ALTHEA FRANCINI

FRA 02436

The Emergence of Visual Culture in Visual Arts Education: A Study in Political Discourse in the Field

Introduction

A current debate in Visual Arts Education concerns arguments for the reconfiguration of the field to that of Visual Culture. This paper considers what is proposed, setting out the arguments made by two exemplar proponents of Visual Culture, Dr. Kerry Freedman and Dr. Paul Duncum. The paper discusses the account, identifying the outcomes and significance of an adaptation of the field of art education to the practices of Visual Culture suggested by Duncum and Freedman.

The purpose and practices of Visual Culture in the form argued by its major proponents are significantly different from those of contemporary Visual Arts Education. Visual Culture is focused on the investigation of mass media as "an empirical examination of visual data" (Duncum, 1993, 32). The theoretical frameworks of Visual Culture rely on culture, literary and media studies (Duncum, 2001), and sociological perspectives (Freedman, 1991(a)). These configure the field as a literary practice, to enable the critical analysis of "cultural artefacts and practices primarily as a way of understanding the political and economic structures to which...they are endemic" (Duncum, 1982(c), 75). The skills and techniques of the study of visual culture have sociological analysis as their framework, utilising visual artefacts as the evidence of hegemonic agendas (Duncum, 1997). While contemporary Visual Arts Education is engaged with the production and investigation of artistic artefacts, Visual Culture employs images to describe the political and economic conditions of social practices. This means that the present emphasis in art education on the skills and knowledge of the production and functions of the artworld is marginalised in favour of investigating such contexts as social problems (Duncum, 2001), theme parks or television (Duncum, 1999(b)).

From the construction of art to the consumption of images

Contemporary practices within the field of art education are argued as misdirected by the authors due to the current emphasis in those practices on "form and technical skill" in contrast to "context" (Freedman, 2000(a), 316). Freedman argues for a reconstruction of understanding in relation to the "debilitating" formal practices of the field (2000(b), 9). The skills of the discipline become focused on the development of political knowledge, referred to by Duncum as "the opportunity for students to become politically literate by studying cultural products..." (1997,75). The change from "visual arts" to "images, no matter what kind, from which people derive meaning..." (Duncum, 1993, 3) enables the field of art education, in Duncum's view, to reposition itself within social and literary areas of education (1993, 22, 32). Duncum argues that a field reconfigured to popular culture needs to form "new alliances" with English, and "any subject involving the human condition" (1993, 32). Arguing that "the object of concern for art education is constituted by the social fields in which images are produced, distributed and used" (Duncum, 1997, 71), "ethnographic" investigations of "everyday" sites "form invaluable resources to critique" (Duncum, 1999(b), 307). Freedman's work indicates a view that artefacts are constructed by their contexts (2000(a), 318), and little relationship with artefacts is described beyond a sociological
investigation within political contexts. Freedman and Duncum’s writings characterise the use of images for the purpose of providing understanding of particular kinds of political and economic practices (Freedman, 2000(a), Duncum, 2000).

As a language-based discipline focused on the political literacy of students, the production of artworks is either marginalised or rendered largely irrelevant in the writings of the authors. Duncum argues for the suggested material of study to be "mass-produced, mass distributed and mass consumed artefacts; typically involving content that is relatively clear and simple; and produced by a small group of professionals for the consumption of others" (1987, 6). He also challenges the prioritisation in art education of "the acquisition of skills, technique and procedure in a range of media, the means of making pictures" (Duncum, 1991, 30), and suggests the audience for dominant (or popular) culture is interested in "being satisfied with the product, not the process" (1990(a), 212). Duncum asserts that art educators who are "committed to a producer orientation" and an "individualistic model of cultural production", "ensure their practice remains peripheral for the great majority of students" (1990(a), 213-214). For Freedman, "curriculum has often focused on form and technical skill, as opposed to content" (2000(a), 316). She argues for a "shift in the emphasis of teaching from formalist concerns to the construction of meaning" (2000(a), 315), and reorientation towards social contexts of works with an "emphasis on critique" (2000(a), 315). She also criticises the focus in art education on "production, not (a socially) aesthetic appreciation" (2000(b), 8)(parentheses added).

Duncum suggests, "the term visual culture implies two things" (2001, 106), which are the concern for "substantially visual artefacts", and an "interest in the social conditions in which the artefacts have their being, including their production, distribution and use" (2001, 106-107). He observes the "more radical approaches" of visual culture engage "images rather than art" (2001, 104), where "the lines are seriously blurred between the study of images and sociology" (2001, 105). Cultural production thus becomes another contextual site of critical investigation (Freedman, 2000(a), 318), rather than the current focus of its creative practices within Visual Arts Education. In this way Visual Culture does not require an inclusion of the understanding of social conditions and contexts into the investigation of art practices and artefacts, rather it seeks to reconfigure the field of art education to a study of social conditions and contexts, with an emphasis on critique (Freedman, 2000(a)). The investigation of conditions of production are, for Duncum, undertaken from the "outside" (1987, 10), and in relation to student production, collaborative models are proposed in contrast to individual works (Duncum, 1990(a), 214, see also Freedman, 2000(a), 320). The function of the artist is blurred with that of the audience, where the audience, Freedman argues, become "artists in that they remake the work in the act of understanding" (1997, 25).

The difficulty the authors express in engaging the professional practices of visual arts lies in their arguments of the historical relationship of artworld practices and particularly aesthetics, with the hegemonic agendas of government, class and capital (Duncum, 1999(b)). The functions of aesthetic and professional artistic practices are characterised as elitist (Duncum, 1982(a), Popkewitz and Freedman, 1984), exclusive or irrelevant (Duncum, 1999(b)), and unsocial (Freedman, 1997). Both aesthetics and art are aligned with agendas of social control (Freedman, 1987, 1989). Freedman argues that the "aesthetic conventions and codes that are an integral part of the production of art by the professional art world" are "used to establish the status and legitimacy in controlling a specialised knowledge and service" (Popkewitz and Freedman, 1984, 278). For Freedman, these are not the professional and philosophical aspects of a field, but rather characteristic of the artist's separation from their social context. For Duncum, the "idea of the cultural producer as a creative individual" is a theoretical preoccupation of "our particular cultural period" (1990(a), 209).
In summary, the critical study of social contexts in Visual Culture emphasises practices of consumption. Mass produced, distributed and consumed artefacts are "produced by a small group of professionals for the consumption of others" (Duncum, 1987, 6), and the "material conditions of production are often virtually unknowable" (Duncum, 2000. 172). While the authors argue the necessity of students' political literacy, Visual Culture as a field is based in a critical investigation of mass consumption, and does not provide knowledge for cultural production by students. Rather it is argued by the authors that the emphasis in art education on technical skills is "debilitating" (Frederman, 2000(b), 9) and the field's contemporary commitment "to a producer orientation" is "peripheral" (Duncum, 1990(a), 213-214). Visual Culture looks to an audience who are "satisfied with the product, not the process" (Duncum, 1990(a), 212).

The production of works in visual culture

In contrast to Freedman and Duncum's arguments, contemporary practices of artistic and aesthetic production are well placed to support the agency, or empowerment of the student. Ironically, Duncum suggests, "consumers are led to believe they possess real social agency which actually exists only among producers (2000, 172). He also argues that in contemporary life aesthetics has "acquired a wholly unprecedented significance" (1999(a), 46). The production of artistic forms is central to the social and economic practices of society. Aesthetic and artistic representation is an irreplaceable condition of reference in contemporary culture, and the social agency of its producers is valued.

If production is a part of the practice of Visual Culture, there are two concerns. The first is that it must represent production as an aspect of mass-produced cultural artefacts, as Duncum's suggested study of the soap opera Dallas proposes (1987). In this sense it is undifferentiated from media studies, from which Duncum draws his primary material of engagement (1997). The second difficulty is that production of any cultural form engages formal and aesthetic concerns, the "range of skills", which are described by the authors as problematic in art education. In this instance however, they would be the aesthetic concerns of mass media production. Duncum characterises their form as "unambiguous", where "good is clearly distinguished from evil, strength from weakness" (1990(b), 21), and which "expresses and reinforces conventional ideas, feelings, values and attitudes" (1990(b), 21).

To engage with these forms on any other level, including that of critical reformulation returns the issue to that of artistic production. If the production of cultural works is limited to the social "form(s)" (Frederman, 2000(a), 320), "meanings" (Frederman, 2000(a), 317), and "conditions" (Frederman, 1997, 23) that Frederman argues are the sole basis of contemporary artistic concerns (2000(a), 320), then the restriction of other reasons for artistic production is not addressed. Frederman has referred to other functions of artistic production in a criticism of them as "separated", requiring a "need for isolation", and engaging a denial of "influence...by social conditions" (1997, 23). As in the previous example of mass media, it is still true that any production of "social" works still requires a foundation of aesthetic and formal understandings.

Should Visual Culture engage purely sociological concerns and marginalise production altogether, it must distance students from the agency of artistic production, maintaining the argument that those conditions of production are unknowable, or distant from us. In this way it genuinely reduces the empowerment of the student in contemporary society as someone actively engaged in the production of works. It also becomes then a social or cultural studies program, engaging an entirely different theoretical and disciplinary foundation to that of Visual Arts Education.

It is inevitable that both authors must return to the issues of aesthetic values in art education, as their more recent papers indicate (Frederman, 2000(b), Duncum, 1999(a)).
construction of work in relation to images or visual representation is necessarily based in formal and other aesthetic considerations. That these issues exclude investigations of sociocultural concern in art education is not indicated by literature in the field. In 1989 Brown noted the possible disruptions to and emergence of new meanings attributable to works over time when he suggests they have "a persistence and a vulnerability" (225), suggesting that within the engagement

...the myriad of properties relative to it can be accepted without exclusion; its interesting historical facts, its physical nature, its market value, its fashionability; the general ideas and narratives transacted within it and about it, its causal effect on oneself, and upon others, its social anthropology, its technical nature and, not least, its aesthetic and representational character (225).

Duncum acknowledges the requirement of understanding and engagement with the values inherent in the productive base of a field in his references to the curriculum of media studies. He notes that production in the field "requires a knowledge of the codes and conventions with which media products are created" (1997, 75). Freedman argues that postmodern artists frequently "reject formalistic uses of the elements and principles of design" (Freedman, 2000(a), 317), however aesthetic construction remains essential to any cultural production. This remains also true when artists choose to subvert or reformulate those codes. Through the investigation of works on the basis of their values in the area of visual arts, the social and cultural issues concerning the artefact's contexts can be addressed within different frameworks engaging complex relationships.

**A critical engagement with the student's social world in visual culture**

Investigating the internal consistency of arguments for critical engagement with students' cultural practices challenges the assertions made by Duncum and Freedman that students will benefit from this method of enquiry.

The studied authors reiterate the necessity for a critical engagement with cultural practices consistently over the period investigated. Duncum characterises sites of popular cultural engagement as the means to develop "rich ethnographies of everyday aesthetic sites which can form invaluable resources to critique (1999(b), 307). He argues that art educators "need to make problematic the beliefs and values that underpin everyday aesthetic sites" (1999(b), 308). Those values, he suggests are "often dubious" (1999(b), 308). Freedman sets out within her requirements for changes in the field "a new definition of and emphasis on critique" (2000(a), 315), in conjunction with a prioritisation on contexts of social perspectives.

Simultaneously, this is to be an engagement "without prejudice, of all cultural artefacts by which people in our society make meaning" (Duncum, 1982(c), 73). In this instance Duncum is referring to the differentiation of values made by distinctions between 'high culture' and 'low culture'. The statement describes his wish to disengage from what he perceives as class-based hegemony, which he argues disputes value in popular cultural production. Further, he suggests that criticism of popular culture is a "highly conservative, defensive reaction" by an "authoritarian", "cultured minority" (1990(b), 21). That minority is concerned with a culture of "social control", which "operates in opposition to the beliefs, practices and valued artefacts of the masses" (1982(c), 73).

Arguments of uncritical engagement with, and criticism of student culture both emerge as essential to the authors; first as a means to differentiate their arguments from those who had nominated a critical position of popular culture on the basis of aesthetic values, and second to consolidate the credibility of their participation as emergent from within a normative and
ubiquitous social context, that is, a democratic context. Use of the argument of the ubiquity of visual experience is characterised on the one hand as an ethical validation for engaging in contexts by which the vast majority of ordinary persons participate in and generate their own culture (see Freedman, 2000(a), 326), and on the other as invalid in terms of its "rapacious" (Duncum, 1999(b), 303) capitalist (refer Freedman, 1989) and hegemonic agendas.

The reductive nature of the materiality and commodification of cultural artefacts Visual Culture engages is a difficult representation of cultural and social practices in art education. While Freedman and Duncum consider this methodology enables an investigation of the economics and politics of production, distribution and consumption, the processes also engage an objectification of complex cultural experiences. In addressing this, Bourdieu suggests the "rupture that must be effected in order to ground a rigorous science of cultural works is hence more than and different from a simple methodological overturning" (1996, 185).

In contrast to Freedman's arguments for an integration of "body and mind" (2000(b), 2), the objects, experience and characteristics of student lifeworld activity are engaged on the basis of their authenticity, vitality and the pleasure they offer, only to be exposed to the scrutiny of Visual Culture as ethnographic "resources to critique", characteristic of "dubious" beliefs and values. The two authors express little engagement with the images, objects or practices in themselves as cultural productions, with Duncum asserting, "always, images tell us more about the interests of those who make images than the subjects represented" (1997, 71).

The paradoxical engagement of identification with, and deconstruction of, students' cultural environment Visual Culture proposes, requires an objectification of students' conditions and experiences. While Duncum argues for the attitude of "delight in the frivolous and refusal to take things seriously" (1990(a), 211), which for him characterise much popular cultural production, "imagery, like language" is really a "battleground of meaning" (Duncum, 1997, 71), and constitutes the terms of engagement. Cultural practices, reduced to an image (Duncum, 1993, 3), or material commodities (Duncum, 1997, 69), become the material evidence of agendas constructed within "site(s) of ideological struggle", dominated by the "hegemony of mass media" (Duncum, 1997, 71). In Duncum's view, empowerment lies in the student's "challenge (of the) use of symbolic power which denies their, and others, reality of social existence and social worth" (1997, 71). The shift from artworld practices to a semiotic deconstruction of the cultural object enables "students to become politically literate by studying cultural products in which they have a personal investment" (Duncum, 1997, 75). However, it does not provide a methodology of social empowerment beyond a "politically literate" articulation of those revealed "agendas" for the student to engage with. The seductiveness of (Freedman, 2000(b)), and complex relationships within the enactment of cultural forms transacted by people, are reduced to elements in an objectified economy (Brown, 2000, 4) of political and economic structures wherein the process "kill(s) off its meanings" (Brown, 2000, 4). Students are engaged through their "personal investment" (Duncum, 1997, 75) in the study of their cultural pursuits, and those practices become the subject of a sociological (Freedman, 1991, 43) "gaze" that supposes it can define the "obscure and elusive 'inner nature'" (Bauman, 1992, 70) of the forms.

Freedman and Duncum propose arguments that reduce complex and vital engagements to simplified moral and economic binaries. This inevitably demotivates engagement and disrupts, misrepresenting participation, which is replaced instead with a distanced observation. It is an ironic consequence that the possibilities in education of an integrative experience connecting body and mind Freedman argues for, are reduced by the conditions she and Duncum suggest.
Conclusion

Two alternatives for the inclusion of Visual Culture exist in art education. The first regards the incorporation into the field of additional content. This risks becoming increasingly additive, within the context of a high turnover of ephemeral exemplars. Also, in this case, conditions of production would be situated by Duncum’s arguments, in the field of mass media.

The second alternative is the proposal that the field of Visual Arts Education reconfigures to a sociological curriculum that marginalises its relationship with artworld practices. This would require the configuration of the field to a social or cultural studies program, engaging an entirely different theoretical and disciplinary foundation to that of Visual Arts Education. If this occurs, the skills and practices of artistic and aesthetic production and values currently engaged in the field would be rendered redundant. In this situation, the marginalisation of contemporary artworld practices argued by the proponents of Visual Culture cannot be considered supportive of the field of art education.

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