Visual Culture in Art Education

What should we teach? The topic of visual culture has emerged in discussions about what ought to be taught in schools. In the 1960s, some art educators advocated inclusion of what was then termed “popular art” (film, TV, posters, album covers, expressly decorated Volkswagen beetles) to the traditional curriculum built around “fine art.” In 2000 and since, a handful of professors of art education, building on interdisciplinary scholarly work in visual culture in the humanities and social studies, are advocating that visual culture studies replace notions of art instruction based on fine art. Thus the content of art education would be expanded to include all of visual culture (popular art, fine art, and all things humanly made or altered to be seen, such as parks and gardens, shopping malls, Disneyland, professional wrestling, maps, kitsch, music videos, fashion, computer-mediated imagery). Most agree that visual culture includes fine art, but the amount of time that ought to be devoted to it varies in different proposals.

Visual culture studies in art education is presently a top-down movement, from the universities to the schools. Proponents’ arguments have an edge of irritation toward the study of “elitist” fine art and notions of “the aesthetic.” Advocates are promoting the movement toward visual culture studies in a profusion of journal articles, conference presentations, anthologies of readings, and a new collection of case studies of art teachers implementing visual culture studies in their classrooms, preschool through 12th grade and in college courses. Some of the cases studied are lessons about a local Kmart and a reconstruction of its packaging and visual displays; a critical examination of teen magazines by teens who then reconstruct their own magazines that are more representative of who they think they are; and a construction of a new reality TV program based on the students’ art room to show them how reality is constructed by those behind cameras.

The choices of what to teach are bewilderingly broad since by definition visual culture includes everything art teachers have been teaching—art of the whole world through time and across cultures—and now everything that Wal-Mart sells, that Disney builds, that Mattel markets, and what Hollywood and Madison Avenue bring to the screens in our homes and theaters.

Advocates of teaching visual culture seem to lack consensus about why to teach it. Should we celebrate visual culture or critique it, and if either or both, when and on what grounds?

Some argue that the study of visual culture will further social justice; others argue that it will result in a more informed citizenry, and some support it primarily on the basis of its relevancy to students’ lives and the irrelevancy of fine art.

Some art educators question the necessity or desirability of the nomenclature “visual culture.” They argue that by teaching about art made since the 1950s, with pop art a primary example, such teaching is already based in visual culture. To teach any art well, one must teach its sources. Postmodern artists of the late 1960s through the present have intentionally collapsed distinctions between “high” and “low,” “fine” and “popular,” and in their art routinely form hybrids of popular media technology and topics.

Fine art examples of images based in visual culture sources include Cindy Sherman’s photographic portraits of herself disguised as different women as represented in popular culture and in fine art, Paul McCarthy’s explorations of the object that are hidden by Disney characters, and Michael Ray Charles’s paintings of stereotypical racist depictions of African Americans.

Many art teachers in schools are baffled by what visual culture is and do not know how to approach it. Some teachers seem willing to include aspects of visual culture in their curricula but are unsure of how much and what it should replace in their current curricula. Visual culture studies (and contemporary fine art) add more theoretical demands of teachers to be knowledgeable of concepts of semiotics, psychoanalysis, gender, class, multicultural concerns, post-colonialism, and queer theory.

To teach any art well, one must teach its sources. Postmodern artists of the late 1960s through the present have intentionally collapsed distinctions between “high” and “low,” “fine” and “popular,” and in their art routinely form hybrids of popular media technology and topics.