

On Knowing: Art and Visual Culture

Paul Duncum and Ted Bracey (Editors) 2001.
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Reviewed by Melody Milbrandt

In this volume of less than two hundred pages six well-respected art educators of international stature offer essays regarding their differing aesthetic and epistemological views of art. Each position is well crafted and persuasive. A few of the six authors are in strong agreement, while others provide counter perspectives, all addressing "knowing art." The first six chapters are devoted to individual position statements, which flow together smoothly with a strong coherent structure. In the next section of the book (chapters seven through twelve) each author responds to the other five contributor's essays, noting both similarities and differences, sometimes in great detail. If your adrenaline pumps at the thrill of a good debate and you want to keep a tally of points for each author as you read, the response section is for you.

Although the authors presented their initial position papers at the Aotearoa New Zealand Art Educators Conference in 1999, the group worked via E-mail for almost a year prior to the event on the question of epistemology of art and its implications for art education. The response sections were drafted and exchanged again via E-mail in early 2000. In these chapters each author further delineates and defends his or her argument. It is not the purpose of this review to determine the strongest position or argument presented in the response section but to briefly highlight each author's view.

Paul Duncum begins the discussion by setting out his perception of "knowing art" at the beginning of the twenty-first century as visual culture. He suggests the field of art education re-examine the fluid concept of what we call "art" to better apprehend the social world in which works are created. Visual culture is the term he suggests to help us look at the broader range of all material objects in the environment, and the contexts in which meaning is constructed. Duncum suggests it is critical for art educators to construct lessons that present both the physical artifact and contextual social practices in which the object is created. Analyzing the social context of contemporary images and objects engages students in active investigation of the meanings and impact of visual culture on daily life.

Through a study of contemporary visual culture one may better grasp the economic and political motivations served through imagery in the popular culture. Duncum draws comparisons between both the aesthetic experiences and purposes of high art with the aesthetic experiences of the mass-consumption of visual culture. Based on the magnitude of the impact

of media culture in the way people construct their sense of identity and social roles, Duncum concludes that contemporary media culture has changed the way we view our world, education, and the arts. Art education, he suggests, must address these deeper theoretical issues regarding visual culture, to better address student needs and maintain credibility as a discipline. This is a powerful chapter that presents critical analysis of visual culture, as a strategy for constructing meaning through social interaction. This discussion of dialogue provides a nice segue to the next chapter by Kerry Freedman.

Freedman approaches "knowing art" as aesthetic theory through which we understand art. She lays out the historic, philosophical and conceptual groundwork that suggests a neo-pragmatic aesthetic stance offers promise in guiding contemporary art education. This stance best meets the need for art education to connect to students' lived experiences with contemporary visual culture. Like Duncum, Freedman understands the power of imagery and artists in contemporary culture, suggesting that advertisers understand that as consumers construct meaning in text and images, they are simultaneously being impacted; often re-constructing their own identities in response to the images they see and value.

Freedman points out that most traditional art education curricula are grounded in formalist models. The analytical, disinterested modernist approach in looking at works of art was often cold, detached and elitist. According to Freedman, an understanding of the relationship of art and culture must go beyond a dichotomous, postmodern critique of the modernist tradition. Students need to view work in a context that encourages multiple personal and social meanings. Discussion of popular culture requires an aesthetic approach for in-depth and inter-active learning through discussion and dialogue. Freedman turns first to the work of John Dewey to provide a holistic pragmatic approach to art and aesthetic experience as a part of daily life. She then offers the neo-pragmatism of Richard Shusterman, focusing on lived aesthetic experience, as an important theoretical addition. By focusing on the lived aesthetic experience, comparisons may be made among objects from both popular and high culture. This intersection of high and popular culture is key to connecting education to contemporary art, which often requires the viewer to interpret contextual signs and construct personal and cultural meaning. Freedman finally cites Patrick Slattery, who advocates utilizing autobiographical narrative and aesthetic sensibilities throughout general education for constructing more responsive multi-faceted postmodern curriculum. From these sources and others Freedman constructs a strong foundational argument; persuasive for conceptualizing curriculum in contemporary art education that is dynamic, fluid and centered in a new aesthetic awareness and investigation of popular visual culture.

As if in response, the development of a contemporary aesthetic

framework in art education curriculum is addressed by Ted Bracey in the next chapter. In a laudable effort to provide an epistemology, ontology, and axiology of art, Bracey provides an extensive rationale for a justification of art education founded on Institutional Theory. Bracey suggests that if we investigate "how art can be known" we may locate the idea of art within the conceptual framework of social life. From an institutional perspective "art" is a socially constructed concept like religion, law, education and government. Our understandings of the role of art in society come from other disciplines, such as sociology, history, anthropology, psychology and philosophy. Art cannot be understood by looking only at its products, but also by its practices. In an economic sense the social roles involving art are to produce, distribute and consume; or the artist and his relation to the art public. These roles involve numerous supportive and inter-dependent activities, engaging people in sustaining and nurturing the physical and ideational functions of the artistic community in relation to the larger social order. The criterion for judging success of art as a social institution is its performance, or how it impacts and relates to society. Artistic practice in contemporary western culture is no longer guided by a master-narrative. Bracey suggests that contemporary society has replaced one dominant narrative with several, sometimes competing narratives. This paradox necessitates a shift toward greater cultural pluralism, encouraging people to maintain their strong feelings about art, while respecting beliefs that conflict with their own. We learn these responses by following examples set by others. According to Bracey, learning roles of cultural values is how culture is transmitted from one generation to another. Art provides a context for reflection and opportunities for advancing the values of such reflection that may challenge or support the patterns of established social order. The effectiveness of art, in the institutional sense, depends on how well people understand their roles, the function of art in the larger society, and the desire of people to play a productive part in it. Bracey suggests that the Institutional Theory of Art holds the most promise for art education to empower students, as they learn about the function of art in society, to productively assert their own interests as consumers of art.

In the fourth chapter Philip Pearson likens the lack of epistemology in art education to a purple haze that has clouded the mission of the field. Traditionally, art education has often focused on works of art, their value and function. Pearson contends that art education has a larger responsibility, which is to spotlight the existence of art in social life. He points out two primary ways that have been presented in art education as ways of "knowing art." One approach has been discussed in research designed to develop an understanding of the artistic or creative mind. The second way of knowing looks at art as a social or cultural product. These two approaches are not

mutually exclusive, and they have been mixed together in a variety of ways for the advancement of the field. However, for the most part, knowing about art has been equated to knowing about art objects, rather than the artistic part of life. From Pearson's viewpoint there is little art education theory. He suggests that the field has offered prescriptions for strategic success for building programs and support rather than a theoretical sense of what should happen in the art education classroom. If these prescriptions are incorporated into the art education curriculum they become a normative reality, which may have more to do with accommodating the beliefs and views of people about what "should be" rather than what "might be" in art education. If normative practice is limited to only thinking about art works, many of the ways art might be known or experienced are closed. Pearson advocates that art education move toward a reflective rather than reactionary theory of art, conducive to the construction of more consistency between theory and practice. Art education is only one part of the larger Art Institution, suffering from gaps between theory and practice. His explanation for these gaps lies in the conflicting theoretical focus on artifacts as the primary means of knowing art, rather than the institutional focus on social function, including art education, as a way of knowing art.

Pearson's view of art education theory as "fuzzy" is followed by Graeme Chalmers' essay on "knowing art through multiple lenses." Chalmers insists that it is impossible for art education to conform to only one theory of art. Instead, he suggests the field of art education shun an elitist vision of art as privileged domain and come to understand art as visual culture, supported by theory from other disciplines like anthropology, sociology and linguistics. Postmodernism focused our attention on personal stories in contemporary art. Chalmers suggests the master Western narrative, derived from the aesthetic ideals of Plato, Kant and Hume, no longer binds us to one view of the world; we have come to know art in a variety of ways. Just as we should take care to not limit "knowing art" to the artist (maker), Chalmers warns we should not totally replace "making" with alternative "ways of knowing." Contemporary art educators must recognize that the aesthetic discussion of "what is art?" is dependent on cultural context, so a more appropriate question might now be "what is art for?" Once we begin to think of art as an active social function that impacts the lives of students daily, and art educators as active social agents of change, we may be better able to develop theory that informs students about the multiple, divergent ways in which art can be known. Chalmers views the multiple meanings and purposes of art education as strength and revels in the purple haze of theoretical ambiguity.

In the final position paper Elizabeth Garber explores "how theory can inform knowing and teaching about art." Based on dictionary meanings

for each word about "how we know art," Garber analytically determines that knowing art is a cultural, social and anthropological enterprise that involves not only perception and knowledge, but also self-knowledge and willingness to listen and continually adapt to the new or unfamiliar. Garber takes an intentional leap from theory in Western aesthetics and philosophy to dialectics, a questioning approach derived from other cultural and literary disciplines, including gender and ethnic studies. She explains that in her ethnographic research an understanding of Chicana/o art is framed by theory drawn from literature, yet as her study unfolded she questioned and examined the dynamic inter-relationship of the individuals with the social, cultural and historic forces in their lives. In Garber's essay she uses an interview method of conversational questions and answers to investigate the identity of Chicana/o artists in relation to their Mexican-American culture. Rather than looking for continuity of experience, a dialectic approach enabled Garber to include those elements of identity and culture that were disputed or fused into a new identity, creating a montage of the multiple influences impacting the lives of the artists she interviewed. Garber does not propose dialectics as the only theory in art education. In fact, she seems to indicate a lack of interest or need for developing any single theoretical construct for art education. She proposes that explorations of theory and learning be broad and varied, with dialectical interplay providing a structure for a theoretical foundation that supports and nurtures multiple identities and experiences that contribute to knowing the world in ways that do not limit human potential.

While the response section of *On Knowing* is often as dizzying as watching a fast paced tennis match (or a snowball fight among six authors) it leads us to greater depth of understanding, not only of each author's position, but of how they view their position in relation to others. In this section of critical examination, mutually supportive alliances appear and positions are challenged, reminiscent of a discussion of the tribal elders, town hall meeting or sibling rivalry. If how we conceptualize theory or theories about art implicitly impacts how art education is taught and delivered we should look at not only the differences that each author delineated, but also their similarities. Virtually all of the authors conceptualize art in relation to society and suggest that the practice of teaching art must involve students in constructing deeper, more personally meaningful experiences with art on a variety of levels. The differences in viewpoints presented were primarily based on how to arrive at a theory of art that would support an expanded practice and ways of knowing art. The generally congenial unspoken "agreement to disagree" among these authors must not be mistaken for the end of this discussion.

Duncum and Bracey have organized an inviting volume of essays designed to engage the reader in an examination of the multiple perspectives

of what an epistemology of art might encompass. The six participating scholars appear ready to continue the conversation, and it's likely the questions they have raised will draw other voices to a wider discussion about what it is to know art. If there are, as several of the authors indicate, unlimited ways to know art, the conversation initiated here may go on indefinitely. As an art educator I may enjoy the haze of theoretical ambiguity, or choose to open windows for fresh air by embracing a theory of art that supports my way of knowing, teaching and relating art to my life, culture and community. Whether seen as promoting a purple haze or providing windows of clarity in art education theory, *On Knowing* challenges the reader and the field to reflect on the forces that drive curriculum practice, and consider alternative ways of thinking about the relationship of theory and practice in contemporary art education.

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