

# Turning Down the Burner: Fear, Anxiety, and Art Education.

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## ABSTRACT

As art educators strive to promote social justice we may want to invite our students to embrace examples of art and the histories of artists who have resisted the oppressive forces in their respective eras. This article examines the role Czechoslovakian artists have played, and the works they created, in opposition to Soviet occupation in the city of Bratislava in the late 1960s and early 1970s. In addition to providing a cultural, political, and historical context for interpreting these works, the author advocates for the introduction of works of art that stem from this unique set of circumstances to high school students. The article also uses the discussion of unofficial Czechoslovakian art and artists of Bratislava to examine Conceptual and Performance Art and their implications in deviating from traditional high school art teaching practices.

As a foreigner to this country, but one who has visited many times since the early 1990s and lived here now for over 7 years, I attest to the validity of Sturken's identification of a culture of fear and anxiety that pervades the United States. Whenever I visited, even before 9/11, I felt a palpable sense of anxiety here that I do not experience either in my home country of Australia, or the European and Asian countries I have visited (some of which have dealt with terrorism on their home soil much longer than the United States has). Despite enormous variations within this country, overall its ways of life appear grounded in fear and anxiety.

While no one could have predicted precisely how the United States would respond to 9/11, given its culture it was entirely predictable that it would not be good. All 9/11 seemed to do was channel pre-existing paranoia about threats from both within and without. It merely fed into and confirmed the already extant culture of fear and anxiety, which, it is now all too apparent, is a very bad place from which to develop public policy and conduct foreign affairs.

Like any single group of civilian professionals there seems little art educators can do to directly influence the material consequences of this culture. However, because art education now embraces a broad range of visual material it is in an almost unique position to address at least one important contributor to it. Sturken's chapter demonstrates how the most ordinary, everyday item of visual and material culture embodies systems of thought and feeling. And if Lacan is right about fictional forms, like television programs and Hollywood movies,

being the subconscious writ large for all to see (Zizek, 1992), then the American subconscious is a place of relentless, anarchic, and never ending violence. And a violent imaginary begets real violence. This is not to say that watching violent media turns audiences into killers; there appears to be no direct connection between violence on the screen and people being violent themselves. But recent research indicates that watching fictional violence is not without indirect, real-world consequences (see Duncum, 2006 for a review). Aristotle's famous idea of catharsis, and similar popular understandings of Freud, appear to be wrong. Exposure to fictional violence does not allow the release of anxiety; rather, it creates anxiety. And anxiety leads to bifurcation between good people (us and people who support us) and bad people (everyone else)—a division President Bush articulated so well in capturing the spirit of the moment immediately following 9/11. It is not as if such bifurcation leads ordinarily peace-loving people to be violent, but it does appear to lead people to be willing to allow others to be violent on their behalf. Since violence, both real and fictional, begets more anxiety that then begets more violence and so on, a vicious cycle is established in which fictional violence, real violence, and a culture of fear and anxiety are symbiotic. Each determines the other.

Some people blame the media for a violent society, and on the above reading it is not without some responsibility; but since it is only one element of the culture, Church (2004) has argued the answer lies in turning down the burner on our fears and anxieties. Turning down the burner seems essential if our students are to go on to make rational, informed decisions about their relationships with others in the world. It is equally important that teachers, all of us, are able to turn down the burner on our own fears and anxieties, for otherwise we could not hope do so with our students.

The difficulties involved should not be underestimated. This is a country whose historical legacy is exceptionally violent. It was created from a bloody revolution. It practiced slavery until a war that claimed 60,000 lives, and soon after reinstated slavery in everything but name. It invented the atom bomb and remains the only country to have used it. Sturken documents many other reasons that have historically and more recently contributed to the tendency of the United States to resolve conflict with violence, both domestically and internationally. Changing something so deeply rooted as a national culture will not be easy.

Nevertheless some art educators have taken up the challenge, devising programs that address this culture of fear and anxiety. While majority art educational practice remains silent on the matter, exceptions show what is possible; there are examples to guide the way. Drawing from the literature of



art education, below I survey a range of responses taken by art teachers from kindergarten to graduate school.

First, some art educators have devised classroom programs that examine mass media representations of violence with a critical eye (e.g., Ballangee-Morris & Stuhr, 2003), and, as Sturken also showed, how corporate America was quick to exploit 9/11 for commercial purposes through advertising by linking violence, patriotism and consumerism (Green, 2004). Other programs include examining how images of violence raise questions about how greed, superstition, fear and anxiety contribute to violence and war (Milbrant & Bonds, 2000), examining images of war, protest and memorialization (Brickly-Green, 2007), examining artists who have dealt with cruelty and war (Alter Muri, 2004), considering representations of violence as a springboard to students discussing their own experiences of fear and terror (Arnold, 2005), and learning to talk about violent imagery (Dicket & Mucha, 2002). Still other programs have considered the trauma of living in a war zone (Cohen-Evron, 2005), addressed the anxiety arising from recent school and community shootings (Stockroki, 2000), and devised programs for school bullying (Orr, 2004). (See Duncum, 2009 for a more detailed review.)<sup>1</sup>

Most of these programs were directed toward understanding the causes and effects of violence and/or war. Many of them involved discussion followed by students responding by making images. Some of them involved students being directed by their teachers to make anti-violent and anti-war images; other teachers were prepared to allow their students to openly express their responses as they chose. For my part, I believe it is essential that students be allowed to respond as they will. Otherwise, teachers ignore the pleasures of watching violent media and shut down student views, sending those views underground. Instead, it seems crucial to consider the tension, even the cognitive dissonance, between condemning violence from a moral perspective yet relishing it in graphic detail. Not to consider this tension is to reproduce the contradiction embedded in many U.S. movies and television programs of simultaneously condemning violence and offering up so much of it.

Carpenter (2003) usefully offered a model of such an open, free conversation. In a previous issue of this journal, Carpenter described his local, African-American barber shop that effectively functions as a community centre. This is Pat's Barber and Beauty Shop, which Carpenter described as "a neighborhood curriculum" where, mediated by Pat and his fellow barbers, customers always seem to "have some sort of outrageous story, idea or proposition for anyone

1 These references are limited to reports on programs in schools with students. The theme of the immediate past issue of this journal was violence, which was variously addressed by different authors by reference to representation in a range of media, sexual and racial stereotypes, programs on bullying, and its use in the workplace. Many other art educators have addressed issues arising from 9/11 (see Darts, et al., 2008 for a review).

willing to listen.” Yet, Carpenter said, as in any classroom, everyone is challenged to provide evidence and to reference his or her sources. Pat’s barbershop is more than a place for a haircut. It is more a combination of social club, recreational centre for youths with nowhere else to go, and a community information centre. Complex and competing exchanges ensure that it is open to multiple layers of interpretation and meaning, “a site of social discourse, interpretation and cultural commentary” (p. 12). There is constant interaction among the barbers, customers, community members, the radio and television, telephone calls and events witnessed through the front window. Advocating this free flow of exchange as a model for the artroom, Carpenter wrote:

The ‘real classroom’ exists when the classroom environment is viewed as a complex text—comprised of the interactions among teacher, students, visitors, subject content, artifacts in the room, external references and to other stimuli—worthy of interpretation and relevant to student’s lives. (p. 15)

This is dialogic pedagogy, one that privileges what Bakhtin (1981) called a “polyphony” of voices (p. 263), where there is constant interaction between meanings. Here, the meanings created always have the potential to influence others. Ideas bounce around; sometimes ideas are poorly articulated and in search of coherence and connection, yet they are rich in their multi-layeredness, their emotional complexity and specialized knowledge. Classrooms, which are so often a site of straightforward didacticism, are turned into spaces safe enough for students to exchange their views, and open enough to be affected by others.

However, as essential as dialog is, it often remains a purely intellectual exercise about the imagery, behavior and values of others, and this can be true even when producing one’s own images in response to the dialog. By contrast, I advocated in the previous issue of this journal the importance of personal reflexivity (Duncum, 2009). Examining imagery not produced by oneself may obviate the need to take personal responsibility. It is even pleasurable to condemn others for the production of violent images. On the other hand, to consider what baggage we bring to an image is to turn the examination onto ourselves.

To effect such reflexivity the notion of the gaze is particularly valuable. The gaze refers to how we as an audience look at imagery, what assumptions about the world lead us to make particular interpretations. Becoming aware of one’s own gaze has the potential to act as a catalyst to reevaluate one’s values and beliefs that otherwise might remain unexamined. To consider our own gaze is to see how we may be implicated in assumptions we might prefer to deny; it is to see to what extent we may be complicit. That many of us are mightily attracted to media representations of violence is evident reference to the market driven nature of the television, movie and video game industries. To merely



examine media representations of violence without an acknowledgement of our complicity fails to see ourselves as members of a society that not only produces fictional violence as a manifestation of its imaginary, but also permits horrific, real violence to be visited upon others. By contrast, considering our gaze is to take some responsibility upon ourselves.

Additionally, it is helpful to be made aware of just how risk averse our gaze has become. Art educators, Darts, Tavin, Sweeny, and Derby (2008) refer to the actuarial gaze by which they argue we have learnt to survey our environment for any signs of the unusual as potentially dangerous. The insidiousness of this gaze lies in both how it limits our own possible ways of looking at the world and how easily it stereotypes anyone not like us.

However, even open dialog and honest self-reflection and awareness are not necessarily empowering, and may even be disempowering. Mostly, art teachers ask students to respond to social issues of concern by producing a cultural product of their own and regard this as empowering. However, such productions usually go no further than their classroom or the school hallway display area. Students get to talk back to power but in a highly circumscribed way. Beyond personal consciousness raising, these activities do not materially challenge the wider culture.

A few art educators, however, have attempted to do just that. They have taken their students to public spaces to confront the general public in city squares and crowded streets (Darts, 2006; Pistolesi, 2007). Again an example is offered from a previous issue of this journal. In the days immediately following the 9/11 attacks in their home city of New York, Dipti Desai, her colleagues, and participating students created an interactive flag (Desai, Bui & DiFilippo 2001-2002). Appalled at the media's one-sided story of unquestioned patriotism and revenge, they sought to express other narratives. Noting the sudden proliferation of American flags, they conceived the idea of a flag consisting of a wide cross-section of views drawn from the public. Denied access to public squares or city properties by virtue of requiring a permit, and anxious to act in the moment, they initially took their flag to the first major open space on their campus. This turned out to be in front of the business school building, where instead of the interaction they sought, they were viewed simply as an anti-war group and drew little other than abuse from the conservative business students and faculty who used the building. Later, in another venue, and with a broader cross section of the public, many people participated by adding their comments to the flag. In an atmosphere where a single media message completely dominated, the flag project provided a venue for a range of views to be expressed. Even while acknowledging one's own complicity in a culture of fear and anxiety, perhaps it is only by taking

such direct action that fear and anxiety can be addressed within oneself; and only by such means can it be channeled to help others turn down their own burner.

The task of turning down the burner on fear and anxiety is especially daunting given the grim prospects that now hang over the United States as a world leader. With the rise of other nations to preeminence and the relative decline of the United States, hastened by the current political stalemate, the climate of fear and anxiety seems unlikely to abate.

There are many aspects to the United States, but perhaps none with more consequences for itself as well as the rest of the world than its culture of fear and anxiety. Furthermore, Sturken's chapter was originally published in 2007, and, in the wake of the subsequent financial crisis, the trends she identifies appear to have been magnified many times over. With the Tea Party having migrated from the margins of lunacy to a significant social movement, the irrationality that fear and anxiety breed seems to be on the rise. Thus, what more urgent role could art education perform in this country right now than to attempt to turn down the burner of fear and anxiety. Sturken's chapter offers a best case for the contemporary visual/ material culture approach to art education in the United States, one that engages critically as well as productively with the everyday visual practices of the darker side of its national culture.

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