

## Swimming Up-stream in the Jean Pool: Developing a Pedagogy Towards Critical Citizenship in Visual Culture

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American children and youth live in and through mass media and popular culture. They frequently fashion their sense of history, ideology, and multiple and ever-changing identities through popular visual imagery. These images penetrate and pervade every aspect of our students' lives in the form of television programs, children's books, advertisements, movies, comics, toys, cereal boxes, video games, fashion merchandise, sport shoes, fast food paraphernalia, and architectural and public spaces. These images help to shape students' experiences by capturing their imagination and engaging their desires. These pervasive, immediate, and sometimes ephemeral images often construct students' consciousness and their sense of citizenship and culture. In fact, as images become more prolific and powerful, students' sense of agency and civic participation is understood as consumer choice while politics are relegated to somewhere beyond the everyday. It is clear that rapid proliferation of imagery has profoundly changed American children, youth, culture, politics (relationship between power

and knowledge) and academia, yet the field of art education has not quite caught up.

Dominant practices in art education have done little to help students become critical citizens—able to exercise power over their own lives—in an ever-increasing visual culture. Most often, dominant practices in art education correspond to modernist paradigms of cultural literacy and inculcate students to existing social and political forms. These practices often maintain the canon of high art as 'apolitical' and reify the partition of high and low culture. This separation reflects a myopic view of politics relegated to the periphery of students' lived experiences. Indeed, most prevailing forms of art education instruction separate moral and ethical dimensions of epistemology while reifying the social, political, and economic codifications through which 'art' and 'education' becomes unproblematicized (Freire, 1998).

Most of the current practices in art education do little to cultivate what I consider critical citizenship in visual culture. Critical citizenship requires valuing egalitarianism, social difference, democracy, and justice through critique and possibility. A critical citizen is one who has a deep concern for the lives of others and actively questions and challenges the social, political, and cultural structures and discourses that comprise everyday life (Schwoch, White, & Reilly, 1992). In an ever-increasing visual culture, critical citizens would need to understand that visual images are ideological texts—representations that help to construct a view of the world. Critical citizenship means an active, engaging, and questioning relationship with visual texts in order to understand how meanings are produced in various historical, political, and cultural contexts. Unfortunately, in a climate of disciplinary hegemony, decontextualized curricula, and knowledge standardization, students of art rarely engage in discussions (and

actions) regarding politics, (the struggle over) culture, and the impact of an ever-increasing visual world.

I believe our field needs a sea change—a redefinition of art education toward critical citizenship in visual culture. Under this concept, art education could be reframed as a political, social, and cultural practice where educators and students (one in the same) approach representations in visual culture as multidimensional political texts. This would require that art education be understood as producing not only art knowledge but also political discourse through conscious or unconscious means. Rather than rejecting the language of politics, art educators should link public education to the imperatives of critical citizenship.

In opposition to dominant practices in art education, I want to develop a rationale and posit some principles for developing a pedagogy of critical citizenship in visual culture. First, I will provide an overview of visual culture, as both a description of postmodern culture and a field of study, and map its relationship to critical citizenship. Second, I will discuss current art educational strategies that are at odds with both visual culture and critical citizenship. Third, I will provide a framework that articulates a transformative pedagogy of critical citizenship within visual culture. Fourth, as an example of this type of pedagogy, I will describe the project of a pre-service elementary education student who drew upon his own interests to expose and challenge race and gender oppression in popular images. Finally, I will conclude with a call for art educators to embrace a pedagogy of critical citizenship in visual culture.

### Visual Culture and Critical Citizenship: A Performative Hybrid

Students of art education need to move beyond (to include, contextualize, connect, and go forward from) their own art making and discussions revolving around 'fine art' and begin to critically assess the rapid flow of signs and images that saturate the fabric of everyday life in contemporary society. The particular characteristics of these cultural forms can be understood as, and examined under the rubric, "visual culture." In this sense, visual culture is both a description of postmodern society subsumed by images and an academic enterprise. Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster (1996) describe visual culture as providing

a double service: it is both a partial description of a social world mediated by commodity images and visual technologies, and an academic rubric for interdisciplinary convergences among art history, film theory, media analysis, and cultural studies (p. 3)

I would go beyond Krauss and Foster's notion to include convergences between and among other fields of study such as anthropology, archeology, African-American studies, women studies, linguistics, literary criticism, philosophy, political science, post-colonial studies, sociology, and of course, art education (Walker & Chaplin, 1997). As a transdisciplinary project, visual culture would investigate, among other issues, the social construction of the visual experience (the sociosopic) through "political discourses of identity formation, sexuality, otherness, fantasy, and the unconscious" (Mitchell, 1995, p. 540).

Like the postmodern condition, the project of visual culture constitutes a general attempt to transgress the borders sealed by modernism. Visual culture makes the distinction between high and

low culture problematic and liberates art from the stale canon of masterpieces to a larger sphere of visual images within the context of culture. Visual culture is both transdisciplinary and intertextual. As a field of study, visual culture would take into account the crucial importance of image production, reception, and consumption in which the hermeneutics of the visual expands to include the audio, olfactory, kinesthetic, spatial, and psychological dynamics of spectatorship. Thus, as Rogoff (1998) states:

Visual culture opens up an entire world of intertextuality in which images, sounds, and spatial delineations are read on and through one another, lending ever-accruing layers of meanings and subjective responses to each encounter we might have with film, TV, advertising, art works, buildings or urban environments. . . the scrap of an image connects with a sequence of a film and with the corner of a billboard or the window display of a shop we have passed by, to produce a new narrative formed out of both our experienced journey and our unconscious. (p. 14/16)

Rogoff's notion of visual culture allows us to see visual representations as intertextually imbricated with a wide variety of senses (hearing, touch, smell), other visual texts, and conscious and unconscious experiences and thoughts that leave traces and reminiscences. Therefore, the study of visual culture creates a pedagogical entry in a decentered "multidimensional world of intertextual dialogism" (Shohat & Stam, 1998, p. 45). In the best of possibilities, visual culture presents a space in which to (re)theorize, (re)locate, and (re)address the possibilities for a project of critical citizenship by combining analysis with cultural production.

The mobile, transgressive, and transdisciplinary nature of visual culture offers new hope for expanding the practice of critical citizenship

through what Henry Giroux calls "border crossing." According to Giroux (1992), the transformative aspects of border crossing

signal a recognition of those epistemological, political, cultural, and social margins that structure the language of history, power, and difference. . . . That is, it signals forms of transgression in which existing borders forged in domination can be challenged and redefined. (p. 28)

By seeing visual culture as a type of border crossing, critical citizenship becomes a search for equality, freedom, and justice by "examining how institutions, knowledge, and social relations are inscribed in power differently" through visual imagery (Giroux, 1992, p. 28). This examination could be translated into cultural production that is urgent and necessary. In other words, students of art could see themselves as critical citizens—agents of change—by linking the analysis of visual culture with the production of alternative forms of visual culture that challenge and transform "culture."

While the project of visual culture proclaims the arbitrariness of modernist boundaries, transgresses the policed limits of academic disciplines, and acknowledges popular culture as a significant basis of meaningful inquiry, it has been conspicuously absent from most of the art educational domain.

### **Aiming High (art) and Falling Short: Current Practices in Art Education**

Current art educational practices can be seen as a amalgam of educational concepts, modern and postmodern theories, and the so-called four disciplines of art—art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and art-making (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). These four disciplines encompass the dominant paradigm known as discipline-based art

education (DBAE). DBAE was originally founded upon a fundamental goal for K-12 art students: "through creating and interpreting works of art, all students will gain a meaningful conception of themselves and their relationships with others, culture and society, and the world in general" (Asmus, et al., 1997, p. 117). The result of this type of pedagogy is meant to help students gain high critical acumen—to their immediate world and to the larger world around them. Proponents argue that the discipline-based approach stresses the development of critical thinking skills by posing comprehensive problem-solving tasks and enhancing *a posteriori* interpretations of 'artworks' based on art disciplines. Indeed, one of the basic tasks of DBAE is to draw content from the (so-called) four foundational 'art disciplines' in order to identify methods of inquiry that can be utilized in the design of a comprehensive and holistic approach to curricula and instruction. In other words, DBAE was/is predicated on integrating the work of the 'expert practitioners of art' into the k-12 curricula. Advocates of DBAE stress the importance of curricula based on these disciplines to be in written form, having content sequenced, and implemented district-wide (Hamblen, 1997). This DBAE approach focuses on content that is derived from a variety of visual art works with an emphasis on what meanings and messages can be gleaned from works through disciplined inquiry and production. Undeniably, this art-centered approach reinforces the notion that a discipline-based curriculum should be limited primarily to artworks from the museum realm. With very few exceptions, most current practices adhere to this principle (Wilson, 1997a).<sup>1</sup>

As a new construct in the latter part of the 1980s, DBAE immediately attracted scrutiny and criticism. This criticism continues to dominate the concerns of many scholars and practitioners in the field. Opponents of DBAE have argued that it is too restrictive in content, too prescriptive in theory, too academic in practice, and too



Eurocentric in nature (Clark, 1997). Other arguments have been based on feminist (Collins & Sandell, 1988), multicultural (Chalmers, 1992), and child-centered critiques (London, 1988), as well as the role of general education in the curriculum (Hamblen, 1987) and the cognitive nature of learning (Parsons, 1998). Although I believe some of the critiques may still be valid, I openly acknowledge that DBAE has undergone significant changes since its inception in the late 1980s. Furthermore, much of what was scrutinized and criticized in the early years of DBAE could be linked to broad misconceptions of DBAE. Indeed, it is clear that there are many conceptions of DBAE and forms of instruction labeled discipline-based (Wilson, 1997b). I do not intend to give a detailed account of the criticisms toward DBAE or adjudicate between them. Instead, I want to posit the notion that even the most progressive forms of DBAE fall short of their claim of helping students "gain a meaningful conception of themselves and their relationships with others, culture and society, and the world in general" (Asmus, et al. 1997, p. 117) by narrowly defining 'art disciplines' and focusing almost exclusively on art examples from the museum realm. In other words, all forms of DBAE that limits itself to 'four disciplines' and promotes art from the museum realm as the best means for providing today's students insight to themselves and others is outdated and out of touch with postmodern visual culture. For practitioners of DBAE, the brilliant luminosity of visual culture is obscured by a dark modernist lens and disciplined (based) squinting.

### **Disciplined (based) Squinting in (the) Light of Visual Culture**

DBAE theory emphasizes the unique qualities of so-called 'art disciplines' as a primary source of student inquiry and production. In their seminal essay on DBAE, Clark, Day, and Greer (1987) defined a discipline as a "field of study. . . marked by recognized communities of scholars or practitioners, established conceptual structures, and

accepted methods of inquiry" (pp. 130/ 131). In worst-case scenarios, these disciplines delineate experts in the field as superior 'providers of legitimate knowledge' and teachers and students as passive subordinates. In this sense, DBAE functions, at least implicitly, to bring students as close as possible to the expert's judgments and declarations about art and disciplinary structures. In other scenarios, the (so-called) art disciplines are used as overlapping lenses through which works of art are analyzed, interpreted, and produced (Wilson, 1997b.). In either case, these disciplines operate hegemonically; policing the boundaries of art education practice through catechetical loyalty tests disguised as critical inquiry and studio production.

The traditional distinctions that frame established art disciplines seem no longer feasible due to the great diversity of cultural phenomena that has come to characterize an increasingly hybridized postmodern world (Giroux, 1992). The spread of visual culture has shifted the ground of scholarship away from fossilized art disciplines designed to preserve high culture to the more amorphous field of visual culture. Visual culture not only converges with the inner and outer boundaries of various disciplines, but also problematizes the very notion of disciplinarity. This transdisciplinary movement, similar to the established field of cultural studies, attempts to remap the once rigid boundaries of modernism while decentering disciplinary hegemony.

This cultural turn (more like a rupture) calls into question the way in which 'art disciplines' have defined the boundaries of pedagogy and designated the range of options in a DBAE approach. Through postmodernism, the disciplinary boundaries that once legitimated DBAE— art history, art criticism, aesthetics, and art production— have begun to dissolve. New spheres of inquiry are constantly being (re)invented and contested. The narrow language of anointed specialists is being challenged and disrupted. 'Expert' judgments that

once established the parameters of students' experiences in art education can now be seen as obsolete (Wilson, 1997a).

Disciplinary hegemony has tainted the tastes and values of many art educators. The notion that there is something inherently special about art from the museum realm, as opposed to other types of images, remains paramount even within the most progressive DBAE curricula. Most art educators believe that artworks from the museum realm are the best conduits to creative, humane, honest, and inspiring aspects of ourselves and society (Duncum, 1997). This educational belief inculcates students to existing social and political forms, rather than developing a critical capacity to challenge and transform social structures. Indeed, DBAE maintains the canon of art from the museum realm as 'apolitical' while ignoring the fact that "canons are the condition and function of institutions, which presuppose particular ways of life and are inescapably political" (Spivak in Giroux, 1992, p. 89). Furthermore, many devotees of DBAE subscribe to the separation of art inquiry from a critique of power relations. They locate examples of art from the museum realm within a depoliticized arena. When art educators present art in an apolitical discursive space with predetermined 'truths,' they whitewash all possibility of social antagonism and conflict (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997).

I believe art education needs to embrace the radical changes in culture and academia and transgress the rigid boundaries of discipline-based approaches. If art education is to be transformed and (re) mapped into a pedagogy of critical citizenship that acknowledges the changing conceptions of self and world brought on by postmodern visual culture, we must learn to traverse disciplinary borders, develop new language, and challenge ourselves and our students to think and act in fresh ways. This, of course, is a challenging task. An approach to this type of pedagogy precludes adopting the same type of prescriptive curricula

as in many DBAE approaches. However, there are a number of theories one can utilize. What follows is a framework of visual culture pedagogy under the larger project of a critical citizenship and the problems raised by such a project.

### **Inside the Outside Images: A Framework for Critical Citizenship in Visual Culture**

For art educators to embrace a pedagogy of critical citizenship in visual culture they need to begin to transform their understanding of how images, politics, language, and representation function together in a postmodern society. Baudrillard (1987), Debord (1977), Derrida (1976), Heidegger (1977), Mitchell (1994), and many others have characterized postmodern society by the proliferation, dissemination, and consumption of images (signs and simulacra, spectatorship and spectacle, representations and reflections, images and imaginations, pictures and pictorial turns) within the cultural landscape. The technological revolution of the past few decades, with new mass communication and information technologies, has helped to change culture from one that privileged the written text and spoken word to one that is "more visual and visualized than ever before" (Mirzoeff, 1999, pg. 1). The proliferation of television channels—generating between fifteen and thirty images per second—the growth of home video, DVD, and personal computers, and the increase of magazine and book production and accessibility, all profoundly affect the way ideas and images are exchanged, circulated, and understood (Collins, 1994). Moreover, fewer and fewer mega-corporations and global media oligopolies, interested in profit-maximization, are controlling both the production of images and the policing of the ways in which those images are circulated (McChesney, 1997). As our cultural landscape becomes filled with images from a limited number of corporations, the nature and function of politics becomes obscured and our ability to act

politically becomes undermined (Kincheloe, Steinberg, & Hinchey, 1999). These images constitute part of visual culture and as such need to be understood as a series of complex texts permeated with often-contradictory signifying processes.

In developing a pedagogy of critical citizenship in visual culture, educators and students could move beyond a simple (mostly vapid) critique of (art from the museum realm) images to a critique of socioscopic ideology. Images would be seen as having "signifying practices which produce meanings and construct images of the world that affect particular ideological representations of the world" (Garber in Tarlow-Calder, 1993, p.146-147). Educators could read images as multidimensional political texts that contain a wealth of meaning, inscribed from the outside, while seeing themselves and their students as multifaceted beings, socially constructed and overdetermined by a range of images, discourses, and codes. This would necessitate educators to see visual images in constant play with other texts as historical and political constructions (Kellner, 1991; Giroux, 1992).

Transforming the critical process from museum art to vernacular imagery requires an understanding of the importance of popular cultural texts to students' lives. Laurie Hicks (1989) argues that the educational process should begin with the student's own phenomenological experience – "the vernacular." She believes educators should "start out with images that originate within the culture and everyday experience of students rather than imposing too quickly academic constraints on what counts as legitimate art" (p. 55). By beginning with vernacular images, teachers can help students glean affective investments from their popular cultural mattering maps. These mattering maps are constructed through popular culture and articulated with energies, histories, and pleasure. Lawrence Grossberg (1992) defines mattering maps as telling people "where, how, and with

what intensities they can become absorbed-into the world and their lives" (p.82). Within these maps, complex sociopolitical relations become internalized and quite often naturalized through affective investment.

Educators can begin to understand the power of popular culture by taking the social forms and practices of their students seriously. Henry Giroux & Roger Simon (1989) argue:

The study of popular culture offers the possibility of understanding how a politics of pleasure (through one's mattering maps) serves to address students in a way that shapes and sometimes secures the often contradictory relations students have to both schooling and the politics of everyday life. (p. 3)

As educators learn to deconstruct the political potency of popular cultural texts, they need to consider the possibility of student resistance. One possible reason for this resistance is that students learn at an early age to separate popular culture from politics. To most students, the former exists in the realm of pleasure and the latter within the confines of the Washington D.C. beltway. Many students separate 'political texts' from popular texts, which they see as apolitical entertainment. Paul Smith discusses the difficulty of articulating the political/pedagogical power of popular images by reflecting on his own teaching of popular culture. Smith (1989) frames popular images as Popular Culture Commodity Texts (PCCT), and states:

Meaning is already understood by students to reside within texts of traditional kind but not always recognized by them as a component of PCCT. Students already think of PCCT's as texts which do not need to be analyzed; rather they often seem self-evident or obvious, texts which, to adopt a distinction of Roland



Barthes, signal rather than signify. (p.34)

These popular images (texts) need to be problematized and played out in a hermeneutical field of contradictory political meanings. As students investigate multiple readings of popular images, the role of the teacher could be seen as akin to an orchestrator— facilitating the articulation of students' experience (Smith, 1989). It is important that educators not appear to be politically neutral, nor should they appear to be so removed from culture that they can position themselves as a one-way conduit to administer 'academic knowledge' to their students. In doing so, educators relinquish claims to objectivity and acknowledge that they are too enmeshed in the culture to be free of it. By refuting the objectivity of their own discourse, educators display their own emotional and affective investments and expose themselves to extensive autocritique and dialogue throughout their pedagogical project (Smith, 1989; Giroux, 1994; McLaughlin, 1996).

When students read these images as powerful cultural and political forms, inscribed from the outside, the structuring principles of hegemony are made visible. Lawrence Grossberg (in Giroux & Simon, 1989) provides a theoretical elaboration of hegemony as a battle for the popular:

Hegemony defines the limits within which we can struggle, the field of 'common sense' or 'popular consciousness.' It is the struggle to articulate the position of 'leadership' within the social formation, the attempt by the ruling bloc to win for itself the position of leadership across the entire terrain of cultural and political life. (p. 27)

From this position it is impossible to read images as simply static, one-dimensional entities articulating a discourse of manipulation.

Indeed, by engaging students in multiple readings and exposing the larger discursive formations, the essentialist perspective of top-down articulation is disrupted and transformed into a bottom up, or outside in, process of mediation. Stuart Hall (in Giroux & Simon, 1989) clarifies this issue by stating:

The meaning of a cultural form and its place or position in the cultural field is not inscribed inside its form. Nor is its position fixed once and forever. . . The meaning of the cultural symbol is given in part by the social field into which it is incorporated, the practices with which it articulates and is made to resonate. What matters is not the intrinsic or historically fixed objects of culture, but the state of play in culture relations. (p. 9)

By seeing popular images as a site of differentiated politics and multiple ideological positions, inscribed from the outside, students can recognize that popular images are neither static manipulative entities nor a terrain of unproblematic entertainment (Giroux & Simon, 1989). When students investigate images from their cultural landscape as a site of multilayered and contradictory political investments, they see the possibility of recognizing the culturally invisible, and in turn, produce their own knowledge. This form of critical thinking allows both students and educators to expose the nature of cognition as a political act (Kincheloe, 1993).

In order to provide a transformative aspect to this type of pedagogy, students must assume that social conditions can be improved. They need to understand the underlying values, motivations, ideologies, and perspectives that emerge from systems of signification. By focusing on the political dynamics of popular texts, the pedagogy of visual culture becomes a tool for social reconstruction through critical citizenship, as it challenges and offers alternatives to



traditional frameworks and processes (Tarlow-Calder, 1993). Both teachers and students can create new knowledge and reconstruct themselves for social agency. What follows is a description of one prospective teacher's discovery of the politics of oppression in popular images and his quest for social agency.

### **Celebrating Your Specialness: What is that Floating (signifier) in the Jean Pool?**

In the fall of 1997, I began to develop a pedagogy of critical citizenship in visual culture while facilitating two sections of a university course entitled, "Visual Arts in the Elementary School." This is a required course in which elementary education and early childhood majors are exposed to the visual arts and its pedagogical applications. Although this was the third time that I taught this course, I approached the fall semester differently. In previous semesters the course had three components; an initial unit taught by the instructor, a group project, and an individual presentation in which students would teach part of a lesson for one hour to their peers. The three units were based on (what I understood as) a progressive discipline-based art education model that revolved around one or more works of high art.

In the fall 1997 semester, I included in the curriculum, essays, lectures, and student projects dealing with the pedagogy and politics of visual culture. I focused on my students' memories of childhood to legitimate the political power of popular culture. Towards the middle of the semester I assembled the students in a computer lab to discuss their elementary experiences with high art and images from popular culture. I drew a line down the center of the chalkboard and on one side asked them to list all of the artists that they had learned about in their kindergarten through high school art education. In both sections of the class, no more than twelve artists could be recalled, all of them

dead, white, and European. They struggled to describe any of the accomplishments of these artists (although half the class remembered something about VanGogh cutting of his ear) and had difficulty relating the relevance of these men and their art to their own lives. On the other half of the board I divided and labeled the space into four sections; children's television programs, films for children, toys, and breakfast cereals. I asked the class to list as many images as they could recall from their childhood, accompanied by a brief explanation.

The subsequent discourse exposed a celebration of shared private experiences with public forms. The class exchanged dynamic narratives of encounters with toys, recalled the specific imagery on a multitude of cereal boxes, and discussed specific actors on television shows. These memories amplified the echoes of investment that the themes and images identified. I asked my students whether the dominant site for learning visual culture was inside or outside of school. I inquired how these memories allow us to presuppose particular histories and social relations as natural and guileless. I encouraged students to view these images as cultural commodities and sociopolitical documents that frame power relations, values, and truths.

During our discussion of the politics of visual culture, we examined a project I created, which linked, hypertextually, various historical, political, social, and cultural images to an advertisement for Diesel jeans. Through *Storyspace*, a hypertextual computer application, I linked a multitude of images (including films, television programs, newspaper and magazine articles, and historical photographs) to the Diesel advertisement. As Hammett (1999) notes, *Storyspace* offers at least three features relevant to a critical exploration of visual culture:

First, *Storyspace* allows the author to set up the hypertext so that as the reader moves from space to space, the windows remain

open unless purposely closed by the reader. The various texts are thus juxtaposed or displayed side by side. Second, each window may contain a number of texts. Multiple windows, presented sequentially and/or simultaneously, may thus contain any combination of print text and digitized video, audio, and visual images. Windows may also be created so that sounds begin to play as they open and sized so that the visual images and words may be displayed as well. . .

Third, *Quicktime* movies can be created and displayed, with or without other texts, in windows. These *Quicktime* movies can present a series of images, with transitions, accompanied by a sound track. (p. 209-210)

Using this hypertextual media, I produced and shared new texts that challenged dominant representations. I recontextualized the advertisement by deconstructing its codes, structures, and shifting contexts. After the group investigated my project, I invited each student to individually experience the text I created in order to help them to generate themes and issues for further exploration.

A very insightful student, Chris Robbins (irony?) came to me after class with a *Silver Tab* jean advertisement he had pulled from the pages of *RollingStone* magazine. It is an example of Levi's postmodern version of the Enlightenment worldview— the compulsion for authenticity through the surface of the pose. In the image a young women of color, dressed in 'hip' clothes and sporting pigtails, is juxtaposed with a stereotypical conservative middle class white family. Through this juxtaposition, "the social dominance of whiteness is continually alluded to and parodied" (Nicholson, 1998, p. 196). On the right half of the advertisement there are five smaller images of the female figure reclining confidently on a dining room chair in a pose that combines

the Afrocentric self-confidence of Angela Davis and the introspection of Rodin's *The Thinker* (Fig. 1). Freed from the bonds (literally) of 'traditional values' and empty conformity, the antagonist in the advertisement signifies her resistance to the dominant culture by setting herself apart from the poseurs by posing. Under the banner of "celebrate your specialness," this semiotic opposition pits bourgeois morality, that often devalues the other, against bourgeois alienation, that frequently celebrates 'the other' (Goldman & Papson, 1996). Chris found this advertisement disturbing and curious because 'the other' is defined by blackness (symbolically wild, self-confident, and brash) and yet 'the other' remains non-threatening through signs of civil assimilation, comedic gesture, and the masking of an oppositional gaze (sunglasses).



fig.1

Chris' interpretation echoes Toni Morrison's (in Nicholson, 1998) description of how African-Americans and Whiteness are represented in the literary canon:

(I)mages of blackness can be evil and protective, rebellious and forgiving, fearful and desirable—all of the self-contradictory features of the self. Whiteness, alone, is mute, meaningless, unfathomable, pointless, frozen, veiled, curtained, dreaded, senseless and implacable. (p. 196).

Chris remarked how much this image reminded him of racist portrayals of African-American women such as pickininnies, mummies, and minstrel actors, that were constructed to be non-threatening through overdetermined forms of comedic gesture, desexualization, and objectification. Chris articulated his desire to investigate how this advertisement might be interpreted within the larger historical context of identity politics and decided his inquiry lent itself to the creation of a hypertext. He searched for how African-American female subjectivity was/is signified and objectified within visual culture.

Chris read several essays on identity politics and searched through contemporary and historical popular novels, magazines, films, advertisements, and television shows for examples of racial subjugation. Chris collected historical white-American representations and narratives of African-American women, signified in a myriad of ways, from the non-threatening and subservient wet nurse, midwife, cook, and slave, to the tempting and exoticized dancer, whore, and Jezebel.



fig. 2

On numerous occasions, I met with Chris, and other students, in the computer lab to share my knowledge of *Storyspace*. I helped them learn to digitize sound, scan images, import video, and create *Quicktime* movies. Chris began to work all hours of the day and night on his project. He gathered and linked all of his visual research to contemporary artworks, television programs, advertisements, and a plethora of other texts using *Storyspace* (Figure 2). By deconstructing and recontextualizing racial, ethnic, and gendered codes within the new images, and the connections between the images, Chris expanded and challenged his initial reading of the Levis' jeans advertisement and questioned his own subjectivity. Moreover, Chris discovered how popular images often erase the problem and politics of representation by whitewashing complex social, political, and cultural relationships between blacks and whites (Giroux, 1994).





reflexivity is required in any pedagogy—more importantly in one that is attempting to develop a critical citizenship.

In using hypertext as pedagogy, reflexivity becomes paramount. It is not enough to provide connections or reproduce multiple resistant texts— one must interrogate and problematize the very nature of each connection and the ideology behind them. This reflexive thinking is exemplified in an e-mail Chris sent to me at the end of the semester. Christopher Robbins' (1998) statement is worth quoting at length:

Working hypertextually, especially with material pertaining to race, class, and gender, I have to be incessantly cognizant of the images, videos, and music I use, and I also have to be acutely aware of the connections I make between the images and other texts. I mean, developing this project is not like following a recipe. These particular texts are arranged in a number of ways, and can be perceived through as many lenses as there are discourses; the product is never finished or read the same way. What I am getting at is that I have been engaged in a learning process which has put me in the center of experience. . . . When I make links between images and text, text to text, text to image, I have to be aware of what message I am sending and, actually, what new meaning or message I am creating for myself. At times, this project is very painful to work with, for I realize different things about my identity, or possibly that I have many subjectivities in any one given social situation. . . . I had to question my thoughts and consider what a viewer from a race, class, or gender different from my own would perceive as a result of looking at the texts. Consequently, I found/find myself not only immersed in articles on identity politics and critical pedagogy but also engaged in highly intense conversations with people from all walks of life, something they or I might not have been doing before the construction of this hypertext. (Robbins, personal correspondence, p. 1-2)

Christopher's comments describe a project rooted in struggle, joy, and eventual critical consciousness— all of which is mired in his own history and interrelated with conflicts and histories of other people. This is the type of reflexivity that is possible through the exploration of visual culture. In Christopher's case, this allowed him to speak from his own experience and "identify and unravel the codes of popular culture that may work to construct subject relations and (at the same time) serve to silence and disempower them" (Sholle & Denski, 1994, p. 39). This type of reflexivity is a difficult process and does not guarantee the same results in each student.

## Conclusion

Postmodern society is subsumed with images through popular culture. The proliferation of these, and other, images constitute "visual culture." In numerous other fields of study, the spread of visual culture has shifted the ground of scholarship away from fossilized disciplines designed to preserve high culture to a more contextual and transdisciplinary approach. Yet, the rapid proliferation of imagery and the changes in American culture, youth, politics, and academia brought on by visual culture, have had little positive impact on the field art education. The dominant form of art education—DBAE— is organized around conventional discipline-based categories that are at odds with the hypercomplex and transgressive nature of postmodern visual culture and continues to promote art from the museum realm as the best means for providing today's students insight to themselves and others. As such, much of art education practice struggles, asymptotically, towards the postmodern relevancy.

Art education should be viewed as a political, social, and cultural practice that addresses a broad range of images if it is going to help students (and teachers) adapt to the new cultural landscape (rather than try to escape from it). If art education is to be transformed into a

pedagogy of critical citizenship that acknowledges the changes brought on by postmodern visual culture, we must learn to cross borders, develop new language, and challenge ourselves and our students to think and act in new ways. We need to recognize that tomorrow's producers of visual culture are the students who sit in our class today (Buck-Morss, 1996). These students live in and through mass media and popular culture. They negotiate their history, ideology, desires, expectations, and multiple and ever-changing identities through visual imagery. To ignore this, is to deny the dominant site of learning and, in turn, deny students their own voice in shaping their own life.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Despite the fact that numerous art educators and scholars have problematized the role of discipline-based art education in a postmodern context (Chalmers, 1987; Duncum, 1990, 1997; Hamblen, 1997; McFee, 1988; Smith-Shank, 1995; Wilson, 1992, 1997a, 1997b), and within the last decade both theorists and practitioners of DBAE have embraced the study of multicultural, folk, and other forms of art, classroom examples are rarely drawn from areas outside the museum realm- outside the parameters of the artworld.

## Art, Action Research, and Activism at Artpark

Carole Woodlock & Mary Wyrick

### The History of Artpark

The authors have an ongoing interest in combining local history, culture and environmental issues as topics for teaching. As newcomers to western New York, we became fascinated with the story of Artpark in Lewiston, New York. High on the edge of the Niagara Gorge, the site of Artpark has a complicated history that has been enlivened by Native Americans, the French, the British, contemporary artists, senators, toxic waste specialists, visiting art teachers, and local students. The passage and effects of time on nature, art, and culture have been an important influence on art production since the beginning of Artpark in 1974. For over two decades, professional artists have been invited to build temporary sculptural installations that were dismantled or deteriorated due to human and natural forces, leaving artifacts on the site that echo works documented primarily in exhibition catalogues.

The region has been a culturally significant site since the Seneca tribe anointed it as sacred centuries ago. Seneca, French, and British battled over it in 1720 because a French trading post that was established there became a powerful trade center. This confluence of commerce