Visual Consumers and Art-makers: Adolescent Art-making as a Site of Legitimate Critique of Cosmopolitanism

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Abstract
The phenomenon of globalisation presents for adolescent students a need to navigate the complexities of a transnational commodity society. While globalisation facilitates a freeing up of culture, it can also present as perplexing and contradictory to young, emergent adults. Secondary visual art curricula in Australia, informed by postmodern and popular culture perspectives, are providing sites for the active and powerful negotiation of the phenomena of cosmopolitanism, citizenship and the construction of identity. These sites accommodate personal narrative perspectives that represent legitimate critique for the condition of a mobilised and fragmented self. An examination of five years of Higher School Certificate artworks in New South Wales reveals a rich imagery of how student artists use their art-making to affirm their consciousness about their world and self. It reveals how visual art-making may facilitate the ongoing mediation of society via mutating images, symbols and meanings in cultures, and provides tangible evidence of how aesthetic engagement can promote an investigation of personal and cultural values through communicative knowing.

Introduction
Globalisation presents adolescent students with the need to navigate the complexities of a transnational commodity society in a new, rapid communication context. While globalisation may facilitate a freeing up of culture and present the promise of the development of dispositions that are more open, tolerant and flexible, it also presents the contradictory position of a world of social inequality, religious intolerance, war and economic anxiety that are ever-present challenges for young, emergent adults. For Barnett (2003), cultural institutionalised practices through discourse and narratives in the global culture are more aimed at shaping conduct than presenting individuals with opportunities to exercise free will. The homogenising effect of this cultural phenomenon presents as perplexing and contradictory to the young who experience the instability of their subjectivities. Secondary visual art curricula in Australia, informed by postmodern and popular visual culture perspectives, offer sites for the active and powerful negotiation and construction of identity.
Cosmopolitanism, Visual Culture and Identity

The phenomenon of cosmopolitanism is characterised by a shift away from bounded and unique cultural communities, an intensified mixing of the signs, symbols and activities of compressed cultures, and an intensification and speeding up of this phenomenon (Held, 2005). Postmodern constructs of self are relative to interpretations of history, culture and beliefs, and are "dependent on free access to the interpretive possibilities of cultural tradition" (Habermas, 1979: 93). In the twenty-first century, this is increasingly dependent on understanding how the image and text within cultural institutionalised practices (art galleries, images as symbol systems in the media, telecommunications and popular culture) shape our conduct and regulate forms of ‘free subjectivity’ (Barnett, 2003: 96). One’s life world is now a collage of ever-increasing hybrid visual auditory experiences that happen in a temporal and spatial compression.

Media normalising messages bombard us through television, new media, shopping centres and the new cyber world with experiences and messages of consumption (Mirzoeff, 1998). For Deleuze: ‘We are definitely moving towards “control” societies’ (1990: 174) as deregulation of society promotes corporate ideologies. The forms of this domination operate in ‘rhizomorphic and disjunctive global flows’ (Barker, 2000: 117), where the power of dominant Western commodification or globalisation as a euphemism for ‘Americanisation’ (Centre for Arts & Culture, 2004) impacts on new cultural, semiotic and symbol mixes challenging global and local cultural identities and the maintenance of citizenship rights. Meaning about self as image circulates the globe, ‘conveying information, affording pleasure and displeasure, influencing style, determining consumption and mediating power relations’ (Rogoff, 1998: 15). The experiencing of these new hyper-realities and the experiences of time and rapid change present for many as dislocating, disorienting and anxious.

Youth Culture, Image and Cosmopolitanism

Youth cultures are heavily influenced by the full repertoire of signifiers within global popular visual culture, and increasingly by the time-space compression of the shrinking world (Barker, 2000). Globalisation has seen youth culture become highly dependent on visual culture and the image as a complete meaning-making system (Venturelli, 2004). The space or territory in which the self is constituted is therefore also inhabited by a vast bank of images which Rogoff (1998) argues present a dominant Western empirical determination of the world ‘bodies of thought ... in the service of a particular politics or ideology ... populated ... with a select set of images, viewed through specific apparatuses and serving the needs of distinct subjectivities’ (1998: 21). Hall argues that this power has become a constitutive element in all our identities (Hall, in Barker, 2002: 119) and that we, as spectators, are prone to the manipulation and deception of consumer myths in our desire for cultural objects. It is increasingly important that youth develop the capacities to mediate all the messages presented to them in ways that develop their critical and rational understandings of how these communicative systems operate.

Culture, Communicative Knowing, Citizenship and Contemporary Art Education

If we accept the position presented by Hawkes (2002) that cultural vitality should be as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, then we need to give consideration to how popular media culture constructs an ideology of consumerism, and how all its signs and communicative activity work to make cultural meanings. Further, we need to consider how the latter part of the twentieth century saw the arts (music and image) used to ‘support the two forces of the political salesmanship and commercial advertising’ (Saul, 1997: 65–66). The negotiation of new subjectivities which are constantly shifting, unstable and problematic for the individual need to be viewed from the position of how ideologies function predominantly to naturalise and perpetuate differences within a culture, and how — paradoxically — this
is usually done through the attempted erasure of differences (Schirato and Yell, 2000: 74). As well, we need to consider this in the context of Barnett’s (2003) observations that a ‘speeding up of activities through communications innovations leads to the replacement of reasoned, deliberate judgement with spectacular display and appeals to emotion’ (2003: 34). If ‘identities have to be negotiated or won’ (Edley, 2001: 194), then it is essential for society to provide individuals with the cultural literacy skills and reflective practices to continually evaluate their own ‘subjectification as process’ (Deleuze, 1990: 92) — to learn how to critically interpret media field positions and use cognitive tools to interpret how they operate and exercise power to shape one’s cultural identities, subjectivities and citizenship positions. For Haraway (1998), the best way to see the big picture is to position the view from the particular and use the skill of self-reflexivity (Kellner, 1992).

Creating Possibilities and Communicative Participation

For Habermas (1990), a person’s selfhood or identity emerges from their reflective responses to their personal realities differentiated from individual life worlds and worlds. This sense of self is dependent on our capacities to meditate our physical, emotional, cultural and social consciousness within our individual lived experiences. Increasingly, we have come to acknowledge the discursive nature of this activity and the immense impact of popular culture and cosmopolitanism on this construction. What appears essential is the need to develop in young people the ability to monitor their own lives and mediate the social and cultural influences of society in the development of a moral consciousness and a capacity for communicative action (Habermas, 1990). This capacity for self-regulation will act as an agent to develop a sense of identity, social responsibility, and an awareness of moral issues, while supporting active negotiation of what constitutes productive citizenship. In today’s society, we must acknowledge the role of culture — and particularly popular visual culture — in personal and group identity formation for young people.

Visual arts education offers two essential components of this agency. For Deleuze (1990), it provides a closed site for personal new meaning-making, and is different to communicating — ‘a creator is someone who creates their own impossibilities and thereby creates possibilities’ (1990: 133). The artists can channel this action through their multiple positions as well, when a new image is formed and a person positions themselves as viewer, they are able to understand self from the reflective positions of active maker, consumer-participant and objective observer. Within popular culture and the broader cultural and social context, this represents a vital function in the formation of a moral consciousness, individual well-being and citizenship. All youth need authentic, active and critical sensory engagement with this cultural form if they are to develop communicative capacities and understand how cultural forms construct meaning.

Student Art-making and a Visual Culture Orientation

Art-making is a unique process of validation is grounded in intuitive knowings (Eisner, 1972, 1990; Gardner, 1990; Neilson, 2000), critical orientations with communicative and personal relevance to the student. Students draw on their skill of objective and perceptual observations and engage with a hermeneutic cycle of reflection in search of other ways of knowing the world (Grushka, 2004). Student works, co-constructed with the teacher and their investigative processes, give them the capacity to manipulate their gaze to take on both subject and viewer positions. The ability to take on multiple positions, to use the technologies of vision (Haraway, 1998), is an essential critical skill in art education and in the qualitative field can demonstrate active democratic practice (Denzin, 2002).

Visual art practices, with a visual culture slant and a discursive ‘seeing’, give attention to how production, circulation and reception inform one’s unique ways of knowing (Grierson, 2003: 7),
supporting a critical consciousness of the phenomena of cosmopolitanism for the twenty-first century. This emergent interdisciplinary field within visual art curriculum studies is represented through a wealth of visual forms, including photography, painting, sculpture, fashion, advertising, virtual reality, new images and science images, as well as other electronic imaging systems (Mirzoeff, 1998; Sturken and Cartwright, 2001, in Duncum, 2003), and examines the range of communicative modes in contemporary life linked to material culture. Visual art education that includes this orientation may promote forms of thinking that allow one to deal with ambiguity and complexity, to treat situations flexibly and to form imaginative responses suitable for a creative society (Centre for Arts, 2004).

The New South Wales Visual Art curriculum (New South Wales, Visual Art Stage 6 syllabus, 2000 and subsequent revision of Stage 4–5, 2004) provides the opportunity for a discursive examination of our visual world. Students studying or making an artwork conceptually position their inquiry at the centre of the communicative understanding between self, audience, world and artist, and consider the discourses generated from these perspectives within a range of critically framed positions. These include the subjective frame, the structural, the cultural frame and the postmodern frame. Students are working with postmodern practices that include multi-literacy, as well as multi-modal meaning-making systems (Duncum, 2004) that include sound, sight, movement, video, animation, installation and the interactive platforms. With a visual cultural orientation, it is a discipline with the pedagogical tools to discern and deconstruct the dominant conditions of visual production and legitimisation of certain authorities (Grierson, 2003), and it offers students a platform from which to test their new, emergent adult identities.

Mode of Inquiry

The longitudinal research qualitative inquiry and image analysis is grounded by the assumption that the inner nature of artistic, aesthetic and social life of an individual (artist) often resides in the experience of it (Deleuze, 1990; Neilson, 2000). It may be evidenced in an artwork or artist statement, and is subject to audience interpretations, relative to their own phenomenological experiences. The research will embrace both a philosophical hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Denzin and Lincoln, 2001; Plager, 1994), combined with the field of inquiry of the critical discursive psychology methodology (Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001). It will draw on the acceptance of various types of data representation that resonate with the nature of the phenomena, rather than conceptualising it (Eisner, 1991; Sullivan, 1998; Neilson, 2000). It uses Hutcheon’s (in Barker, 2000: 385) stylistic markers: aesthetic self-consciousness/self-reflexivity; juxtaposition/монтаж/bricolage; paradox/ambiguity/uncertainty; intertextuality and the blurring of genre boundaries; and irony, parody and pastiche; as well as the work of Grieve (2004), who analyses student artworks on the basis of postmodern principles.

Participants and Data Sources

The participants were students between the ages of approximately 17 and 18 years who exhibited in Art Express, a public travelling exhibition held between 2000 and 2004, including works drawn from the Higher School Certificate in Visual Arts — an external examination conducted by the New South Wales Board of Studies. The study examined image data drawn from five years, involving approximately 990 student artist statements and the corresponding artworks. This selection represents approximately 10 per cent of the total student cohort for each year examined.

The data were initially analysed and organised to identify those works that dealt with a subjection process in relation to the self, compared with those which used subject-matter such as landscape or still life, or appropriated other artworks. Overall, 82 per cent of works dealt with issues about the self and the student's life world. Within the set of images studied, 46 per cent represented subject-matter of the self,
such as self-portraits, narratives or self or others, autobiographical images, and tangential relationships to self, such as images of self, friends and family, places and personal objects. As a sub set of the above, 26 per cent represented students reflecting on self as a cultural construct. They commented on self in relation to issues within society, such as: cultural identity; gender and sexuality; consumerism, desire and identity; conformity and identity; politics and war; science and technology; media and identity; the time and space phenomenon of modern living; and the arts as mediators of culture. Generally, they presented narrative or portraiture referential to contemporary society in traditional and contemporary media. This research acknowledges that the works and artist statements have been co-constructed by student and art teacher (ARTEXTRESS, 2001: 22) and have been part of a curatorial process.

Results and Discussion
The following discussion will attempt to summarise and present the richness and range of the ways in which the students engaged with issues around cosmopolitanism, and demonstrate the appropriateness and legitimacy of visual media and associated technologies in supporting a contemporary exploration of self.

‘How We Perceive and How Others Perceive Us’: The Interrogation of Self through the Gaze

One of the main preoccupations of adolescent youth is the search for a way to define one’s individuality. This requires self-reflexivity and an understanding of how others perceive self. Often seeing self can be explored through an investigation of others. ‘My Friend Ben’ is such a work. The image is of a fragile male youth, holding his arms, dressed in cult fashion with music and guitar as essential attributes. The words ‘customise,’ ‘piece’ and ‘identity’ overlay images that are associated with the subculture of heavy metal, electric guitar and with particular masculinity: ‘My work is concerned with individuality and the ways we choose to define ourselves and how others define us.’ (ARTEXTRESS, 2002: 96) Ambiguity of identity is explored in the work titled ‘Who Do You Want to Be Today?’ The audience at first glance appears to be viewing a self-portrait of a boy doing up his tie, a symbol of a male middle-class white-collar worker; however, look again and we see in the projected text clues of possibilities that may challenge an original assumption of boy. For this student, the work is about ‘the role of gender stereotypes’. For another, a work titled ‘Marilyn Monroe — A Dime a Dozen’ is a parody of the pop art genre: midst the multiple images of what appear to be female students wearing Marilyn wigs we see on closer examination a challenging of the line between male, female and human and a clear attempt to ‘blur the barriers between race, gender and even species’ (ARTEXTRESS, 2001: 53).

Taking the most common position is the intense investigation of oneself through the portrait as central subject-matter, and self as observer and commentator. In these works, the subject is presented with multiple positionings and, through the use of deconstructed and recontextualised images, asks the audience to look beyond the immediate ‘first glance’ of images to ponder and explore the ambiguity and complexity of what defines an individual.

Media, Consumerism, Conformity, Desire and Identity

Through the investigation of contemporary arts practice and current media images, youth find rich territory to explore current social representations of self. In this area, feminist artists have been a significant influence, commenting on the role of media in defining and representing what it is to be female within a patriarchal society. This has given birth to a range of exploratory works by students who have used the technologies of vision to explore cosmopolitanism as social and cultural critics. They choose topics as diverse as cosmetic surgery, fashion, genetics, history and domesticity, and exploit media practices to
represent the ways gender has been commodified. ‘Dangerous Looks’ (*Artexpress*, 2003: 43) is a work which appropriates Andy Warhol’s famous Campbell’s Soup can icon, recontextualising it, labelling it FAT, and creating a bricolage of images that depict the wounds of cosmetic surgery, the hand of pain and a young face in agony torn by the multiplicity of forces that impact of ones identity. ‘My Breasts are Your Fortune’ (*Artexpress*, 2003: 21) is another artwork exploring similar territory. In the text of the calendar design, the July and August pages consists of repeating images of bared breasts interspersed with the words, ‘Buy Me, Wear Me, Drive Me, Use Me, Date Me, Smell Me, Eat Me, Love Me, Watch Me’, or ‘sex, sells, use me, I’ll change your life’; these are juxtaposed with images of dollar signs, outlined female forms, beauty lotions, drinks, lips — all conveying the mood of the sensual, desirable female targeting the executive male. In the work ‘You Are What You Wear’ (*Artexpress*, 2001: 18), the student interrogates the devices used by marketing and media to promote specific fashion statements that facilitate consumerism and define the female adolescent. The work is intensely personalised and internalised as the artist engages through accessorising, wearing, photographing and manipulating the very images and products of the consumer world which have helped to define her. Her final note is ‘without you I am nothing’. In another commentary on consumerism, from the position of participant observer, the work titled ‘Plastic Majority’ looks at the issue of conformity as it confronts both males and females. While clearly a self-portrait, its message is universal. The image of the artist is partially hidden by the sea of smiling nude and numbered asexual mannequins with synthetic form: ‘I stand apart in myself portrait, only revealing to the world a part of my face looking onto the Plastic Majority of our society.’ (*Artexpress*, 2003: 77)

**Manipulating the Socially Discursive Nature of Identity**

While some students have chosen to drive their research about society from a capitalist consumer orientation, others have preferred to comment more directly on the dynamics of contemporary society as emergent in patterns of events and cultural behaviours that define self and are referential to their own journeys across different sites. They choose carefully where to position themselves to explore societal expectations and normalisations within the ambiguity and uncertainty that is the habitus of contemporary society.

Characteristic of youth is their resistance to power and their desire to validate their own culturally located behaviour. It is imperative for them that they have the opportunity to express and to some extent take control in the quest to define themselves as unique, special and having a purpose for both self, family and the broader society. It is little wonder the notion of conformity or cultural identity preoccupies many. In the work ‘Conformity is a Valid Concern’, the artist comments through a digitally manipulated full-body police-style photograph of girl in white underwear. On to silhouettes are projected repeating bar codes and numbers that symbolise commercial signs of commodification. There is no expression, the stance is firm and resolved, the eye looks through the photographer to the audience: ‘Blindly, we line ourselves up along the dotted lines of formulaic ideals. Our society undermines any sense of individuality.’ (*Artexpress*, 2003: 47)

The works ‘The Bloke and the Dog’ (2001) and ‘The Boys’ (2003) both confront notions of the objectification of Australian masculinity. ‘The Boys’ (inspired by the work of Brett Whiteley and George Gittoes, two well-known Australian male artists) is a self-portrait. This expressive work has overlaid images of the subject’s face and upper torso, taking up the majority of the composition. The careful selection and placement of the whiskey bottle draws the viewer and begs reflection on the social ritual of male drinking and emergent manhood. ‘The Bloke and the Dog’ is a series of ink drawings that have been described by the artist as ‘parody of the typical Australian bloke who despite his middle class background often readily identifies with the beer-swilling, pie eating yobbo’. The dog represents ‘the average man’s
basic instincts of food, sex and marking his territory (Artexpress, 2001: 81). They are works that are grotesque yet comical, and resonate with the student's personal and emotional responses to Australian masculinity.

Another significant area is students working through issues of cultural identity and society. The work 'Oppression Resistance Asylum' (Artexpress, 2001: 75) deals with political issues in Korea and a struggle for freedom for the individual, while 'Not Ready for the Veil' (Artexpress, 2003: 21) explores a grandmother's cultural and religious traditions as a point of reference for a student's self-examination.

Time, Patterns, Rhythms and Spaces of Existence

The self-portrait presents as a powerful platform for young artists who wish to intensely investigate consciousness and patterns of daily existence, such as relationships, travel, time, communication, consumerism and desire, as pervading elements of our lives. Particularly in the city, the pace of life and media overload confronts our sensuality and challenges truths. Students exploring this territory have selected generally to place themselves as participants and use new media, such as video, animation, advertising and the web, as their platforms of communication. Their messages are intensely revealing of the condition of adolescence and change, intensified by the pace and the compression of the new realities of a globalised society. The 'Brain Train: Inside Insanity' (Artexpress, 2004) is a self-portrait with multi-framing, music, overlaying of images, text media, and the video journey. The student questions what is the norm, how communication, advertising, perception and illusion are all elements of the lived experience in contemporary society. The train races on, the text flashes 'deluded', 'minding', 'sane' as points of reference, while the music repeats the rhythms the train rattles past and the voice says 'hello'.

The video 'Zero Infinity' (Artexpress, 2004) also confronts the hyper-reality of the media and questions how we make choices, which journeys we travel and how media programs our realities and the confusion this presents. For these students, media and the virtual world offer rich territory to ask questions about possibilities and existence.

Conclusion

Society's values are the basis on which all else is built, and how these values are expressed in our culture and schools represents an instrument of this production and social empowerment. Providing authentic and relevant participatory communicative platforms for this activity is emerging as a new critical literacy function of art education. The power of self-transformation within a democracy requires an understanding of how education can support the process of debate, discussion and persuasion in public, and how this participation is ultimately transformative (Dewey, in Barnett, 2003: 36) It also lends weight to the importance of student engagement in the contemporary visual cultural forms (Duncan, 2004). A study of visual arts curricula, applied in a supportive learning environment, can provide a safe legitimate critique for the condition of a mobilised and fragmented self. It can offer a platform for a critical discursive understanding of how one's identity is negotiated and constituted, and as such it provides a legitimate platform for the development of critical navigation skills for later life.

References


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