Introduction

"[Visual culture] exists within networks of culturally learned meanings and power relations that surround the production and consumption of images."

—Art educator Nancy Pauly[1]

We enter a public building or a friend's home, or visit a Web site. We drive by billboards, past store signage, through upscale and architecturally designed communities or through patchwork neighborhoods of mass-designed and -produced structures. We wait in a doctor's or dentist's office, viewing the art on the walls or browsing through the magazines. We might feel superior, belittled, comfortable, or awkward without naming the response or really thinking about the surroundings. These visual events are not just the neutral background of our lives—they have meaning and we absorb these events as knowledge because of that meaning.

Images as Cultural Meaning Systems

In her teens, a young woman might flip through hundreds of magazines and sit through endless hours of films, television programs, and commercials. She is immersed in a visual culture. The women whose images she sees there are predominantly young and extremely thin with flawless skin, perfect hair, and designer clothing, no matter their socioeconomic status. The meaning is clear. This image of womanhood is normal. By its very pervasiveness, it suggests a standard against which all women are measured. This meaning becomes knowledge. If a woman does not measure up to these standards, she is flawed. Similarly, young men are presented with images of maleness that suggest physical power—a dominant, take-charge attitude with overtones of violence. For children, youths, and adults, the process of internalizing meaning from images is the same. While the visual events are temporal, the meanings endure.

Meanings derived from images are built on both past and current interpretations of images. For example, why does the cowboy archetype continue as a cultural mythology? Because the meanings associated with those images—power, assertiveness, and violence as the solutions to conflict—still persist as a shared cultural consciousness.

Meanings absorbed from images are part of the present, since they refer to what we know at this moment. Ubiquitous in many homes are images from television news coverage. The news reports are secondary and often interpret the journalists' photographs in only one way, planting the seeds for how we are to see news images.

Further, meanings we make from visual information are foundational to future understandings. Images that communicate their very identity to young people today impact who and what they will become as adults.

Why a Visual Culture Approach

Because of this disconnect between reality and the world portrayed through visual culture, we need to examine critically the formation of meaning and knowledge from images. As teachers whose work contributes to maintaining our democratic society, we hope to guide young people toward a respect for social and political equity for themselves and others. Teaching about visual culture can be an important avenue for encouraging this respect. We must first recognize that this visual knowledge, absorbed as assumed truths, can bestow privilege on some people while oppressing or limiting the potential of others. If in doubt, we need only ask who is left out of the pervasive flow of images flitting across our perception day after day. The elderly? The poor?

The differently-abled? If we take note of the images seen in a day, it becomes clear how limited the representations are of people and their sexual identities, ages, occupations, race, and ethnicities.

Active examination of the meanings of visual culture that surround us can point to ways in which many differences can coexist peacefully. If we ask a class of young people to choose "the best" from a set of objects or images, we can immediately experience and demonstrate an in-the-moment case of difference. If we then ask them to defend their choices, sets of shared principles will emerge across the group. Four different students will likely choose very different images. Perhaps they will each express a liking for different colors. At this point, we can show that, even in their expression of difference, they share something—a liking for color. Beginning with such a simple demonstration, lesson after lesson can be built to point out the complex elements in how we read and interpret the visual that make us different, but also of what we share.

Expose, Explode, Empower

This book is intended to provide guiding principles and hands-on strategies for helping learners to interpret and build meanings from the pervasive flow of visual imagery in our world. Through a series of explorations that inform and diversify visual interpretation, we "expose" learners to a variety of ways of thinking critically about visual culture and how its meanings impact their lives. As learners will see, these include the hidden assumptions that influence how we see the world. Next, through a series of explorations that inform and focus visual interpretation, we "explode" passive acceptance of expert authoritative knowledge, arguing instead for an awareness of how mind-sets and symbols influence individual thought.

Finally, we provide strategies to "empower" students to participate in the construction of meaning—through re-envisionings and re-creations—of the visual culture that pervades their lives. Empowerment also involves strategies for students to create new possibilities, new visions that are not yet recognized or readily apparent in their visual culture.

Before a society can change its behaviors, beliefs must evolve through a self-reflective process. Looking at and articulating beliefs about the visual images that surround them can help students to develop explicit processes for thinking through beliefs and the behaviors that rise from those beliefs. The possible objects of such reflection are endless—a controversial work of local public art, a handmade object from an unfamiliar culture, a provocative Web site.

We believe that the key to unlocking a door to thoughtful interpretation of visual communication is process, hands-on, and immediate. We believe in teaching through modeling. For example, in order to model our belief in experiential learning, we encourage teachers to use the activities presented in this book to better understand, through doing, the significance of learning from an application of this teaching approach to visual culture. Through active processing, we can uncover beliefs that fuel behavior and ultimately foster change.

Individual self-reflective transformation precedes societal change. The first step toward this transformation is to identify and articulate deeply held beliefs. The strategies in this book provide ways to identify assumptions that inform how we see and make meaning of the world, construct knowledge from that meaning, and act on that knowledge.

What Do We Mean by Visual Culture?

Visual culture is the place where visual objects meet their cultural contexts. Visual culture study is the

pursuit of the meaning of imagery that includes fine art, folk art, mass media, design, popular culture, architecture, and other constructed categories of visual phenomena in the everyday life of diverse societies. The significance of visual culture for art education rests not so much in the object or image but in the processes or practices used to investigate how images are situated in social contexts of power and privilege.

A Social Theory Approach

Which images are relevant to study, and how we approach the study of images, are ongoing issues for art educators. A social theory approach to the study of art as visual culture has been present in art education literature since 1980, with the first volume of the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education*.[2] A social theory perspective toward art education holds that art communicates cultural values and beliefs and that the study of art involves investigation into the social values that inform the work. Further, from such an approach, the nature of art is questioned and expanded to include diverse cultural narratives of the imagery that is privileged in societies. The meaning of an image cannot be extracted from its context and measured as if it might mean the same as a similar image in another context.

Visual literacy is possible when symbols (visual, verbal, or kinesthetic—gestures with shared and individual meanings), the maker's sociocultural world, and the viewer's sociocultural world are woven together through understanding the context of the three complex networks of production, display, and consumption of visual culture. A context can be described to some extent, but it is as much, or more, a construction of the individual who is recording the description. To best understand ourselves and others, it is necessary to consider the threads of individual "texts"—that is, our perceptions of the texts and images we see—and how they are experienced.*

Our Approach to Activity-Based Learning

First, at the core of our teaching, we believe that complex, visually based concepts are best taught through engagement in carefully crafted activities that require learners to physically "act out" the concepts, creating a firsthand experience of the idea, followed by dialogue, reflection, and internalization. This is by no means a new approach but builds on the theories of early-twentieth-century educator John Dewey and other proponents of experientially oriented teaching.[3]

We also believe that, in a participatory democracy, agency involves active creation of the meanings of visual culture. Those who make communicative images generate dialogue that drives context-specific visual meanings.

The Activities in This Book

Fueled by these beliefs, many years of collaborative teaching have gone into developing the core activities in this book. We have designed, tried, revised, and used the visual culture "lessons" in this book many times with children and students of all ages. With careful attention to developmentally appropriate adjustment, primary, intermediate, and secondary

*Discussion of a visual culture approach in art education has been ongoing at the National Art Education Association conventions since 2002, and it was the theme of three art education journals in the spring of 2003 (*Studies in Art Education, Art Education,* and *Visual Arts Research*). While visual culture studies have taken many different emphases, with various terms promoted to describe these differences (e.g., mass culture, material culture, and popular culture), the premise of this book is critical social theory and experiential-based pedagogy. (Appendix A provides a bibliography for a social theory approach to visual art and to other forms of visual culture practiced by art educators.)

school learners, college freshmen, preservice and in-service teachers, administrators, and university colleagues have engaged in these activities. For example, in classrooms, workshops, and conference presentations, we have used the Draw a Chair exercise (Chapter 1) to guide participants—including a group of six hundred freshman engineers, small and large groups of parents, and classes of elementary-aged students—to actively understand aspects of their own and others' visual information processing style, which affects how visual messages are read. The Art, Not Art activity (Chapter 2) has been used effectively with both children and adults to help them understand the complex sets of art ideas that contribute to how they view, judge, and value visual culture.

The Intervisual Process

A premise of this book is that interpretation of visual information is directly affected by what we know, how we know it, and by the physical, psychological, and sociocultural surroundings in which we encounter images. To address this, we introduce a teaching strategy for interpreting visual culture that we call the "Intervisual Process" (Chapter 3). When successfully implemented, this process reveals the influence of various contexts of images, their viewers, and their makers.

We choose not to highlight famous artworks but rather to guide the viewer to seek meaning in visual phenomena that exist both inside and outside institutional definitions of art. Using a thematic approach, this book guides art educators to facilitate exploration of a rich variety of visual imagery that includes fine arts, public and folk arts, film, video, and digital media. Furthermore, we attempt to challenge canonical thinking not only in what we say but in the way we say it. A declarative, didactic approach may challenge canonical thinking with words but not by example.

How This Book Is Organized

The book is divided into nine chapters, each titled to evoke the broadest central concept supporting the chapter content. Each chapter is further divided into five sections. The first three sections introduce the chapter's key concept through activities that expose, explode, and empower. The fourth section, "Reflect," provides questions to critique the theory that underlies the chapter's concepts. The fifth and final section of each chapter, "Catalyst," provides practical classroom and age-level appropriate strategies, as well as suggestions for how to teach for student engagement and principles for curriculum development.

Chapter 1, "Beliefs," shows how a simple drawing can tell volumes about individual and shared beliefs. Participants in a categorization activity explode underlying assumptions about how people organize visual information as it relates to diverse mind-sets. Finally, students are empowered through an activity in which they create personal symbols that communicate their sense of identity.

Like a drawing, a simple physical act can reveal a great deal about one's operating definition of art. The activities in Chapter 2, "Definitions," reveal the multiple approaches to art that in turn can inform viewers' attitudes and biases.

Chapter 3, "Processes," introduces our Intervisual Process, used here for constructing meaning from public artworks. Starting with a specific activity involving a real work of public art that exists in a specific place, we provide strategies for extending the process to any work in any context.

In order to uncover sources of art attitudes and beliefs as well as patterns of visual thinking, Chapter 4, "Origins," provides strategies to reflect on childhood art experience and to consider how that experience can be reshaped in images. Theories of visual language development (notably that of Piaget)

indicate ways to understand how children's environments influence their visual thinking.

An exploration of symbolic visual codes exposes conceptions of self that are largely derived from shared understandings. These understandings draw on portrayals of the social groups with whom we identify. In Chapter 5, "Codes," we suggest ways to layer still life painting and drawing lessons with visual culture explorations. The strategies help to build a visual vocabulary that integrates technical art terms, art history terms, and visual culture codes.

"Power"—commonly assumed to be synonymous with domination, authority, and control—is the subject of Chapter 6. Here, we provide strategies to expose deep-seated understandings of power, to explode notions of power that affect how we interpret images, and to create images for transformative and collective power.

Juxtapositions, use of empty space, overlays, spotlights, and repositionings are visual strategies emphasized in Chapter 7, "Politics," to expose how meanings of art and other artifacts of visual culture are shaped by contexts that either privilege or diminish the value and influential power of the object. We present accessible classroom and age-appropriate suggestions to explode museum exhibition politics, to empower learners to re-envision display in virtual and physical spaces, and to generate critical dialogue.

Narrative portrayals—whether oral, visual, or textual—are means to understand experience and to envision possibilities. In Chapter 8 we focus on the stories that designed environments—such as digital games, shopping malls, and neighborhood meeting places—communicate. The activities explode notions of story and of the meanings conveyed by a place.

In the last chapter, "Synthesis," we discuss strategies to expose cultural narratives in film and video and to explode concepts presented in the preceding chapters—beliefs, definitions, processes, origins, codes, power, politics, and stories. These strategies empower learners to question visual cultural homogenization and to construct their own moving pictures, reflecting what is important to them.

Why It Is Important to Do the Activities Described in This Book

We encourage all of our readers, students and colleagues alike, to fully engage in this book's activities in order to experience the ideas and to better understand the impact of learning prior to facilitating the lessons with others. Moreover, in doing the activities, teachers learn about their own values and beliefs and can bring that understanding to teaching visual creation and to critique of individual, shared, and diverse experiences and possibilities.

There are many ways to approach the objective of exposing beliefs and behaviors that impact how we see the world. Such activities are presented from a visual culture orientation in successive chapters of this book. The larger goal is to make apparent how cultural contexts shape beliefs about images. What becomes important is not the image itself but rather what it reveals about the people who made it, the people who look at it, and the social context within which it functions.

Notes

1 Nancy Pauly, "Interpreting Visual Culture as Cultural Narratives in Teacher Education," *Studies in Art Education* 44, no. 3 (2003), 264.

2 Robert Bersson, "Toward a Socially Progressive Conception of Art Education," *Caucus on Social Theory and Art Education*, *Atlanta Papers, 1,* 1–2 (1980). [This is the first volume of what became the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education* (JSTAE). A list of all articles in JSTAE is at http://explorations.sva.psu.edu/cstae/journal/JSTAEtoc.htm]

3 John Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 60th anniversary ed. (West Lafayette, IN: Kappa Delta Pi, 1998; original work published 1938).