Visual Culture and Studio Practice?

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Abstract

This paper describes a number of classroom activities informed by the emerging paradigm of visual culture in the art classroom. It demonstrates the continuing importance of studio production and, thereby, both responds to critics of the paradigm, who have claimed it downplays studio, and provides exemplars to inspire teachers to develop their own visual culture informed art programs. Studio activities spring from considerations of consumerism and, more specifically, *Barbie* and the reality TV show *The Osbournes*. In addition, the model of the traditional studio where single artists work alone is made problematic by virtue of so much contemporary image making, both within and beyond the professional artworld, now being the outcome of collective effort.

Visual Culture and Studio Practice?

This paper describes a number of classroom activities informed by the emerging paradigm of visual culture in the art classroom (see Duncum, 2001; 2002a, Freedman, 2003a). Among other things, the idea of visual culture is

an acknowledgment that contemporary, high tech information societies tend to picture knowledge, attitudes and beliefs. It is through such cultural sites as television, the internet and videos, as well as environments like shopping malls, fast food restaurants and theme parks, that all of us – students and teachers alike – are now acquiring many of our major reference points for living (Sturken & Cartright, 2001). Increasingly, ours is a picture-based society. The imagery of the professional artworld - both its archive of the past and its contemporary experimentation - are important for understanding visual imagery beyond the professional artworld. Yet it is the imagery outside the professional artworld - the imagery of corporate capitalism - that has come to hugely impact not only our economy but to dominate our consciousness. The idea of visual culture is a very inclusive one, incorporating both the imagery of the professional artworld and the imagery of corporate capital. A visual culture approach to art education seeks to incorporate both kinds of imagery in order for students to better understand the kind of imagery to which they are daily exposed, which they greatly enjoy, and by means of which they are working out how to live.

Over the past few years many art educators have contributed to the emergence of this paradigm and since it breaks significantly with the past, it has its critics. One of the criticisms leveled against it is that it has little or no place for studio activities (eg., Smith, 2003, Brown, 2003, Francini, 2002). Thus one of the aims of this paper is to respond to this criticism. Despite arguing for the central role of studio in a visual culture approach to art education (Duncum, 2002b, Freedman, 2003b), and the publication of many specific examples (eg., Condon & Blandy, 2003; Stuhr & Ballangee-Morris, 2002; Tavin & Anderson, 2003), including most of the articles in the Fall 2002 special issue of *Visual Arts Research* devoted to visual culture, some critics have argued that visual culture in art education at best downplays studio activities. It will be shown in this paper that while there may yet remain work to do on developing exemplary studio activities, much good work has already been accomplished. Thus, the second aim of this paper is to contribute to the growing literature that offers teachers practical examples of a visual culture approach in the classroom.

However, I will also want to question the traditional idea of the studio as a

model for today's classroom. This is why the title of this paper includes a question mark. Does the idea of the single, independent artist working alone in his or her studio accurately represent the way many professional artists work today? It certainly does not represent the working conditions of salaried or outsourced professionals – filmmakers, graphic designers, architects and so on - employed by corporate capital. Should the traditional artist studio, then, be the model for the hands-on making aspect of a visual culture curriculum in art education? I will explore this below.

None of the activities described below are intended to be used prescriptively. To follow them slavishly would be to run counter to the spirit of visual culture in the classroom, which, being respectful of the fact that the culture is student's own, is anything if not quixotic. Often, students will know more of the details of a cultural site than their teachers, and teaching becomes an act of reciprocity between teacher and student knowledge. Specific examples of visual culture are ephemeral, and adolescent cultures are ever morphing (Karpati & Szirmai, 2003), so that both specific examples of visual culture, and the particular subcultures from which students will be coming, will change from place to place and time to time. Nevertheless, the examples given below will hopefully be found useful by teachers wondering where they might start opening up their art classes to the rich but often perplexing and ideologically suspect visual culture through which their students are living their lives.

Consumerism

Rebecca Rohloff-Plummer, a high school teacher in small town in Illinois, USA, was disturbed by the extent to which her students appeared to identify themselves as consumers. [1] She knew that shopping is now a popular leisure activity, second only to watching television (Buckingham, 2000), although from a manufacturing point-of-view she knew that the purpose of commercial television is to deliver audiences to the manufacture's products (Jhally, 1990). Even watching a television documentary or drama is to be treated as a consumer. She was also aware of how commercial companies were encroaching on her own territory. With the Coca Cola Company promoting its products by sponsoring reading programs in schools, the province

of teachers and parents had become the purview of a soft drink manufacturer *(The Coca Cola Company 2000 Annual Report, p. 14).* Also, schools are increasingly welcoming commercial enterprises onto schools grounds that are beginning to influence the curriculum.

Rebecca observed that her students appeared to buy into consumerism in an unreflective way. While often expressing cynicism about how they appeared to be regarded by advertisers, her students did not seem to understand to what extent they had accepted the advertisers view of them foremost as consumers. They often seemed to identify themselves primarily in terms of what they could afford to buy and their employment of the latest fashions.

Rebecca had her students spend an entire quarter collecting artifacts from their shopping experiences; they collected receipts, tags, labels and logos. The students then arranged these items into a mixed media collage on banner paper within the traced shape of their bodies. Using the image of their own empty, outlined body as a site of need and desire, the students explored, playfully and seriously, the role that entertainment and identity has upon habits of consumption. Students were generally surprised to discover the extent to which they had intimate knowledge of numerous products, both what they thought advertisers intended to signify and the range of interpretations the students employed. They were also shocked to discover the degree to which they participated in consumer culture, an observation that confirms Grauer's (2002) when she had adolescent students photograph their bedrooms. The evidence of their own photographs confounded students who had initially denied the influence of corporate products.

Through a studio activity Rebecca's students were able to grasp the impact of consumerism upon their lives in a way that could not have been accomplished through studying the issue or discussing it. By literally *seeing* themselves as consumers, the students were in a good place to proceed with study, discussion, and making their own choices regarding their identity.

Barbie and Perfection

Audrey Rizio, a master's in art education student at the University of Illinois, had long been a Barbie fan when she discovered the same fascination

among students she taught. Just a child's toy when first introduced in 1959, Barbie is now a brand name for movies, songs, and numerous products, as well as an identifier of a certain kind of female stereotype (Handler, 1995). While still a relatively inexpensive child's doll, she - *she* is never an *it* – is also a high priced collector's item for adults. She plays numerous roles while simultaneously never appearing to change (though over the decades she has responded to social changes). She is both ordinary and a celebrity. She is certainly big business. With the average US girl aged between 3 and 11 owning 10 Barbies, and an estimated half million adult collectors world wide, Barbie is the worlds most popular toy, generating 1.9 billion US dollars in annual sales over the past few years (Barbie.com).

As a fan herself, Audrey was aware that for many girls Barbie is a means to sort out what might be available to them in the future. While initially the roles were limited, including getting married and being a mother, future possibilities have long included numerous professional roles. This includes now Barbie as an art teacher, complete with color wheel, brushes, paints, easel and palette accessories.

Above all else, Barbie offers an ideal. As Brandt (1999) writes, " For burgeoning adolescents who could find fault with every inch of our bodies, there was something reassuring about Barbie's perfection." (p. 53).

Audrey wanted to explore the notion of perfection. What did it her adolescent students consider ideal, and how did Barbie contribute to this? She began by having her students examine Barbie's proportions and then draw them up life size. Her students discovered that if Barbie was a real person she would need to be seven feet tall with the following approximate measurements: 39-20-34. They estimated that she would weigh about 110 pounds, and given these proportions would likely have to walk on all fours. A real Barbie, they found, would be incapable of standing up, let along walking on two feet.

Audrey then had her students examine other ideals of female perfection. They examined statues of Venus from Ancient Greece, women of the Romantic period, and other contemporary ideals such as Brittany Spears and Pamela Anderson. The juxtaposition of ancient and modern ideals caused astonishment, as did the examination of recent magazine covers where it

was found that digital manipulation seemed commonplace. They found examples of celebrities that had been given bodies that were not their own but conformed more closely to current ideals. At this point her students seemed ready to discover how easy it is to manipulate imagery themselves. Audrey introduced them to PhotoShop, including the use of the paintbrush tool, smudge tool, eraser tool and clone tool. Each student selected an image of their won choice - it was usually a celebrity - and Audrey had each of them write down their intentions regarding how they would manipulate before they began. Students were quickly attuned to how easy it is to change the appearance of someone, turning the most prosaic subject into an ideal of perfection or, alternatively – and this proved great fun - turning an ideal into something gross.

However, Audrey wanted her students to go beyond acquiring facility with a computer program; to stop there would be merely to reproduce normal, traditional studio practice with a new media where skill not thought was the focus. She wanted her students develop a critical understanding. She wanted her students to synthesis their developing ideas about Barbie, conflicted ideas about bodily perfection, and the ease with which images can be manipulated, and she wanted them to clarify and extent their understandings. The students began by visiting the official Barbie Internet site where they found numerous hyperlinks to related products and retail outlets. By searching for other Barbie sites, students found numerous fan clubs, related toys, and articles on Barbie. Following Audrey's directions, the students created a hypertext/hyperlink dialogue, that is, a record of their journeys. This, however, was only a preliminary to creating their own Microweb. Rather than simply writing down the process of navigating through information, students were now asked to download images and information to create their own site. For this purpose, Audrey introduced them to *Flash* (other teachers have used *Storyboard*). Students created their own combinations of images and texts, downloading from such diverse material as fan explanations about the attraction of Barbie, fan material from movie stars, the annual sales figures from the official Barbie site, Barbie movies and songs, and pictures of Barbie in different roles and with skin tones. This material was then hyper linked to further information about the different roles Barbie assumed and her variety of

ethnic origins. To this material students also added their own perceptions, both written and drawn. The students worked in small groups but the groups shared ideas and sites as they were discovered. After completion, each group explored the webs that other groups had created, finding that although they had often used the same sites, quite different hyperlinks often had been established and quite different interpretations made.

Through engaging in this research-cum-studio activity, Audrey's students gained a much more deeper understanding of ideals of bodily perfection than they would have left to undertake research alone. By producing a hyper linked website they owned the knowledge they discovered because the website allowed them the space with which to collect information, process it, edit it, and respond to it in their own way.

TV and Reality

Sherri Polaniecki, a junior high schoolteacher in Mahomet, Illinois, found that her students were fascinated by the reality TV show *The Osbournes*, which debuted on US television in March 2002. And she quickly became hooked herself. She and her students were not alone; with a viewing audience of six million people per week, the show enjoyed the highest ratings in MTV's 20-year history. Within weeks of the show first airing no less than 325 products related to the show were in development, including a calendar, bobble heads, action figures, a line of underwear, and the Osbourne vomiting bull-dog. For 2002 sales where projected at 200 million dollars (Waddell, 2002).

The program shows edited, live scenes from the daily lives of the family of Ozzy Osbourne, an aging heavy metal rock star infamous for outrageous onstage performances. Sherri believed that her students enjoyed the program because of its interplay between the familiar and fantasy, between seeing celebrities living ordinary lives, though also lives that were lived consciously through the ever-constant presence of the media. She quickly saw that the program presented a slice of life that arguably presented a mirror of what families now mean, especially when considered in light of previous apple pie sit-com families like *The Brady Bunch*. By contrast, the Osbourne family are chic but blunt, where bleeping can occur every few seconds. Ozzy himself, stammering and incoherent, the legacy of decades of drug abuse, is

anything but a traditional role model. In one episode, Kelly, one of the daughters, herself a budding rock star, deflects questions about her father sacrificing animals before dinner and whether she believes in Satan. In the second series Ozzy renews his marriage vows to Sharon, his wife of 20 years, despite Ozzy's 14 trips to rehab. The family is bizarre but the program is fundamentally socially conservative. It is also a vehicle for merchandising in which, for example, Ozzy can spend 10 whole seconds pouring *Diet Coke*.

Sherri began her program inspired by the Osbournes doing what here students were doing in their own time, discussing the program, but with her as guide. She asked questions like: What are the themes that emerge from the show? what intentions might be inferred by the makers of the program? and how do dialogue, camera angles, and lighting work together to influence perceptions? Sherri found that many students had already formed opinions on the characters and their behavior in the show, and by calling these into question she attempted to encourage students to look beyond surface viewing. Through discussion it became apparent that students viewed the program in a variety of ways and that there was not one "true" reading. Students were forced to reconsider their opinions. They also became aware their peers noticed details they had overlooked and that what went into the program was very much more complex and apparently planned than they had previously thought. Sherri asked her students to make lists of why they enjoyed the program, and it came as a revelation to students that there was a very diverse range of pleasures their peers enjoyed.

One of the major themes of their discussion was the often fine line between reality and fiction, or alternatively, the carefully constructed nature of mediated reality. Since there seemed no better way to understand this concept than for the students to construct their own reality TV show, Sherri had them make their own short videos. Before they began, however, she had them look closely at a short sequence of *The Osbournes* and then short sequences of other related TV genres. They looked at typical sequences from talent competitions *(Star Search)*, dating programs *(Blind Date)*, practical joke programs (Candid Camera) and survival programs *(Fear Factor)*. Students identified and made lists of the different techniques used, including the typical length of shots, camera angles, lighting, camera movements, and

the use of music and dialogue. Then, to further clarify the techniques used on *The Osbournes*, she had them watch a clip from a documentary film. In particular, the students considered how a program that was alleged to offer a slice of reality was similar to but also different to a documentary. In what ways or to what extend did *The Osbournes* conform to the genre of the documentary. Throughout, the animating question was: how real is *The Osbournes*?

Students then formed themselves into production teams. Each team consisted of two or more producers, directors, camera people, and editors. The producers developed specific criteria for the program, creating sets of guidlines for items they wanted to appear in the show, including merchandizing. They considered the length of segments and the balance between different parts of the program, especially between interviews and action sequences. The directors figured out how to structure filming based on the producer's guidelines. They scheduled the camera people for each segment and suggested techniques and specific responsibilities. For their part, the camera people were responsible for dealing with the technical aspects of getting the necessary footage and working with the video equipment. The editors, in turn, used computer-editing software - *Adobe'Premiere* in this case - to edit the video. At various times, all the students were to perform as actors. This is because the students chose to make their own reality video of the experience of being in an art class. Time was set aside for lessons in a more traditional art curricula with a rotation of students missing normal studio time to work on their part of the video. During days that necessitated full student participation in the traditional curricula, a camera was set up on a tripod in an area of the artroom and filming took place in addition to the normal lessons. Later, when the video had been edited, discussion ensued about the process and what they had learned about the breakdown of responsibilities and the decision making process involved in a collaborative image-making enterprise.

Students worked collectively. They keep process journals in which they recorded their concerns about teamwork and joint decision-making. American students are used to working independently, so that the experience of working in a team proved to be a challenge for some students. However,

the collective effort by which the video was created actually mirrored professional practice in most image making contexts. Those who produce the imagery of corporate capitalism are typically highly specialized and work in teams. Even much of the art of the professional artworld, involving as it does, complex technical processes, involves collaboration with technical specialists. Sherri's classroom reality TV show, then, is actually closer to the kind of practical artmaking than typically takes place in artrooms today where students work independently on their own projects. Far from downgrading the value of practical, hands-on image making, Sherri's classroom is more up to date than what usually happens in the art classroom.

Conclusion

Studio practice remains central to a visual culture approach to art curriculum, but it may not always involve the same kind of studio activities that we are used to. It is bound to involve new media, in preference to pre-industrial revolution media such as clay and painting. The studio is also bound to involve a more contemporary understanding of studio than the lone artist working in their garret; rather, it is likely often to involve collaborative team effort where students adopt specialized roles and learn from each other. And as each of the examples above illustrate, studio is unlikely to be pursued purely for the sake of acquiring skills and technique or for expressing individual perceptions. In a visual culture approach to art curriculum studio becomes an exploration of ideas and a form of social critique much in the way that a great deal of contemporary practice within the professional artworld has become. A visual culture approach to art curricula does not downplay studio practice; it adopts a contemporary model of studio practice.

Notes

1. The three teachers mentioned in this paper were graduate students in the art education program at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign during the Spring of 2003.

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