

## **“Meaning Making in the Museum”**

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### **Introduction**

#### **Historical changes in art education in the United States in the past 25 years:**

Everything that I say about art education in the United States is a generalization and there are all kinds of exceptions. We do not have a national curriculum in the United States. There is variation in curriculum from state to state in the country, and art teachers enjoy a high degree of independence in what and how they teach. The following observations are trends and are not accepted by all art teachers.

Today the trend in the United States is toward a comprehensive art education. By comprehensive, I mean an art education that is more than studio-based instruction. In the 1960s there was a strong push by university art educators to include the study of art history and art criticism in the art curriculum in addition to teaching children to make art. Later, in the 1980s a belief that aesthetics, or the philosophy of art, should be added to the art curriculum.

Although this proposal was made in the 1960s, it took a long time to take hold in schools. All change in education comes slowly. Before the 1960s, many art teachers held a romantic belief in the child artist, glorifying whatever marks the child made as wonderful expression. The child was considered innately creative, and in the extreme, some art teachers believed that they should pass out art materials and leave the child alone.

Another major trend in the United States is toward an increase of awareness about the multicultural nature of American society, and a need to actively embrace and celebrate the difference in cultural heritage of children in the art room. Rather than teaching only the art of the West, many art teachers are struggling to become much more inclusive of the art of world cultures. Multicultural art education is most likely to be found, in varying degrees in metropolitan areas where diverse cultures force recognition of differences. In rural areas where children and their teachers are predominantly white, there is less concern for cultural inclusion. The societal demand for multi-cultural education also puts a great burden on the individual art teacher to invent her own multi-cultural curriculum and to find her own sources of art from diverse cultures.

Other emerging trends are to move art from the fringes of the curriculum in to a more central and visible place. Rather than art as recreation, and art as a relief of emotional tension, and self-expression, art is increasingly being considered a subject matter with its own unique curricular demands. Art is seen by some educators as knowledge that ought to be taught for its own sake. As art is seen as knowledge, there is a slow increase of cross-disciplinary approaches to the teaching of art, where art is built

into language studies, social studies, and sometimes, but rarely, even into math and the sciences. These practices are rare.

Tensions still exist in the United States between an art centered curriculum and a child centered curriculum. What I am going to show you today are examples of comprehensive art education that goes far beyond a studio-based model of teaching art. My examples include multi-cultural art education and some efforts at interdisciplinary art education.

### **Visual literacy:**

*Visual literacy* is not a term I ordinarily use when I talk about art education. It is a term that emerged in the late 1960s and was meant to draw attention to the effects of mass media, particularly television, on society. Visual literacy was and still is embraced by a handful of teachers, but they are usually teachers of English or social studies, rather than art. I am more accustomed to talking about *comprehensive art education*, and more specifically, the inclusion of art criticism in the art curriculum. Nevertheless, I am comfortable with the term *visual literacy*, and can adopt what I say about art education to include what I consider to be the main goals of visual literacy. I think the goals of visual literacy and comprehensive art education are similar.

For me, visual literacy is an ability to intelligently navigate complex visual environments. Above all, this requires the ability to accurately interpret images. Images have simple as well as complex meanings. Images have deep as well as superficial meanings. Images have subtle connotations built on obvious denotations. All images require interpretation. It also requires that one have the ability to understand the implications and possible consequences of imagery, both “fine” and “popular,” in museums, magazines, on television, and in the streets, in one’s own culture as well as the cultures of others. To be visually literate is to be cultural literate. Visual literacy cannot be separated from language. If one does not know the spoken and written language of a culture, one is going to have a very difficult time deciphering the meaning of that culture as they are manifested in images, and especially images with text.

### **Working with school age groups**

- (slide) Pre-school, group with stuffed animals
- (slide) Stuffed animals
- (slide) 3-4 year-olds
  
- (slide) Kindergartners, age 5, with cereal boxes for children
- (slide) Kindergartners with cereal boxes for adults
  
- (slide) 3rd graders, Center for Creative Photography, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona  
70, 000 images in the permanent collection  
20 classes of 3rd graders from the Tucson city schools doing photo-story projects that will later be exhibited at the museum
- (slide) Cass Fey, Curator of Education, introducing them to the museum
- (slide) showing them a variety of approaches to photography including these images by Edward Weston, Ansel Adams, Jerry Uelsmann, and Arthur Tress, *Fish Tank Sonata* (200 images)

- (slide) a unique photographic book
- (slide) original photographs by W. Eugene Smith, his Country Doctor photo-essay for *Life* magazine in 1948
- (slide) the back of a large collage by Joyce Neimanas that has been to the Smithsonian

- (slide) Athens, Ohio

High school students, Athens, Ohio; students writing their individual criteria for what they think makes a good photograph

Laddie wrote these: “Good art often scares those who are afraid to think for themselves.”  
“Good art should please the artist if it doesn’t please anyone else.”

Kat wrote a negative criterion: “A bad photograph has too much action all over and no point of main interest.” Kat, Sophomore

- (slide) Laura searching for photographs that meets her criteria

Laura wrote these:

“Good art should show emotions and technical skill.”

“Good art should cause a passionate response.”

“Good art mixes creativity with good composition.”

“Good art should make you think.”

- (slide) Laura’s selection of best of show based on her criteria

This is an example of moving from aesthetics to criticism, of starting with work that is close to them, then moving to other artists’ works in museums.

### Crossing Disciplines

Art and literature

- (slide) Trimble High School in Gloucester, Ohio, students examining and selecting photographs
- (slide) Sheryl the writer, Todd the photographer
- (slide) *Caution! Children at Play*
- (slide) *Favorite Play Area*

This is an example of

Art and Social Studies

- (slide) Sandra Semchuk, “How Far Back Is Home...”

Center for Creative Photography, Tucson, Arizona

Canadian artist of Ukrainian and Polish descent, marrying a Cree Indian

Viewing the exhibition with lenses from the social sciences, a collaboration with a social science teacher-educator, Barbara McKean, University of Arizona:

1. Individual identity and development--looking for autobiographical information, indications of personal development
2. Culture--indications of system of beliefs, ways of living, rituals

3. Indication of time, continuity, and change
4. What Peoples, places, and environments do you see
5. What Social groups and institutions might she belong
6. Does she partake in global communities

Break the tour group of 30 into 6 smaller groups, assign each group a lens with which to view a section of the exhibition

- (slide) A group listening to the sound track of a video tape portrait of the artist
- (slide) The small group examining the portraits
- (slide) Another group examining a series of portraits within contextual environments
- (slide) Another group examining a series of photo murals of the artist with her Cree Indian fiancé
- (slide) The whole tour group listening to the spokesperson from the sub-group
- (slide) The spokesperson
- (slide) Another spokesperson explaining a three-monitor video component of the show

This is an example of

### **Fine art and popular culture**

- (slide) “Truth in Advertising,” digital photographs by Tony Labate and Huey Lentz.
- (slide) gallery view
- (slide) gallery view
- Barbara Kruger, Wexner Center for the Arts, Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio
- (slide) *Another Hero*
- (slide) *Kill Time*
- (slide) Kids with reproductions
- (slide) Kids with reproductions
- (slide) *Undo You*
- (slide) *Intricate Rituals*

This is an example of where the original is not enough

- (slide) Ad
- (slide) Ads: denotations an connotations
- (slide) List all the things that are true in the ad, and all the things that are false

### **Strategies for viewing exhibitions**

#### **Small group work**

- (slide) “Memories Of Childhood,” Traveling Exhibition, curated by Bernice Steinbaum of the Steinbaum Krauss Gallery, New York City, featuring 16 culturally diverse artists.
- (slide) Rima Gerlovina and Valeriy Gerlovin, (émigrés to the USA from Russia)
- (slide) Juane-Quick-to-See-Smith, (a Cree Indian)
- (slide) Beverly Buchanan, (African-American shack communities in North Carolina)

- (slide) Duane Slick, (a Winnebago Indian)
- (slide) Slick
- (slide) Slick

This is an example of

### **Individual work**

- (slide) B.A.B.Y. traveling exhibition at the Virginia Beach Contemporary Art Center, Virginia
- (slide) Robert Karl, *About Eve*, by Judith Fox Contemporary Art Center of Virginia, Virginia Beach, VA, 1997.

Take the point of view of a specific person or object in an artwork and write about the artwork from *that* point of view. Write in the first person singular: “I am...

“I am Eve. You see me as both baby and bitch. And I see you for everything that you are: your body, your mind, your spirit.

My tiny hands touch the parts of my body which discomfort your gaze the most--until you look at my face and into my eyes which consume you, haunt you, frighten you. Your mind assumes things from my stance, my stare, and my stature that make you question my innocence, but at the same time reveal your own limited humanity. Remember: I an Eve--the personification of innocence that gave birth to guilt.

From me--from my innocence blemished by my guilt--sprang the human race, including you. So you see in me your own reflection, in the gestures of my body, the fantasies of my mind, and the eternity of my spirit.” Robert Karl, adult viewer

- (slide) William Wegman, an exhibition of paintings, photographs, and video tapes that traveled Europe and the United States I saw it at the Ringling Museum in Sarasota, Florida.
- (slide) *Man Ray Contemplating the Bust of Man Ray*
- (slide) *Elephant*
- (slide) *Fey Ray*
- (slide) *Dusted*
- (slide) *Blue Period*
- (slide) *Dressed for Ball*
- (slide) *Duplex*

Three different single paragraphs written by adults in response to this question: What are Wegman’s photographs about?  
(IVAE, Cincinnati, 1991)

"William Wegman's photographs of his weimaraners create an uncomfortable sense of exploitation similar to photographs of nude women in men's magazines or Richard Avedon's photographs in his American West series. The obedient subject endures costumes, eye coverings, uncomfortable positions and long poses for the amusement of

the photographer and his audience. Wegman's 'love' of his dog is similar to a possessive male's 'love' of his woman."

"William Wegman's directed photographs of his pet weimaraners delight my eyes and heart, and tickle my funny bone. Strong compositions with high contrast, both in lights and textures, make me want to reach out to touch the soft fur, the highly polished metal. These dogs, affectionately portrayed, seem to adopt poses in cahoots with the artist. They are real hams."

"William Wegman's weimaraner images create an exciting reaction to what one would have called cliché calendar art. It is anything but cliché. His composed images of everyday, ordinary objects placed on or around his dogs vaguely reminds one of Andy Warhol's Brillo boxes or Claus Oldenburg's hamburgers."

### **Dealing with controversial art**

- (slide) Sally Mann, *Immediate Family* and *At Twelve*  
5th graders, in the city of Cleveland
- (slide) *Virginia Asleep*
- (slide) *Nap Time*
- (slide) *Dirty Jessie*
- (slide) *The Terrible Picture*
- (slide) *Jessie and the Deer*
- (slide) *Jessie at 5*
- (slide) Kids
- (slide) Kids
- (slide) Kids
- (slide) Kids writing
  
- (slide) Robert Mapplethorpe, *Self-Portrait* with carrots for horns

Deal with it directly. Do not deny that it is controversial. Let them express their reservations, affirmations, or condemnations. Ask them to be respectful of one another. They don't have to like it, they just have to deal with it.

- (slide) Andres Serrano standing with *Piss Christ*, 1989
- (slide) Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987

19 viewers: 4 against, 15 for, Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio

"Yes - artists should have freedom to create and express ideas. Viewers have a freedom to look and admire or not look. Those who are interested in artistic endeavors have a responsibility to understand before making a judgment."

"No, I think we should be broad-minded to a point in accepting and being open to this type of work, but I think using body waste, especially in context with the religious figure is too degrading. The artist is like a naughty child seeing how much he can get away with. I also think the art world is like a baby sitter, too willing to accept what is created without thought of good taste."

"This piece is highly offensive to me. I don't like people who denigrate things that are important to me. However, artists have a responsibility to help us to see things in a new light, from a perspective that we may not otherwise recognize. Therefore, as much as I personally do not like this piece, I am forced to conclude that it does have a place in society." Nancy Converse

"If, for whatever reason, an artist has a need to provoke those around him, he or she should have the freedom to travel that avenue." Chuck Stella

"One positive consequence of controversial images is the very debate and discussion they engender. The church continues to play a too-large role in secular life (e.g., choice divorce). This image can initiate dialogue." J. Walsh

### Using Technology

- (slide) ArtsEdNet, Getty Institute for Education in the Arts, Los Angeles, Sydney Walker and I--"Sandy Skoglund: Teaching Contemporary Art"

Partnership: Columbus Museum of Art, Ohio State University, the Getty Education Institute, and teacher educators from Ohio State, Florida State and Penn State universities. The Columbus Museum of Art exhibited Skoglund's photographs and installations. While Skoglund was there, teacher educators interviewed her on video tape, and made a documentary of her installing *The Wedding*, one of her large installations.

- (slide) *The Wedding*

That summer, Ohio State and the Getty brought together 50 elementary and high school teachers for a one week symposium about teaching contemporary art. The teachers were from around the United States and five teachers joined us from Brazil. We had five university teacher-educators, Sandy Skoglund, the artist, Arlene Raven a well published critic based in NYC who has written about Skoglund's work. In team we wrote curriculum that the teachers could take back to their classrooms. Later a colleague and I, with technical help and funding from the Getty, built this on-line educational program.

- (slide) Screen scrape of Sandy Skoglund Gallery 1

Contents:

Five galleries of Skoglund's major pieces arranged in chronological order. About 35 images all together.

A biography of the artist.

A bibliography about her work.

An interview with Skoglund.

Pictures of Skoglund in her studio.

An essay on Skoglund's work by critic Arlene Raven.

Five different sets of teaching prompts organized by themes such as : Art and Religion; Skoglund and Suburbia; Art and Dreams; and so forth.

Skoglund on-line with students and teachers all over the world answering questions about her work. Two weeks. Archived and can be accessed.

- (slide) Screen scrape of *Radioactive Cats*

Cat in *Radioactive Cats*, Bobby Sayles, 5th grader, Chicago:

"I am so angry that I am radioactive that I knocked down this chair. I think I will do the same to the people that did this to me. Not only are my friends radioactive, but most of my family. We are all going to go back to the nuclear power plant, after we thrash this guy's house. It is also very hard to catch rats at night because now we glow in the dark. But, all in all, its very hard to get hit by a car, 'cause I glow in the dark."

- (slide) Screen scrape of Gallery 2

- (slide) Screen scrape of *Greenhouse*

Blue dog in *The Green House*, Hana Topalovic, émigré to Cleveland, Ohio, from Bosnia, 5th grade:

"I would feel in that green house like I'm in jail. I don't like to be a blue dog. I want to be a brown or black dog. How do these people live in this house? Everything is closed. There are no windows, no food. No one is happy. These too people don't have feelings for us. One day, thrust me, I'm going to get out of here."

This is an example of: collaboration, partnership, looking at art for content rather than form, raising questions which teachers and their students can answer for themselves.

### **Concluding remarks**

independent thinking

dialogue

interpretation

conversation

a community

For related work, see:

Terry Barrett, *Talking About Student Art*. (Davis Publication Co., Worcester, MA, forthcoming Fall 1997).

Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. (Mayfield Publishing Co.: Mountain View, CA, 1994).

Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Photographs: An Introduction to Understanding Images*. 2nd edition. (Mayfield Publishing Co.: Mountain View, CA, 1996).