Visual Culture in Art Education

By Terry Barrett

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, expressively 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 cultural 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 deconstruction 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.

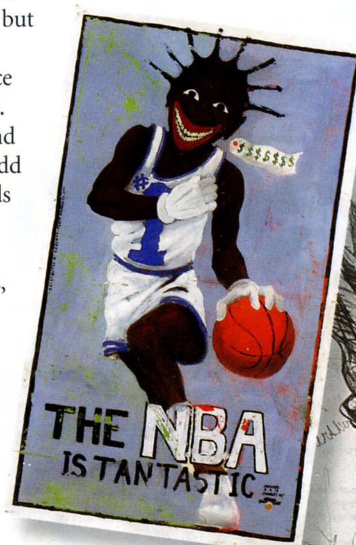
The choices of what to teach are bewilderingly broad since by definition visual culture includes everything art teachers have been teaching—art of the whole world through time and across cultures—and now everything that Wal-Mart sells, that Disney builds, that Mattel markets, and what Hollywood and Madison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

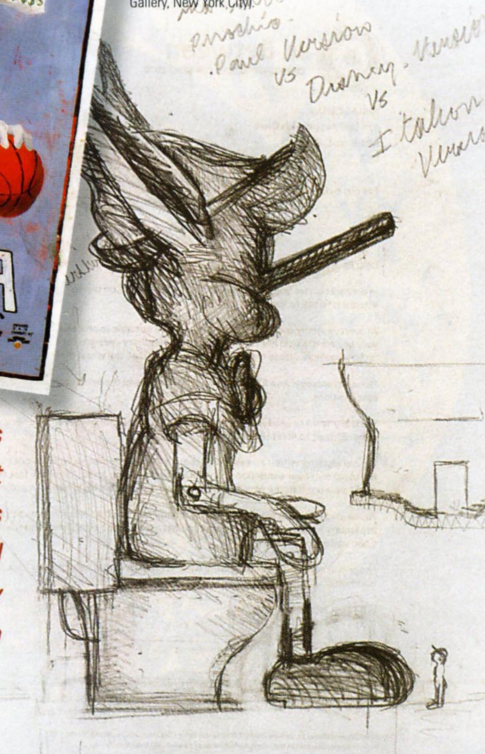
Fine art examples of images based in visual culture sources include Cindy Sherman's photographic portraits of herself disguised as different women as represented in popular culture and in fine art, Paul McCarthy's explorations of the abject that are hidden by Disney characters, and Michael Ray Charles's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



© Michael Ray Charles, *(Forever Free) The NBA*, acrylic latex, stain, and copper penny on paper, 60 by 36 inches, 1995. Collection: Brian Cooke (Tony Shafrazi Gallery, New York City).

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.



© Paul McCarthy, *Pinocchio Pipenose with Donkey Ears on Toilet*, preparatory sketch, pencil on velum, 8.5 x 11 inches, 1999. (Courtesy of the artist)

The Department of Art Education at Ohio State offers well-attended courses based simultaneously in both visual culture and fine art, including GEC offerings in art and popular music since 1945, ethnic arts, criticizing television, writing art criticism, and courses for arts majors on photography criticism, aesthetics, postmodernist theory, and visual culture theory. Visual culture exemplars include Barbie dolls, anime and manga (Japanese comic books and animation), TV commercials, magazine ads, media images of the Iraq war, Native American casino displays, and Hollywood films. All of our graduates are more or less conversant in the aesthetic and social theories upon which art is studied. The degree to which visual culture, contemporary art, or historical art is emphasized depends on individual faculty stances, which we both respect and argue.

Terry Barrett is a professor of Art Education and the recipient of a distinguished teaching award for his courses in art criticism and aesthetics for teachers. He serves as an art critic-in-education for the Ohio Arts Council, a consultant to arts agencies and art museums nationally, and visiting critic to universities in which capacities he engages learners of all ages in thinking and writing about art. He is dedicated to increasing understanding and appreciation of art, especially contemporary art, controversial art, and items of visual culture, through philosophical and critical inquiry. He is the author of numerous books for college students and teachers.

Reprinted from *Humanities Exchange*,
College of Humanities, The Ohio State University,