids (and many adults), wrestling is "real." Not everything is "faked" in that business. Wrestlers do get hurt, adding to its viewers confusion over whether to remain believers or dismiss it as just another form of entertainment. In Brazil, where television is still perceived as a magical box by many farmers living in outlying regions, there is no differentiation made between the soap star and his or her character. The modality there is indistinguishable (Vincent, 1993).

The problem of what is "real" has become the question of the referent. Just where is the line to be drawn between reality and illusion? When so much of our knowledge comes at us vicariously, in a mediated form, and not directly, we can never be certain. To say that all knowledge is constructed has become a truism. Teresa de Lauretis (1984) provides an interesting example concerning the woodcut print of a rhinoceros drawn by Dürer. Most art educators know it; it appears in Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*. The image is of a beast, its skin rendered as if

it were a series of heavy armour plates. Dürer never saw a rhino. He drew it from tourist reports. Now a curious thing happens when the daguerreotype process provides the possibility for a photograph of a rhino to have wide distribution. Guess what happens? The European populous believed that Dürer's representation was closer to what the creature actually looked like. So who has the "real" representation of the rhinoceros, Dürer or its first photographer? The importance of modality goes far beyond this curious example. Modality, as the social definition of the "real," is decisive in the battle for social control when it comes to deciding whose definition will count as "truth" and "reality." My questioning of the integrity of the label throughout this essay is an issue of modality and its referent. The importance of modality for ideology is obvious since it points to the social construction or contestation of knowledge-systems. Modality is one of the crucial indicators of political struggle, a central means of contestation, negotiation or imposition of ideological systems. As such, it is a crucial component of a complex process that establishes a hegemony through the *active* participation of social agents (see Hodge and Kress, 1988, esp. Chapter 5).

Questioning the referent brings about two well known concepts that are often discussed in postmodernity: Baudrillard's well known concept of the *simulacrum*, the copy of a copy, and the question of hyperreality. To illustrate this, a recent example from a television ad is useful. To promote their "new and improved" sharpness of definition of Sony television, a television set is seen standing on the outer edges of the Grand Canyon. A boy comes over and turns the set on showing us, the viewers, another picture of the Grand Canyon. The family gathers around this television and the son says: "Look dad, it's the Grand Canyon!" suggesting that the television's picture is more real than real – better than the 'real' thing – hyperreal. So where is the referent, "Grand Canyon," if you have never been there? After such hype, often when we

visit the actual site/sight/cite we are totally disappointed. (I remember this happening with my first visit to Stonehenge. It had been exaggerated, hyped up to spectacular proportions.) We, the viewers, staring into our own television sets are seeing an endless reflection of mirrors, a surface intertextuality that has received wide attention in postmodern thought.

If so much of our knowledge in this electronic age comes this way, vicariously, mediated, what special problems does this bring for the educator? For many students history is the white washed or reconstructed film biographies of *JFK*, *Chaplin*, *Ghandi*, *Hoffa*, *Malcom X*. The electronic age raises many difficult questions for the art educator. Being "critical" in the old sense of "false consciousness" seems singularly inappropriate as we are faced with questions of representation whose purposeful construction is no longer "hidden." In a sense, all "lies" (pun intended) on the surface for us to read; no "hidden meaning" behind the text, or buried in the mind of the artist; no "deep message" we must hermeneutically decipher. The messages are all *exposed*. They are there to be played with. If you have seen Robert Altman's *The Player*, you will know immediately to what I am referring. Ideology is worn on the shirt-sleeve, blatantly displayed, and *that* is its great strength. It can be paraded right under our noses, right in front of our eyes, and like a magician's sleight of hand, the product can be sold to us as we revel in its pleasure. Give me a news headline, says Hollywood – tragic or comic – it doesn't matter, and we'll script it as entertainment. Not *all* films play with this obvious self-referential construction of artifice. Reception aesthetics has shown that there is a broad range of interpretations of any given film. But the obvious display of artifice in such films further blurs the assurances of our referent. What is really "real" if we only know the world through our technologically mediated constructions of it? This applies equally well to

"documentaries" which have been regarded as more "real" than images from drama and fiction texts (Nichols, 1991).

I suggest we have entered into a war of labels — sign wars. By which I mean to become players we had better start learning how the game is played — from our students, from our teenagers, for ourselves. So here I am, a parent, an art educator, a Leftist baby boomer, three points which handicap me from accepting the possibility that there is more resistance and agency in consumerism than I thought possible.² I still believe that consumerist Global Capitalism is an insidious system which is slowly s(t)inking like its (br)other, Communism; whose days, in its present form, are numbered as the Pacific Rim, along with China, begins to marshal a change to the global balance of trade and power. Now asking myself how to become "a player!" I pick up the "Cross label" Jeremy had discarded and thrown on the couch. (He never picks up after himself! One of the most non-anal retentive kid I've ever met. His teachers called him messy. I wonder where he got that from? Certainly, not from me!) I read the label. It has three equal bands of colours –red, black and green– with a white circle in the middle. Inside this circle is yet another. "Cross Colours" appear within this rim. Below in capital letters it is written: "CLOTHING WITHOUT PREJUDICE." The more interesting part appears on the back cover where "THE DEFINITION" of Cross Colours is given:

CROSS COLOURS: /kros/ kel-ers/

concept. 1. the art of being able to clearly see the world through more than one colour. 2. a prodigy owned by African-American Designers, Carl Jones and T.J. (Thomas) Walker, launched in late 1990 as a means of establishing a legacy and a message of peace and unity among all people. 3. an act beginning with the love for one's self. For within the African-American race alone, there are many different shades of colour over which a single message of togetherness must first soar from one people in order to overcome barriers of hate and prejudice. *also*

4. KNOWLEDGE, self respect and love,
Peace.

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Jeremy tells me a lot of kids are wearing these T-shirts. Ring up thirty-two dollars. He told me that these shirts are against prejudice and that he was aware what the T-shirt stood for. For me the question becomes, "should I remain skeptical?" Is this just another scam to sell T-shirts? Are they just another Benetton? Is this company serious? or are they playing into the youth like the good multi-national capitalists of the record industry, mostly men, who see yet another big market to exploit? In this market, it's not sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll that sells, but the discourse on racism. And where do I stand on issues like Michael Jackson's campaign to save the "children of the world" when a gigantic Pepsi can always appears behind his back whenever he goes about "saving" children? Such confusions and ambivalences point to the contradictions of transnational capitalism where "progressive" elements swim

together with "regressive" ones, like "ecocapitalism," a form of merchandising with a green patina.

Generation "X"

Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) is a brilliant film, and it too is about racism. It is also about the discourses surrounding the representations of three iconic black men: Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and Michael Jordan. It is about a Brooklyn, Italian American Pizza owner, named Sal, who refuses to put their pictures up in his own "Hall of Fame," amidst Rocky Marciano, Sylvester Stallone, Robert De Niro, Frankie Vallie and Frank Sinatra (Denizen, 1991). Lee deconstructs the binaries of racial violence and non-violence in the enigmatic space of an ethical act which simply tells us to "do the right thing," another instance of undecidability. On one side lie the non-violent protests of Martin Luther King, Jr., while on the other, the violence of self-defense as advocated by Malcolm X. Somewhere in-between is a playing surface where African American ball players appear whose court prowess signifies the Black male's struggle for recognition and self-esteem in what was a white man's game. But *Do The Right Thing* is also about a T-shirt war, T-shirts that carry the names of Bird (Larry Bird of the Boston Celtics), Robinson (Jackie Robinson of the Dodgers), and the "X" in Malcolm X. Spike Lee provides his viewers with a political economy of the sign (Baudrillard, 1981) and its multiplicity of racial meanings. It is a study of the symbolic meanings conferred on the heroes of young and old Italian Americans and African Americans. The T-shirt wars chart how cultural heroes are appropriated by racial and ethnic groups as signifiers of repression and control: so while the baby buster generation celebrates Malcolm X's violence, the baby boomer generation still believes in the non-violence of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Do the Right Thing is also a clash of signifiers at the level of popular culture between white and black America in the late 1980s. Baseball, basketball and hockey cards are not *just* images; they stand for the complex game of racial and cultural politics. In Canada, identity politics is played out primarily through the exchange of hockey cards: the already complex differences between English and French speaking Canadian players are further complicated by other differentiations which help to distinguish Canada from the United States. The dressing up of the national-ethnic-racial self is a hypercomplex process which no sociological study can ever hope to capture without reduction. As Denizen (1991) writes:

The T-shirt, as such, is a multiple thing: an utilitarian, mass-produced, outer- and undergarment; a simulacrum of the hyperreal, prideful racial identities of the black male which are attached to supporting idols and teams...; a fluid, expressive, problematic, visual icon...which challenges the viewer. ...Its wearing embodies the attempt to capture a piece of the "real" as part of the persona of the person wearing the garment. The T-shirt stands for the racial self. (pp.131-132)

Denizen's insights into T-shirt culture provide a hint about Jeremy's desire. The T-shirt is not a direct index of his experience. I'm sure Jeremy's understanding of racism isn't sophisticated, rather it references experiences he hasn't yet had, but symbolically identifies with. (The population of African Canadians is very small in Edmonton compared to large American cities.) This is unlike myself who wears T-shirts that commemorate the road races in which I have participated. The signs on today's T-shirts embody dreams and fantasies that attach themselves to cultural idols. The status to wearing a Cross Colours T-shirt connects Jeremy to the community who

are "in the know." It expresses his personal choice whether he is or isn't fully cognizant of racism. But all this doesn't escape the contradictions that come about in this hypercomplex play of identity formation. There is currently a lawsuit filed by Malcolm X's legal wife against Lee for having appropriated the "X" for commercial ends. Lee has also been criticized for selling tennis shoe commercials with Michael Jordan. The prize of owning a pair of top-of-the-line basketball shoes has caused "swarming" raids where teenagers rob and kill one another for such shoes by ganging up on those who possess such items.

The well-known justification for such "semiotic" dressing has been advocated by cultural critics who claim that irony and parody function today in this war of signs as the new politics of postmodernism. A Canadian, Linda Hutcheon (1989), has fingered such a posture as "dedoxification," a form of self-reflexivity which plays on difference and ex-centricity. It now replaces homogeneity and centrality as the foci of postmodern social analysis. To "de-doxify" is therefore to de-naturalize representation. According to Hutcheon, there is no effective theory of agency that enables political action as it was once theorized, identifying a specific historical agent as the motor of change, i.e., the proletariat, student movements, intellectuals. What is left is a "paradoxical postmodernism of complicity and critique, of reflexivity and historicity, that at once inscribes and subverts the conventions and ideologies of the dominant cultural and social forces of the twentieth-century western world" (p11.). Such a state of affairs makes it difficult to ascertain what *are* the emerging new forms of political agency (my personal dilemma). It is just as easy to be deceived as surprised by the ingenuities of the *resistances* in everyday life, so well described by Michel de Certeau (1984) and John Fiske (1989a,b) in their writings on popular culture and its practice in everyday life. Here the fundamental agency of human resistance is given center stage: popular or profane culture is pitted against high arts, its well defined Other. The pleasures

of textual poaching are constantly at play. Paul Willis (1990) describes such "common culture" as the operation of symbolic work for youth identification. This is a politics, to be sure, but the gnawing question remains for me: is this merely a "romanticized resistance"? Not hard hitting enough, not emancipatory enough, still caught within consumerist ideologies? Have I come full circle — as a middle-aged hippy having forgotten his own rebelliousness?

I point to the vehement writings of Zavarzadeh (1990, 1991, 1992; Zavarzadeh and Morton, 1991) who has absolutely no use for such deconstructive play. As a member of the Old Left, Zavarzadeh wishes to return to the emancipatory potentials of critical theory. Like Habermas, the enlightenment project for him remains unfinished. In contrast I point to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) position, which is a *left* critique of Marxism. They embrace poststructuralist philosophy (Derrida, Foucault, Wittgenstein) to rethink political action. They argue that all objects are constituted discursively and therefore affirm the material character of every discursive structure. Language and action create its objects. They renounce a general theory of politics, placing their democratic hopes in the new social movements like feminism and ecology movements who do not become transcendent guarantors of liberation like the rhetoric of emancipatory education (i.e., especially Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren). If their social linguistics are taken to be a possible direction for democracy, then the discursive language game of labels can act as a force for both resistance and change. But the instances of where that happens need to be contextualized and argued. Signs are put to use for both conservative and radical ends, conflated with other discourses so as to eliminate their radical force.³ If we return to Spike Lee perhaps the issue might present itself more sharply.

Spike Lee's characters are said to play this ironic game that mocks contemporary reality through T-shirts. So when

Mookie, who works for Sal in the Pizzeria, wears a T-shirt with his name on it advertising Sal's Pizzeria, it is said to "confuse and conflate the signifiers of whiteness and blackness" (Denizen, 1991:132). This statement isn't far from Jeremy's Cross Colours T-shirt.

These contemporary sign functions of the T-shirt point to the evocative, elusive, floating, adrift racial signifiers which define the age of the simulacrum. A sign no longer refers to a thing, but to another sign. ... They allude to a loss of meaning and permanency in the current age. ... The T-shirt presumes that voyeurs everywhere will read the signs of the racial self that are announced by the shirt that is worn on the person's body. The sign has replaced the person. (Denizen, 1991, p.132)

These are harsh words: *Jeremy* replaced by the signs he wears! from the bottom of his Kross (Ewing) *black* basketball sneakers to the top of his Miami Hurricanes hat. Is he a walking corporate billboard, like those company men who wear their corporate logos on their hats? Should I be worried? Do I accept postmodern irony as *the "new" style* politics?

I can't help thinking how much of a fad tattooing has become in our high-schools and colleges. Ceramic branding has really taken off. In junior high I often see girls with rings through their noses, earrings through their cheeks and eyebrows. It's as if they require such reminders of pain to assure themselves that they are still capable of feeling, a rather sobering Nietzschean thought: we remember the pain more than the good times. Yet, I must agree with Susan Willis (1993) in her assessment of hard-core subculture in America:

Subcultural groups may appropriate, use, recycle, and redefine cultural commodities, but their practices don't change capitalism as a mode of production. The spectacular designates the difference between cultural practice as a response to capitalism and political practice, which might have cultural dimensions but doesn't aim at the transformation of capitalism (p.366).

Said in another way, subcultural oppositional styles are responses to the shrinking middle class and the emergent youth as a *lumpen* class distinct from a traditional working class —the Generation "X". I think this is it, and I can see Jeremy caught up in this recycled world. Many of his friends already earn pocket money, working by delivering flyers, refereeing hockey games, and eventually nailing down McJobs so that they have money to spend. (By the way, the number of BNEs — break and entering — by youth is staggeringly high.) In a way, Jeremy attempts to get in on the latest fashion statements, to be part of the crowd, to have status, to keep "up," to duel with his own set of heroes. He knows which caps are "in" and "out," which T-shirts are hot. But it's a tough pill to swallow to say that this is an ironic postmodern gesture and it's even a bigger pill to say that my son is a walking billboard.

There is a fine essay by Kabeena Mercer " '1968': Periodizing Politics and Identity" (1992), which attempts to show how difficult identity politics is today. The challenge, according to him, is to go beyond any simple "essentialist logic of "identity politics" in which differences are dealt with only one-at-a-time and which therefore ignore the conflicts and contradictions that arise in the relations *within* and *between* the various movements, agents, and actors in contemporary forms of democratic antagonism" (p. 425). Spike Lee's films are a good example of this radical pluralism which presents new difficulties when deciding what is or isn't progressive.

According to Mercer, new social movements structured around race, gender, and sexuality are neither inherently progressive or reactionary. "Just like everyday people, women, black people, lesbian and gay people, and people who worry about social justice, nuclear power, or ecology can be interpellated into positions on the right as much as they can be articulated into positions of the left" (p.426). By this Mercer means that "*no one has a monopoly on oppositional identity.*" Political identities, as antagonistic elements in ideological struggle, appropriate and articulate different meanings out of the same system of signs. The construction of an oppositional social identity does not neatly fall into the left or the right camp. Various social issues can and do divide both factions. If you follow this "deconstructive" logic, then the either/or positionalities of political left and right break down and the indeterminacy and ambivalence that inhabits the construction of social identity comes into play. For Mercer, this leads to what he calls "*the challenge of sameness.*" Because the meanings of keywords that signify the things that really matter are never fixed, but are constantly subject to efforts of articulation as different subjects attempt to hegemonize discourses to support their versions of each signified over alternative versions proposed by adversaries and opponents, there is, quite literally, a war over labels. It is no surprise then that "Cross Colours" states its definition of racism and meaning of "colour." Racism is the multi-accentual keyword of its identity politics. Mercer also develops how the "struggles over the sign" can lead to changes in perceived reality. He shows the changes that the signifying chain, nigger/Negro/Black/Afro-American/African-American has undergone and how these "imaginary forms of identification" in maintaining a black consciousness (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) are central to such changes of representation. Yet, often, contestations over keywords lapse into strange coalitions between left and right. The rhetoric of being ideologically "right on" or "politically correct" often leads to confusion and counter-productive measures,

highlighting the challenge of sameness (see footnote 3 for an example).

As in the signifying chain that Kobena maps out, in education the labeling of children is a key sociological insight. There is now a large body of established literature by both feminists and educational critics alike (Katz, 1968, 1971; Spring, 1968, 1972; Bowles and Gintis; 1976) who argue that the "factory" sense of linear chronological time has been the basis to categorize and sub-categorize our "exceptional" children. "Brightness" is a function of how quickly a concept is understood. Being a "slow learner" automatically places you at the bottom of the class. Skipping grades, being a genius, having a high IQ, are all judged on a relationship between mental and chronological age. The signifying chain of /idiot/ imbecile/ mongolism/ Trisomy 21/ Down's syndrome / mentally retarded / physically and mentally challenged is a social record of the struggle for definitions that are against the dominant discourse of how we label our children. Labeling a child Mongoloid or Trisomy 21 doesn't seem like much of a difference, but clearly these definitions support different discourses, different attitudes, different social relationships educators have with these children. Being called a Mongoloid groups the child in a racist category of belonging to the Mongolians, an Asian people who inhabit Mongolia in Central Asia, said to be 'primitive' in the Darwinian anthropological discourse which differentiates between the civilized and the primitive (savage). And while Trisomy identifies the child in a genetic discourse (problems with the 21st set of genes), it also objectifies the child as a 'freak' of nature, a mutant of some kind. Down's syndrome begins to personalize the child at least by providing a name in "honor" of its discoverer, yet it covets a paternalistic attitude towards such children. Only by representing them as "challenged," comparing them to themselves, are they given dignity. When such children are shown fighting their own struggles through various television

series and films, a new discourse with new social relations has been achieved. As can be seen from this example the struggle is for representation. Each discursive formation constructs its object with a political and ethical intent. Exceptional children, race, gender formations, AIDS and so on, do not exist apart from the practices that conceptualize them, represent them, and respond to them. By knowing and analyzing these discursive formations, control can be wrestled away, in other words — sign wars.

I now come back to Jeremy's T-shirt. If Jeremy's comments are any indication of the raised consciousness of racism through Cross Colour T-shirts, hats and jeans, the answer has to be a lukewarm "yes" to the label's impact in intervening the discourse on racism — pointing to the differences of color which exist amongst African American themselves. But it's more the case that it is simply popular to wear them in school to be part of an "in" group. My skepticism remains. On another level, I recognize that the new definition of "colour" which is being promoted supports Jesse Jackson's "Rainbow Coalition" which, I would argue, is a further advance on both the black/white and white/other binaries that dominate racist discourse. There are degrees of understanding and internalizing this racial issue, as with any other form of politics. Some high school students, I am sure, are fully *conscious* of why they wear the Cross Colours label. But I imagine that they are a minority. Critical educational discourse has not been successful in understanding the changed politics of identity of sign wars. Questioning popular culture in an art class almost seems to be a contradiction in terms. As soon as you question it, it no longer is popular.⁴ (Jeremy guards what he says to me. "Why are you asking all these questions?" he asks. He wishes not to be identified with an adult world and wants to be different from his father.) There are, of course, the constipated and turgid writings of Henry Giroux, which attempt to explain this changed reality, but these hover in the clouds of academia and present

the type of discourse that promotes academic elitism of the worst kind. (Henry is always trying to have the "last" word on any "critical" topic that might emerge, promoting transcendental educational assurances under the rubric of emancipation.) And, on the whole, educators—including art educators—have not embraced popular culture in any *critical* way to provide insight as to how these labels are being played with, unlike the well known French sociologists, de Certeau and Bourdieu.⁵

Jeremy has recently organized a chocolate drive in order that the soccer club is able to purchase Umbro shirts, shorts and bags. Obviously the Italian sounding label carries a great deal of prestige, like the Mercedes, BMWs and Porches of the adult world where labels have become just as important, and company loyalty an obsession. At the same time, it was his design that appeared on these shirts—a creative act of appropriation. Yet it is his uncle's business which is promoted. Now, is Jeremy using the label or is the label using him? The symbiosis of such an event, for a leftist like myself, is surely a perplexing one to answer. Perhaps the coalition works in this case. Umbro is advertised, his uncle is advertised, and the team feels good because they have "sharp" outfits to wear. It sounds like I am cheering for the workings of capitalism until I see another team come onto the field with flimsy T-shirts and running shoes (and they win!).

* * *

I returned to that store—"Bootleggers"—by myself, without Jeremy, now for the fourth time. I looked again at the

Mondetta T-shirts and made some inquiries. I should have known. Their slogan is: "A spirit of unification;" a chance to reunite the world under the Mondetta label. I immediately thought of the Tyrel Pyramids in *Bladerunner*. I was informed by the young sales clerk that it was possible for me to request any country's flag I so desired. All she needed to do was phone the central warehouse to see if it was possible. Italy, Australia, Great Britain, Canada, Kenya (by the way, Kenya only came in black), Germany, and Israel are readily "on line" and available. Their flags appear on the T-shirt sleeves. Again, all I can do is maintain a healthy skepticism.

What I have said here in this essay has been said in different ways by Situationists, post-structuralists, deconstructionists of every persuasion, and any other new labels that might be found. Each has made a proposal how to theorize these *fractal* spaces of the postmodern. In the end, the complexity of it all is rather astounding, as can be gleamed from Soja's (1989) deconstruction of Los Angeles. In this essay I have tried to show the undecidability of a politics that is swallowed up within the mass media. In the critical postmodernism of Jenny Holzer or Barbara Kruger the problem is no different for there is no objective platform to step onto. Their signs jostle and compete amongst other public signs; their statements oscillate between the political and apolitical despite their radical intent. Many viewers simply do position themselves in the anti-patriarchal space provided for them. In the politics of postmodernity sometimes the issues seem very clear to me—as in the case of AIDS representation, exceptional children and questions of color. But, in other cases I'm not sure. I think that is the challenge opened up by the spaces of undecideability. It seems decidedly non-propagandistic. Given this hypercomplexity it seems I should now market a T-shirt which scra(m)bles all the labels together, conflating them into one impossible moment in a Scrabble game when everything about language has been sucked into a black "worm hole."

Who knows what new language will eventually emerge on the other side to help us understand this postmodern moment?

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Footnotes

¹ There is a wide literature now concerning the inadequacies of DBAE written by many members of the Social Caucus. I do not wish to rehash the points of this critique, but perhaps add that postmodern as a pastiche style is alive and well in our schools. Here the canon of Western is recovered through ingenious new ways such as quoting from past styles, poaching images and transporting them into new contexts so as to help identify famous work of art, i.e., the picture of Michaelangelo's *David* now appears in strange environments or the *Mona Lisa* is (re)presented as a paint by number project, or projected as fat, thin, androgynous. Another favorite exercise is to cut out a jigsaw piece from a famous print. This is then blown up and painted with the 'original' as its reference. Students must then identify the famous print from which it came. As this essay develops, I raise questions about the use of such parody and irony. My purpose for dwelling on popular culture, rather than art education *per se*, is because popular culture is high or elite arts Other and does not find its way into our classrooms in any significant way. It is experienced in spaces outside official school settings: in school lockers, in films, music, in clothing styles. However, both "school art" and popular art are conflated by this postmodern moment by the larger issue of representation.

² A number of feminist writers argue that shopping for women can be a subversive activity. Historically the shopping mall was one of the few places women could go and feel safe (see Gaines and Herzog, 1990, for such arguments). There is also Fiske's (1990) recent reading of the consumerism by women in patriarchy as a resistant pleasure in quiz shows (i.e., *The Price is Right*). His argument is that the distinction between work and leisure, set up by capitalist practice, is inverted by women shopping for themselves or displaying their consumption skills on *The Price is Right*. I personally find such arguments unconvincing. But certainly they present another example of undecidability.

³ Kobenna Mercer (1992) provides an example. During the 70s the animal rights movement extended the concept of democratic rights on the grounds that animals were enslaved and exploited "just like blacks were enslaved and exploited. The conflation of race and animal rights continues today with the way black males are systematically disadvantaged as a distinct group within the urban underclass as an "endangered species." In the first case the progressive potential of the discursive rhetoric is cancelled by the assumption that black people were non-human or at best bestial in nature. In the second case, the black male is perceived as a victim and cancels out the issue of human agency.

⁴ This remark, common in cultural studies on popular culture, is aimed at the distinction first raised by Michel de Certeau (1984) who made a differentiation between "tactics" and "strategies." Tactics refers to subversive practices used by subordinates for their own resistance and pleasure, as opposed to strategies which refer to policies by those in power in order to remain in control. Popular art for de Certeau is *not* a domain of texts or artefacts, rather it is these tactical practices (struggles over the sign) performed on texts or text-like structures. If these tactics are appropriated they no longer become "popular."

⁵ Although Jack Hobbs has championed the need to turn to popular culture, as did Vincent Lanier, I would argue their attempts, while valuable and noteworthy, were

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not informed by poststructuralist theories that opened up issues of ideology and complicitness in a much more profound way.

Feminism and Censorship in Art Education: Four Perspectives

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Gudrun Helgadottir

VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY IN ART AND CRAFT

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Censored by Omission: IMAGERY THAT IS EXCLUDED FROM THE ART EDUCATION CLASSROOM

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