The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education

9/11—Reflecting on Our Social Condition

Evacuation begins immediately.
Massive cloud of dust and debris forms and slowly drifts away.

10:28 a.m.: The World Trade Center's north tower collapses.

Flight 11: 9:03 a.m.: A second hijacked airliner, United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston, crashes into the south tower of the World Trade Center and explodes.

9:09 a.m. (all times are EDT): A hijacked passenger jet, American Airlines Flight 77, crashes into the Pentagon.

10:03 a.m.: A second hijacked airliner, United Airlines Flight 175 from Boston, crashes into the south tower of the World Trade Center and explodes.

10:28 a.m.: The World Trade Center's north tower collapses.

JSTAE
Number 22
2002
9/11 Reflecting on Our Social Condition
Contributors

Future Akins is an artist specializing in artist books and sequin tapestries. She teaches Architectural Delineation in the College of Architecture, Texas Tech University and 7th grade art at O.L. Slaton Junior High in Lubbock, TX. She may be reached at Hattiemay@aol.com.

Ed Check is a gay activist and Assistant Professor, Visual Studies School of Art, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas. (echeck@ttacs.ttu.edu)

Paul Duncum is a lecturer in visual arts curriculum, Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Australia. A recipient of the Manual Barkan Memorial Award for scholarship in art education, he has published widely in his areas of interests, which include children’s drawings, images of children, and critical theory and art education. Most recent is the publication Duncum, P. and Bracey, T. (Ed). On Knowing: Art and Visual Culture. Canterbury University Press.


Mike Emme is an Associate Professor in the Dept. of Elementary Education, University of Alberta, Canada. He is the Caucus co-ordinator for 2001-2003.

Dr. Laura Fellemann Fatale is the author of The Antiques Roadshow.

Dennis E. Fehr is a social activist and Associate Professor of Visual Studies School of Art, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

Karen Kiefer-Boyd is the past Caucus co-ordinator. She is Associate Professor, Art Education, School of Visual Art, The Pennsylvania State University. e-mail: keifer-boyd@psu.edu

Angela M. La Porte has been an assistant professor of art education at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville since 1998. Her research interests include social, multicultural and intergenerational issues in art education. Angela will be presenting a research paper, Diversity in the Art Classroom: Issues for Curriculum and Instruction, at the InSEA 31st World Congress 2002 in New York. Her articles include Oral History as Intergenerational Dialogue in Art Education, Ethnographic Discoveries During an Intergenerational Visual Art program in New York City’s Harlem, and Building Community Through Intergenerational Art Education. She is currently co-authoring a book on African American Arts and Cultures, has presented at numerous national art education conferences and has served two years as editor of the United States Society for Education Through Art Newsletter.


Edgar Heap of Birds: For the past decade, Heap of Birds has explored the stylistic and iconic affinities between indigenous art forms across the globe. Through the work of native and African artists Edgar Speak explore the relationship between the art and culture of indigenous Rhode Islanders and visual expressions from Africa.

Jan Jagodzinski is a Professor in the Dept. of Secondary Education, U of Alberta, Canada. Book credits include The Anamorphic Ili (Duval, 1996); Postmodern Dilemmas (Erulaum, 1997); Pun(k) Deconstruction (Erulaum, 1997); Pedagogical Desire (forthcoming, April 2002).

Dr. Laura Fellemann Fatale is the author of The Antiques Roadshow.

Dennis E. Fehr is a social activist and Associate Professor of Visual Studies School of Art, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas.

Karen Kiefer-Boyd is the past Caucus co-ordinator. She is Associate Professor, Art Education, School of Visual Art, The Pennsylvania State University. e-mail: keifer-boyd@psu.edu

Angela M. La Porte has been an assistant professor of art education at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville since 1998. Her research interests include social, multicultural and intergenerational issues in art education. Angela will be presenting a research paper, Diversity in the Art Classroom: Issues for Curriculum and Instruction, at the InSEA 31st World Congress 2002 in New York. Her articles include Oral History as Intergenerational Dialogue in Art Education, Ethnographic Discoveries During an Intergenerational Visual Art program in New York City’s Harlem, and Building Community Through Intergenerational Art Education. She is currently co-authoring a book on African American Arts and Cultures, has presented at numerous national art education conferences and has served two years as editor of the United States Society for Education Through Art Newsletter.


Edgar Heap of Birds: For the past decade, Heap of Birds has explored the stylistic and iconic affinities between indigenous art forms across the globe. Through the work of native and African artists Edgar Speak explore the relationship between the art and culture of indigenous Rhode Islanders and visual expressions from Africa.

Jan Jagodzinski is a Professor in the Dept. of Secondary Education, U of Alberta, Canada. Book credits include The Anamorphic Ili (Duval, 1996); Postmodern Dilemmas (Erulaum, 1997); Pun(k) Deconstruction (Erulaum, 1997); Pedagogical Desire (forthcoming, April 2002).

Karen Kiefer-Boyd is the past Caucus co-ordinator. She is Associate Professor, Art Education, School of Visual Art, The Pennsylvania State University. e-mail: keifer-boyd@psu.edu

Angela M. La Porte has been an assistant professor of art education at the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville since 1998. Her research interests include social, multicultural and intergenerational issues in art education. Angela will be presenting a research paper, Diversity in the Art Classroom: Issues for Curriculum and Instruction, at the InSEA 31st World Congress 2002 in New York. Her articles include Oral History as Intergenerational Dialogue in Art Education, Ethnographic Discoveries During an Intergenerational Visual Art program in New York City’s Harlem, and Building Community Through Intergenerational Art Education. She is currently co-authoring a book on African American Arts and Cultures, has presented at numerous national art education conferences and has served two years as editor of the United States Society for Education Through Art Newsletter.

Editorial:
At Long Last A Moment of Silence

jan jagodzinski

This year's journal finds many of its authors in a reflective moment, affected by the still radiating and lingering pulsating light of 9/11. The journal pays respect to the tragedy of that event and the suffering that ensued through its cover design. As caucus members, we acknowledge the magnitude of the event in the way that our lives have been affected by the many horrific images that remain forever embedded as part of America's cultural memory. Besides my own mediation on the imagery of 9/11 from a Lacanian and Deleuzean perspective ("The Last Shard Standing"), Jim Edwards in, "Tagging a Boxcar," reflects on his motor journey through the Nevada desert the day after 9/11. His meditation on Inuit art, rock art and graffiti boxcars he sees as he is driving, raises questions of the human need for mark making. As he notes, "art" as interpreted from a Western perspective is not needed by saints and the totally insane. For the saint all things are possessed by an animism that is perceived as "art." For the insane, art's categorical specificity seems to vanish. In this regard, his meditation both complements and contrasts Laura Fatall's reflection on the educational potential of the "Antiques Roadshow." Again, defying the common acceptable categorizations of art, Fatall argues how such readily accessible artifacts can be a rich source of history and cultural richness. They can be explored for their educational potential.

2 Editorial—Silence

Other author's obliquely seed their reference to 9/11 as they engage questions of art's power to transform lives. Future Akins in "Miss, Miss, Look What My Mother Sent Me from Jail," takes us back to the junior high classroom to remind us—as educators committed to social change—of the importance of cultural diversity. Our sensitivity to differences, and the need to re-write signifiers which label and hold us hostage to stereotypes is an interminable task. Community and cooperation also characterize Angela LaPorte's social activism in New York City's Harlem district. "Intergenerational Art Education: Building Community in Harlem," discusses her research as a participant observer. Hispanic and African American teenagers collected oral histories of volunteer senior citizens discussions about culturally and historically relevant artwork. Such collaboration resulted in collages based on these histories which, in turn, facilitated a greater intergenerational appreciation, reduced age-related stereotypes, and provided a learning environment which fostered a sense of community. In a similar mood of critical reflection, Esther Parada's eloquent essay, "When the Bough Breaks: Loss of Tradition in Urban Landscape," raises our ecological consciousness to reconsider the symbolism and cultural capital of the Elm within American history. A well-known photographer and writer of cultural politics, Parada leaves us with the complexity of contradictory discourses which compete for the Elm's symbolic signification.

Such reflective moments, however, were slow to emerge after 9/11. We seem to live in a society which is shock-proof. Rather than a feeling of outright numbness and silence, the airwaves were filled with noise, much of it directed against the Arab world. The fall of the World Trade Center viewed on any number of television sets was a sight/site we had seen before in countless Hollywood films. CNN seemed to reinforce the nation's disbelief that such an atrocity had happened by continually recycling the imagery of the towers being struck over and over again. The image in our minds became emotionally
inured. One wonders whether the media treated the event as an aesthetic opportunity rather than a moral challenge to ask some tough questions about America’s foreign policies? In this regard, a number of the essays deal with the importance of understanding the media images that engulf our lives. Mike Emme’s brilliantly insightful essay, “Critical Creativity: On the Convergence of Medium Education and Media Education,” makes the crucial point through an absolutely charming story about his son’s encounter with the Mutant Ninja Turtles cartoon regarding the complexity of media reception and the need for critical reflection. We are hardly the ‘dues’ of media. Rather, there are countless ethnographic studies that point to complexities of interpretation and internalization of popular culture. Emme develops both a differentiation as well as a coalescence between media and the mediums that dominate art education. He calls on a critical and creative engagement with media by art educators. Paul Duncum answers this call with “Wrestling with TV “Rasslin.” TV wrestling stretches the envelope as to what art educators presently consider to be the legitimate content of visual culture. Yet, it is precisely the critical analysis of such postmodern spectacularity which the field needs to explore. In contrast to the “needs and gratifications” approach to media literacy which held the field until the early 80s, Duncum recognizes the need to study media from a cultural studies perspective. TV wrestling is critiqued for its racism, xenophobia, homophobia, and familial dysfunction, as well as its anarchy and obscenity.

Violence is no stranger to a globalized society. 9/11 made terrorism a household word. The award-winning design for the memorial will be two beams of light projected into the night sky—a palimpsest reminder of the twin towers. Cultural memories are crucial for identity. They are reminders of a nation’s resolve. Edgar Heap of Birds commemorates the resolve of the Tsistsistas (Cheyenne) who were massacred by Colonel George Custer, by honoring Moving Behind, a fourteen year old Tsistsistas woman survivor who grew up to become a respected elder and leader. His art (several pieces are included in the essay, “Heads Above Grass”) continue to trouble accepted official history by raising uncomfortable questions that refuse to go away. Like the haunt of those 6000 lost souls at the site/cite/sight of 9/11 who demand justice before they can rest in peace, Edgar Heap of Birds, as artist, keeps vigil and insists through his art that justice for past atrocities be answered. And, it is the question of justice which haunts the last essay in this collection. A cacophony of voices, Dennis Fehr, Ed Check, Future Akins and Karen Kiefer-Boyd document the canceling of a panel called “Sexual Identities and the Art Classroom” by an administrator at a state art education annual conference. “Canceling the Queers: Activism in Art Education Conference Planning” is a memorial of sorts as well. The voices insist on justice, some cry out in the pain of having their identity “canceled,” so as to feel less than human, without a full accord of rights. The violence of structural homophobia both silences and creates a climate of anger. To break that silence becomes a struggle to regain dignity and one’s identity. As one author reflects, the massive gravesite in New York City known as “ground zero” also describes the place that gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered youth experience in schools.

Art after 9/11? Is there enough distance now to make it possible? Could its horror ever be represented without falling into a barbarism of one sort or another? For all the praise it received, Steven Spielberg’s Schindler’s List was still too pretty. Many years passed before Holocaust survivors were able to find adequate artistic forms (like Art Spiegelman’s Maus II that Emme mentions in his essay) to cope with what they had witnessed or were finally able to reimagine. No “art” can appear about 9/11 in this journal, or any other as yet. Not even Art Guagliumi’s cover design which, ever so gently touches and then backs away from the subject it wants to represent.
9/11
The Last Shard Standing
Grasping the Fossil Object and the
Recollected-Image Psychoanalytically

jan jagodzinski

This meditation on the event of 9/11 emerges from a certain perplexity on my part concerning an elision on Lacan's part regarding the materiality of vision as developed in Seminar XI (The Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis). Many cinematic theoreticians and art historians have returned again and again to his discussions, "Of the Gaze as Object Petit a," to establish the definitive distinctions between the look and the gaze. To briefly recap this well-known territory, the look is attributed to 'natural' perception. That is, to the initiative and power of the subject as moi. This means the ability to place people and things at a proper distance from the self, constitute them as objects at the ego's disposal. The ego (as moi) has the capacity to continually misrepresent and deceive itself. The look more properly belongs to the working of the spectacular imagination and not the Imaginary which, for Lacan, always implies a framing by the limits of perception itself, by that which threatens the very stability of the ego. We can never occupy this zone outside framed perception, or "true infinity" in Hegel's terms. We can only perceive the illusionary false infinity of geometrical space. The Imaginary presupposes the inclusion of a screened non-spectatorary dimension which Lacan attributes to the unconscious Real, specifically naming it object a, a skewing of geometrical space into non-Euclidean possibilities of ex-imate space/time. The imagination remains confined to the preconscious cognito (I think) whereas Descartes' cogito

6 9/11—Opacity of Visibility

(I am) is rendered as the subject of the unconscious. The Je, becomes the 'true' subject of the symptom.

When we come to the gaze our mastery over perception fails. Proper distance collapses as 'something' is found not to be in its proper 'normative' place. Something ordinary now becomes extraordinary. It stands out as object a, metaphorically speaking, as a bit of the Real. It has become 'too close' or unthinkably distant, 'too far' away since the ego is unable to grasp or contain it. It enters into the twilight zone of ex-imate space, a place of "impossibility." The experience is described as shattering of the ego's co-ordinates. Strangeness, uncanniness, shock mark its effects. The Je is directly affected by a psychotic moment where the object gazes or stares back.

The blurring of simulated Hollywood violence and the event of 9/11 places this complex issue of the traumatic Real in the forefront of our concerns. The destruction of the World Trade Center was most certainly Osamar ben Laden's wildest fantasy coming true. As many commentators have remarked, it was impossible to watch the event—over and over again in disbelief—without the intertextuality of the Hollywood disaster films in mind.

Lacan makes clear in Seminar XI that what attracts and satisfies us by a trompe-l'oeil effect is certainly its constructed nature, its artifice. Hence, when we view the images of actual destruction...
It is the viscerality of the image, its penetrating nature, the optical touch of the image which perhaps seems undertheorized in Lacan’s section, or is at least glossed over. Lacan, however, made two provocative asides, both in discussions after his presentations which relate directly to the question of optical tactility. The first is that the stain of the Real in the scopic drive is not homologous with all the drives. “[It is the [scopic] drive that most completely eludes the term castration.” (S XI, 78) This scopic drive is on the side of the gaze and the evil eye which arrests movement through the power of fascination; the fascinum being the object a which captures the subject.

For Lacan there seems to be no “good eye,” no eye that blesses, only a voracious, greedy, and “evil eye” (ibid., 115); a possessive eye which can arrest (castrate) movement. It is here that Lacan introduces his second aside which recognizes the reciprocity of the gaze from the realm of the Other—more specifically art, nature and another human being. He introduces a dialectics of horror and beauty, of laughing and crying. Against the evil eye Lacan sees art and nature as providing a dompte-regard effect, a “laying down” of the gaze.

It is the fascinating power of nature and art to tame and civilize the evil eye of the gaze. The capturing of the subject by the object is experienced as an arrest of movement, where the “thing-itself” is affectively experienced as an intensity of sensation. In horror, this ‘presence’ of a thing is felt radically as an “outside” which becomes a suffocating intrusion “inside,” reversing and confounding the body’s boundary. This moment of sublime beauty always already suggests a moment of awe, terrifying and beautiful at the same moment. Such sublime horror certainly describes the experience of the event of 9/11.
How are we to grasp the materiality of this Real encounter, especially when it comes to recording and memorializing, and mourning such an event as this? What are the ways such a tragic event becomes embodied by the media? To get at a tentative answer concerning the materialization of the Real, I have turned to the writings of Deleuze (1986, 1989) on cinema, especially the concept of time-image as opposed to the movement-image, and to his notions of the recollected image and the fossil object. I have then tried to apply these conceptualizations to images which have emerged during and since the event of 9/11.

**Fossil Image**  
**The Last Shard Standing**

I am particularly drawn to a metonymic fragment of the World Trade Center that remains standing—almost alone, as if refusing to fall down. It is an iconic shard that continually emerges in the media, again and again, as it beacons to be photographed. Reminiscent of a cathedral ruin, this shard presents the remains of a memory that cannot be assigned a present, only a mechanical objective signifier it seems, an ironic and fortuitous 'freak' signifier that is homologous to the call for help—911—of an event that breaches and then makes history.

The *New Yorker* produced a double "black cover" where the World Trade Center’s ghostly presence became visible as a slightly contrasted pitch-black outline against a dark background of almost equal value. The degree of tonal difference between ground and figure demanded that the viewer dwell on the cover so that the two towers could be differentiated once the top cover enunciating the date of the event was removed. The building’s mortal remains became metonymically present. (Unfortunately, the available technology prevents the cover’s reproduction here.) Like a phantom limb, the ghosts of the buildings hovered over New York as the cover so ably illustrated. But the shard is neither the building itself nor any sort of “reality”; it is neither the building as it was nor another thing—rather it has become an iconic sign in the sense that its presence gives us the event immediately. Like a cadaver, it becomes an iconic sign in the Real—a monumental uncanny object that is doubled as an apparition of the original, resting in absolute serenity as if it has found its place. And where it stands is where it died, relying heavily on the weight of the ghostly spot—as if this is the only place left for it. I can’t image it being carted away to the dump. That would constitute a sacrilegious act.
The shard is a fetishistic 'fossil objet' in Deleuzean terms, an irreducibly material object that encodes the collective memory of the event. It has come to embody the "resilience" of a nation—"still standing" as a witness to the event that no narration of signifiers can ever adequately narrate. In this sense it is a recollection-object. Its lattice shape speaks to the skeletal bones of a building, the ruins which have taken on a mysterious and magical significance. The mysteriousness of its direct presence is captured in such a way that one might almost taste and smell the ash and smoke of the event. The sensible body of the building can be felt in this way.

It is presented to us as a ghostly form, a haunt in the distance, as if its steel girders are made of fine, thin lace, able to rise effortlessly above the ground.

The graininess of the image makes this an affected-image in Deleuze's terms—an image which arouses emotional and visceral responses. Rather than opening up forms of action, it opens up experiences of time, or reverie.

In the flood of artificial light during the night, the shard takes on an eerie feeling of hard-tempered armour. It stands like an avatar looking on as the excavation work progresses.

Its presence looms in the distance. Watching. Recording the events around it.
Yet, unlike the cadaver that collapses the lived and imagined body together to produce the sublimely beautiful body with its organs still intact, this shard is much more terrifying. It has shed its blood and guts to remain a sublimely beautiful skeletal structure.

In another context as a skeletal steel sculpture with a flag beside, it recalls the memory of "The Iwo Jima Memorial" where 6,821 sailors and soldiers had died. As a fossil object it has condensed time within itself. If it remains standing, it will in the future expand outward in time, becoming a "radioactive fossil," throwing out pulse light, made more ominous by the smoldering of ground-zero which never seems to end.

It is perhaps no accident why this “remainder” has become the front cover of *Der Spiegel’s* cover story—New York: The wounded city. It remains standing in the clear light of day. This recollected-image, bathed in the fire of the sun and its own smoldering heat, remains an embodiment of the “resilience of American democracy.”
The shard has become a fetishistic object, an auratic object, and hence an embodied object. Benjamin wrote that aura is the quality in an object that makes our relationship to it like a relationship with another human being. It seems to look back at us (1968, 188). Aura is the sense an object gives us that it can speak to us of the past without ever letting us completely decipher it. It is a brush with involuntary memory, memory that can only be arrived at through a shock. We return again and again to it, still thirsty, because it doesn't satisfy our desire to recover or forget its memory. This shard as an auratic object maintains its distance no matter how closely we attempt to embrace it. It remains distant from us even when it is present in space. The shard as an auratic object remains a fragment of the social world that cannot be read from on high, but only as the witness of the object. Its aura is what makes the fetish volatile, for it incites us to memory without ever bringing memory completely back. When a fossil is radioactive it hints that the past it represents is not over, and it beckons the viewer to excavate the past, at his or her peril. Meaning is encoded in such objects not metaphorically but through physical contact—the embodiment of the event in the shard's case. Such objects tell stories and describe trajectories, the unresolved traumas that are embedded in them—why was America attacked? Why is there so much hatred for its foreign policy? Benjamin's auratic fetish and Deleuze's fossil have in common a disturbing light, an eerily beckoning luminosity. In the fetish it is called an aura, in the fossil it is called radioactivity, and in Lacan it is called the pulsation of the drive, the objet a as it stares at you from the Real.
The contact print photos remind us that thousands and thousands of rolls could have been shot, each categorical signifier signified by an endless number of personal names. What might have become clichés, commonsense hegemonic images without reflection that extend unproblematically into action—what Deleuze termed sensory-motor images of the movement-image cinema—have been deconstructed and tuned into something else—into what Deleuze calls “optical images” characteristic of time-image cinema.

Like the shard that, to my mind at least, has become the iconic embodied image of the event—a fossil object—the iconic portrait of heroism has emerged as a testament to the bravery of firemen and policemen, and the loss of life in the line of duty. These portraits, found in the November issue of *Vanity Fair*, are held together by iconic signifiers marking their dutiful place in the Symbolic Order first, and followed by their proper names second. (eg., Firefighter, Steam Fitter, The Trauma Team, The Bucket Line, etc.) Each slide tells briefly what the men and women were doing during 9/11 and after.

One is struck immediately by a frozen-moment of silence and the absence of any action. Perhaps it is the silence that recalls the Real event of 9/11 most profoundly. As an excavation of recorded history, these contact prints show us that cultural memory is located in the gaps between the recorded images. Silence, absence, and hesitation are the marks of the very inability to speak, to represent objectively one’s own culture, history and memory. This is where the trauma of the Real lies—in the gaps beyond the signifier.
The affection-image is the domain of what Deleuze calls ceremonial cinema—the ceremonial body. The ceremonial body is introduced at the very moment when all other action has become impossible. Aren’t these the portraits of the ritualized body, wearing the uniform of duty? Ritual connects individual experience with collective experience, activating collective memory in the body. This is precisely what these photos are about. The search for memory images turns out to be a process of collective mourning: of ritual. Here the poses are staged. What kinds of moments are these? They are still—silent—in honor and mourning of the wandering ghosts—a collective grief arising from individual stories.

No Bodies: Acts of Re-Collected Memories The Memorials

In the beginning there was hope that someone alive might be found at ground zero, but after several days of desperate searching Major Giuliani released the terrible news that no live bodies were expected to be found. The search and hope of survivors was effectively over. New York City remained haunted by 6,000 missing bodies. Outside Bellevue Hospital “A Wall of Prayers” grew and grew. Hundreds of such shrines began to appear throughout the city.

20 9/11—Opacity of Visibility

Here the portraits enact their revenge against any form of symbolic categorization and containment attempted by the Symbolic Order. Each posting screams out for a specific body to be found, remembered by the very materiality of an image caught in memory of a happier time, described by age, weight, height, the floor that they were on, the company they worked for...

These are “thin” images, optical and recollected images of another sort. Bare in what they are able to solicit, the “missing person” floats in a decontextualized space, yet pointing to a singularity that demands of the perceiver not “perception” in the cognitive sense, but what Deleuze refers to as an “attentive recognition.” It demands that the viewer draw on his/her own reserves of memory as s/he participates in an attempt to recreate the missing person.
The contrast of this form of portraiture from *Vanity Fair* (as presented above) is striking. They present to us the way an image always splits time into two parts. In Deleuzian terms—borrowing from Bergson’s philosophy of *durée*—there is the time that moves smoothly forward—the present that passes—and the time that is seized and represented (if only mentally) as the past that is preserved. Hence, the actual image and the virtual image are the two aspects of time as it splits. The very moment that they diverge, the two types of images create two disjunctive representations of the same moment.

The personalized portraits, the prayers for the missing persons try desperately to capture and bring back the actual image of the loved one. They are recollection images, the unofficial histories and private memories which compete with the official histories, the virtual iconic portraits of *Vanity Fair* that speak to duty and bravery in the best possible way. But these portraits of the missing point to actual time, not virtual time. They are portraits which belong to the Real and not the Imaginary. They live in those “missing” gaps.

But the 6000 have not been forgotten. To remember their spirits memorial sights like Union Square became gathering places of mourning. There, fossilized objects found a resting place. These memorial sites contain many different and incommensurate stories—personal stories, fantasies, and hopes depending on who was looking at the objects.
The recollection-images and objects in these memorial sites—peace banners, flags, crosses, teddy bears, fireman’s hats, ribbons, photographs, poems, candles, flowers—confront what cannot be represented. They are an attempt to bring them into dialogue with memory of the missing. They cry out to tell histories, lives of which they are an index. It is a road back to particular memories and partial histories. It is these inexplicable images that testify most profoundly to the forgetting of both official history and private memory. They are multisensory bits which call upon a sense knowledge that cannot be reproduced nor represented. These are rituals that are necessary and crucial for psychic survival. Let us remember that rituals, including rituals of mourning, are not final acts but beginnings.

Postscript: Since the writing of this essay, the shard has been removed for safety reasons. It will not be used as a monument to mark the 9/11 monument. The winning design is to have two beams of broad light projected into the night sky to commemorate those souls whose bodies remain forever lost. They await justice so that they may finally rest in peace.

References


On Wednesday, September 12, scheduled to fly from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, I found myself instead driving a rental car from Logan, Utah to the Bay Area. I left early — at daybreak, on a clear morning, just at that turning point when summer slides into autumn. Several hours later, on Interstate 80 east of Salt Lake and along the Bonneville Salt Flats, the National Public Radio station began to crackle and fade. By the time I crossed into Nevada, and moments after turning off the radio, I slunk into a state of sad resignation. Two hours of news about the horrors of the collapse of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon were all I could take. The talk of war had put me in a sullen mood.

Ahead on the horizon were storm clouds and every mile or so a short stretch of wet pavement. There were few billboards or manmade distractions of any kind. The traffic was very light — mostly semis. The overcast sky added to the general bleakness. But as I continued driving westward through the Nevada desert I had the strange feeling of moving towards the light, even though I could see piled up clouds ahead of me. The openness of the desert seemed to amplify the sense of light and space. There is an austere beauty to the desert, and trapped in the comfort of the car, this sense of sublime beauty seemed almost reachable in real time. Looking through the windshield of the car was...
The recollection-images and objects in these memorial sites—peace banners, flags, crosses, teddy bears, fireman's hats, ribbons, photographs, poems, candles, flowers—confront what cannot be represented. They are an attempt to bring them into dialogue with memory of the missing. They cry out to tell histories, lives of which they are an index. It is a road back to particular memories and partial histories. It is these inexplicable images that testify most profoundly to the forgetting of both official history and private memory. They are multisensory bits which call upon a sense knowledge that cannot be reproduced nor represented. These are rituals that are necessary and crucial for psychic survival. Let us remember that rituals, including rituals of mourning, are not final acts but beginnings.

Postscript: Since the writing of this essay, the shard has been removed for safety reasons. It will not be used as a monument to mark the 9/11 monument. The winning design is to have two beams of broad light projected into the night sky to commemorate those souls whose bodies remain forever lost. They await justice so that they may finally rest in peace.

References


On Wednesday, September 12th, scheduled to fly from Salt Lake City to San Francisco, I found myself instead driving a rental car from Logan, Utah to the Bay Area. I left early—at daybreak, on a clear morning, just at that turning point when summer slides into autumn. Several hours later, on Interstate 80 east of Salt Lake and along the Bonneville Salt Flats, the National Public Radio station began to crackle and fade. By the time I crossed into Nevada, and moments after turning off the radio, I slunk into a state of sad resignation. Two hours of news about the horrors of the collapse of the World Trade Center and attack on the Pentagon were all I could take. The talk of war had put me in a sullen mood.

Ahead on the horizon were storm clouds and every mile or so a short stretch of wet pavement. There were few billboards or manmade distractions of any kind. The traffic was very light—mostly semis. The overcast sky added to the general bleakness. But as I continued driving westward through the Nevada desert I had the strange feeling of moving towards the light, even though I could see piled up clouds ahead of me. The openness of the desert seemed to amplify the sense of light and space. There is an austere beauty to the desert, and trapped in the comfort of the car, this sense of sublime beauty seemed almost reachable in real time. Looking through the windshield of the car was
like watching a movie, the panoramic view ahead existing in that second
only because of the momentary quality of light – solitude in shifting
illumination. Over the years I have wondered what it would be like to
live in such a landscape – stuck out in some trailer house in the barren
great basin. I imagine that one would die of boredom, or die and be
reborn as a mystic, or perhaps one would simply just die.

It also occurred to me that the high desert landscape of northern
Nevada must be geographically (along with the black hills of South
Dakota) the closest equivalent in the United States to the rugged terrain
of Afghanistan. Other than their beautifully proportioned and
decorated mosques, I wondered what the Taliban had in the way of
art. Holed-up in bunkers, caves and garrisons, not much, I speculated.
I wondered also, do they even have a form of secular art? Or were
they like the Inuit of the frozen Arctic, existing in a hostile
environment, their life reduced to the barest essentials. Art for the Inuit on the Tundra,
100 years ago, had a completely different meaning and function than
what we are accustomed to in the affluent West. Their materials were
solely provided by the animals they hunted: the bones, tusks, and
antlers of the walrus, bear, caribou and seal. Occasionally a bit of
driftwood would supply material for sleds, and the leftover wood
chunks for utensils and carvings. The concept of art was a natural
extension of their lives. Their carvings were small, tended to be hand
held or sewn onto their parkas as amulets. Since they did not
differentiate between making a spoon or comb and the carving of a
seal or bird as amulet or toy, all of what they made became part of their
all-pervasive environment. My first curatorial position was at the
Alaska State Museum in Juneau. The museum’s collection had drawers
full of tiny Inuit utensils and animal carvings. Many of these were
acquired by simply being picked up off the ground. The important
thing to the Inuit was not the possession of the artifact, but rather the
act of making the thing. Once the little carving of the ptarmigan was
complete, and played with a bit, it was just as much a part of the Inuit’s
world if it had been dangling from the hunter’s harpoon or left behind
in the snow. But as I thought about it, I began to feel that the Inuit
actually had very little in common with the Taliban. The Inuit’s
worldview was restricted to their own land; and, they were not religious
zealots. The Taliban and their cells have a worldview, even if it bans
art and free expression. I have recently been reading Bruce Chatwin’s
Anatomy of Restlessness – his selected writings from 1969 to 1989. In
his chapter titled “The Morality of Things”, the late author argued
against the art world’s practice of hoarding objects, of using material
possession as a kind of cache to lord over the less fortunate. Chatwin
had worked for Sotheby's Art Auction House at some point in his career
and the experience had profoundly soured him. He was much more
attracted to the possession-less Australian Aborigines. What Chatwin
hated about the art world was not the art in that world, but rather the
one-upmanship of the art world, controlled as it is by over-inflation,
greed and hoarding. Chatwin begins his chapter on “The Morality of
Things” reminding us that Old Testament prophets lived by the credo:
“Thy shall not lust after things.” Such fervor, based on religious ideals,
leads to extreme behavior. Chatwin writes:

The patriarchs of Ancient Israel lived in black tents. Their wealth
was in herds; they moved up and down their tribal lands on
seasonal migrations, and they were famous for their resistance to
art objects. They would have stormed into art galleries as they
stormed into the shrines of Baal, and slashed every image in sight.
And this, not because they couldn’t pack them in their saddlebags,
but on moral grounds, for they believed that pictures separated
man for God. The adoration of images was a sin of settlement;
the worship of the Golden Calf had satisfied emotional weaklings
who sighed for the fleshpots of Egypt. And prophets like Isaiah
and Jeremiah recalled the time when their people were a place of hardy individualists who did not need to comfort themselves with images. For this reason they denounced the temple which God’s children had turned into a sculpture gallery, and recommended a policy of vandalism and a return to the tents.

The American writer and amateur watercolorist Henry Miller pointed out that art is not needed by two kinds of people: saints and the totally insane. For the rest of us, art is usually there for those who have the need. For the saint, everything in the living world is alive and possessing some kind of power. Even stones and trees spoke to mystics like Mohammed. The plants and rocks also spoke to the shamans - the mystics of Native American culture who hunted and walked across the desert we now call Nevada.

In the summer of 2000, I was also driving through the Nevada desert, but on that occasion with my daughters Kelcey and Alicia. This time on I-50, advertised as “The Loneliest Road in America.” We were driving west to east, from San Francisco to Santa Fe. Highway I-50 is about 100 miles south of I-80, which also cuts across Nevada east to west. Even more barren and isolated than I-80, this highway was also nearly devoid of traffic. It was midday and all morning we had been within the sight of smoke and lightning fires in the mountains to the north. At a forest service site known as Hickison, we turned off the highway, as close as a few hundred yards and no more than a half mile to the north of I-80. For the next couple of hundred miles I encountered numerous trains - some of the train engines pulling as many as 90 boxcars. Many of the cars were graffitied, some simply tagged in a style, looping and meandering abstract designs were crisscrossed occasionally with anthropomorphic figures. None of these quasi-abstract designs resembled the pronghorn antelope or mule deer that grazed and were hunted on the valley floor just below the petroglyph rocks. These rock drawings are shrouded in mystery; the meaning as sign and symbol of these gouged and pecked drawings are lost in time.

As Kelcey, Alicia and I walked from rock to rock, I began to look for the famous art figure Kokopelli, the humpbacked flute player. In the early 1970s, with my wife Victoria, we saw some humpbacked flute players along a ridge on the Galisteo Basin in New Mexico. I had not seen a Kokopelli since, or at least not an authentic humpback flute player as a rock art figure. Kokopelli is depicted in profile throughout the Southwest, his most prominent feature being a flute held to his mouth, his humped back, and a prominent erect phallus. All kinds of speculation exist as to Kokopelli’s powers. He is seen as a fertility symbol, a rain priest, trickster, and seducer of maidens, among other things. We could not find Kokopelli at the Hickison site, so he was perhaps not of this region, or in hiding.

In recent years, with the increased popularity of rock art in the Southwest, the Kokopelli figure is commonly depicted on a vast array of commercial products: on book jackets, coffee cups, and t-shirts. There are a multitude of variations for Kokopelli including a sexually neutral humpback flute player, and it is always this less sexually explicit Kokopelli that is depicted on contemporary commercial products. This has caused me to speculate that Kokopelli has lost his sex, and it only reappears now as graffiti in truck stop restrooms across the American Southwest.

As I continued my drive through the high desert, dropping out of a pass east of Elko, I noticed that the railroad track paralleled the highway, as close as a few hundred yards and no more than a half mile to the north of I-80. For the next couple of hundred miles I encountered numerous trains - some of the train engines pulling as many as 90 boxcars. Many of the cars were graffitied, some simply tagged in a
continuous one color calligraphic style. A few of the cars were completely bombed, and one was a complete top to bottom, in other words, every inch of the side of the boxcar was covered in balloon style letters, “BIG 5”, chunky, thick, outlined, and shadowed letters in red, yellow and dark blue.

At various points along the highway, it was possible for me to shadow the train for several miles, driving at about 70 miles an hour, running in sync with the train’s westward movement. I had fun with this since it allowed me to move right next to cars that were especially beautifully spray-painted. The letter styles were at times difficult to decipher, the letters and names seeming to mock the more staid, stenciled lettering of the railroad company – Southern Pacific or Burlington Northern. The bubble letters of the graffiti artists (known as throw-ups) lean and loop and intertwine. They have all the flare of Chinese and Arabic calligraphies, all the presence and authority of the Hebrew alphabet. Where these boxcars were spray-painted was impossible to determine, but most likely in some urban train yard. Freights (as graffiti artists call them to distinguish them from trains which are subway cars) have become something of a West Coast movement, so the boxcars I was following could have been bombed in Los Angeles or Fresno. Each region of the country has its own variation of styles, and its own masters. One thing for sure, the history of bombing trains and freights is short, colorful and often dangerous.

Bombing is a late 20th century art form made possible in large part because of the invention of the aerosol spray can. The artists are young, mostly of the urban poor, or working class. In recent years, the bombing of freights and trains has become a part of hip-hop culture that exploded in popularity in the 1980’s. The official grown up world fought the spray painting of trains from the very beginning. In May of 1989, New York City’s Municipal Transit Authority declared victory over subway graffiti by enforcing a policy of removing all marked cars from service. The MTA also dramatically increased security in the train yards and hardware stores locked up spray cans, refusing to sell the paint cans to minors. In large part, the loss of subway graffiti in eastern cities was answered by a new generation of freight car bombers in the 1990s. In 1974, Praeger Publishers in New York published a photo book, The Faith of Graffiti, documented by Mervyn Kurlansky and Jon Naar with text by Norman Mailer. It is a classic in the field of graffiti art documentation. Mailer’s text seems relevant in the face of recent world events. After interviewing New York subway artists and chronicling their exploits, Mailer concluded his essay with these sage words:

It is not enough to think of the childlike desire to see one’s name ride by in letters large enough to scream your ego across the city, no, it is almost as if we must go back into some more primeval sense of experience, into that curious intimation of how our existence and our identity may perceive each other only as a mirror. If our name is enormous to us, it is also not real – as if we come from other places than the name, and lived in other lives.

Perhaps that is the unheard echo of graffiti, the vibration of that profound discomfort that arouses as if the unheard music of its proclamation and/or its mass, rapt intent seething of its foliage, is the herald of some oncoming apocalypse less and less far away. Graffiti lingers on our subway door as a memento of what it may well have been, our first art of karma, as if indeed all the lives ever lived are sounding now like the bugles of gathering armies across the unseen ridge.
Graffiti and rock art are not new, they exist worldwide and they are thousands of years old. Their subjects span the entire scope of human life and aspirations, including threats, proclamations, and profanity, even the caricature of mystics. In the Kircherian Museum in Rome there is a scratched graffito of Jesus Christ drawn only a few years after Christ's apostles were preaching the gospel in Rome. Here, Christ is depicted standing with his arms spread the length of the cross and with the head of a donkey. To the left of the cross is the figure of a Christian youth in adoration. Underneath the inscription reads: "Alexamenos worships his God."

The rock artists are lost to us as individuals. We do not know their names, and even make calculated guesses as to their tribes and their time on earth. Writers of graffiti, in spite of throwing up their street names along the entire length of a freight train, are seldom seen at their labors. A handful of graffiti artists became known in the art world. When, in 1983, Tony Shafrazi included Jean-Michel Basquiat, Keith Haring and Futura 2000 in his New York City Soho exhibition Champions, he was acknowledging that for a handpicked few graffiti art had gone above ground. The ephemeral art of tagging a subway car and the impracticality of an art collector actually buying a graffiti train car caused a few to leave the tunnels and yards for the more profitable art world. But the real spirit of graffiti remained underground, and if we ask what type of individual writes graffiti, the answer lies in the nature of the message, the place where it is written, and the spirit of the times.

The efforts to eradicate graffiti will almost always be defeated. If you take away graffiti, you take away the people's roots. Today, in third world countries, in this country, and abroad, there are people for whom graffiti is the only visual art and writing form that they have. Therefore, as I continue driving across Nevada, I found it reassuring to drive side by side with the spray-painted boxcars of freight trains. It was nice to know that art existed before, and continues to exist now, that comes from the people uncensored. It is also nice to know that art can be made without the aid of gallery dealers, collectors, academics and studio assistants, that art can exist in some extreme state, by virtue of the impulse and will to exercise the very human need to make a mark.
Antiques Roadshow: The Object of Learning

Laura Felleman Fattal

Even as school administrators were cutting the unique feature of museum Educators from the school district budget, museum directors in Philadelphia were calling teaching through objects, 'lightning in a bottle.' Educating through objects that have been crafted by talented artisans, owned by famous people, cherished by their association with loved ones, or inanimate witnesses to important historical moments is a recognized and immediate path to learning in the arts. In the search for the authentic, while simultaneously embracing the virtual, Americans participate in shaping a broad understanding of popular culture and accumulated history. Americans are having a love affair with bric-a-brac, yard sales, estate sales, and flea markets. A parallel development can be seen in the advent of genealogy as a hobby in diagramming family trees. Learning from actual objects fuses the critical processes of observation, analysis and evaluation with an appreciation of technical and design skills. Object learning is a type of cultural mirror.

The appeal of the objects found in attics, basements, and garages is best seen in public television's program, Antiques Roadshow. An educator can not help but be absorbed by the interest level and attention to detail the amateur antique scavengers have for the stories the appraisers wholeheartedly share with them and the public television audience. Art education, as a discrete discipline as well as a springboard to interdisciplinary instruction, shares similar goals and investigative approaches to learning from objects with that of Antiques Roadshow. Mutually reinforcing pedagogical comparisons between popular television shows and educational initiatives create cultural connections and build community. After watching Antiques Roadshow only a few times, a viewer could become an amateur art historian grouping objects being appraised into germane themes such as Frontier Life after the Civil War along America's major rivers - the Missouri, the Mississippi, the Columbia, and the Colorado, or The Untutored Eye-portraits and landscapes in clothing, wall hangings, flags, and upholstery or The Inventive Mind-fanciful toys and useful tools or New York City 1920s through the 1950s from Table Settings to Street Walkers. Style, materials and chronology become the tools for all learners in a quest to categorize history.

The call to merge 'road' and 'rubric' has direct backing in the National Education Goals: lifelong learning, language literacy linked with visual literacy, an enhanced set of national standards in all disciplines, and recognition of professional development as a part of the national agenda. In addition, the Advanced Placement examination in art history has begun to move from object identification to an understanding of cultural values inherent in a work of art. These examinations have a wider range of artifacts from world cultures being examined than ever before underscoring the importance of ritual, myth, ceremony, religion, geography, and materials inherent in each society. The sanctity of what is considered an art historical resource is therefore greatly expanded to include objects of daily life as well as those in archives and on view in museums. For over ten years, Art Education magazine has used its instructional resource section to provide color reproductions of non-western artifacts to promote further integration of global art making into the classroom. The pictured resources of
diverse objects act as two-dimensional substitutes for actual objects not readily accessible.

The Smithsonian Institution with its numerous museums in Washington, D.C. and two in New York City is embarking on a reinvigoration of its National Program. The Smithsonian Institution owns circa 140 million objects including rocks, sundials, candlesticks, weathervanes, and iron, teapots, quilts, clocks, paintings, documents and a great variety of other artifacts together seen as the accumulated wealth of the nation. If just over half of the 275 million people who live in the United States became the caretaker of one of these objects there would be a ground swell of national pride in the contents of the storeroom of our natural and constructed environment. A more closely aligned sense of ownership could develop with these objects through actual and/or virtual adoption. Ideas of personal and national ownership would, therefore, be both expanded and refined. A breathtaking piece of jewelry at the Cooper Hewitt Museum in New York, for instance, was labeled American, not because of its style or manufacture, but because the stones employed in the broach were indigenous to the United States. Art education in the United States has its foundation in aiding industry and refining tools and instruments for industrial and domestic improvement so important to a growing country. Concomitantly, copying Old Master paintings and sculptures has been a hallmark of traditional American art education in the academies. Object learning, however, has functioned both in progressive learning environments and in bastions of traditionalism fostering an in-depth exploration and understanding of one's surroundings.

Discovery is both a method and an inspiration for learning. The 'you are there' instant, the 'aha' moment, and the unfolding of a story with a totally surprise ending often requires great planning, orchestration, and erudition. The appraisers at the Antiques Roadshow know competing jewelers of the 19th century in New York or silversmiths in Boston, they know the manufacturers' hallmark stamped into glass and metal pieces, and they readily recognize hardware that has been replaced on bureaus, dressers and desks. Interesting asides reflects the expertise of the appraisers and includes information such as the use of the word Catlinite. Catlinite is a stone carved by Native Americans named after the East Coast painter George Catlin, who was known for his portraits of Native Americans in the mid 19th century. The appraisers know the distinction between 5, 4 or 3 clawed small sculptural dragons used as holders for Chinese calligraphy brushes which feed a wide collectors' market. The owner's appreciation of the symmetry and design of the horns on the back and sides of a Texas Longhorn Rocking Chair was rewarded by knowing others valued this piece with high auction prices. Astute to the fact that a flint enamel glaze for ceramics is typically from Scotland enabled the appraiser to quickly match up the piece on hand with one sold at auction earlier in the year. Antiques Roadshow's producers are the first to say that it is not the price tag but the legacy, the origin or manufacture, rareness or commonness of the household treasures that makes the object dear to its owner. The disappointment of hearing of repaintings, destroyed patinas, and/or of elaborate additions to already complete objects gives a nuanced meaning to originality and replicas. The 'best of show' is not necessarily and not often the aberrant piece done by an artisan but the most typical of a style according to most appraisers. The 'wrinkles' of age are, in fact, the beauty of a scuffed chair leg.

Objects are survivors of another age. Earthquakes, wars and divorces displace objects from their original homes. Zuni pottery uses stacked geometric designs to symbolize thunderhead clouds, a formation certainly crucial to the arid locale. The symbolism of the geometric shapes often gets lost when far from it mythic beginning and geographic source. Deductions on the inside pages of books or edits of a manuscript are treasured survivors of the actual thinking of a person. The original version of Lewis Carroll's Alice in Wonderland
is annotated in purple ink. Lewis Carroll taught mathematics at Oxford University and must have kept the purple inked pen, the color ink Oxford professors used, in his hand moving from grading math exams to editing his manuscript. In the purpled marked manuscript, one is then a witness to the meanderings of creativity.

The real life ‘Wonderland’ of auction pricing and personal attic cleaning is not without intrigue. What museums buy, what auction houses sell and what individuals want would be storyline for any soap opera not only an edutainment public television show. Traveling auctioneers set up in Victorian mansions or other large prestigious buildings subtly attempting to substantiate their legitimacy. However, poor bronze casts of facsimile Frederic Remington charging horses may not be disguised to an educated eye even on a porch with a lovely striped awning. One must investigate carefully who appraisers say are their clients. Antique owners have a soft spot to giving artifacts to museums to preserve for the general public’s edification. Without asking for contracts and/or proof of collaboration between museum and appraiser, it is hard to know where an artifact will go after it is sold to an appraiser. An appraiser can be working for an insurance company, or for an antique dealer or as a business partner with a dealer. An appraiser’s unscrupulous predilection would be to offer low estimates for artifacts and sell to a dealer at a considerable profit or to have the client sell to the dealer and get a kick back from dealer. The provenance, the ownership history of an object, adds greatly to its value. Many sellers do not know the word or the significance of provenance as a type of lineage of the object that is a major asset in selling an artifact. A way to side-step collusion between appraiser and dealer or appraiser and museum is to make sure the client has done comparative pricing for similar historical objects. The time-consuming activity of researching provenance, style, materials, and condition of the objects can be of little interest to many individuals holding onto objects solely for sentimental reasons. The treachery of salesmanship, the need for

seemingly new found cash and a reinforcing of questionable taste coalesce to undermine an honest transaction between client and appraiser or antiques dealer or museum official.

Certain historical periods continue to provide the public with treasure troves of artifacts. The on-going fascination with Civil War history, an American war that requires no reading ability in a foreign language to understand its documentation and the likelihood to have had a great-great-great relative who fought in that war, makes artifacts from that war often quite sought after and valuable. The disappearance of Dutch Renaissance drawings and paintings after World War II that then resurface and are returned to German museums adds to the mystic of art as currency, as barter and as talisman. Hidden in a German castle by conquering Soviet troops, a group of Dutch Renaissance drawings and paintings, now valued at $15 million, were handed over to the KGB during the Cold War. After display at an art museum in Baku, Azerbaijan, the work was stolen again and offered for sale by a Japanese ex-wrestler trying to raise $12 million for a kidney transplant. Underlining the importance of the uniqueness of a work of art, museum objects also clarify an historical and stylistic moment regardless of a tainted provenance. A museum visitor, perhaps, unknowingly is then the recipient of the variegated political, scholarly and entrepreneurial route of the object into the museum’s collection.

Telltale characteristics for diamonds are the four ‘c’s - color, clarity, carat, and cut. The code for valuing rubies is for them to be pigeon blood in color. Noting tricolor in cameo glass is highly desirable. Bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, in the 18 th century was so treasured that large bronze European kettles were alternately traded by settlers, broken into smaller pieces to make weapons and buried with their dead. Samovars that appear so exotic, with their bulbous shape, to 21st century Americans were ubiquitous in 18th and 19th century Russia. They were all marked with medals of merit and every family had one. Samovars may have sentimental or decorative value, but they have
little or no value as collectibles in today's market. For collectors of toys, condition and rarity is everything. The excitement of folk art for both scholars and collectors is the endemic uniqueness of the art form. For various paintings and sculptures, it is the collective wisdom and consensus of curators, appraisers, scholars, and dealers that determine which periods in an individual artist's development is most important and ultimately most valuable in the market. Punctuated by acknowledged and valued qualities, there are nevertheless arbitrary biases in all categories of collected objects accentuating the spirit of individualism.

The market and the classroom often corroborate democratic orientations. Public opinion and public taste form a shifting matrix of consensus. Object learning advances the national art education standards with its emphases on critique, cultural history, aesthetics as well as technique and design. As states throughout the country are issuing and revising arts standards, the reappearing concern for creating community connections is supported by the heightened examination of the artifacts of our personal and collective histories.

**References**


*Schools, Communities and the Arts: A Research Compendium* Arizona State University and it Morrison Institute for Public Policy, June1.

---

**Miss, Miss, Look at What My Mother Sent Me from Jail**

When I tell people that I teach in a public school, especially when I go on to say that I teach at the Junior High level, there is almost always snickering sounds and rolling eyes followed by horror stories from the past. They relate memories of crowded, noisy hallways filled with bullies; classrooms that felt like jail, teachers that were bored and lots of hormone driven mis-adventures. I just smile because I know it is all too true. I do not attempt to explain why, as an artist, I choose to return to the classroom after so many years or how I am inspired everyday by the energy and truth of the students I encounter. I have come to learn that this immediate reaction by others is only a small part of the whole experience.

Junior High, for all its craziness and rambunctiousness is also a place of incredibly direct honesty. I do not know if this honesty is a remnant of innocence from elementary school or if it is the beginning bravado of young adulthood. It is probably a mixture of both. I only
The excitement of folk art for both scholars and collectors is the endemic uniqueness of the art form. For various paintings and sculptures, it is the collective wisdom and consensus of curators, appraisers, scholars, and dealers that determine which periods in an individual artist's development is most important and ultimately most valuable in the market. Punctuated by acknowledged and valued qualities, there are nevertheless arbitrary biases in all categories of collected objects accentuating the spirit of individualism.

The market and the classroom often corroborate democratic orientations. Public opinion and public taste form a shifting matrix of consensus. Object learning advances the national art education standards with its emphases on critique, cultural history, aesthetics as well as technique and design. As states throughout the country are issuing and revising arts standards, the reappearing concern for creating community connections is supported by the heightened examination of the artifacts of our personal and collective histories.

References

Beyond Enrichment: Building Effective Arts Partnerships with schools and Your community, New York: American Council for the Arts, 1996.


Schools, Communities and the Arts: A Research Compendium Arizona State University and it Morrison Institute for Public Policy, June 1.

Miss, Miss, Look at What My Mother Sent Me from Jail

Future Akins

When I tell people that I teach in a public school, especially when I go on to say that I teach at the Junior High level, there is almost always snickering sounds and rolling eyes followed by horror stories from the past. They relate memories of crowded, noisy hallways filled with bullies; classrooms that felt like jail, teachers that were bored and lots of hormone driven mis-adventures. I just smile because I know it is all too true. I do not attempt to explain why, as an artist, I choose to return to the classroom after so many years or how I am inspired everyday by the energy and truth of the students I encounter. I have come to learn that this immediate reaction by others is only a small part of the whole experience.

Junior High, for all its craziness and rambunctiousness is also a place of incredibly direct honesty. I do not know if this honesty is a remnant of innocence from elementary school or if it is the beginning bravado of young adulthood. It is probably a mixture of both. I only
know that if I get out of the way, if I pay attention, and if I allow for the unexpected, I will experience glimpses of unbelievable insight. It is these moments that guide me as a teacher, and as an artist.

Through my personal teaching experiences, I have observed young men and women who transcend the conditions of their daily lives to communicate through art the raw truth of who they are. When I teach, I do so from the experience and perspective of an artist. I try to bring the world of art into each life by first helping each student realize that art is everywhere, that you do not have to be privileged or wealthy to see art or to study art; you simply have to look around you. With this in mind I periodically ask a simple question “who has seen some art lately?” After we all survive the giggles from the various versions of questions about cartoons (yes, they are art), video games (who do you think drew the characters?), wrestling (look at the wonderful colors and use of design in the costumes), graffiti (how many symbols do you see everyday?) and slightly racy scenes from movies (yes, when you go to college you will be able to draw and paint nudes), there are some shy responses about a painting or a drawing in someone’s house. I always ask them to describe the piece in words that paint a picture...size (height by width by depth), media (drawing, painting, sculpture), and subject and then to tell us why they liked it or disliked it. In the case of small pieces or reproductions, I encourage them to bring them in or to take a photograph of the art so our class as a whole can experience the visual image first hand. We have good reports and not-so-good reports, but we are talking about art and it is this dialog that I believe is the foundation of an awareness of art that can last a lifetime.

One day the importance of this casual conversational atmosphere became clear when a very excited young woman quickly raised her hand and shouted out “Miss, Miss, look at what my Mother sent me from jail!” She held up an envelope covered with drawings. I knew I had no time to hesitate in my acknowledgement and encouragement of this form of art. So, as she opened the letter and brought out the enclosed handkerchief, I asked the class to gather around. Instantly, we were surrounded by “oohs” and “ahhs.” Suddenly, students that had been silent throughout all our art talks started to tell of art they had received from relatives in jail. They compared images, color of ink, styles of lettering and the pros and cons of using tears. We were all looking, really looking at, the quality of the lines; the subject matter and the emotional message each image carried. It was a great art moment.

Art can bring people together who never might have met. In one class, one very shy young man (Ben) who was new to the United States (English was his second language), living with his elderly grandfather, ended up sitting next to another young man (Jared) who was a bright, gifted and talented student from a well-to-do home. I am not sure how they ended up next to each other (I allow my students to sit where they please), but I do know that they were the two smallest guys in a class of very large and very life-experienced students. We were about halfway through the semester when we developed a project on maps. I casually mentioned that they could work in groups. I explained how collaborations in art happen more often than most people think. I showed a number of slides of examples of collaborative work, discussing how the work was divided fairly. Class continued as usual for a number of days and then about a week later, Ben came up to me and carefully asked if I had meant it when I said they could work together. I assured him I did and then asked him why he wanted to know. He reluctantly turned over a drawing of the cartoon character “Snoopy”, explaining that he and Jared both loved Snoopy. He hesitated, but slowly went on to explain that it was really important that it was “OK” to work together because “I don’t always draw so good, but Jared can draw what I think.” I wanted to cry or hug them...
both. Somehow, a simple cartoon had helped two young men transcend cultural, financial and social barriers that most of us take a lifetime to even recognize.

When I teach, I try to show how art has many inspirations and takes many different forms. Just as art is all around us, it is also within each of us. As we are all different, so is art. The idea that there is only one “good” art is ridiculous.

Last year my school decided we should have multicultural classes once a week for our magnet students. (These are students who are bused-in from other parts of town based on their outstanding scores in science, math or the performing arts). Although this extra assignment was given to the foreign language department, I volunteered to help because it seemed like a good idea. I quickly surmised that what had been decided was a “country a week” theme as I was asked what country I wanted to talk about next week. I politely declined, mumbling some excuse and walked out the door. While leaving the room I literally ran into one of the Spanish teachers who was also escaping the situation. After just a few minutes reaffirming each other’s disbelief in what was happening we said “lets do it right”. It did not take long to find left over students (non-magnet students who just happened to be in a language class with mostly magnet students), to locate an available classroom, or to get a general okay from the administration (to do the class our way) with the warning to keep it on task.

We had no real idea what needed to be covered, so we did what good teachers do everywhere—we asked the students what they thought about the subject. What we learned is that the students were not sure what multi-cultural was or why it was important to them. So, we decided to begin by inviting people to come and try to help us answer the question. We asked two friends to the class: Rebecca Riley, an artist from Houston and Dr. Robert Owen, a Fulbright scholar who worked in Paraguay. Both were wonderfully open with the students as they talked about their work in South America. Ms. Riley had lived and studied in Brazil while a young woman. She spoke of her love for that region and how that special time/place had changed her art forever. Dr. Owen talked of his work in Biology. He told of how he had traveled throughout the world, emphasizing the importance of speaking two languages. He talked about science and made references to how like art, it was a universal language. The students thought it was “neat” and loved that both guests spoke beautiful Spanish. They found it interesting to hear the strange variations on the language.

But, something was still missing. Everything seemed beyond the student’s reach. They were not artists—even though I keep assuring them we could do art—nor were they scientists with big college degrees. What could they do? What could any Mexican-American do that mattered? Why did they have to learn about other cultures, anyway?

In an attempt to help them find answers we reviewed a video on the life and the work of Caesar Chavez. At one place in the movie Chavez is called a “hero”. Someone asked out loud “what is a hero?” The Spanish teacher stopped the video. We looked at each other and knew this was the opportunity we had been waiting for. We embraced the question and re-asked it to the entire class. What happened next was phenomenal.

The class quickly came to the agreement that a hero was someone who would put his/her life on the line for you or sacrifice his/her life for yours. We began to name heroes that we knew from history. Martin
Luther King, Mother Theresa, Caesar Chavez, and Gandhi were all mentioned. We next asked about heroes they might know in their own lives, families or neighborhoods. It took a few minutes but names and stories began to come forth. At the same time, one student reminded me that they had been promised a chance to do art, so we diverted the conversation for a few moments to decide what kind of art everyone wanted to do. As suggestions were given and discussed, the class (with some gentle guidance) divided into groups based on students' general ideas about what makes a hero, as well as students' interests in a certain type of art.

Two young women wanted to do something about Mother Theresa because they had heard about her in church.

After a brief inquiry both admitted they liked things that were sewn and embroidered, even though they confessed they knew nothing about handwork. Shyly they agreed to try. They also agreed to ask relatives to share sewing abilities.

Another group of students wanted to do something about the school's new mascot. After 50 years as the Redskins, the school had rightly changed its name to the Knights. There had been much discussion both in and out of school concerning this decision. Many students were third generation attendees and brought the resentment they heard at home to school. We had talked for over a year trying to help the students understand how much courage it took to change a name that was offensive, to a name that stood for a higher goal. It took a while, but finally, most students accepted the new name. This particular group wanted to honor that decision. They believed that mosaic tile; with its broken pieces of many colors, would be a great way to portray the diversity of the school.

The largest group of students was committed to local heroes and wanted to do photography. One young man had recently been given a used 35-mm camera, which he was willing to share and the Spanish Club had a camera we could check out; so we were set. Next, I asked the students to take time to make up a list of heroes to be photographed. When I returned and asked them about their list, I was overwhelmed with the results. Some names were predictable but for unpredictable reasons, others were touchingly personal and unique. At the top of the list were weathermen, because "they tell us when the bad weather is coming that will hurt us." Living in West Texas tornadoes and violent hail storms are a reality. Many of these students came from families that had survived the deadly tornadoes of the early 1970's and had been raised with the stories of devastation.

Next on the list were firemen because "they saved my little cousin and my aunt." One young man had just written "my dog" on his list. When I asked him why, he told the most beautiful story of how when he was little he had fallen into a play pool and the dog had pulled him out. His dog was his best friend. All students agreed the dog was a hero. Others on the list included our principal because he keep the school safe, the head cleaning lady because she kept the building clean and even cleaned up the restrooms when someone got sick. There was a surprise addition of one of our young performing students who had only recently "come out" as a gay. When I asked why this choice, (I was fearful of some cruel backlash) they were all silent. Then one student just said he thought the male student "had guts and he could really sing great."

Finally on the list were Lowriders (highly modified cars with extensive individualized detail on the exterior and interior). I said, "Ok, I know you all love the cars but are cars heroes?" They laughed and said, "No, Miss, but the men who work on them are." I again asked why and they simply said, "Because they keep us off the streets and out of trouble."

As conversation continued a few decided to leave the photography group to concentrate on Lowriders. We learned that Lowrider Magazine was beginning a series of articles on the history of these unique cars. Since most of these young men were in a reading
class, we instantly knew we had a way to help them with their reading. The Spanish teacher offered to oversee this part of the project. Each student agreed to read the article each month, in class, together, and out loud, while working on drawings and models of the cars the rest of the time. As the year progressed the students told of how proud they were to be carrying on a tradition, how much fun it was to learn why these cars were so much a part of their Hispanic heritage.

It was a great year. We went to a dehydration plant to learn first hand what a very small group of people do to feed the world. While there, we were amazed to hear the director of the plant tell the story of the first shipment overseas going to Mother Theresa. The girls working on the embroidery banner were thrilled. We toured the civil engineering department at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, to learn how tornadoes are formed and to hear stories about the work of the storm chasers. We had the Fire department come with their engine and all their equipment to talk with the students about what it was like to be a firefighter.

We ended the year with an exhibition of their finished art works at the Museum, Texas Tech University. One of my favorite pieces was a painting by a young African American student that came into class near the end of the school year. When we explained the theme of heroes, he smiled and said his grandmother (who had just died which was why he was suddenly at our school) was his hero. He missed her. He asked if he could do a painting about her. I thought it was a good idea. When I next checked on him, he was doing a plant. When I asked what happened to the idea of using your grandmother, he said, “this is my grandmother.” Now I have been doing art as long as I can remember, but this was a jump in thought even for me. So I asked him to explain. What he said was “My granny loved plants and she named all her plants. This one is Arron, he was her favorite.” I understood.

I have learned that art can help bridge historical and contemporary cultures through the study of famous artists. One such artist is Diego Rivera. I show slides of his work. We view a video on his life. We discuss the difference between murals or graffiti. And, we examine how art can make a statement. Usually I give each student a three-foot by three-foot square of canvas and tell him or her to design an image that will say something personal. Then, I allowed the students to team up in
order to combine resources and skills. The topics can be about anything as long as it is honest and the students have proven to me they have thought about it and planned out what they want to do. There are lots of dragons and dogs, cars and pop stars. We use acrylic paint and try not to be too messy. The work is fun.

Each year one canvas piece stands out for its honesty and its power. During my first year, one of my most reticent students came up after a couple of days and asked if it was okay if a group got together to do something really big. When I asked how big, he said, "You know, kind of like a wall big." I took the bait and asked why that big. He smiled and said slyly that he and a few others had "previous experience with that size." I laughed and agreed. He then asked if they could use spray paint. Once again, I asked why. This time he simply said he could do a better job with spray paint. I told him I would have to check with the principal, knowing I was on that thin line between we-love-to-see-art-work-in-the-halls and you-are-encouraging-illegal-activity. Finally the principal agreed after I assured him I would account for every spray can—every day. The next thing I knew Elias had convinced the entire Hispanic male population of two classes to join canvases with his. He then organized and oversaw the creation of a magnificent banner approximately forty-eight feet long celebrating the Mexican and American history. Influenced by the illustrations from popular magazines and tattoos, the banner proclaims the power of unity through freedom and justice. It was grand.

I have always held that art is a universal language. That it speaks when words fail. That it has the power to unite. This has never been more true than during my second year when two young women, one from Moscow, USSR the other from the Philippines worked together to create a visual statement on their canvas about the abuse and misuse of power they experienced everyday in school. Their work was direct and bitter. It told of a principal who yelled more than he spoke, of being shoved into lockers, of students sleeping in classes, of teachers who had given up long ago, and of being herded along as if they were cattle while being fed food unfit for cattle. As with the other stories their story was personal, insightful, and honest.

Not everyday is filled with moments like the ones I have described. But, when I am able to experience one of these rare moments I am reminded of my own time in public school and how art became my place of safety. The place I first learned to trust the truth within. I only hope that I am somehow able to create the same safe place.
Intergenerational Art Education: Building Community in Harlem

Angela M. La Porte

I began the first of 43 visits to an after-school intergenerational art program in Lower East Harlem, New York, with the expectation of a straightforward research project, one which would perhaps ratify my growing conviction that young people and older adults together would provide a natural learning environment for art. My first personal encounter with the Lower East Harlem community began when I crossed 96th Street, an informal boundary separating its decaying tenements and public housing projects from the newer, more prosperous neighborhood to the south. I soon realized that there was no need for a line on the map indicating the division between Manhattan and Harlem. And referring to a travel guide of New York City, I noticed that it listed no restaurants, hotels, or shopping highlights above 96th Street. Subway tracks emerged above ground and loomed over Central Harlem’s neighborhoods. The only new building in the vicinity north of 96th Street was the impressive Muslim Mosque.

A mixture of fear and compassion swept through me as I entered the economically struggling neighborhood of primarily Puerto Ricans, Dominicans, and African Americans. I viewed an area punctuated by deserted buildings with barred or bricked-in windows, and walls covered with gang graffiti or murals in tribute to youthful victims of crime. In front of one row of tenements, stuffed animals dangled from the limbs of a tree like pendulant fruit. One teenage informant suggested, “A child probably died there.” Kozol (1995) mentioned a similar mysterious tree in the South Bronx in his ethnography, “Amazing Grace.”

I passed by sidewalks strewn with trash and windblown paper, vacant lots cluttered with abandoned cars and garbage, even a rat carcass in a sidewalk puddle. An occasional child’s shriek broke through the din of traffic and the racket from a nearby playground. Across the busy street a loudspeaker crackled, blaring a message of religious redemption over the heads of school children carrying book bags and crowding the entrance of a tiny storefront shop. As I approached the senior center that was to be the base for my study, I noticed a rag doll discarded on a rubble heap behind a chain link fence. It was somehow ominous at the moment.

The neighborhood, sometimes known as El Barrio, extends north of 96th Street and east of Fifth Avenue, bordering the northern edge of one of the wealthiest cities in the world. East Harlem, one of the poorest areas in the country, chronically shoulders many economic and social problems, among them poverty, drug abuse, and broken homes. AIDS is one of the fastest growing killers in the neighborhood. This area records the highest rate of child abuse and neglect in New York City and the greatest number of births to teenagers in the United States (Freidenberg, 1995; Demographic Profiles, 1992). Grandparents often become the principal caregivers of their grandchildren. The guardian for one of the teens in this program was his 40-year-old grandmother. Several were from single parent homes. Nearly all of the East Harlem residents involved resided in public housing projects which were deteriorating, sometimes vermin infested and overcrowded. According to the 1990 United States Census, the socioeconomic conditions found in this area have been devastating, with approximately 40 percent of the area’s population living below the poverty level, with an annual income of less than $10,000. Median household income in lower
Manhattan (below 96th Street) was $32,262 in 1992, well over twice that of East Harlem, which was $14,882.

Research Role

Within this inner-city community, I was an outsider, a small town intruder of Italian descent. Outwardly, I could almost have passed for a Latina resident, but I knew I was out of place. Since my background was so different from other study participants, I felt uneasy about taking on the role of participant-as-observer prescribed by my study. But I hoped that I would become less conspicuous through extensive interaction with participants.

I began collecting data in this role, as a member directly involved in the group experience. Weeks passed before I was able to establish a rapport with both age groups through close personal contact. My position, participant-as-observer, required less involvement than a full participant, thus allowing me more time for observation. As the program moved from training and relationship building to oral history collection and art making, I shifted towards a full participant role, more engaged in program activities.

The Participants

Participating seniors in this intergenerational program, aged 62 and older, were chosen from a list of 100 recipients for the city’s Meals-on-Wheels program. The majority lived in public housing projects within El Barrio. The group of secondary school students varied in number from 10 to 12, as a few left and others enlisted. They ranged in age from 14 through 18 and were primarily from the same neighborhood. Nearly all of both age groups were from lower income households. They were Puerto Rican, Dominican, and African American, representative of the multi-ethnic population. A few spoke and/or understood Spanish. All were fluent in English.

The students became involved with the intergenerational program through the encouragement of their teachers, school counselors, and friends. As participants, they were expected to maintain passing grades throughout the seven-month program. They received a $200 stipend for each three months, six hours per week of regular participation. Some had considered volunteering before learning of the monetary incentive.

The youths identified various reasons for joining the program. Some wanted work experience and hoped to improve their communication skills. Others joined the program exclusively for the money, and possibly, for a place to socialize with other teens. A few received high school credit. One of the teens said, “I just like the idea of actually helping somebody, the idea of talking to that person and seeing where they came from, and how they dealt with things we’re doing right now.” One of the teens had never known her grandparents but felt confident that she would find a surrogate in the program. “You can pick them.” Many expressed stereotypical attitudes that the older adults were merely helpless members of their community, while they themselves were doing a good deed.

The Art Program

The art program was a joint project funded by a grant through an intergenerational arts organization and a New York City social service agency for seniors. I planned to investigate the development of intergenerational relationships that were encouraged through the program’s three components, social service, oral history and art making. The first of these, social service, helped establish friendships and included pre-program training, phone reassurance, friendly visits, and shopping assistance. Pre-program training involved educating the young participants about the physical problems they might encounter
with older adults. Phone reassurance included conversations with seniors via the telephone. During friendly visits, teenagers visited the residences of homebound seniors. The young participants helped them with shopping or purchased items at the store for them.

The second program component, oral history, involved family tree training and creating a family tree, an oral history workshop, and collecting oral histories from seniors. Methods of oral history interviews involved formal and informal questions and an extension of inquiry through the discussion of artworks relevant to the Harlem residents' history. The third element, art making, consisted of studio art experiences for participants at the senior center led by a professional artist. Participants collaborated on developing a theme idea web (a schematic plan) for a collage, and then on making a collage based on a central theme from the senior's life story.

Making family trees with the seniors helped establish relationships between age groups. The oral history interviews expanded upon these relationships and potential collage themes began to emerge. Over a period of five months, the professional artist devoted weekly art training sessions to studio art. Teens learned various techniques for making a collage using a variety of media.

The arts organization had developed many programs over the previous decade, the goals of which were to increase interaction and understanding between widely disparate age groups, and to diminish social and psychological problems experienced within inner-city communities (i.e., depression, dementia, suicide, and the development of age-related stereotypes). Funded by a combination of grants and corporate support, the backbone of the organization's activities has been the development and sharing of the oral histories of individual participants, who then transformed them into a variety of artistic representations such as plays, illustrated books, photography and video exhibits, artworks or collage. At a prestigious central New York City museum, I viewed a video produced by a recent program that was compiled from footage taken by teenagers roaming Harlem, interviewing the oldest residents. The particular program I studied focused on oral history and collage.

The intergenerational art program brought together several homebound older residents of East Harlem housing projects with teenagers living nearby. The goal of bringing the two generations together was to develop positive relationships between the teenagers and seniors, diminishing common stereotypes and ameliorating mental and physical problems associated with the social isolation of the elders. The collection of oral histories and the creation of visual art were means to encourage partnerships and sharing, and build relationships and understanding.

My research interest complimented the program’s purpose, seeking to identify potential educational benefits of intergenerational art education, to understand how old and young people interact within this particular context, including the study site, the curriculum, intergenerational relationships, and the participants' ages, gender, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. Although data was triangulated, it was site specific, and consequently some findings may only be relevant to similar situations and participants.

Interpretations of the Intergenerational Interactions

My interpretation of this seven-month study of intergenerational interactions emerged from data collection and triangulation. I described, analyzed, and interpreted interactions between seniors and teenagers throughout the three program components: social service, oral history and art making. All these activities contributed to the formation of relationships between teenagers and seniors. Collecting oral histories and making art intensified the exchange of personal history and culture,
reduced age-related stereotypes, and empowered young and older participants. All of these promoted a sense of community among the participants. As a result of intergenerational relationships, art making became less intimidating and more meaningful for the teens. Oral histories created an open dialogue for learning art context. Data from participants, my observations, and supporting literature provided a clearer understanding of intergenerational interactions within this east Harlem community-based art program.

**Intergenerational Relationships**

Initially, when teens contacted older adults from the community to participate in the intergenerational art program, many hesitated. One senior was afraid to get involved and was apprehensive about the teens coming to his apartment. Another’s original fears were magnified by these words from her sister, “You gotta be careful. You hear so many things,” and she added, “If I let somebody take me out they may never bring me back.” One older woman couldn’t understand why teens would want to know about her history. “There’s nothin’ too much,” she said.

Despite rough beginnings brought on by age-related stereotypes each group had about the other, relationships developed during all three components of the program: social service, oral history and art making. Newman and Brummel(1989), among other researchers, note relative positive impacts that intergenerational programs have on diminishing age-related stereotypes and developing positive relationships for educational exchange (Metcalf, 1990; Rogers, 1995). Caring relationships also became evident as the Harlem program progressed. One teen said,

It’s nice to know that you care about somebody else even though you might not have known them that long, and they also like to see you. They look forward to it. They want you to come see them, not because you’re here and have to see somebody. Both of you look forward to seeing each other and talking. That’s a good experience.

A senior commented on the collage making activity,

You ought to see them. When they do it [work on the collage], I notice, they just don’t do it because they’re doing it. They take an interest. If they didn’t take an interest, they wouldn’t know what to ask me, what I like and what I didn’t like. The way how [sic] they do it, you see they take an interest. . . . they get up with such feelings to do it. Some people, they do it and just don’t care. . . . When they do it, they do it with such a grace, a feeling, uplifting.

Many relationships were almost familial. According to another senior,

She treats me like her daughter, and I’m very attached. . . . she could recognize my voice. . . . We had a little trouble in the beginning ‘cause I didn’t know her, and we didn’t know each other, but after . . . four months, she is great. . . . She’ll talk to me and say, “Hi Rose, do you want to go shopping today or do you want to do this today?”

I observed some visual evidence of relationships that had also grown. For example, when Teresa and Bonita interviewed Carmina, their physical position and body language suggested their intense interest in what the Puerto Rican senior had to say. Teresa sat beside Bonita, both facing Carmina in her kitchenette. Teresa’s mother sat just outside of our circle and jumped into the conversation as a translator.
at times. I knew immediately that there was some special tie between the girls and Carmina. On earlier visits the girls had done their best to distance themselves physically and personally from the elder. They sat at opposite ends of the room and had little eye contact. Now, after several visits, Carmina had opened up her life to us, a story that we had tried to elicit many times before, but which she had assiduously avoided. Meanwhile, the teens' eyes were locked on her while Teresa's hand rested in Carmina's lap.

Some relationships established in the program were lasting ones. Visits and phone calls occurred frequently outside of the program. One team of teens who left the program continued to visit their senior partner. These relationships provided a comfortable learning environment. Adults became more open. Students became more involved and sympathetic as they took a personal interest in the seniors' lives.

The Exchange of Oral History

As intended, discussions were not limited to formal prepared questions from theme interview worksheets. Students developed their own topics of historical inquiry ranging from how much everyday purchases had once cost to discussion of weekly earnings, gender roles, comic books, sporting events and even to what took place at the Savoy Ballroom. Most teens enjoyed the oral history gathering process, even competing to ask the next question. Comparing prices then with now was a common preoccupation among the teens.

Many interesting conversations took place during oral history interviews, particularly when students interjected their own questions. One episode stood out in my mind. During an interview with Mr. Smith, a retired African-American social worker, Dante, a teen of Puerto Rican descent, leaned back on the couch and closed his eyes, claiming to have an excruciating headache. But Juanita's question, "Do you remember the death of Malcolm X," brought him out of it, and he took over the interview.

Dante: Do you remember when Martin Luther King died?

Mr. Smith: Yes.

Dante: How was that?

Mr. Smith: Everybody was saddened, and I was saddened, because I looked at Martin Luther King as being a hero and a leader.

Dante: Me too.

Mr. Smith: And he brought ... a lot of changes in this country.

Dante: And he didn't even use any violence.

Mr. Smith: No.

Dante: That's it.

During oral history questioning, historically and culturally relevant artwork was sometimes introduced as seniors shared their personal history and culture with teenagers. Making their lives the center of interest gave them a unique opportunity to display the understandings they had achieved through experience in a situation that valorized this knowledge. The young participants often responded with contemporary comparisons and contributed original questions of interest such as, "What was it like to go to the Savoy Ballroom?" and "How much did it cost back then?" Most noted that they gained a better understanding of their community's heritage through the unique voices
of older adults. Erickson (1983) asserts that historical inquiry can be enhanced by interviewing older acquaintances about a period of time or place, a young Harlem program participant voiced evidence of this notion:

I learned about their background and some things from history from a person who was around during that time. It gave me a clearer picture. . . . I used to like it when he [Mr. Smith] talked about how Harlem used to be. I can imagine. A picture of the current Harlem is nothin' you want to decorate your living room with. He told me how nice it was. I only seen it in the movies, but when somebody says it out of their mouth that they were actually there, it's different. You get more details. It's like bringing history to life.

Miguel agreed: "Here [in schools], you teach in books. The other way, I see in person with my two eyes." The intergenerational dialogue gave voice to seniors through the sharing of their personal memories and cultural histories, which became a "medium of expression, an empathetic way of seeing through another's eyes," as Gablik (1995, p. 82) has asserted. Providing recognition and validation for their life experiences were empowering to those who had long been disenfranchised, ignored, and forgotten. Their direct connection to the past valorized their lives and offered a living testament to long ago events.

Oral history questions prompted discussions about famous people and places, entertainment, everyday life before modern technological conveniences, traditions, immigration, and more. There was a strong interest in the Great Depression, and the desperate circumstances described by elders astonished the young people. A few of the seniors responded to questions regarding Father Divine, a religious leader in the 1930s who helped feed and organize the poor in Harlem. The teens had been unaware of his work, but they listened intently to some of the comments made by Mrs. Miller:

He was a religious man. . . . He used to charge 30 or 25 cents a meal. He used to help the people, the hungry people. That's back in the Depression.

They also learned about segregation during the 1940s from an older man who experienced it. Mr. Smith spoke of his early years at a school in the South:

The elementary school ran from one through seven. Eighth grade was junior high. We only had one school. We had segregation. So, the blacks went to their school and the whites went to their school. That happened in the county that I'm from . . . . We had another race of people called the Indians, and they had their school . . . . The books that we got were from the white school, if you will. Many of the pages were missing, and we had to use those books. I didn't like that part about it, but we had to do with what we had.

Many in our country look back on "the good ol' days," but these personal experiences of segregation and racial prejudice had left many oppressive memories among older volunteers which brought a poignant silence among the youth. Teachers or textbooks could not offer more eloquent testimony.

Life was a struggle for many people who immigrated to the United States during the early part of the twentieth century. Anna spoke of her family's experience while several of the youngsters listened attentively.

It was tough here. When I was a very young child, I remember soup lines, bread lines. That's when my mother died. Then, my grandmother came. She took me back to the Virgin Islands. My
father's mother took my brother. It wasn't as bad down there. She had a garden. My uncle came up here from the Virgin Islands because of the war. That's the United States. You know, when a person comes from somewhere, the family follows. That's how different ones followed him here, but he came here and got a job in the Navy yard. He stayed there and the family migrated to Philadelphia [to be with him].

Despite the harsh life many people endured in Harlem early in the twentieth century, we also heard warm personal reflections on those times. Many seniors mentioned listening to the radio at home for entertainment, or making excursions to the theatre to watch cartoons on Saturdays. One student asked jokingly, “Didn’t you have video games?” Mr. Smith explained,

On Saturday, there were five cartoons. “Flash Gordon” was one. Every week there'd be a new installment. They had a cowboy picture. You take your lunch. Some kids would stay in there all day until they put ‘em out, but it was a four-hour show. There wouldn't be grownups there unless they brought their child, because there was too much noise.

During the teen interviews with seniors, I began to recognize a shortcoming of traditional education, the exclusion of the historical and cultural voices of minorities. But when the lived experiences of the Hispanic and African American older adults in Harlem were shared with interested teenagers, they became significant to the teenagers, and this recognition was empowering to the elders.

I asked Rose, an older African American woman who had lived in Harlem all of her life, to respond to Palmer Hayden's painting, "Midsummer Night in Harlem." She said,

This here is nice! [excitedly] This looks like jazz town. This looks like real Harlem! Jazz town. This reminds me of 125th Street. With all our cousins sittin' out there. Look at that [laughing]! Smokey Joe and all of them out there.

Then I asked her, “what would you say if you were one of the women in the painting?”

“Good morning. Hello—How are you?” Then gossip, you know [Rose laughed]. If a lady has a son that she wants to get off, she introduces you.... Years ago they used to pick matches, but sometimes it didn’t work. If she have a daughter, she's gonna pick a fella that she figures is nice for the daughter. Now, it’s up to the daughter whether she likes him or not.

This illustrates Garber's (1995) observation that understanding of culturally based art involves a "longitudinal process" that may encompass "life experiences of persons in the culture studies" (p. 212).

Young participants took in this firsthand understanding of Harlem's rich history through question/answer dialogue with seniors. They discussed reproductions of historically and culturally relevant artwork, which provided visual representations of material culture. I encouraged teenagers to analyze the work as a researcher would study material culture, from various perspectives, i.e., psychological, archeological, anthropological and historical; to consider the original context in time, its change over time, cultural environment, and one’s relationship to what is represented in the artwork. The elders were primary sources for oral histories and they could often personally identify with what was represented in the artwork. Their reflections on the circumstances surrounding an image or an artifact and its place in time and culture offered the students an opportunity for a greater understanding of the artwork. Kauppinen (1988) supported this
concentrated, that older adults can serve as resources for understanding art through their familiarity with events from history. The interpretation of artwork through the reminiscence of elders, and their lived experiences as revealed through the oral history project were sources of understanding of both the artwork and the art making process. Oral history discussion and making art empowered older adults, giving them a forum to share their recollection of the past and compare it with the present.

Art Studio

While the young participants worked with elders toward the design and completion of a senior's collage, all were empowered by the shared experience. Seniors directed teens in developing a theme and creating a web of ideas to symbolically represent their life history in a collage, often portraying circumstances from early in their lives, which positioned them as historical/cultural experts. Teens used their art skills acquired in training sessions with various media (i.e., watercolor and tempera paint, clay and plaster), and the arrangement of found objects to portray the theme while seniors complimented their efforts. Art making, which had been previously perceived by teens as little more than the manipulation of media, began to include individually meaningful content through dialogue about their collage themes (i.e., the culture of Puerto Rico, religion, and childhood).

One intergenerational team (all of Caribbean ancestry) chose Puerto Rico as a theme, creating a web of various ethnic symbols. This group followed my suggestion to explore the meaning of the Puerto Rican subject matter as it was added to the collage, an acrylic painting of a lush island with palm trees, Styrofoam clouds and various objects often found in Puerto Rico constructed from scrap materials. Rita, an older Puerto Rican woman, handed the teens her Christmas card cutouts of Puerto Rican musical instruments to attach to the painting and explained that she remembered a parranda (party) of singers and noise makers.

At Christmas, they come around the house starting the 24th of December through the 6th of January. People would come playing instruments and singing and drink coquito [a coconut drink for the holidays] . . . Sometimes, the people played tricks. The Three Kings is the 6th of January. We used to go to the country . . . . We go from house to house. We also eat pork.

Rita also decided to add the written names of famous Puerto Rican women to the tropical island. She had been reading a book about the lives of famous women from Puerto Rico, and noted,

Those were women from the past century. They suffered a lot . . . . In those times, it was not so easy as now. You see, now in Puerto Rico most everybody has a house with a balcony and this and that, but before there were three or four people sleeping in the same room. That was different.

The women portrayed in the collage had achieved professions almost universally denied to women during that time. She included the names of a poet, a writer, a movie star, a mayor and other famous women. As Bonita inscribed their names on the collage, Rita briefly told their life stories: Julia de Burgos, Antonia Bonilla, Felisa Rincon, Rita Moreno, Doris Matos de Pasarella, and others.

The presence of seniors influenced the art studio environment. Individually in training sessions, teenagers expressed some fear of incompetence in making art. They'd say, "I can't do that," but in the presence of seniors, "they felt like they were doing something good" according to the art instructor. He also observed that there were less discipline problems when the seniors were around. The teens were
more focused and less likely to be distracted by their peers. The collages done in the presence of seniors included more meaningful content than the materialistic fantasy collages the teens had produced during earlier training sessions including vacation spots, expensive cars and fashion statements. While their previous work was dominated by commercial imagery, the collaborative work showed a thematic focus reflecting the shared construction of knowledge built around personal relationships and dialogue as in the collage of Puerto Rico.

Diminishing Stereotypes

Another result of intergenerational exchange became evident in the maturation of the young participants' view of older adults. One teen said,

She [Maria] changed my view a lot. She is very nice. I thought that some seniors was [sic] selfish, angry, you know, always out for themselves. Like on the buses, they would look at you and you'd have to move all the way to the back.

Both Feniak (1993) and Patten (1994) have also found that intergenerational programs improved young people's attitudes toward elders.

Examination of the intergenerational interactions during the final four to five months of this program illuminated some important social and educational implications. Although social service work and sometimes resulted in casual friendships between young and old, age-related stereotypes persisted throughout the first three months. Several teenagers continued to view seniors as people who simply needed help, but could contribute little to their community.

As the program progressed, these friendships, even though casual, set the stage for intergenerational dialogue that occurred later during interviews and discussions about historically and culturally relevant artwork and art-making. Students provided the artistic expertise in constructing the collage, while seniors' historical and cultural knowledge became the central focus of the collage. As a result, age-related stereotypes diminished, and the young learned more about the treasure of personal knowledge within their community. In this study, dialogue pertaining to the collage theme contributed to understanding and encouraged participants to incorporate their own cultural and historical meanings into art making. During intergenerational interactions, the youth moved from the materialistic iconography of pop culture common in earlier collages during art training sessions to meaningful representations of the ongoing dialogue based on the elders' life experiences. Art was about process (intergenerational dialogue), not product. Art-making represented their vision, their definition of their own relations with previous generations.

What is Art Education?

An expanded understanding of art and art education emerged in this study. A dialogic process having both educational and social implications contributed to the building of community relationships. The process of art education was an ongoing dialogue between two generations from which educational and social implications emerged. The program's goal was not to produce professional artists but to develop community relationships and open dialogue through art education. The art education portrayed was reminiscent of what Gablik (1991) has described as a "more participatory, socially interactive framework" (p. 7), in opposition to modernist practice which has "kept art as a specialized pursuit devoid of practical aims and goals" (p. 7).
Likewise, Hamblen’s (1995) postmodern definition of art education, which valorizes the importance of the personal knowledge and the experience of non-experts, was eloquently illustrated during the Harlem program’s oral history and art making interactions. All participants shared in the construction of knowledge through dialogue. Seniors, including one elderly woman who summed up her life early in the program as “nothin’ much,” felt empowered by the central role her life story played in the oral history gathering and art making phases of the program. The experience nurtured caring relationships and mutual respect between generations and cultures and helped establish an environment in which everyone was actively involved in learning.

Conclusion

This research noted several positive educational and social implications that resulted from interactions between teenagers and seniors in art-related activities. The Harlem art project suggested that intergenerational discussions about artwork and artifacts pertaining to the history and culture of older participants can enhance the young participants’ understanding of art because “they [the seniors] bring history [and culture] to life” through their personal experiences. Intergenerational discussions about culturally and historically relevant artwork led to collaboration with elders in art making. The objective of art making was to transform a theme from the senior’s interview into a multimedia collage including paint, in, paper, and miscellaneous materials. In this studio setting, youngsters felt less intimidated and more focused, and they set aside frustrations resulting from their preoccupation with realism. Intergenerational interactions during the oral history and art making components of this study also contributed to the reduction of age-related stereotypes, empowered participants, and generated a community conducive to art education.

References


Considering the theme of this conference—wide-open spaces\(^1\)—has prompted me to think about my life history in terms of landscape/environments: the first eighteen years of my life were spent in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which is set in the gently rolling Grand River Valley of western Michigan; the next four years were at Swarthmore College, amidst the narrow winding roads and lush vegetation of suburban Philadelphia. In the mid-60s I spent two and one-half years at nine-thousand feet in the spectacular Bolivian Andes, as a Peace Corps volunteer art teacher (I'd never seen mountains before the summer we left for Bolivia, but I had a double dose that year, since our two-month training site was at the University of Washington, Seattle, in the shadow of Mt. Rainier). During the 70s and 80s, a good number of Christmas holidays were shared with parents-in-law in the big-sky country of rural Oklahoma, just outside the grand metropolis of Kremlin, not far from what was once the Chisholm Trail. But (aside from relatively brief travel in Europe, Latin America and India) a large part of my life over the last 30 years has been lived in or near Chicago. For the first ten of these years I was located on the top floor of various three-story walk-up apartment buildings. (I came to take this arrangement more or less for granted until the eight year-old daughter of a friend of mine from
When the Bough Breaks: Loss of Tradition in the Urban Landscape

Esther Parada

Considering the theme of this conference—wide-open spaces¹—has prompted me to think about my life history in terms of landscape/environments: the first eighteen years of my life were spent in Grand Rapids, Michigan, which is set in the gently rolling Grand River Valley of western Michigan; the next four years were at Swarthmore College, amidst the narrow winding roads and lush vegetation of suburban Philadelphia. In the mid-60s I spent two and one-half years at nine-thousand feet in the spectacular Bolivian Andes, as a Peace Corps volunteer art teacher (I’d never seen mountains before the summer we left for Bolivia, but I had a double dose that year, since our two-month training site was at the University of Washington, Seattle, in the shadow of Mt. Rainier). During the 70s and 80s, a good number of Christmas holidays were shared with parents-in-law in the big-sky country of rural Oklahoma, just outside the grand metropolis of Kremlin, not far from what was once the Chisholm Trail. But (aside from relatively brief travel in Europe, Latin America and India) a large part of my life over the last 30 years has been lived in or near Chicago. For the first ten of these years I was located on the top floor of various three-story walk-up apartment buildings. (I came to take this arrangement more or less for granted until the eight year-old daughter of a friend of mine from

¹Wide-open spaces


Eau Claire, Wisconsin, came to visit and couldn't stop exclaiming about our upstairs kitchen! The concept of living all on one floor was completely alien to her.

Indeed I'm acutely aware of the influence of context or cultural background on perception; but my professional focus was originally on the power and the possibilities of pictorial space. In graduate school (at the Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology) I was profoundly influenced by the exquisite modernist work of my advisor Aaron Siskind, then by my teacher at IIT (and later colleague at University of Illinois at Chicago) Joseph Jachna, as well as visual wizards like Harry Callahan, and others who carried on the new Bauhaus experimental tradition. I'm sure as artists or art educators you too have explored the space of the frame, notions of figure/ground and the optical illusions which toggle foreground/background.

What I try to stress now, as a teacher, is that such formal/spatial qualities: foreground/background, light/dark, broad/narrow, horizontal/vertical, smooth/rough, sharp/blurred, etc. are inseparable from content; and indeed have a profound psychological and political dimension. Today I will be sharing some recent work with you that explores certain formal and ideological connections in relation to horticulture.

But first let me show you some earlier work that grew out of my experience in Latin America. As a Peace Corps volunteer in the 60s I made photographs, not of the people I worked with in the town of Sucre, Boliva, but rather of campesinos or exotic indigenous people, people with whom I never spoke.

On the other hand, in the late 80s and early 90s the work shifted. I was influenced by close personal and cultural ties with a number of Latin American artists and photographers. I used digital photomontage with text in an attempt to reveal the roots of power relationships operating in this hemisphere.

A 1927 photograph of U.S. Marines in Ocotal, Nicaragua, training members of the Nicaraguan National Guard, (this was after years of U.S. military occupation fighting the Nicaraguan nationalist hero Sandino) represented for me the paradigm image of North-South power relationships. Enlarged, pixilated, fragmented, and replicated within the shape of hemispheric maps, that photograph became the matrix image for the installation series titled The Monroe Doctrine: Theme and Variations. You can see this (and some of the other works related to Latin America) in more detail on the dif website, http://www.art.uh.edu/dif/ published by Manual (Ed Hill and Suzanne Bloom), based at the University of Houston.
My high school textbook acquaintance with the Monroe Doctrine had not revealed such blatant claims of hegemony as those I later discovered and incorporated into the piece bearing that name. For example, in 1820 Secretary of State Henry Clay declared: “It is in our power to create a system of which we shall be the center and in which all South America will act with us.” In 1906, Secretary of State Elihu Root pronounced: “Nearly everywhere the people are eager for foreign capital to develop their natural resources and for foreign immigration to occupy their vacant land.” The assessment of “vacant” land in Latin America seems to have been similar to our perception of wide open, i.e. empty or underutilized spaces in the North American continent as we enacted our “manifest destiny” to reach the Pacific coast.

The pixilated matrix image of the soldiers in The Monroe Doctrine functioned as a kind of low-resolution warp on an electronic loom, into which details of text and photographs could be woven. I was fascinated with the perceptual shifts occasioned by changes in resolution, scale, and viewer position and their metaphoric implications. Just as the overall image is indecipherable at close range; likewise our absorption with the day-to-day details or “current events” of our lives means that we may fail to see—or are discouraged from seeing—the historical pattern of which they are a part. That same concept operated in the 1990 unfolding exhibition Define/Defy the Frame, which compared two distinct perspectives on the Nicaraguan revolution, emerging from a variant on the pixilated map/matrix of The Monroe Doctrine.

And finally let me give you a brief glimpse of two subsequent works which also digitally interweave distinct historical periods and perspectives. Text and images representing European colonial attitudes toward the New World are subverted or challenged when placed in juxtaposition with images I had taken representing the dynamism and variety of contemporary populations in New World countries, in this case Cuba.
A Thousand Centuries combines two images: a stereograph of the purported tomb of Columbus in Havana, Cuba, with a photograph which I took on the streets of Old Havana in 1984. The second image, At the Margin, is generated in part from a statue (rather than a tomb) of Columbus. Keep in mind the predominance of Columbus statues in the central square of virtually every Latin American capital at the end of the 19th century. I discovered stereographs of these statues when researching images of Latin America at the California Museum of Photography. Incorporating them into my early 90s work, through layering, partial blending or erasure, was a way of questioning the master narrative (to use a perhaps hackneyed phrase). At the very least it was a way to balance the single heroic male European figure, with attention to some of the anonymous folk at the base of the monument.

But let's leave the Quincentennial debates or clash of perspectives for now, and let me talk about elm trees. I'll start with a question and a return to the title of this talk “When the Bough Breaks.” Why were we soothed with the rather menacing lyrics of what the Annotated Mother Goose calls “the best-known lullaby in English”?

“Hush a by Baby
On the Tree Top,
When the Wind blows
The Cradle will rock;
When the Bough breaks
The Cradle will fall,
Down tumbles Baby,
Cradle and all.”

In my case, growing up in Grand Rapids, Michigan in the 40s and 50s, perhaps I was lulled by the tenderness of my father's cantorial baritone. Perhaps, even as children—or especially as children—we need stories and songs that acknowledge our nightmares, at the same time that they offer comfort. As an artist I am interested in this kind of duality—celebrating beauty while recognizing danger; honoring anger and mourning while insisting on understanding and analysis. I'll let you be the judge of how effectively that happens in my work.

In any event, when I was a youngish mother in Oak Park, Illinois, a large branch of a magnificent elm in our yard snapped to the ground during a thunderstorm. This was July of 1978. It was a field day for the neighborhood kids, an instant intricate jungle. It was also probably the death knell for the tree, increasing its vulnerability to Dutch Elm disease, which was rampant in Oak Park during the 70s. The disease didn't manifest in our tree, whose enormous crown had shaded our entire house, until the early 80s. Pre-emptive injections didn't help. In 1982 it had to come down.

This loss coincided with a personal blow, the impending breakup of our nuclear family. Making a detailed black and white photo-documentation of the tree's toppling and dismemberment served a healing function for me. I had no particular plans for these images. They lived in the drawers of my vast archive of dormant negatives.

Yet grieving the elm (ours and the many others that reduced Oak Park's population from 16,000 in 1970 to barely 3000 at last count—not to mention losses in many parts of the country and the world), grieving that elm, and mourning the loss of my traditional family unit, gave way over time to a curious and critical look at certain traditions, or what I've come to call “the hazards of monoculture”—the fragility inherent in planting a single species or in promoting a single "lifestyle." or family model.

In 1998, thanks to a fellowship at the Bunting Institute, Radcliffe College, I was able to pull together these earlier images, plus new material, into a two-part exhibition titled Canopy: A Meditation on the Demise of the American Elm. One phenomenon which I've encountered
repeatedly during my elm research is the pairing of before-and-after scenes—with “before” showing homes or buildings gracious under the shade of a generous elm canopy; and “after,” showing houses unprotected under a glaring sky. The unquestioned assumption seems to be that life under an open sky is bleak and hostile, as if we were cast out of a dappled Garden of Eden.

A 1937 pamphlet (distributed by the Massachusetts Agricultural Experiment Station) titled “The Dutch Elm Disease: A New Threat to the Elm” (note that the disease had not been found in Massachusetts at that time) contained photographs that showed a current scene in a Massachusetts village (that is, in 1937) contrasted with the projected impact of Dutch Elm Disease, shown in a rather crudely altered photograph. Closer to my home in Chicago is a circular that was published by the Illinois Natural History Survey, probably in the late 60s or early 70s. The caption reads:

The stately American elms that formed a cathedral-like arch over the University of Illinois boardwalk in Urbana are gone. The area has been replanted with other species of deciduous trees.

This gives us a vivid contrast, but not such an alarmist perspective. In yet another comparison, two students studying the living collection of Harvard Yard in 1989 digitally removed all the trees in front of Holworthy Hall, thereby visualizing a landscape which they described as like a penitentiary or a military parade ground.

Yes, indeed we do need stories—and images!—that acknowledge our nightmares—and our realities. On September 11 we experienced a ghastly fulfillment of this scenario of erasure. I’m sure that many of you have seen the “ghost limbs” of the memorial which appeared on the September 23rd cover of the Sunday New York Times magazine, as well as the numerous paired photos (before and after) which have formed part of an anguished effort to comprehend the absence of the World Trade Center towers.

Let us return for the moment to Canopy: A Meditation on the Demise of the American Elm. We begin this virtual tour of my 1998 Bunting Institute by toggling between two images. They are yet another example of before and after elm decimation. You can find them as thumbnail photos on the current Elm Research Institute website <http://www.forelms.org/> (I’ll talk more about the Elm Research Institute later).

The first part of my exhibition was titled, Preserve/change the Character of Our Village. It referenced the tension between our profound human instincts toward preservation or restoration of the familiar, and our powerful, also human impulse toward change or modification, the creation of new patterns and paradigms.

Upon entering the gallery on the ground floor of the Institute, the viewer encountered a seemingly idyllic canopied street. This digital mural was, in fact, generated from a slide of the Oak Park block where I lived for 17 years (Oak Park, by the way, is a near west suburb of Chicago, quite urban, and tied into the Chicago Transit Authority; it’s best known to some as the home of Ernest Hemingway and Frank Lloyd Wright). As one approached the walls of the gallery, the photographic reality dissolved into a landscape of pixels. It also became apparent that the continuity of the street image was an illusion, since the wall “surface” was actually composed of 38 panels, eleven of which were light boxes in varying degrees of relief. Translucent images at the side of the light boxes were only revealed as one stood near the intersecting walls—or, in other words, at the vanishing point of the canopy. (You may notice a strategy similar to that of the Monroe Doctrine, in the sense of different realities rendered at different scales & resolutions, and therefore visible at different distances)
Each translucent light box strip contained a sequence of 21 frames. The two strips to the left of the corner represented the cutting down of our elm tree [1982]. The nine strips to the right of the corner were less explicitly linked to the elm loss. Rather each was intended to evoke a shifting configuration of relationships among family and friends. These images were recorded through still photography or video over the course of almost two decades, for the most part without any intent of using them in this context. The first strips have an elegiac tone; others are more prosaic, or even celebratory.

As with the installation, the central image of the poster (especially if you encounter it in folded form) is the sheltered canopy of my Oak Park street. Like the wall, at sufficient distance it looks almost photographic; close-up it is almost an abstraction. However, erupting through the pixels you find both large and small images signaling change. The most visible line of text (“preserve/change the nature of our village/family/nation”) marks the tensions engendered by these changes. The texts were taken from local newspapers published between 1935 and 1997. In the process of choosing excerpts I’ve constructed a kind of historical portrait of Oak Park which is, of course,
selective—as is all representation. The quotes (drawn from articles, editorials, or letters to the editor) trace pride in the elm-lined avenues of Oak Park, and subsequent alarm at the appearance of Dutch Elm Disease. I found another kind of uneasiness as well: fears of racial change in the village began to surface about the same time as Dutch Elm Disease (the first case was reported in 1955). At first, both biological and demographic (i.e. racial) changes were conflated as invasions, through use of the term “urban blight”. In the late 80s and 90s the threat (especially in the eyes of certain conservative religious groups) was extended to include the increasing presence and activism of gays and lesbians in the community.

Here are a few excerpts from these quotes: The first group (left side) dates from the 1940s and 50s:

* “Oak Park is famed for its vistas of elm-lined streets.”
* “The drive to conserve the values of Oak Park as a residential and commercial suburb of the highest type seems to be picking up momentum.”
* “After the desired standards have been firmly set up... constant civic pressure must be exerted to prevent any letdown.”
* “Deterioration, blight, and slums are easier to deal with before they have made important headway.”
* “Report suspicious elms.”

The quotes on the right date from the late 1990s:

* “Left unchecked, this aggressive and lethal disease could forever alter the character that Oak Park is known for...”
* “As Oak Park deliberates a Registry for same-sex domestic partners, we, the undersigned clergy and leaders... wish to speak out...”

Yet attachment to this pre-eminent American elm canopy, both as a physical phenomenon and as patriotic symbol, dies hard. For example,
the contemporary Elm Research Institute mentioned earlier, based in Westmoreland, New Hampshire, is an outspoken American elm chauvinist. It continues to promote the American Liberty Elm:

not to be confused with European and Asian hybrid elms ... as a focus of patriotic inspiration, ... a green and growing tribute to the birth of freedom in America, and ... a rare specimen that will help restore yesterday's elegance to (our) neighborhood(s). (retrieved 1998, http://www.forelms.org/)

As much as I love the elms, I question such efforts to reestablish past glory. Yet I heartily support a careful look at the past. What are the cultural roots of our horticultural fixation on elms. What is the origin of this romantic ideal?

To answer that, we have to look further back historically. As you may know, one of the great figures in 19th century American landscape design was Frederick Law Olmsted. We could easily spend weeks discussing his prolific interests and projects in this country. Suffice it to say that he (along with Calvert Vaux) was the master planner for New York's Central Park in the mid-19th century. Central Park was famous for its Grand Mall of elms, which in turn undoubtedly influenced the planting of Chicago's Grant Park, as well as numerous small town locations such as Oak Park.

Olmsted, in turn, had been influenced by the writings of Andrew Jackson Downing, America's pre-eminent landscape designer of the mid-19th century, who was a leadingponent of the English naturalistic landscape style. Downing expressed unabashed chauvinism, even racism, through his horticultural opinions (you'll see what I mean shortly). As editor of The Horticulturist magazine as well as author of the influential Treatise on the Theory and Practice of Landscape Gardening adapted to North America (first published in 1844), he did not hesitate to chide his fellow citizens of New York state regarding their landscape practices, (or lack thereof), comparing them unfavorably with New Englanders.

At the same time Downing lashed out against the trendiness of certain "foreign" species, such as the ailanthus. Please excuse the offensive racist language; I only quote it to make a historical point about the conflation of xenophobia and horticultural practice:

(the ailanthu'ô has come over to this land of liberty, under the garb of utility, to make foul the air, with its pestilent breath, and devour the soil, with its intermeddling roots—a tree that has the fair outside and the treacherous heart of the Asiatics,... But we confess openly, that our crowning objection to this petted Chinaman or Tartar is a patriotic objection. It is that he has drawn away our attention from our own more noble native American trees, to waste it on this miserable pigtail of an Indianman. (1844, pp.311-13)

While we clearly have a more sophisticated appreciation of the wisdom of plant diversification, nevertheless, the notion of the elm as touchstone for stability, civility, and grace persists. Melvin Kalfus (1990), one of Olmsted's biographers and a self-described psycho-historian, sees both Downing's and Olmsted's writings as casting the elm in the role of a bisexual symbol—the trunk of the tree personifying the (so-called) masculine virtues of solidity and nobility, while the graceful leafy boughs of the tree represent the (supposedly) feminine attributes of beauty and nurturance. Kalfus claims that the elm functioned therefore as an integrating and restorative symbol of self-acceptance, particularly for Olmsted in a Victorian society that vigorously differentiated between masculine and feminine qualities.

In the course of my research, I've become aware of these and a whole range of other emotions and metaphors associated with the elm. In fact, I incorporated some of them into a second poster made in conjunction with the Bunting exhibition. These phrases, culled from
monarch among plebes
imperial supremacy among the lesser forest growth
Olympian majesty
perfect message of the reigning monarch
towering grace
stately dignity
God’s first temples
cloistered grandeur
arching vista
one of the noblest works of creation
most magnificent vegetable of the temperate zones
largest and most graceful tree of the Northeast
extreme elegance of the summit
Medusa-like branches
serpentine branches
dean of shade bearers
lattice-like shade
exquisite dapple

Given the elm’s generally benign image and historic importance, it’s not surprising that (according to Arthur Plotnik’s *The Urban Tree Book*, 2000) “elm” is the 13th most common street name in America. But the dissonance between naming and reality in the urban landscape can be acute. For example, “Elm Street” passes through what’s left of Cabrini Green, a public housing project in Chicago. The title for movies such as *Nightmare on Elm Street* (which seems to be set amidst the palm trees of southern California) also builds on that irony in reverse—the

notion of rot or threat at the core of tradition or suburban normality, which has been the subtext of any number of films or stories.

A more recent movie, *The Virgin Suicides* (Coppola, 2000) is quite fascinating in its explicit reference to elm loss linked to economic decline, pollution, and teen alienation. Apparently set in a Detroit suburb, it opens with the following lines: “Everyone dates the demise of our neighborhood from the suicides of the Lisbon girls. People saw their clairvoyance in the wiped out elms, the harsh sunlight, and the continuing decline of our auto industry.”

I created a video which weaves excerpts from the films *The Virgin Suicides* (Coppola, 2000) and *American Beauty* (Mendes, 2000) together with my own footage of elm-cutting on a particular block of Oak Park (i.e., the 600 block of Taylor Street which lost six trees during the summer of 2000). This juxtaposition is not intended to suggest that harsh sunlight leads to suicide, nor to spiritual and economic malaise. Landscapes in West Texas, for example are valued for their “big skies” and wide open spaces—conditions distinctly different from my Midwestern and New England experiences. However, I trust you can relate to the notion of an artist who is rooted in the personal, the particular and the local; but expands beyond that to broader issues—questions of loss and change, of native and foreign, of homogeneity and diversity, of restoration and innovation. I emphasize the “and” hoping to avoid false polarities.

Earlier I asked that you to keep in mind the Columbus statues formerly dominating the central square of virtually every Latin American capitol. The analogy with trees is limited. Nevertheless, I’d like to suggest that, just as we have enriched our historical understanding by attending to alternative narratives, likewise we may enrich our horticultural panorama by shifting our attention away from monumental trees, or structures; and focusing our attention, our nurturing, on the more modest growth or activity at their base. An excerpt from Adrienne Rich’s 1977 poem “Transcendental Etude” expresses this idea far more eloquently than my words:

*When the Bough Breaks*
I've sat on a stone fence above a great, soft, sloping field of musing heifers, a farmstead slanting its planes calmly in the calm light, a dead elm raising bleached arms above a green so dense with life, minute, momentary life - slugs, moles, pheasants, gnats, spiders, moths, hummingbirds, groundhogs, butterflies - a lifetime is too narrow to understand it all (Rich, 1978, pp. 72-77).

I conclude by showing you sketches from work-in-progress on the exhibition When the Bough Breaks.

Returning to the Taylor Street block in Oak Park where six trees were lost in one summer, I want to commemorate the stunning absence of fallen trees through memorial rubbings of the remaining stumps, they reveal traces of each year's growth, as well as the overbearing marks of the saw's blade, and the subtler but unavoidable marks of my own digital recording and printing process.

I want to evoke the singular glory and infinite preciousness of the American elm, the unique value of each remaining tree, even of every seed, every hair on each seed, every serrated notch on each leaf. But at the same time I want to question the fetishizing of the American Elm—its conflation with patriotism, its promotion as uniquely representative of our history, our liberty, and our cherished traditions. Through creative dialogue I hope to stimulate imaginative alternative visions of what may flourish in our neighborhoods, both our private gardens and our public parkways.

References


Craven, Wes (Director) (1984). Nightmare on Elm Street. [Film].


Critical Creativity:
On the Convergence of Medium Education and Media Education

Michael J. Emme

My son, Paul, had the mixed fortune to be the firstborn to ‘older’ parents (we were in our 30’s when he arrived in our lives). He was between 3 and 4 when the Mutant Ninja Turtles were the hot cartoon on TV. As earnest, engaged and peace-loving parents, we redirected our son’s viewing to videotapes of what we judged to be quality ‘educational’ children’s programming and copies of Canadian National Film board animated shorts. Paul had a little playmate who came over to visit and dig in the sandbox almost everyday. This friend wore Ninja turtle costumes and brought little plastic figures with him most of the time. Not surprisingly Paul became fascinated by all of the toys and the stories and began to bug us to let him watch the Ninja Turtles. Well, we were new parents, so our determination to protect our son from everything evil in the world hadn’t developed many cracks yet and for reasons that are not terribly clear to me now, the Turtles TV show was on the other side of our own personal good/evil divide. Paul was persistent but we were resistant and then a funny, wonderful thing happened. I was sitting within earshot of the two boys and heard Paul start to tell a story to his friend. He was describing a heroic little bird who came to the rescue of someone. Of course this was no ordinary bird. This bird had a costume and a personality and powers (all of

Note


Elm Research Institute. (retrieved 1998). About the American Liberty Elm. [available online at http://www.forelms.org/]

Parada 91

Note

My son, Paul, had the mixed fortune to be the firstborn to ‘older’ parents (we were in our 30’s when he arrived in our lives). He was between 3 and 4 when the Mutant Ninja Turtles were the hot cartoon on TV. As earnest, engaged and peace-loving parents, we redirected our son’s viewing to videotapes of what we judged to be quality ‘educational’ children’s programming and copies of Canadian National Film board animated shorts. Paul had a little playmate who came over to visit and dig in the sandbox almost everyday. This friend wore Ninja turtle costumes and brought little plastic figures with him most of the time. Not surprisingly Paul became fascinated by all of the toys and the stories and began to bug us to let him watch the Ninja Turtles. Well, we were new parents, so our determination to protect our son from everything evil in the world hadn’t developed many cracks yet and for reasons that are not terribly clear to me now, the Turtles TV show was on the other side of our own personal good/evil divide. Paul was persistent but we were resistant and then a funny, wonderful thing happened. I was sitting within earshot of the two boys and heard Paul start to tell a story to his friend. He was describing a heroic little bird who came to the rescue of someone. Of course this was no ordinary bird. This bird had a costume and a personality and powers (all of
which were described in great, enthusiastic-4-year-old detail). Over the weeks Paul continued to tell stories to his friend. I came to realize that he was feeding the Ninja turtle stories back to his friend repackaged in the guise of ‘Superbird’! At one point Paul’s friend got so excited by the stories that he asked my son what channel Superbird was on.

Shortly after Superbird came into our lives we moved from the west coast of Canada, on Vancouver Island, to the east coast and Halifax, Nova Scotia. Paul had to leave his sandbox playmate behind, but Superbird made the trip. Over several years Superbird evolved. My son got a stuffed toy of the Muppet character Gonzo, who became Superbird, and a nightly bedtime companion. He received a hand-me-down set of pajamas with the Toronto Blue Jays baseball team logo on it that became his Superbird shirt. His recreational drawing often ended up involving elaborate maps of Birdland that would include lengthy, sometimes stream of consciousness explanations of the politics, crisis and intrigue experienced by the expanding collection of good and evil characters surrounding Superbird. Birdland even became the way that Paul and I talked about death and the idea of an afterlife once he began imagining that Superbird couldn’t live forever. (He thought some form of recycling sounded good.) When we moved from coast to coast again this time from Halifax to central Washington state (I was an academic nomad in search of a tenure track oasis!) Paul was old enough to ride with me nearly 6000 kilometers in a rental truck. Photographing water towers with a Polaroid camera and telling Superbird stories were the main entertainment for 6 long days of traveling. Superbird developed an alphabet and language (Birdlandish, naturally) and helped Paul to develop interests in government, storytelling and performance that are still important to my son’s identity even though Superbird watches the world from a shelf these days.

While we were living in Nova Scotia Paul began lobbying my wife and I to let him see the Simpsons. This was the hot show for Paul and his kindergarten classmates. At first we played a bit dumb and just said that the program was on after his bedtime (which was true). But by the age of 5 Paul understood all about the potential of videotape. He asked us to tape the Simpsons so he could watch it the next day. Neither my wife nor I had really watched the show. Cracks began to appear in our parental resolve and we (predictably?!) caved in to the pressure of our 5 year old. That was the evening of January 17, 1991. That also turned out to be the beginning of Operation Desert Storm, the invasion of Iraq by US/UN military forces. We had programmed our VCR to tape the Simpsons for 8:30, but the war took over the airwaves at around 8pm in Halifax.

At 6 in the morning on January 18 I felt a tug on my pillow. Standing next to me was an eager face wanting to watch his Simpsons’ tape. More than half asleep I had to explain to my son that a war had begun and that all of the channels were showing the war. The Simpsons had been canceled that night. Of course Paul whined and complained and asked for further explanations, but the rhythm of the day soon took our attention.

Now one of the marvelous things about 5 year olds is that the patterns of the day will help them remember and think about ideas. Any primary teacher will tell you that small children derive real joy from knowing that at 12:30 on Tuesday the teacher always reads us a story. At 6 am on January 19 Paul was thinking about some of the ideas we had discussed at 6 am the previous morning. Again I felt a tug on my pillow. Again the same bright face slowly came into focus as I tried to wake up. This time, with a bit of concern etched around his eyes, Paul asked, “Dad? With the war, did they blow up the spaces between the channels?”

I think I need some coffee!

A few days later when Paul was watching (yes we are a TV family) cartoons the programming was interrupted by a newscaster who
announced, “Next up, the latest on the war in Iraq.” Paul turned to my wife and asked, “Mom, was that an ad for the war?” Maybe coffee isn’t strong enough! Children study television as they watch it. After the invasions of Kuwait and then Iraq in January 1991, Birdland experienced war. War existed for my son not only as a series of actions, but as a question that became one of the features of his image-making and storytelling.

**Critical Creativity**

Days after the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in the United States I heard an interview on the radio. The short exchange, with peace educator and activist Johan Galtung, not surprisingly in light of world events, focused on conflict resolution. While I was impressed by professor Galtung’s commitment to peacemaking (http://www.lende.no/conflict), and his real experience serving as a mediator in world conflicts, what struck me most was the word he used to describe the key ingredient in conflict resolution. That word was ‘creativity’. As an artist, art educator, academic and parent I suppose it makes sense that creativity, whatever that may mean, would be important to me. After hearing Professor Galtung describe how he has worked with disputants individually to try to move them into the kind of creative mindset that would allow them to imagine beyond the immediate details of violence and conflict, I had a vivid example of something I believe to be true. Creativity isn’t just about personal expression, it is also foundational to the health and survival of society. It takes real risk-taking creativity for adults locked in violent conflict to get beyond the action of war to the challenge of questioning their own actions.

I feel very strongly that our visuality, comprised of the perception and response to the visual world on the one hand, and our processes of visual creation and communication on the other are central ingredients in social development in this new century. I also believe that a centuries-old prejudice that subordinates visual knowing and thinking to the knowing and thinking possible with words and numbers is changing (Stafford 2001). Now, because of work by activist researchers and educators (Fischman, 2001), it is just beginning to be possible for academics to ask, “can I know this moment, analyze this idea, or express this concern better through images?” We are still a long way from being able to answer this question with a strong, “yes!” There are lots of implications embedded in this question because the patterns of analysis, the responding to images, is fundamentally different from the reading of words. I think the patterns of mind involved in perceiving a visual image...not to mention a 3-dimensional experience like the structure that probably surrounds you as you read this, are very closely parallel to the thinking processes that we recognize as creativity. Whether you conceptualize it as a postmodern affinity to collage (Brockelman, 2001), or as the ‘rediscovery’ of analogy (Stafford, 1999) or even spacial intelligence, (Gardner, 1999) it is clear that educators and the world of academic research are far more comfortable with the nonlinear, complex thinking patterns that might have been derided as ‘mere’ intuition in the recent past.

**Medium vs. Media?**

The art world is divided into categories. Clement Greenburg’s modernism may have asserted the idea that each medium has its meaning 50 years ago, but a quick survey of most contemporary art programmes reveals that we continue to divide art making into distinct processes such as painting, drawing sculpture and photography. Mixed media and multimedia education is certainly on the rise, but does not
dominate art learning, yet. On the other hand, there is a strong tendency in critical and educational literatures to visualize 'the media (meaning the mass media of television and film) as monolithic and monstrous. The banner quotation, "A democratic civilization will save itself only if it makes the language of the image into a stimulus for critical reflection, not an invitation to hypnosis." (U. Eco (as cited on the media literacy web site: www.medialit.org) assumes that the media pacify viewers into an uncritical stupor. While major media education sites and curriculum encourage a media making element, most are strongly inflected by the perceived urgent need to deal with the media as a problem.

Those of us who are educators often argue about the need for media 'literacy' because the term 'literacy' is our only metaphor for controlling communication. In a world filled with monstrous media, teaching control seems essential; the loss of control is a crisis (and as a bonus, educational crises are easier to fund than mundane 'needs').

Writing about the children of holocaust survivors generally, and focusing specifically on Art Spiegelman's comic book novel Maus II, Hirsch describes what he calls 'postmemory.'

Postmemory is a powerful and very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation... Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that precede their birth, whose belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can be neither understood nor recreated. (Hirsch, 1997, p. 22)

In the case of Spiegelman, Hirsch focuses on the fact that the comic book includes several photographs among the pages of drawings. Hirsch explores the relationship between the aesthetic and the document. Representations aestheticize and thus undermine documents as evidence. At the same time, representations allow a certain distance in the face of particularly horrific documentary that can allow resistant viewers to approach otherwise overwhelming events. Certainly this approachability is one of the strengths of Spiegelman's comics. The balance that Spiegelman strikes between fiction and fact, between cartoon and photo document allows the images and narrative to sustain a level of power that Hirsch would argue could easily have been lost through overexposure.

In many ways my son's childhood experiences have no connection with the childhood experiences depicted by Spiegelman in his two Maus comics. In focusing on the children of victims of trauma, Hirsch identifies a population where the use of creative play in response to the world can have severe restrictions. Arguably any context where children's freedom to respond creatively to world events is surrounded by a dominating adult framework (be it media, parental, educational) is a context where both criticality and self-identity suffer. The role that critical strategies play in media literacy curriculum would seem to demand a degree of creative freedom for students and teachers alike. One of the recurring debates in the literature on media literacy curriculae is the trap, on the part of curriculum developers, of attempting to 'inoculate' students against the media.

In visual arts education the language is much warmer. Even in the most politicized art classes there is still some room for personal expression. Milbrandt's (2002) recent study of art educators engagement with social issues suggests that while many educators recognize and even value the political side of art, fewer than 11% would ultimately choose to break open their modernist cocoon to allow real world concerns to dominate their classes. Perhaps it is not surprising, then, that many of the ideas and skills we teach don't generate the sense of urgency that the term literacy conjures. The state of art education is
not perceived as a crisis except in the language of documents such as Visual Arts Education: Setting and Agenda for Improving Student Learning (Goodwin, 2001). The crisis is about the marginality to the educational main stream and the response has more to do with accountability than literacy.

Fischman’s (2001) recent survey, “Reflections About Images, Visual Culture, and Educational Research,” is an elegant depiction of the current scope and debate about the use and study of images in educational research. The author traces both the presence of visual research and the ongoing debates about the ways images constitute knowledge in a research environment. He cites Eisner’s argument for the role of experiential understanding along with the more dominant “verificationist conception of knowledge” (as cited in Fischman, p.31). Fischman sees the growth of visual research as a process of developing tools that can be used to address the fields current ‘blind spot’ (p.32) with regard to the impact of visual culture on teaching and learning. It has been my position that the field of art education must draw from its strengths as teachers with and about visuality and take those tools and ideas to educational research and practice, rather than trying to turn art education into another academic subject. Having said that, there is a need for art educators to reflect on the difference between medium education and media education.

Convergence

Brockelman (2001) identifies collage as an apt metaphor for the relationship between the modern and the postmodern. He argues for the longstanding coexistence of the attraction to unity in modernism and the repulsion toward fragmentation in postmodernity. His argument echoes Soja’s (1989) in replacing historicizing sequence with the geographical complexity of simultaneity. For Brockelman, culture and meaning, like collage, are constantly striving toward unity that reveals itself as fragmented and complex. In reflecting on art education and media studies these impulses can also be discovered. The structures of art as they are taught in public school, art schools and universities are aimed at expressive visual communication. These curricula are still deeply vested in such modernist tropes as Bauhaus design concepts, the study of individual mediums such as painting, drawing or sculpture, and, in art education, the traditional interpretive disciplines as explored by the DBAE movement. Media Education curriculum, as discussed earlier, are built on a foundation of criticality driven by sociological and theoretical interpretations of cultural power that foreground the mass media as potent tools of control. Brockelman’s metaphor suggests to me that art education is modem to media studies’ postmodern. His argument about the coexistence of these two impulses suggests to me that the intermingling of art education and media studies would represent a more complete visual education that would address the marginality perceived by many art educators. Introducing criticality and a more open engagement with contemporary visual culture in all its forms strikes me as a far more meaningful and appropriate strategy then trying to remodel existing art educational practice to seem more like other curricula through the disciplinary structuring of assessment and accountability plans being promoted in documents such as Visual Arts Education: Setting and Agenda for Improving Student Learning (Goodwin, 2001).

This reflection returns me to the several stories of my son I told at the beginning of this paper. His experience allowed me to witness a young, creative mind that was able to play, invent and critique in a media saturated environment. An individual child living with many privileges, comforts and support is not the same as a school or a community. Nonetheless I pass these stories on to you because I continue to learn from them as I reflect, as an art educator, on the choices we are making regarding the future of children’s visual learning.
References


(http://www.lende.no/conflict),

1. examples of sites.www.media-awareness.ca
http://interact.uoregon.edu/MediaLit/mlr/home/index.html
http://www.adbusters.org/home/
Wrestling with TV Rasslin

Paul Duncum

TV wrestling stretches the envelope of what art educators might consider legitimate content under the emerging art educational paradigm of visual culture. (Duncum & Bracey, 2001) TV wrestling, or "rasslin" as its known to its audience, is a significant cultural site because it is very popular and, under analysis, has much to say about contemporary cultural experience, especially that of its audience. While it provides pleasures and reference points to its audience, these reference points are often sexist, xenophobic, homophobic, and in terms of familial relationships, dysfunctional. They are also violent and obscene. 

This paper both acknowledges the lived experience of the audience for TV wrestling and calls into question the structures of feelings and ideas that are embodied in art. For the former it employs the theory of "needs and gratifications" that holds that cultural sites serve deep instinctive and/or social functions. By contrast, in critiquing TV wrestling, a cultural studies approach is employed that views underlying values of cultural sites in terms of the hierarchic power structures of society.

Definition

TV wrestling should not be confused with sport; it is entertainment, as the following legal definition makes clear:

Professional wrestling means an activity in which participants struggle hand-in-hand primarily for the purpose of providing entertainment to spectators rather than conducting a bona fide athletic contest. (We're Shocked, 1997, p. 30).

In a 1957 article that remains seminal, Barthes (1972) says, that professional wrestling is a "sum of spectacles." (p. 16). While the laws that regulate professional sports stipulate that action may be taken against those who permit a sham or fake a match, there are no comparable admonitions against faking a wrestling match. (Maguire & Wozniak, 1987). If sport is part play and part display, wrestling on television is all display and only a pretence of play. In the terminology of the TV wrestling world, those who do not understand that it is faked are called "marks"; they are easy prey because they are very stupid (McCoy, 2001).

Its Popularity

The popularity of TV wrestling is apparent on consideration of just a few statistics. In the US alone it is a multi-billion dollar business with a weekly viewing audience of 35 million people a week (Cantor, 1999). It has long been used to attract people to cable TV, and in 1999 the then two rival programs were the two highest rated programs on cable (Scott, 1999). It has also spread into other forms of cultural production. In 1999 the autobiographies of two top liners occupied the number one and three positions on the New York Times Bestseller list in 1999 (Devine, 2000), and merchandise - including plastic action figures, T-shirts, videotapes, feature films, photographs, fan clubs, and magazines - grossed $400 million in sales.
Its Audience

The precise demographics of the audience are contested. Apologists for TV wrestling now claim a far broader audience than its traditional working-class male fans. There is some independent evidence to support this view (Migliore, 1993; Ramsay, 1992) but recent machinations of TV station owners (Rutenburg, 2001) suggest that the great majority of viewers remain, as Scholosbers found them to be in 1987. His profile of a typical TV wrestling fan was male, among adults aged 18-24, poorly educated, and with a higher proportion of Blacks than in the whole population. Campbell (1996) accounts for this traditional demographic by arguing that the working-class finds an echo of its own experience in the determination of fate through physical rather than intellectual trials. The constant defeat of the good guys and ineffectiveness of the referee is also said to reflect working class experience.

Perhaps the broader audience is due to the opportunity TV wrestling offers to escape the more general constraints of an ever increasingly regulated social life, distant and indifferent governments, and repressive religions. A broader audience presumably mediates wrestling differently from a working class audience, perhaps relishing its self-mocking and parodical qualities, delighting in what is knowingly so artificial and exaggerated as to be funny. Perhaps better-educated and better-paid audiences also take pleasure in feeling superior to what is cheap and the product of the sensibilities of those who they perceive to be are beneath them. For this audience, TV wrestling would offer opportunities for slumming.

Meanwhile, recent attempts to appeal to children appears to be working, with TV wrestling Internet sites being accessed by 13 percent of all 12 to 34 year olds on the Internet, making it the number one entertainment site among 12 to 34 year olds, and the number one sport site among 12 to 17 year olds (WWFE, 2001). Its appeal to youngsters then would not only be found in the cartoon-like simplifications espoused by TV wrestling, that are so appealing to children, but in the constraining regimes that govern children's experience. What is clear is that TV wrestling is highly popular and big business.

Its Pleasures

The pleasures of TV wrestling are many and diverse, and I deal here with only a few: visual spectacle, mythmaking, insider knowledge and artifice, and the carnivalesque joys of inverting social norms. Most of these pleasures have been described in terms of "needs and gratifications" theory whereby TV wrestling is said to gratify both social and instinctive needs.

Visual Spectacle

Barthes (1978) predates the post-modern emphasis on spectacle by noting, "For adults the issue is clear - wrestling is faked: the public is uninterested in whether or not it is rigged because it abandons itself to the primary virtue of the spectacle - what matters is not what one thinks, but what one sees" (p. 15). TV wrestling has been likened to MTV in that it

uses a visual style characterised by an insistence on the importance of the signifier, physical sensations, the surface of the body.... Wrestling fans need not spend any intellectual energy making sense of wrestling. It is a spectacle that exaggerates the visible, works on the physical senses, and refuses meaning or depth (Campbell, 1996, pp. 127, 128).

It is theatre; specifically, it is an "elaborately staged and imaginatively costumed" combination of melodrama, soap opera and
slapstick comedy (Devine, 2000, p. 11). Professional wrestling requires of its actors the communication to a large audience of emotional states such as the effects of torture, abasement, outraged fury, abjection, cowardice, triumph and contempt. Because it is offered up as theatrical spectacle, Levi (1998) rightly says that it is misread if it is seen as fraudulent.

Visually, it is a celebration of what is artificial, exaggerated or wildly, and explosively ridiculous; it is everything that refined good taste is not. It suppresses narrative drive in favour of the dazzling, the spellbinding; as theatre it celebrates corporeal sensations, albeit virtual, and downplays characterisation and plot.

**Mythic Dimensions**

This is not to say that TV wrestling is without a narrative interest. From various perspectives observers have commented on the mythic, metaphoric and ritualistic dimensions of TV wrestling, including history (Devine, 2000), Jungian psychology (Zengota, 1994), and anthropology (Migliore, 1993). Ramsay (1992), a sociologist, sees TV wrestling as a moral drama or morality play, a latter-day passion play. In this sense too it is not fake; as a myth it is real. This can be seen by discerning the recurrent patterns involved. According to Ramsay’s research, most fans report that the prime attraction is wrestling’s clear-cut incarnation of good and evil. Yet while there are no shades of grey, there is much more. Heroes suffer at the hands of unscrupulous opponents and ineffective referees as well as the general arbitrariness of fate. Often they suffer repeated failures, but their manliness is demonstrated by accepting their outrageous fortune because there is no salvation without pain, even humiliation. Yet justice demands retribution where ultimately evil is destroyed by its own weapons of force.

**Insider knowledge and the Skills of Artifice**

Until the past few years TV wrestling has existed in a tension between two related but quite different pursuits, theatre and sport. While it purported to be sport, all but the utterly naive knew it was theatre. Thus, even the most casual viewer could indulge in the pleasures of being-in-the-know, in the secret, however open the secret, that the narratives were fiction and the bouts were faked. Pleasure came from seeing what could not possibly be believed, as ring commentators frequently proclaimed, yet, nevertheless, was constantly asserted to be true. In this way the pleasure of watching lay in a tension between an official discourse of what one was witnessing and knowing more.

However, the pretence to be sport has recently given way to an open acknowledgement that wrestling is all theatre. As one of the top liners explains: “No longer is anyone trying to pull the wool over anybody’s eyes.... It’s live-action soap opera. It’s entertainment” (cited in Scott, 1999). Cantor (1999) says that in this respect TV wrestling is now a quintessentially post-modern cultural phenomenon, openly
parading itself and engaging the audience in the joke. For the audience, the success of a wrestling match is not in who wins or loses, but how effectively the wrestlers play their roles. While a kind of morality play, it is all designed to be fun and one of its pleasures lies in admiration for the skill of artifice.

Carnival

TV wrestling offers all the pleasures of the carnival. Like medieval carnivals, it criticises social norms and turns their power on their head through derisive laughter (Fiske, 1987; Campbell, 1996; Langman, 1997). The TV wrestling ring is a carefully circumscribed ludic space where the vulgar, obscene and erotic are celebrated. Like the festivals of feudal times, where for a day all that was normally repressed was inverted, TV wrestling provides frenzied expression to what is elsewhere constrained or forbidden. For example, breaking unwritten rules saw one wrestler base his character on the alleged size of his penis and another, described by Leland (1998) as “a walking cry for help,” strutting about brandishing a woman's severed head.

While legitimate sports value fairness and equality for all the players as well as respect for the loser, wrestling inverts the dominant ideology. Campbell (1996) says that for the losers of society it represents their ideology; they know that they have little chance of being respected by the winners, and they don’t necessarily admire the winners. It is a chance for them to demonstrate their difference through a celebration of a resistant culture, and it shows the strength and endurance of such oppositional and disruptive popular forces. This is another reason Campbell (1996) claims that the bad guys of wrestling so often win; the audience identifies with the “baddies.”

TV wrestling transgresses the moral boundaries; it mocks, and, often literally as well as metaphorically, sticks out its tongue or gives the finger to authority. This gives it, however momentarily, authority over authority as well as the pleasure of bonding with a community of like minds.

Its Reference Points

TV wrestling has undoubted appeal, but what is it about? If its pleasures are many and diverse, what values and beliefs does it seek to both challenge and side step? “Needs and gratifications” theory seeks to explain and, by implication, justify TV wrestling. By contrast, what follows is a cultural studies attempt to challenge TV wrestling in terms of its underlying values.

TV wrestling is decidedly “non-PC.” In particular, it is racist, xenophobic, sexist, homophobic, violent, anarchic and obscene. Also, more recently, it engages in the same seriously dysfunctional relationships celebrated by programs like the Jerry Springer Show. While cloaked in outlandish humour, it deals with “the other” — whether of another race, country, gender, or sexual orientation — in terms of degrading stereotypes.

Racism

While most “baddies” are presented as unethical, black wrestlers are often seen as uncivilised. One prominent black wrestler, Junkyard Dog, wore a collar and chain as a vestige of slavery, and he frequently wrestled on all-fours. While his manager claimed that he worked with Junkyard Dog to “draw out his charisma from within,” this effectively meant wearing a spiked collar and a leash, and eating dog biscuits that fans threw into the ring (cited by Maguire & Wozniak, 1987, p. 262). Another black wrestler was taunted by opponents as “a monkey” and compared to a gorilla in the Atlanta Zoo.
Kamala, purportedly from Uganda, was variously described in fan magazines as having an “animalistic look in his eyes”, the look of a wild animal,” and having “animalistic tendencies” (p. 265). In one interview he brought along his lunch, a live chicken in a cage and on returning from a commercial break the chicken had gone but feathers covered Kamala’s face. In another interview Kamala was said to be “eyeing up the cameraman” while his stomach rumbled, so that viewers were invited to believe that Kamala was a cannibal (p. 265). In a further example, the New Zealander Maoris, oddly called the Bushwackers, are said to “slaver, bulge their eyes, and strut grotesquely around the ring ... in a caricature of drooling idiot” (Zengota, 1994, p. 168).

Xenophobia

Until the last decade it was possible to view the periodic booms of professional wrestling in the United States in terms of its simplistic and xenophobic interpretation of international political events with America’s enemies personifying evil (Monkak, 1989 in Richard, 1999, p.137). In the 1930s it was the Nazis and Japanese; in the 1950s it was the Hungarians and the Russians; in the early 1980s it was the Iranians and the Russians (Campbell, 1996). The Iron Sheik, purportedly from Iran, and Nikolai Volkoff from Russia, were matched against an iconographic patriot of the US, Sargent Slaughter. The Iron Sheik would denounce everything American while Volkoff would grab the arena microphone and demand silence so he could sing the Russian national anthem. Meanwhile, Slaughter kissed babies, draped himself in the US flag, and extolled the virtues of everything just and American. Despite the despicable tactics of the foreign duo, Slaughter usually prevailed.

Arab wrestlers have always been presented as treacherous (Ramsay, 1992), so a stereotype was ready at hand when directly following the September 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, the entire company of wrestlers, good and bad, lined up to outdo each other in their verbal vitriol against the as-then unclear perpetrators of terror. Through this unprecedented show of solidarity, which transgressed the usual intrawrestling conflicts, TV wrestling continued to serve as a marker of America’s enemies.

Sexism

Woman appear most often “as clinging love slaves of the muscled villains, pouting seductively at the camera, stripping the man of his outer garments before the match and interfering during it to save ‘their men’” (Zengota, 1994, p. 173). Their secondary role is underlined by having such cute and submissive names as Precious, Baby Doll, and Miss Blossom (p. 173). Women wrestlers, or divas as they are called, used to appear as oddities like wrestling midgets, but nowadays they are more commonplace. With the same instantly recognised stereotypes as their male counterparts, “pretty cheerleaders and down-to-earth cowgirls face off against slinky leopard women and ratty-haired biker molls” (p. 173). Dressed to expose their bodies, even what little they wear is often ripped off during a match. They exist in a tension between a prurient wish to avoid reference to pornography and exploiting just that interest. Internet sites of women wrestlers include those where the wrestlers appear in the nude whereas there are no such similar sites for male wrestlers.

Homophobia

The appeal of near naked men displaying their muscles and in constant physical contact with one another is proportionate to the denial
of any homoerotic interest. Homoerotic desire is carefully policed and this is best illustrated in the invariable fate of wrestlers in drag. Gold Dust pranced into the ring performing an effeminate parody of a gay man and was beaten to a pulp by the other wrestlers in what one commentator called “ritualised fag bashing” (in Vadim, 2000, p. 196).

In another incident, The Beverly Brothers, in lavender tights, pouting and hugging each other, entered the ring against the Bushwackers, who by contrast wore big boots and work clothes. As the Bushwackers pounded their effeminate opponents baiting them as queer and gay, the crowd of thousands shouted “faggot, faggot, faggot,” and at the conclusion of the match they cheered and stomped approval for 10 minutes. Jenkins (1997) says that what necessitated this homophobic spectacle was the need to define the Beverley “sisters” as outside accepted masculinity, a space where homoerotic desire could be freely expressed without danger of it calling into question the gender identity or sexual preference of the audience. While wrestling is an excuse for homoerotic contact, nothing is allowed to threaten the heterosexuality of the audience.

Familial dysfunction

With the breakdown of the Soviet Union, foreigners have been, to some extent, displaced as enemies in favour of psychopaths within US borders. Wrestlers now scream at each other their dark domestic secrets, sordid tales of adultery, sexual intrigue and child abuse. Consider this scenario: Kane, a good wrestler, hides his disfigured face with a mask. He is pitted against the Undertaker, who frequently punishes his victims by stuffing them into coffins, which as Cantor (1999) wryly notes, is “a nasty case of adding interment to injury” (pp. 20-21). It turns out that they are half-brothers, and it was the Undertaker who as a child lit the fire that not only disfigured Kane but also killed his parents. The Undertaker then turns out to be the son of his manager who neglected him for years and is only belatedly acknowledging paternity. Cantor (1999) says, “All the elements are there: sibling rivalry, disputed parentage, child neglect and abuse, domestic violence, family revenge” (pp. 20-21), and the scene is set for endless confrontation.

Anarchic and obscene

The show of solidarity over the terrorist attacks was an aberrant return to an earlier period of TV wrestling when the enemies of the US were clear and values well understood. Over the past decade TV wrestling has tended to reflect the demise of clear enemies abroad and the general breakdown of traditional sources of authority and authenticity. During the 1990s, TV wrestling increasingly became anarchic. Instead of good guys and bad guys only occasionally converting to their opposite side, wrestlers swapped back and forth at regular intervals. While attempting to maintain the opposition of good verses bad with all its associated qualities, TV wrestling has come to blur these distinctions by constantly alternating its representatives and by allowing heroes more and more to indulge in such massive retribution that there is effectively nothing to distinguish between the perpetrators of violence. Whereas wrestlers used to retain their identity as good guys or bad guys, they now switch back and forth with such rapidity that as one promoter says, these days “everyone is a psychopath” (Leland, 1998, p. 60). And bad guys are now heroes. Stone Cold Steve Austin, “a foulmouthed, scowling thug,” (p. 60), one of the most popular heroes of the late 1990s—a good guy—based his character on an HBO program on serial killers. Whereas the universe of TV wrestling was once grounded in a view of established values, now these values are fluid, relative to the moment; instead of being governed by set rules, it is now chaotic.
Until recently, when parents and other moral campaigners ensured a diminution of sleaze, TV wrestling had increasingly become obscene. Leland (1998) writes,

To have a character simulate masturbation with a squirt gun or urinate in someone's boots in front of an audience of 7-, 8-,9 year olds - well there's something demented about that (p. 60).

And Art Education?

Under the emerging paradigm of visual culture, art education has an important role to play in addressing the issues raised by cultural sites like TV wrestling. While inverting social norms of official, politically correct discourse, TV wrestling undergrids the status quo by extolling the virtues of blind patriotism, patriarchy, and heterosexuality. Moreover, it does so in such a cartoon cutout way that alternatives cannot even be considered. While, offering indulgences in the pleasures of excess, especially the carnival as spectacle, it acts to reinforce dominant values. It offers an opportunity for resistance and fun, but simultaneously it is socially and politically conservative. Furthermore, to the extent to which it refuses to consider alternatives, it is reactionary. While offering indulgence in the pleasures of childhood anarchy where big men get to behave like two year olds, it is underpinned by severe parental prescriptions.

Art education has a role in drawing out the underlying values embodied in TV wrestling and exposing them to their adolescent audience for critique. Perhaps no other site more clearly poses the question: when is a cultural site significant because it gratifies deep needs and when does it fail to serve its audiences' best interests?

At a theoretical level, this question is inherent in the clash between the two broad types of theory employed to examine TV wrestling and which have been used in this paper. On the one hand, the theory of...
is: when are the characteristics of TV wrestling to be taken seriously as contributing to people's actual beliefs and when are they just laughable?

Other forms of popular culture can be used to develop these questions by seeing how other images reinforce, question or counter the stereotypes offered by TV wrestling. For example, contemporary images of positive male identity and behaviour can be found in advertisements, TV drama programs, and computer games. They offer visual models with which students can develop their own images.

It is also interesting to note that the history of art can be read in terms of the stereotypes and behaviours offered by TV wrestling. Indeed, TV wrestling owes more to the history of picture making than it does to contemporary reality. In looking through a standard history of art, such as the recent Oxford History of Western Art (2000), there are many examples of homoerotic statues and paintings from Ancient times to the 19th century and an equal number of erotised women. There are some images of suffering male heroes such as Mantenga's 1459 painting Sebastian. There are pictures that celebrate violence, such as ancient friezes depicting scenes of war. There are images of naked men fighting such as Pollaiuolo's 1489 Battle of the Nudes. There are even images of sexual violence like Poussin 1636 painting the Abduction of the Sabine Women which is actually a rape scene. Finally, if further proof was needed that the history of art supplies TV wrestling with some of its icons, there are pictures of men carrying about severed heads as trophies.

If we want students to go beyond the stereotypes and limiting behaviour of TV wrestling, we need to deal with it directly. While acknowledging its many pleasures, we should ask students to stand back from it and examine it honestly to see to what extent it is merely funny, and to what extent it helps to shape their values and beliefs.

References


Many Tsis/sistas (Cheyenne) were killed during the fight. The air was full of smoke from gunfire, and it was almost impossible to flee, because bullets were flying everywhere. However, somehow we ran and kept running to find a hiding place. As we ran, we could see the red fire of shots. We got near a hill, and there we saw a steep path where an old road used to be. There was red grass along the path, and although the ponies had eaten some of it, it was still high enough for us to hide. In this grass we lay flat, our hearts beating fast; and we were afraid to move. It was now broad daylight. It frightened us to listen to the noise and cries of the wounded. When the noise seemed to quiet down and we believed the battle was about to end, we raised our heads high enough to see what was going on. We saw a dark figure lying near a hill, and later we learned it was the body of a Tsis/sistas woman and child. The woman’s body had been cut open by the soldiers (Hoig, 1979).

Quote from Moving Behind, a fourteen year old Tsis/sistas woman, survivor of Colonel George Custer’s massacre of the Tsis/sistas people at the Washita River November 27, 1868, near what is now called Cheyenne, Oklahoma.


Many Tsistsistas (Cheyenne) were killed during the fight. The air was full of smoke from gunfire, and it was almost impossible to flee, because bullets were flying everywhere. However, somehow we ran and kept running to find a hiding place. As we ran, we could see the red fire of shots. We got near a hill, and there we saw a steep path where an old road used to be. There was red grass along the path, and although the ponies had eaten some of it, it was still high enough for us to hide. In this grass we lay flat, our hearts beating fast; and we were afraid to move. It was now broad daylight. It frightened us to listen to the noise and cries of the wounded. When the noise seemed to quiet down and we believed the battle was about to end, we raised our heads high enough to see what was going on. We saw a dark figure lying near a hill, and later we learned it was the body of a Tsistsistas woman and child. The woman’s body had been cut open by the soldiers (Hoig, 1979).

Quote from Moving Behind, a fourteen year old Tsistsistas woman, survivor of Colonel George Custer’s massacre of the Tsistsistas people at the Washita River November 27, 1868, near what is now called Cheyenne, Oklahoma.
As that high red grass of the violent Oklahoma prairie offered shelter and seclusion for the young Tsistsistas woman, she lived to see many more mornings. That brave young person would grow up to become a respected elder, matriarch and tribal leader. We are blessed to have had those moments of protection extended to Moving Behind. Perhaps that time of danger had passed in order for her to become a mother, to nurture and teach the children of the future, as well as facilitate the writing of these words.

Today it is imperative that we acknowledge the brutality, intolerance and biased actions of the past. Thus by lifting our heads above the tall grass we can move forward to personal affirmation and progress. This progress can be represented by the educational and artistic exploration of complex issues of our society. In the field of art education we can articulate the progress by welcoming the creative activities of all vectors of youthful life and culture. Through this acceptance a wealth of experiences can be deposited to actually create more understanding and an enriched learning atmosphere. Once the multi-form stories of life are truly received we must then reverse the flow and generate an out-pouring of concepts, emotions and offerings back to society. The return of these artistic gifts may be in the form of workshops, lectures, critiques, dance, theatre, music, public art, visual art exhibitions and other boldly inclusive expressions.
In life the act of hiding or being purposefully hidden by others may have once had its place in terms of surviving troubles of the past. This tactic, as an act of preservation, is useful no more. To confront collectively our shared histories in total and exchange the truths of this nation, by artistic means, will generate a fresh and healthy beginning. Just as the prairie grasses are renewed green each spring such openness of the academy shall serve to see us all safely through many more seasons together.

References

In life the act of hiding or being purposefully hidden by others may have once had its place in terms of surviving troubles of the past. This tactic, as an act of preservation, is useful no more. To confront collectively our shared histories in total and exchange the truths of this nation, by artistic means, will generate a fresh and healthy beginning. Just as the prairie grasses are renewed green each spring such openness of the academy shall serve to see us all safely through many more seasons together.

References

The administrator does not ask local conference coordinators to clarify the purpose of the session. Instead, he convinces the state art education association executive board of his outrage that such a session would be offered for educators and threatens to ruin the organization’s future. As a result, two weeks prior to the conference, the state art education executive board cancels the session. Illness and sleeplessness manifests in several executive board members, as one explains her feelings:

I too am very disappointed in the situation we faced two weeks ago and have very strong feelings about the entire situation. I have had a very personal struggle with the issues faced and have had a great deal of difficulty with the entire issue.

Another conference attendee not from the area responds: “so sorry that this oppressive situation exists.”

The “Sexual Identities and the Art Classroom” session involved four presenters: two high school art teachers, one from Houston, one from East Texas and two nationally prominent art educators whose research expertise is LGBT issues. Conference co-coordinators believe that the topic is too important to summarily dismiss and therefore opt to offer the session at a nearby state university independent of the state conference. Co-coordinators know first-hand from lesbian and gay high school students that they need teachers, environments, and curricula to include and respect them. Once conference keynote speakers learn about the homophobic incident, they make sexual orientation more prominent in their presentations than they had originally planned.

Since the conference catalogue no longer includes the cancelled session, we decide to announce the workshop at the opening general session. While we unanimously agree to hold the session, we disagree on how to handle advertising the panel. Threatened with reprisals by local school officials, should we make an announcement using the original text, distribute fliers, or even mention the words “lesbian” or “gay?” We struggle through several e-mails and meetings on how to advertise the panel and appease local school folk. A bland announcement written by Ed is a dissatisfying compromise that in no way represents the homophobic interchanges between the local committee, the state art education association president, and the school administrator. We feel silenced and angry. We utilize Dennis’ golden boy aura to announce at the opening general session as part of a five-minute welcome our bland compromise:

Gendered and Other Marginalized Identities and the Art Classroom: This university seminar highlights low student self-esteem, self-hatred, teen suicide, and censorship issues in the art classroom.
This paper examines how individual and collective strategies and interventions countered homophobia and censorship in a public venue, in this particular case at a state art education association annual conference. We reveal our personal actions and reactions to hysteria, institutional homophobia, and find solutions. Our individual and collective responses demonstrate how layers of emotional, intellectual and activist energy co-exist and that harmony and quick solutions to such complex social problems involve sustained and dedicated efforts.

Golden Boy's Five Magic Minutes
Dennis Fehr

Following a glowing introduction from the state art education association president, he majestically rises. Is it his imagination, or does his aura brighten the cavernous auditorium as he approaches the podium? His audience of art teachers perch on the edges of their seats, their eyes hungry as they await the pearls about to drop from his lips. He is, after all, The Golden Boy—-the demigod who can send any message, challenge any tradition, mock any standard, and be loved only the more. His task on this, the first morning of the conference, is to welcome the attendees. He has five minutes.

"Welcome, fellow art educators, to our 2001 conference!" His rich baritone washes across the rapt audience like healing waters. "I'd like to tell a story, starting with this observation: The world is different now."

He pauses, making the mesmerized audience wait for the next pearl. "Art education must change."

Is that a twitch from the association president seated next to his podium? "When I was a sophomore art major, I realized that the solitude of the studio was not for me. I changed to art education and my status among my peers dropped. My work was the same, but as one of them put it, I had joined the 'cut and paste crowd.' And when I began my ten years of public school teaching, the community I taught in considered my subject a frill. I refused to stand for it. But how to change it?"

"First I looked at art history. This is what I found—its themes are war, peace, life, death, love, sex, hate, violence, politics, and religion." She definitely twitched that time.

"I realized that I had been taught a bleached and lifeless version of a rich, and shocking, and ecstatic, and scary, and thought-provoking subject. I had been taught to study how art looks, not what it means. I determined to teach my students art's meanings." Another twitch. More like a spasm.

"But then, how to teach it in K-12 classrooms? Thus I began what would become a ten-year study of how to teach real art to kids with real needs." Now the past-president, two chairs over, twitches. And didn't the president lower her head several centimeters?

"I taught every grade from kindergarten through 12th—mostly grade 8. Some of my 8th graders were on alcohol and drugs. When we studied Jackson Pollock, we talked about alcohol and drugs to understand the artist and his work, and see what lessons my students could draw about art and life, because the two cannot be separated." The president's chin drops to her chest. The past-president's shoulders sag.
"Some of my students were in gangs. When we studied graffiti art, we talked about gangs so we could understand the art. Some were having sex. Some of them were getting sexually transmitted diseases. Some were becoming parents. When I discovered Barbara Kruger, I knew I had to teach her to my students. Through her work we talked about sex in a way that not only did not get me fired—it got me compliments from parents, and maybe prevented a pregnancy or two. And we talked about the beauty of children and family, when young people wait for the right time to have them, by learning about Mary Cassatt and Maria Izquierdo."

The president seems to physically be losing mass. The past-president is ashen, and the secretary-elect, seated in the first row, clenches her handkerchief to her perspiring brow.

"Some of my students were already in abusive relationships. We studied the sculptor Camille Claudel, who suffered at the hands of Auguste Rodin, and we talked about how to get out. Some were engaged in criminal activity. When we studied Caravaggio, we talked about the self-destructive consequences of violence and crime."

The president falls halfway out of her chair before catching herself. The past-president is visibly trembling. The secretary-elect mouths curses. "Some were considering suicide. Although this did not happen at my school while I was there, one eighth grader shot herself in the parking lot at lunch time. That morning she had told another student that her father threw her out—physically threw her through the screen door and onto the porch—because at breakfast in the middle of a screaming match, she finally told him that her boyfriend was a girl. When my students and I studied Vincent van Gogh, we talked about suicide. And when we studied Michelangelo, we talked about gayness in a way that did not get me fired."

130 Cancelling the Queers

The president moans as she slides to the floor. The past-president clearly needs first aid. The secretary-elect lies prostrate at the foot of the stage, and the treasurer, two rows back, is gnashing his teeth. The Golden boy must wrap this up and begin CPR.

"Here's the latest chapter of the story: I left K-12 to become a professor. I teach art ed majors how to teach real art in a way that does not turn its face from real life. If you already know how to do these things, I tip my hat. If you want to learn how, I'll be teaching a course in it for three weeks this summer at our satellite campus in Junction. Just email me at dennis.fehr@ttu.edu and I'll get you all set up."

He ducks a tomato thrown by an assistant principal.

"Have a rich and thought-provoking conference. You will see the gentle threads of this new art education woven through the sessions. My wish is that Sunday on that airplane ride, you'll not only be thinking 'I loved this conference,' but also, 'I'm going to change how I teach.'" At that point a blast of gunfire sends him diving to the floor. From behind the podium he shouts, "Have a wonderful conference! We're glad you're here!"

So—no more Golden Boy. Bad Boy maybe. Cleverly hiding behind the president's ego, he avoids the lynch mob until, frustrated, they leave in search of the other conference coordinators.

Now's his chance. He dashes for the exit, but he is headed off by a second mob, this one larger than the first. As he prepares to hide under an abandoned conference catalog, he hears a shy voice: "Excuse me, but I simply must tell you that was the most wonderful message I've heard at a conference in ages. And so very badly needed."
Huh?

Another voice: “I want to take your course this summer. I loved what you said.”

And another: “Do you really teach like that? Where do I sign up for your Junction course?”

“Me too! Bravo!”

“Here’s my address. Will you mail me information about Junction?”

And three of my friends had to leave to attend a workshop, but they want information too.”

“Uh... of course. I’d love to.” He notices now that the glow was not emanating from him, but from the crowd. He may no longer be The Golden Boy, but that’s fine. Bad Boy somehow sounds even better.

If I say I am homosexual, or “queer,” does it make you nervous? I have experienced various reactions to that simple disclosure in the course of life. I often wonder whether my being a queer who asserts his sexual identity publicly makes some people see the word “QUEER” somehow written across my forehead in capital letters. And I wonder whether or not that revelation prevents some from hearing anything else I say, or whether or not it automatically discounts anything else I might say. [Italics and caps Wojnarowicz's] (p. 150)

The hostility that I have experienced as a gay male in West Texas these past five years has been described as living in a war zone by artist David Wojnarowicz. Just being who I am, a gay artist educator, puts me at odds with many people at my university, in local school districts, and within various circles of friends. I am no stranger to self-censorship and internalized homophobia, strategies I use to protect myself and create zones of safety in my life.

In spring of 2001, an East Texas high school art teacher e-mailed me, asking if there were any presentations dealing with lesbian, gay, and bisexual issues and the art classroom at an upcoming state conference. (Our fall conference is the largest state art education conference in the United States.) I replied that none were being offered. After discussing the email request with a colleague, I decided to develop a panel that included the East Texas art teacher. The four persons on the panel would address myriad sexuality issues in relation to art and teaching: homophobia in the art classroom and school settings, lesbian
and gay art teacher’s internalized homophobia, strategies supporting
lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students, and artists
making art supporting LGBT issues and people.

When I found out that the state art education association executive
board cancelled the LGBT panel for the fall conference, I was angry
and embarrassed that I had been caught off guard. My self-esteem
plummeted and my internalized homophobia escalated as random
thoughts flew through my mind:

The bigots and homophobes had won.
How could I be caught off guard?
Why did I ever consider such a panel might fly in the first place?
I was not attuned to local mores and values.
I was wrong!

Where I live, I observe many professional lesbian and gay
acquaintances and friends live in fear for their jobs and reputations.
They publicly disconnect from their lesbian and gay lives—one of a
few strategies whereby they can live somewhat comfortably within
the hostile and rampant homophobia local environments. As an
openly gay academic and student teaching supervisor, I sometimes
wonder if I will ever be expelled from local schools because of my public
sexual identity.

Homophobia is rampant at my university. As academic advisor
for the university’s Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Association
(GLBSA), I have witnessed countless testimonies from students of anti-
gay violence and overall fears. Letters to the editor in the campus
newspaper frequently condemn homosexuals and homosexuality. Gay
and lesbian colleagues keep their sexual identities a secret. I have
experienced anti-gay harassment as well.

When I began my tenure-track position in 1996, a colleague sullied
my nascent reputation with homophobic allegations to local school
district officials. Written in my first year tenure review was a statement
that if I intended to teach about homosexuality that neither I, nor any
student teachers from our art education program, would not be
welcomed in the local school district (J. Stinespring, April 20, 1998,
personal communication). I felt sick to my stomach as I read this.
Internalized homophobia set in as I initially felt my gay identity was
compromising our art education program. In reality it was my
colleagues’ homophobia that was the problem. The next day I
demanded this person be taken off my tenure committee.

In the summer of 1998, I gave a presentation about lesbian and
gay artists to a local chapter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and
Gays (PFLAG). The members wanted to learn more about lesbian and
gay cultures. After my talk, I remember a mother telling me several
times how “proud” she felt that her daughter was lesbian. I could see
the doubt and pain in that mother’s face—she was working through
her own internalized homophobia. She so desperately wanted to love
her lesbian daughter. PFLAG is a safe and accepting space in Lubbock
that fosters tolerance and change.

In the summer of 2001, we decided to offer four “Wellness
sessions” for free (that included my Sexual Identities panel) at the
conference. I canvassed potential local donors to raise two thousand
dollars to offset speaker travel and fee expenses. An officer in PFLAG
virtually raised the two thousand dollars for me. She contacted the
minister at Lubbock’s Metropolitan Community Church (our local gay
church) and they collected three hundred dollars in a special offering.
A few other individuals anonymously gave five hundred dollars. Others
wrote checks for twenty-five to fifty dollars. She was determined to
support our panel and make it a reality.
Through it all, I felt like the gay poster boy—inflicting my gay agenda on a homophobic art association and Lubbock community. (Remember, I am not immune to internalized homophobia myself.) The state association president confessed she cancelled the LGBT panel session because she felt she was “saving art in Lubbock schools.” If we offered the panel, “art teachers would be fired and children would not have art. Social issues have nothing to do with teaching art.”

Replieding that had she talked to us before agreeing to the administrator’s demands, that much conflict and controversy could have been avoided, made her all the more obstinate that our actions were folly and ill-planned. Exhausted at that point, I walked away.

In the end, no one from the conference attended the panel at Tech. (I even rented a van to transport conference members to the university.) A conversation with a conference attendee confirmed my suspicions that our watered-down announcement piqued little interest. Luckily, one of the panelist’s friends, a music education professor at Tech, offered to invite her students to attend the workshop. Her students were the bulk of the audience. They politely listened, asked questions and thanked us. One student informed one of the panelists that he had just recently “come out” and that our timing could not have been better for him.

According to the art association president this one panel would have led to the destruction of the art organization. Further, she stated that the goals of the panel were not in line with the goals of the art association (E. Herbert, personal communication, November 26, 2001). Both of these statements are consistent with how administrators and teachers dismiss the incredible incidents of the violence and threats regularly experienced by lesbian and gay teens in our public schools (Ruenzel, 1999).

I record this experience as breaking a silence. I must be vigilant and not internalize other people’s fears and discriminations as my issues or my mistakes. That’s one of the dangers of this kind of work. I

Breaking silence about an experience can break the chains of the code of silence. Describing the once indescribable can dismantle the power of taboo. To speak about the once unspeakable can make the INVISIBLE familiar if repeated often enough in clear loud tones. To speak of ourselves—while living in a country that considers us or our thoughts taboo—is to shake the boundaries of the illusion of the ONE-TRIBE NATION. To keep silent is to deny the fact that there are millions of separate tribes in this illusion called AMERICA. To keep silent even when our individual existence contradicts the illusory ONE-TRIBE NATION is to lose our own identities. BOTTOM LINE, IF PEOPLE DON’T SAY WHAT THEY BELIEVE, THOSE IDEAS AND FEELINGS GET LOST. IF THEY ARE LOST OFTEN ENOUGH, THOSE IDEAS AND FEELINGS NEVER RETURN. (Bold face and caps Wojnarowicz’s) (p. 153).

Refusing Silence
Future Akins

I don’t know what to say. The cancellation of “D” section from the Wellness session finds me emotionally fluctuating between confusion and embarrassment with occasional peaks of anger or outrage. Sometimes, I just want to scream until someone, anyone will listen. Other times, I am too stunned to even speak. For over thirty years I have called this place home. I have defended its uniqueness to strangers
and friends alike while proclaiming its creative atmosphere. When others talked of its little townness, or its limitations, I have spoken of its friendliness and its endless skies. Now, I am not sure what I think. I do know I feel ashamed. The very narrow mindedness I for so long denounced, has proven to be more pervasive and more reactionary than I could have imagined. Still, I find it hard to believe that the cancellation of one small panel of one experience institute could cause so much disappointment and discontent. I can only hope that this action by a small group of people was done out of some sort of misguided sense of protectiveness.

As for the organization that sponsored this event, I feel betrayed. When I chose to come into education I did so with the idea of passing on a few of the lessons I had been lucky enough to receive while on this path as an artist. Art is and has always been a “safe place” for me, protecting me from a home life I couldn’t understand and a school system that didn’t seem to notice. I wanted to make a difference by hopefully re-creating a similar classroom that would act as a safe place for young artists to express themselves as they explore the world around themselves. I was excited when the opportunity came to take a leadership role in the planning of this statewide conference. I really thought it was a perfect way to unite my love of art and my love of this region all at one time. I was not aware of nor prepared for the prejudices.

I want to believe that this act of elimination was done by people who have forgotten what it is like in the classroom. People who have forgotten the horrible name-calling and cruel jokes aimed at another’s sexuality. That they have forgotten the fear on the faces of the young men and women who have just begun to know themselves when they suddenly are told that they are different and unwanted. They must have blotted out the images of the not so innocent shoving and pushing by the so-called cool kids towards those that are labeled “different”. And, I can only hope that they no longer remember what it was like to hear the silence of some teachers when the subject of home life and family dominate the conversation at the lunch table.

What is hard to believe is that those who made this decision chose to ignore the statistics on suicide which involve issues of sexuality among secondary students. How could they? With one cowardly and overly reactionary demand they limited the knowledge and information so needed in today’s classroom. Somehow, the connection between feeling safe and feeling safe enough to be creative and/or productive was forgotten.

I do believe that what we (the local planning committee) tried to do was worth all the time and all the energy it required. Every long meeting every summer afternoon spent in an office instead of in a studio, and every arrangement that had to be re-arranged, was justified. Those teachers that attended the alternative “blacklisted” session, or heard one of the speakers as they made a reference to the cancellation or some other social topic expressed their gratitude for the opportunity for an open dialogue.

Yet, I am not sure if it was worth the pain I experienced the night I found myself across the table from one of my best friends arguing about the word “homosexuality”. I can still hear myself sounding like someone I didn’t know and don’t want to know; defending a system I had ceased to respect. I knew I was simply trying to protect the teachers who, without warning or explanation, had suddenly been told by their principals that they would have to take personal leave time to attend the conference. In a few cases they were even encouraged not to attend. So I argued, knowing if we simply left out the word “homosexuality,” we could still get the approval of the district thus allowing the teachers the necessary professional leave time they deserved. Yet, I knew as we sat there trying to find a way to continue that I was somehow adding to the silencing he had endured his whole life.
I believe that I will no longer be able to be this involved with this organization ever again because I am tired and frustrated from feeling ignored. Never once were we—the local planning committee—asked our opinions or the reasons for our decisions. The cancellation was made without a single question or inquiry. I am also tired of trying to explain why human rights are important to us all when I am repeatedly asked why did it matter to me, a “straight” person, if there was a panel on gay issues or not. I am definitely tired of being screamed at by the state president of the organization to be and told I was just a marginal employee within the public school system and easily replaced. Most importantly, as these events fade into some sort of conference myth/history, I know I will never again allow myself to be even a little part of the reasoning for silence.

Art Educator Activism
Karen Keifer-Boyd

Our focus in this article is on our responsibilities as teachers and leaders to be cultural workers—working to change schools, curricula, and pedagogies—and on how activism and teaching are slippery slopes, what it means to do what we believe—the practical costs, community costs, and personal costs. The “Sexual Identities and the Art Class” session concerns art teaching strategies to enable self-representation and presentation of identity in one’s art and on ways to build self-esteem in the students who have the highest rate of teen-age suicide. Fear, hatred, and prejudice toward those who were not born heterosexual solidified our resolution of the vital need for sexual identities workshops for teachers and their supervisors. Such students know they must live a lie about their identity in school districts that normalize heterosexuality. Teaching respect for all people regardless of race, religion, country of origin, or sexual orientation through inclusive pedagogies, supported by policy set by district-wide administrators, undermines environments that perpetuate a normalcy that does not fit all students’ identities. At this particular school district silence of one’s sexual orientation is mandated. This perpetuates a lonely world for the ten percent of the student body born homosexual.

Ground Zero: What Does Sexual Identity Have to Do with Art Curricula?

Yesterday I visited a massive gravesite in New York City that the media refers to as “ground zero.” This term also describes the place that gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered youths experience in schools:

We recognize that schools are “ground zero” in our efforts to curb homophobia. GLBT youth face unspeakable harassment and abuse in schools. What’s more, young people are learning in schools that it’s acceptable to hate GLBT people. The average high school student hears 25 anti-gay slurs daily; 97 percent of high school students regularly hear homophobic remarks. This harassment takes its toll: Gay students are far more likely to skip classes, drop out of

Few art teachers in the United States disagree that art communicates ideas and feelings. National Art Standards, which shape state and local standards, support self-knowledge, self-representation, and self-identity with statements such as: "arts education places a high value on personal insight" (Visual Arts Task Force, 2001). Art is what makes us human. It is what we do with text, sounds, movements, lighting, placement, symbols, colors, and/or voices to stimulate our senses and to evoke responses from viewers about our ideas, feelings, beliefs, and experiences. Art can be persuasive, expressive, ritual, playful, decorative, a livelihood or career, a business, therapeutic, or transformative. While not all art is transformative, both the making and viewing of art can be personally and socially transformative. Transformative power refers to knowledge that empowers self and others rather than dominates. Consider how your art curriculum defines art and how your pedagogy delimits the nature of art creation and study in your classroom. We can teach animals to use art-making tools, but to do so in a meaningful way (some call it the creative impulse or self-awareness) is unique to human’s who make transformative art. An art curriculum that includes exploring one’s identity and one’s heritage matches the National Standards of Visual Art.

Most art teachers raised in a democratic society value the constitutional protection of free speech and include in their curricula ways to develop expression of student’s critical and creative thinking. How should the art teacher respond to the child in second grade who shows his drawing of his family that consists of two Lesbian mothers when such expression communicates something that is against the school district’s policy to express? What message is sent to the sixth grader who feels attracted to the same gender and knows this expressed attraction in her art is against school policy and differs from what the teacher defines as normal? Will you provide an art curriculum that encourages students to explore and express hetero-, homo-, bi-, or transsexual identity with one identity not privileged over another, or will some of your students be silenced about who they are? Will your teaching practices help to prevent violence toward homo-, bi-, and transsexual students and self-hatred which too often leads to self-abuse through drugs or suicide? Your art class need not be ground zero.

References


notes

1 The authors are the co-coordinators. We call ourselves, the Gang of Four—alluding to cultural revolution, a belief that a good society will rise from the past if that past gets past its oppressive lack of tolerance, Dennis maintained the persona of the Widow Mao in planning the conference, the rest of the gang is still seeking conference identity.
The state president consistently projected dooms-day scenarios throughout the planning of the conference. She feared the remote location of the conference would translate into low attendance figures, thus bankrupting the association. When approximately 652 had registered as of Saturday of the conference, she claimed her homophobia had saved the conference.

Ellen Herbert, a high school art teacher from East Texas, spoke about the need for positive role models for LGBT students in the art classroom. Houston high school art teacher Michael DeVoll talked about stages lesbian and gay kids go through as part of their “coming out.” Ed Check talked about and showed slides of recent art and a current series of posters he is producing on themes of gay identity and schools.

According to research by the Washington DC based organization, Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, ten percent of the world’s population, not bordered by race, religion, or social-class is homosexual (2001, Online: http://www.pflag.org)


The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education (JSTAE) is a publication of the Caucus on Social Theory & Art Education (CSTAE), an affiliate of the National Art Education Association. Its editorial policy is in compliance with the CSTAE’s constitutional mandate:

...to promote the use of theoretical concepts from the social sciences—which include, but are not limited to, anthropology, sociology and political science—to study visual culture and the teaching of art; to inform art educators about theory and practice in the social sciences, thus acting as a liaison between social scientists and art educators; to encourage research into the social context of visual culture and teaching art; and to develop socially relevant programs for use in the teaching of art.

Volume 23: October 15, 2002 is the deadline for submission of articles, images, and reviews of books, video/films, performance/action pieces, and exhibitions. Images and visual research may be submitted. Membership is not a precondition for submission. Please send black and white or color images no larger than 8"x10" in either photographic, original, digital, or slide form. Original manuscripts, including an abstract, should be prepared according to the APA (4th ed.) style. Please place your name on a separate paper to help facilitate anonymous review. Please send images and/or four paper copies to:

jan jagodzinski
University of Alberta
Department of Secondary Education
Room 347 Education South
Edmonton, Alberta
Canada, T6G 2G5
e-mail: jan.jagodzinski@ualberta.ca
780-492-3727

SUBSCRIPTION RATES:

The Journal of Social Theory in Art Education is a benefit of membership in the Caucus on Social Theory & Art Education. Membership in the Caucus is $20.00 U.S. The journal is published annually. Individual copies of JSTAE are $20.00 U.S./$25 Library (add $5 for outside of U.S.) ISSN 1057-0292

© Copyright by the JSTAE 2002