

Visual Culture and June King McFee

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Abstract

Like our visual culture, art education is ever evolving. New technologies have brought change to the way in which art is made and have simultaneously created new notions about the character of art. As art educators, it is important that we be receptive to a variety of approaches to teaching art. Our students live in a society where access to their common culture is simply a keystroke, touch, or voice command away. Students' lives are influenced now more than ever by television, computers, music, their visual environment and a plethora of other forms of mass media. Children experience up to 8 hours a day plugged into media such as music, television, video games, and the internet (Rubin, 2010). With such unprecedented access to the world, students have become consumers of mass media on a global scale. So that young learners may navigate society and become literate, critical thinkers and well informed consumers of visual imagery, art educators must look to a method of teaching that has its roots in the 1960s. Visual Culture Art Education is a pedagogical style, the very nature of which is oppositional to traditional art education (Buhl 2005). This paper will describe Visual Culture Art Education, reflect on the contributions of June King McFee's work in the study of visual culture education, and consider some problems associated with this pedagogical practice.

The Purpose and Meaning of Visual Culture Art Education

The purpose of Visual Culture Art Education is difficult to define. The primary problem in defining visual culture comes with the breadth of the field of study. It is enormous in its depth and scope and no set framework exists with which to associate visual culture (Duncum, 2001). Duncum (2001) compares visual culture studies to an ant colony, constantly expanding and growing ever more complex and complicated; even if one tunnel collapses, there are others to take its place. In its most basic form, visual culture in art education is used to teach critical thinking skills to students wherein those skills are used to reflect on the meanings and values expressed in their everyday visual world from images in magazines, to fine art, to a walk in a department store. Through the study of their visual planet, students are better prepared to recognize how images and cultural artifacts create the shared attitudes, beliefs, and values that we call culture.

A Short History

In order to understand visual culture in art education, educators must first understand the work and beliefs of June King McFee, whose ideas best anticipated our current perceptions of visual culture in art education (Chalmers 2005). When McFee entered art education in 1952 with experience in art, but not in education, she was charged with creating an art education program at a community college. As she studied education, McFee (1984) wrote, "For some students, apparently, I was a good teacher...But there were students I was not

reaching” (p188). This realization led McFee on a pursuit to define art education and its role in culture and general education.

For McFee, art was a comprehensive term defined as anything purposefully created by man that interprets or enhances the value of his experience. In the book *Art, Culture, and Environment: A Catalyst for Teaching*, McFee and Degge (1980) say that art expresses beliefs, values, and feelings and acts as a means of communicating these beliefs, values and feelings from individuals, groups, and generations to individuals, groups, and generations. According to this purview of the nature of art, anything from a cabinet, to a painting by Picasso, to a shoe could be included in the scope of artistic study. Freedman and Stuhr assert that “[a]nyone who travels, watches rock videos, sits on a piece of furniture, enters a building, surfs a web, or does a number of other things is experiencing the visual arts” (as cited in Efland, 2004).

McFee’s conceptions of art came at a time of great historical change, the 1960s. During this time man walked on the moon, Janis Joplin heated up the stage, the Vietnam War was fought, Martin Luther King, Jr and President Kennedy were assassinated, the Civil Rights Movement came to a head, and Pop Art rose to prominence in the United States blurring the lines between high and low art. This was a time of cultural, societal, racial, gender, and economic awareness (Eisner, 2002). This awareness of the inequalities of society led McFee and other art educators to question the pedagogical practices of art teachers art by looking critically at the context of images and who created them. Eisner (2002) writes that by viewing images through this lens, art becomes “a

kind of text, and texts need to be both read and interpreted” (p.20). Approaching the study of art as a kind of text to be read and interpreted made sense, as visual culture studies arose from literary studies. It was during this time of great awareness in the 1960s that June King McFee first used the words “visual” and “culture” together (Chalmers, 2005).

Purposes of Art

According to McFee’s philosophy, there were two main purposes for the visual arts: personal expression and interpersonal communication. In an eclectic contemporary society, the work of an artist conveys a variety of different types of information. While some artists are concerned with the beauty of aesthetics and form, others are interested in emotional expression or the surface qualities of their materials and yet others may be concerned with the political content of their art. Individuals bring multiple perspectives and personal experiences when responding to works of art which influence the parts of the message to which an individual responds. The viewer selects what to respond to and thus include in his repertoire of visual experience (McFee & Degge 1980). In a visual culture, most people tend to learn from the vast visual landscape they see everyday, thus culture depends upon communication (Silvers, 2004).

Communication

In the 1965 NAEA Symposium, McFee suggests that art is a means of communication, “an expression of the qualitative essence of experience, whether it uses word symbols, sound symbols, or visual symbols” (p.9). McFee believed that the role of communication in the arts had been deserted by art education.

She felt that art educators must challenge the emerging use of the visual arts in mass media using the language of art in order to combat the influence of mass media on our shared culture. Silvers (2004) asserts that the “mass arts are often cited as paradigmatic of our contemporary visual culture” (p.20). Mass media has developed into its own art form and reflects the world in which young people live and learn. But mass art has also developed its own vocabulary, requiring young learners to be proficient in its use. By providing an education in the language of art and how it is used as a communicative device in television, print ads, interior design, and commercial and industrial design, young learners are better situated to make knowledgeable selections about their culture (Chalmers 2005). Visual Culture Art Education promotes the deconstruction and decoding of visual symbols in a work of art, or advertisement, product package, television ad, music video, or store displays to better understand the message embedded in a work of art. The Deweyan notion of experience and construction of meaning and interpretation of shared culture is inherently important to art education in the philosophy of McFee.

Culture

Viewed from an anthropological standpoint, culture is the total sum of the behaviors, beliefs, and values within a group of people and its transference from one generation to the next. Such shared beliefs and values are articulated through the commonplace routines, language usage, art, religious symbols and visual symbols used by the individuals comprising a cultural group. An individual’s values, beliefs, ideas, and attitudes are shaped by the culture in

which that individual lives. Culture changes as a result of some driving force that affects a society politically, economically, or ecologically (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia, 2008). The idea of culture is abstract, a hodge-podge of beliefs, ideas, and values given shape through the materials which reflect that culture. Those who live within the group and experience similar mind-sets, cultural sites, and ideas of reality comprise a cultural group (McFee & Degge, 1980). Prior to the invention of the printing press, meaning and values were communicated orally, through speech or shared stories. With the advent of mass communication through printed texts, transmitting value and culture became primarily visual in nature (Silvers, 2004).

While culture is an intangible concept, McFee & Degge (1980) say that “the structure of our beliefs is made apparent, that is, more real, through art” (p291). McFee believed that we share a common experience that, through language and art, allows man to generate culture. Thus, culture is a socially constructed concept shaped by shared experience. In the 1960s, mass media was limited to radio, movies, television, product packaging, and print ads in magazines, books, or comics. In today’s contemporary, post modern world, culture is still determined in part by such mass media activities; however, as our technologies evolve, society is forced to find more economical forms of communication, thus the flood of visual images grows. Technology rich societies also tend to be societies saturated in visual images (Silvers, 2004). These images are often created by corporations or those with the financial resources to produce mass communicated images. Following McFee’s belief that images are

coded with the symbols of culture, then whomever controls these images, steers the ship of shared cultural experience. Visual culture education is aimed at teaching students to decode these images in order to understand the symbols of culture coded into the imagery (Eisner, 2002). As a result, students can better understand the messages communicated through mass images and make critically informed decisions about what parts of their culture they choose to accept or reject (McFee & Degge, 1980). With an understanding of how these images influence their culture, students actively participate in the deconstruction of imagery and the construction of their shared culture.

Learning in a Visual Culture

Most individuals are not aware of the visual culture in which they live; rather, culture is accepted as it is presented to the individual (McFee & Degge, 1980). The perceptions of children's lives are formed and limited by their popular visual culture (Hermann, 2005). Learning in a visual culture relies on the practice of viewing and interacting with images and sites characteristic of that culture. Through observation of objects or images, we learn information about the object or image studied. For example, the form, color, and design of a building tell about its role in a community. By observing its apparent upkeep or disrepair, one can interpret how important the site is to the people of the community. A change in the condition of the building may communicate a change in the perceived role of the building according to its status in the community. The character inherent in an environment conveys to its people information about who and what they are compared to others in their group (McFee & Degge 1980). McFee promoted

attentiveness to the appearance of buildings, magazine art, product design, fashion, graphic displays, and comics as cultural exemplars for study in an art class (Chalmers, 2005). Duncum (2005) describes a lesson using professional television wrestling as motivation to delve into art history where students discover that men full of muscles and bravado carrying around severed heads have historical precedents.



Al Snow. 2009, by Lee South. Digital Photo.



David and Goliath. 1598, by Caravaggio. Oil on canvas.

In a recent trip to a modern art museum, a middle school student connected his love of football to a painting by a Le Corbusier saying that the spiral shape reminded him of the ram's horn from UNC football.



Spirales Logarithmiques by Le Corbusier. Oil on canvas, 1929-1931.

McFee (1961) said that:

It seems important for children to realize that all this visual learning is going on, so that they can learn to be discriminating about what they accept. Critical analysis is necessary if a realistic...version of our culture is to be maintained. (p21)

It is in this philosophy that we find the seeds to visual culture art education.

Problems in Visual Culture

McFee acknowledged a problem with visual culture in art education, expressing a belief that popular culture was an abuse of art which taught an exaggerated version of our culture to unsuspecting children, who were incapable of decoding the meaning of the imagery. Following this belief, popular culture is a form of conflictive communication wherein the dominant culture imparts its values and beliefs to its audience. Tavin (2005) says that “studying popular culture could be an effective way of cultivating discriminating (so called) aesthetic taste as a defense against the influence of popular culture” (p.10). Regardless of who controls the transmission of popular culture and imagery, the individual can resist and construct meaning for him or herself (Duncum, 2003). This construction of meaning happens as the individual chooses which portions of his or her culture to accept and reject, using these choices to build on prior experiences.

Visual Culture Art Education is a postmodern conception of education that draws on the gamut of visual experience available to society. According to Freedman and Stuhr, “[w]e live in an increasingly image-saturated world...where

students spend more time in front of a screen than in front of a teacher, and where new-born babies are shown Disney videos to activate still developing neurons” (as cited in Efland, 2004). Young learners are deluged with a variety of visual images. Paul Duncum (2002) suggests that visual culture is:

Characterised (sic) by depthless and self-referential images, more concerned with style over substance, and more with play than significance. These so-called postmodern images involve immediate, short and intense sensations. (p.15)

Duncum (2002) describes a self-referential loop where a magazine advertisement refers to a television show which refers to a movie which refers to a product brand that appears in a magazine. Many of today’s contemporary artists address popular culture in their artwork, forming yet another link in the self referential chain of postmodern visual imagery. Contemporary artists such as Banksy, Steff Geissbuhler, Grayson Perry, Marcus Kiser, Roger Shimomura, Paula Rego, and Sarah Lucas are all links in the chain of self-referential postmodern visual culture.

One of the primary difficulties in teaching visual culture is its extensive breadth. Visual culture studies have become such a large interdisciplinary field that it is nigh unmanageable in the short time art educators have with students (Efland, 2005). However, the study of visual culture has expanded the inventory of images and cultural artifacts from which to study and provided art educators with new ways in which to analyze art (Tavin, 2005). So where do art educators draw the line? How do they determine what students should study?

Concern

Art educators are not concerned with all forms of visual communication. While road markings are wonderful tools describing which side of the road to drive on, art educators are not necessarily concerned with such mundane things as they are not symbolic of anything. Rather, art educators are interested in imagery that is symbolic and communicative (Duncum, 2003). “If it tells us something about who or what we are, where we want to go or do not want to go, then it is of interest” (Duncum, 2001, p.106). There are some educators who take a more traditional approach to art education, believing that artworks express meaning through their depictive and expressive qualities and that meaning in art is often complex and intricately fashioned by the artist (Kahmi, 2004). Efland (2004) believes that the visual culture art curriculum should contain a variety of art forms with many levels of complexity to promote increased cognitive growth. Silvers (2004) suggests that “teaching students to understand art must center on explicating and interpreting particular visual objects and engaging them with the complexity of value” (p.21). Teaching children how to decode the information in a work of art may be fine to help them interpret the world, but the question of value still stands. Can a commercial for yogurt be used to educate young children about art and their shared culture? Or do the traditional forms of art – painting, sculpture, or printmaking – help students better understand these concepts? Hermann (2005) says that “investigation and communication” should be the motivation for learning in the art classroom (p.42). If this is the goal, does visual culture art education deliver for young learners? Mitchell writes,

The genius and the masterpiece will not disappear in the context of visual culture but the status, power, and the kinds of pleasure they afford beholders will become objects of investigation rather than a mantra to be ritually recited in the presence of monuments (as cited in Duncum, 2001).

Sociological Aspects

Visual culture studies erases the lines of “high” and “low” art which essentially denies the existence of artistic value (Efland, 2004). Art educators who teach under visual culture choose art based on social or political themes regarded as important to the teacher or student. The chosen imagery is centered around the omnipresent conditions of the artwork (e.g. art that reaches the masses) but the quality of the selected work may be lacking. Efland (2004) asserts that while social and political issues may be important, “if attention to these matters preempts attention to aesthetic features, we lesson the prospect that our students will have opportunities to become acquainted with both the fine arts and those of the popular culture” (p.240). Visual culture in art education thus runs the risk of turning the art classroom into a sociopolitical forum, teaching students how to decode popular imagery created by those with power and influence, and leaving out the study of art altogether. Homer (1998) describes visual culture as “a postmodern tool” that allows its proponents to “revel in visual sensations and experiences, welcome the interdisciplinary, rejoice in the profundity of high art as well as the vitality of mass or popular culture, and view culture nonpolitically, almost from an anthropological perspective” (p.8). While visual culture welcomes the interdisciplinary and delights in the visual, Homer is

wrong in assuming that visual culture rejoices in the profundity of high art because visual culture blurs the lines between so called high and low art. He is also wrong in thinking that culture is viewed nonpolitically. On the contrary, McFee and other proponents of visual culture would argue that all art has some political leanings. Efland argues that if the field of art adopts the framework of sociology and anthropology, then the rules constraining those fields apply to the visual arts (Efland, 2004). What does art education become under such constraints? If visual culture is designed to democratize arts education by leveling the playing field for all forms of art, and indeed, all types of students, are art educators who use visual culture doing a disservice to their students?

Aesthetics

By favoring aspects of the visual which require students to decode images (e.g. social and political trends) and promoting visual art as a form of conflictive communication (e.g. mass communication), visual culture tends to disregard aesthetics (Efland, 2004). Under the current framework of Discipline Based Art Education, art is divided into four distinct disciplines: Production, history, aesthetics, and criticism. Under the DBAE framework, art becomes a subject of study just like math or science. Breaking down art into four distinct disciplines promotes accountability in art while simultaneously connecting it to other areas of study in the school curriculum. Aesthetics pertains to the beautiful and deals with critical judgments concerning works of art. Efland (2004) is concerned with aesthetic inquiry in the art classroom, fearing that if visual culture art education drops aesthetic inquiry from the curriculum, then art has lost educational value.

Efland (2004) goes on to say, “[a]s long as aesthetic experience was recognized as the principal benefit or value, art educators could justify the study of the fine arts on the grounds that it prepared individuals to have such encounters” (p.236).

Can art educators who adopt the tenets of visual culture in their classrooms and teach the social and/or political aspects of a work of art justify the teaching of the visual arts in schools today?

Conclusion

McFee’s early ideas provided the groundwork from which contemporary visual culture studies would find roots; however, these early ideas contained some detrimental notions about the character of visual culture (i.e. an abuse of the arts) and suggest qualitative beliefs aimed at students (i.e. learning discriminating aesthetic taste) (Tavin, 2005). McFee felt that part of our job as educators was to help children understand other people through art. Rather than simply seeing art as images, she felt children should recognize the value of art as a manifestation of their sense of reality (McFee & Degge, 1980). Visual culture in art education should help students learn to recognize, comprehend and become proactive in shaping their world. The primary task of art educators is to provide students the skills and space they need to learn how to shape their culture (Buhl, 2005). McFee believed that young learners could use study in art to become active participants in society, prepared to critically examine their visual world. McFee felt that students should decode their visual world wielding the dual swords of artistic expression and communication. By understanding how to read the language of their visual culture, students are prepared to understand the very

nature of their world, allowing them to decode the symbols used around them every day.

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