

# Contemporary Art and Student Learning

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## Abstract

Three broad rationales for art education are reviewed: Creative self-expression; history and culture, and popular visual culture. All are considered praiseworthy as bases for art curriculum, or as components within art programs. Values of contemporary art are viewed as essential for student learning, regardless of selected rationale or combination of rationales. Several contemporary artists are presented and discussed as exemplars for student learning, including artists from several regions of the world. Six typical contributions of contemporary artists are discussed with reference to potential student learning.

**Key Words:** rationales for art education, contemporary art, student learning art curriculum

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The content of art education in many countries, including the United States, addresses several broad categories. Children and young people in the schools make art through use of traditional art materials and art principles and conventions. They study the history of art from their own culture and from cultures around the world, with attention to significant works and major artists from various periods and styles. Currently much attention is focused on the study of visual culture from the mass media and advertising that students experience in their everyday lives. Any of these three basic approaches or combinations of them can lead to quality art programs, as attested by examples of excellence in art education from around the world.

Regardless of the approach taken, any art program can benefit by including the visual art of today: the works of living artists. Children and young people are interested in and responsive to the art of their own time. This article analyzes the works of several prominent contemporary artists with a view to identifying educationally worthwhile concepts, generalizations, and experiences that foster student learning. The works of each artist convey concepts, feelings, values, and ideas in ways not considered in prior traditions in the visual arts. These artists and their works represent creativity in contemporary art through media and modes of expression such as installation, video, and environmental art. This author suggests that art education today should attend to the works and lives of contemporary artists as well as to artists whose creative expressions in past traditions are highly valued.

### **Three Prominent Rationales for Art Education**

Art education programs often are founded on one or more of several prominent rationales or justifications for art in education. In broad terms, they are: Creative Self-Expression; History and Culture; and Popular Visual Culture.

#### **Creative Self-Expression**

The names of Viktor Lowenfeld (1947), Victor D'Amico (1942), and Manuel Barkan (1960) are rightly associated with the creativity rationale, which promises an approach whereby students will enhance their creativity

and develop more integrated personalities. In *Creative and Mental Growth*, Lowenfeld emphasized seven areas of growth in children that might be fostered through art education: Intellectual; emotional; social; perceptual; physical; aesthetic; and creative. The art curriculum offered opportunities for students to integrate various aspects of their personal growth by means of making art. This rationale was most prominent from the 1940s through the 1970s.

The creative self-expression approach emphasizes the belief that children and young people can experience the joy of making art, the exhilaration of self-expression, and the quiet, sometimes exuberant satisfaction of aesthetic experience. Art making is and has always been one of the universal human endeavors. Children enter early in the realm of mark making and graphic communication, following a progressive development in many ways similar to their language development (Hurwitz & Day, 2007); perhaps no other human activity offers earlier entrée for creative behavior by children.

Children and young people in the schools make art with traditional art materials, often drawing upon their own life experiences, moods, and events of daily living. Exploration of art materials is often a central focus of creativity programs and children are motivated to make art freely, without being overly concerned with technique or final product. Some programs emphasize traditional art methods and art skills. When children make art they learn skills that are not available in any other area of the school curriculum. Children can express ideas and feelings in creative ways through art, perhaps more so than in any other subject. Art making continues to be at the center of art programs in many countries.

### **History and Culture**

In a landmark article in 1962, Barkan decried the total emphasis on art making within the creative self-expression approach and encouraged art educators to attend to the disciplines of the visual arts. This new direction resulted in a number of related rationales based on content from art history and from world cultures combined with art making. Multi-cultural, cross-cultural, discipline-based, community-centered, and place-based

approaches to art education flourished from the 1970s to the turn of the century and continue today.

These approaches hold that children need to learn about the art of their heritage and the art of other peoples and cultures. They study the history of art from their own culture and from cultures around the world, with attention to significant works and major artists from various periods and styles. Every country or region has its own history of art and culture and these cultures are deemed worthy of study. Often students make art based on or related to their cultural and historical learning. The school is the best place for students to learn about their own heritage and to experience the visual arts from other cultures and times. Children need to identify with their heritage and learn to appreciate diverse world cultures through the arts.

The comprehensive, or discipline-based (Greer, 1984), approach broadens art content to include aesthetics and art criticism as complements to the study of art making and art history and culture. This approach emphasizes the art knowledge, skills, and understandings necessary for the general education of all students, and as a foundation for those students with special interests and abilities who wish to pursue art as an advanced study in school and, possibly, as a vocational choice for the future.

### **Popular Visual Culture**

Recently much attention has been focused on the study of visual culture from the mass media and advertising that students experience in their everyday lives (Freedman, 2003). With the advent of contemporary popular culture, children and young people are increasingly confronted with commercial messages crafted through the arts to produce maximum influence. Images and messages delivered by means of television, movies, video games, the Internet, cell phones, and all forms of advertising from billboards to window displays in the mall environment are part of the popular visual culture that young people experience on a daily basis.

Some of these images and messages are subtle and suggestive. Other messages from popular culture are blatant and overtly persuasive. Many messages are not in the best interests of children and some are downright destructive. As recipients (or targets) of today's multimedia splurge of

popular culture and advertising, children urgently need to learn about the motives, hidden messages, and strategies of the digital environment. They need to develop skills of analysis and deconstruction that will allow them to ascertain the agendas of those who fund and generate commercial messages. Increasingly, art educators have accepted responsibility to teach students to discriminate and analyze the innuendos and values conveyed by objects of visual culture.

The visual culture approach pays less attention to cultures of origin, past cultures, and the history of art, and focuses more on the immediate popular visual culture. Growing up in the digital age provides the young with technological advantages in relation to their elders, who gained their maturity without cell phones, video games, and global positioning systems. Today's children are often much more media-savvy than their parents and teachers. Many students can readily understand and appreciate the fact that corporations and conglomerates are trying their best to influence them through the arts media. Within many art programs, study of visual culture holds an important place, but might require only a modest share of the total instructional time for art.

## **Learning from Contemporary Artists**

These three general areas of art learning are praiseworthy and deserve place in the total art curriculum. Rationales for art education tend to evolve with the times and rarely disappear completely. For example, Daniel Pink (2006) and others assert that economic and cultural survival in the new millennium requires much more emphasis on right brain capacities stimulated through the arts. Pink (p.1) says:

The future belongs to a very different kind of person with a very different kind of mind – creators and empathizers, pattern recognizers, and meaning makers. These people – artists, inventors, designers, storytellers, caregivers, consolers, big picture thinkers – will now reap society's richest rewards and share its greatest joys.

This view is, in some ways, a newer version of the traditional creativity rationale and, similarly, variant versions of the history/culture rationale and the visual culture rationale are found in the literature of art education.

However, one component is too often missing. Many art programs neglect the visual art of today: the works of living artists, or artists who have lived during the lifetime of the students. This author has often observed college art majors in art criticism and contemporary art classes exclaim, "I thought all the important art had been done by the great artists such as Picasso, Van Gogh, and Dali. I didn't realize that there are exciting and creative artists doing new kinds of art today." One is lead to wonder where the students have been to remain so uninformed about contemporary art. The answer is that they have been in art classes that focus on making art, art history and culture, with some attention to visual culture. They simply have not been taught about the art and the artists of today. When they learn about contemporary artists such as Andy Goldsworthy, Nam June Paik, Barbara Kruger, Faith Ringgold, and the Guerrilla Girls, they often are enthralled and impressed. Young people and children are surprisingly in tune with and responsive to contemporary art, the art of their own time.



There are many living artists in every culture whose works are creative, inspirational, and thought-provoking. Some have changed the art world through their creativity and innovation; some have been driven by a cause or value; and others exemplify personal qualities worthy of emulation. We can say that:

- Today's artists have created exciting new art forms.
- Some of today's artists are heroes with admirable personal qualities.
- Some of today's artists create works of exquisite beauty.
- Today's artists deal with life's most significant and universal questions.
- Some artists have communicated the essence of social and political issues.
- Fortunately, some of today's artists have provided humor and imagination.

Following is a brief review that includes a few of the many contemporary artists that have contributed in each of these categories. Many of these artists are well known to art educators, but surprisingly unknown to many of their students.

## Contemporary Artists in the Art Curriculum

### Today's artists have created exciting new art forms.

Contemporary artists are responsible for a tremendous bursting forth of creativity as they venture beyond traditional forms of the visual arts and create new forms. One of the most significant artists of our time is the late, great, Korea-born, Nam June Paik, universally recognized as the father of video art (Bussman, 1993). Many art lovers have been privileged to view Paik's video installations in art galleries and museums around the world, including the wonderful, comprehensive retrospective of Paik's work at the Guggenheim Museum of Art in New York City in 2000, and his *Video Tower* at the National Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, Korea. Paik created an entire new mode of art expression with the then-emerging technology of video.



British artist Andy Goldsworthy is another of the unique artists of our time. He has selected nature as the subject and source for his work and often restricts himself to natural means for creating art without the use of typical art tools and materials. Some of his works call attention to simple concepts such as color variations in leaves, and serpentine shapes created with sand, snow, or rocks. Other ideas from Goldsworthy address concepts of time, natural attrition, and transitory aspects of life. Like environmental artists, Christo and Jeanne-Claude, most of Goldsworthy's works are temporary and are preserved primarily by means of the artist's photographs. His rain shadows,

for example, last only a few minutes in the real world. The artist (Goldsworthy, 2004 video) says, "At its most successful, my 'touch' looks into the heart of nature; most days I don't even get close."

Young people often are attracted to his work because they can comprehend what he has created with only the essentials of nature. The same natural materials are available to all who wish to try Goldsworthy's approach. When students attempt to create art in this manner, with leaves, sand, rocks, wood, or other materials, they gain a new insight and develop a new vision for nature. They also gain respect for Goldsworthy's work when they discover how demanding the process can be. Through watching Goldsworthy at work, students can learn that even the most successful artists face disappointment and discouragement; that a good deal of determination and perseverance are required in order to achieve work of high quality.



Cai Guo-Shiang is a Chinese artist who studied at the Shanghai Drama Institute, lived and worked in Japan, and now has completed works in many countries around the world. Many of his ideas are taken from traditional Chinese culture. His interests in scrolls, printmaking, and gunpowder are combined in his gunpowder drawings. Many of his works include fireworks. Others incorporate a wide variety of materials and technologies, such as his installation, *Inopportune*, at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, which includes sequenced multi-channel light tubes and addresses issues of existence in a dangerous world where reality and media seem to merge.

Cai directed the visual and special effects for the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2008 Beijing Olympics and he prepared a large-scale retrospective of his work at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2008.

### **Some of today's artists are heroes with admirable personal qualities.**

Young people tend look up to movie stars, athletes, musicians, and celebrities as their heroes and role models. Parents often are concerned with the values projected by some of these high-profile and attractive personalities. The artist Chuck Close is not known to many young people,



but he is worthy of hero status. Twenty years ago Close was a highly successful New York artist, known internationally in the art world, when he suffered a debilitating spinal aneurism that made him a quadriplegic. But with support from his wife and children, he struggled to improve his condition and continued his painting. His art is even better since his disability and he continues to be productive and successful. Even beyond the value of his art, students can benefit from learning about the artist, Chuck Close, his trials, his courage, and his success against all odds. His personal story can benefit the lives of those who study his work.



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**Some of today's artists create works of exquisite beauty.**



A favorite artist, Joan Mitchell, created most of her non-objective paintings in France. She is no longer living, but her delightful work is included here as a worthy example for student learning. Mitchell strove to put into paint the emotion that a landscape inspired. Philosopher Suzanne Langer (1967, p.87) famously posited that "Art is the objectification of human feeling." What cannot be stated in discursive language can be expressed only through the arts.

This definition of art is reflected in Barrett's (2008, p. 73) comments on Mitchell's painting:

The landscape is nothing more than a meditation on evoked feeling, a metaphor of existential experience. This is complex, for here enter notions of nature, colors, and visual mass, not to mention the tone of days, the suggestion of death, the emotional domain of the painter. For Joan Mitchell, places are more than places: they are filled with people and memories of them.

Dale Chihuly is another artist who has captured beauty and presented it to the world. Based in Seattle, Washington, in the U.S., Chihuly studied

traditional glass arts from the old world, particularly in Venice, Italy. In an outburst of creativity, the artist transformed glass art with new forms, context, and meaning. Now his influence is felt throughout the world as he creates works of exquisite beauty and stature. Beauty, a once rejected aspect of visual art, has been revived by contemporary artists.

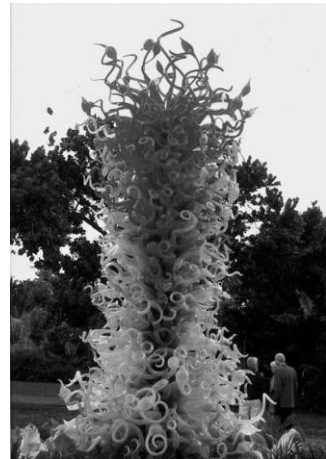
**Today's artists deal with life's most significant and universal questions.**

Contemporary video artist, Bill Viola, who recognizes his debt to Nam June Paik, is unique, not only in his technical innovations with video, but also in his exploration of humanity's universal themes: birth, death, wonder, transformation, and resurrection. Viola uses video to explore spiritual concepts gained from his studies of Zen Buddhism, Islamic religion, and Christian mysticism.

In this work with two TV monitors facing each other on a sculptural pedestal, Viola asks, "How are the generations of human connected?" One video image is of the artist's mother during her last hour of life. The other video image is Viola's newborn son during his first hour of life. The two images face one another and each is reflected from the other monitor screen, metaphorically joining the lives of the subjects across temporal generations.

**Some artists have communicated the essence of social and political issues.**

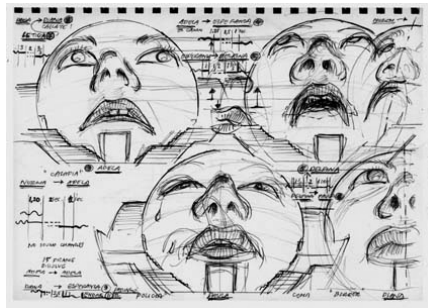
Barbara Kruger worked as a graphic designer and photo editor for a prominent women's magazine, which influenced the development of her mature art style. She combined photographic



images with superimposed text to convey straightforward, aggressive, even personal messages. Her use of personal pronouns, I, you, and we, brings the viewer in direct contact or conflict with the work. You, the viewer, are implicated and involved whether you like it or not.

Kruger has the astounding ability to capture the essence of complex social issues in seemingly simple visual images. Some of her images are frightening, some are humorous. All are provocative. Kruger (1993) states: “Your body is a battleground,” and immediately a multitude of examples emerge from the controversial social issues of the day. News sources in magazines, newspapers, and video broadcast stories that deal with anorexia, obesity, abortion, abuse, prostitution, plastic surgery, organ donation, surrogate motherhood, and other issues that focus on the human body as a battleground. Art teachers who wish to address these or related issues with their students are provided access through the work of Kruger, a highly recognized living artist.

Krzysztof Wodiczko's mother was a Jew who survived World War II and whose entire family died in the Warsaw, Poland, ghetto. Wodiczko was a child during those horrific years and has a heightened capacity to understand and empathize with survivors of chaos and trauma. His works have provided voice to survivors of the Hiroshima atomic bomb, crime-ridden inner city neighborhoods, and victims of poverty in Tijuana, Mexico. In *The Tijuana Project*, the artist positions a video camera that focuses directly on the face of a survivor, whose image is projected on the spherical building that houses the Tijuana Cultural Center (PBS, 2005). The crowd views and hears the testimonies of volunteer individuals who wish to tell their own stories of survival.



Wodiczko's work “examines notions of human rights, democracy, and truths about the violence, alienation, and inhumanity that underlie certain aspects of present-day society.” (Art 21, p. 229) The artist makes detailed sketches for his projected images as they will appear in site-specific installations.

### **Fortunately artists also express humor and imagination.**

We are all thankful that the world is not altogether grim and serious. Brad Bird is a writer and director responsible for the Pixar (2003) feature-length presentation of *The Incredibles*, a computer animated super-hero family, all with special powers to be used in the service of humanity. Students can learn the many ways and media with which artists work. Some, like Goldsworthy and Mitchell do their best work alone, while others like Cai, Viola, and Bird provide the creative drive for a host of collaborators.



### **An Essentialist Stance for Art**

I have mentioned 3 prominent sets of justifications or directions for art education, all of which are worthy of consideration. Variations and combinations of these rationales can provide a rich, vital, and relevant art curriculum across the school years from early childhood to high school graduation.

When they graduate from school, young people should carry with them art knowledge, art skills, and art experiences as integral parts of their intellectual lives. The distinguished philosopher of education, Harry Broudy, asked this question: “Is Art Necessary or is it Nice?” Broudy (1979) explained that the world is replete with “nice” things that would be good to include in the curriculum. But unless the case can be made that art is a necessary component for a complete, balanced education, and that art accomplishes something unique that no other subject can offer, there simply is not room for art in an increasingly crowded school day.

Art education should provide abundant aesthetic experience through making and viewing art as well as studying art history, world cultures, and popular visual culture. All children should have access to the positive experiences and values found within excellent art programs. Art teachers are most successful when they are well qualified to teach art and when they

share their art knowledge and expertise, as well as their passion for art, with their students.

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Because of professional and technological developments in this field, now is a most exciting time to be an art educator. Teachers have at their disposal strong proven rationales that justify art education as an essential component for the general education of all children and young people. Advances in graphic and digital technologies provide educators with a wealth of art teaching materials and access to all the best art and visual culture from past and present. An art program that provides access to creative behavior, real art skills, knowledge, and understandings, and that teaches through positive, even joyful, art learning experiences delivers for students what no other subject in the curriculum can offer.

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## Art works

Please include the following information with the respective art works included in the article.

- GGs. jpg: Book cover: *Confessions of the Guerrilla Girls* (1995)
- Paik Video Tower. jpg: Nam June Paik, *The More the Better*, (1988) Tower of 1003 video monitors
- Goldsworthy. jpg: Andy Goldsworthy, *Penpont Cairn*, Dumfriesshire, Scotland (2000)
- Cai Guo-Qiang. jpg: Cai Guo-Qiang, *Borrowing Your Enemy's Arrows*, The Museum of Modern Art, New York (1998)
- Chuck Close. jpg: Chuck Close, *Self Portrait* (1998)
- Mitchell. jpg: Joan Mitchell, *Mooring* (1971)

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Chihuly. jpg: Dale Chihuly, *Tower: Citron, Red, Green*, (c.2000)

Viola. jpg: Bill Viola, *Heaven and Earth*, (1992)

Kruger. jpg: Barbara Kruger, *Your body is a battleground*, (1989)

Wodiczko. jpg: Krzysztof Wodiczko, Sketch for *The Tijuana Project*, (2001)

Incredibles. jpg: Pixar, *The Incredibles*, (2003) Feature-length computer animated movie