

The Future of Education in the Visual Arts

Comments for the January 20, 2010, ESEA Reauthorization Meeting

submitted by

Michelle Marder Kamhi, Co-Editor *Aristos* (An Online Review of the Arts)

Member, National Art Education Association

Member, University Council for Art Education

Contact: kamhi@aristos.org

[*Note:* To save space, some of the links cited below have been condensed to “Tiny URLs.” See <http://tiny.com>.]

The traditional visual arts of painting, drawing, and sculpture have played a significant role in human culture since prehistory. Yet they are receiving ever-shorter shrift in our nation’s schools. Critics of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, or “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB), attribute the neglect of arts education largely to the pressures imposed on schools by mandatory testing in math and reading. They seek to remedy the situation with new proposals for the section of the Act dealing with the arts in education.

As I have indicated in numerous articles published in *Arts Education Policy Review* and elsewhere, however, the real problem with visual art education goes much deeper than the impact of NCLB. Moreover, the changes to NCLB proposed by the National Education Taskforce (NET) will, I argue, only make matters worse.

The NET proposal recommends defining *the arts* as “creative activities and products of the theater, the visual arts, dance, music, and multimedia combinations of the above” and requiring that “all children [be] taught the arts by arts specialists.” With respect to the *visual arts* in particular, however, standards have so declined that virtually anything can qualify as contemporary visual art—from purely verbal expressions such as Jenny Holzer’s *Truisms* < <http://mfx.dasburo.com/art/truisms.html> > to “*sound* installations” < <http://tiny.cc/FnIuN> >. Yet most art specialists ignore contemporary work in the traditional visual genres of painting, drawing, and sculpture that are recognized as art by the general public, from the paintings of Andrew Wyeth < <http://www.awyeth.com/> > to public sculptures such as Frederick Hart’s *Three Soldiers*, which forms part of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in D. C. < <http://tiny.cc/Fx2f4> >, and the *Boston Women’s Memorial* < <http://tiny.cc/11Cgx> > by Meredith Bergmann, honoring women who have contributed to America’s history and culture.

Thus the key questions for art education are What truly qualifies as *visual art*? And what sort of training and assumptions qualifies someone as an *art* specialist? Whereas professionals in the field increasingly engage in and teach about the dubious new forms of “contemporary art,” the

general public is correct in failing to recognize such work as art. The truth is that baffling and often transgressive new genres such as “performance art” < <http://tiny.cc/wdv61> >, “installation art” < <http://tiny.cc/eJ1Bq> >, and “video art” < http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_art > originated as expressly *anti-art* gestures, which deliberately abandoned the characteristic features of the traditional visual arts of painting, drawing, and sculpture: that is, meaningful imagery created with care and sensitivity to the human values projected.

In addition to embracing the spurious new forms, many art teachers have been extending their purview to all of “visual culture”—from action toys and shopping malls to MTV videos and commercial advertising. Finally, and most disturbing, their visual culture lessons tend to be skewed to inculcate particular political or social views, ranging from attacks on capitalism to the glorification of counterculture expressions such as “street art,” or graffiti.

A recent issue of *Art Education* (the journal of the National Art Education Association), for example, featured an article critiquing the popular Build-A-Bear Workshops—a commercial enterprise that enables children to assemble personalized teddy bears. In it, the author censured the “capitalist ideology of consumerism.” Another recent article praised the “street art” of the British practitioner Banksy < <http://www.banksy.co.uk/> > and suggested that teachers encourage students to create their own examples. The Banksy images recommended for study included *Kissing Cops* < <http://kalafudra.files.wordpress.com/2008/06/banksy-kissing-policemen.jpg> >, which “forces pedestrians to revise their conceptions of homosexuality and masculinity.”

The NET proposals to amend NCLB would exacerbate these disturbing trends by appending the following requirement:

To teach children to interpret media messages critically, arts curricula shall include study of mass media, visual culture, popular culture, government documents, educational materials, and entertainment and commercial productions, with age-appropriate attention given to how these means of visual communication manipulate arts and aesthetic content to influence thought and emotion.

The goal of education in the visual arts (as contrasted with social studies or language arts instruction) should not be to “teach children to interpret media messages critically” or to study such things as “government documents.” It should be to teach them to understand and appreciate works of visual art—as distinct from “media messages” and other forms of expression. The *New York State Education Standards for the [Visual] Arts* < <http://emsc32.nysed.gov/ciai/arts/pub/artlearn.pdf> > recommend, for example, that “students should not only compare the ways ideas and concepts are communicated through visual art with the various ways that those ideas and concepts are manifested in other art forms” but should also “compare the ways in which a variety of ideas, themes, and concepts are expressed through the visual arts with the ways they are expressed in other disciplines.” Similar goals are included in the National Standards for Arts Education.

The NET proposal flouts such objectives in its emphasis on “interpret[ing] media messages

critically,” however, as well as in its suggested addition of the following more radical goal for arts education:

To create a civically engaged and ethical citizenry, study of the arts shall include age-appropriate examination of social justice and ethical questions posed by artworks throughout history and across world cultures.

That proposal raises further serious questions. Is the goal of creating a “civically engaged and ethical citizenry” the proper focus of the art classroom? Or does it belong elsewhere? And should art teachers be professionally concerned with the question of “social justice”? Yet that is the theme of this year’s National Art Education Association convention (whose organizers declare that the term “alludes to the notion of education as a political act, and when coupled with the term *art education* hints at models of resistance—teaching as a form of activism”). Many concerned citizens would argue that such an issue lies within the province of social studies teachers, who are more likely to have the educational background to deal with the complex and often contentious questions involved.

Finally, in suggesting that works of art should be understood through the lens of the “social justice and ethical questions” that they appear to pose when judged from our modern cultural perspective, the NET proposal again flies in the face of the national standards. Those standards appropriately recommend that students be taught to understand works of art as far as possible in relation to their *original* cultural context.

Alternative Recommendations

Education in the visual arts should emphasize the following:

1. From the earliest grades on, students should be exposed to age-appropriate examples of painting, drawing, and sculpture from the world’s great artistic traditions, with particular emphasis on our own tradition of Western art. Age-appropriate study should aim to nurture an understanding of the ways in which works of visual art convey their meaning and elicit an emotional response.
2. Beyond the largely physical exploration of art-making materials and the opportunities for spontaneous expression appropriate to very young children, the foundational skill of drawing from observation should be a primary technical focus in studio classes, supplemented by the study of how the elements of color, line, and composition can contribute to the creation of a meaningful image. Given available resources, such studio practice might also be extended to include the modeling of figures in clay.

A curriculum based on these principles could begin to achieve genuine quality in visual art education.

Bibliography follows:

Related Articles

“What Hope Is There for Art Education?” *Aristos*, July 2009
< <http://www.aristos.org/aris-09/arteducation.htm> >

“What About the *Other* Face of Contemporary Art?” (*Art Education*, March 2008; reprinted in *Aristos*, June 2008) < <http://www.aristos.org/aris-08/otherface.htm> >

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“Modernism, Postmodernism, or Neither?--A Fresh Look at ‘Fine Art’” (*Aristos*, August 2005; reprinted in *Arts Education Policy Review*, May/June 2006)
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“Where’s the *Art* in Today’s Art Education?” (*What Art Is Online*, November 2002; reprinted in *Arts Education Policy Review*, March/April 2003)
< <http://www.aristos.org/whatart/arted-1.htm> >