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Arthur D. Efland
Professor
The Ohio State University
E-mail: efland.1@osu.edu

Abstract

Arguments favoring the continuing role of a fine arts emphasis within a visual culture curriculum are presented. The value of art is not to be found in the veneration of masterpieces or in creative self expression but in the role it plays in creating the freedom of cultural life – the creation and rehearsal of new possibilities for human evolution and exploration. To fulfill this purpose, however, art must maintain its autonomy and not get lost in the thickets of the social sciences.

Key Words: Art, Non Art, Fine Art, Theory, Visual Culture

Introduction

In the last decades a new movement has appeared urging that the field of art education should lessen its traditional ties to drawing, painting, and the study of masterpieces and become instead the study of visual culture (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Tavin, 2001; Duncum, 2002).¹ Visual culture refers to an all-encompassing category of cultural production that includes the various forms of popular culture, the folk traditions of art making, crafts, industrial, interior, package and graphic design, photography, commercial illustration, the entertainment media including cinema, television, and their electronic extensions via the computer and the internet. It includes the design of built environments in public spaces such as theme parks, mega-churches, fast food restaurants, shopping malls and electronic games. It also includes the processes and products of artists that comprise the art world. All of these serve as potent sources of visual imagery – an aggregate of stuff that embodies a record of changes taking place within American society and culture. Knowledge of these changes and transformations will help individuals develop awareness of the social forces at work in their culture.

In addition, visual cultural studies also places a strong emphasis on topics advocating social reform. This is seen in the theme of the 2010 NAEA annual conference in 2010 namely “Art Education and Social Justice”. Social justice is a laudable aim, broad enough to be the aim of general education as a whole. One could frame the teaching of math and science around the pursuit of social justice as well as geography and history. In my view, social justice is not an aim exclusive to art education, which leads me to ask whether there is some special property or advantage for pursuing this aim within an art education context other than the fact that many works of art

¹ For opposing views on the topic of visual cultural studies see Dorn, C. (2003). Sociology and the ends of arts education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 104 (5), 3-13. and Smith, P.J. (2003). Visual culture studies versus art education. *Arts Education Policy Review*, 104(4), 3-8.

allow us to encounter this theme directly – say in works like Goya’s *Third of May* or Faith Ringgold’s quilt *Whose Afraid of Aunt Jemima*? ART

While investigating themes of social justice illustrated by art works is an important advantage, I am not persuaded that this offers a sufficient reason for justifying art education or visual culture in the schools. What I am asking is whether there is something else that art education offers which makes it educationally worthwhile? Does it have aims, content and practices that are important and that are less likely to be encountered in other subject fields? My answer is in one sense very simple namely that it consists of *art* itself as a category of experience, apart from the ordinary experience of everyday life. Unfortunately, art is one of the more problematic terms in philosophical aesthetics.

The Problem with Art

The problem with art is how to come to terms with it as a human endeavor including how to identify its bounds. What purpose does it serve as a domain of practice especially when the boundaries which separate it from the everyday life-world, are fading? In *Beyond the Brillo Box*, the philosopher and critic, Arthur Danto, (1992) described the cultural landscape as having multiple regions bounded by various zones. One zone is the “artworld” where art serves as its main preoccupation. Other regions include the mass media and the popular culture. One difficulty is that the boundaries that kept these zones apart have either disappeared or are undergoing erasure. Lines that once separated fine art from popular culture have either become imperceptible or register as disputed territories or “sites of contestation.”²

As Danto explained, starting in the 1960s Pop Art eliminated the boundary between high art and low art; minimalism erased the distinction between fine art and industrial process. The border separating mass-produced things from the images of fine art housed in museums has

² See Chapter Two in Efland, Freedman and Stuhr *Postmodern Art Education: An Approach to Curriculum* for a discussion of cultural boundaries and their disappearance.

ART

disappeared from the landscape. Another is the distinction between objects appreciated as exemplars of cultivated taste and the objects of the ordinary person's life-world including comic strips, soup cans and cheeseburgers. No longer does art have to be beautiful or to resemble nature; indeed there is no longer any perceptible difference between works of art and what Danto called "mere real things!"

Even more telling was his observation that "you cannot tell when something is a work of art just by looking at it, for there is no particular way that art has to look" (Danto, 1992, p. 5). One can no longer teach art simply by looking at examples. And so the question becomes, what does one teach? If works of art are indistinguishable from the rest of material culture, how does one define the limits of instructional content? How does one contrast or compare objects when no set of visual attributes can be used to differentiate art from non-art?

What made Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* art was the rise of a theoretical perspective within the art world affirming these works to be art. Warhol's *Brillo Boxes* became for Danto the case that dramatized the situation. Danto relied upon the existence of an art world defined by theories that determine what art is. By contrast, many proponents of visual culture do not try to maintain art as a category separable from the rest of human culture. A visual culture proponent would have little difficulty proceeding with a curriculum comprised of "mere real things" since whether they are in fact art works or not is not a source of worry. They would have little or no difficulty in promoting a curriculum grounded in themes of social justice approached through the study of visual objects that are not works of art. However, most proponents of visual culture do continue to use works of art as well as non-art in their teaching and writing. For example, the use of art works often becomes necessary when one refers to historical periods that pre-date photography (Freedman, 2003).

If visual culturalists acknowledge the existence of art as a category they tend to describe it as the product of bygone eras such as the Italian Renaissance or Modernism. For example, Freedman and Stuhr recognize the importance of fine art as a carrier of historical and contemporary culture, but conclude that "fine art objects and "good taste" can no longer be seen as

the only visual cultural capital to serve elementary, secondary, or college level students” (2004, p. 817). If art no longer should play the principal role in determining the content of instruction in a visual culture curriculum, what role should it play if any at all?

As noted earlier many practitioners of visual culture are generally unconcerned with the task of teaching art as *fine art* in all its separateness and remoteness. Fine art as a subject in the curriculum was once taught to cultivate and refine taste. The task now, as writers like Kevin Tavin see it, is to teach students to become critically attentive to the cultural meanings that visual images convey for the purpose of understanding society and culture, including how these images help create the shared meanings we call culture. Critical citizenship rather than the appreciation of a “stale canon of masterpieces ” has become the objective. Tavin does not explain how or why canons grow stale, how such determinations are made and by whom (Tavin, 2001, p. 133).

In my view the teaching of art has a different purpose than learning to make it or to venerate masterpieces. Its value is found in the role it plays in enabling one to explore in freedom, the creation and rehearsal of new possibilities for human experience.

According to Julian Johnson terms like “high art” “fine art” or “classical music” refer to arts distinguished by a self-conscious attention to their own artistic language. Their claim to function as art derives from a particular concern with the ways these materials are patterned and organized to arouse perceptual attention (Johnson, 2002, p. 3). Terms like “fine” or “high” also refer to those specific cultural endeavors that undergo refinement in a search for expressive content by such means as experimentation, rehearsal and the practice of criticism. Though I generally support Johnson’s views they do present difficulties in that they suggest that what makes a thing art is something that can be discerned in and through the perception of special qualities or features found in such objects that allow them to be classified as works of art, but while perception is necessary to apprehend the existence of such objects, it is not sufficient. What makes something art as Danto puts it, is a theory affirming it as art. In other words something that arises as a result of thought. He writes:

ART

To see something as art demands nothing less than this, an atmosphere of artistic theory, a knowledge of the history of art. Art is the kind of thing that depends for its existence upon theories; without theories of art black paint is just black paint and nothing more. Perhaps one *can* speak of what the world is like independently of any theories we may have regarding the world, though I am not sure that it is even meaningful to raise such a question, since our divisions and articulations of things into orbits and constellations presupposes a theory of some sort. But it is plain that there could not be an artworld without theory, for the artworld is logically dependent upon theory. So it is essential to our study that we understand the nature of an art theory, which is so powerful a thing as to detach objects from the real world and make them part of a different world, an *art* world, a world of *interpreted* things. . . . [T]here is an internal connection between the status of an artwork and the language with which artworks are identified as such, inasmuch as nothing is an artwork without an interpretation that constitutes it as such. (Danto, 1981, p. 135)

The Problem

What worries me is that many advocates for visual culture rarely discuss art as a subject in the curriculum –as *art!* – as a thought process that makes something art. The idea of a canon of masterpieces repels enthusiasts of visual culture on the grounds that in the practice of listing such works one must perforce exclude other works. From their vantage lesser works might well have important social or cultural insights to reveal to the viewer, especially if they tell the story of society’s disenfranchised groups. Designs by an accomplished tattoo artist would in theory be as entitled to the same educational consideration as *Michelangelo’s Sistine Ceiling*, exemplifying the tendency within visual culture to reduce all visual manifestations of culture to carry more or less the same educational weight or value.

This is because the intent in studying works of art as visual culture is not done to study art *per se*, but to study culture – “a disciplinary responsibility

that hitherto was assigned to anthropology” (Levine, 1994, p. 2). When carried to extremes this tendency puts visual culture in danger of becoming an adjunct of the sociology or anthropology of art rather than the study of art in its own right.

If art in this heightened sense is acknowledged at all it is grudgingly. It is often mis-equated with upper class domination. If they are discussed at all, it is in terms of their use as a tool to confer status upon the upper classes, – to distinguish themselves from the lower classes (Johnson, p. 112). However, such uses are misappropriations of art that have little or nothing to do with art of and by itself considered.

The Everyday World.

To understand why art as a category still continues to have educational value it will be important to distinguish it from the objects comprising the everyday world. My position became clear after reading Paul Duncum’s view of visual culture (2002). He distinguishes between “everyday cultural sites” as opposed to art objects “which belong to the refined and special” (p.5). The latter would be the kind of art that concerns artworld professionals whereas the average layman is more likely to be involved with everyday concerns. He writes:

Everyday cultural sites, then, are set apart from experiences of art insofar as their appeal is to popular sentiment . . . Their references are familiar and together they help form the common culture. They directly address the present moment. Unlike the art of the art-world, they are neither a collection of sites that derive from the past, nor an attempt to articulate the future. They represent neither a residue of the past, nor what is emergent; rather they embody the values and beliefs of the currently dominant form of economic arrangement – global capital – and this in the sense they form what Williams (1977) calls the dominant culture. (Duncum, 2002, p. 5)

Duncum argues compellingly that the aesthetics of everyday encounters are offered by such sites as shopping malls, television, theme parks, and fast food restaurants and should be regarded by contemporary art educators as

ART legitimate sources of content in contradistinction to the experiences provided by the arts of the museum. These latter arts are more likely to emphasize the one-of-a-kind, unique aspects of aesthetic experience. “Everyday life” in his view “involves the mundane world which is seemingly unrelated to the major events of history.” “It involves the reproduction and maintenance of life, not the production of new ways of thinking and acting” (Duncum, 2002, p. 4).

Duncum describes art as a tradition that “focuses exclusively on certain privileged forms of the visual . . . works considered spiritually elevating. Art is said to take us out of ourselves. Aesthetic appreciation is thus an especially heightened, even consummatory experience” (Duncum 2002, pp. 6-7). “Creating calm reflective sites, separate from the overt dynamic of a materialistic society was for this tradition the point of both fine art and the aesthetic” (p. 7). By contrast the aesthetics of the everyday world emphasizes “the present moment,” an immersion in the immediacy of current experiences and activities” (p. 4).

The musicologist Julian Johnson takes an opposing view. His little book *Who Needs Classical Music?* reads like a reply to Duncum though, of course, this was not his purpose. Johnson asserts that sometimes art is not “concerned with the everyday [but] with the extraordinary, the outer limits of our experience . . .”

[I]t is the source of art’s unique value as a means of articulating areas of experience beyond everyday linguistic discourse, and at the same time, it is the means of becoming fantasy, more or less unrelated to the concerns of the everyday. (Johnson, 2002, p. 49)

And he continues:

Art’s apparent refusal of the everyday is not a refusal of the “human” as such: it is a refusal of the idea that the sum of what it is to be human is found in the everyday. (p. 49)

So, if we adopt Duncum’s view, we would emphasize the aesthetic encounters of everyday life. If we take Johnson’s view we would look to the fine arts to enter a realm of experience that extends beyond everyday

linguistic discourse, including perhaps that spiritual world so readily dismissed by Duncum. But while Duncum has a point in asking students to become attentive to the aesthetic dimensions of everyday life, it is equally the case that on some occasions we should look beyond the everyday. In my view a visual culture curriculum should embrace both. To limit the range of experience to the aesthetics of the everyday world is to constrain the freedom of cultural life.

Implications for Art Education

The visual culture proposal is a step in the right direction that should enhance the relevance of the field of art education, identifying it more closely with the whole fabric of social life, but it also has the potential to get lost in the thickets of the social sciences. In its zeal to reject art as an elitist category sanctioned by formalist aesthetics and the modernist practice of separating art genres into high and low forms, care has to be taken not to go to the polar extreme of restricting educational attention exclusively to the social and cultural dimensions of such works. Each extreme flies in the face of democratic aspirations in that each constrains the freedom of inquiry, the freedom to explore various forms of cultural life including formal conceptions of aesthetic value.

Why Art is Important

It is the particular role of art as a category of experience to *transform* the culture of which it is part. Without art a visual culture curriculum might still enable one to understand one's culture but such a curriculum would fall short by failing to provide art practice as a venue for social change. The creation of novel, imaginative works of art does allow one to experience the transformation of culture. This happens in the popular culture as well, but it is principally in the fine arts where the human imagination enjoys its greatest freedom to cultivate, explore, and express novel meanings relatively free of social repression, censorship and market forces. By contrast popular culture must disguise its ideological agendas as entertainment. Art fosters an experience of freedom that in the final analysis can serve the same broad

ART social purposes favored by advocates of visual culture, but only when such arts are autonomous, that is, only if in human cognition there is a space for imagination and understanding to entertain and rehearse social and moral ideas without immediate social, political or economic consequences. If in the pursuit of visual culture we lose our autonomy by becoming annexed to sociology or anthropology, we then become subject to the disciplinary constraints of these domains.

As sciences these domains must focus on questions about “what is?” or “what is real or actual”. They must work within established paradigms whereas in the arts the mind of the artist is free to ask “what if? – allowing cognition to conceive of unforeseen imaginative possibilities.

In the opening passage of his book the physicist Lee Smolin remarked that “some seek transcendence in meditation or prayer; others seek it in the service of their fellow human beings; still others, the ones lucky enough to have the talent, seek transcendence in the practice of an art” (Smolin, 2007, p.vii). Art is that space in human cognition where new forms of cultural life are created. In an ultimate sense this activity is the source of freedom that the proponents of visual culture hope to foster. In the final analysis, we need art in a visual culture curriculum to keep the doors of the human imagination open.

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ART

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