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*THE IMPORTANCE OF
TEACHING INTERPRETATION***Terry Barrett**

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The Importance of Teaching Interpretation¹

Interpretation is a process of deciphering what an artwork is about or expresses—not whether it is ‘good’—but what it might mean to the maker and to its viewers. Meanings are the results of interpretations; meanings for the maker, meanings for the viewer. Sometimes meanings for the maker and the viewer coalesce, other times they do not. This article explores how artists and designers make meaningful artifacts with materials, and how viewers infer those meanings through thought and emotions put into words in response to what artists and designers make. The article encourages that we overtly and explicitly teach students to think about what they make, how they make it, and most importantly, what consequences the work has for the world.

Designing with a purpose

Architects, designers, and artists working under commission typically work within parameters established by the client who hires them. When accepting the commission of a design project for a functional space or object, one needs to be aware of such key factors as audience, purpose, and budget: An object or space must meet users’ needs, fulfill a pre-determined purpose, and be competitively priced. Craftsmanship is an essential component of purposive making, whether the project is to be built to endure for generations or to last for a moment in a crowd of competitors.

Fabien Baron designed a bottle for Flowerbomb perfume, which debuted in 2005 and endures. Viktor & Rolf, who own the product, wanted the design of the bottle to begin with the name Flowerbomb: ‘We wanted an explosion of a thousand different flowers, a flower bomb.’ Baron designed a glass hand-grenade with pull pin. The owners were pleased with the design, seeing it as a diamond grenade that combined ‘power and romance, preciousness and rareness,’² but critics of the design saw mangled bodies and severed limbs of soldiers and civilians, including children, and a cynical disregard of suffering by the protected wealthy and their fineries. Designers must be aware of what their designs actually suggest, no matter their intentions.

Commissioned art

Painters, sculptors, and other artists may have greater freedom than designers and architects, but they too work within the parameters of a project. The choice of media, subject matter, and intended message, and such practical considerations as space to work, equipment requirements, and budget impose limitations on what they can create.

Artists who accept commissions from individuals or community groups must address the needs of those clients and keep them in balance with their own creative criteria as artists. Artists who accept commissions for public art face similar challenges to architects and other designers.

Rather than viewing limitations as negative impositions on creativity and expression, successful designers and artists willingly accept them as positive challenges and as needed constraints. It is much harder for a student to do ‘anything you want’ than to start with some guidelines and restrictions, whether self-chosen or required by a client. In early coursework in art classes, many assignments start with certain constraints provided by the instructor. As student artists progress, they usually impose their own guidelines on their work in order to structure their creative processes.

The value to artists of knowing their intentions

Instructors of art generally expect their students to think about what they are expressing and why, and to be able to articulate their intents in words. Knowing one’s intent is an essential part of the learning process. Oftentimes the instructor will supply the intent for students’ work in the form of a class assignment, and will evaluate the work on how well it meets the course assignment. Beyond the classroom, however, students will find it essential to be able to discuss their work with others when they attempt to obtain gallery shows, apply for grants and other sources of funding for their work, or present their designs to a client.

Students thinking about what they want to express will guide their creative process. Their ideas will help them select appropriate media to express those ideas, will help them form their ideas in media with appropriate attention to craft, while they consider their audience and where their work will be shown. In the following paragraphs conceptual artist Tom Friedman and designer Maya Lin express their thoughts on the value of knowing their intentions when they are making their artworks. Painters Eric Fischl, Jackson Pollock, and Miriam Shapiro say that they sometimes discover and refine their intentions for works while they are making them.

Maya Lin, designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial at the age of 21 while an architecture student, and designer of other monuments, private homes, and maker of individual works of art starts her work by trying to anticipate the viewer's experience. The V-shaped Memorial wall of black stone, etched with the names of 58,000 dead soldiers, is now the most visited memorial in the nation's capital. At the time of its planning and installation it was very controversial because of its unconventional design. Many wanted a traditional sculpture of soldiers and viewed Lin's minimalist design as a protest to a very controversial war. There was more political energy devoted to stopping the project than implementing it. However, after the memorial was completed, a journalist reported its success by saying, 'Its political foes fell silent.'³

Lin 'creates, essentially, backward. There is no image in her head, only an imagined feeling.'⁴ According to Lin, she stripped the question of how she wanted the Memorial to work to: 'How are all these people going to overcome the pain of losing something? How do you really overcome death?' During the development of the design, she remembers a skeptical veteran asking her, 'What are the people going to do when they first see this piece?' She remembers telling him something like, 'Well, I think they are really going to be moved by it.' She adds, 'What I didn't tell him is that they are probably going to cry and cry and cry.'⁵

Tom Friedman's *Untitled* is a sculptural work from 1992 that does not reproduce well but is easy to describe. It consisted of one thin wire that protruded, perfectly erect, from the middle of a floor. He made *Untitled* by placing the tip of the wire into a small, drilled hole. He observed the long wire: When the wire bent over, he would cut it down slightly and straighten it. He kept cutting down the wire and straightening it until he found the exact height at which the wire would support itself without bending.

About this wire piece, Friedman said, 'It was so sensitive that it would quiver with just the vibrations in the air, and it seemed to be defying gravity. It was almost invisible—you had to be shown where it was. I remember people would come into my studio, I'd point the piece out to them, and wherever they were, walking around my studio, they'd constantly have to orient themselves in relation to the piece. That's the kind of presence I was thinking about. Because of its fragility, people would have to consider it, hold it in their minds, and be sensitive to it so as not to damage it.'⁶

From what Friedman says, we know that he was sure of his intent in making the piece. He wanted a presence for the wire and its fragility that would sensitize people to it. Viewers who experience the piece may well go away thinking about the implications of the piece, what it might mean for their lives. That is, they might interpret their experience of the work and build personal meaning about it: perhaps about the fragility of a moment; the preciousness of a blade of grass; the care they might want to provide for another.

Had Friedman not made the piece just right, figuring out just what he wanted the piece to do, choosing an apt medium for his idea, crafting it carefully so that the wire did just what he wanted it to do, placing the piece in a place in a gallery where it would be seen, the piece would not have worked as he intended it to work. Also, if people walked into the gallery space, saw the wire, but pondered it no further, they would not have experienced a meaningful piece of art—they would just see a wire protruding from the floor. Both artist and viewer are engaged in an exchange of meaning when works of art are successfully made and interpreted.

There are important conclusions to be drawn about artists' intents in making works. Artists do think about and articulate the intended meanings of their work. Some artists form clear intentions from the start. Others do not always know with specificity what they mean to express when they begin a piece, and they are content to start with an ambiguous notion or a general direction and refine their idea in media as they proceed. Artists also learn more about the meanings of their works *after* they have finished them. Some of their intended meanings are very general and they do not offer explanations for particular works, but artists do concern themselves with what their work means to them and what they want it to mean to those who see it.

The process of interpretation: subject matter + medium + form + contexts = meanings

The following paragraphs examine how two artists express meanings in a sculptural installation and in a nonobjective painting. To arrive at sensible but tentative meanings, the works are considered according to how their use of subject matter, medium, form, and contexts contribute to interpretations of their meanings.

Martin Puryear made a sculpture in 1996 that he titled *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*. What follows is an interpretive examination of what the artist did in making the piece meaningful for himself and for viewers, by using the formula Subject Matter + Medium + Form + Contexts = Meanings.

Subject Matter

Puryear chose the subject matter of a ladder for his sculpture. In that single choice, Puryear invites many associations. Ladders are for climbing up to reach heights we might not otherwise be able to reach, to pick fruit from high tree branches, to reach the roofs of tall buildings. There are 'ladders to heaven' in songs and poems. We 'climb ladders of success.' Ladders also allow us to climb down from lofty heights. Ladders have rungs; one mounts them or descends them usually one rung at a time. One ought to climb ladders with some care; ladders ought to be inclined at a certain angle for maximum stability; ladders can slide out from beneath the climber, in which case one is cautioned to 'ride the ladder down' as it falls to the ground to minimize or avoid injury. Ladders are used to rescue people from burning buildings, and sometimes cats who are afraid to come down from trees they have climbed. Ladders generally carry positive associations.

Medium

Puryear made his ladder of wood, specifically, ash. He left the wood rough and did not varnish or otherwise coat it with a protective seal. The ash is hand hewn. The tree from which it came grew on Puryear's land in upstate New York. The artist felled the tree, split it into two continuous sections to form the sides of the ladder. He hand-turned each rung and joined them into place. His choice of medium and his acts of craftsmanship imply that he has a heartfelt attachment to his material.

Form

Puryear made the sculpture very long: 36 1/2 feet. He built the ladder so that it continually narrows from bottom to top: Each rung is narrower than the previous, and the final rung narrows to about an inch at the top from a two-foot span at the bottom. He did not straighten the sides of the ladder but rather let them curve in and out. Because the ladder is crooked, it would be more precarious to balance and treacherous to climb than one that is straight. By how he formed the ladder, Puryear implicitly asks: How high could a human climb on this ladder that diminishes to one inch at its top? Is the ladder meant to be climbed at all?

Contexts

Puryear provides three very important bits of contextual information that are part of and inform his piece. The first is that it is an artwork, not just a ladder. The artist signals to viewers that it is an artwork by showing it in an art museum. Because the artist made an artwork, and not simply a ladder, he invites viewers to interpret it. Second, when he places the ladder in an art gallery, he erects the ladder vertically and does not rest its feet on the floor.



Martin Puryear
Ladder for Booker T. Washington, 1996
Ash, 438 x 22 3/4 x 1 1/4 in.
(Fort Worth Museum of Modern Art)

The title provides a third bit of contextual information. Puryear expects his viewers to know that Booker T. Washington is a person of historical import. Washington (1856-1915) was born into slavery; he was six when American President Abraham Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation. He studied and then taught at the Hampton (Virginia) Normal and Industrial Institute and was later selected to head a new teacher-training institute for African Americans, now known as Tuskegee University. Washington was probably the most prominent black leader of his time, but his views were controversial: He advocated advancement for blacks through education rather than through demands for civil rights. His books include *Up From Slavery* written in 1901.

Puryear is an African American artist. It is likely that Puryear can relate to many of the experiences and struggles that confronted Washington.

Meanings

The sculpted ladder, handmade, crooked, and suspended off the floor, is clearly a metaphor. Puryear does not mean the wooden object to be seen as a functional ladder, but as a symbolic image. It is rich in symbolism. Ladders have many connotations, usually positive, about rising to new heights, about personal challenges to meet, about personal or societal goals. This is a very precarious ladder, however: It is not grounded or leaning, but suspended in the air. As this ladder rises, it becomes impossible for a human to safely climb because its rungs diminish in width to a mere inch at its top.

Perhaps the sculpture is a visual meditation on metaphorical climbing. We can literally climb ladders to reach new heights. We can imagine symbolic ladders that we might construct to reach a higher status in life or a higher state of consciousness. Puryear's ladder, however, is precarious. It is not grounded, and it has no support that it leans against. Because Puryear has made it progressively narrow, its top cannot be reached. Perhaps Puryear's ladder asks us to carefully reflect on imaginary ladders that we construct to reach new personal heights, economic gains, or social status.

Puryear's sculpture is not only a generically metaphoric ladder: The artist specifically identifies it as *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*. Because of Washington's biography—born as a slave, died as a leader for social equality—the subject of race is attached to the sculpture. We could juxtapose Puryear's title for the sculpture, *Ladder for Booker T. Washington*, with Washington's title for his book, *Up from Slavery*, leading us to a pessimistic interpretation that one cannot totally raise up from slavery. Perhaps the sculpture is Puryear's negative critique of the strategic ladder that Washington built to free blacks from social repression.

It is likely, however, that this piece is positive because Puryear's other sculptures seem positive and optimistic rather than negative and pessimistic. Puryear is likely admiring the miraculous height to which Washington did rise, even with the limited social ladder to which he had access, or with the ladder that Washington built for himself.

Anne Seidman's painting presents interpretive challenges. Can meaning be constructed about such a nonrepresentational painting?

Subject Matter

The subject matter of Seidman's painting is the shapes and colors and textures of the paint she has used to make the work. It is an abstract painting that is nonobjective, that is, an artwork that does not depict objects in the world, but it may well refer to the world.

Medium

Seidman's medium is water-based paint that she has applied onto a surface of flat wood. She built up the paint so that the individual shapes are so heavily textured that they have a third dimension. By allowing a drip to fall toward a shape, she shows the liquidity of her paint.



Anne Seidman
Untitled, 2002.
Aquamedia on wood, 24 x 24 in.
(Courtesy of the artist and Marc and Susan Howard, Philadelphia)

Form

The shapes of the painting descend and ascend from the top and bottom of the composition. Because they are cropped at both edges, Seidman implies that they continue although we cannot see them.

One writer⁷ applies an earth analogy to Seidman's paintings: He says that they are like strata of stacked earth, 'tectonic plates,' full of energy, tense with friction, piled along fault lines that could quake. Interlocking bits of shaped color are condensed into a limited space, and each one of these shapes holds its own against the other and against the edges of the composition. He sees that the artist has stacked chunks of organic material and has suspended them within a thick, white, textured field. Although the chunks share similarities, each one is distinct and unique in color, size, shape, and texture. Each holds its own identity in a pressurized field, yet they coexist, but with tension. The drip of paint from the bottom chunk of the top stack almost meets the chunk rising from the bottom stack. The ever-slight space that the artist left between the shape with the drip and the one below it is one 'contested boundary.' Most amazing is that the composition holds together even though it is clearly in danger of catastrophic collapse.

Contexts

Seidman has shown her paintings in art galleries that feature contemporary art. She exhibits this one painting with other paintings she had made around the same time. Any single work in Seidman's exhibition is in dialogue with other works around it. Seidman knows that her work is also in dialogue with all abstract and nonobjective works of art made in recent art history. Seidman and the gallery assume and expect that viewers understand and appreciate nonobjective abstraction in art. Were one to walk into the gallery showing Seidman's paintings never having seen anything but realistic renditions of people and places in paint, one would likely be baffled. Such a viewer would lack the necessary art historical context that Seidman's paintings presume and require.

Meanings

Seidman's painting does not present itself as a story or a political statement about current events. Rather, it presents itself as thick paint on board with nonrepresentational subject matter. Even though Seidman's painting presents itself as nonobjective and austere abstract, the artist provides associations that may be personally relevant to viewers based on the shapes and colors and textures of paint on the board. The painting, as abstract and nonobjective as it is, delights in ambiguity. It is open to meaning by its lack of representational subject matter or narrative. Nothing in it prevents a viewer from building personally meaningful interpretive thoughts about the piece. The artist would likely be pleased to hear a viewer responding to *Untitled* with statements such as these: 'My life is like this painting!' or 'Our world is just like this, teetering on devastating collapse!' or 'Sometimes I feel that the relationship between the two of us is just like the separated shapes: I'm almost ready to touch you.'

'Right' interpretations

The interpretive thoughts about Puryear's *Ladder for Booker T. Washington* and Seidman's *Untitled* concluded with meanings. Are these meanings the right meanings? The single right meanings? No. Any single work of art can engender multiple meanings. No one of the meanings is the right meaning, even the artist's intended meaning.

When the artist who made a work provides the intended meaning for it—in an artist's statement, for instance, or in an interview—this intent should not limit to a single meaning the many meanings that the work can have. The false assumption that a work of art means only what the artist intended it to mean is known as the 'intentional fallacy.'⁸ Works of art can mean more, less, or something entirely different than what their makers intended. The intentional fallacy can be taught as a reminder that students need to purposively decide what to include and exclude from their works so that they indicate to viewers a direction for interpretation. If they want to communicate a particular idea or evoke a particular response, they will need to consider all the expressive qualities of all

the visual elements in their work, and the context in which they place their work for viewing.

Students might also be encouraged or directed to show their work to artists and non-artists and get reactions to it while it is in process or after they have finished it. They can then match their intents for their work with viewers' interpretations of it and decide whether to alter your work or to let it be.

Eric Fischl was both surprised and hurt by how people interpreted and reacted to a sculpture he made when it was displayed in Rockefeller Center in New York City to memorialize the victims of 9/11 one year after the attack on the World Trade Center. The bronze sculpture shows a life-size female nude falling, her legs in the air and arms outstretched when she hits the ground. The Rockefeller landlord who had borrowed the sculpture from a gallery, quickly removed it from the Center and offered an apology when viewers complained and the New York Post condemned the sculpture. He added, 'For centuries, the horrors of war have been sculpted by artists so that people would never forget. That was the intent of this sculpture, and that has been overlooked and misinterpreted.' Fischl, the artist, also issued a statement, saying that the sculpture was 'a sincere expression of deepest sympathy for the vulnerability of the human condition, both specifically toward the victims of September 11 and toward humanity in general.'⁹ Clearly the work meant more, or much differently, to viewers than the artist intended.

Are all interpretations equal? No. Because all interpretations require reasons, some interpretations will likely be more reasonable than others. Generally we do not say that an interpretation is 'right,' like the answer to an arithmetic problem may be right; rather we say that interpretations are 'insightful,' 'enlightening,' 'interesting,' 'compelling,' 'convincing,' 'a good way to look at it,' or on the contrary, that some interpretations 'don't make sense,' 'don't fit the work,' 'are without evidence,' or are 'nonsensical.'

There are three criteria by which we can test interpretations:

(1) coherence

(2) correspondence

(3) completeness

Coherence maintains that the interpretation ought to make sense *in and of itself*. We have all likely heard interpretations that sound like mumbo-jumbo: On that basis alone, they are not good interpretations because they do not even make sense in themselves.

But a thoughtful and coherent string of thoughts that sounds good in itself must also *fit the work* it is meant to interpret. This is the criterion of **correspondence**. We have all likely heard interpretations that sound good but that do not seem to match what we are looking at. These are not good interpretations. A good interpretation has to make sense and clearly fit what we see in or know about the artwork.

Thirdly, a good interpretation has to account for everything in the work and how, when, and where it was made. An interpretation that leaves out something that is in the work is likely not going to be a good interpretation. This is the criterion of **completeness**. Completeness includes knowledge of the artist who made the piece and the cultural context in which it was made. When interpreting Martin Puryear's sculptural installation, it would be important to say, for instance, that he is African American.

As artists, students can use coherence, correspondence, and completeness as criteria for making art that can be meaningful to others. Whether they begin with a preconceived idea or arrive at an idea while in the process of making a work, they can do a self-check to see if their ideas are coherent. They can check to see that what they show actually corresponds to what they want to express. Everything in a work of art counts toward meaning: Are there distracting elements in a piece that they might eliminate for clearer communication? If they mean the piece to be ironic, will the viewer be able to decipher its irony? Is the work complete in the sense that it adequately expresses what they want to express?

That all artworks have meanings does not necessarily mean that an artist must carry a burden to make profound works of art, tell complex stories, or communicate overt political messages. A work might well simply be about the joy of making or the delight in materials.

Deciding among competing interpretations

Students frequently ask who decides what is the best interpretation of a work of art when there are many competing interpretations of it. If it is the students' works that are being interpreted, they will likely decide which interpretation best fits their work while listening to what others have to say. In judging their own interpretations, they should apply the same criteria that they use to judge other interpretations: Does their interpretation make sense in itself; do their thoughts and words match what can actually be seen in the work; does their interpretation cover everything they have included in their work? They must learn that just because they want a work to mean a certain thing, it does not necessarily mean that to other people. If communication through their art is important to them, they will be wise to get a variety of interpretive reactions to their work and consider them, especially if they are coming from knowledgeable people.

Should a work of art survive in the artworld and become famous, the art community will decide what that work is about, and this interpretation will likely stand as the authoritative interpretation. Important works of art receive considerations from many people over time: the artist who made the work, other artists who see the work, critics, historians, collectors, and so forth. Each one's interpretive opinion will slightly or largely influence other opinions, and we will have a 'best interpretation' at any given moment, but that interpretation might be improved when others study it and make further comments. Thus, interpretations are not subjective, they are inter-subjective, formed by a community of interpreters. Leonardo da Vinci's Mona Lisa continues to be interpreted in new and different ways centuries after it was made. We will never get a single right interpretation of it, nor would we want to: Interpretations are a matter of ongoing discussions.

The value to students of having their work interpreted

Many artists enjoy thoughtful attention when it is given to their art, as well they should. It is a significant compliment that someone would thoughtfully and carefully attend to a work of theirs, seeking what it seems to mean to the viewer and to the viewer's life. As Carrie Mae Weems says, 'I'm excited when my work is talked about in a serious manner—not because it's the work of Carrie Mae Weems, but because I think there's something that's important that's going on in the work that needs to be talked about, finally, legitimately, thoroughly.'¹⁰

We would be wise to inculcate the goal that student artists have their work interpreted by viewers. If paintings, for example, are made but not interpreted, they are then reduced to mere pigment on canvas. Without interpretive viewers, their art will not come alive or contribute to the world. Artists sometimes think that their art is misunderstood. Although their work may be interpreted in a way with which they do not agree, they can hear that interpretation, reflect on it, and decide whether to hold it and be influenced by it or let it float away as irrelevant. They can decide to change their work or to leave it just as it is.

When students are aware that viewers will construct meanings about their work, they can better guide and limit how their works will be understood by their choices of subject matter and how they present it, by the medium they use and how they use it, by the form of their work, their process of making it, by contextual clues they offer viewers, and by where and how they display it.

If serious and knowledgeable viewers study artists' works and give them serious interpretive attention but say that a work lacks coherence, artists may learn from this and consider changing their work accordingly. They can learn from their viewers

Notes

- 1 This article is derived from Terry Barrett, *Making Art: Form and Meaning*, (New York: McGraw Hill, 2010).
- 2 Chandler Burr, 'Style: Smoke and Mirrors,' *The New York Times Magazine*, August 7, 2005, 55-57.
- 3 Peter Tauber, 'Monument Maker,' *The New York Times*, February 24, 1991.
- 4 Louis Menand, 'The Reluctant Memorialist,' *The New Yorker*, July 8, 2002, 62-63.
- 5 Tauber, *ibid.*
- 6 Tom Friedman, *Tom Friedman*, (New York: Phaidon, 2001).
- 7 Frank Galuszka, Schmidt-Dean Gallery, Philadelphia, PA, 2002.
- 8 W. K. Wimsatt and Monroe Beardsley, 'The Intentional Fallacy,' in *The Verbal Icon: Studies in the Meaning of Poetry*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1954).
- 9 David Ebony, '0/11 Bronze Brouhaha,' *Art in America*, November 22, 2002, http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1248/is_11_90/ai_94079478, July 11, 2008.
- 10 In Paul Fabozzi, ed., *Artists, Critics, Context: Readings in and Around American Art Since 1945*. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall 2002), 430.

*WEST MEETS NON-WEST: TEACHING AN
“INTEGRATED” HISTORY OF ART***Robin L. O’Bryan, Ph.D.**

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Overview

In the spring of 2007, I embarked on an adventure of a lifetime. For 3 ½ months, I sailed around the world teaching with Semester at Sea, an academic study abroad program now administered by the University of Virginia. The most daunting challenge—aside from fending off seasickness, outrunning pirates in the Straits of Molucca, and being cooped up on a ship with 700 students—was developing three new courses geared to the non-Western, primarily Asian, itinerary. This was no mean feat. As an Italian Renaissance specialist thoroughly grounded in the European tradition, I had to revamp my Western-oriented approach toward teaching art history. In effect, I had to find a way to teach an ‘integrated’ history of art that mirrored the thrust of our global voyage. As I was to discover, my pedagogical foray into ‘uncharted’ territory proved to be a learning experience that was as enlightening for me as it was for my students. In this essay I will focus not on the travel component of my journey around the world, but rather on the specific courses that I developed to complement my students’ encounters with cultures different from their own. I’ll start out by giving a brief overview of course content, citing objectives and identifying issues that I thought were effective in helping students learn to appreciate variances in world artistic expression. I will also address how the knowledge gained from developing these courses led me re-evaluate the Western art historical paradigm, while providing examples of some of the specific areas which I would suggest merit further study and/or reassessment. Finally, I will use this discussion as a framework for proposing a teaching strategy that others may find helpful in bridging the West/Non-West divide.

Course Development

My first undertaking was a lower level course entitled ‘World Art Against the Western Canon’. This was essentially structured as a survey focusing on the arts of (Pre-Columbian) Latin America, Africa, Islam, India, China, and Japan—in accordance with the countries on our itinerary. Since most students had never taken art history before, I began with an introduction to the artistic traditions emanating from the Greco-Roman era, and used this model as a basis for comparison and analysis with the arts of these non-Western societies. My aim was to give students more in-depth knowledge of world cultures—including their own—while also teaching them how to appreciate artistic traditions that deviate from the Western canon. Aided by Janet Marquardt’s and Stephen Eskilson’s *Frame of Reference, Art, History, and the World*, I adopted a topical approach, focusing on conceptual similarities—and thematic variations—in the fashioning of objects and the building of monumental structures.¹

One of the first issues I dealt with was a working definition of ‘art’, showing that things such as Islamic brass basins, Chinese guangs, Japanese Jomon vessels, and Greek vases were actually created to serve a functional and/or symbolic purpose, at odds with our modern notion of art-for-art’s sake. Equally important was stressing the relative stature of these craft and decorative arts, which were traditionally accorded higher value in both non-Western and Western societies, until the early modern age began to place a premium on painting and sculpture. I was also particularly interested in examining cross-cultural influences as reflected in the arts, a topic that was especially germane given the peripatetic nature of our learning environment.

Lectures and class discussions were structured as exercises in comparative analyses. Sometimes we examined the commonality of special themes, such as the representation of rulers and religious deities, or expressions of ancestor worship. Other times the discussion focused on aesthetics and formal considerations, as for example, ideas of beauty, or the role that color played in various artistic traditions. Certainly monochromatic Chinese landscape painting—‘black is all the color you need’ said one famous critic—was a much different, but no less successful, approach toward rendering the natural world than the pigment-laced scenery fashioned by the Western painter. Still other times the discussion took a more theoretical turn. The cognitive challenge posed to Islamic viewers prompting them to look for specific geometrical patterns within the entire field of ornamentation, involved a parallel type of mental gymnastics for the fifteenth-century Italian audience predisposed to reading volumetric forms in Renaissance painting, in a process that Michael Baxandall has called ‘gauging’.²

I used a similar comparative methodology for my course, ‘Art and Religion’, which explored the expression of religious principles and practices in the art and architecture of world cultures. I began with an overview of the Judeo-Christian tradition, moving on to African indigenous religions, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and then Confucianism, Taoism and Shintoism. Salient topics of discussion included the representation of deities; the illustration of religious histories and myths; the use of symbols; and the development of architecture in the service of religion. I also introduced students to the concept of syncretism—the

blending of differing religious ideas—to see how such fusions were manifested in the arts.

As with my ‘World Art’ class, I tried to address themes that could be used to illustrate common ideas that reached across cultural boundaries—even those that were seemingly alien to Western practice. Thus, notions of blood sacrifice as seen in depictions of Mayan rituals, but held to be repugnant to European eyes, were little different in theory from depictions of crucified Christ shown with blood visibly dripping from his wounds. Likewise, the magical-religious properties ascribed to African nkisi, Hindu Ganesh figures, or Shinto foxes had obvious parallels in miracle-working images of the Madonna and medieval reliquaries housing saints’ bones. Deviating from thematic analogs, I wanted students to consider alternative expressions of religious ideologies. The reverence for the natural order of life symbolized by mithuna statues on Hindu temples, in which sexual union was equated with mystical union, served as a sharp contrast to Christian imagery which showed such ideas to be shameful.

One of the most fascinating aspects of this course was examining the way that religions were nourished and/or transformed by contacts with other cultures. Students were especially surprised to learn of the development of Christianity, whose early forms took a very different trajectory than that with which they were most familiar. Traveling along the Silk Road—the same network of trade routes that served as a conduit for the spread of Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam—Christianity was in India by the first century AD.³ In fact, there is a tradition, still very much believed, that the Apostle Thomas preached and was martyred on the subcontinent, which subsequently gave rise to a great cathedral erected over his tomb on India’s eastern coast.⁴ By the seventh century, a Christian mission was established in China, and a century later Buddhist and Daoist motifs appear alongside an Orthodox Christian cross on a monument in Xian.⁵ Equally tantalizing for students’ imagination was the syncretic imagery associated with Santeria and Candomblé, in which depictions of Catholic saints were conflated with Yoruban orishas, or nature deities, a merging of religious beliefs that occurred when Europeans brought African slaves to the Caribbean and Brazil (respectively) in the sixteenth century.

Cross-cultural interaction was the primary focus of my third offering, ‘Western Art and Cross-Cultural Exchange’, which explored the influences on, and by, Western art generated through trade, conquest, religion, diplomacy, and travel in foreign lands. This course proved to be the most eye-opening for my students—and for myself—and one which required the most research. Because there was no textbook that adequately covered the material and issues I wanted to address, I assigned readings from a variety of texts, both journals and books. To help give students direction for processing this information, at the start of each lecture I provided them with a list of objectives on PowerPoint. Lectures were arranged chronologically beginning with the Silk Road and early Western contacts with Asia, and proceeding through the Middle Ages and Renaissance with artistic exchange stimulated by the Crusades, the Pax Mongolica (Mongolian Peace), and the travels of Catholic missionaries, and merchants such as Marco Polo. From there, we examined artistic influences emanating from the growing European presence in the New World, Africa, and Asia, and the increasing Western taste for exotic objects. The course culminated with the impact of global Colonialist expansion in the nineteenth century, and the radical changes to the European aesthetic inspired by such things as African sculptures, Japanese ukiyo-e prints, Polynesian wood carvings, Peruvian mummies, etc.

Aside from demonstrating the fluidity of cultural exchange throughout history, the main thrust of my lectures was to emphasize that this meeting of West with non-West, was a transformative process that was not one-sided, but rather was a *two-way dialog*. Thus, while the backdrop to the Madonna in Duccio’s thirteenth-century painting was derived from Islamic ornamentation, reciprocal influence was felt in a fourteenth-century Mongolian manuscript illustrating the Birth of Mohammed, its tripartite setting based on an Italian convention.⁶ And while the sixteenth-century plaque from the oba’s palace in Benin showed evidence of European influence with its square format, brass material, and depiction of Portuguese, an about-face occurred in the twentieth century, when European artists overturned the Western canon as they absorbed influences from the African masks and sculptures making their way into Europe.

The most stimulating discussions were on Chinese Influence on Western Art and one simply entitled Speculations. Building on the scholarship of Roxann Prazniak, who considers the cultural interconnections between Siena and the Mongolian empire in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and Lauren Arnold, writing on the Franciscan mission to China in the same period, the first of these lectures examined the influx of Chinese scrolls and other objects that were making their way into Europe, which are thought to have served as resources for Western artists.⁷ Arnold demonstrates how Chinese painting influenced Giotto’s frescoes and his workshop in the Franciscan church at Assisi, even as others have shown that motifs such as bat wings and dragons, which became popular in European art about the same time, emanated from Chinese sources.⁸ Equally compelling is the suggestion made by Hidemichi Tanaka that the background in Leonardo’s Mona Lisa, unusual for its monochromatic hues and fanciful setting, was itself indebted to Chinese landscape imagery.⁹

This China connection served as the catalyst for a speculative lecture, in which I asked students to consider possible questions of influence—not only with China, but also with India—based on historical circumstances and visual similarities. One of the issues I addressed was what I termed Sudden Appearances. Why, for example, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, when there was massive East-West interaction stimulated by the Mongolian Peace, did Western art suddenly change? Why did Giotto, later dubbed the ‘Father of the Renaissance’ because ‘he looked to nature’, suddenly decide to look to nature, instead of the Byzantine prototypes that were serving his peers? Why, during this same period did the pronounced Gothic sway followed by the bulbous breasts—both of which bear a striking resemblance to the figural conventions used in Hindu statuary—suddenly show up in the art associated with the royal courts in France, the same courts, incidentally, which were collecting Asian artifacts?¹⁰ Is it only a coincidence that in paintings commissioned by these patrons—we see the up-tilted perspective, a formal device that was alien to Western artistic tradition, but which was a characteristic of Chinese landscape painting?¹¹

Towards a More Integrated Global View

As is probably evident from the nature of such questions, in the process of developing my courses, I experienced a sea change in terms of how I have come to view the Western art historical model. I question, for example, why our survey texts still continue to give short shrift to the issue of non-Western contact as it bears on the development of European art. The latest edition of Gardner’s, despite billing itself as a ‘A Global History’ has perpetuated many of its same mistakes, treating much of the chapter contents from an ‘isolationist’ perspective. The quantitative influence of Islam on European culture in the Middle Ages and Renaissance has been thoroughly documented, and yet the text makes no mention of Islamic brass trays and Arabic Kufic writing having served many Italian artists as models for haloes and for decorative motifs on textiles and other objects.¹² Moreover, isn’t it time to acknowledge contacts with India—and reevaluate the anomaly that is the Gothic?¹³ Surely the upsurging architectonic masses and profusion of sculptures adorning Gothic cathedrals bear more of a resemblance to Hindu temples than to European prototypes, just as the crockets of Gothic ornamentation look like those found in Hindu statuary. Such visual kinships hint at the need for further study, while also reminding us of the distorted picture that results from viewing artistic creation as taking place in a cultural vacuum, much like the concept of artistic genius that came to dominate Western thinking on art.

Changes in the way I now think about art have ultimately had an impact on the way I now teach the survey course. I pose the same questions and discuss many of the same issues that I did with my courses with Semester at Sea, emphasizing relationships, both conceptual and those effected by cross-cultural exchange. I have found that the most effective way for me to incorporate non-Western arts into my teaching—in a way that makes the most sense given the nature of our discipline—is by situating them within the historical continuum. I teach the ‘history’ in art history, and while I want students to appreciate the ‘things’, I also want to give them reference points to help them understand why art developed as it did.

With each new edition of the survey text and its more expansive treatment of world art, it has become increasingly difficult to cover all the material in one semester, which has related implications for teaching. Since I do not want to shortchange students on learning about their own cultural heritage, this poses a dilemma as to what information to include, what to leave out—and where exactly to insert the non-Western arts into the discussion. (Gardner’s tends to lump them together). In the first part of the survey, it is not really an issue, but for the second part where the focus is on Western art, it becomes more problematic. My solution is to bundle information, giving lectures on the non-Western components that tie in with the particular time periods under review. So, rather than treat the Renaissance as an European cultural phenomenon unto itself, I bring in the influence of Chinese and Islamic arts. I do the same thing for the periods after 1500, with discussions on the European presence in the New World, Asia, and Africa and the related impact upon art. And, in deference to my new-found research interest in India, I have also begun to have students consider putative relationships, as for example the first-century Buddhist chaitya hall which in its conception, function and design is strikingly similar to the eleventh-century Romanesque church interior such as seen at St. Sernin in Toulouse.¹⁴ This integrative methodology not only gives students a better sense of the debt of Western art to non-Western sources—and vice versa—but it also helps them to better see the global picture.

And the global picture is what we should be striving for. One of the best examples I can give for the need to look beyond the confines of our traditional approach to art history is a late thirteenth-century illumination from Alfonso the Wise’s *Cantigas de Santa Maria*.¹⁵ The illustration portrays a Jewish money lender bent over a coffer adorned with the çintamani motif, a triangular three-dot configuration with Buddhist and Hindu origins.¹⁶ Directly above him is a

curtain decorated with an inscription in Arabic and two Stars of David, and to the extreme right is an open box containing an Islamic brass tray. The inclusion of all these ‘exotic’ details provides visual evidence of the cosmopolitan nature of Alfonso’s court when Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars were in attendance, in that part of Spain that was formerly under Muslim rule. But also within this scene we see the surprising presence of a swastika. Although the swastika was found in ancient ornamentation—including Jewish and Christian contexts—rather than posit its appearance in the manuscript as a resurgence, I suggest that the swastika we see here is associated with the Hindu symbol of auspiciousness.¹⁷ Thinking “outside the box” to establish a cross-cultural historical connection does much to confirm this idea, since Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traders had vibrant contacts with India during this period, as they had for centuries.

In January 2008, a conference sponsored by the 32nd Congress of the International Committee of the History of Art in Melbourne, Australia, was devoted to the theme of ‘Crossing Cultures’, a title which reflects the growing awareness of, and interest in teaching a more inclusive world art history. While there are still obstacles to overcome and although there may be conflicting ideologies in how best to achieve this goal, I do think it is possible to find common ground in a way that attaches cultural significance to both non-Western and Western arts, without privileging or diminishing the value of either. In this respect, we may want to take the advice of John Onians, Professor Emeritus at the School of World Art Studies, University of East Anglia.¹⁸ In his recently-published book, *Art Between Culture and Nature: From Art History to World Art Studies*, he advocates adopting a methodology which ‘. . . treat[s] all art equally . . . so that Europe is not treated as the center of art, but as just another “dark continent” where art making and using is—and always has been—every bit as odd and problematic as it is thought of as being in other regions. So, for example, the idea of taking a wooden board, using an animal hair brush to cover it with pigments until they look like someone’s face, and then fastening the board to the wall of a room for 500 years is just as odd as making a mask out of wood, raphia, and feathers and dancing with it on for just a few hours.’¹⁹

Recognizing the universality of human experience and the cultural interactions that are an important part of this equation puts us on the right path for teaching a more ‘integrated’—and exciting—history of art.

Notes

- ¹ (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005).
- ² Baxandall’s discussion on gauging appears in his *Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press, 1988), pp. 86-93.
- ³ Moreover, Jewish settlements were established along the southwestern coast in the second century, spreading to the east coast and Ceylon.
- ⁴ St. Thomas allegedly came to the Kerala coast in 52 AD, and was later martyred at Mylapore, near Chennai (formerly Madras). His followers—known as the St. Thomas Christians, or Syrian-Malabar Christians—maintained strong ties with the Syrian Christian church for centuries. They were later affiliated with the Nestorians, who came in great numbers from Mesopotamia to India between the third and ninth centuries.
- ⁵ While Byzantine monks were certainly in China by 550 (when they are reputed to have smuggled silk worms back to Byzantium), the earliest formal mission to China is dated to 635 at Ch’ang-an (modern-day Xian); see Philip Jacks, *The Lost History of Christianity, The Thousand-Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia—and How It Died* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2008). Also see Richard C. Foltz, *Religions of the Silk Road, Overland Trade and Cultural Exchange from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century* (New York: St. Martin’s Griffin, 1999), who provides an excellent overview of the religious and cultural transformations that were effected by Silk Road activity.
- ⁶ On Duccio’s *Rucellai Madonna* (and others), see Rosamond Mack’s *Bazaar to Piazza, Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), which treats extensively the influence of Islamic crafts on a range of Italian arts (and architecture). The illustration of Mohammed’s birth, which was based on Italianate models transmitted to the East by Franciscan friars, is contained in *The Legacy of Genghis Khan, Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353*, ed. Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 112.
- ⁷ In fact, it was many discussions with Roxann that ultimately gave rise to my course on cross-cultural exchange—and set me on a new course of art historical exploration; to her I am indebted. She has recently published her ideas in her article entitled “Siena on the Silk Roads: Ambrogio Lorenzetti and the Mongol Global Century, 1350-1350,” *Journal of World History*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (2010: 177-217. Lauren Arnold’s *Princely Gifts and Papal Treasures, The Franciscan Mission to China and its Influence on the Art of the West, 1250-1350* (San Francisco: Desiderata Press, 1999) essentially serves as a compendium of much of the earlier research on the topic, particularly that of Hidemichi Tanaka (see note 9).

- ⁸ For example, Jurgis Baltrušaitis discusses the influence of Chinese demons on the development of Gothic demon imagery; see *Le Moyen age fantastique: Antiquités et exotismes dans l’art gothique* (Flammarion, 1955), pp. 151-63.
- ⁹ See his *Ex oriente Lux: the Influence of the Far East on Western Art* (Tokyo: 1986).
- ¹⁰ Statues of the Virgin holding the infant Christ portray her with a sharp twist to her hips in what has been termed the “Gothic sway” or “Court Style.” While the pose does appear in ancient Greek art—albeit with pronounced contrapposto—the addition and position of the child suggest knowledge of Indian sculpture, such as seen in a sixth-century statue of the Hindu mother goddess from Rajasthan; see for example, George Mitchell, *Hindu Art and Architecture* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000), p. 55. A similar prototype seems to have also served Jean Fouquet in his depiction of Agnès Sorel as the Madonna, particularly in the widely spaced bulbous breasts; she appears in the *Melun Diptych* the artist painted in 1451 for Charles VII, King of France. As the king was related to Jean, Duc de Berry and Philip the Bold, both of whom are known to have had exotic collections, he more than likely shared in their taste for objects coming in from Asia.
- ¹¹ As seen for example, in Melchoir Broederlam’s altarpiece for Philip the Bold (the *Retable de Champmol*, ca. 1399), where the uptilted rocky landscape looks like Song Dynasty scrolls. The left panel of the altarpiece also displays a swastika in the floor panels; see below.
- ¹² By Rosamond Mack as noted above. Deborah Howard examines the corresponding influence in architecture in *Venice and the Islamic World, The Impact of the Islamic World on Venetian Architecture, 1100-1500* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000).
- ¹³ Surprisingly, the influence of India on the arts of Europe and even Africa has received scant attention from art historians, despite the fact that Western contacts with South Asia were in place for centuries, even before the rise of Christianity. Evidence of Roman settlements have been discovered on the Western coast of India from at least the first century.
- ¹⁴ The chaitya hall was constructed in Karle along the heavily-traveled Western coast of India. The structure has a ribbed, barrel vaulted ceiling and is carved from rock, which made for excellent acoustics for devotional chanting. The pillared ambulatories at each side also enabled worshipers to circumambulate the stupa in the apse. The church of St. Sernin was erected along an important pilgrimage route in France. Deviating from past practice, the Romanesque builders introduced stone vaulting, which made churches more fireproof and provided excellent acoustics for music, as well as chapels radiating around the apse, which were meant to house the holy relics acquired during the Crusades. This spatial configuration allowed pilgrims walking along the columned side aisles to go behind and around the altar to view the relics on display (so as not to disrupt church services).
- ¹⁵ The image (fol. 39r in the original manuscript) is illustrated in *Remembering Sepharad: Jewish Culture in Medieval Spain*, exh. cat., State Corporation for Spanish Cultural Action Abroad (Washington National Cathedral, May 9-June 8, 2003), p. 52. The manuscript is housed in the Biblioteca del Real Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial, Madrid.
- ¹⁶ Jaroslav Folda gives an extensive account of the motif in his “Crusader Artistic Interactions with the Mongols in the Thirteenth Century: Figural Imagery, Weapons, and the Çintamani Design,” in *Interactions, Artistic Interchange Between the Eastern and Western Worlds in the Medieval Period*, ed. Colum Hourihane, (Princeton University, 2007), pp. 147-166. According to Folda, *çintamani* is the Turkish word given to this design as it was used in Ottoman art. The term seems to have derived from the Sanskrit “chinta mani,” meaning “auspicious jewel,” and was used in Hindu and Buddhist contexts. Originating in Turkestan or India, the motif appeared in a variety of arts, including frescoes in the Buddhist shrine at Miran (third century). The design seems to have had its greatest flowering in silks, which were transported along the Silk Road. Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, the Western world began to use the motif primarily in paintings where garments were supposed to represent silk. After the thirteenth century, the motif was applied to background ornamentation. Interestingly the motif was most popular in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries when there was increased contacts between East and West due to pilgrimages and the Crusades—a period which also saw increased imports of silks from the East.
- ¹⁷ I have to respectfully disagree with the analysis of the author, Isidro Bango, who identifies the swastika as representing either a Jewish or Christian symbol. He also says that the swastika forms part of a pillow decoration, although it looks more like a wall hanging (the ends of the supporting framework are clearly visible). He further identifies the script on the curtain as Hebrew. Based upon the single diacritical marks and more specifically on the curvature and upward patterns of the letters, I suggest the text was meant to be read as Arabic script. Since it is unlikely that the artist was himself Jewish (the *Cantigas* contains several unflattering images of Jews), and since the artist has purposefully surrounded the figure with design elements having Islamic and Asian pedigrees, it seems more than likely he was attempting to convey the cosmopolitan atmosphere of Alfonso’s court—if not the expansive mercantile interests of the money lender himself. (Jewish traders had for centuries profited from trade with India.)
- ¹⁸ Some fifteen-plus years ago, his university renamed the “School of Art History” to the “School of World Art Studies,” a change in nomenclature that was meant to reflect the incorporation of archaeological, anthropological, and cultural studies into their art history curriculum.
- ¹⁹ (London: Pindar, 2006), p. 31.

*OBJECTIVE-DRIVEN EVALUATION:
A COLLABORATION BETWEEN STUDIO
FOUNDATIONS AND ART EDUCATION*

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Since the 1970s, ‘accountability’ has been an increasing concern for art educators at all levels. For elementary and secondary teachers, the advent of national and state visual art standards in the 1990s and the No-Child-Left-Behind legislation of 2001 increased demands to demonstrate student learning. Pressures for accountability in higher education are also on the rise, though they may never match the level of public scrutiny focused on K-12 instruction. Professors and instructors feel a need to develop clear and useful evaluation policies to eliminate student confusion and dissatisfaction and increase a sense of fairness.

This is the story of a collaboration between Master of Fine Arts students and an Art Education professor at Arizona State University to improve art-evaluation methodology. (The then MFA students have since graduated and now hold positions at other universities.) Although the collaborators are not ready to pronounce any one-size-fits-all solution to the challenges of evaluating student art nor do they claim that the totality of art learning is measurable, they have gained some insights to improve their own teaching practice that may be useful to others who face similar challenges.

Most of the Teaching Assistants in Arizona State University’s Core (Studio Foundations) Program are novice teachers. They have never studied education and may be teaching for the first time. As they design their classes, they tend to draw upon their recollections of their own university art courses as models for evaluating student art. James (1996) documents traditions of university studio instruction:

[In] much studio instruction, information [is] communicated largely through visual and oral models, many of the lessons [are] implicit, and students [are] generally expected to make sense of their expectations on their own. Beginning students may not know how to interpret, conceptualize, or integrate the seemingly ineffable knowledge that is constructed during studio practice. (1997, pp. 86-87).

Recognizing that evaluation is an interest shared by all art educators, regardless of the levels at which they teach, Mary Erickson designed a graduate course focused on planning and assessing art learning in its broadest sense. This course provided students Jeana Klein and Mike Wirtz with experience in articulating clear, yet open-ended objectives, and designing evaluation guides which led them to join Erickson in further investigation. Such collaboration was particularly rich because of the complementary concerns and perspectives of MFA students and art education researchers.

Early on, Erickson, Klein, and Wirtz discovered that their understandings of key terms differed substantially. They wondered whether their differences were representative of other TAs at Arizona State and among undergraduates enrolled in Core courses. They developed a survey, asking 12 TAs and 35 undergraduates to choose one of three student artworks, and respond to the following:

1. Describe the artist’s technique.
2. Describe the conceptual basis of the piece.
3. Is the piece aesthetically successful? Why or why not?
4. Is the piece creative? Why or why not?
5. Is the work expressive? How?
6. Evaluate the craftsmanship of the piece. Be specific.

Sure enough, both groups (TAs and undergraduate students enrolled in Core courses) used some key terms inconsistently.

When considering ‘craftsmanship’ and ‘technique’, TAs consistently discussed materials and processes. Some expanded to speculate on the artist’s presumed intent or the style in which materials were used, with descriptions such as ‘[the brushstrokes] seem like they were intended.’ The undergraduate students, however, varied greatly in their understandings of these seemingly basic concepts. When considering craftsmanship, the majority of students failed to mention materials or processes and instead discussed aspects as varied as composition and level of realism.

‘Conceptual basis’ and ‘expressive’ resulted in even more varied responses from students, including the common evasion ‘it is open to interpretation.’ In response to both ‘conceptual basis’ and ‘expressive,’ TAs generally mentioned communication of an idea. The question involving the work’s ‘aesthetic success’ more frequently generated comments on the formal elements from TAs, while students’ comments split between discussions of formal elements and perceived communication. TAs and students alike generally concluded that some level of originality was essential to ‘creativity.’ Peppered among responses by both TAs and students were emphatic statements, such as “all art is creative!” and ‘it was created, therefore it is creative.’

Most TAs interpreted such common critical art words as ‘craftsmanship’, ‘technique’, ‘expression’, ‘aesthetics’, ‘creativity’ and “conceptual” in similar ways. Students, on the other hand, attached various meanings to these terms. The effectiveness of objective-driven evaluation depends on TAs and students sharing a common language of art as it applies to grading and critiques.

Establishing Flexible, Objective-Driven Evaluation Guides

Instructors have a variety of worthwhile course objectives, including presenting content, establishing a stimulating and safe studio, and properly managing tools and equipment. However, objective-driven evaluation requires a particular kind of objective, sometimes called a student-learning objective. Such an objective is a statement by the instructor that identifies what a student should be able to do through completing an assignment. In *Teaching Meaning in Artmaking*, (2001) Walker proposes that ‘...objectives give direction to the artmaking and also provide criteria for assessing student learning’ p. 30. In *The Arts and the Creation of Mind*, (2002) Eisner argues for objectives that take into account the heterogeneity of the outcomes of art teaching, that is, ‘objectives in which criteria to be met are specified, but the form the solution is to take is not’ (p. 160). An evaluation guide articulates differences among individual students’ learning outcomes. That is, it distinguishes levels of achievement that show what students can actually do as demonstrated in their final assignments. Student learning objectives are useful both in planning assignments and in evaluating individual student art made in response to assignments.

After designing objective-driven evaluation guides, Wirtz and Klein discovered they could clarify expectations while maintaining flexibility. They found that carefully articulated objectives stated as complete sentences leave less room for misunderstanding than single terms or short phrases, such as ‘solution to problem,’ ‘creativity,’ ‘craftsmanship,’ or ‘technique.’ Such objectives provide a basis for establishing distinct levels of student achievement. Multi-level evaluation guides allow instructors to evaluate each student’s assignment based on how well that student satisfied each of the objectives.

Wirtz identified the three following general student-learning objectives and then developed a three-level guide to evaluate student work (outcomes) for each objective:

1. Student applies foundation principle/s effectively (for example, mass, unity, line quality, subtractive color mixing, figure-ground, etc.)
Exceptional = the assignment demonstrates the student’s clear understanding of the principle.
Competent = the assignment demonstrates the student’s partial understanding of the principle.
Unsuccessful = the assignment demonstrates no understanding of the principle.
2. Student uses assigned tools, materials, and techniques well.
Exceptional = the assignment is highly crafted and demonstrates the use of proper techniques.
Competent = the assignment has some blemishes that result from the slight misuse of the materials or techniques.
Unsuccessful = the assignment demonstrates little or no attention paid to craft, materials, or technique.
3. Student demonstrates innovative solutions to the assigned problem.
Exceptional = the assignment demonstrates that the student looked for a better solution to the problem rather than relying on the most basic (obvious, common, usual, predictable, etc.) solution.
Competent = the assignment does not show much innovation or exploration beyond the most basic (obvious, common, usual, predictable, etc.) solution to the problem.
Unsuccessful = the assignment demonstrates a basic (obvious, common, usual, predictable, etc.) solution.

Wirtz links his evaluation guides to grading by assigning points to each level of achievement of each objective. He varies the weighting of points assigned to each general objective to match the importance of that objective in specific assignments. For example, one assignment might place more emphasis on formal principles than on innovation, in which case Wirtz assigns more points to objective #1 than to objective #3.

Wirtz found the general objectives to be convenient starting points that are adaptable to specific assignments. For example, in a two-dimensional design assignment given as part of a unit on compositional devices, he asked students to create a compositionally balanced protest poster. Although the protest topic was left up to the individual student, he required that the topic meet a pre-discussed definition of protest: communication that runs contrary to the top-down flow of information. Wirtz identified three specific objectives and developed multi-level evaluation guides for each.

The objectives were:

1. Student applies the principle of compositional balance. (Wirtz believes that a project can usually be considered either balanced or not balanced compositionally, therefore, he eliminated the competent level in his evaluation guide.)

Successful = Student constructs a poster that is balanced compositionally.

Unsuccessful = Student constructs a poster that is not balanced compositionally.

2. Student uses cut paper and associated materials successfully.

Exceptional = Assignment is highly crafted with few (no more than two) small blemishes (for example, small spots of glue on the surface of the paper, or slightly frayed paper edges caused by a dull knife).

Competent = Assignment displays several blemishes consistent with the slight misuse of the paper and glue (for example, larger spots or smudges of glue and frayed or torn paper edges).

Unsuccessful = Assignment displays minimal consideration for craft (for example, ripped paper edges caused by careless tearing or improper use of cutting tools, large smears or stains caused by using too much glue, and surface marks caused by dirt and other debris).

3. Student chooses a protest topic and communicates that topic through a visual medium.

Exceptional = the protest poster meets the definition of protest and clearly communicates the desired topic.

Competent = the protest poster meets the definition of protest but does not clearly communicate the desired topic.

Unsuccessful = the protest poster does not meet the definition of protest or fails to communicate any idea of the desired topic.

Wirtz found objective-driven evaluation to be useful in clarifying general course objectives, yet flexible enough to adapt to the peculiarities of specific assignments.

Reflections on the Value of Writing Objectives

Klein’s experience using objective based evaluation guides has significantly transformed her approach to grading student art. She concludes that although the idea of formalized objectives and evaluations is loathsome to many artists, the benefits are numerous to instructor and student alike. For the instructor, the act of identifying and verbalizing specific objectives and their associated evaluation guides serves to organize the course, ease the challenges of grading, and assess the overall effectiveness of the course. For the introductory art student, clearly stated objectives and evaluation guides help in attaining goals and learning from feedback.

As a TA, Klein’s understanding of objectives and evaluation evolved over three years. Initially, she provided vague objectives on syllabi and orally evaluated assignments, but consistently second-guessed her own ability to objectively evaluate student artwork. She has steadily increased the specificity of assignments and expectations and now feels she can quite confidently state precisely what the objectives of any given assignment may be and can specify grades for various outcomes.

The unexpected bonus of established objectives and evaluation guides for Klein has been a sharp reduction in grading time. When she has determined in advance what constitutes an A, B, C or D for each objective, she does not waste time questioning whether she is actually favoring craftsmanship over composition or an outgoing student over a shy student. She can see, quite simply, whether a project has implemented the unit’s lesson in a successful manner.

By verbalizing the objectives and evaluating the projects, she is able to assess the effectiveness of her instruction. If a unit's objective is completely unrelated to the assigned project, the results are generally disappointing. With formal objectives and evaluation guides, it is much easier to determine where the problem lies. If the majority of projects are flawlessly crafted and soundly composed, but completely lacking in conceptual thought, then perhaps the unit's conceptual (formal principle) objective was not clearly stated or not present in the assignment. If students consistently create meaningful, well-composed compositions with poor craftsmanship, she may need to more thoroughly demonstrate the uses of the tools, materials, and techniques.

Klein concluded that specific objectives and their evaluation guides need not be excessively rigid. On numerous occasions, a student's performance in one area, perhaps involving a new technique beyond those taught in class, is so outstanding as to partially counteract deficiencies in other realms, such as less-than-perfect craft or a hazy concept. With objectives and evaluation guides firmly in place, grading flexibility lies in the hands of the instructor. Therefore, students are much less likely to independently initiate bargaining for grades.

For the beginning student, articulated objectives and evaluation guides are perhaps even more important. Depending on the program, many beginning art students have had very little, if any, formal art education. Many students arrive at college without knowledge of basic art vocabulary or any understanding of the purpose of foundation art courses. Many perceive art-making as a mystical process that can only be properly undertaken by those born with talent. They also may assume that all art is inherently good, and therefore beyond the realm of grades.

Objectives broken down into specific, attainable pieces help students examine both their own artworks and those of their peers more clearly and rationally. When the evaluation is clearly based on the art produced—rather than the assumed, perceived, or imagined talent of the student producing it—critical feedback can be more productively given and taken. Students can evaluate their own artworks in advance in relation to defined objectives, and are therefore ultimately responsible for their own grades.

When armed with well-reasoned objectives and evaluation guides, students know what is expected of them. They can identify achievable goals. They can begin working immediately and spend less time floundering about searching for a solution to the assignment. They are discouraged from making excuses. They are able to overcome many of the prevailing myths about the impossibility of actually judging art.

Finally, students presented with articulated objectives and evaluation guides learn to be articulate from that example. With art vocabulary defined and a framework for evaluation established, students are able to productively participate in critiques. They develop more constructively critical eyes and the ability to form concrete verbal evaluations.

Conclusions and Issues for Further Collaborative Reflection

As goals of foundations art courses evolve, written language can be brought into service to negotiate conclusions about the meaning and value of student art. Wolcott and Gough-Dijulio (1997) propose that even in art, 'concepts become more manageable when we can name them' (p. 147). Eubanks (2003) describes 'artistic codeswitching' as the interaction of visual and verbal codes. She writes:

... the artist/critic puts aside the artist/creator's intentions and looks at the work with fresh eyes. . . . When the artist/creator takes the position of the artist/critic for the sake of conscious examination of the artistic product, the artist/creator can then take that information and use it to analyze and verify meaning in the art, thereby completing the creative process (p. 14). As the collaborators in this report have suggested, verbalization can be a tool not only to help foundations art teachers clarify their expectations, but also for beginning art students to improve their work.

Although the traditions, constraints, and expectations for artwork vary substantially from elementary and secondary programs to university studio foundations, a significant number of concerns are shared. In this collaboration, teachers of both studio foundations courses and traditional art education courses refined their understandings of the role objectives can play in evaluating student work. The authors of this report hope to encourage other art faculty and TAs to break traditional program barriers in search of the rewards and stimulating dialogue of collaboration.

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*SOUNDSCAPE:
REDEFINING LANDSCAPE***Roberley Bell**

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Landscape: The way things look so it tells you where you are.
Soundscape: The way things sound so it tells you where you are.
Touchscape: The way things feel so it tells you where you are.¹

‘Nothing exists until or unless it is observed.’
— William Bouroughs²

Overview

The first year foundation design program at Rochester Institute of Technology strives towards a common goal of developing a visual, verbal, and critical vocabulary that is applicable to the diverse range of disciplines in the contemporary fields of art and design. This curriculum concentrates on introducing students to many ways of thinking, seeing, and working, often beyond traditional art process and materials.

This approach is evident in our exploration of landscape as a physical entity. Students learn to look with all of their senses, recording what they see, smell, touch, taste, and hear through various means. One specific component is the *Soundscape Touchscape Redefining Landscape* project where students engage the environment in which they live, focusing their attention on the everyday. Students investigate ways to alter an existing environment by inserting sound into a specific locale. Through the auditory investigation of physical space and landscape, coupled with exercises on the process of observation and recording these observations, students begin to understand that listening is a form of observing.

In the 1991 article, *Architecture for All Senses*, Frances Anderton states, ‘We appreciate a place not just by its impact on our visual cortex but by the way in which it sounds, it feels and smells.’³

Over years of experience, we all encounter and re-encounter sounds. Recorded in our memory, these sounds build upon one another, allowing us to establish our own vast and brilliant auditory library from which we read and re-read the world around us. Sounds inform us of the conditions of a given spatial environment, giving us a greater depth of understanding to what we see. Sounds allow us to see in the dark, through a wall, or behind us. For example, the sound of a bouncing basketball tells us how much air is in the ball. The bouncing tells us how dense, soft, or hollow the ground is below it. One need not personally bounce the ball to decode it or the ground; more importantly, one need not see it either. We need not see the basketball since its sound is, to most of us, part of our collective sound library. The sounds generate a physical sensation and felt space to the listener. The ball’s echo indicates the environment of a gym, a corridor, or a parking lot. Additionally, it indicates the agility of the user. Sound characterizes, spatializes, and contextualizes—it has the capacity to tell much.

The Soundscape project provides a complementary role to the visual observation of space. It redefines the space without the addition of physical elements but through the sensory experience of sound and vibration. The emphasis on sound focuses our attention and changes our perception of particular moments. It reacts to environments and reshapes them, sculpting both space and time. In addition, the viewer is more aware of the importance of the auditory component of space: Is sound always present? Is silence sound? When does sound become noise?

Focusing on a single sense raises fundamental questions of how we use all of our sensory skills to define space within a specific locale and specific time. The sound of traffic will vary in pitch, volume and texture from 2 a.m. to 2 p.m. Yet the sound of a church bell exists as a static sound mark; like a landmark, it locates the body in space.

The development of the Soundscape project was influenced by the availability of consumer digital software and hardware and builds on this form of expression. The documentation of sound can now be done with greater ease through the incorporation of new technologies affording the possibilities of capturing sound in real time, providing students with a personal, transportable sound library as a basis from which to create a ‘soundscape’. The process of collecting sounds also demarcates location. Recording samples becomes a system of mapping and a record of one’s movement in both in time and space. Here, the artist is also a participant as well as an observer.

Conversely, cell phones and iPods constantly fracture our experience of time and place, disconnecting us from the landscape. Students have grown up in an electronic culture; the cell phone and the iPod are extensions of their bodies. And as such, they move through spaces transporting the dislocated sound from one locale to another.

*'When one moves through a space, the space is divided invisibly by one's movements and breathing.'*⁴

Project Implementation

The students were asked to record sounds found in the environment through field recordings. The recordings were compiled from the students' firsthand sensory experiences in the environment on various scales from the macro to the micro. Environments such as racquetball courts, campus tunnels, kitchens, and bathrooms were recorded, along with personal actions including zipping a jacket and scratching one's head. The sounds of motion were also captured, such as the movement of a passing car or the overhead flight of a flock of geese.

A list might be as follows:

Flipping pages
Train passing
Crumpling bag
Making change
Walking in heeled shoes
Door opening
Door closing
Coughing
Yawning
Elevator bong
Glass breaking
Wind
Chair sliding on the floor
Writing with chalk
Class period alarm
Birds chirping
Coffee brewing
Washing windows
Spray bottles
Washing hands
Keys on a chain
Crunching popcorn
Gulping water
Raindrops
Mouse click
Pen click

Students did not discriminate when recording sounds; they simply searched for sounds in various locations, looking for what makes sound, and leaving the editing until later.

Critical to the process was the understanding that sound exists in a specific spatial environment. In their quest for sound, students began to see how it fills a space, paying attention to quality and volume. They discerned the impact of the size of the space, how sound in space and time interfaces with the human condition, and how sound can control our experience in a space. The ball bouncing on the gym floor is expected, but the sudden jolt of the bleachers being opened and echoing through the gym is not. Such sound distracts; its abruptness creates a pause which punctuates the moment and fills out beyond the object and into the environment.

In the process, the Soundscape project becomes a means to redefine landscape: it becomes the vocabulary which locates an individual as clearly as the way things look. The sensory element so often overlooked in a spatial environment becomes the system of translation and affords another possibility for decoding the spatial experience. Moreover, students were able to begin making the connections to auditory memory, or a collective sound library. Tapping the collective library is intuitive, it allows us to recreate a space from a series of sensory remembrances.

As a means to capture, document, and record auditory experiences, students made use of consumer electronics such as laptop microphones, MP3 peripherals, digital cameras, and cell phones. Within the ordinary campus environment and immediate surroundings, they found or performed actions to be recorded. Throughout the recording process, they followed a single principle—that of the quality, the richness of existing sound they could obtain. Working from their sound bank, they created a soundscape, a collage of edited and pieced-together sounds.

Remapping their sensory experiences from a sequence of locales, the completed soundscape was limited to 90 seconds. Ninety seconds seems like nothing when, in fact, it can hang in the air forever—the sound seemingly repeating and repeating itself. The time frame of the project posed an important parameter for the students to reaffirm that sound happens in real time and that time is measurable. The editing necessary for the soundscape composition was kept again to available consumer-based free downloads or software bundled onto computers.

Our campus ice arena was used as the presentation venue for the project, which was known from the onset of the project.

We selected the ice rink for several reasons. During lunch hour sessions at the rink, Amos and I both noted how the circular pattern of the ice rink appears to create an encapsulated void, a space to be filled. Also, practical matters suggested the rink to us, such as a captive audience and an amplified sound system that any fourteen- year-old would kill for.

On the night of February 2nd, in the middle of a fierce hockey game, a selection of the 'soundscapes' was played to an audience of 2,000 plus. The announcer read a short script of what they were about to hear. The hockey game, a wild and noisy affair, surprisingly was reduced to silence; to our own amazement, the audience, for those 90 seconds, engaged in the experience, mouthing what they thought they heard: running water, air being released from a balloon, and change being pushed across the counter.

With the fullness of the audience, the ice rink had become something else. It was no longer the imagined void to be filled to its fullest through the breath of mundane sounds. But there was still room for the 'soundscape' to fill the gaps between the crowd, providing, if only for a fleeting moment, the sounds to penetrate the ice rink, forcing us to take notice of the '*meager aspects of our life that we so take for granted, the sounds of slicing fruit and opening a bottle*' to quote one of our students, Victoria Kolembia.

Conclusion And Impact On Student Success

The project provided a means for extended learning beyond the classroom. Working in groups of four, the surrounding campus environment became their laboratory. The successful soundscape was able to reconfigure sound in such a way as to shed speculation on the part of the audience as to the sound's origin and how was it made.

It is common to refer to the experience of one sense by using language common for describing another of the senses. For example, we might refer to the quality of a sound as “bright,” a descriptive term most often associated with vision, or refer to a sound as “sharp,” a descriptive term associated with the tactile sensory experience. We asked the students to develop a concept for the soundscape to consider how we refer to sounds, images, or tactical experiences through language and to use this as a guide in editing and creating a final soundscape. Below is an excerpt of one student’s guide, entitled *The Urban Jungle*:

Think of a natural jungle – some sounds rhythmic and repeated, like the calling of a bird or rain falling; some sounds more chaotic and sporadically interspersed, like animals moving through the brush. We also thought of the imagery of a jungle storm, building slowly to something as loud as a thunderclap and just as suddenly going quiet. However, in place of birds and animals, our composition is filled with sounds of technology and modern life: an amplifier, a microwave, and a vacuum cleaner, among other things. This led us to the final concept of the urban jungle or created soundscape.
– Jack Gold, student

Translating its coordinates and conditions to a separate spatial environment, the students became aware of the environment in which they live and work. They expanded their means for perceptual understanding and observation as well as exploring space and landscape.

Notes

- 1 “Sensory Skill Training,” Wayfinding. March 16, 2006. Institute for Innovative Blind Navigation. www.wayfinding.net/cursensory.htm
- 2 Burroughs, W.S. BrainyQuote. September 7, 2005. <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/w/williamsb149743.html>
- 3 Anderton, F. “Architecture for all Senses.” *Architecture Review*. 189, no 1136. October 1991:27
- 4 *MA, Space/Time in Japan*. Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum. April 3–May 27, 1979. Exhibit.

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Emaciation or emancipation of drawing

Drawing from life, observational drawing, life drawing, call it what you will - they are dangerously close to slipping off the radar for many college/university art and design students. We could say perhaps it is time to re-lay this foundation stone once again within the academic content and delivery of our foundation programs.

I see observational drawing/drawing from life as universal. To sketch one-hundred one-minute drawings of a pumpkin spilt in two at an oblique angle is highly beneficial to a design student studying fashion design (layers of tissues, folds, cuts in the form) or an architecture student (structure, volume, spatial awareness, inside and outside). Such a course, or set of smaller projects, could be embedded within a first year undergraduate program common to a range of art and design subject areas.

Sensibilities of the Spirit

We live in a world that is becoming increasingly abstract and contingent. Authentic, visceral experience is being constantly bombarded, eroded, displaced and lost by sophisticated technological mediums and tools. Where is the tipping point between an essential theoretical, critical discussion, and the raw, studio-based experimentation? Where does life drawing and drawing from life dovetail within these challenges?

It is worth amplifying the notion of 'authentic experience' here. An example of an inauthentic experience would be the effortless rendering capabilities of Adobe Photoshop's range of filters that stylistically add extra dimensions to an image using various simple commands and clicks of the mouse. This 2D surface treatment is largely done for the artist or designer, and often excludes or negates any sense of haptic, tactile or bodily engagement with the making process of an image. It is also an immediate 'a' to 'b' switch from one digital state to another. This switch in state is so immediate and definitive that there is no space or opportunity for going off tangent or pausing to evaluate what is happening. Conversely one could associate an authentic experience with some kind of phenomenological experience, perhaps best exemplified by creative experiences that occur outside. The architect Steven Holl is a designer who embraces the notions of phenomenology and sense of space/place in his work.¹ The authentic, personal experiences that could occur if sketching in a fierce snowstorm as the sun begins to set are dense. In such an example, I can see a group of students huddling around each other, or perhaps off on their own, standing or sitting, working manically. With this phenomenological experience so rich and concentrated, the authentic experiences of the drawing process would be monumental, the learning flight path wild and memorable.

Integral Balance

Back to the question about the tipping point between needing to have a discursive, at times theoretical culture within the studio versus the practical work such as drawing in compressed graphite over a collection of found objects. A fictitious interview with Matthew Collings and William Hogarth in *Art Review* in 2009, in which they debated similar ideas brings these shining thoughts by Hogarth to the surface: 'There has to be talking, of course, but the emphasis of the conversation should be on making, the logic of making – visual ideas. Not ideas about ideas.'²

Art instructors once filled the studio with lively talk about the subtle differences between a 2B pencil and a stick of charcoal, how to measure the human body using just the thumb and pencil. Perhaps you can fondly remember those early mornings in the studio where small portable heaters were used to illuminate and warm the model. When life drawing was still an active part of the college art studio, the sense of presence in the studio was so thick you could grind it in a mechanical pencil sharpener. Looking back to some of the art instructors at the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam in the 1990's, they passionately stood by students using a knife to sharpen their pencils instead of mechanical sharpeners. The reasons, arguably, were that a hand-made point was sharper and more personally defined, yet one cannot ignore the romanticism in such an act.³

Wireless Lines of Intimacy

As an art and design teacher working in lively, dynamic, university studios, the position of life drawing, both interlaced within the curriculum and more centrally as a fundamental, autonomously practiced core skill, follows me like a maddening shadow. These thoughts are far from being just my own, and to echo the thoughts of Rogena M. Degge, keeping students motivated and engaged is one of our main creative pursuits.⁴

The content and buzz words of campus lectures often challenge traditional life drawing. If it is not virtual reality, it is augmented reality. If it is not discussing how social networking sites modify authentic face-to-face conversation, it is debating the pros and cons of cutting edge wireless, paperless technologies, such as the Amazon Kindle DX⁵. The Kindle is yet another astonishing design innovation that injects an eerie distance between the sensibility and intimacy of life drawing and how we engage with the act of reading, experiencing and seeing. After all, the Kindle DX has radically transformed the solid communication medium, reading, to a place that dissolves the ability to differentiate between real, tangible paper and its extraordinary replication on the LCD screen. The replication looks like real paper but of course has neither smell, ageing quality, nor aura when you turn the page, or rather, click the page. But the hand, arguably, will always have the upper-hand when it comes to a sensibility and sensitivity to qualities such as spatial awareness and scale. These are sensibilities that drawing from life excite and heighten exponentially.

Earlier in the year, when taking the number 6 train uptown from Canal Street in New York City⁶, I saw a subway advertisement that really hit the nail on the head. It was an advertisement for the Sony PlayStation 3. The slogan read, *‘It Only Does Everything’*. The slogan *‘It Only Does Everything’* was like taking a generous swig of mouthwash first thing in the morning after spending a rough night at some cheap hotel on the edge of the city. Is it possible to provide a creative, forward thinking, intelligently balanced art and design curriculum that provides all the nutrients and vitamins that successful art and design students need to survive in the various demanding creative industries today? What is important, essential you might say, for those students studying art and design undergraduate degrees? I passionately argue that having multiple opportunities to draw from life, i.e. spending hours drawing people in their natural, everyday states in the city for instance, in addition to sketching the form of a model in the studio, is absolutely critical.

Creative Responses with Pencil on Paper

My students recently put on a public art and design exhibition, covering multiple spectrums from 3D fine art work to fashion design concepts. There were exciting responses to the urban environment by those embarking on becoming practicing architects in the future and students feeding into a wide range of other art and design disciplines. One thing struck me while working with the students over the twelve-week project: from the brainstorming of initial ideas, through the development of work, and later the production of models and CGI’s of the final concept, I observed how difficult it was for them to draw from life. These were students who were responding to spatial problems in a city, in particular how to revitalise areas of the city through intelligent and creative designs. It was a great example of how drawing as a noun and drawing as a verb are indivisibly linked.⁷ Their slick computer generated images, produced using 3D modelling programs such as 3D Studio Max and Google Sketch-Up certainly caught the eye. However, as designs that were intended to be lived with and lived in, they lacked something. That ‘something’ traced its way back to how humans interact with and experience space and place.

Realigning the Senses

My avid attempts to incorporate drawing from life and life drawing from a model into their development of ideas found multiple challenges. Once, at the tail end of winter, I took the students to an empty bandstand in the local park. Students were only allowed to bring their sketchbook and drawing mediums – pen and pencil being the most popular. I asked them to simply observe what they saw. Not to think, not to question, but to simply observe, to look around them and, hopefully, to see. Sketches of people sitting on a bench, sitting in a rounded form against the wind reading a newspaper began to materialize on the paper. Student’s spent more time looking and observing, thinking of drawing as a way to see and experience the physical place, rather than fiddling around with lines on the paper. The wheels of drawing as a way to see and experience the physical place were beginning to screech. Magical moments. Then one of the students’ cell phones went off, and that fine crest of observational drawing collapsed.

Ways of Seeing by John Berger is a magnetic book for an art and design teacher. As he boldly lays out on the first page, which is also, interestingly, the front cover, ‘Seeing comes before words. The child looks and recognizes before it can speak.’⁸ He goes on to write, ‘But there is also another sense in which seeing comes before words. It is the seeing which establishes our place in the surrounding world...’

This is precisely what needs to be readdressed in our current art and design curriculum, *the ways in which we teach our students to see*. In a 1928 advertisement by Kor-I-Noor, asserting themselves as being the finest purveyor of drawing pencils, Kor-I-Noor came up with the apt slogan, ‘Famous artists have gone hungry rather than use any but the best materials.’ It strikes me that one of our main challenges today regarding drawing from observation is to excite student curiosities again, to make them *hunger* to draw and to see. As Plutarch states, ‘The mind is not an empty vessel to be filled, but a fire to be lit’.

The Flipside

Use of sophisticated 3D modelling programs such as 3D Studio Max, with other CGI making/enhancing programs like Photoshop, V-Ray, Google Solidworks, etc., was a well-represented in my students’ last public exhibition. I am by no means discrediting such art and design tools, far from it. However, the trend is that students use such programs to visualize and build their proposed architectural concepts, effectively circumnavigate any direct drawing from life. I observed a substantial absence of drawing when it came to the important site and context analysis and the development of ideas phase. Because much of the work was performed in front of the screen, rather than on location, most of the designs looked glossy and slick in their revolving animations, but lacked that awareness of place and space. It is important to add that these observations were not exclusively found in architectural concepts, but also spanned into fashion design, graphic design, product design, and other design areas. Does this sound familiar? Dr. Russell Marshall writes, ‘Advances in technology have introduced interesting challenges upon the users and teachers of drawing, and also highlighted the issue of efficiency of the selected tool.’⁹

In contrast, one student in particular invested hours standing, walking around, watching, observing and being on-site with her sketchbook. She spent time on-site during different times of the day, sometimes during rush hour, sometimes in the stillness of mid-afternoon, sometimes in the bright sunshine, frequently when the sky was overcast and the shadows under the bridge were tinged in a cooler air that was almost tangible. Her amalgamation of drawings built up a collective inquiry into the deeper layers of the spatial dynamic, the live veins that make up the sense of place, and her understanding and engagement with the place struck much deeper chords. Her final CGI work was much more simple, but as a whole, the design was grounded in shockingly more acute sensitivity and awareness of where her design was going, how people would likely respond to the site, how the space breaths, etc. These finer nuances are arguably impossible to tap into when students jump the gun and go through the design/developing/thinking phase exclusively with the computer.

Shifting Baselines

So where does this leave us? Many art and design teachers struggle with this question today. Sometimes it is an issue of practicalities, such as limited of hours in the week, and over the course of an academic year, to effectively get through a complex range of key skills and learning outcomes. Students take positively to the experience of sketching from direct observation, and their relationship and interaction with a project is heightened exponentially with even ten minutes of outside drawing time. Drawing as a thinking tool really takes off in such experiential, practical, raw explorations.

It is not a question of how we ‘add’ drawing from life or life drawing opportunities to our curriculum, but how we can ‘re-mesh’ and ‘integrate’ drawing back into the curricula. It is a question of creative balance, and taking a risk sometimes with how we teach. Evidently, continued and progressively heated debate about the role of observational and life drawing in the mainstream art and design education gave space for places such as the Prince’s Drawing School in London to flourish.

The dilemma is a tough one to wrangle with though. We cannot throw out or turn off for extended periods of the week all the computers in our art and design departments. But when the Life Room at the Royal Academy in London, once regarded as the epicenter of academic drawing culture in England, is now barely used by its students, while the Epson printers are in constant use, the question begs to be asked: how will this affect the bigger picture for our students, who

will go on to be tomorrow's designers? Can programs like 3D Studio Max really give the designer that 360 degree, emotional, creative, intelligent, spiritual experience so essential for successful, healthy, sustainable and bright design?

Continuing the train of thought regarding observational/life drawing as critical to the ideation process in arguably all art and design subjects, we can find particular sustenance in Martin Heidegger's 1951 essay 'What Calls for Thinking'. Heidegger draws attention to being 'pulled into' the act of drawing, and that it is in such an experiential act that ideational drawing takes its raw form of being a live thinking agent, and that thoughts stimulate further thoughts. When computers and, in particular, 3D modelling programs perform too much of the thinking, then the individual's creative output and latitude is trimmed significantly. Arguably, drawing is never simply about just seeing and making an image. Heidegger writes,

'Once we are so related and drawn to what withdraws, we are drawing into what withdraws, into the enigmatic and therefore mutable nearness of its appeal. Whenever man is properly drawing, he is thinking—even though he may still be far away from what withdraws, even though the withdrawal may remain as veiled as ever.'¹⁰

Back to the Rawness of the Studio

Gray card, cutting knives, cutting boards and masking tape are frequently used by design students undertaking projects that are implicitly about the built environment, such as architecture students, who make 3D models to test out ideas and extend their visual thinking into something tactile. I push my design students similarly, often suggesting this cardboard cutting and space/form/ composition experimentation as an important stage in the development of ideas. This often comes before the Mac or PC is turned on. Drawing from life shares similar ground with the model-making phase just highlighted. Drawing from life enables the artist and designer to live with the problem, subject, and space.

Michel Serres, in the book *Genesis*, sheds light on the role of the hand as a thinking and cognitive tool. He writes, 'So what is the hand? It is not an organ, it is a faculty, a capacity for doing, for becoming a claw or paw, weapon or compendium...'¹¹ Drawing, especially observational drawing from life, has always been respected as being the direct, immediate, central and often primal way of seeing, recording, visualizing, developing ideas and problem solving. Furthermore, drawing and sketching by hand, regardless of whether the drawing is finished or an initial concept, is the ultimate transferable skill, a core skill that can be taken from an exercise or experience and then applied to a range of creative outputs and situations.

Bill Buxton, throughout his amalgamation of ideas and thoughts about sketching within the context of design, defines and underlines the anatomy of healthy, vibrant sketching. Buxton states that the power and vehicle of sketching (the active process of doing and making) must be a hybrid fusion of quick sketches loaded with free-flowing gestures. The sketches, as things, should be plentiful, autonomously flowing, have minimal detail and be disposal in nature¹². Furthermore, sketches which retain and reflect a sense of ambiguity and in a non-finished state, pierce and probe the raw essence of sketching as being a reflective, discursive, and highly sensitive tool for dialectic engagements and digressions.

As both a romantic gesture and an effective teaching technique, I regularly perform spontaneous shock tactics with the students. If it is raining heavily outside for example, out we will go, sketchbook under the arm. We do not need to go far, the corner of the street works fine. There, in the pouring rain, we embrace the heightened sense of place, and we sketch like crazy, lateral transformations expanding in concentric circles, conversations and questions, original ideas and project engagements running wild.

I am equally motivated by 'immersion' and 'experiential' teaching, where the interface with the student is direct and raw. I have seen that direct observational drawing can radically complement and galvanize the student's creative response to a challenging design brief, such as sketching twenty on-site space/place/context drawings in an urban environment before they photograph it. Similarly, that CGI work from students can be heightened when they print the image then draw over the image on tracing paper, adding and lifting a spiritual, human, visceral element to the awareness of space, the appreciation of form, the connection between the building and the earth, etc.

Sharpening the Pencils

In conclusion, we are still likely to be meandering with the thoughts that art, after all, cannot be taught¹³. Furthermore, that drawing today, on one hand may look emaciated, yet vibrantly emancipated too.¹⁴ The power of direct observational drawing is an incredibly important part of an artists' cognitive, spiritual and emotional composition. I believe that we can, with passion and innovation in the delivery and content of teaching, strike and maintain a coexistence with observational drawing and computer based drawing. We could even ambitiously adventure toward a symbiotic interrelationship between the two, but this is fuel for another fire of thought and speculation.

Drawing from life with a pencil, or a stick of charcoal, or even some sort of non-traditional medium on paper, like chewing gum, gives the artist or designer the sensitivity of scale, depth, edge, spatial volumes, etc. These sensibilities are not as easily understood or appreciated when we have a mouse in the hand. When we have a drawing medium in our hand, we somehow feel closer to an idea, a place, a person, a thing. If a drawing tablet is hooked up to a program like Adobe Illustrator, we can make an infinite number of lines on the screen. Yet how many of these lines could be differentiated between weight, tension, emotion, memory and purpose? If we said to a student who was in the midst of creating a concept sketch on a 3D modelling program to suddenly switch to an old paintbrush loaded with enamel paint and a piece of cardboard, would his or her design process and engagement with the idea change?

Finally, drawing on paper lets us go forward and backwards, and most poetic of all sometimes, to have those moments of hesitation. It is, I find, during those moments of hesitation while drawing from life that we stop and see, stop and assess, pause and reflect, get caught up in the eddy of an idea... to not jump in a straight line, calculated move from 'a' to 'b', but to linger in the middle ground.

Notes

- 1 See Steven Holl, *Questions of Perception: Phenomenology of Architecture*, (William Stout Books, 2007)
- 2 For the full interview see Matthew Collings, 'An Oral History of Western Art no.13 Hogarth', *Art Review*, issue 37, December 2009, 46 - 48
- 3 In his article, 'Pride, Prejudice and the Pencil', James F. Walker extends an intriguing exploration of the relationships artists have with pencils and pens. See *Writing on Drawing*, Steve Garner, ed., (USA and UK, Intellect Books, 2008), 71-92
- 4 See Rogena M. Degge, 'The Classroom Art Teacher as Inquirer', *National Art Education Association*, Vol.24, No.1, 1982, 1
- 5 The Amazon Kindle DX is one of the short listed designs of 2010 in the respected *Brit Insurance Designs of the Year*, exhibition at the Design Museum, London
- 6 Peter Matthews. *Selections Spring 2010: Sea Marks*. Drawing Center, New York. January 15-April 5, 2010. Exhibit.
- 7 Inspired by Richard Serra's drawing practice. See Richard Serra. *Writings./Interviews*, (Chicago: at the University Press, 1994), 51
- 8 John Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, (Penguin Books Ltd., 2008), 1
- 9 Dr Russell Marshall, *Drawing – The Purpose*, Ed. Leo Duff and Phil Sawson, (Intellect, Bristol, UK and Intellect, Chicago, USA, 2008), P. 69
- 10 Martin Heidegger, 'What Calls for Thinking', *Basic Writings*, David Krell ed., D.F., (London, Routledge, 1999), 374
- 11 Michel Serres, *Genesis*, (University of Michigan Press, USA, 1995), 34
- 12 For further insights into Buxton's anatomy of sketching conditions please see Bill Buxton, *Sketching User Experiences – getting the design right and the right design*, (Morgan Kaufmann Publishers), 2007
- 13 A figurative spin from James Elkins, *Why Art Cannot Be Taught*, (University of Illinois Press, 2001)
- 14 The emancipation of drawing forms the conclusion of the exhibition book by Laura Hoptman, *Drawing Now: Eight Propositions*, (Museum of Modern Art Publishing, NY, 2002)

*ACKNOWLEDGING THE CULTURAL
DETERMINATION OF VISUAL
PERCEPTION: AN OPPORTUNITY TO
LIBERATE THE MUTUALITY OF ART*

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The notion of *cultural determination* can be viewed as a given, one recognized and acknowledged as applicable to everyone surrounding the creation of art. Recognizing this, artists, viewers, teachers of art, and their students move past a view of *determinisms* as cause for dismissal or negation, and toward a view that *relativisms* must be acknowledged. That there is something about an artwork, a created work, that can be perceived, examined, taught, and learned is not only the premise—but, the foundational requirement—for teaching and learning within the visual arts.

In the words of Martin Luther King, Jr., *We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality*.¹ His 'beloved community' envisioned an integration of all races and creeds: a spiritual, social, economic, and cultural imperative. The enterprise of 'teaching art' can be a key vehicle for forwarding this cultural imperative across multiple disciplines and viewing communities. The visual-arts instructor, however, must be prepared to drive this vehicle forward with as few blind spots as possible, both asking and answering the following questions on an ongoing basis.

1. Can one teach an understanding of visual cultures other than one's own?
2. Do aesthetic concepts and art-making techniques 'translate' across societies or historical periods?
3. Do visual predilections and biases affect the way we see things, especially the art of other cultures or historical periods?
4. What is the relationship between culture and vision?

Two overarching responses are typically prompted by these questions:

1. We are all culture-bound and our visual world is determined; consequently, we can never transcend it.
2. We are all culture-bound and situationally determined; but, that does not forever preclude mutuality of understanding across cultures, or preclude some commonality of response to the same artwork.

The reality that we, including our perceptions, are culture-bound—that is, determined by our personal pasts within a general historical and cultural context—bridges these two responses. It does not mean, however, that we each inhabit solitary, isolated, or group-exclusive worlds. Solipsism is not homo sapiens' social norm, nor necessarily, one's academic fate. Commonality and mutuality are inevitable, if not intentionally achievable. The mutually dependent enterprises known as teaching and learning are, ultimately, based on this precept.

We assume, as teachers in the visual arts, that there are aspects of an artwork which are not only *sensible*—perceptible to the senses—but, sensible to *all* our students. Drawing upon the example of the University of Hawaii (UH) student population, a rich multi-layered, multi-cultural microcosm, this might mean 'sensible' to a first-generation ethnic-Chinese Vietnamese immigrant, a native Hawaiian, a fourth-generation Japanese American, an African American, a Filipino-Japanese-Chinese American, or any person of just about any heritage, age, or gender. The teaching/learning enterprise requires such a basic presupposition of potential mutuality.

The students at the University of Hawai'i are representative of the larger Hawaii community, a state with no ethnic or racial majorities, one in which the strongest cultural context is 'local'. The predominant extra-curricular social influences and constructions within this local culture are African-American: in fashion, in music (hip hop and rap), and in gesture. In other words, they reflect mainstream- American popular culture.

If it is postulated that many of these UH students are not necessarily aware of their own inherent, family-linked cultural context, then, for such a student to investigate his or her own particular heritage or heritages, he or she must investigate largely through primary, *local*, resources (not necessarily synonymous with their own primary, family-linked resources) and other secondary sources to reconstruct a particular legacy, or a locally influenced particular legacy.

Furthermore, these UH students' own art-making interests not infrequently include local (read popular)-culture genres such as graffiti, body-building drawings, and *manga* (Japanese comics). When asked to discuss an extra-cultural visual object or event, such a student, one not necessarily aware of their own inherent cultural biases or cultural lenses, must first re-form, or form de novo, an understanding of the depth and complexity of their own inherent cultural baggage. This is a vital step toward grasping one's own cultural impositions on another culture's artifact, let alone an artifact from one's own cultural heritage.

One way to heighten students' awareness of their own popular-culture biases is to highlight visually based constructs from other times or cultures. This helps to illustrate the question: 'What conventions of our 21st-century-cultural context are we aping in our own contemporary depictions?' David Wade Chambers

effectively demonstrates this concern in his elaboration on social, political, and cultural lenses in his essay ‘Reading the Hieroglyphs of Nature’.² Chambers points out that Albrecht Dürer’s depiction of a rhinoceros (1515) served to establish ways of seeing, and conventions of representation, that were imitated for well over 200 years.³

If, for example, students are encouraged to access the Aboriginal-Australian dot-and-line symbolic systems in dreamtime paintings, what are we—or, could we—actually be asking of them? A bidirectional analysis would, at a minimum, include the following inquiries:

- Can we (students and instructor) fathom this series of interrelated codes?
- Could we imagine Australian Aborigines looking at a drawing in a western- European linear-perspective system?
- How might we investigate the effect these created works might have on their viewers?

Some theorists may argue that asking our students to thereby ‘connect’ is, in itself, a culture-bound, Western goal. That aside, we can look for genuine points of contact, ‘connections’, with an assumption that something can be transculturally transmitted, and that the actuality of cultural determination is not cause for dismissal of the given artwork and its various components.

Mark Tansey’s *The Innocent Eye Test* (1981)⁴ was clearly created in a Western context. Painted in an intentionally representational/illustrational style, the image begs viewers to regard its narrative as an actual, documented, fact. Human sentience versus human reason: The viewer is caught in a conundrum—photographic mimesis as factual. The Western response to this conundrum is to look to content, in this case, subject matter. *The Innocent Eye Test* ‘asks’ students to reflect on questions of causality and to attribute rational processes to the actors in this tableau. Many students and inexperienced viewers of artworks jump to conclusions and are intentionally misdirected by their own interpretive processes.

Viewers, including our visual-arts students, are challenged to navigate their way through western-narrative codes or structures visually depicted as a frozen moment on a two-dimensional surface. Tansey’s ‘test’ intentionally misdirects the viewer. The painting is human scale (78” x 120”), making the viewer part of the ‘action’. And, as if that is not influential enough, the spatial clues of relative size and overlapping figures place the viewer closest to the backside of the cow, partially sharing the cow’s imagined line of sight. Tansey misdirects the viewer just as Rene Magritte causes the viewer to puzzle over the pipe’s visual and verbal codes in *Treason of Images* (1929).⁵

The Innocent Eye Test, like *Treason of Images*, uses layerings of codes: depiction codes, language codes, and storytelling codes. Both paintings embody a fundamental question about art-making — a question that informs the core of mutuality in teaching and learning within the visual arts: What is representation? Tansey’s title, *Test*, certainly evokes an educational enterprise well known to students; here one designed to comprise this core question, as well as to sum up what has been learned from the image, itself.

We can move our students toward looking for values within the artwork, intended or not intended; positive-value outcomes being just as likely as negative ones. In this deconstruction approach, however, where all is contingent, and the deconstruction agenda is essentially analytical and divisive, there is the potential for infinitely receding levels of meaning wherein no meaning and no value may emerge.

Further, some proponents of various postmodern approaches—academic and sociopolitical—attribute ‘problems’ in their attempts to understand art: the hierarchy problem, the gender problem, the multicultural problem, etc. But, instead of leading our students to either extreme relativism or such problem attribution, what if values, or *perceptible effects* of art, were sought, recognized, discussed, and further transmitted? Human love, compassion; profound qualities of any kind.

A ready argument lies within the agenda—acknowledged or unacknowledged—of much of postmodern theory: Notions of form, quality, profundity, endurance (if not timelessness), and universality derived from a created work of art can be—must be?—dismissed. More specifically, deconstruction and ethnic-centric approaches are dismissive of those not of the same persuasion. Such deconstructionist relativism need not be accepted as the new absolute in either the teaching or criticism of art.

Notions of quality, worth, and endurance can be sought and experienced by our students as the intended or unintended *results* of an artist’s or art creator’s perceptible effects. An historical hypothetical: A patron-sponsored artist paints the faces of the patron’s wife and child into a Christian-inspired mother-and-child scene. Can’t the *transmitted effect* be the engendering of reverence and extreme piety—a stirring of the heart—on the part of a viewer/student, despite the socioeconomically linked origin of the human images?

This question is further elucidated by one of Marshall McLuhan’s favorite jokes: ‘What did Rodin say to his model after he completed his sculpture the *Thinker*? ‘OK stupid, you can get up now.’⁶ What if the model for Rodin’s *Thinker* was, indeed, a boorish illiterate airhead who spent all his time pumping iron and building muscles? Does that change our perception of that iconic sculpture as illustrating or representing the human mind deep in contemplation and introspection? Does it matter to the student how smart the actual model was? Such behind-the-scene determinisms—the socioeconomically driven origin of the painted Madonna’s image and the intellectually superficial existence of the sculptor’s model are not reasons for our students to dismiss or negate the transmitted effects of the created work. Ought such theoretical concepts of dismissibility and deconstruction apply to these theories, themselves?

Art-making codes, the visual construction of an artwork, and the interpretation of such codes and constructions, depend on mutually understood conventions. Tansey’s *The Innocent Eye Test* asks the student-viewer to consider the site and the context of this narrative event: Where is the artwork being seen and by whom?⁷ The depicted venue is, indeed, the Western presentational art-making milieu, such settings representing contemporary notions of historical codes, fashion codes, workplace codes, as well as the presentational museum codes. The image—cow observing cow—is displayed on an anointed pristine white wall in the open space of a museum where signage—NO ANIMALS ALLOWED—is hardly necessary.

In *Art and Discontent*, Thomas McEvilley addresses the multiplicity and mutuality of codes and conventions by which our visual-arts students could access and discuss the content of an artwork.⁸ He suggests that all statements about artworks involve attributions of content, whether acknowledged or not; content arising from one or more of the following inherent or external sources:

1. Aspects of the artwork that are understood as representational
2. Verbal enhancements supplied by the artist
3. Genre or medium of the artwork
4. Material of which the artwork is made
5. Scale of the artwork
6. Temporal duration of the artwork
7. Context of the work
8. Relationship of the artwork with, or to, art history
9. Externally accrued attributes of meaning over time
10. Association with a specific iconographic tradition
11. Formal properties of the work
12. Attitudinal gestures (wit, irony, parody, and so on) that may appear or occur as qualifiers of any of the foregoing sources
13. Physiological responses, and/or cognitive awareness of such responses

McEvilley titled that section of *Art and Discontent* after a poem by Wallace Stevens, ‘Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird’ (1917), in which each stanza places the speaker and his subject, the blackbird, in different relationships to the site or context of observation or imagination.⁹ By way of an art instructor’s facilitation, a multicultural student cohort can accomplish this same analysis vis à vis a selected artwork, grouping observations or impressions within similar ‘relational terms’. In iconic terms: relationships to the representation of the apparent actual world; in indexical terms: causal relationships; and, in symbolic terms: arbitrary relationships of attributed meaning to signs in mutually agreed upon contexts. The task of the visual-arts instructor is to bring to light the process of making meaning—both individually, and collectively—within a culturally diverse student group.

We teach and learn art within an *inescapable network of mutuality*, one spanning time, place, context, media, convention, application, and inevitably, culture. What we are teaching as visual-arts instructors and what our students are discovering are *recoveries of*, and *recommittals to*, cultures beyond our own immediate temporal and contextual spheres. That there can be a mutuality based on the shared recognition of the significance of art and created works in all

cultures requires the acknowledgment of cultural determinism as a given. This liberates all who surround the creation of art—artists, viewers, teachers of art, and their students—to seek the *inclusiveness of mutual understanding* through the appreciation of created works of human expression.

Notes

- 1 King, Martin Luther, Jr. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, April 16, 1963. (New York, New York: Harper Collins, 1994).
- 2 Chambers, David Wade. In *Essays on Perceiving Nature*, edited by Diana DeLuca. (Honolulu, Hawai'i: Perceiving Nature Conference Committee, 1988), 3-12.
- 3 Dürer, Albrecht. 1515. *Rhinoceros*, woodcut.
- 4 Tansey, Mark. 1981. *The Innocent Eye Test*, painting.
- 5 Magritte, Rene. 1929. *Treason of Images*, painting.
- 6 McLuhan, Marshall. Television Interview. c. 1975.
- 7 Tansey, ibid.
- 8 McEvelley, Thomas. *Art and Discontent: Theory at the Millennium*. (Kingston, New York: McPherson, 1993).
- 9 Stevens, Wallace. "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." *Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens*. (New York, New York: Knopf Doubleday, 1954).

*PRACTICES OF LOOKING: AN
INTRODUCTION TO VISUAL CULTURE*BY MARITA STURKEN AND
LISA CARTWRIGHT

Reviewed by

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I entered the classroom with the conviction that it was crucial for me and every other student to be an active participant... education that connects the will to know with the will to become.— bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*

Inset in a recent NEA Advocate article, I encountered an excerpt entitled *Classrooms Should be Safe Places for Voicing Risky Ideas*. In short, a literature professor recounts a scenario in which a student's uninformed (and somewhat risky) question sparks a lively conversation. While the question reveals the student's clumsiness and misunderstanding of literary chronology, it ultimately provides an opportunity for the professor to explore a complex relationship between unrelated texts with full participation from the class at large. The stage is set for a genuine learning experience that both conveys important information and promotes critical dialogue.¹

I was struck by the similarities between this professor's experience and my own in foundations level art history and criticism courses, where I regularly encounter questions from students struggling to synthesize complex ideas embedded in works of art. How can we, as educators, successfully engage inexperienced students in meaningful dialogue while building knowledge? How can that exchange of ideas build a meaningful foundation in art history and criticism, particularly for visual learners? In *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright present a framework for exploring images that bridge this gap.² In ten concise chapters, Sturken and Cartwright provide critical tools for viewing and interpreting visual art without mandating the rules of engagement. Risky questions are encouraged from the onset.

Practices of Looking deftly moves readers closer to a fluid read of art history and criticism—a perspective that more closely reflects contemporary art making practices and research methodologies. Sturken and Cartwright highlight interrelated histories, rather than rote chronology. Consequently, a deeper correlation is forged between image, concept, and content. *Practices of Looking* is a refreshing look at the visual that situates readers' experiences within larger themes, both historical and contemporary. The 'dynamics of looking' are examined from three primary perspectives: applying theories to study images and their meanings; considering spectatorship and 'social patterns of looking'; and examining circulation of media across social spheres and cultures. With a strong emphasis on critical and theoretical counterparts to visual expression, the authors compose an elegant, if not easy, volume wherein critical thinking and context go hand-in-hand with appreciation of the art object/subject.

To this end, the text is relentlessly inclusive. A succinct introduction, complete with chapter overviews, reminds readers of the ongoing capacity of the visual to reflect and shift cultural experiences. From the start we understand that visual experiences are not fixed. Nor are they limited to traditional definitions of the art object. Full-color illustrations are lifted from a variety of sources, and range from print media, photography, film, television, and the web to painting, drawing, printmaking, sculpture, and performance, among others. The theoretical underpinnings of *Practices of Looking* are equally diverse, drawing ideas from, 'cultural studies, cinema and media studies, communication, art history, sociology, science studies, and anthropology.'³ The result is a dynamic examination of visual expression that students readily identify with, in part because of what they bring to the conversation.

One of my favorite chapters, 'Viewers Make Meaning', illustrates the point. It engages foundations-level students in exercises of visual acuity, including production of meaning, visual codes, 'viewer' from 'audience,' and the importance of context. Here, Louis Althusser is introduced in conjunction with a 2006 Olay ad.⁴ Subsequent images, often challenging in their own right, are equally adept at engendering an appreciation of theorists like Hall, Barthes, Foucault, and Gramsci. Some of the most remarkable conversations in my foundations level lecture courses have been in direct response to this chapter, where students begin to understand how ideas presented in the book intersect with their personal experiences of art and visual culture. By establishing this sense of dynamism between looking practices and larger cultural, social, political, and personal histories, students actively engage in the concepts encountered in the text.

In sum, applying *Practices of Looking* to foundations-level art history and criticism pedagogy is a worthwhile endeavor. The ambitious scope of the book emphasizes the intersections between visual culture, art history and criticism, and art making. It offers broad-based exposure to theory and contemporary art practice that will resonate throughout foundations and upper-level coursework. I would only suggest supplementing *Practices of Looking* with focused inquiries into specific artists or larger bodies of work and providing more instructor's materials online to augment the text. Perhaps what makes this book most attractive is its pedagogical flexibility—affording ample opportunities for students and faculty alike to participate in a way that, like art, embraces risk and seeks answers that ultimately allow us to formulate stronger questions.

Notes

- 1 Darby Lewes, Ph.D., 'Professor of English and Women's Studies', *NEA Higher Education Advocate*, Vol. 28, No. 1. October 2010, 7.
- 2 Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: an introduction to visual culture*, (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 2.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

TEXTBOOKS FOR GRAPHIC NOVELS
AND COMICS: A BRIEF REVIEW
OF WORKS BY EISNER, McCLOUD,
AND ABEL AND MADDEN

COMICS AND SEQUENTIAL ART
BY WILL EISNER
W. W. Norton & Company 2008

*GRAPHIC STORYTELLING AND
VISUAL NARRATIVE*
BY WILL EISNER
W. W. Norton & Company 2008

*UNDERSTANDING COMICS
AND MAKING COMICS*
BY SCOTT McCLOUD
Harper Paperbacks 1994

MAKING COMICS
BY SCOTT McCLOUD
Harper Paperbacks 2006

*DRAWING WORDS AND W
RITING PICTURES*
BY JESSICA ABEL AND MATT MADDEN
First Second 2008

Reviewed by
Mary (Moxie) Stoermer, Ph.D.
Independent Scholar

The attack of the comic book fans is coming to a college campus near you. Maybe you already know them; students with a drive to make comics that puts them at odds with the traditional foundations curriculum of art school. They aren't going away.

Currently I am teaching 100 fourth graders how to make comics as part of a language arts unit in a Northwestern suburban school. Almost all students are enthusiastic and highly productive when I teach a lesson on making comics. Common wisdom holds that these students will abandon their toys and childish reading habits for more mature interests (Vollrath, 2006). With this level of interest, though, we can predict that art programs in higher education will see more and more students who desire to learn the transferable, foundational skills through comics, as they aspire to be artists, designers, illustrators and cartoonists.

The problem for instructors of college-level foundation art courses is that comics are a distinct and primarily narrative art form. Although some comics demonstrate the use of sophisticated drawing skills and a virtuoso comprehension of anatomy, this graphic surface is secondary to successful storytelling (McCloud, 1994). The role of storytelling in contemporary art has been sharply limited by 20th century critics and art theorists. Worringer (1953), for example, positioned the shift away from realism and toward abstraction as one more appropriate to modern life. Realism offered assurances and an empathetic relationship to the past, while abstraction and an apparent lack of meaning reflected the anxieties of modern life.

Comics use multiple panels and repeating images; they are meant to be read. That programmatic requirement to communicate a sequential narrative has perhaps meant that most stories told by comics are conventional. Will Eisner, who popularized the term *graphic novel*, argued tirelessly that comics were a literary art form that was constrained only by the human condition. The literary qualities of comics were acknowledged in 1992 when *Maus* (Spiegelman, 1986) received a Pulitzer Prize Special Award. Our students who aspire to make comics may have similar artistic ambitions—or not. The significance of this new status of comics is that art departments can no longer consider making comics to be a narrowly specialized field of commercial art. With lines between disciplines becoming increasingly blurred in contemporary culture, it is an appropriate vehicle for exploring many essential principles of art at the foundations level, including narration, composition and sequential, time-based structures, among others.

The five works briefly reviewed here are practical, pedagogical works that aim to teach. All address the medium of comics at a pragmatic level. Although there are other more theoretical works on comics, such as *The System of Comics* by Groensteen (2007), these books by Eisner, McCloud, and the recent textbook by Abel and Madden are the work of practicing artists. The authors, in particular Scott McCloud (Varnum & Gibbons, 2001), have been criticized for the of a lack of a scholarly approach, while at the same time his work *Understanding Comics* is one of the most cited works on comics. I propose we regard the work of Eisner and McCloud as original and practical research, ones that attempt to outline the first principles of comics.

Will Eisner: The Language of Comics

Will Eisner is the acknowledged master of the medium of comics. His foundational works *Comics and Sequential Art* (2000) and *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (1996) evolved from the lectures Eisner prepared for the courses he taught at New York's School for the Visual Arts. Eisner has a unique pedigree in the field of comics. As a young man with one year of training at the Art Students League, he participated in the creation of early comic books, including a knock-off of Superman: Wonder Man. He continued to create graphic stories until his death in early 2005, when he died of complications from a quadruple bypass surgery.

In the first chapter of *Comics and Sequential Art*, 'Comics as a Form of Reading,' Eisner provides an essential summation of the art of comics.

In its most economical state, comics employ a series of repetitive images and recognizable symbols. When these are used again and again to convey similar ideas, they become a language—a literary form, if you will. And it is the disciplined application that creates the 'grammar' of sequential art. (2000, p. 8)

Here Eisner names the essential features/functions of a grammar of comics. First are the repetitive images. Second is the singular message that comics communicate—for example the joke-a-day comics of the newspaper funnies. Third is the application of sequential images to tell a story as a literary form in its own right. Such an art form demands discipline and mastery to tell a story.

TEXTBOOKS FOR GRAPHIC NOVELS AND COMICS: A BRIEF REVIEW OF WORKS BY EISNER, McCLOUD, AND ABEL AND MADDEN

COMICS AND SEQUENTIAL ART BY WILL EISNER W. W. Norton & Company 2008

GRAPHIC STORYTELLING AND VISUAL NARRATIVE BY WILL EISNER W. W. Norton & Company 2008

UNDERSTANDING COMICS AND MAKING COMICS BY SCOTT McCLOUD Harper Paperbacks 1994

MAKING COMICS BY SCOTT McCLOUD Harper Paperbacks 2006

DRAWING WORDS AND WRITING PICTURES BY JESSICA ABEL AND MATT MADDEN First Second 2008

Reviewed by **Mary (Moxie) Stoermer, Ph.D.** Independent Scholar

The second chapter in *Comics and Sequential Art*, ‘Imagery’, sets the requirement that the reader and artist understand the meaning of an image through a literal common sense, i.e. a cultural and experiential immersion in the meaning of the visual world surrounding us. The third chapter, ‘Timing’, illustrates how time can be visually rendered and the fourth chapter, ‘The Frame’, establishes that ‘the work of the sequential artist must be measured by comprehensibility’.

Thus in less than 40 heavily illustrated pages, Will Eisner sets out the elements, applications, and evaluation criteria for comics as a literary art form. It is as if Michelangelo Buonarotti recorded his anatomical studies with the virtuoso drawing skills of Leonardo da Vinci, taught these drawing skills to students, emphasizing that drawing was merely a tool in the service of sculpture, and finally prepared a widely published academic treatise on the subjects of drawing and sculpture.

Eisner does what any good teacher does. He “explains, presents, questions, provides evidence with credible authority, but not patronizing authoritarianism” (paraphrased Tufte, 2006, p. 7). What he doesn’t do is provide a series of exercises for students or teachers to copy. Thus comics remain a mysterious art—or as described by McCloud, an ‘invisible art’. In *Graphic Story Telling and Visual Narrative*, Eisner shows us how story types impose a program on design, sequence, and the message of comics.

Scott McCloud: Mechanics and Structure

If Eisner is the master of sequential art, Scott McCloud is the journeyman artist. *Understanding Comics* (1994) and *Making Comics* (2006) (both acknowledge Eisner’s fundamental contributions to the medium) document the artist’s journey of understanding. At a recent San Diego Comic-con panel, McCloud described how *Understanding Comics* grew out of his own attempts to analyze and comprehend the medium of comics (2010).

Understanding Comics is not, in the author’s own words, a practical book on making comics. Instead it addresses power of the medium and demonstrates how the reader’s imagination completes actions in the blank space between the panels known as the gutter. This work makes a second fundamental contribution: a detailed elucidation of how the artist controls the passage of time. Eisner addresses this as well, but McCloud shows us panel transitions in units of time, as marked by the reader: ‘moment to moment, action to action, subject to subject, scene to scene, aspect to aspect, and non sequitur’ (when images no longer follow each other in a comprehensible narrative) (1994, pp. 70-72).

Making Comics, McCloud’s third book on comics, begins with a caution: ‘There are no rules [for making comics,] and here they are’ (2006, pp. 5-6). The reason no rules exist is because the image itself is deceitful, and even abstract and conventional symbols such as words are slippery. Words and to a lesser extent images are vulnerable to misunderstanding, double meanings, puns, and insulting misuse. In *Making Comics*, McCloud shows us how the artist has a choice of controlling moment, frame, image, word, and flow to create a story that the reader comprehends.

If control of these five elements isn’t daunting enough, the tools for using images include ‘every artistic/graphic device ever invented’, and similarly words can be applied in the manner of ‘every literary device ever invented’ (2006, p. 37). Yet this is a practical book that addresses storytelling, setting (also known as world building), words, and images working together, as well as chapters on technology, stylistic families of comics, and working in the field. Furthermore, after each chapter is a section with notes and exercises to further explore the concepts in the previous chapter.

A word on polite assessment or critique: comics are intended to be read, and the artist’s goal is to deliver a comprehensible story. So rather than the stand and deliver critique in front of the class, Scott McCloud suggests pairing students—putting an artist with a reader. He finds that a sequential narrative cannot be faked and that a subsequent discussion about the artist’s choice of ‘moment, frame, image, word and flow’, is a more pedagogically sound approach and ultimately more useful to the student artist (McCloud, 2009, 2010; TCJ, McCloud, & Sturm, 2010).

Jessica Abel and Matt Madden: Tools for Teaching

Finally there is *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures* (2008), the closest thing published to an apprentice’s workbook. Eisner and McCloud also make an appearance here. Eisner (acknowledged as a pioneer in the first chapter) is mostly invisible, but readers of *Comics and Sequential Art* will recognize the reading of panel arrangement, or as McCloud describes it ‘flow’ in this book. This oversight may be because panels and their sequential arrangement are the common-sense building blocks of comics, and it is no longer necessary to reference Eisner and McCloud. However, I have found that if you teach an exercise on making comics where the students are left to their own devices on panel arrangement, even adult students may omit this essential structure of comics. In chapter four, Abel and Madden reproduce McCloud’s seven transitions mentioned above, showing the reader how the passage of time is illustrated. Eminently practical, *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures* is the work where instructors will find topics for class discussion, exercises to build necessary skill, and a means of polite assessment.

So teaching a course on making comics is good work if you can get it, and Abel and Madden’s book is structured for use in a semester course. It’s also full of practical tips on brushes, pens, anatomy, reproduction, lettering and other essential skills, so it can be used independently. Furthermore, the sequence of instruction begins with single-panel cartoons, then comic strips, and then one-page comics before more ambitious stories are attempted. In my own experience, all the lessons on comics I have taught have provided me a deeper understanding of Eisner and McCloud—that, and the year I spent making private, unpublished, and personal comics.

I recommend that an instructor prepare for a course on comics by reading first *Understanding Comics*, then Eisner, as well as making comics and following exercises from *Making Comics* and *Drawing Words & Writing Pictures*. Our own struggles and misadventures will improve our teaching. Making comics also provide us with a compassion for our students as they explore this art, which appears to be transparent, but is instead both highly formal and entirely open-ended.

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THE STATE OF FATE

Scott Betz, President Foundations in Art: Theory and Education Associate Professor Winston-Salem State University

The State of FATE continues strong!

FATE continues to grow in numbers and quality in its 33rd Year. Below are some highlights:

Financial

We have a solid base of savings and investments promising the continued growth of our organization. Our members and institutional affiliates play an indispensable role in keeping us in the black through modest dues FATE uses to drive our programs and activities. Thanks to Jeff Boshart and Diane Highland for their attention to our bottom line.

National Conference

For the first time, FATE joins forces with Mid-America College Art Association and Integrative Teaching International (formerly Thinktank), in a most unique conference program “On Stream 2011” hosted by Eastern Illinois University. Thanks to Jeff for all his work and the many locals in St. Louis such as Joe Chesla who have assisted in this exciting project. Innovations such as break out sessions on creativity promise to make this conference more engaging than usual. Thanks especially to Scott Sherer of MACAA for this innovative approach.

Communications

Jerry Johnson continues to work hard on our current campaign to improve FATE communications. We regularly reach 4,000 artists, educators and schools via our email blasts that update interested parties between our three newsletters each year. We remain visible and in touch with 438 friends on Facebook as well.

Even with improvements in digital technology, direct, in person discussions with administrators, faculty and students is still important. Since opportunities for such interaction are normally at the comparatively expensive national conferences, Jesse Payne’s excellent job encouraging and coordinating nine smaller and more affordable Regional Conferences as the Vice President for Regional Conferences has been essential. I personally attended 4 of these and enjoyed the success and diversity of each. One example was in Georgia hosted by Savannah College of Art and Design. Chris Kienke did a great job with the program and has all my confidence as we ramp up to our next FATE national conference at SCAD in 2013.

FATE in Review

FATE in Review too continues to provide a forum for discussion of our collective ideas and experiences in foundation teaching and learning. It remains an important and competitive peer juried journal with nearly three times as many submissions as accepted articles. This year we hope to have all FATE presenters at our national conference in St. Louis provide abstracts to FATE in Review. In the future, we will set up a permanent system to make sure all conference proposals reach the editors for consideration. In this issue, I am particularly proud to see a range of voices from all regions of the country (and abroad in England and Qatar), working as independent scholars, gallery directors, lecturers and professors. These unique perspectives are representative of our diverse membership and its wonderful to see this reflected in FIR. Thanks go to Editor Kevin Bell and his efforts to continue FATE in Review’s tradition of intelligent, thoughtful discourse on pedagogical ideas and innovation while still remaining accessible and relevant to all foundations instructors.

Future Directions

The board has recently identified a central focus on quality growth and financial stability for the near future. Expanding our affiliations and visibility has played a large part of the former. FATE is an affiliate member to the Southeastern College Art Conference, Mid-America College Art Association, and the College Art Association and continues the foundations dialogue in special sessions at each organization’s annual meetings nationwide. My thanks go to Greg Skaggs (SECAC), Marlene Lipinski (MACAA) and Steven Bleicher (CAA). These three board members bring the FATE dialogue to many people who are new to FATE and who may later attend our conferences and join our membership based on those sessions. I have worked to extend FATE’s reach even farther through dialogues with the National Arts Educators Association (NAEA), National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) and Integrative Teaching International (ITI).

To increase financial opportunities, the board has agreed that it is important to add the position of Vice President for Development. Reid Wood, FATE President 1999-2001, worked to develop a 501c3 status for FATE so that we might pursue funding through grants and gifts. Up until now, we have not fully utilized the possibilities of this status because of a lack of personnel. A Vice President for Development would allow us to pursue other avenues for revenue beyond the very affordable membership dues and enhance our ability to deliver support for our mission. Below is a description for this important new FATE board position:

Reporting to the FATE President, the Vice President for Development (VPD) will harness the energy and commitment of the community to build FATE revenues. Internally, the Vice President will collaborate with the President and the Vice President for Communications. Externally, the Vice President for Development will also collaborate closely with members of FATE and the Board of Officers and various funders and prospective funders of the association. The VPD will be a critical member of the FATE management team. He or she must have the ability to represent FATE to a variety of constituencies, and must significantly enhance support for FATE among public sector funders, venture capitalists, foundations, think tanks, high net-worth individuals and businesses. He or she must have the drive, maturity, entrepreneurial spirit and communications skills required to take on the task of securing the financial health of FATE over the next years, and must gain the respect of a broad constituency. The VPD will also be responsible for fine tuning and/or proposing new fund-raising events that engage and excite the FATE community, entice new members to join FATE, and encourage current members into higher levels of support for FATE and its programs, events, publications and services. Emphasis will be centered on major gifts, event-driven donations (through dinners, speeches, symposia, special events and other activities), planned giving; encouraging moderately sized annual gifts from individual donors, regular giving from businesses, and support from governmental and non-governmental institutions. Over time, the development staff can grow in line with the success of FATE.

Thanks for all you do for students, for foundation teaching and for your investment in the future of FATE.

Scott Betz

ABOUT FATE

Foundations in Art: Theory and Education, FATE, is a national, non-profit 501(C)(3) organization dedicated to the promotion of excellence in the development and teaching of college-level foundations courses in both studio and art history. Founded in 1977 as an affiliate society of the College Art Association (CAA), members include approximately 400 studio and art history faculty and administrators, and over 60 sponsoring institutions. The organization sponsors a national conference bi-annually, regional conferences in interim years, panel sessions at CAA and regional associations, and publishes a professional journal (FATE in Review) and a newsletter. For more information, please see the website at: www.foundationsinart.org



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Philip B. Meggs
(1942-2002)

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FATE MEMBERSHIP INFORMATION

Regular membership dues are \$50.00 for 2 years.
Graduate student membership is \$20.00 for 2 years.
Institutional sponsorships are \$100.00 for one year.

Membership information can be found online at www.foundations-art.org,
or by contacting:
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