Theory versus Practice

Art educators have long been concerned with the relationship between theory and praxis. These concerns have been manifested in extensive debates about the role of critical theory in studio art programs. There is a widely held assumption in art teaching that theory gets in the way of creativity and spontaneity. While all educators must consider the interrelations of theory and practice, in art departments there is an all too frequent dismissal of theory. Resistance can be related to the theoretical questioning of deeply held beliefs about art, such as truth and originality, in the context of an understanding that the construction of meaning is inseparable from the production of power. In these discussions, the theoretical adage of theory into praxis has often mutated into the pedagogical opposition of theory versus practice. This divisiveness does not fully consider the particular challenges that arise in the studio art classroom.

The opposition between art theory and art making is commonly articulated in terms of visual versus verbal intelligence. Many students are also resistant to theory, and a type of anti-intellectualism regularly becomes the response to the political dimension of critical theories. Art is thus seen as a nonintelectual endeavor—as a manipulation of physical materials separate from ideological contexts. A good example of this is the one-sentence artist statement accompanying a recent M.F.A. exhibition that read “Look Don’t Think.” Although I agree with the assumption that studio art departments need to integrate a theoretical analysis into the curriculum, I do not want to dismiss the exhortation “Look Don’t Think,” as it exemplifies the distinct considerations of teaching theory to art students.

Aesthetics and Politics

One of the most frustrating things about the divisiveness of theory versus practice is the presumption that a skills approach to studio art is not a teaching of theory. A formalist approach to aesthetics and a model of individualistic expression are presented as facts in studio art classes. As Victor Burgin points out, what counts as criticism in art critiques is in a symbiotic relationship with the narrative, chronological construction of the canons of genius of traditional art history. Students may be told to look not think, but they are being taught a way of thinking about the primacy of the artist and the originality of the object.

Many art students do not have the skills or background to read theoretical material. Problems with reading and analytic comprehension leave some students feeling overwhelmed and confused. Instead of acknowledging that not being able to read and write might be a problem, perhaps even a learning disability, the reification of look over think does art students a disservice. Given that it is unlikely that more than a handful of these students will be able to make a living from art making, let alone teaching, this seems problematic if not unethical.

Susan E. McKenna

Theory and Practice: Revisiting Critical Pedagogy in Studio Art Education

2. The bibliography on critical pedagogy is extensive; see Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (New York: Continuum, 1989); Henry Giroux and Peter McLaren, Between Borders: Pedagogy and the Politics of Cultural Studies (New York: Routledge, 1994).

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Like all dualisms, theory versus practice oversimplifies, as each side must dig in determinedly to hold on to the oppositional position. It is equally important to look at what counts as knowledge and intelligence in both art education and in critical pedagogy. For instance, much of the literature on pedagogy brings up the idea of "politicizing" students without questioning what that really means. Politicize is implicitly associated with a leftist or progressive political position that can be simplified (and dismissed) under the red flag of political correctness. The pedagogical goal of politicizing students can work against the goal of empowering students; frequently, the few students with some background in political rhetoric attempt to dominate the class discussion. When considered in the context of the opposition of visual versus verbal intelligence, putting theory into practice can, as Elizabeth Ellsworth states, "lead us to reproduce relations of domination." The answer does not lie in directing discussion or in rejecting theory.

Ideology and Experience

In my teaching, I have a general goal: for students to understand that their language (both verbal and visual) and thoughts are not neutral and natural. Judith Williamson states that an understanding of ideology is the underpinning of any critical thought or questioning on the part of students. The goal of teaching perhaps should not be to politicize students, but to encourage them to engage with complex ideas. It is this distinction between politicize and engage which is key to bridging the boundaries that divide studio art education. As Abigail Solomon-Godeau notes, one of the "most daunting of all contradictions that critical practices must negotiate is . . . problematizing the concept of the political in art."

One way to encourage students to consider the relationship between the nonconscious mind and ideology is to have it connect with a personal experience. There are pitfalls, however, in asking students to find the missing link between personal experience and theoretical ideas. Revealing personal information may be an unbalancing and inappropriate intrusion, as the process of making art can be interspersed with anger and pain. Art students on some level already know that reality means that they will not become famous artists. For many students deconstructing their lives is unsafe, as not all voices in the classroom carry equal weight or have equal access. For example, a young gay or lesbian student struggling with the coming-out process may find a social constructionist theory of identity threatening.

Strategies in Context

Although I want students to develop a self-reflexive self-consciousness about their lives and their image making, I hope they will do so without losing themselves. Questioning reality does not mean that there is not any meaning; rather that meaning is relational and therefore historically and culturally situated. I try to take difficult concepts and make them accessible, useful, and safe for students. Ellsworth suggests a pedagogical model that creates what she calls strategies in context, an acknowledgment of the contradictory and shifting terrain of the classroom. Informed by that suggestion, the following ideas originate in several teaching contexts: first, in both introductory and
advanced photography classes in a studio art program; second, in seminars on
critical theory for art majors; third, in general education classes for both art
and non-art majors. Although these examples vary in relation to course level,
they can be translated into any studio class.

I do have students read from the canon, but I also have them read from
a variety of sources and vernaculars, including popular magazines, alternative
newspapers, and current fiction. I incorporate the obvious as well as the unex-
pected. In a section on Marxism and political economy, I include clippings on
corporate sponsorship of museums and skyrocketing "masterpiece" prices, an
article on the sexual politics of housework, and appliance ads from women's
magazines of the fifties through the nineties. In conjunction with readings on
semiotics, the appliance ads are especially useful in exemplifying how mean-
ings can both repeat and change across time periods.

I have students implement these semiological principles by first finding
and contrasting similar ads from different decades and then visually comment-
ing on or disrupting the content or form. Advertisements are a catalyst for
discussions about symbols, identity, and consumption that can be considered
alongside statistics about advertising costs and research. Working with chang-
ing ideas about masculinity, one student collaged and enhanced cigarette ad-
vertisements; another inserted fifties images that referenced Freudian symbols
into drawings. These visual assignments are treated as rough sketches; the
goal is to begin to be conversant with different ways of thinking and look-
ing. Students are encouraged to work visually, not to become text dependent,
and to consider how content and form work in concert. Assignments like
these can change the hierarchical terms of the classroom, as frequently a stu-
dent hesitant to engage in a discussion will bring in strong visual work that
demonstrates an application of the theoretical material.

I want students to have some sense that what they see as reality is always
changing and evolving. Interdisciplinary does not mean just Freud and Marx
or Judith Butler and Michel Foucault. I search for readings in communication,
sociology, and even legal studies textbooks to find accessible examples of the-
ory into practice. A brief article on the interrelations of Supreme Court decisions
and police illegitamities on television can be compelling as linked to discussions
of race, class, and gendered representations of violence. I also found a brief
sociology article with statistics on the changing measurements of Miss America
to be useful for discussing cultural constructions of beauty and taste without
sliding into the frequently dead-end debates about images of women in art.
One student used these ideas to extend the advertising assignment into a final
painting project incorporating images from fifties lingerie ads. Representing
the body is an important topic for all art classes. I ask students to consider
what it means to take responsibility for making images and to place them-
selves in those debates.

I do extensive lecturing accompanied by slides and video clips. I read TV
Guide, and I tape, tape, tape! I go to conferences, and I read both academically
and popularly. I do show examples from contemporary art and art history, but
I try to utilize the student language of popular culture. Students who grew up
watching MTV have seen the blurring of high and popular culture in action.
For example, I address censorship using a Simpsons episode that begins with
Marge picketing children’s TV and ends with Michelangelo’s David wearing a pair of blue jeans. I discuss visual ethics and authorship by contrasting the films of Leni Riefenstahl with the political incorrectness of Seinfeld. Another way to demystify the language of theory is to consider how dense ideas become popularized. I tell students that they are “always/alread’y” in a conversation with Freud as I give a lecture called Pop Up Freud that is repeatedly a big hit, as it references the postmodern Pop Up Video on VH1. Growing up on Madonna videos means forever more disputing the terms of a feminist psychoanalytic analysis of representation.

**Strategies in Practice**

I am acutely aware that my class may be the only one in which art students hear these ideas, and I try to give pragmatic strategies for using theory. One of the most difficult things to teach is that form has content. I illustrate this by showing a collection of ten images with different subjects, such as Hillary Clinton, a fashion model in stiletto heels, the quintessential white man in a suit, a black football player, and lastly, Joe Camel. Although all the figures are shot from an extreme low to high perspective, the reading of each image is radically different. The goal is to understand that representational codes such as perspective have ideological content.  

Students can easily recognize that a low to high camera angle—perspective—is associated with power; the man in the suit is meant to be seen as powerful. In contrast, the image of Hillary is unflattering, and “power” reads as “aggressive.” More subtly, a reading of the powerful black athlete might be linked to a racist connotation of primitive savagery. Closely examining these images suggests to even the most resistant student that perspective is constructed through such cultural myths as gender, class, and race. This deconstruction of perspective is particularly useful for drawing or painting students who believe that theory is only for photography majors.

Another good example is an exercise I call The Color Red; this works especially well on Valentine’s Day. We look at a number of uses of red, including romance, religion, communism, danger, fear, blood, seeing red, passion, red-light district, and adultery. This example of semiotic theory put into practice serves as a catalyst for discussing how color has political, historical, and corporeal meanings that resonate in a system of cultural relations. These exercises demonstrate a theoretical application of formal codes such as perspective and color, and are useful for integrating critical ideas into any studio class, especially during crits where students can become defensive about their own work. Furthermore, short visual exercises can be extended into sophisticated final projects that question how the language of looking as well as thinking has constructed meaning.

I encourage students to consider how every image they make is a self-portrait. Sensitive projects from beginning students include a text-and-photo series on how Native Americans were historically associated with disease, a painting series on birth and death, and a collaborative drawing project that is an ironic commentary on accessibility. Although theoretical applications are more visible in some projects, students who place themselves traditionally can do so with self-reflexivity: in landscape photography with unexpected inserted
content; in figure drawings disrupting notions about perspective and gaze; and in abstract paintings incorporating symbolic meaning to work with the idea that form has content. Other students created advanced projects such as sensual paintings of the female figure incorporating computer-generated mythic imagery; a witty satirical film on masculinity, heroism, and violence; a provocative multimedia book on sexuality and personal space; and a video linking commonsensical definitions of black and white with the Rodney King beating. Theory is put into practice both explicitly and implicitly in end-of-semester projects; what is important is that students consciously place themselves in relation to looking and thinking.

**Theory and Practice**

It is a challenge to make material accessible and compelling to students who perceive thinking as an alienating barrier to art making. It is difficult to compete with the visceral pleasures of looking and with the mythic allures of genius. Teaching about looking and thinking requires patience, humor, and hard work. It also requires the acknowledgment that many students want to be artists not only because they seek fame and fortune, but because they take pleasure in intuitive and experiential forms of knowledge.

I use myself as an example. I come out in several different ways in the classroom, but the most potent revelation is when I tell students I was in the Miss America Pageant when I was their age. This always elicits a visceral response that opens up a discussion of feminism and how my relationship to feminism has changed. In addition, this revelation breaks down stereotypes of how they might see me (or dismiss me as "PC"). I also discuss the pleasures I take as an artist in making objects, as well as the pleasures in reading and writing. I make sure students know that I did not come to art or academe through a customary route, and that art and theory have each been strategic lifelines. I build on the traditions of both theory and practice to encourage students to see ideas as not only useful, but necessary for taking one's place in the contemporary art world. Finally, I ask students to situate themselves in "an identity that knows where it comes from, where home is, but also lives in the symbolic."  

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