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International Dialogues about Visual Culture, Education, and Art: A Review Essay

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This anthology originated in an international congress for teachers, museum educators, curators and others involved in art education in March 2006. With 42 contributors from 16 countries offering 25 chapters organized in terms of five themes, it is a rich brew. My own thoughts are organized in terms of the keywords used in the book's title: *International, dialogues, visual culture, education, and art*.

The claim to being international is fully justified. Contributors represent 4 of the 5 continents (Africa is missing) as well as some islands, and several authors describe projects involving multiple countries. The physical geography covered is highly diverse, including the barren "northern places" of Finland, Norway and Russia, crowded urban Brazil, and the sparseness

of the Australian outback where the art teacher flies into isolated settlements in a plane. Cultural diversity is equally evident; for example, from the social stability of countries like New Zealand and Belgium to war-torn Israel and the life of refugee children from the former Yugoslavia now in Greece and Iraqi children displaced in Sweden. Additionally, some contributors specifically address the nomadic nature of geographic and cultural identity, as with Pakistani children in the United States and Ethiopian children in Israel. The multicultural nature of many countries is stressed, no more so than in the tiny Cayman Islands where, with a population of only 60,000, 45% represent 107 nationalities.

A consistent theme is the celebration and reworking, sometimes the rediscovery, of local cultural traditions in the face of globalization. Of particular interest is the note struck by several authors regarding a post-colonial identity in which people feel a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others" (p. 51), as well as the assertion by Ana Mae Barbosa from Brazil as to the rising challenge to the first world by the third world in defining what it means to be global.

It is less clear that the book represents a series of dialogues. Rather, very different visions about very different situations are offered that, while they rarely conflict, lie side by side rather than interact. Many individual chapters imply dialogue in terms of negotiations between countries, for example between Finland and Scotland, and in one project among 14 South Pacific nations. Dialogue is also implied by the negotiations necessary between different kinds of cultural organizations - schools, community groups, artists, tourist operators and so on. Issues raised by different contributors, and thus potentially the basis of dialogue, include different visions of globalization originating from the first and third worlds, screen culture verses the tactile nature of traditional arts, and the role of art as social critic verses art that offers support to government initiatives.

Three central characteristics of visual culture studies are evident in some of the chapters. A few authors refer to imagery outside the province of the fine arts, some of the authors explicitly draw upon critical theory, and some papers evoke the concept of visibility (though not by name) in which consideration is given as much to how we look and under what circumstances as to the objects looked at. Of visibility, for example, one project from the United Kingdom involved a group of Muslim parents who objected to depictions of human eyes because such representations they claimed were prohibited in Islam. This "led to discussions on disparities of interpretation of Islam" (p.241). In this case visibility involved what kind of images are even permitted to exist. In Israel in an equally fraught social context, programs attempt to broaden "the gaze on the 'Other'... to unlearn some of the biases and stereotypes in the process of socialization" (p. 226).

Also informed by visual culture studies, educators in the United States, Sweden and India drew freely from different kinds of imagery. In the United States students critiqued visual culture of the Iraqi war, including magazine covers, photographs of US government officials, toys, and Internet images of torture. In Sweden, students refashioned newspaper photographs of the Iraqi war in terms of historical paintings as a way to consider pictorial representations of power and bloodshed. In seeking to preserve traditional Indian folk arts in the cause of social and political identity among the poor, Durgadas Mukhopadhyay sees no conflict in using electronic arts, noting that traditional Indian folk arts and popular Hindi cinema share similar “organic structures” (p. 37).

Drawing upon critical theory to develop critical pedagogy, US art teachers compared images of race, while in the UK educators investigated images of race and gender. Brazilian educators stress the inherently political nature of both fine art and popular visual culture, and they argue for a pedagogy aimed at social equality. I note that while critical pedagogy is well-intentioned as well as necessary, nowhere amongst its advocacy, is there an acknowledge of the seductive pleasures offered by imagery, pleasures that greatly complicate the intention to inculcate a critical consciousness among students especially about their own cultural preferences.

All chapters deal with education. Most chapters deal with schools, but some are concerned with educating the general public about the nature of postmodern art. In both the Australian state of Tasmania and Finland the postmodern art projects described evidently met resistance from some local artists. In Finland some locals declared that the project the authors describe was simply not art, while in Tasmania some locals evidently considered working on behalf of government policies an anathema. In response the Finish project was explicitly designed as educational, and the Tasmanian project sparked a spirited defense of art's instrumental value.

Critical pedagogy is advocated in several countries in the cause of social equity, while a didactic approach is adopted in Germany toward teaching hypermedia. Environmental education is advanced in India and visual literacy is promoted in Spain. Peace education is stressed in Israel where children were asked to develop empathy for Palestinian victims of war, and among Muslim girls in the United Kingdom peace education was advanced in an effort to develop a sense of community cohesion. Chapters variously describe children drawing their self-portraits on glass in Brazil, using recycled materials in Brazil, photographing their faces in search of cultural identity in multicultural Britain, and drawing ordinary daily life in the Philippines. United States educators advance a curriculum for “social justice” (p. 81), and in outback Australia where vast distances and isolation threaten “community sustainability,” educators exemplify a site specific “cultural pedagogy” (p. 173). Additionally, several chapters deal with the use of new technologies. German children are shown drawing together on networked computers, Spanish educators address blended learning

– a hybrid of on line and face to face – and in Japan educators describe media workshops primarily designed for children with “mental and physical handicaps” (p. 141).

Most authors either claim success for their projects or are content to merely describe them, although the descriptions often lack sufficient detail to be able to gauge the connection between intentions and outcomes. Some authors admit to only partial success. Thus, for example, Japanese educators confess that their “learning objectives were not fully achieved” (p. 141). Furthermore, while most of the projects stretch conventional practice, Kerry Freedman notes that in many countries government policies stressing standards and teaching to-the-test are increasingly detrimental to experimentation. Moreover, the point made in the last paragraph of the last page by a contributor from the Philippines will be familiar to many, namely the marginalization of art in schools in favor of math, language and science. Though no doubt representing a realistic assessment of the field as a whole, the note struck is curiously placed in light of the generally upbeat nature of this book.

As for art, the adult examples are decidedly post-modern. Artwork is often community based and produced by teams. This includes installations intended to inculcate an environmental consciousness towards marine life off the coast of Tasmania, creating group murals to encourage stewardship of giant sequoia trees in California. This art is valued because it works towards a sustainable future. Alternatively, artwork like confrontational contemporary photography is valued because it turns a critical eye on the use of power. On the other hand, the art of children is primarily a matter of therapy in response to trauma, investigating the possibilities inherent in new media, inquiry into personal and/or cultural identity, or community building.

One of the main contributions of this book is highlighted in the preface by Ana Mae Barbosa where she argues that the third world must produce its own research because the first world only addresses its specific questions. She argues that the third world must move beyond what she calls “intellectual boycotting” (p. 11). Overall, this anthology demonstrates lively activity among first world countries, but it also goes some way to fulfilling Barbosa’s desire for it also demonstrates something of the liveliness of current visual arts educational endeavors that lie beyond western mindsets.

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