

SOCIAL PERSPECTIVES OF ART EDUCATION IN THE U.S.: TEACHING VISUAL CULTURE IN A DEMOCRACY¹

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Abstract

This paper is an overview of social perspectives of art education. These perspectives include, but are not limited to, a concern with issues and interactions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, special ability, and other body identities and cultures; socioeconomics, political conditions, communities, and natural and humanly-made environments, including virtual environments. I focus here on the common ground among the perspectives which is based on the conviction that the visual arts are vital to all societies and that representations of art in education should seek to reveal its complexity, diversity, and integral cultural location. These perspectives represent the lived meanings of art and arts communities through, for example, change in curriculum, collaborative instructional methods, and community action. Social reconstructionist versions of these perspectives are also founded on the

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belief that art education can make a difference in student understanding of and action in the world and that, that difference can enrich and improve social life.

Social Perspectives of Art Education: Teaching Visual Culture in a Democracy

This paper is an overview of social perspective of art education. It is not a critique; but neither can it be neutral. Rather, it is a sympathetic description of what I believe to be some of the important conditions, characteristics, and purposes of these perspectives in and of the field.

The task of describing these perspectives is difficult because so many social perspectives exist. These perspectives include, but are not limited to, a concern with issues and interactions of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, special ability, and other body identities and cultures; socioeconomics, political conditions, communities, and natural and humanly-made environments, including virtual environments. The common ground among these perspectives is that they are based on the conviction that the visual arts are vital to all societies and that representations of art in education should seek to reveal its complexity, diversity, and integral cultural location. These perspectives represent the lived meanings of art and arts communities through, for example, change in curriculum, collaborative instructional methods, and community action. Social reconstructionist versions of these perspectives are also founded on the belief that art education can make a difference in student understanding of and action in the world and that, that difference can enrich and improve social life.

I do not claim to speak for the many art educators who approach art and art education as a social endeavor and I cannot do justice to each of these various perspectives. It is not my intention to devise categories of perspectives or delineate distinctions between them. Rather, I am more concerned with the task of understanding what they have in common and why art educators maintain social perspectives. So, I will simply try to describe some general characteristics and explain why I believe that social perspectives of art education are just good art education.

This paper has three parts. First, I will summarize what I believe to be

influential theoretical foundations of these perspectives. Second, I will briefly discuss related historical and recent developments in the field. Third, I will reflect on some of the recent changes in visual culture that led me to my social perspective.

Democratic Art Education: Some Theoretical Foundations

The visual arts, in a sense, help to make life worth living. They enable us to create, force us to think, provide us with new possibilities and allow us to revisit old ideas. It is artistic freedom --- that is the freedom to create and have access to those mind-expanding ideas and objects --- that perhaps best illustrates democratic thought. At a time when democracy is being challenged by even our own policy-makers, the protection of art and art education in social institutions is becoming increasingly important.

One of the most often quoted statements ever written by an American is the following:

We hold these Truths to be self-evident, that all [people] are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.

The beginning of the second paragraph of the United States Constitution (with my small adaptation) states the reason that the visual arts and art education are necessary in a democracy. If we view art and art education as aids to making life meaningful, as reflections of liberty, and as means through which people might pursue a constructive form of happiness, *art education is a sociopolitical act*.

The social perspectives I discuss are, at root, forms of democratic education --- that is, they concern the ways in which teaching art can promote democratic thought and action. At least four general foundations underpin these perspectives: a) a broadening of the domain of art education, b) a shift in the emphasis of teaching from formalistic concerns to the construction of meaning, c) the importance of social contexts to that construction, and d) a new definition of and emphasis on critique.

Visual Culture: Broadening the Domain

The central theme of postmodern debates, especially in the form exemplified by the work of Frederic Jameson (1984; 1991), has been that a shift in the cultural sphere---above all, the emergence of an all-encompassing visual culture---has fundamentally transformed the nature of political discourse, social interaction, and cultural identity. Visual culture is expanding as is the realm of the visual arts. It includes fine art, television, film and video, computer technology, fashion photography, advertising, and so on. The increasing pervasiveness of such forms of visual culture, and the freedom with which these forms cross traditional borders, can be seen in the use of fine art in advertising, realistic computer generated characters in films, and video museum exhibitions.

In part, freedom in a contemporary democracy is reflected precisely through the ways in which the visual arts cross traditional artistic and social boundaries. For example, artists recycle gendered ideals. Historically, the fine arts have been replete with idealized representations of gender. But now, through contemporary visual culture translations (many of which are rooted in fine art depictions), those idealistic representations are sold with products that promise to give people qualities of the ideals. These idealized images have come to represent the dualism associated with, on the one hand, the individualism and artistic freedom of the avant-garde and, on the other hand, the pervasiveness of gender stereotypes that only the visual arts can make possible. We see this dualism in, for example, clothing, perfume, and cosmetic advertisements suggesting that buying a product will make us more individual, while fitting us better into the stereotype.

It is not only the mix of visual cultural forms that will shape art education in the new century, but the intergraphical connections between them. For example, the advertisements discussed in the previous paragraph are perhaps more closely related to historical, fine art representations of beauty than to contemporary realities. It is the conceptual and physical interactions of various images, forms of imagery, and their meanings, that are the essence of the visual arts.

Form and the Interpretation of Meaning

The variety and connections between different forms of visual culture in the postmodern age leads us to the second foundation of social perspectives, which is the shift in emphasis from mainly formalistic concerns to interpretations of meaning. While meaning has always been vital to art, it has not always been reflected as so in education. Instead, curriculum has focused on form and technical skill, as opposed to content. As John Dewey wrote in 1916 in *Democracy and Education*:

It is frequently stated that a person learns by merely having the qualities of things impressed upon his mind through the gateway of the senses. Having received a store of sensory impressions, association or some power of mental synthesis is supposed to combine them into ideas - into things with a meaning...The difference between an adjustment to a physical stimulus and a mental act is that the latter involves response to a thing in its meaning; the former does not...When things have a meaning to us, we mean (intend, propose) what we do: when they do not, we act blindly, unconsciously, unintelligently. (*italics in the original*, p. 29)

Artist Ben Shahn (1957), an art educator with a social perspective, explained the problem in relation to teaching:

In the midst of our discussion one of the students walked up to me and said, 'Mr. Shahn, I didn't come here to learn philosophy. I just want to learn how to paint.' I asked him which one of the one hundred and forty styles he wanted to learn, and we began to establish, roughly, a sort of understanding.

I could teach him how to mix colors, or how to manipulate oils or tempera or watercolor. But I certainly could not teach him any style of painting - at least I wasn't going to. Style today is the shape of one's meanings. It is developed with an aesthetic view and a set of intentions. It is not the how of painting but the why. (*italics in the original*, p. 123)

It is no surprise, then, that theory grounded in the construction of social meaning has had an impact on social perspectives of art education. As a

result, the influence of hermeneutics, originally the study of meaning interpreted from scripture, has been at the root of much of this theory. Other theories on which social perspectives have been grounded have emerged from, for example, political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy, as well as the arts. These range from neo-Marxism to post-structuralism. I cannot do justice to a description of each theoretical framework here, but an example of the shift in thinking about interpretation can serve to illustrate some of the issues involved.

The mainstream conception of interpretation in U.S. curriculum is based on analytic aesthetics and establishes a boundary conflict: form versus meaning. Historically, analytic aesthetics enabled the emergence of formalism, which carries with it the assumption that 'aesthetic experience' is a mere sensory coupling with elements and principles of design, not the meaningful, interpretive (cognitive) experience that makes art fundamental to human existence.

In contrast, in an increasing body of contemporary theory and artistic practice, *meaning is inherent to aesthetics* and interested interpretations are not only expected, but promoted. Postmodern artists often reject formalistic uses of the elements and principles of design in favor of symbolic uses that suggest multiple and extended social meanings. For example, in the piece *Us-Them* by Gary Simmons, the artist uses two black towels hanging on a rack, one with the word "Us" embroidered on it in gold, and the other with the word "Them" to suggest meaning. Simmons refers to the typically white His and Hers towels associated with wealth, but changes an element (the color) from white to black, which symbolically references the many meanings people have of these colors, and changes the text to Us and Them. He juxtaposes color with ideas of elitism, gender, and social conflict, suggested by the objects and the words, so that the color black suggests the word (Black) and the word suggests and combines with knowledge, feelings, and beliefs about racial tension. In other words, Simmons uses color for symbolic reasons rather than formalistic. As a result, formalism would not go far in helping students gain access to the piece. Instead, color is a sign that suggests meaning based on social experience.

Contexts: The Importance of People

This leads me to the third foundation of social perspectives: contexts. Without context, a painting is just paint on canvas. With context, a painting is a work of art. As well as its surface form and content, it is about the people who created it, viewed it, showed it, bought it, studied it, and criticized it. As a result, both contexts of *production* and *appreciation* or use are important. (I use the traditional word “appreciation” here because it refers to the seductiveness of visual culture and its increasing value.) Such contexts include cultures, countries, communities, institutions, including schools themselves, and the sociopolitical conditions under which art is made, seen, and studied. Contexts include theories and models, such as the models of aesthetics, childhood, and curriculum that shape our views about art and teaching. Contexts also include the conditions and environments that make student art possible, from what students see every day to sources of their emotions, opinions, and beliefs.

Although, of course, many individual teachers represent wider contexts of production in their teaching, a review of the history of art education and most contemporary published curriculum packages reveals that such contexts have not generally been represented as important in our field. For decades, sociologists have understood that the contexts of art and other cultural carriers contribute to their symbolic, attached meanings (Berger & Luckmann, 1967). Contexts of production are part of works of art; they provide the conceptual connections that make art worth studying. And yet, some art educators still argue that understanding contexts of production is peripheral to understanding art. Of course, I have often seen works of fine art presented in the context of a fine art style (usually as a formal, rather than a social, context). However, I have rarely seen, for example, explanations of French Impressionism including the importance of artists being able to leave their studios for the first time on trains for quick trips to the countryside to paint, of the sociology of World War II to Abstract Expressionism, of the intended rites and rituals associated with ceremonial masks, or even the role education plays in artistic communities.

Also, contexts of appreciation or use have not generally been given attention in curriculum. Images are now often seen without the context of their

original intent and juxtaposed with previously unrelated imagery that provoke associations created by this new context. The various modes of reproduction that enable viewing on a large scale are productive in the sense that they involve the creation of a new object each time an object is reproduced. The contexts of museums, television programs, advertisements, as well as school curriculum, all influence the ways in which a single work of fine art (and through the exemplar, fine art as a concept) is understood.

From an educational standpoint, it would be unwise to assume that images are held as mere forms (formal objects) in students' minds --- when students do not have contextual information, they construct their own contexts, thereby forming their own knowledge. This was illustrated in a study I did with high school teacher John Wood where students discussed, for example, a painting of two Eastern Indian gods as if it represented an interracial couple (Freedman & Wood, 1999). The students did not know that in the time and place it was painted, lighter skin was considered aesthetically pleasing for women and darker skin was desired for men. The painting actually represented an ideal aesthetic of a single racial couple, which could have taught them something about the relativity of skin color, the use of artistic form as a representation of ideals, and so on. Instead, the students interpreted the piece in relation to their own (unfortunately, racist) context.

Occasionally, I am asked why social perspectives of art education are not social studies. The answer should seem clear --- art education is about visual culture, which is vital in a world where students of all ages are increasingly learning from visual sources ranging from television to manga. Even so, from my perspective, students need to know non-visual aspects of visual culture, if for no other reason than because greater general knowledge can reveal the importance of the visual.

Critique: The Constructive Process of Democracy

The fourth foundation of social perspectives is the importance of critique based on various types of critical social theory. To provide context, I start with a few historical notes. The critical theory turn in U.S. art education, and general education, has its recent theoretical roots in the 1960s. Two strains of critical theory from other countries particularly influenced U.S. thinking

about art and education. The first was European neo-Marxist theory, particularly the work of critical sociologists of the Frankfurt School, such as Theodor Adorno who wrote on aesthetics. The second strain was Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's theory that grew out of efforts to promote literacy and borrowed from John Dewey's pragmatism and ideas about progressive education. These social theories were vehicles for responding to political and economic oppression. In part, their translation in the United States was a response to the personal isolation of existentialism and the extreme individualism that developed after the Second World War, as a result of fears of authoritarianism and anti-Communist sentiments. These theories were drawn on in general education to address problems of increased asocial, technization of curriculum, such as the development of 'teacher proof' curriculum. The historicism of the Frankfurt School provided a way of escaping the ahistorical grip of logical positivism and reconnecting various modern practices to their traditions. In art theory, the conceptual shift from modernism to postmodernism supported artists as they revisited social content and revealed historical connections to their art and popular culture.

By the 1970s, the U.S. version of neo-Marxist theory and Freire's "pedagogy of the oppressed" became entangled in education with feminist and cultural theory related to civil rights. Ideas were taken from each and adapted to fit into U.S. contexts. For example, U.S. poststructuralists and other postmodernists rejected Marxism as a meta-narrative and feminists and cultural theoreticians pointed out that neo-Marxist theory, although helpful in uncovering historical dimensions of oppression related to economics, did little to aid in the understanding of complex cultural, social, and personal issues. In the 1980s, when people used the term critical theory referring to education, it had a range of meanings from poststructuralism's challenge to the notion of a single, correct or even best structure (composition, interpretation, lesson plan, etc.) to analyses of curriculum based on the socioeconomic conditions of certain populations. However, all referred to critical reflection at a social level.

By the 1980s critical social theory became part of the discourse of art education and fueled the growth of social perspectives of the field. In part, the fuel came from the work of art educators who had grown up in the 1950s

and 1960s and belonged to the group of Americans who as youngsters had taken part in civil rights marches and demonstrations against the Viet Nam War. Their convictions about the relationship between aesthetic meaning, civil rights, and social justice were long held and strongly felt

While enabling change in conceptions of art education, concerns about the influence of critical social theory have floated around in the air of the field since the 1980s. This is the case, in part, because critical discourse is thought to have a negative quality. Phrases that now float in the air of the visual, performing, and literary arts like "death of the author," and "the end of art history," may sound a bit scary and some social theory is critical in the deconstructive sense. But these can be looked at as metaphorical ways to jolt people into understanding that profound changes have occurred in the visual arts --- that art educators are responsible for representing --- and that these changes are social in character. Of course, artistship is alive and well, but perhaps, in a more social form, where the content of fine art, television programs, and even advertising imagery are about social issues, artists sign paintings in pairs, and kinetic sculptures and room-sized installations only become art through audience interaction. Art still has a past --- but art history is no longer based on a single, linear, progressive, monocultural model. Rather, art lives in a four-dimensional space where cultures collide and inter-mingle and time works back on itself.

Critical social theory is a form of critique and critique is a constructive force in arts communities precisely because it opens discussion that might otherwise be closed. Many types of critique exist, such as, classroom critique in which teachers try to get responsive comments from students that reflect formalistic lesson objectives. However, from a social perspective, critique helps participants not only to make judgments and reflect on their own positions, but to realize that the discourse of their positions, the critique, the curriculum, the field, and so on, create a social milieu of possibility. Art educators (e.g. Blandy & Congdon, 1987; Freedman, 1987) who work from social perspectives generally tend to view critique in and about our field as a democratic process.

Social Perspectives: Past and Present

Reconstructionism has long been one of the three major streams of art education in the United States (Efland, 1990). Interestingly, social reconstructionism in general education has a history closely tied to art. This might best be represented by the work of educator Harold Rugg who joined the faculty at Teachers College, Columbia University in New York shortly after WWI and quickly became influential through his interpretation of progressive education. Rugg's conception of schooling was the radical perspective that education was a route to political, social, and economic change. One of the influences on Rugg was Greenwich Village culture and the circle that surrounded Alfred Stieglitz and Georgia O'Keeffe (including artists such as John Marin, Arthur Dove, and Ansel Adams, and critics such as Waldo Frank and Lewis Mumford). In part, as a result of this influence, Rugg considered art an essential part of social reconstructionism in general education.

Although the stream of social reconstructionism in art education has flowed throughout the twentieth century, it now seems to be the wave of the future. In the last three decades social perspectives have broadened beyond the reconstructionism of the past. These perspectives now include a range, for example, from general methods of art education that include sociocultural issues not necessarily tied to reconstructionist methods or purposes, such as in the work of Edmund Feldman, to specific concerns of certain social groups in relation to art education. Such concerns have received increased attention in art education literature, conferences, and NAEA affiliate groups (such as the Committee on Multiethnic Concerns, INSEA/USSEA, the Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Issues Caucus, the Social Theory Caucus, and the Women's Caucus). From the writing of national and international art educators, such as June King McFee and Rogena Degge, Eugene Grigsby, Ana Mae Barbosa, Vincent Lanier, Brent and Marjorie Wilson, Graeme Chalmers, and Ronald Neperud, in the 1960s and 1970s, to the many who have joined them since, sociocultural issues have made teaching art worthwhile.

Recent Research and Theory

In the 1980s and 1990s, several foci of social perspectives surfaced to become areas of research, including those giving attention to particular social groups, such as people of special ability (e.g. Blandy, 1994), and gen-

der, such as gay and lesbian (e.g. Check, 1998) issues. Many of these issues were introduced in Blandy and Congdon's (1987) edited volume, *Art in a Democracy*. The influence of women educators, women's art, and feminism has become an area of study, from the seminal book by Georgia Collins and Renee Sandell (1986) to the series of histories edited by Enid Zimmerman and her co-editors (e.g. Congdon & Zimmerman, 1993) and Collins' (1995) Studies in Art Education Award Lecture. This work has demonstrated that women have been highly influential in the field and that further studies of influence are needed in order to promote an understanding of the conditions of influence of social groups.

An important aspect of the concern with social groups has to do with the inclusion of the art of diverse people in curriculum and attention to the diversity of students, including ethnic diversity. Art educators such as Jackie Chanda (1991), Phoebe Dufrene (e.g. 1990; 1993), Patricia Stuhr (e.g. 1991; 1994), and other scholars have worked to change curriculum so that the art of various cultures are presented in their appropriate complexity. This work includes empirical investigations of educational issues concerning the art and cultures of many cultural groups, such as first nations peoples (e.g. Stuhr, 1987; Irwin, Rogers, & Wan, 1997).

With the increasing interest in fine art disciplines has come a major effort to update representations of art history, criticism, aesthetics, and studio forms of production. Attempts to update curriculum representations of fine art are desperately needed and must go beyond what has been done to date. The attempts that have been made have sought to make education have greater consistency with the shift toward social issues that has occurred in visual arts communities (e.g. Congdon, 1986; Freedman, 1991a; Garber, 1992; 1995; Hamblen, 1988; 1990). However, much more work must be done to synthesize contemporary art concepts and skills for inclusion in curriculum if we are to legitimately continue to include fine art in curriculum.

Much of the work in the development of social perspectives has been in the forms of philosophical essays that concern the ethics of art education and what ought to happen in and through curriculum. However, foundations for social perspectives have also been based on empirical research in classrooms (e.g. Freedman & Wood, 1998; Stout, 1995) and have included other

forms of inquiry, such as social history (e.g. Freedman, 1987; 1991b) and political analysis (e.g. Boughton, 1998; Hernández, 1998; May, 1994). More empirical work is needed both as a foundation for social perspectives and to establish what occurs in classrooms when social perspectives are enacted.

The social shift has included a broadening of the field to include all the visual arts including folk art, performance, environment, and computer-assisted-art (e.g. Congdon, 1991; Duncum, 1990, 1991; Freedman, 1989; Garoian; 1996; Hicks, 1992/93, 1994; Smith-Shank, 1996). Further, the breadth of visual arts that co-exist and influence student artistic production in the postmodern world demands a social reconsideration of assessment and evaluation (Boughton, 1997). The recent attention given to understanding visual culture is not synonymous with social perspectives of art education. However, they are related. It is the recent changes in visual culture and their relationship to social conditions that give social perspectives of art education their urgency and may be one of the reasons for the increased interest in both understanding visual culture and reconstructionism in our field.

I do not wish to unnecessarily categorize the work of individuals and it is not my purpose to make minute distinctions between the conceptual locations of people who have social perspectives of art education. Rather, my description is of the landscape within which those locations might be found. But it is not only the actions of writing books and articles that characterize this group. It is their work in schools and local communities, with teachers and other educators, graduate students, members of various arts communities, international communities, and even on the web that mark this group as agents for social change.

Student-Eye Views

Social perspectives of art education are always concerned with student learning and art knowledge. Students make art to express not only things about themselves, but about their surroundings, their social context, the things that act upon them. Students generate social ideas about art. For example, the following is a list of art topics generated by a sixth grade class:

Love Marriage Sex Aids Murder Hate Killing Battles Freedom Family
Friends Relationships Celebrations Holidays Spirituality God Beliefs

Culture Drugs Peace War Pollution Earth Ecology Work Feelings
Hunger

Students make visual art not merely for its formal, technical, or even private value, but to communicate about social issues in social ways. This was illustrated in a sculpture I recently saw made by a student in middle school after she was raped. This sculpture was one of the most powerful works of art I have ever seen. Although the student's experience was private, her method of responding to it was public and her message was social. Students have concerns, they ask questions, interpret imagery, and make judgments. They make works of art that illustrate social injustice, community change, and concern for the environment.

The primary purpose of such student art is not therapeutic --- it is social. It is not just about individual emotions, it is about the personalization of social issues. The complexity of this, perhaps subtle, difference is critical if we intend to teach students' about art in relation to their world.

As well as presenting art as a form of social production, it has been my experience that social perspectives of art education include the view that vital learning takes place in relation to classroom culture. Student interpretation is valued, as well as challenged, and expert opinion is represented as part of a negotiated system of information, rather than a deliverable object. As Maxine Greene (1996) states, "In the realm of the arts, as in other realms of meaning, learning goes on most fruitfully in atmospheres of interchange and shared discoveries" (p.126). These perspectives promote dialogue that relates objects and ideas formed in class to the cultural identities, social actions, and multiple discourses of art that live outside of school---not only those by fine art experts. Those who teach from a social perspective help students in the construction of meaning toward a broader, more sophisticated understanding of visual culture.

Art as Social Knowledge and Belief

Art is a vital part and contributor to social life and students have the possibility of learning about life through art. At its root, the purposes of art education is not to merely educate people about the technical and formal qualities of artifacts, but to help to extend the meaning of those qualities and artifacts to

show their importance in human existence. It is this relevance that has made art worthy of a place in formal education.

I have had the privilege of spending most of my sabbatical during the past year overseas, including in some newly developing countries. I have learned a great deal about local and global communities, students and teachers in various contexts, and the social production of art. One lesson has been continually reinforced: art education is increasingly important in societies built on expressive freedom that are rapidly shifting from text-based communication to image saturation. No educational group outside of art education is prepared to teach students about the complexities of the increasingly pervasive visual arts. And no group, including ourselves, is yet prepared to address the educational implications of a visual aesthetic that is both sophisticated and popular.

Social Responsibility and the Pervasiveness of Visual Culture

Television has become our national curriculum. More students watch a nationally broadcast television program than are taught through the same curriculum text. Highly seductive and widely distributed images with sophisticated aesthetics intricately tied to sociopolitical meaning are now seen every day by students. As a result of telecommunications, students learn from and about the visual arts through a virtual curriculum. Literal and conceptual, intertextual and intergraphical connections between television, the web, and other visual technologies, such as film, photography, and video, are expanding this learning environment.

An important part of postmodern art and art education involves these connections between and among the forms of visual culture seen in museums, on television, in movies, as part of video and computer games, on the Web, on packaging, and so forth. As Ellen Dissanayake (1988) argues, art is used across cultures to “make special.” In the contemporary democracies which promote the “free” flow of information this idea of making special has been appropriated by the mass media, advertising, and even education, as exemplified in the use of the arts to aid student learning in other school subjects. The same techniques that artists have used for centuries to make

imagery seductive, didactic, and powerful, are being used today on the grandest of scales.

From my social perspective, it is the responsibility of our field to address the issues and problems of student experience with visual culture. Unlike the strongest traditions of our field, which have focused heavily on promoting an appreciation of the visual arts of the past, art education from this perspective is concerned with taking a more critical stance and addressing the increasingly difficult challenges of the visual arts in the future. Even when the future of the visual arts involves recycling the past, they present new challenges to new audiences, like our students.

The Example of a New Democracy

In case anyone doubts the pervasiveness of these changing conditions concerning the visual arts, and the importance of responses by art educators, let me give you an example from Kyrgystan, a country that was previously part of the Soviet Union. The educators in this country are struggling to construct a democratic system of education appropriate for the Kyrgyz people. The old Soviet curriculum continues to be resistant to change. Many of the officials in the ministry, where curriculum at all levels must be approved, are of the old regime. And yet, through the untiring efforts of a few Kyrgyz educators, reform has begun to emerge in a relatively short period of time.

One of the changes that has emerged is the rejection of the heroic story of Lenin and the promotion of the story of Manas, the historical epoch of the Kyrgyz people. It is a poem of more than half a million lines that was oral history for centuries and was probably first recorded in the 13th century. The poem tells the story of a great leader's exploits. As was the case with the story of Lenin, students learn about Manas in every school grade level.

The centuries old story contains many ideals that might be easily translated in a democratic environment. Manas is considered an example of honesty, generosity, and wisdom. However, as with most things of importance, the solution to a problem has raised new problems. One of the educational tools used to teach the story of Manas is a powerful, dramatic video tape (a work of art) with actors playing characters in the poem against a backdrop of special effects. It illustrates the poem and in the process shows, in vivid

imagery, historical traditions of sexism, racism, and violence. Such visual representations of Manas are already being used outside of school, too. I saw a television commercial in which an actor portraying Manas was selling chocolate. However, the complex influence of these images has yet to be addressed in this new democracy where little formal art education exists.

Artistic freedom has always been a condition, even a defining term, of democracy. But now, the characteristic *form* of artistic freedom is *visual* and the power of easily accessible visual arts has become a generator for democratic culture (in all its definitions). In this context, the intersection of the range of visual arts with social meaning is not, for example, propaganda or any other form of imagery previously considered peculiar or different from art. Instead, this intersection is just normal life at the turn of the 21st century---and it is the topic of art education.

Conclusion

I have argued that art must be represented in education as a social statement, in a social context, from social perspectives. A conceptual, social space exists between images through which people make contact. Learning takes place when students visit this virtual space as they study paintings and photographs in social studies texts, watch television shows that reproduce violence in films, see ads that recycle fine art, talk with friends about rock videos that simulate computer games, and so on.

We have a great deal of work to do in this new artistic renaissance called the information age. An essential responsibility of our field in the up-coming century will be to teach students about the power of the visual arts and the freedoms and responsibilities that come with that power. If we are astute, we will spend less time arguing about the structural character of curriculum and more time on its meanings; we will focus less on national and state bordered guidelines and more on local and global communities; we will be less concerned with the technical qualities of art and more concerned with its reasons for being; and above all, we will focus less on teaching students what we were taught and more on what they need to know. In this way, we will lead, rather than follow, general educational trends and help people understand life in the context of the visual arts.

I wish to thank the people I have cited who have social perspectives of art education and the many others who have helped to move art education forward in a social direction. It is a more enriching, critical, and interesting field because of you---you who understand art as above all of, by, and for the people.

Author's Notes

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1999 annual meeting of the National Art Education Association in Washington, D.C. The presentation contained slide images that were important to its message, but could not be reproduced here.

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The student examples discussed here, and those shown during the presentation of this paper, came from the classrooms of three outstanding art teachers, Barbara Bridges, Virginia Kressin, and Cleveland Eady, whom it has been my privilege to teach.

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