WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE ASK, "What is Art?"

BY CAROL S. JEFFERS

In the debate over what is art, Goodman (1977) challenged aestheticians, critics, and others to re-think conceptions and re-direct discourse using the question, "*When* is art?" (emphasis added). This led to new explorations of institutional contexts and the promulgation of institutional theories of art. Rajchman (1985) declared that in these postmodern times, the question is not what or when is art, but rather "who are we in all of this?" Such a question raises issues involving alienation, voyeurism, viewer-artist relationships, and interactive dialogue in and through art. Dissanayake (1988) and Anderson (1995) advocate the use of the question, "What is art *for*?" (emphasis added), as it can lead to new bio-aesthetic, socio-anthropological, or contextualized understandings of art. Simple changes in the *form* of the question open new lines of inquiry and affect subsequent conceptions of art.

Despite efforts to open the debate, the question, What is art?, persists. It is the stimulus for many classroom discussions and the focus of research in art education literature. Johnson (1982) collected responses to "What is art?" from K-12 students to understand meanings about art, underlying cultural assumptions upon which those meanings were based, and influences of the socialization process. Stokrocki (1986) asked second grade children to define art and talk about their art-making. In recent research, I explored the relationship between diverse students' and teachers' aesthetic preferences and definitions of art (Jeffers, 1998). As art educators, we must acknowledge that students' and teachers' conceptions of art—like those of aestheticians and critics—are shaped by the question itself, "What is art?" within which lies a power to frame the debate along narrow lines. Students' and teachers' responses to questions such as "What is your definition of art?" or "What is art to you?" are predisposed and based on "socially relative learned expectations" (Hamblen, 1984, p. 21). We, therefore, must interpret the meaning and significance of research on students' and teachers' definitions of art in light of these expectations.

By conducting a comparative analysis of these three studies, I explore similarities and differences in findings related to the content and context of students' and teachers' definitions of art, which prompt a need to re-interpret the studies and their data.

THE JOHNSON, STOKROCKI, AND JEFFERS STUDIES

Johnson questioned 251 K-12 students attending different schools in several districts in southeastern New York. Participants in school art rooms responded to the questions "In your opinion, what is art?" or "What do you

think art is?"" (p. 62). Elementary children in this study received art instruction from art specialists.

Stokrocki documented the experiences of one class of 24 second graders in the art room of a midwestern school. These children completed a questionnaire that asked, in part, "What is art?" (p. 14).

I conducted a survey of 22 fourth grade children, 19 tenth grade art students at a high school of the arts, 25 tenth grade students attending a comprehensive high school, 17 pre- and in-service art teachers, and 23 pre- and in-service elementary teachers. All participants attend school in and reflect the ethnic diversity of Los Angeles County. High school students and teachers were asked "What is your definition of art?," while fourth graders were asked "What is art to you?" These children received some art instruction from their classroom teacher.

Also as part of my research, 23 additional definitions of art were obtained from case studies conducted by pre- and in-service teachers. Working one-on-one with subjects from 4 to 20 years of age, usually in home settings, these teacher-researchers established rapport and asked their subjects to define art.

SIMILARITIES IN CONTENT

Children's definitions of art in all the studies are thematically similar. Johnson and Stokrocki noted that many children defined art in terms of doing or making activities. Some defined art in hedonistic terms, indicating it is beautiful, pleasurable, "fun," "relaxing," "I like it," "my sister likes it," and "it is my favorite subject." Other children defined art as object(s).

I discerned the same themes. For example: Latino or bi/multi-racial fourth graders overwhelmingly defined art as "paint, painting, and drawing," with several references to "coloring." One child included "sowing"[sic] and "sculpturing"; two others referred to "making designs and shapes" or "using beautiful colors" with references to painting and drawing. Several defined art in terms of beauty, e.g., "beautiful things that amazing people create," "beautiful pictures... painted with beautiful colors." Three children wrote "art is special to me [a lot]." One wrote "it can go beyond my imagination" and another wrote "it's something that comes from the heart or something createful that sometimes comes from your dreams." Generally, definitions are similar to those of the fourth graders in Johnson's study.

All tenth graders in my research defined art similarly to the 10th-12th graders in Johnson's study. As Johnson noted, high school students tended to conceive of art as a "way" to "express" or to "communicate"; they also seemed to believe art is "anything" and "everything." These themes were prevalent in the definitions of the pre- and in-service art teachers and elementary teachers in my research. An independent rater, to whom color-coded definitions were submitted for blind review, detected no differences in definitions, either by group (teachers with or without art background, students with or without art background), or ethnicity. On the contrary, the rater noted a remarkable similarity among the definitions of all the high school students and all the teachers. The rater also noted similarities among Latinos, Asians, Whites, African-Americans, multi-ethnic persons, and others.

Themes such as art is a means of expressing oneself and communicating thoughts and feelings pervade many definitions. Variations included: a "visual," "tangible," "creative," "aesthetic," or "complicated" expression that is "understandable," "meaningful," "appealing to others," or "worthy to me." Other variations included: "Art is another way of describing feelings and telling a story that comes from the soul" (African-American comprehensive high school student). "Art is open to interpretation and expressing thoughts and feelings" (White student, high school of the arts). An Asian art teacher wrote: "Art must deal with emotions and ideas so a viewer can understand or have sympathy with the artist's ideas." Introducing the concept of judgment, a Latino elementary teacher wrote, "art is any form of expression that can be viewed and judged, liked/disliked." Several participants in each high school and teacher group countered this definition with references to the subjective and relativistic nature of art. For example: "Art is anything you want it to be," "... anything that appeals to me," "... different things to different people," "... a dichotomy: everything and nothing at the same time" (White art teacher). Another theme is that "we are all surrounded by art" (Latino elementary teacher) and "art is a way of life" (Latino art teacher).

DIFFERENCES IN CONTENT

One difference in content involves the use of the word "stuff." Both Stokrocki and Johnson noted that children often said, "art is doing or making stuff [when you're bored]." Johnson found "stuff" used in definitions up until grade 10; the use of "stuff" seemed a function of development or a line of demarcation

between elementary/middle school and high school students. Interestingly, "stuff" does not appear in my research data. Thus the use of "stuff" could be considered as an idiosyncratic, rather than a developmental issue.

Another and more important difference involves the concept of place: *art is where you go to make pictures.* For Stokrocki, place was one of the three categories into which second graders' definitions fell. Interpreting this category, Stokrocki (1986) said: "One surprising finding is that second graders consider art as a place separate from their regular classroom.... Second graders lack the ability to connect their art experiences to any other places, such as in the home, their own classrooms, or to a museum" (p. 16). Interestingly, none of the definitions collected in my research fell into Stokrocki's category of place.

One of eight categories created by Johnson, "time and place," accounted for definitions referring to art as something that happens at a specific time or place: "art is when or where you do or make." Johnson noted that elementary children's definitions more commonly fell into this category than those of older students. Of the 22 definitions collected from the fourth graders in my study and the 23 in the case studies, only one, said "art is when you draw."

There are several possible explanations for these differences and their categorizations. With respect to place, (art is where...), Stokrocki posits that "physical layout, scheduling, and school philosophy contribute to [children's] conception[s]." Because they do not receive art instruction in an art room from an art specialist, elementary children in my research could not be expected to conceive of art as happening in a special place-and apparently, did not. These children receiving art instruction in regular classrooms did not situate their definitions in that or any other place. It would not seem they "lack the ability to connect their art experiences to other places, such as in the home, their own classroom, or to a museum"; rather, children receiving art instruction from classroom teachers may define art differently than do children receiving art instruction from specialists in art rooms.

DIFFERENCES IN CONTEXT

Differences in the elaboration and length of definitions are readily apparent. As Johnson noted, some are due to developmental and cognitive differences. However, they also appear to be results of differences in methodological contexts. Differences in oral and written definitions—solicited by an interviewer or elicited by a survey—are expected. Written definitions collected through surveys were shorter than those gathered through case study interviews. Written definitions on Stokrocki's questionnaire also were short and simple, for example: "Art is fun," "art is painting." Compare this to a second grader's case study interview response:

> Art is very fun. It is very beautiful. I like to do art. You can decorate your house with art. My sister likes to do art. You can do art with Crayolas. You can decorate boxes with art. For me, the cartoons have art. Most of the people like art. Santa likes to do art when he brings the toys. He paints the toys for the children. (Mexican-American girl, 7 years old)

In addition, there appear to be differences in oral definitions collected by Johnson and those collected by the teacher-researchers. Definitions given by case study participants are more expansive and inclusive, richer, and more colorful than those given by Johnson's participants. Perhaps in the comfort of their homes, speaking to a familiar teacher-researcher, case study students were more willing to provide longer definitions of art than were students speaking briefly to Johnson during art class. Teacher-researchers found it difficult and meaningless to categorize definitions (such as the one provided above) using Johnson's categories, as most fell into five or more of her categories.

Some content differences seem to be attributable to different contexts. Johnson reported a few students at each grade level responded to "What is art?" with "I don't know." Two case study participants began with "I don't know," but after some thought, provided definitions. All 23 case study participants formulated some definition. It seems that when a participant says, "I don't know," this may indicate that s/he does not know how to formulate his/her definition, or does not know what is expected of him/her-rather than lack any knowledge of what art is.

While it seems reasonable to find *differences* in content attributable to differences in context, it is baffling to find *similarities* in content despite differences in context. Each study was conducted in very different historical, geographic, demographic, and programmatic contexts. They span 14 years and took place in very different settings. Stokrocki studied 24 white second-graders in a working class neighborhood in an industrial area of a midwestern city. Johnson conducted her research in southeastern New York state. In my Los Angeles study, fourth graders and elementary teachers were predominantly Latino. With the exception of the fourth grade group,

Asians and African-Americans also were well-represented among the other groups. There was a higher proportion of Whites in the high school of the arts group and the art teacher group than in other groups. Case study participants were mostly Latino, some newly-arrived in the Los Angeles area. Most children in my research were working class and lower-middle to middle class. Again, it seems odd to find such differences in ethnic background and socio-economic status resulting in such thematic similarities.

As noted, elementary children in my research did not receive art instruction from art specialists, while the children in the Stokrocki and Johnson studies did acquire such instruction. Those differences are not reflected in the thematic content of the children's definitions. Moreover, the high school of the arts students in my research, who received intensive and in-depth instruction in visual art, did not formulate definitions different from Johnson's high school students and the comprehensive high school students represented in my study. Does a program or curriculum have no impact on students' definitions of art?

EXPLAINING THE SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

The form of the question, "What is art?" and the context in which it is asked seem to explain some differences in the content and elaboration of responses, but not major thematic similarities in definitions of very different participants living in different times under different circumstances. Some possible explanations were found by revisiting the experiences of several children in the case study and by talking with art teachers. The experience of a 4-year old girl is revealing. When she told the teacher-researcher twice that she didn't know what art was, the child's mother interjected, "V., you know what art is. It's when you draw and color." Asked a third time, the child said predictably, "[Art]'s when I draw and color." This mother not only prompted her daughter (and contaminated the research), she also taught that "I don't know" is not an acceptable answer, that there is an acceptable one, and that the mother knows the answer. In this example, there are important lessons for art educators. We must learn that "What is art?" is not an open-ended question about an abstract mental concept; rather, it is laced with expectations and can be perceived as a test question having an acceptable answer. As Stokrocki (1986) put it, the artworld of a child is "based on a system of conceptions conditioned by parents, school, community, and experience" (p. 13).

Another 6-year-old child in the case study already had learned about such expectations and perceptions. According to several teacher-researchers, this 6-year old and two 15-year old participants were reluctant to provide definitions for fear they would be "wrong" or fall short of expectations. Teacher-researchers found themselves reassuring their subjects there was no one correct answer. From such reassurances, students learned that responses such as, "art is anything, art is everything," are acceptable. Thus the willingness to provide definitions may be based on learned expectations.

In talking about their own responses to the question of "What is art?," art teachers were honest. I wanted to know why their sophisticated in-class discourse about postmodernism and shifting paradigms was conspicuously absent in their written definitions of art and what they thought of similarities among their definitions and those of elementary teachers and high school students. To help me understand what seemed obvious to them, art teachers offered: their professor asking them "What is art?" was like a spouse asking, "How do you love me?" As one art teacher said, "Love, like art, is difficult enough to verbalize and you certainly don't want to offend anybody. So you choose your words very carefully." These words, like the experiences of case study participants, lend support to Hamblen's (1984) claim that "predispositions for the aesthetic are based on socially relative learned expectations" (p. 21).

With their words, I realized the art teachers thought of themselves as graduate students in my classroom, and as such, formulated risk-free responses according to what they believe is expected. They saw me not as a researcher, but as their teacher asking them to define what already had been socially-defined for them. Under these circumstances, how could I have expected them to do otherwise? In setting out to study the powerful effects of the socialization process and in using the loaded question "What is art?" Johnson, Stokrocki, and I failed to grasp that we were part of a socialization process. Indeed, we perpetuated the process by solidifying students' and teachers' learned expectations of what is art. Apparently, we were using the question as a double-edged sword, to both understand the socialization process and to perpetuate its effects.

In light of these powerful learned expectations, the question of what is art itself raises a question: Do we, as art educators, really want to ask this

question, knowing students and teachers will respond with what we and others have already taught them? By asking, do we appear disingenuous? We might carefully consider this risk, indeed, as one 9-year-old child thought it utterly ridiculous that the teacher-researcher, whom he knew to be a painter, would ask him, "What is art?" Incredulously, he said, "You're an artist, don't you know?" This response suggests the child saw the questioner, and perhaps the question itself, as disingenuous and inauthentic.

Perhaps a better and more genuinely evocative question is "What is art *about*?" Art educators may want to question students and teachers about how they *use* art in their own worlds. Such changes in the form of the question may empower us to join an authentic debate about the nature of art.

As art educators, we may want to understand more about our roles in the socialization process. We may come to a point where we seek to understand not how expectations about art are learned, but why these particular expectations (which result in "art is fun, art is making, art is anything, art is a way of expressing") are learned. If we seek to broaden or otherwise change these learned expectations, then we must understand our roles in making such changes.

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