

**INTRIGUES AND PRIORITIES:
CRITICAL THINKING AND CONTEMPORARY ART IN VISUAL ARTS
EDUCATION**

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Connor Phillips

Rhode Island School of Design

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Approved by

Paul Sproll, Ph. D. Professor. Thesis Advisor

Department of Teaching and Learning in Art + Design

Nancy Friese Professor. Thesis Advisor

Department of Teaching and Learning in Art + Design

John Chamberlin Associate Professor

Department of Teaching and Learning in Art + Design

INTRIGUES

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CONNOR PHILLIPS

DEDICATION

To Paul, Nancy and John thank you for your constant support and insight. The opportunities you provided and commitment to my success are not lost on me.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at how arts education can respond to the context of the 21st century by focusing on critical thinking and contemporary art in visual arts education. I argue that art as a subject has the potential to educate youth beyond mere aesthetic, formal art skills. Its inherent flexibility to encompass all interests, cultures, and backgrounds makes it a truly inclusive subject and the multiplicity that follows provides students with opportunities for cross-associative and critical thinking. If utilized in an education context, it can be the necessary conduit for engaging students, respecting their intrigues, and offering a space to critically understand their priorities. The research questions that guide this thesis are as follows:

1. Has the role of art education diametrically changed for the 21st century student and why? What new empowering roles can art education assume today? How is critical thinking incorporated currently in arts education?
2. How does art education promote critical thinking among students? What are the underlying challenges and changes needed in enhancing critical thinking in an arts education context?
3. What are the distinguishing features and qualities of contemporary art that enhance art education?

CHAPTER

ONE

INTRODUCTION

The goal of my thesis research was to examine how visual arts education can foster and develop critical thinking skills, specifically with the support and knowledge of contemporary art. My investigation explores how educators can best reach students and examines the intrigues and perspectives educators have within an arts education context. I will argue that contemporary art methods and theories are applicable to education and relatable to students in the 21st century. The result of this integration is a stronger base of skills, especially critical thinking.

The arts provide a unique and essential opportunity for students to develop multi-disciplinary abilities - to analyze and evaluate issues and interests, which turn into informed points of view. There are different perspectives on this topic that come from national mandates and curriculum standardizations, and from a lack of consensus among educators about approaches to and goals for their instruction. These variables have left a space for arts educators to explore their own approach to the preparation of students for the 21st century. Therefore, it is crucial that today's educators help enable students to be comfortable with their own ideas and the larger realities and concerns surrounding them.

In his TED talk video, "Do schools kill creativity?" educational theorist Ken Robinson (2006) states that "creativity is now as important in education as literacy, and we should treat it with the same status...." Robinson's essential reasons are that the arts have an ability to engage students in divergent thinking and advance

students' abilities to apply their knowledge critically.

We have always had a broad definition of what the arts can achieve. Hanks (1971) uses a quote from educational theorist Abraham Maslow that addresses the importance of arts education. "Education through art may not be especially important for turning out artist or art products as for turning out better people"(Hanks, 1971, p.10). In *Democracy in Education*, John Dewey (1916) argues that art education must expand beyond the school environment. The importance of art and its ability to connect to world issues is not a new topic, but its specific application in the 21st century and the important skills it can help develop have yet to be studied and standardized like the rest of education.

These perspectives on the potential of arts education and its ability to connect young people to global matters through critical thinking, runs parallel to the state of contemporary art. The art world today, with its diversity of approaches and practices, is made up of artists who are more globally minded than ever before. Contemporary art is unique in that it accepts all methods of questioning and, therefore, allows for the investigation of any interest. Interest in both the highest of academic culture and the lowest of pop culture are received equally. What connects these wide ranging sources is the ability to think critically and collectively about all aspects of our culture. The process of making contemporary art and talking about it creates the need for training in critical thinking.

The direction of my research can be summarized in these questions:

1. Has the role of art education diametrically changed for the 21st century student and if so why? What new empowering roles can art education assume today? How is critical thinking incorporated currently in arts education?
2. How does art education promote critical thinking among students? What are the underlying challenges and changes needed in enhancing critical thinking in an arts education context?
3. What are the distinguishing features and qualities of contemporary art that enhance art education?

BACKGROUND

It is safe to say that making art relatable through its associative abilities has always been of interest to me. I had the privilege of being raised in a Waldorf school, a specific alternative education system founded on the philosophies of Rudolf Steiner. Many of the activities and learning methods I experienced were different from the status quo, but none more different than the arts. Within Waldorf education, the arts are as important as any other subject. In fact, they are a necessity - all student work and progress is documented in the form of art. While other schools might have worksheets or essay prompts, we drew our own pictures of historical figures, drew borders of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, all to accompany to accompany handwritten paragraphs about the topic. Visual elements of learning are integrated intensely into the daily environment.

Through drawings and other art processes like painting, handwriting, and singing, the subjects and core takeaways of the lessons were retained. Art reinforced a connection to the material, while challenging each student to expand on his/her skills in multiple disciplines. For example, I struggled with math but I could demonstrate my skills by drawing the symbols' action and by creating narratives that metaphorically described the functions of mathematical symbols. All subjects had the possibility of being understood in many ways, and the arts were always at the core of our understanding.

Later in my life, while teaching at a public elementary school, I was challenged by how to convey the importance of the art because I had never experienced it as a separate subject, as if in a vacuum. I was advised by supervisors to create a curriculum that, above all else, was objectively gradable. In response, what I taught became rudimentary: a collection of lessons inspired by Pinterest images and School Arts articles that touched only on formal elements. I honestly don't know what my students got out of it. I did not see any advancement in students cognitive abilities or indeed any other skills. These experiences opened a gateway to new and broader thinking about what the arts, as a subject in school, need to convey. I recognized that I wanted to know the ways to help students decipher their interests and objectives, while offering them opportunities to expand their critical thinking skills.

Through my research I have come to realize that these outcomes are more

deeply felt and learned when students are able to draw from their personal interests and passions. In this scenario, students' interests are allowed to go beyond the painting, sculpture, installation, or performance that they create. These are tried and tested forms of expression, but the process of making art is what helps develop a sense of purpose behind it. Therefore, art is not an insular subject, but a way of relating to things far beyond it.

This, too, is the foundation of contemporary art. It inherently addresses and is inspired by contemporary culture by using an array of genres, media and methods. During my undergraduate studies at the Rhode Island School of Design in the Painting Department, the emphasis was always placed on whether or not a medium or style supported the artist's goals and intentions. The majority of contemporary artwork operates with a similar premise: the medium becomes the idea. Above all else, there is a desire to create something that goes far beyond just the visual manifestation of the work. The result is a prioritization of process and the intention of the artist. Therefore, an artist must be able to think critically about his or her subject matter.

At Waldorf I experienced art's ability to relate and describe subjects beyond itself. In the contemporary art landscape, I also see art being used to express ideas far beyond itself. Ken Robinson (2010) said in his animated TED Talk "Changing Education Paradigms, "aesthetic experiences happen when the mind is engaged in creative pursuit, easily accessible to the intrigue in creative practices." Knowing the

benefits of those experiences personally, and seeing the lack of them professionally, I aim to meticulously examine the potential of arts education. I will focus specifically on how critical thinking evolves out of a contemporary art process.

METHODOLOGY

This thesis uses two methods of research: an academic literature review, and an annotated reflection through case studies. The literature review is sourced from qualitative research methodologies to review, assess, evaluate and explore the ideas and perspectives of theorists, scholars, artists and educators. These references explore the ideas and ways of encouraging critical thinking in arts education.

The annotated reflection compares different methods of applying the perspectives discussed in the literature review. It examines two case studies, one in a museum education environment, and the other in a public academic environment. Both use contemporary art to further critical thinking. These settings are evaluated on the artistic approaches designed for students and how a sense of self is broadened through the experiences gained from museum or academic institutions. It was my goal that through an examination of specific programs, I would be able to highlight the challenges and benefits of setting up opportunities for students to engage with contemporary art.

I address all of these themes through a broad organizational model: the “why,” the “what,” and the “how.” The chapters of this thesis are subsequently aligned. “The Context of the 21st Century Student” highlights the cultural, economic and technological variables students navigate today. “Strategies for Engaging with Contemporary Art” examines the ways that a conversation about contemporary art can address these variables. “The Path to Critical Thinking: Studies from the Field.” assesses two case studies tied to engaging critical thinking through the use of contemporary art.

To find related resources, I used the e-database provided by the RISD Fleet Library and broadened those resources with the assistance of research assistants and library faculty. I have also benefitted greatly from the mentorship of Dr. Paul Sproll and the many readings he provided me with during my independent study. Professor Nancy Friese and the Teaching + Learning in Art + Design Department have also helped me along the way to perfect the goals of this research.

SCOPE AND LIMITATION

It is fair to suggest that some themes in this thesis span across many fields of knowledge. Possibly the most significant among them are the terms “critical thinking” and “contemporary art.” In hopes of defining these terms as they pertain to my

research, I establish my own definitions. Critical thinking is often associated with forming one's own point of view through deductive reasoning. However, the term as it appears in this thesis suggests a process of making associations across many subjects and, specifically, the ability to use those connections to make art that is meaningful. Thus there is an overlap with terms such as "divergent thinking" and "creative thinking." As demonstrated by the work of Paul and Elder (2004), these terms are inextricably connected when creating and discerning due to the logic involved in these processes (p.21). What is pivotal in this research is not just the ability to think critically in an academic setting, but also the ability to take the meaning that is produced of it and use it in everyday life. One might also refer to this process as applied cross-associative thinking.

Similarly, the term contemporary art has many connotations. Work that exists within gallery, museum, and other environments could all fall under the same definition. I will reference works that have appeared in a public exhibition and that have been cited in academic sources. The works I find particularly engaging tend to involve the use of everyday, cultural material. These are also works that can be used as teaching tools to begin the critical thinking process. Although these terms will be used frequently, it is not my aim to research all of their many meanings. Instead, I use them as signifiers of a much bigger process that can happen when contemporary art is used in a visual arts education setting.

STRUCTURE AND CONTENT

CHAPTER I: "Introduction." Through an examination of my background, research methodologies, setting and limitation of research, this chapter establishes the direction of this thesis and my personal motivations for writing it. The origin of my belief in the importance of critical thinking and contemporary art are discussed in reference to my own education experiences. I make apparent my own predispositions for believing that interdisciplinary learning can be reflected within art practices and exemplified in contemporary art work. Removed from my own experience, I also establish initial scholarly texts that have strengthened my understanding of these themes. Lastly, this chapter describes the research methodologies used in support of my investigation. I also explain the ways in which qualitative research is used in subsequent chapters.

CHAPTER II: "The Context of the 21st Century Student" establishes the importance of critical thinking in today's age and amongst young people. This chapter is centered on an evaluation of socio-political perspectives. Postmodernism is presented as a theoretical framework for making art in a complex modern world. Sources such as Hardy (2006), and Swift and Steers (2006) provide examples of how postmodernism can aid students in deciphering the times they live in. Outside of the education community, postmodernism is the prevailing theory in

contemporary art for its ability to create a framework for artists to do the very same thing. Another key voice is Richard Florida (2002), who has researched the rapid growth of the creative economy. A look at today's economy will reveal the importance of critical thinking given the rise of and demand for creative jobs and the importance of technology proficiency. A discussion of technology and how it meets the needs of the 21st century, and also strengthens the case for visual arts education, is the last part of this chapter.

CHAPTER III: "Strategies for Engaging with Contemporary Art" involves current ways of making contemporary art applicable to students. It explores how Art:21 (2016), through their video series and private meetings with artists, engages viewers with contemporary art practices. Terry Barrett (2011) explains applicable approaches for students to understand confusing work they might not know how to experience. Artists Daniel Bozhkov, Jayson Musson (a.k.a Hennessy Youngman), Jennifer Dalton, and William Powhida represent how multidisciplinary practices can provide insight into daily or trivial subjects, which are a sign of critical art making.

CHAPTER IV: "The Path to Critical Thinking: Studies from the Field" examines two case studies, one of a museum education program and the other a high school education program. The evaluation of these studies will be based on the implementation of contemporary art as a means of developing critical thinking. Other key factors are how educators' goals are quantified and how students articulate their

own experiences.

CHAPTER V: The conclusion will tie together all of these facts and experiences to make a final, solid case for the use of contemporary art practices in visual arts education in order to foster critical thinking and meaning making among students of the 21st century.

CHAPTER

TWO

THE CONTEXT OF THE

21ST CENTURY STUDENT

In a time of increasing accountability and a focus on core academics in America's public schools, any consideration of why creativity is taught must take into account the purpose it serves in students' lives. It is important for educators, especially visual arts educators, to acknowledge how teaching and learning can address what some describe as a postmodern age and its impact on both source material and assignments. There must be an intersection with new computer and media technologies to prepare students the arts and other professional fields (Patton & Buffington, 2016).

Research from national and international organizations highlights the growth of the creative sector in the American economy (Freedman, 2007, p.206). Economist Richard Florida, for instance, has suggested that exploring the creative arts and cultural interests of students has never been more important. The reward for being able to apply these creative skills is a unique level of personal engagement and preparedness in various fields (Florida, 2002). Despite such evidence, past perceptions of the role of the arts in schools have yet to be challenged and rigorously changed. If art educators share the common goal to connect with students and teach them how to think critically about their interests and objectives, surely we must acknowledge how the education system could and should make those connections and reflect those interests. By examining our current culture, one realizes the importance of encouraging students to think critically and how this can be developed

through visual arts education. These are, I argue, crucial yet underappreciated concerns for 21st century teaching. To move beyond our current, aesthetically-based art education model, it is essential to engage students so that they may develop a set of tools to discern, build, and broaden associations between many areas in their lives.

POSTMODERNISM IN RELATION TO EDUCATION

The examination of postmodernism provides a useful theoretical framework for looking at the culture that students participate in today. In his article “Nailing Jelly: Art Education in a Postmodern World,” Hardy (2006) begins by stating, “We live in a postmodern age” (p.7). Postmodernism as a philosophy is most commonly associated with the most conceptual and contemporary of art practices, yet its role in secondary education to reveal culture’s influence on students is hard to ignore. Postmodernism prioritizes diversity and the intersection of culture and personal interest/identity.

Appearing initially within the publication *Architecture and the Spirit*, Hudnut (1949) used the term postmodernism to signify an era “after modernism.” To understand the era in terms of time and culture, modernism was the age of linear and empirical knowledge, whereas postmodernism now examines all knowledge and ways of acquiring it on an even, nonlinear plane. Similar applications of critically

evaluating culture and the destructuring of hierarchies also appear in feminist theory on mobility (Pritchard, 2000). This definition evolved, especially in relation to art, throughout the later part of the 20th century. The concept gave way to artists building unexpected and often more expansive associations in their work. This enabled a convergence of high and low culture, which encouraged artists to be more reflective and critical in their work. As Hardy (2006) states, the shift gave us “the M15 building at Vauxhall, sampling and rap in music, Jerry Springer: the Opera, Galliano and Brit art” (p.7). Artworks became critical, no matter their source subjects. In short, the term reexamines conventional aesthetic norms, re-envisions conventional perspectives, and allows for mediations between self and world. Does postmodernism create its own aesthetic norms? Does postmodernism thrive on lateral thinking?

So far, postmodernism has been generally kept separate from art education, despite its relevancy within the art world and culture as a whole. The reasons are perhaps understandable as it often embodies a contrary point of view with little to no guarantee of a result. Contemporary works continue to be less engaged in aesthetic goals and traditional methods, favoring instead more conceptual objectives (Kamhi & Torres, 2008). But in this discrepancy there is an irony: being removed from the larger art dialogue is part of postmodernism’s goal. And that idea seems most relevant to educators; postmodernism invites students to ponder and lays out critical ways to explore significant life themes.

These, of course, are not new ideas despite being grouped under postmodernism exclusively. Jones and Risku (2015) refer to John Dewey's (1916) argument in *Democracy in Education* that arts education should relate beyond the confines of the school classroom and that notions of self-discovered knowledge, as opposed to mandated content knowledge, are supported by postmodernism.

It is important to note that postmodernism also addresses the concerns of creating a curriculum applicable to the demographic of American students, rather than the outdated western canon. In his chapter "Post-it Culture: Postmodernism and Art and Design Education" MacDonald (2006) states: "multiculturalism, and the range of approaches possible under that heading, have emerged as a result of modernism being seen as exclusive and postmodernism culturally inclusive" (p.49).

These are perhaps grand ideas, and one critical of them might ask that if there is not a clear hierarchical framing of knowledge in the teaching, how does a student build on their knowledge? In their article "A Manifesto for Art in Schools," authors Swift and Steers (2006) lay out a systematic way to address postmodernism in a curriculum. They suggest using, "a postmodern emphasis on difference, plurality and independence of mind" (p.17). They continue to argue for more decision-making and autonomy for teachers and learners by encouraging "means of discovery and risk-taking inherent in experimental practice and thought" (p. 20). With regards to teachers, Swift and Steers recommend that they "construct a variety of approaches

where no single obvious learning route is evident by devising a range of ways of working across different media and types of learning” (p.20). With regards to the learners, Swift and Steers suggest that for students disengaged with the arts, a postmodernist lens can create the space for their concerns to be addressed. This can happen by “placing the personal within the social, historical and other contexts in such a way as to encourage enquiry and develop ideas of evidence and relevance for the learner” (p.21). In order to evaluate this subject matter, Swift and Steers urge all engaged with education to “open up all cultural forms for interrogation, appraisal and ordered on received evaluation – debate rather than state ideas of superior/opinion inferior, rich/thin, complex/simple, fine/popular, etc” (p.21). Lastly, in order to evaluate the learner’s achievements, they ask educators to be “open to debate as opposed to being ‘givens’” (p.22).

Postmodernism as a theory upon which visual arts curriculum can be built has cultural relevance, as it asks students to evaluate their own, personal interests, and recognizes the ideas that come out of that process as important. As a guiding principle for an assessment of student work, the postmodern approach to designing a visual arts curriculum provides educators with a significantly more pluralistic and culturally aware lens through which to construct meaningful learning encounters for their students. If educators are to truly inspire their students today they must access students’ intrigues and priorities as a basis on which to build skills and interests

beyond themselves. Most importantly, and in the best-case scenario, it is the students who have the ability to reason for themselves the relevancy of their work and ideas.

CREATIVE SECTOR

Former U.S. Secretary of Education Richard Riley, when discussing how to prepare students for the workforce, suggested that the skills that will be in demand in the future do not yet exist (Eger, 2008, para 3). Riley's premise was that in order to prepare students for the future and its rapidly changing landscape, they would have to be taught how to invent, adapt, or acquire new technologies on their own volition.

In recent years, the ability of the arts to encourage critical thinking has given researchers more reason to consider how the subject supports the workforce today and moving forward. As the arts compete for attention in times of educational reform, further evidence of its significance to the economy has emerged. Florida (2016) for instance states, "The creative economy—which spans arts, culture, media, design, technology, education, health care, and law—is a key economic engine of advanced nations and cities" (para.1). In an earlier writing, Florida (2002) characterized "the creative sector" as currently comprising approximately one third of the United States economy (Freedman, 2010, p.8). The jobs involved are dependent on the same skillsets that the arts promote: creating, perceiving, conceptualizing, and critically

thinking. Florida (2002) is not unique in emphasizing the importance of the arts to the economy. Increasingly, organizations and businesses are taking notice of the trend. In 2010 the National Governors Association published a report that looks at the increase of creative industries and their significance in the general populace. However, there is still an apparent gap in the acknowledgement of this fact. Richard Deasy, former director of the Arts Education Partnership has suggested that the “problem we confront in making the arts an unquestioned part of the learning required of students and teachers is the position of the arts in the broader culture” (Eger, 2008, para. 10). Disappointingly, the actions taken so far have not been enough to bring sufficient attention to the significance of K-12 art education.

If the assertions made by Florida and others are indeed true, the stability of the U.S. economy is critically dependent on developing a considered foundation of the arts in education that is relevant to today’s culture. The general encouragement of this process by and amongst educators is essential not only in preparing more dynamic and creatively confident individuals; it is intrinsic to a much larger network of concerns. The development of the skill sets associated with art are essential to preparing youth for the workforce of the future.

NEW MEDIA

As early as 1988, Linda Ettinger argued for the importance of embracing computer technology within the arts classroom. "Many art educators believe in the value of teaching the use of computers, undoubtedly reflecting the increased presence of computers in many areas of their daily lives" (Ettinger 1988, p.53). Over two decades later, her testament is even truer. When speaking about the challenges that educators face when designing curriculums that reflect the environment of today's students, it is essential to be clear and decisive about new media platforms and to utilize their full potential for teaching and learning. This reality is highlighted in Freedman and Stuhr's (2004) article "Curriculum Change for the 21st Century: Visual Culture in Art Education." Placing their argument within the historical progression of arts education, these scholars argue that the greatest need resides in the critical examination of how new media technologies can prepare students for the future. Examining the interaction with such devices on a daily level, Freedman and Stuhr (2004) state, "The current transformation of art education is more than just a broadening of curriculum content and changes in teaching strategies in response to the immediacy and mass distribution of imagery" (p.815).

Research by Li-Fen Lu (2005) highlights a discrepancy that often happens when arts educators consider the use of new media tools. In a study with undergraduate

pre-service art educators, Lu found a general disapproval of using new technologies and referencing new media works with preference being given towards traditional methods (p.90). Educators must become comfortable with using these new technologies in order to thoroughly engage students. As Elizabeth M. Delacruz (2009) offers, "Kids and families, students and communities are plugged in, cued to the latest electronic developments and diversions, ready to creatively adapt them to their own purposes" (p.13). New media is, therefore, an inevitable tool of 21st century youth and, therefore, should be a tool accessible to every student. Duncum (2002) argues that because of this familiarity, teaching students how to respond to computer generated visual imagery is absolutely necessary.

CONCLUSION

In his article "Teaching Students to Learn and to Work Well with 21st Century Skills," Charles Kivunja (2015) states:

That whereas every educated person should have an appreciation of core skills in literacy and numeracy to succeed in the 21st century, an educated person must also have skills that enable him or her to think logically and to solve problems effectively and independently. (p.1)

The issues and realities that shape how students should be assessed and prepared today are clear. As "The Partnership for 21st Century Skills" (2008) suggests we must formalize "the connection between education and competitiveness

with an agenda focused on 21st century skills—which are widely acknowledged and supported by voters, employers, educators, researchers and thought leaders” (p.16).

For contemporary arts educators the task ahead is how these areas can be addressed through their subject’s curriculum and through their teaching can best prepare their students with the skills needed both professionally and personally. Freedman (2010) says that art educators’ methods “must be defined as applied in a cultural context” (p.10). I have argued here that postmodernism provides a theoretical model that supports this position by suggesting the need to challenge a hierarchical sense of knowledge and that engaging students’ diverse interests is the first step towards critical thinking. An increasing demand for creativity in the workforce also suggests that preparing students with the ability to critically examine problems in creative ways is necessary for preparing students for an unknown future. A shift in arts educators’ responsiveness to embracing new technologies is one way for students to apply critical thinking skills and provides opportunities for cross-associative learning.

CHAPTER

THREE

STRATEGIES OF ENGAG-
ING WITH CONTEMPO-
RARY ART

The previous two sections of this literature review have addressed how critical thinking is an essential aspect to dealing with the concerns of today. The first section examined how the arts have historically encouraged critical thinking and have been approached in the classroom. The second section examined how a larger socio-economic position informs the importance of developing critical thinking. The focus of this previous research was on an examination of the existing context for students. In this chapter, promising strategies will be explored for how arts educators can engage students through the use of contemporary art. As previously mentioned, art educators such as Duncum (2003) and Freedman (2010) point to the necessity of a shift in arts learning in schools, which responds to the contemporary society and is attuned to how the curriculum might more effectively prepare today's students today.

It is my position that contemporary art addresses and is inspired by contemporary culture. As art critic Eleanor Heartney states:

Hardly anyone worries about the unique characteristics of painting and sculpture anymore. Just as artists hopscotch around the globe, they vault effortlessly across media, producing work that simultaneously incorporates traditional materials, but also digital technology, theatrical installation, photography, performance, music, film, and video. (Walker, 2006, p.191)

Similarly, art educator Gude (2007) suggests that using modernist education models neither prepares students for today, nor relates to their daily lives. In contrast, teaching students how to look at contemporary works of art and using such artists as references encourages diversity in their own works and utilizes critical thinking skills.

PROMISING METHODS FOR APPROACHING CONTEMPORARY ART

The notion of using contemporary art in education for both its references and concepts commonly encounters barriers with pre-established ideas of what art is in the first place. Annette Lawrence suggests that educators:

are climbing an uphill battle once people establish what art is in their head. If contemporary art is a part of that establishment from the beginning, if it's just in the language, then it's not so difficult to unlearn the things that create prejudices against things that are less familiar. (McKay, 2008, p.72)

Art:21, a video series, provides one example of addressing the ways to make contemporary art understandable. Its goal is "introducing audiences to today's visual artists, stimulating critical reflection and conversation through the production of films, books, artist projects, educational programs, and special events" (Art:21, 2016, p.3). Through discussions, the video series introduces artists in terms of how they and their works connect to specific themes such as "*Stories, Systems, and Change*". These person-to-person discussions around the artist's intentions happen before the viewers experience the artist's work. It is this format that allows the series to engage viewers, particularly students, before they have the chance to make making judgments about the appearance of the work. These videos succeed in demystifying the artist's process.

Jessica Hamlin, the former director of education and public programming at Art:21 said: "to change the definitions and parameters of artistic practice, art educators are confronted with the challenges and opportunities of connecting

teaching and learning in the arts to the contemporary art world” (Graham & Hamlin, 2014 p.49). If these challenges are maneuvered carefully and patiently, students are more likely to be able to make connections between contemporary art and their own lives, while using critical thinking tools. Visual arts educators can consciously use relatable or engaging artists as guiding examples, emphasizing that almost any interest a student has can be explored through the subject of art. Personal interest in art and an understanding of its cultural malleability is the first step towards critical thinking about art and the world beyond it.

In his article, “The Importance of Teaching Interpretation,” Dr. Terry Barrett states: “Sometimes the meaning for the maker and the viewer coalesce, other times they do not” (2011, p.4). This is the same gap that visual arts educators are challenged to close between students and art. Using approaches that make art personally relevant to students is an essential step in the preparation for students’ engagement with the realities of today’s culture. In addition, it has the capacity for nurturing and enriching students’ personal experiences with art itself. Barrett’s work addresses how the visual arts can be an action towards engagement. His methods, which provide catalysts for observation, hope to discern a work’s key meanings for both the artist and viewer.

To examine, for example, Martin Puryear’s piece *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, Barrett uses an observational formula: Subject Matter + Form + Contexts

= Meanings (Barrett 2011, p.6)(for image of work see Appendix A, 1a). In addressing Subject Matter, he uses the word "ladder" as a metaphor for reaching new heights. In addressing Form, Barrett points to the rough quality of the ash wood taken from Puryear's own property. In analyzing the Context, he mentions the gallery space the work is on view in, along with the implication from Puryear that the audience knows of Booker T. Washington. And, ultimately, Barrett explains the Context of the work by examining its meaning through associations with ladders, Washington's life and Puryears practice. This systematic approach becomes both a structure for comparison and a framework for students to engage in ways that go beyond their initial encounters with the work.

Examining the more objective processes of viewing and experiencing a work of art provides opportunities for visual arts educators to guide their students to explore both the contexts of the works and also strategies through which they can importantly gain a deeper understanding of them. From this point, students can begin to think of the associations implied by an artist in a work of art while also realizing the motivations that impelled the artist. Working with different participants, Barrett's work connects students' interpretations of works of art with their extraction of personal meaning. This is achieved through an explanation of the artist's processes and an invitation for viewers to express their own narrative, supported by evidence found in

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HENNESSY YOUNGMAN

An effective way to disarm the stereotypes that surround contemporary art is by exploring artists whose work explores that very issue. If visual arts educators hope to engender the expression of varied voices that challenge the status quo, such artists are an essential part of visual arts education, according to Briggs (2007). One of the stereotypes of contemporary art involves a wall of racial, social, and economic prejudice that has blocked so many from having their voices expressed and heard in the art world. Those who refer to this issue are not wrong; visual culture and the media give constant affirmation to its existence (Duncum, 2006).

Jayson Musson's character Hennessy Youngman in the YouTube series titled *Art Thoughtz*, addresses this very issue. Youngman is a distinct, truthful, and often comical character who speaks explicitly about being a minority within a white-dominated art world. He challenges restrictions of art mediums (using YouTube as his own medium) while exposing the sociopolitical context the art world most commonly interacts with and caters to. Brian Boucher, an editor and critic at *Art in America* has said about Youngman, "Bringing urban black language and attitudes to the generally pretty-white world of contemporary art commentary just seemed unbelievably bold, and once he did it, it seemed incredible no one had done it before, at least not so effectively" (Considine, 2012, para.9). Boucher also interviewed Youngman (in

character) for *Art in America* in an article titled "Ali G with an MFA: Q+A with Hennessy Youngman." The excerpt of the discussion below describes in a metaphorical manner his position on the art world.

BOUCHER: "Do you think of this as an art project? Or as art criticism? Or both? Or neither?"

YOUNGMAN: "If one believes that dialogue can be art then in a sense 'ART THOUGHTZ' is my art. It's also criticism, but not a direct criticism of specific works of art. It's more like when you're a kid and your parents are arguing with each other at the top of their lungs, then all of a sudden your aunt gets involved with the fight and she starts yelling too; there you are, just some kid surrounded by a bunch of yelling adults and you just want everyone to shut the fuck up, and you just can't take it anymore so you burst out in tears and suddenly all the adults stop yelling at each other and feel ashamed at what their behavior's done to a child. That's 'ART THOUGHTZ,' the tears of a child in room full of screaming adults. (Boucher, 2011, para. 9-10)

Hennessy offers a gateway into the art world that is rooted in its institutional failures: the child in the room of screaming adults. He is an educated commoner who tangibly understands the art world, but still questions its significance and priorities. And yet, he is definitively educational. *Art Thoughtz* is an unexpected phenomenon of institutional critique, but it is also a useful tool for understanding key art terms, general concepts, and the context in which they were made. In an episode called "Relational Aesthetics," Youngman deconstructs the most basic ideas about the form that artwork takes (for image of work see Appendix A, 2a). In "Beuys Z," he strips away the differences that culturally separate the artists Joseph Beuys and Jay-Z, and unifies them through the theme of personal mythology (for image of work see

Appendix A, 3a). Both artists were, and still are in the case of Jay-Z, consumed by the idea of becoming a successful artist in the art world and in pop culture. In “How to be a Successful Black Artist,” Youngman talks about the different criteria the art world applies to African Americans and the problematic benefits of presenting yourself as the “other” (for image of work see Appendix A, 4a).

By challenging the voice and medium commonly associated with art through hip-hop lingo and YouTube uploads to communicate key concepts and trends of contemporary art, Musson’s character is an incredible tool for educators when trying to explain contemporary art to students and to increase their interest and engagement. It also begins a conversation about the art world’s faults. Youngman could, for instance, serve as an example for high school students of an artist who engages in a critique of the institutional idea of knowledge, one that Considine (2012) described as that of “court jester to the art establishment” (para.4). I certainly believe that the typical teenager can look at his work as an example of the many innovative means available to be creative, expressive, and to think critically. Musson himself described the derivation of *Art Thoughtz* as a frustration with traditional confines of the school context. “Hennessy,” he says, “comes out of a specific reaction to graduate school and the academic, fine-art world that I was exposed to at school” (Considine 2012, para.8). Musson’s creatively critical

reasoning helped him develop an ideal vehicle to effectively challenge the things he was personally frustrated by.

DANIEL BOZHKOVA

While describing Bulgarian artist Daniel Bozhkov's practice, Annette Lawrence writes, "his work deals with language, water, plants, Larry King, the DNA yogurt culture thing.... And that's just one artist" (McKay, 2008, p.72). Daniel Bozhkov is not confined to one medium. His real life experiences and interests drive the final version of his work. In his piece *Learning to Fly over a Very Large Larry*, Bozhkov explores media by making a crop maze in the shape of Larry King's face and took flying lessons so he could shoot a video from a plane (for image of work see Appendix A, 5a). Larry King later discussed this video on his show (Coggins, n.d). Bozhkov times the piece to coincide with the release of the film, *Signs*. All of these elements signal to a metaphor between flying over something and how the media observes events. Bozhkov himself suggests that Larry King resembles a bird, which is yet another iteration of these potential associations. In a discussion on numerous works with David Coggins in Artnet, Bozhkov specifically addresses his desire to create associations and relationships between topics.

COGGINS: "So the media inspires you to make a piece that gets fed back into the media and becomes transformed – the meaning shifts each time."

BOZHKOVA: "For me that transformation, that track of abrasions, is very interesting. It's almost like they become traps for coincidences."
(Coggins, n.d. para.25-26)

From creating a viral image of Darth Vader standing at the edge of the black sea in hopes of addressing environmental concerns about pollution, to evaluating American masculinity by creating a cologne inspired by Ernest Hemingway, Bozhkov creates opportunities to observe cultural interests and icons and how they can be reworked to take on new meaning. Beginning with an idea based on his own interests, he transforms it through art into something more critical. Bozhkov states:

There's something in traditional art historical practices that has been, at least in the context of a museum, elevated beyond reach. We are almost accustomed or conditioned to experience culture in terms of excess and not in terms of necessity. I want to imagine art forms that are 'daily level' necessary. Almost like some weird kind of emergency. (Dudley, n.d., para. 5)

Bozhkov's interactions with communities during the creation of his work have at times led him to be associated with social practice. This is understandable, given that in order to carry out the his work, Bozhkov often collaborates with or utilizes the expertise of people in given fields, from local biologists to Turkish bakers and even WALMART greeters.

To study Bozhkov means that visual arts educators have the opportunity to expose students to the ways art deals with the everyday in a critical way. By building associations between diverse subject matter, Bozhkov's work serves as an opportunity

to examine the ingrained and arbitrary distinctions we make between the icons and issues in our culture. For students, his work might serve as a catalyst to engage their personal interests and to begin thinking about them critically. For example, if someone is disenchanted with painting an animal, using inspiration from Bozhkov, they might create a project that critically involves their disinterest in drawing that animal. In other words, they might feel permission to make work out of their skepticism of traditional visual arts education. For me, Bozhkov's work exemplifies the concept that joining one's interests to a task can lead to new opportunities for self-expression, a broader understanding of the world, and heightened creative engagement in a changing future.

JENNIFER DALTON AND WILLIAM POWHIDA

Jennifer Dalton and William Powhida are two other contemporary artists whose work provides evokes a discussion about associations between contemporary art and education. Both artists, each in their own way, examine social and political issues. Combine that with determined institutional critique, and the result is two artists concerned with the process of self-reflection. Nowhere is this more demonstrated than in their collaborative work called *#class*, which, by borrowing institutional critique formulas, think tanks, and college seminar formats, examines the economic forces

behind contemporary art and the reasons for its seclusion from a general populace (for image of work see Appendix A, 6a).

The Winkleman Gallery, where *#class* was presented, turned into a space for inquiry, discussion, and documentation. In an interview with Stephen Squibb for *Idiom Magazine* (2010), Dalton described the origin of *#class* and her feelings when critiquing the contemporary art market:

The word we kept coming up with was a “queasiness” that we felt in participating in the market system. But we had trouble explaining where that queasiness came from and why we felt it. So we decided to invite anyone and everyone to pitch in in defining the problems and proposing solutions. (Idiom, 2010, para. 7)

Led by proposals submitted through the hashtag “*#class*,” the month long show took many shapes: from seminars led by theorists, to roundtable discussions on the intentions of collectors, to various performances. Dalton and Powhida welcomed many speakers from the broader contemporary art world whose interests coincided with the aims of the show. The artists essentially became facilitators for spontaneous and unplanned discussions.

#class demonstrates a new way that a project can be framed as “art,” and familiarizes viewers with non-traditional forms. It exists comfortably in the pluralizing, broad associations of art in general. Contemporary art can be difficult to navigate, but Dalton and Powhida demonstrate its ability to critically explore aspects of

everyday life by breaking the barrier between vulnerable self-reflection and confident contemporary art-making.

Exploring such shows as *#class* can help students formulate questions they have about contemporary art and can demonstrate to educators the opportunity for bringing contemporary art into common classroom discourse. In an article by Kennedy (2011), this crossover is defined:

To interrogate art via school and school via art is to call into question the typical spheres of operation of each, collapsing the formal distinctions between already fraught official sites of creative practice, performance and the display of commodities on the one hand, and traditional institutional spaces of education, learning and professionalization on the other. (Kennedy, 2011, p.17)

Contemporary artists are free to engage in any kind of creative practice, but it is works like *#class* that demonstrate how contemporary artists can challenge their own biases within those practices. Dalton gives art credit for being something in which questions and doubts can be raised so freely. She, does, eventually understand that queasy feeling; stating:

We want recognition for our work, but we may be uncomfortable with personal attention. We want to sell work for a price that many can afford, but we can't afford to sell it for less than it costs us to make, so we therefore can't sell art to people like ourselves. We want more types of people to participate in art, but we might not appreciate their taste. There may not be any solutions to these paradoxes, but it was helpful for me to recognize them because it explained why one might feel queasy in the art business. But perhaps we can make peace with having to feel these contradictory emotions all at once. (Idiom, 2010, para.14)

CONCLUSION

A key reason Thulson (2013) argues for using contemporary art to support critical thinking is that it has a better chance of connecting with students' sensibilities today than historical works do. In the article "Young People and Contemporary Art" Illeris (2005) begins her discussion with a quote from an upper-secondary student participating in a museum education project. The student wrote:

Even though trying to get something productive out of the artworks seemed overwhelming at first, it actually became really interesting when you forgot to use your common sense for a while and just let your thoughts take over. You just can't compare contemporary art to the art we are used to. You don't know whether the work is meant to be interpreted or whether you just have to let it be what it is. I mean, it's entirely up to the individual what they can or will get out of it. (Illeris, 2005, p.232)

If contemporary art is to be introduced to students, it must be done in a way that allows for them to take ownership of what it means to *them*. This is a key way for students to engage with art's inherent flexibility and offers them the opportunity to interpret work from their own points of view. When a student is in the process of creating a work with personal significance, he or she is much more likely to open up to the subject's potential and can place it in the context of the world around them.

As previously mentioned, there are countless ways of doing this. Jessica Hamlin's work with Art :21 inspires students' imaginations by showing artists discuss their creative processes and work. Dr. Terry Barrett's system of deciphering work

through an examination of personal narratives and self-expression provides a powerful lens for students to do the same in their own work.

Artists like Bozhkov and Musson highlight the value of the “banal” and “ordinary” and blur the lines between pop culture and fine art. They represent artists who have not let prejudice or notions of “high culture” get in the way of their personal interests. Jennifer Dalton and William Powhida demonstrate art’s self-reflexive and inherently critical qualities and how those perspectives can be expressed in non-conventional ways. If we are to encourage students to think about things critically, we must do it with the support of what they already occupy their time thinking about. To do this, we must give value and substantiality to youth’s interests. This will not only enrich students’ creativity with the backing of their personal interests, but will also prepare them to decipher meaning and think critically in today’s world.

CHAPTER

FOUR

THE PATH TO CRITICAL

THINKING: STUDIES FROM

THE FIELD

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The previous two chapters have explored a collection of work sourced from thinkers and educators that offer a theoretical explanation for why critical thinking is important and how it is encouraged through contemporary art. What is left to be examined are questions about how these theories play out in practice. And, on an even more complex level, what are various ways of creating meaning for students?

In this chapter, through the examination of two case studies, examples of addressing such concerns will be examined, compared, and evaluated. The first study, which was facilitated by the Tate Modern (2006), is titled “Contemporary Art and the Role of Interpretation: Reflections from Tate Modern Summer Institute for Teachers.” It focuses on meaning-making in visual arts education by exploring the possibilities for examining contemporary work with art educators at various stages of their professional careers. According to the authors, this is a skill that can be honed (Charman & Ross, 2006).

Like this thesis, this case study bridges the associative qualities of critical thinking with contemporary art as its facilitator, but stresses the significance of translating such ideas to students so they can represent their perspectives fully. It is also similar in that it ties together postmodern theory and its ability to remove the “grand narrative” of art, to how contemporary art is presented and explored, providing ways to make such things applicable to students and educators. And,

ultimately, through a study of methods, it questions the ways that predispositions are developed, solved, and informed in contemporary art.

The second case titled "From Theory to Practice: Concept-Based Inquiry in a High School Art Classroom," by Walker (2014) provides a framework for how to emplace these themes in the classroom. Walker (2014) examines high school educator David Miller in hopes of demonstrating a method she refers to as "concept based inquiry" (p.287). The study focuses on the implementation of this method in a way that is convincing and straightforward. The result is critical thinking paired with meaning making in the visual arts classroom. Additionally, examples of student perspectives expand this case study from theory into practice and the far-reaching impact of arts education.

These studies do not encompass or reflect all of the themes explored in this thesis, but rather establish specific issues in order to isolate the primary goals and outcomes of an arts curriculum. The studies, I contend demonstrate the potential of how critical engagement is supported and beneficial in visual arts education.

CONTEMPORARY ART AND THE ROLE OF INTERPRETATION: REFLECTIONS
FROM TATE MODERN SUMMER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHERS INTERNATIONAL
JOURNAL OF ART AND DESIGN EDUCATION

Introducing their case study, Charman and Ross (2006) established that conceptual and artistic qualities of contemporary art do not often find their way into the education experience. They stated, "While debates around the value and character of interpretation are familiar to the language and practice of art history and art criticism, they are yet to find their place in the school art and design curriculum" (p.29). This issue frames a study that asks if methods of interpretation can not only broaden the potential of contemporary art, but also begin to discern objective and subjective experiences of artwork. Using the method developed by the TATE Liverpool, four specific areas of interpretation are identified: (1) Personal Response, (2) Looking at the Subject, (3) Looking at the Object, and (4) Looking at the Context (Charman & Ross, 2006, p.31). The study cohort was comprised of fourteen educators at various junctures in their careers who, over a week-long course, examined these methods of interpretation and emerged intent on creating frameworks for approaching things that might not be immediately understandable. Participants were asked to keep logs and individual research journals, and to complete surveys based on their experiences at the end of the week. In reference to the experience of the study, Charman and Ross said that it "turns all the people involved in a project

into researchers, based on the belief that people learn best, and are more willing and able to apply research findings, through doing the research themselves" (2006, p.31).

I was drawn to this study because the authors seemed intent on figuring out the nuances of the art educator role and on discerning the challenges educators face when bringing a contemporary art experience to their students. In addition to the experiences of the educators, I was interested in how such a study could work from the side involving students and how they critically decipher a work and their relationship to it. "Teaching pupils the skills of interpretation in such a precedent-defying discipline as contemporary visual art poses the question of the status of knowledge" (Charman & Ross, 2006, p.35).

FRAMEWORKS OF INTERPRETATION THROUGH PERSONAL REFLECTION

Charman and Ross (2006) begin by trying to discern subjectivity with one's initial experience of a work. Through the *Ways of Looking* technique, along with the looking logs, they encourage educators to detect where their own opinion's might affect their experience of a work. An interview structure is used to discuss these perceptions. One participant takes the role of enquirer, while the other explains their perspective.

The interviewer's task was to support the interviewee in extending their personal responses to the work through questioning the cause and effect of specific responses, and to provide a more objective view of the interviewee's pathways of enquiry which were mapped diagrammatically into looking logs. (Charman & Ross, 2006, p.33)

The realizations that came out of this process allowed participants to delve into a more considered and patient understanding of contemporary art. From there, they were able to discern subjective responses from objective ones. No hierarchy was placed on either response. Instead, it provided a valuable example of how students can think critically about their perspective as a part of the work. This dynamic is full of nuances. "Creating interpretations requires a measure of self-awareness in that the viewer's personal history, gender social class, race and ethnicity will inform a reading of an artwork" (Charman & Ross, 2006, p.33).

LOOKING AT THE SUBJECT

The next question to be asked is: how can those realizations about one's subjectivity be refined? By asking the participants to find commonalities between 3 to 5 works, Charman and Ross (2006) confirmed the need to accept pluralistic interpretations of artworks that don't rely on hierarchies (i.e. good ideas and bad ones, relevant ideas and irrelevant ones etc.).

Due to its complex ties to postmodernism, contemporary art as a source subject demands that its viewers challenge normative ways of thinking and talking about art. When guided through this process, students are able to accept even their most personal ideas in conjunction with broader, cultural perspectives. Charman and Ross (2006) understood that, "The collective nature of enquiry which this activity was designed to foster presupposes that each person's ideas and knowledge are equally significant as potential resources for creating interpretations, but these ideas need to be testified against the artwork itself" (Charman & Ross, 2006, p.36).

LOOKING AT THE OBJECT

Although the emphasis is usually placed on conceptual understanding when discussing contemporary art, that is not to say that there is no worth in looking closely at formal, aesthetic elements. It is also important for students to be able to reach conceptual ideas through the process of analyzing a work as it appears in the physical world. An object has its own way of communicating its meaning that differs from spoken or written forms of communication. If students are able to engage in this kind of critical thinking, their abstract thinking will be all the more stronger. Charman and Ross (2006) developed an exercise that helped distinguish physical material from theoretical subject matter. In this exercise, participants selected one work and were prompted to notice just the "formal qualities" (Charman & Ross, 2006, p.36). What

they found was that this simple process separated predisposed knowledge, which left space for participants to focus on aesthetic decisions seen in the work. In reference to Russian graphic design compositions, Charman and Ross (2006) stated:

Despite the inaccessibility of the Russian poster text, meaning could still be construed through reading the formal qualities of the works - design decisions about point of view, font size and choice of graphics, the formal relationship between word and image. (p.37)

Considering the average art education context, which already gives attention to formal aspects of art, this study seemed to provide a more appropriate path for students to connect critically to the intentions behind aesthetic decisions. Charman and Ross (2006) suggest, "As formal pupils are already very familiar with the formal language of image making, these kinds of activity can offer a good introduction to critical analysis and the process of creating interpretations" (p.37).

THE WIDER CONTEXT OF WORKS

Making connections to a larger cultural context is an important theme in this thesis. Postmodern theory, which suggests the critical potential of these ideas, is one example of how various interests can intersect. Another means of creating intersection is by examining the cultural context of an artwork. This process applies to both students and to teachers.

In one of the final studies conducted by Charman and Ross (2006), participants examined Doris Salcedo's *Untitled 1998*, a concrete-filled wardrobe. They processed their reactions to the piece by writing streams of consciousness and, at first many common themes of childhood, memory, and time emerged (Charman & Ross, 2006, p.38) (for image of work see Appendix A, 7a). However, they state:

When these readings were expanded through additional information about the artist and her social/political context, the discussion moved on from metaphorical associations of the materiality of the object to the real-world connections between political oppression and the artist's choice of material. (Charman & Ross, 2006, p.39)

One can only assume that the process of responding and then learning more about the cultural context of the artist furthered the discussion and led participants to much broader understandings of the work. Charman and Ross (2006) conclude, "Thus the introduction of contextual information about this piece gave the teacher-researchers the confidence to draw on and make connections with their own knowledge in a focused relevant way" (p.37).

FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: CONCEPT-BASED INQUIRY IN A HIGH SCHOOL ART CLASSROOM

Walker (2014) begins her study by describing her personal experience teaching university level studio courses. She expresses the challenges of having

students think critically in the creative process beyond basic observation skills. Walker attributes this to how the arts are taught at the high school level. She states, "It is not uncommon today for students to graduate from high school with a strong grasp of artistic skillsets but with little understanding of art as a reflexive, expressive or problem solving process or a tool for communication and understanding" (Walker, 2014, p.288).

This is what drew me first to this case study. It's a point that highlights that critical thinking skillsets are underdeveloped even in cases where students are proficient enough to study art in college. Walker (2014) is intent on bridging concept and theory with lived practice.

Instead of framing her argument with theoretical support like Gude (2007) and Walker (2006), Walker (2014) uses the real-life experience of high school educator David Miller. It is understandable why he would be the subject of her study, as they share an approach that Walker (2014) titles "concept based inquiry" (p.287). Through a three-day seminar and an online survey with students, the study examines Miller's techniques and how they further students' abilities to make meaning as visual artists.

TAKEAWAYS FROM THE THEORETICAL SUPPORTS FOR DAVID MILLER

For all that I have used Walker (2014) as concrete evidence of applied critical thinking/contemporary art methodologies, her work frequently cites the theoretical-based intellectuals Gude (2007) and Walker (2006). It is reassuring when philosophers and practitioners find each other's work useful. Walker (2014) is a good example of this codependence.

Miller is equally engaged with these concepts. Walker (2014) writes about him when he first started thinking about his curriculum after an introduction to art criticism, postmodernism, and critical theory (p.291). In describing his disenchantment with Discipline Based Arts Education (DBAE) Miller is quoted, "I was very influenced by postmodern thoughts, and was encouraging appropriation, juxtaposition, recontextualization—these were topics I was beginning to explore with my students in their investigations because I was no longer teaching lessons that had anything to do with medium and had everything to do with concepts" (Walker, 2014, p.291).

Walker (2014) explained,

Like other teachers I have met, Miller was working out a teaching philosophy of his own through trial and error with his students, all the while feeling like an outlier since his methods did not conform to the ones promoted in his school district and in education journals. (p.291-292)

Walker's description of Miller portrays him as an educator intent on figuring out how to make his interests a reality in a day- to- day curriculum and, in turn, how

these themes can be engaging to the general high school context. Walker (2014) suggested that a developmentally appropriate curriculum allow students to develop “inquiries about self, self in different environments, and interactions between self and other” (p.289). Experience is thus handed down and facilitated by a practicing educator.

TAKEAWAYS FROM THE FRAMEWORKS OF THE CURRICULUM

The framework of Walker’s study involved an introductory course of twenty-six students whose ages ranged from 14 to 19. The classroom was made up of diverse interests and skillset in the arts. In Walker’s study, this course is titled "Information Distribution Systems" (2014, p.293). Miller explained the context of his lesson:

We are bombarded with information from all directions. Some refer to our time as the information age. How do we "read" all the information engulfing us... we will investigate information distribution systems as they relate to: education, political ideology, family and religion. (Walker, 2014, p.293)

The requirements were broken down into four steps: first, students respond to a prompt through writing; second, they write a project proposal describing their preliminary ideas; third, they make a physical art piece with the freedom to use any medium; and fourth, they write a reflection about the finished work. Over the two to three day workshops, students participated in critiques, dialogues and researched relevant artists.

This is where I began to understand how Miller implemented the ideas so often used only theoretically. By having students summarize, explore, and discuss their ideas and plans through critiques, written responses, and visually through their artworks, they were given the opportunity to engage with rigorous, self-dictated, associative learning. It is in these steps and through the consistent implementation of them that art begins to be relatable to other subjects. This process has been previously referred to as postmodernism. It also creates more opportunities for students to become engaged with the content of their work (i.e. through writing, research, discussion, etc.).

Walker (2014) says that for Miller, the “concept-based teaching methodology helped to enhance his students' conception of self and other, as well as their critical thinking dispositions, artistic habits of mind, and growth as visual artists” (p.290). Interestingly, being a public school teacher means that Miller has been able to maintain this structure and also meet general education standards.

EVIDENCE OF GROWTH

Given the relevancy of Miller’s classroom work to theories from Gude (2007) and Walker (2006), which represent presupposed knowledge of the field, the next

point to be addressed comes from the other end of the spectrum: the students' perspectives.

Walker (2014) dedicated a large portion of her study to conducting surveys with students. She recorded classroom lessons, documented student work, and interviewed 14 of the students in Miller's class. She summarized what she observed:

In their artwork, the students' use of visual metaphor, where images were used to represent ideas, became far more sophisticated over the course of the semester; their visual artifacts revealed more experimentation in terms of materials and processes; and the students grew more autonomous in the classroom as their work became increasingly unique to each individual, with the concepts and styles becoming more personal. (Walker, 2014, p.294)

The achievements of students in this class were also articulated by the students themselves. One male 12th grader said,

Problem-solving in general I look at completely differently now that I'm in this class. I mean, if I come across a problem, I'll think about it more in depth, and kind of change the way that I normally would think about it prior to this class. In other classes I think of things in a more creative problem-solving sort of way. (Walker, 2014, p.295)

Miller's methods consistently encourage experiences like these. One might call it postmodernist engagement, divergent thinking, or critical thinking. Nevertheless, the ability that his students have to think as individuals and with such impressive levels of curiosity and patience speaks for itself.

CONCLUSION

The questions I hope to have answered through an examination of these two case studies are: (1) What are the ways we can set students on the path towards critical thinking through contemporary art? (2) What are the personal perspectives that arise when experiencing a specific work? (3) What are the subjective tendencies when discussing a work? (4) How do we begin to formally translate meaning? How does the way we experience something inform its meaning?

In short, providing students with frameworks for engaging with the meaning and aesthetic qualities of work is a good place to start. These studies provide evidence of how educators can be taught how to deal with these questions. Charman and Ross (2006) demonstrated the subjective and objective ways that educators understand and teach with contemporary works. With simple frameworks for analyzing predisposed perspectives, synthesizing personal opinions, and learning about artists' intentions and cultures, anyone can go beyond first impressions and extract meaning out of a work. Critical thinking happens especially when associations can be made with experiences and knowledge beyond what the work directly depicts. And, ultimately educators from various backgrounds can embrace critical thinking as a tool for students in the process of expanding their ideas and growing their knowledge of the visual arts.

The Tate study demonstrated how contemporary art when used as a source material can be supported by pedagogical tools such as writing, group discussions and critiques. Walker's examination of David Miller's process reveals how critical thinking can come to life in the general visual arts classroom when it is student focused, intention-conscious, and with a considerable amount of diligence. Miller's evaluation is hinged on neither aesthetic preference nor expertise, much like contemporary art practices. Instead, he evaluates how students express themselves in discussion, writing, and in their artwork.

These studies provide valuable evidence that using contemporary art methods in the classroom and curriculum is not only possible, but also has the promise of enhanced student engagement and critical thinking. Both studies indicate that if educators can value the perspectives of their students and embrace the postmodern leveling of all knowledge, student interest and dedication will rise. The lessons that students learn through this and the ways that they are prepared for the world are invaluable.

(For more research articles and case studies on how educators can become more informed with strategies pertained to critical thinking and visual arts education, refer to Appendix B.)

CHAPTER

FIVE

CONCLUSION

P.56

In order to best prepare students today, the visual arts education community must develop ideas around critical thinking. I firmly believe that educators will be better equipped to do so with the knowledge and support of contemporary art. I hope that the explorations of literature and case studies in this thesis have sufficiently demonstrated that contemporary art practices has the potential to develop skills beyond art itself, can prepare students for contemporary society, and can be the gateway for meaning making in students' lives.

Beginning this research, my goal was to establish why these ideas are significant. That is why in Chapter I, I reflect on my own history with art education. I needed to bring things like the power of the educator and the power of the arts back to the basics. What truly shaped my experiences were the opportunities to engage fully and consciously with my own interests, and with the support of my teachers. My college education has left me supporting this process for myself and for my art practice. As a result, the current notion that art education is a place for all interests to live, for empowerment to grow, and for critical thinking to strengthen, spoke to my most fundamental experiences as a student and as an artist. As it were, this discussion involves many theories and voices outside of the immediate art community. It involves postmodernist theory as a mode of leveling all interest points so that they can be used as artistic materials. It also involves the importance of problem-solving in

the 21st century. Divergent thinking and associative, adaptive habits of mind fall from the same tree.

In the hopes of beginning to formulate what specific changes need to take place in visual arts education, I narrowed my research to three areas: (1) what are the general issues surrounding preparing students for the 21st century and how can the visual arts support general education goals? (2) How does contemporary art, in particular, make those goals applicable and desirable to students today? And (3) what are the strategies used by educators to bring contemporary art into classrooms so that critical thinking is attained?

Literary sources are evidence that art theory can make 21st century skills more approachable. Based on the influence of postmodern theory, the arts becoming a catalyst for students to critically associate between many different vantage points and interests. Even the most mainstream pop-culture icons according to postmodernism have a place at the art table. This requires students to develop skills that transcend purely aesthetic art instruction. Art is a meeting place and the students play the parts of documenters, analyzers, synthesizers, writers, and makers. The ability to move through all of these stages of reasoning and, better yet, to be able to do them simultaneously is what's known as critical thinking. Now more than ever, in a growing economic sector that prioritizes the abilities of critical problem solving, it is a crucial prerequisite for many positions. If the education community can communicate this

point effectively, it will not only benefit students, but will also give employers the awareness and vocabulary that often becomes a form of leadership for new generations.

Connecting with new media is another challenge that art educators face. And it is another important 21st century requirement. Technology is rooted in innovation and can open up worlds and new perspectives for students. It is the ultimate example of applied interconnection across disciplines. Prioritizing technology could change the paradigm of contemporary education.

Art educators must also override the historical trend of formal aesthetic training and standardization. Such things that limit students' creativity and ability to think critically. Critical thinking is the opposite of standardization - it is about thinking what has never been thought before and about finding solutions to problems beyond a), b), and c). Asking students to closely examine their own interests hones in the energy and power they normally use to "fill in the blanks" and satisfy generic education requirements. Students then begin to connect concept with form and the relevance/irrelevance of an idea. They begin to make meaning out of the world around them and their experience in it. This is the work that visual art education must take on, specifically with the use of contemporary. For students who don't pursue the arts in the future, these skills are transferrable and long lasting.

However, there is even more to be done than what can be said about art

education. As demonstrated in the two case studies, implementation can be difficult for educators. It requires careful planning and an embracing manner. It also involves specific, well-practiced routines such as writing, researching, making, critiquing, and reflecting. This process demands that students are capable of critical analysis and of having different perspectives. The hope is that students will be able to follow their ideas and express themselves clearly and confidently.

At the conclusion of this thesis investigation, I contend the current educational model must embrace these themes if it is going to continue to prepare youth for the 21st century and, especially, if it wants to ensure lifelong learning in any field. Visual arts education can do its part by framing its curriculum and assignments around critical thinking opposed to standardizations. If we can do this as a society, then we have made an enormous investment in thinkers and educators who will be fit to think about and participate in all of the complexities of our quickly developing world.

APPENDIX

A

EXAMPLES OF ARTWORKS

CITED



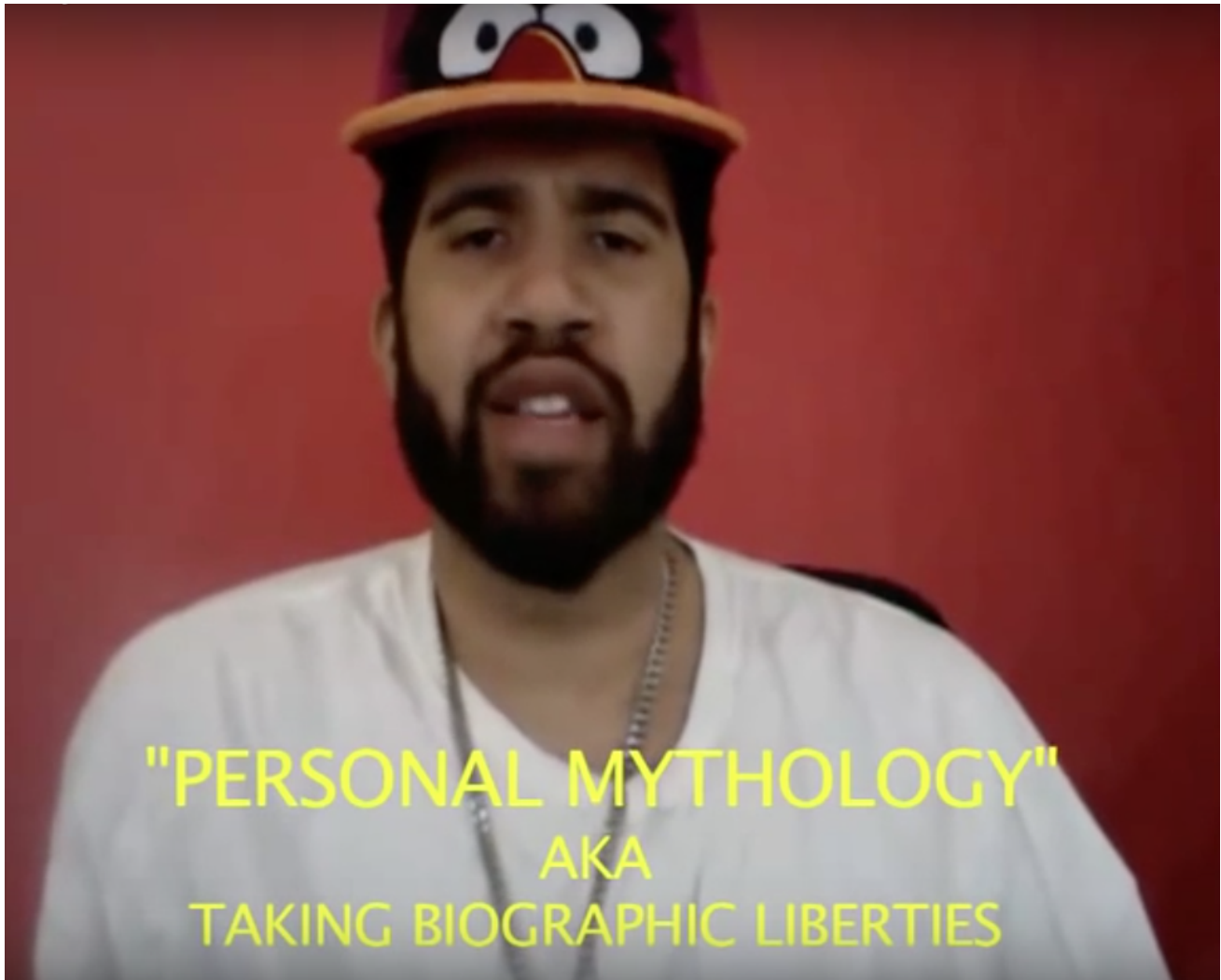
1A. Martin Puryear Ladder for Booker T. Washington, 1996, ash wood, Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art

Barrett, D. (2011). The importance of teaching interpretation. *FATE in Review*, Vol. 32, 1-9. Retrieved from http://www.terrybarrettosu.com/images/pdfs/Importance_of_Teach_Interpret.pdf



2A. Hennessy Youngman, *ART THOUGHTZ: Relational Aesthetics 2011*, video, youtube

Youngman, H. (Director). (2011, March 15). *ART THOUGHTZ: Relational Aesthetics*[Video file].Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7yea4qSJMx4>



3A. Hennessy Youngman, *ART THOUGHTZ: Beuys -Z*, 2011, video, youtube

Youngman, H. (Director). (2011, March 11). *ART THOUGHTZ: Beuys -Z* [Video file]. Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Wcu60-J99w>



4A. Hennessy Youngman, *ART THOUGHTZ: How To Be A Successful Black Artist*, 2010, video, youtube

Youngman, H. (Director). (2010, October 7). *ART THOUGHTZ: How to be a successful black artist* [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3L_NnX8oj-g



5A. Daniel Bozhkov, *Learn How to Fly over a Very Large Larry* (Crop Sign, 2002, Andrew Kreps Gallery)

Coggins, D. (n.d.). An interview with Bulgarian-born New York artist Daniel Bozhkov - Artnet Magazine. Retrieved from <http://www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/coggins/daniel-bozhkov3-31-10.asp>



6A. Jennifer Dalton and William Powhida, *#class*, 2010, Winkleman Gallery

Idiom. (2010, July 13). Art, *#class*: Interview with William Powhida and Jennifer Dalton. Retrieved from <http://idiommag.com/2010/07/art-class-interview-with-william-powhida-and-jennifer-dalton/>



7A. Doris Salcedo, *Untitled*, 1998, Tate Modern

Charman, H., & Ross, M. (2006). Contemporary art and the role of interpretation: Reflections from Tate Modern's summer institute for teachers. *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 25(1), 28-41.

APPENDIX

B

OTHER CASE STUDIES

- 1b. Doyle, D., Huie Hofstetter, C., Kendig, J., & Strick, B. (2014). Rethinking curriculum and instruction: Lessons from an integrated learning program and its impact on students and teachers. *Journal For Learning Through The Arts*, 10(1).

This case study addresses how arts educators can adapt to meet common core requirements. It explores methods from various educators linked to the program being studied. Data tests, teacher interviews and observations provide ample suggestions for multiple approaches of evaluation.

- 2b. Fleming, J., Gibson, R., Anderson, M., Martin, A. J., & Sudmalis, D. (2016). Cultivating imaginative thinking: Teacher strategies used in high-performing arts education classrooms. *Cambridge Journal Of Education*, 46(4), 435-453.

Through an examination of nine Australian classrooms, this study examines the aspects of arts education that engage students in an academic context. There are many benefits to educators embracing aspects of creative activities, which instill a lasting engagement with subject matter.

- 3b. Holdren, T. S. (2012). Using art to assess reading comprehension and critical thinking in adolescents. *Journal Of Adolescent & Adult Literacy*, 55(8), 692-703.

Arguing for the development of critical thinking skills in various subjects, this case study demonstrates the potential of using a visual arts assessment strategy to measure reading comprehension. High school students have the ability to translate deeper meanings in assigned readings and can critically examine source material,

- 4b. Kalin, N. M., & Barney, D. T. (2014). Hunting for monsters: Visual arts curriculum as agonistic inquiry. *International Journal Of Art & Design Education*, 33(1), 19-31.

This study looks at the use of relational and bricolage practices as a way of encouraging critical thinking. It successfully pairs educational theory with artistic practices.

- 5b. Kan, K. H. (2011). Playful mindfulness: How Singapore adolescent

students embody meaning with school art. *Studies In Art Education*, 52(2), 155-170.

In a Singapore high school, this study looks at how students create meaning through their assignments. In reference to Vygotsky's sociocultural learning theory, the author acknowledges how the culture of these students might inform their process of meaning making.

6b. Kyung Hee Kim (2011): The creativity crisis: The decrease in creative thinking scores on the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking. *Creativity Research Journal*, 23:4, 285-295.

In reference to the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, Kyung Hee Kim examines results from four iterations of the test. His final position is that despite higher average IQ numbers over the last two decades, creative thinking has decreased.

7b. Marin, L. M., & Halpern, D. F. (2011). Pedagogy for developing critical thinking in adolescents: Explicit instruction produces greatest gains. *Thinking Skills and Creativity*, 6(1), 1-13.

This study examines the implementation of the Halpern Critical Thinking Assessment in low performing high schools. The research suggests that explicit implementation can be more effective for reasons that include its final ability to be measured.

8b. Taylor, P. G. (2014). eLASTIC: Pulling and stretching what it means to learn, know, and assess art and educational progress. *Studies In Art Education: A Journal Of Issues And Research In Art Education*, 55(2), 128-142.

This study examines eLASTIC, a digital assessment tool that encourages and evaluates students on interdisciplinary knowledge. It creates virtual spaces in which students make cross-associations between subjects and interests. This research demonstrates the potential that new technologies have to challenge common assessment methods in visual arts.

9b. Vahter, E. (2016). Looking for a possible framework to teach contemporary art in primary school. *International Journal Of Art & Design Education*, 35(1), 51-67.

Looking at the revamped national curriculum in Estonia, which has placed a stronger emphasis on holistic education, this case study stresses the importance of straightforward, large-scale implementation. It also supports the use of postmodern concepts in visual arts education.

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