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THREE

SAYS WHO?

WHO DECIDES WHAT IS ART?

JOE L. KINCHELOE

In this chapter I want to view art in context, to ask some questions about art and its social, political and educational roles. In this process I want to put forward some thoughts about elitism, marginalization and the forces that help construct art's relationship to a variety of domains. The following list of questions drives this chapter:

- ⊙ Who decides what is art/artifact?
- ⊙ When does an artifact become art?
- ⊙ Does the location (place) of the art/artifact determine whether it is art?
- ⊙ What is the relationship between art/artifact and the culture that produces it? Evaluates it?
- ⊙ What does power have to do with art/artifact?
- ⊙ What benefits do we derive from encounters with art/artifact? What liabilities?
- ⊙ Is there "good art" and "bad art"?
- ⊙ Should art be judged on a scale of quality? Whose scale?
- ⊙ What is included in the notion of aesthetic?
- ⊙ Do aesthetic experiences involve the pursuit of beauty? Should they?
- ⊙ Is beauty always good?
- ⊙ What are the political consequences of art and art criticism?
- ⊙ Do function, form and technique/skill play a role in the study of art/artifact?
- ⊙ Must art include function, form and technique/skill to be art?

- ⊙ Is meaning always intended in the production of art/artifact? Who makes the meaning?
- ⊙ Does art/artifact always exist in a context?

When analysts study the ways individuals in different periods of time and different cultural settings make decisions about what constitutes good art, they uncover a variety of issues that help them understand not only art but the culture that produced it. This concept grounds my interest in art and art criticism—I admit it I’m first and foremost a culturalist who is interested in making sense of who we are as humans, how we got this way and where we are going (or should go). Thus, my interest in art criticism is not simply to learn about art—though art is extremely important. I study art and art criticism to learn about culture, cognition (creativity), human possibility and history. From my perspective understanding art is not just a frill, an adornment that sets those who have it apart from those who don’t. Such knowledge is a central part of a rigorous education that makes us smarter, more insightful, more sensitive to what is occurring around us—in other words better educated people who are more capable of working toward democratic, egalitarian social change.

As a culturalist I see human beings as meaning makers who inscribe meaning in everything they do. These meanings are not absolute but contingent on an exceedingly complex network of other socially and historically contextualized meanings and interpretations. Many of these cultural understandings become so commonplace in particular societies that they come to be viewed as indisputable truths, “common sense.” Thus, culturalists view art as one of many types of cultural texts to be “read” for the various meanings made around it. In the process we learn about art producers, their audiences and, importantly, ourselves. Here we begin to see how we are part of a social and historical context that produces meaning in ways we never before appreciated. Examining a piece of art we find that our culture has trained/educated us to view it, unwittingly, in particular ways. In this manner we bring to the surface for examination culturally constructed aspects of ourselves and the people around us. This introspective process is a central part of what many consider a democratic education—gaining an awareness of who we are and how we came to be that way.

Thus, a basic question arises here concerning how we judge painting and sculpture, as well as other artistic cultural productions including literature, music, dance, architecture and cultural criticism itself. Is artistic value determined by an artwork’s essence or by its context? This is not

simply a key question of art criticism but the way we answer it shapes the way we structure education, the nature of our social and political perspectives and the types of people we might want to become. Because of its importance, we will return to the question frequently. At this point it is becoming obvious that we study art not simply for art's sake but as part of a larger attempt to make sense of the world, ourselves and our relation to the world. From my perspective such study is a part of a larger attempt to be rigorously educated, to become something more than we presently are. It induces us to consider from a different direction what the world is and ought to be. It induces us to think of our personal role in this life-affirming process, to examine the difference between ethical and unethical actions.

Culture Wars: The Struggle Over Artistic/Social Meaning

Questions of aesthetic/artistic value must be constantly negotiated. And negotiated they are daily and often vociferously at the beginning of the twenty-first century. So contentious have these contemporary debates become that many analysts contend that we are living in an era of culture wars. The war is observed in public controversies over school curricula, movie ratings, TV programming, public funding for the arts, museum exhibitions, the look of skylines in urban areas, etc. . . . Aesthetic values are no longer secure, as individuals from all over the world join in the debate over what constitutes great art, beauty, vulgarity, or compelling originality. To be aware of the forces shaping the early twenty-first century it is important to be knowledgeable of this debate. It is the contention of many culturalists that the elite guardians of the art world have been unreflective about the traditional ways artistic value is determined. Unchallenged cultural assumptions often permeate such determinations and the interests they serve remain unexposed.

Culturalists maintain that it is in the best interests of society to shake up the guardians of tradition with basic questions concerning art, criticism and social values. It is their role, they argue, to point out previously unnoticed features of a work in a way that offers a profound insight into the nature of the artist, his or her audience, critics and the culture in which all of these agents operate. In this pursuit culturalists make use of literature/literary criticism, political analysis, sociology, anthropology, philosophy and history to view art and through art, society in creative new frames. Interestingly the practice of art is being reconfigured in exciting

new ways. Connecting social theory—defined as an act of attempting to make sense of and maybe change for the better the social world around us—to the artistic enterprise exposes assumptions about the ways knowledge and meaning are produced. The consciousness such understandings engender allows artists in different domains to go beyond existing boundaries as the artificial divisions between art and education, art and politics and art and cultural analysis are removed. When such boundaries are transgressed the possibilities for previously uncharted artistic work increase dramatically. Art crosses not only disciplinary boundaries but moves across other demarcation lines as well, connecting text to audience and art to everyday life (Stossel, 1998; Wilson, 1993; Ruesga, 1996; Best and Kellner, 1991).

However, in the cultural war over artistic/social meaning many contend that the preceding pronouncements muddle the debate over the evaluation of good and bad art. If artistic values have to be constantly negotiated, then traditional questions such as “are there consistencies in what constitutes good art?” or “are there clear distinctions between so-called high art and low art?” need to be asked and discussed in an exploratory manner. I use the term *exploratory* in the sense that such discussions should attempt to identify the assumptions and values that shape differing positions. These interchanges need to take place, if for no other reason, to point out how little agreement exists concerning the basis on which aesthetic judgments are tendered. The search for a method to validate claims of artistic value has yielded scant results. Of course, the search becomes more difficult as culturalists delineate the existence of many different systems of evaluation. On what basis do we choose between such systems? “Uniformity amidst variety? Formal unity? Expressiveness?” (Ruesga, 1996). No one knows exactly what even these phrases might mean.

Thus, embedded in every act of art criticism is a social theory, held either tacitly or consciously. Stated differently, the way we make sense of the world shapes our aesthetic evaluations whether we are aware of it or not. In addition to the tacit or explicit social theoretical connection to criticism, those who judge artistic quality seem to concern themselves with the work’s relationship to the historical period and cultural location of its production. Such factors are often claimed to be peripheral to “pure aesthetic” judgments, but analysis indicates that despite protestations to the contrary they exert a profound influence. Indeed, in more classical forms of criticism the idea that art is shaped by social theoretical assumptions and tacit views of the world constitutes a bastardization of the purity of the aesthetic process (Wilson, 1993; Turner, 1996).

Questions of art vis-à-vis power seem to make more traditional critics queasy, as “cultural barbarians” ask: Who says this is great art? Who has the right to designate this piece a part of the official canon of artistic greatness? Would the aesthetic gatekeepers include those critics who write for high art journals or hang around hip galleries in the village? Who draws the line between the high and the low? Between good and bad tastes? What role do highbrow critics bequeath to power and other sociological forces? What happens when these powerful critics disagree—as they inevitably do? Thus, we return to our notion that these issues of judgment have to be brought to the public consciousness, they have to be constantly negotiated. What is low art today may be considered high art tomorrow—Shakespeare’s plays, for example, were very popular as a low art form in his day but were not considered a manifestation of canonical high art for years after his death. Thus, the high art designation is never static, as it shifts with the times (Cowen, 1999; Ruesga, 1996).

The Arbiters of Aesthetic Quality: The Trouble with High Art

Allow me to expose my biases up front: I am not comfortable with modernist means of determining the worth of art. When I hear many experts delineate the impenetrable boundary between good art and bad art, I sweat. Please understand this propensity as you read my chapters and judge my words. My concern in this chapter revolves around the social, cultural, cognitive, political and educational meanings of these artistic/aesthetic dynamics, how we might better understand them, and how we might become smarter about art and aesthetics in particular and about ourselves and the world around us in general. I do not accept the myth perpetuated in Western societies that what is called “high art” or the “classics” is profoundly different and superior to other types of cultural productions. Exposure to these “grand artifacts” of high culture will not automatically make us “cultured” (I think this implies that one who is cultured is of more worth than one who is not) and intelligent. Such an elitist view seems to assume that these artifacts possess a magical power to instill an elite status on those who hang around them.

Having rejected the magic of high art, I am not making the argument that we ignore it, burn it, or ban it from the educational curriculum. Such artifacts, the process by which they were granted high status and the values implicit within this process are important subjects in any contemporary education. My point here is to question these artifacts and the

process of the sanctification, not to hold them up for distant admiration from the cultural barbarians and their untrained eyes. Such a process of demystification, I believe, serves the best interests of a democratic society, as we begin to understand that the differences between the “high” and “low” are not as great as we might have imagined. Indeed, we may find that “objective” judgments of quality may have less to do with particular aesthetic concerns than with cultural values, class dynamics, ideologies and even ethnic, racial and gender issues. Such understandings may not simply change our perspectives toward art and aesthetics but may transform the way we see ourselves and the world. This is, of course, one of many reasons that I find these issues so important to all of us in the twenty-first century (Allen, 1995).

Indeed, in the first decade of the twenty-first century there is renewed effort on the part of the guardians of cultural standards to separate the highest artistic and aesthetic expression from popular or mass art. High art, such cultural trolls at the bridge tell us, is universal and for all times; low or popular art appeal only to particular times and places and exploit those of us who consume them by posing as if they understand our particular circumstances. Thus, they appeal, it is argued, to our baser instincts, in this case to our narcissism (Ruesga, 1996).

Such pronouncements are particular aspects of the elite practice of paradigm enforcement. Such regulation is the *raison d'être* of particular institutions that validate or censure particular artist works or workers. The official condemnation of the Brooklyn Museum's Sensation exhibit could be considered an example of this paradigm enforcement. As a form of low art, Sensation was deemed a “deviant production” by particular cultural brokers. An elitism infuses these boundary drawers as they set themselves apart from the unwashed. The uneducated in this context are not deemed to have the ability to comprehend the sophistication of the elite's aesthetic concerns. As the aesthetic guardians validate and censure, they attempt to remove art from the distasteful realm of the ideological so that connoisseurs can focus on the formal aspects (e.g., form, technique and style) of art. The concept of “art for art's sake” becomes the driving concern of the elite formalists.

In every form of artistic expression formalist modernist constructs of art attempted to attend only to those specific features of the form—e.g., what elements are specific to music, painting, writing, sculpting, etc. . . . Modernism emerged in the early nineteenth century delineating new artistic perspectives that reflected the larger social and intellectual changes of the Age of Reason and its concurrent scientific revolution.

Operating in a methodical and often scientific manner modernist artists sought to keep differing artistic forms separate and pursue the formal aspects of each form. Over the last two centuries various groups would question these assumptions. By the 1960s postmodernists would call into question a long line of modernist and “high art” assumptions. In our exploration of art and the cultures that produce it and assess it this postmodern rebellion against modernist art helps us conceptualize and develop our questions about artistic endeavor and its cultural meanings. We will return to these postmodern themes in this chapter.

As postmodernists questioned the sacred tenets of modernist form and technique, such inquiries were viewed as signs of aesthetic decline and even anti-intellectualism. Postmodern artists were offended by modernism’s artificial boundaries between diverse art forms, between artistic creation and audience, between art and life, between high and low art, between elite and mass culture and between art producer and consumer. Such perspectives induced postmodernists to pose questions about the entire enterprise of art that elicit new insights into “the way the art world works.” My concerns in this chapter are influenced by such postmodernist apprehensions and will be recognized throughout my portions of this book. In this context I advocate a democratic aesthetic that refuses to surrender artistic judgment to an elite pantheon of arbiters of taste. Just as I advocate in other contexts that teachers, workers and other citizens take charge of the production of knowledge in their particular domains, I contend here that artistic production and aesthetic evaluation become the province of everyone. In such a democratic context we may find that the arts become a part of more and more people’s everyday lives and less an esoteric realm unfriendly to everyday people (Brown, 1995; Best and Kellner, 1991).

Very simple and commonsensical questions about the world of art—such as who gave him the right to determine artistic worth?—seem to sometimes send the guardians of culture into fits of rage. Confronted with such intelligent questions they often retreat to the safety of proclamations of cultural decline, “You wouldn’t ask such a question if we weren’t suffering from a *loss of standards*,” they proclaim. In the world of the aesthetic elite it seems that the mere raising of analytical questions about artistic quality and the basis on which they are made, is an assault on the sanctity of Western civilization and the grace of America. It was such questioning, many argue, that brought about the “American fall from grace” in the 1960s. This alleged fall from grace was marked by a decline in aesthetic, artistic and educational standards, a moral crisis and a deterioration of

American eminence. The inseparability of the aesthetic issues raised here from social, cultural and political dimensions seems apparent, as the guardians deem the decline in one domain to be inseparable from decline in another.

In the case of the 1960s and the popular art it produced the guardians of aesthetic and corresponding standards have maintained for four decades that such “art” and the successors it inspired have undermined Western and American cultural stability and the traditional standards of quality on which the society was grounded. In the minds of the guardians such productions were not only “low/bad art” but possessed the social power to shake the very foundations of society (Percy, 1999). As Karel Rose writes in this volume, the guardians often move to suppress that which does not meet their aesthetic standards, often as in the case in question by issuing “dire warnings about the physical side effects brought about by exposure.” In this suppressive role the guardians’ actions display fascistic tendencies. The vehemence, for example, with which New York Mayor Rudolph Giuliani reacted to the 1999 *Sensation* exhibit seems oddly out of proportion to the socio-aesthetic dynamics of the display. Throughout Giuliani’s attacks on the exhibit one can discern the assumption that art such as *Sensation* has the power to undermine American society—such art is an aesthetic terrorist bomb. At the very least *Sensation* and “bad art” like it are to be feared and suppressed in the aesthetic judgments of many of the guardians.

Such paradigm enforcements are reminiscent of the actions of Egyptian guardians of aesthetic standards in the third millennium B.C. To protect their society from the negative effects of “bad art,” aesthetic authorities mandated what colors, designs and artistic forms artists could use in their work. Dictates become so detailed that human representation had to meet exacting rules: “the ankle on the first horizontal level, knee on the sixth level, shoulder on the sixteenth level” (Brown, 1995, p. 140). Implicit in Mayor Giuliani’s pronouncements on *Sensation* was the dictate that cow dung cannot be used in public art. Aesthetic fear and aesthetic enforcement have a long history. Returning to Karel Rose’s point about the protective activities of the guardians, reconsider her assertion that “the public is infantilized, treated like the child sent to the principal’s office and often not allowed to decide what is ‘good’ or ‘bad,’ ‘high’ or ‘low.’” Such aesthetic policy, of course, could not take place if the guardians did not believe that the public is incapable of understanding “great art.” We alone, the guardians conclude, are capable of making aesthetic judgments (Cowen, 1999).

The socio-aesthetic position of the guardians of high art is more than merely a conservative view of culture. Guardians, I contend in this chapter, come from all political and cultural positions. Embedded within many of the guardians' thinking is an unwavering belief in an artistic and even cultural canon that transcends time and place. In this rarefied canonical realm meanings of "the great art of Western culture" are not up for discussion and do not change when viewed from different cultural or paradigmatic locations or in differing historical eras. In short, they are fixed, timeless and transhistorical. With the canon secured and, importantly, *beyond questioning*, profound social, political and educational implications emerge from the exalted world of high art. While I am not seeking the status of some stylized iconoclasm, I cannot help but argue that the aesthetic orthodoxy of the guardians of high culture does not operate to provide higher-order insight into the realm of artistic evaluation or sociocultural concerns.

Indeed, in a context shaped by this type of sacred canonical management of art and aesthetics all a teacher can *legitimately* do is present a body of inert, intractable information about high art, its unnegotiable meaning and the specific features that make it great. Students are rendered passive receivers of such data and are positioned in an infantilized role. Indeed, I do not deem it improper to argue that in such canonical approaches to art, those who are indoctrinated by the guardians of aesthetic truth are stupidified to the degree they fail to question the process. This "questioning of the process" so infuriating to the guardians of high art is key to the rigorous scholarly process advocated here in a democratic art education. In the name of an elite, high quality education great art is taught in a cognitive, social and educational context that is reductionistic in its decontextualization, historical amnesia and dismissal of the complexity of the dynamics that shape artistic production and reception. Not only is pedagogy reduced and critical thinking undermined, but even deliberations over aesthetic value and artistic significance themselves are intellectually diluted in this "exalted" context.

Just who are the barbarians in this context? Who are the aesthetically impoverished? While I am by no means willing to ascribe these descriptions to anyone in the domain of art or aesthetics, I hope these elitists who have traditionally used such terms will reconsider their practices. In this context it is important to note that such damnable elitism is not the province of some bygone era where tuxedo-clad muck-a-mucks sipped fine champagne at Jay Gatsby's estate and made snide comments about the limitations of the "common stew." It is alive and well in many elevat-

ed quarters in the contemporary era. It can be found in many domains and movements of all stripes, including a few of the “return to beauty” advocates of the last decade who seek a “pure aesthetic” free from the muddling influence of social theory and cultural analysis. Such modes of investigation bring entirely too many elements of the rabble into the genteel world of the fine arts and the restricted exalted status it so sweetly provides (Allen, 1995; Stossel, 1998).

Rebellions in Modernism: Complexities and Contradictions

My interest in an anti-elitist, socially and culturally contextualized, humbly iconoclastic, politically transformative study of art draws me inexorably to the work of the avant-garde artists (the cubists, surrealists, dadaists and expressionists, for example) of the early twentieth century. The avant-garde satire of the pomposity of the institution of art and its separation from life inform the type of historically and culturally contextualized, cognitively enhancing, socially transformative and politically engaged form of art study and art education promoted in this chapter. At the same time, however, the modernist avant-garde’s social and political contradictions and the cultural problems emerging from them are also instructive to those concerned with social change and social justice. The complex relationship between their brilliant works of conceptual and visual art and the cultural blindnesses of their time make the cubists, surrealists, dadaists and abstract expressionists fascinating grist for our analytical mill.

From the first time I encountered the artists of the modernist avant-garde—not in school in my case but in my independent studies in early adulthood—I was entranced with the brilliance of their ideas. The artistic and conceptual insights provided by Rene Magritte, Juan Gris, Georges Braque and their cubist colleagues induced me to think of new ways of seeing the world. I was particularly struck by their notion of multiple perspectives of an object. If an artist or a cultural analyst looks at the world only from a familiar perspective, he or she is providing only a fragment of the information needed to gain a compelling insight into an object and its relationship to other objects. To an ambitious but unexposed kid from the mountains of Tennessee this insight provided a unique angle in the effort to gain a divergent view of the cosmos. It provided motivation to seek new and different ways of seeing familiar entities.

I was also entranced by the avant-garde's disdain of the formal quest to produce beautiful art. In alienated times the mere pursuit of beauty and form seemed trivial, they argued. Picasso himself maintained that artistic education in beauty is fraudulent and, other avant-gardists contended, part of our charge is to break down the mandated cultural divisions separating "the beautiful" from "the ugly." In the same oppositional mode avant-garde art, cubism in particular, challenged Western Cartesian-Newtonian notions of time as a linear stream consistently flowing from past to future. At the same time the cubists challenged particular Western ways of seeing, they still were rational modernists as they sought to produce art that contained purer forms, shapes and lines that would lead artists to better represent "the truth" in their paintings (Best and Kellner, 1991; Padgham, 1988).

As seekers of purity in form and truth, many artists in the various movements of the avant-garde sought the heroic possibilities of modernism. Inscribed in this heroism was a belief in progress and individualism and the superiority of Western culture. The point worth making here is, of course, the complexity of modernist avant-gardism. Embedded within the work of the cubists, surrealists, dadaists and expressionists are contradictory heroic, male-centered, rationalistic and white supremacist impulses existing side-by-side with a discomfort with Western material values, the culture's emotional repression, its monoculturalism and its provincialism. Any effort to discuss the cultural dynamics, the cognitive insights and the educational/curricular value of the avant-garde must constantly take into account these paradoxes. One of the features of this revealing avant-garde tendency for contradiction that will be examined throughout the rest of this chapter involves the artists' use of content and forms from nonwhite cultures, or as many of the artists expressed it—"primitivism" (Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

Learning the Multiple Lessons of the Modernist Avant-Garde: Negotiating the Complexities and Contradictions

In many ways the modernist avant-garde becomes a case study for the relationship among art, culture, cognition, politics and education: We learn both from the avant-gardists' brilliance and naiveté and the complexity of the relationship between the two dynamics. While in cubism we gain subtle insight into the way the world and human perceptions of it operate by simultaneous multiple perceptions of an object from numerous angles, we also understand that cubist artists believe that such multi-

perspectives provided the “true reality” of an object. Embedded in such a belief is a modernist assumption that through reason we can provide a final truth about the nature of the cosmos. In light of social theoretical advances of the last few decades, such an assumption seems quite naive.

Despite this naiveté—that I so arrogantly assert with the benefit of 20-20 hindsight—cubist artists anticipated the postmodern turn of the latter half of the twentieth century. A good example of such anticipation would involve Juan Gris’s development of collage, his desire to aestheticize the artifacts of the everyday world and his playfulness with appearances that would influence so many artists of the late 1950s, 1960s, and beyond. Gris and many other modernist avant-gardists induced their postmodern progeny to erase the boundaries between art and life, undermine the autonomy of the artistic domain and to redefine the notion of aesthetics. Also included in this group were the New York-based abstract expressionists who shared many of the cubists’ discomfort with the goal of producing beautiful art. Profoundly influencing the later postmodern revolution, abstract expressionists pushed away the everyday world of objects and started from scratch with new insights into color, shapes, lines and forms.

The string of expressionist movements consistently worked to distort comfortable modes of representation in painting, film, architecture and even literature and drama to express the emotions and private concerns of the artist. The personal feelings of the expressionists, their discomforts with Western social failures, were so intense that they found realistic depictions inadequate to the task of articulating them. In painting, such affective intensities were projected by distortions of traditional forms, shocking colors, weighty lines and the turbulent use of the paintbrush. Despite their passions and discomforts the expressionists were mostly bourgeoisie individuals with little interest in the political domain. Consistent with the contradictions of the modernist avant-garde, the expressionists were deeply offended by the oppression of bourgeoisie family life and its relationship to capitalism and industrialization. Nonetheless, they rarely involved themselves in political movements of any type.

Adamant in their refusal to “beautify” the world, expressionists such as Jackson Pollack, Franz Kline, William de Kooning and Barnett Newman (notice a male dominance here?) paradoxically based their work on a rejection of the Western status quo while simultaneously shying away from overt political statements in their paintings. Sensing that realism in art strong-arms an oppressive and simplistic notion of truth while

protecting the mind from uncertainty, the expressionists carried on the avant-garde resistance to fatuous representations of “reality.” Jackson Pollack is the best known of the angry abstract expressionists, moving abstraction and nonrepresentation to new levels. Pollack came to represent the modernist notion of anti-hero—represented so well in cinema by the image of James Dean—with its desire for significations of the grand, the permanent, the towering, and the masculinity of originality. Such abstract expressionism would influence artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns who would move such work into a post-modern domain.

Dadaism—which moved, amused, and inspired me—has been described more as an attitude than a style of art. Tristan Tzara, the author of Dada manifestos, captured the attitude with his proclamation: “We demand the right to piss in different colors” (Jordan and Weedon, 1995, p. 341). The origins of Dadaism provide profound insight into the ways art, culture, politics, and cognition come together in world-changing ways throughout historical and cultural time zones. Emerging as an orphan of World War I who had witnessed millions of young men dying or hoping to die in soon forgotten trenches, Dadaism burst forth in Zurich of the 1920s. Attempting to shock a complacent middle-class world out of its sociopolitical sleep, young artists produced disorienting works that reveled in their bad taste. Marcel Duchamp, for example, presented a urinal as a piece of art in an attempt to shock the art world out of its comfortable assumptions about the art, aesthetics, culture, and the political realm. The urinal, since its exhibition, has become a symbol of dadaist subversion of established art.

Another modernist avant-garde movement, surrealism, attempted to produce art and artistic concepts that operated outside the influence of reason or a concern with aesthetics. Once this break was made, the surrealists maintained, artistic endeavor could recover all that was lost in modernist scientific attempts to repress the nonrational dimensions of the human mind. Such nonrational dimensions included the erotic, exotic, and the unconscious, and in this context surrealists worked to carefully connect art with philosophy and ways of seeing and transforming the social and political world. Surrealist theorist Andre Breton urged his audience to draw upon the power of their dream lives, the creative abilities of the unconscious, and the benefits of the myths of various cultures that unite us and move us to deeper levels of understanding. I am still inspired and seduced by the libidinal energy of the surrealists and the cultural and aesthetic critique they produced, the social and artistic possibil-

ities they imagined (Padgham, 1988; Best and Kellner, 1991; Brown, 1995; Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

The Slippery Slopes of Modern Art: Avant-Garde Colonialism

No matter how much cubism, expressionism, Dadaism and surrealism might arouse us, it is necessary to note the contradictions within the movements and their failure to undermine oppressive ways of seeing and ideological constructs. One of the most important contradictions and dramatic failures of the modernist avant-garde—and a central concern of this chapter—involves the notion that much of the innovative power of the various avant-garde movements was appropriated from colonized and typically nonwhite peoples. Such appropriations were rarely acknowledged in a direct manner and when they were signaled the problematic term, primitivism was employed. In this failure to understand the relationship between themselves and the “primitive” other, the avant-garde artists provide us with negative lessons that I hope we have the wisdom to learn and apply to the art, cultural analysis, politics and education of our time. Unfortunately, as illustrated by the Sensation and other exhibits I’m afraid we still have far to go in the twenty-first century.

The racial politics of the modernist avant-garde placed the artists on a slippery cultural slope. The dadaists, for example, would be appalled to hear that their racial perspectives would be viewed as inscribed by racist tendencies by their successors—but, to me, there seems little doubt that racist dynamics permeated their artistic viewpoints. This point must be made very carefully and precisely. I do not believe that individual dadaist artists harbored racist disdain of Africans, Asian, Latino, or indigenous peoples. But in what they thought was a celebration of the virtues of such peoples, the dadaists exalted what they saw as their spontaneity, emotional power, irrationality, use of the body and simplicity. To the dadaists these were traits from which all repressed bourgeoisie Westerners could learn. Maybe there are lessons to be learned here, but the point that haunts the dadaist celebration is that these are the very characteristics that Europeans have traditionally used to prove the inferior status of what they considered primitive peoples.

In this racist ideological frame “people of color are musical, artistic, physical and emotional—thus, incapable of the reasoning powers and the cultural achievements of us white people.” This is not what the dadaists meant, but this is what many Westerners understood their art to convey.

Inadvertently, the dadaist and other avant-garde artists bolstered the racial stereotypes and binarisms that were used as justifications for colonialism and other forms of Western racial oppression. Thus, the seeds of their cultural and political failures were sown in an inability to refrain from “otherizing” the nonwhite in their fascination with their cultural achievements and artistic genius.

For example, in the avant-garde’s depictions of women of color the male artists too often merely reflected common racist views of dominant Western culture. The familiar themes of physicality, emotion and passion reemerge, only in the case of the otherized female they are eroticized in a lascivious sexual manner. There is little difference in this avant-garde view of the black women and that of white slave owners of previous centuries. Thus, African, Asian, Latino and indigenous women suffered a double objectification as both woman and racial other. These failures would not surface for decades; they would be understood only after a variety of liberation movements challenged Western peoples with their representations and treatment of “the other.” In the shorter term avant-garde art had more immediate problems to confront.

In both the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany in the 1930s modern avant-gardism came to be seen as a threat to the state. In these regimes such art was violently squashed and only “safe” and “socially responsible” artistic forms were allowed. Modern avant-garde art in the U.S. during this era was contained and pacified in a much less brutal manner via its canonization in museums and universities and its commodification in the art market. Ironically, the works of artists who so loathed the bourgeoisie became upper-middle class status trophies and used to decorate the consumer society. Indeed, marketing, advertising and commercial design employed its forms and techniques as basic principles of their professional knowledge. “What a long, strange trip it’s been” was as appropriate for the avant-garde artists as it would be for the Grateful Dead and the counterculture of the 1960s (Jordon and Weedon, 1995; Best and Kellner, 1991).

Increasingly, in the eyes of many in the late 1950s and 1960s, modernist avant-garde art had lost its driving passion, its freshness, its oppositionality. Contrary to the objectives of its creative generators, modern art was increasingly unable to reintegrate art into the pulse of everyday life as it was increasingly sanitized by its creeping institutionalization. With its obsession with constant change and “the new,” it was vulnerable to capitalist mechanizing and elitist collaboration. In this context avant-gardism devolved into more a change of images than a force for political

transformation. In this accommodationist reconceptualization of artistic avant-gardism, cultural analysts must return to the relationship of the racial other.

These African, Asian, Oceanic and indigenous others could be celebrated and even courted as long as they refrained from asserting their personhood and claiming an active place in the shaping of the history, the present and future of “modern” art. Thus, modern avant-garde art never came to terms with the fact that it had been a principal heir to the spoils of Western imperial brutality. Without such conquests and the power relations they established, progressive Western artists could not have enjoyed the accolades and material benefits bestowed on them as a result of the deployment of non-Western art. But as we have learned from the field of whiteness studies over the last decade or so: such are the benefits of white privilege. It is imperative that anti-racist cultural, political and artistic activities in the twenty-first century act on these racial understandings. They must install warning signs on the slippery racial slopes of the artworld. Who says what is art and the official history of art? In avant-garde modernism it was the Western white boys.

The Postmodern Challenge

As a simple matter of clarification, it is important to explain the complex and ambiguous uses of the term *postmodern* before we proceed with our discussion of art, aesthetics, culture, politics, cognition and education. Postmodernism questions the modernist faith in technology, its doctrine of progress, its cult of reason, its belief in the stability of language and meaning and its ability to isolate aspects of the world in order to better study and understand them. As postmodern observers subject to analysis of modernist notions about the social and cultural spheres, they admit previously inadmissible evidence produced by those previously excluded. In this way they challenge hierarchical structures of knowledge, evaluation and power that promote “experts” over the “masses.” In the world of art, postmodernists have sought to undermine colonialist and masculinist assumptions about art and aesthetics. In the process they work to include women’s and non-European art and to use feminist and multicultural perspectives to challenge the artistic/aesthetic assumptions of the Western male art establishment (Calinescu, 1987; Hebdige, 1989; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1997).

This postmodernism or postmodern critique is not one single perspective but can better be understood by examining two differing bran-

ches. The first, ludic postmodernism, or a playful postmodernism is an approach to social theory that is not centered on the exposure and transformation of oppressive cultural, social and political power structures. Ludic postmodernism typically addresses what it describes as the playfulness of the signifier and the nature of the space between what is said and what is received. In this context ludic postmodernism concerns itself with the deconstruction of Western constructions of reality. In the midst of analyzing the slipperiness of Western meanings, ludic postmodernism, concludes that meaning itself is fragmented and ultimately undecidable. I find much danger in this orientation, for whether it means to or not, such a position props up the status quo by rendering meaning making and change impossible.

I am much more comfortable with an affirmative and democratic form of postmodernism that connects the deconstruction and other analytical forms of ludic postmodernism to the critique of lived social and cultural structures in the context of history. In this articulation postmodernism can serve as a pragmatic intervention to forms of Eurocentric, patriarchal, class elitist and white supremacist forms of regulation. The linguistic, textual and semiotic concerns of ludicism, affirmative/democratic postmodernists maintain, have real-life political, social, economic and cultural consequences. Representations shape human consciousness; and human ways of seeing the world profoundly influence the nature of everyday life and social relations. Without connections to structural power and an understanding of human suffering, affirmative postmodernism fears that ludicism will fall into nihilism.

Many novice readers of postmodern themes become confused by the distinction between postmodernism as previously described and postmodernity. Postmodernism is a critique of modernism, postmodernity is a social condition. Of course, the postmodern critique (postmodernism) and the postmodern condition (postmodernity) are closely connected; yet the attempt to distinguish them confuses many observers. Further complicating the matter is the realization that postmodernity cannot be seen as a simply homogenous historical period. All cultural expression in the contemporary era is not postmodern—just as all art produced in the postmodern condition is not postmodern (Smart, 1992; Borgmann, 1992; Kincheloe and McLaren, 2000). Advocates of a postmodern frame of reference always run the risk of overstating the uniqueness and newness of the concept. While we cannot simply deny the existence of a postmodern condition, neither can we simply assume its widespread existence without rigorous questioning and analysis.

When it exists, postmodernity is characterized by a social vertigo that emerges from a so-called cultural hyperreality caused by a loss of touch with traditional notions of time, self, community and history. New structures transform cultural space and time generated by bombarding electronic images from local, national and international locations shake our personal sense of place. Electronic transmissions move us in and out of different geographical and cultural locales instantaneously, juxtaposing nonlinear images of the world with homey, folksy and comfortable personalities who reassure us in the midst of the chaos (Gergen, 1991; Smart, 1992). Our contact with this postmodern condition or hyperreality diminishes our ability to find meaning to engender a passion for commitment. If the world is so crazy that we cannot make sense, then what conceivably merits our commitment? One of the charges of an affirmative/democratic postmodernism, therefore, is to make meaning of and make meaning *for* the inhabitants of the postmodern condition.

So, in the artistic domain modernism and postmodernism are used in the discursive universe delineated here. Again, for purposes of clarity modernist art usually is said to begin in the late nineteenth century and run at least through the middle of the twentieth century with an emphasis on establishing a universal view of art and aesthetics. Modern art set standards for the proper production, appreciation and critique of creative work. Postmodern art is said to have emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as—depending on which expert you ask—either a new movement discretely breaking from modernism or as a new phase of modernism. Many analysts choose not to use the term *postmodernism* because of the contradictions and uncertainties that surround it. I use it here because it signals some important changes in ways of seeing and in cultural politics that no other term captures. One of the most important features of the movement involved its discomfort with the modernist delineation of universality. This concept, the postmodernists contended, was more of an ethnocentric manifestation of subjectivity underwritten by power than an expression of aesthetic objectivity.

Aesthetic Confusion: The Postmodern Challenge to the Single Story of High Art

Thus, postmodernist art criticism questioned what it discerned was an elite and arrogant proclamation of universal standards for art. In the postmodernist eye modernism was always fearful of a “leveling down” that would erode intractable standards of quality. Such pure notions of art

were challenged by new technologies such as photography and cinema that helped produce a disdain for tradition, an erosion of the special aura of the artist. These new technologies created a huge quantity of popular artifacts for the mass media. Artists would have to find a location in this new cultural domain for their work—a social process that continues to expand and complicates the lives of artists in the twenty-first century. In light of the challenges of this new context to traditional notions of art and the social role of artists, no one has any idea of where art goes from here. Postmodern art reflects this confusion.

Indeed, the inability to address or make sense of this contemporary confusion is an important aspect of the most nihilistic features of the ludic variety of postmodernism. In this theoretical context there is little use for studying the relationship between art, culture, politics, cognition and education because no one can find the way out of the chaos of the present cultural disorientation. A more affirmative/democratic postmodernism attempts to make meaning in this situation. Arguing that while contemporary “hyperreality” with its exploding information production and saturation of visual imagery may be confusing, we can begin to make sense of contemporary culture by abandoning the modernist quest for “one story” to explain it. Such critical postmodernists argue that the “one-story disposition” of modernism was an exclusionary ethnocentric dynamic. The one story told was a Western tale that carefully excluded non-Western and female sagas from the chronicles of culture and art.

Affirmative postmodernists called for the art world to overcome this narrow cultural focus that erases the names of non-Western artists and relegates their work to an unconscious expression of cultural tradition. This postmodernist recognition was a critique of liberal racism and sexism that has permeated Western high culture despite claims of universal human rights, the sanctity of the individual and support of pluralism. Western racism, thus, is not simply the product of right-wing forces. Western artistic studies over the last century, for example, have consistently excluded most everything not white or bourgeois as scholars sought to tell the one coherent story of artistic progress. During the latter part of this era even “ethnic artists” who worked within European modernist traditions were viewed as “inauthentic” and “uninventive.” If they chose to pursue so-called “ethnic art,” they were relegated to the cultural gulag outside of the “story of art.” This artistic catch-22, postmodernists proclaimed, was the work of progressives who prided themselves on their universals and lack of provincialism.

The postmodern artistic production that emerged from this bubbling cauldron of theoretical musings sought to transcend modernist elitism and conflate “high” and “low” cultural forms while concurrently embracing tradition and using it in playful and ironic ways. In this mode postmodernists used pastiche with its patchwork and collage of ideas and images. Often the ideas and images put together were ostensible opposites—old and new, “high culture” and “low culture,” progressive and regressive, logical and illogical, Western and non-Western and “male” and “female” just to name a few. In such juxtapositions postmodern artists seemed to delight in the contradictions, chaos, asymmetry and jocularly that resulted. To deflate the egos of the heroic male modernist artists postmodernists in this same ludic spirit skewered their posturings of profundity, genius and “the maestro” (Wilson, 1993; Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Best and Kellner, 1991).

Embedded in this playful postmodern art are serious analytical themes that have profoundly influenced my own view of the relationships connecting art, culture, politics, cognition and education. In the pastiche of postmodern art one notes the creation of a context where improvisational interpretation can take place. In this crazy-quilt of juxtapositions, postmodern artists recontextualized images and concepts in ways that induced observers to contemplate the meaning of such relationships. In the affirmative postmodernist tradition such pastiche and eclecticism seem to point to a celebration of various cultural and artistic traditions around the planet and the insights that might come from examining them in relation to one another. Such traditions should be open to everyone regardless of background and all should learn from the various forms, techniques, concepts and values expressed in the diverse traditions.

Postmodern art carried a dada gene that permeated many of its productions. Indeed, some of the earliest postmodern work by Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol were termed neo-dada by several art critics. The distancing from the grand tradition of art and the disdain of the affectations of bourgeoisie culture reflected the dadaist spirit and fanned the postmodernist attraction to appropriation, hyperirony and irreverence. In the context of our delineation between ludic and affirmative modes of postmodernism, more ludic artists rejected avant-garde concerns with social change while the more affirmative postmodern artists embraced them. Robert Rauschenberg’s work, for example, illustrated numerous postmodern themes with his collages constructed from the debris of consumer society. Combining such “trash” with images from classical paintings and objects such as stuffed goats, Rauschenberg and

many postmodern artists who followed him worked to produce an aesthetic of disharmony (Wilson, 1993; Cary, 1998; Best and Kellner, 1991).

High Above the Rest: The Cultural Politics of High-Low

In this disharmonious context Jasper Johns joined with Rauschenberg in the early 1960s to attack modernism's tendency to hold itself above popular culture. In this spirit Johns incorporated common consumer products in his collage paintings and made bronze sculptures with artifacts such as beer cans. Recognizable in the consciousness of such postmodern artists was a need to proclaim the death of the modernist avant-garde. The postmodernists wanted to make sure everyone understood that modernist avant-garde art was now part of the institutionalized and aesthetically inert status quo. It had become mere window dressing for consumerism. A new world was coming and the times were changing, the postmodernists announced, and they would not be so quick to place their work above more popular arts, above the productions of popular culture. The boundaries between "high art" and "low art" were beginning to fade.

As Karel Rose writes in her chapters here, understanding this high-low distinction and its aesthetic and cultural meanings were important issues in our team-taught course—and, thus, in this book. How do these labels evolve? Who designates these categories and distinctions? She asks. The issues I am working with in this chapter hold these questions as navigational instruments. What we are dealing with here are the complexities of cultural exchange. In any cultural and/or artistic negotiation individuals are operating in relation to many texts that play a role in the development of their identities and in the mode and content of their interactions with other people. These texts interact with an individual's past experience and present conditions. They typically involve matters of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, geographical place and other factors. These dynamics constitute a process that have been labeled by scholars in the discipline of cultural studies as "cultural politics." The questions we have raised in this book and the issues we have explored can be referred to as the *cultural politics of art*.

As the high art of avant-garde modernism worked itself into a zone of safety and social accommodation, popular culture and the low art forms within it were gaining a new influence in U.S. culture. Radio and its promotion of rock music, television and its cultural power, the accelerating influence of advertising, comics and other pop cultural forms were assuming an unprecedented social prominence. Many people were

gravitating to these forms as a visceral reaction against the pomp of high cultural production. Postmodern artists such as Warhol and architects such as Robert Venturi made use of public knowledges and popular artifacts and like Rauschenberg and Johns connected their art to the lived world of the era. These artists embraced a cultural politics suspicious of an art establishment that would separate great art from the commerce of the world in museums, institutes and galleries. Like many rebellious artists who came before them, they wanted to connect art to life in a variety of ways.

In the social context of the 1960s, entertainment was beginning to play a new and more prominent role in American life. To compete with popular culture forms and their entertainment value postmodern artists began to position themselves as entertainers. By the end of the twentieth century even high art itself would begin to position itself in this way—the Brooklyn Museum, for example, in the fall of 1999 promoted the *Sensation* exhibit in the spirit of a rock concert or a wrestling match. Art is not to be sequestered for the elite, postmodernists contended, it should be there for all people. High art roadblocks to the production, appreciation and benefits of art should be removed, postmodern artists argued, and more of the cultural interactions and productions that occur daily in numerous social spheres should be included in artistic and scholarly analyses. Since everyone is a cultural producer and receiver, the postmodernists were angered by the way high art promoters and their educational allies operated to exacerbate the sociocultural distance between the elite culture and that of common people. Contrary to the elitist pronouncements of critics such as Harold Bloom who argues that the greatest cultural productions cannot be understood by “common people,” the early postmodern artists believed that most people can understand anything that grabs their interest. Nonetheless, with the establishment of postmodern art in the last three decades of the twentieth century and its increasing closeness to the financial establishment questions began to be raised about the elitism of postmodern art. Such art, the argument went, was merely the next form of art to gain canonization and, thus, enter the domain where it was bought and sold by the wealthy (Beyer, 2000; Wilson, 1993; Best and Kellner, 1991; Allen, 1995; Cowen, 1999).

Like its modernist avant-garde predecessor, postmodernist art—if this charge of elitism is accepted—has lost its ability to challenge the status quo with the shock of the unprecedented. In this context we can better understand why New York Mayor Rudi Giuliani’s charge of elitism against the young British artists whose work was included in *Sensation* struck

such a positive nerve with many “common people” around the city and the nation in general. Was he articulating in his crass appeal for conservative favor an unstated sense that postmodern artists and postmodern art were just the latest in the art historical pantheon to move from the popular domain to the realm of “high art?”

The 1990s and the early years of the twenty-first century with the powerful globalized economy and the Internet have been similar to the Gilded Age of the nineteenth century. Both periods have been marked by a great opportunity for those with capital to make phenomenal profits on the industrial economy of the nineteenth or the virtual economy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. In the nineteenth century the industrial profiteers—the so-called robber barons—made money on the art and artifacts they bought around the world. These tycoons built great American museums in which to store the art. In the contemporary era the new virtual money has also invested in all supported art, through the sponsorship of exhibitions—as with multimillionaire Charles Saatchi in the Sensation exhibit—or board members of museums who buy the art of those artists who show in their museums. This, of course, works to raise the value of their collections while promoting attendance at major shows. Once again the art world is in bed with big money and the cultural, political, aesthetic and educational effects of such intimacy will be interesting to dissect (Rorschach, 2000; Becker, 2000).

Making Sense of Art Chutes and Ladders, Discourses and Canons

Traditional forms of art history and art education focus mainly on knowledge content, artifacts, and on who painted this and when did he paint it? What forms and techniques did he use that make the work significant? A more culturalist approach to art education and art history is also concerned with the nature of these disciplines themselves. When did they develop? Under what circumstances do they evolve? What role does power play in their everyday activities? A term used in cultural studies to signify this type of analysis of a discipline is “discourse.” An understanding of discourse and discursive practices helps us appreciate the political (power-related) processes that shape what are assumed to be neutral disciplines, bodies of knowledge. When subjected to discursive analysis, the language and disciplinary assumptions of art history, for example, reveal a myriad of hidden and unexplored assumptions. Discursive practices involve the tacit rules that influence what can and cannot be said, who

speaks and who must listen and whose depictions of reality are valid and worthy and whose are unlearned and unimportant.

These discursive inclusions and exclusions are typically quite subtle. In the cases of art history and art education, most observers are unaware of their operations. Indeed, suppositions thought to be harmless are exposed by cultural discourse analysis to be powerful political influences. High-art arbiters of quality operate as if they are oblivious to the ways their pronouncements, judgments and positionings of art/artifacts shape power relations between various groups of people—think of the previous examples of nonwhite, non-European art in avant-garde modernism. The privilege of the arbiters is hidden under assertions of quality and excellence, as particular cultural ways of being human and producing art are deemed superior to others. Museum directors, art dealers, wealthy sponsors and collectors, art critics and art professors have access to the status of arbiter and often work in this role to keep diverse voices and productions out of the picture.

By using discursive analysis, we gain a much more compelling insight into the cultural politics of art. We begin to uncover the ways the high-art establishment inscribes the superiority of whiteness, masculinity and Eurocentrism on art, art history, art criticism and aesthetics in ways that shape views of self and world. Just as discursive analysts have revealed hidden values defining the difference between normal and abnormal, sane and insane, good student behavior and disruptive student behavior, here we explore the veiled values constructing the difference between high and low art. The artful teaching of art education that we embrace wants to engage students in a higher-order understanding of the discursive dynamics of art. In many encounters with the educational arm of high art institutions, such discursive analysis seems to be positioned as an inappropriate behavior, a manifestation of not only bad pedagogy but, even worse, bad taste (Allen, 1995; Wilson, 1993).

Another discursive aspect of established art involves the nature of the history it produces. The heart of high-art history involves a focus on the great work of selected individuals and the movements they inspired. This Western single-story history, as postmodernists labeled it, proceeds chronologically without disruption, leading us intractably to the present. Discursive analysts are interested in who is left out of the story, the asymmetries that emerge, the power plays that oppress and, of course, the many other art stories to be told. In these discursive examinations of art history we begin to sense, for example, that what earns the label of artistic realism may be that work which is most faithful to the discursive rules

of an official genre—not that which most accurately represents “reality.” In this context we come to appreciate the notion that what appeared as realistic art to the arbiters of aesthetics in China during the Ming dynasty may constitute a profoundly different mode of painting than what was defined as realism in fifteenth-century France.

Thus, in our discursive analysis we begin to understand that what we view as the history of art, as great art or as realism is socially constructed by those with the power to decree. Art history as composed by the Western art establishment would not be recorded in the same manner in a society that did not place great value on fame and names. The discourse of official Western art history—a.k.a., art history—is a chronicle of cultural unconsciousness, of a blinding cultural narcissism. The “storage” of African, Caribbean, Asian and Native American art not in galleries but in anthropological museums is a material manifestation of the discursive practices of the Western art establishment. Defined by the discourse of Western art, such artifacts have not traditionally merited inclusion in art institutions; they are the primitive by-products of “the other.”

The point that emerges here moves me to assert that the factors which produce impenetrable boundaries between “high art” and “low art” may be based not as much on carefully considered artistic qualities as on cultural, gender, racial and class biases. Non-Western art, women’s art, art produced by individuals from the lower socioeconomic classes has been conveniently dismissed because of its failure to meet the discourse’s “high standards of quality art.”

“High art” and “low art,” “good art” and “bad art” are not intractable categories that never change—they are constantly being renegotiated, perpetually in process, never at rest. Since they are discursively produced, they change when the discourse changes—and all discourses undergo change. My concern here is that we understand the negative impact of these discursive constructions and work to create new inclusive artistic traditions and innovative and multiculturally informed aesthetic practices. Such democratic and inclusive strategies are dedicated to naming and confronting the sexist, racist and class-biased pronouncements that travel under the banner of universal standards. Contrary to the way our democratic strategies are represented by the guardians of tradition as destructive of artist standards, such inclusive ways of studying art force the arbiters to examine the discipline from numerous perspectives, to understand a wide variety of artistic, cultural and interpretive traditions (Brown, 1995; Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Allen, 1995).

Understanding and acting on these dynamics raise the quality of art education, cultural analysis and the study of politics. Our insights are thickened and deepened by not only knowledge of aesthetic forms, techniques and perspectives but also by an awareness of the discursive dimensions delineated here. In the cognitive context created here we begin to gain the higher-order ability to see what is not present but yet is central to the entire process under examination. Seeing what is not there, we are prepared to go out and find it. Now that we know what we are looking for we begin to seek out long-subjugated art and not only include it in the curriculum but in the process learn from it. What, for example, do we learn from the attempts by our own art establishment to maintain its exclusion of art produced by artists from non-Western cultures from the universal history of art and to not subject their own discursive assumptions to analysis?

The Canonical View of Difference as Deficiency

As we ask these discursive questions and learn from the process of answering them, we encounter many revelations from many disciplinary domains. One art-related insight we gain involves the notion that it is problematic to equate the category of “high art” with “good art.” The more accurate equation may connect “high art” with canonical art. The Western artist canon, the official story goes, consists of those officially sanctioned works of art that meet the criteria of strict rules of judgment. In the “Sensation” debate it was fascinating to read and listen to guardians of the canon react to the work of the young British artists. “They are challenging our tradition of quality,” and “we are being assaulted by an invasion of barbarians,” they cried. Artistic work that moves outside canonical boundaries must be contained, the priests of high art incant. In the process, of course, creativity, social critique and genuine forms of diversity are squashed (Ruesga, 1996; Walsh, 1999).

Indeed, difference has often been reduced to deficiency by the guardians of the artistic canon. The art of the other is seen only through the lenses of the canon. That which is artistically transgressive is “tamed” and rendered harmless by including it as a primitive stage of canonical development. The other is thus operating on a different (lower) rung on the evolutionary ladder. Once again as Westerners, we are reminded of our blessed superiority—a preeminence that gives us the right to establish the universal characteristics of “good art.” The type of artistic analysis and art education called for here demystifies these hidden cultural and ideo-

logical dimensions of the canon. In this process it exposes not only what is excluded but also the ideological precepts shaping the inclusion of the other. In our cultural analyses of art we study the reasons that poor people, the “racially different,” or women appear in particular ways in canonical work.

One of the most puzzling aspects of this picture of the high-art establishment involves the guardians’ seeming inability to reflect on the forces that shape their aesthetic judgments. Are they unaware of the obvious impact of the ideology of Western colonialism on the fine arts? Many of their exhibitions, sponsored lectures and curricula would seem to indicate either a genuine or a cultivated lack of unawareness. In the twenty-first century it can no longer be simply stated that the West is white. England has an ever-increasing Caribbean population; Germany is home to many Turks; the United States has never been white but it is less white now than ever before. While the West is increasingly not white, Western high culture maintains its illusion of whiteness. But what would the Western artistic canon look like without its “appropriated” art—works stolen from Africans, Asians and indigenous peoples during colonization?

Often the colonial expeditions to bring back “primitive” art were financed by the art collectors and museum patrons themselves. These same agents were the ones who assessed the work, provided its “meaning,” and distributed it to deserving collectors for sizable profits. Even as the guardians produced artistic scholarship on the “primitivism” of their colonial spoils, they failed to reflect on the ideological construction of their canon. Primitivism in art was conceptualized with a very simple but powerful schema: The artifacts of colonized peoples around the planet were objects placed on the low levels of the European artistic and cultural hierarchy. European artifacts—better known as art—occupied the higher rungs. Even in twenty-first-century artistic production, we see forms of neoprimitivism that while celebrating the art of the other still place artist and art at the bottom of the hierarchy.

A description of the ideological dimensions of the Western canon would not be complete without reference to its patriarchal foundations: the male artist as genius who constructs his own world and creates the rules by which it operates. This privilege was not granted to women or the racial other, only to the white male—the one with the entitlement to creative rebelling and the innovation it summoned. Says who? The white male guardians of the canon. *He* is the one who is heroic in his vision and electrifying in his aesthetic breakthroughs. It is hard for the guardians to express such sentiments about a female artist. The white male artistic hero

is the artistic analyst who recognizes the formal aspects of artistic technique. Though “others” may have produced interesting artistic forms, it was the white man who discovered that they were of interest. Indeed, it is he that stands ahead of the aesthetic frontier: Balboa discovered the Pacific Ocean; Picasso discovered the “flat plane” of African art (Rorschach, 2000; Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Best and Kellner, 1991; Turner, 1996).

Making Sense of Art: Developing a Complex Hermeneutics of the Visual

In our discussion of high and low art—the analysis of “who says?” what is good and bad art and the examination of the way discursive and canonical factors shape the ways art is viewed—we have been studying the larger issue of interpretation. Hermeneutics involves the art of interpretation; the word is derived from the Greek god, Hermes, the messenger, who interpreted the pronouncements of the gods and delivered his readings to other gods and mortals. Interestingly, Hermes both clarified and played with these messages, in the process alerting humans to the ambiguity and complexity of the process of meaning making in everyday life. No matter how certain and direct an expert in art may be about the meaning of a particular painting or sculpture, a student or teacher who understands hermeneutics will know better. All narratives about the meaning of art are interpretations—and interpretations are never simple.

The interpretive act is tricky—Hermes was, after all, the “trickster god”—because a text to be interpreted, whether it be visual or print, can’t be separated from meanings and inscriptions granted it by past, present and future meaning makers. For example, a Volkswagen may be a cute little lime green car, but it can never be completely separated from its Nazi origins as Adolph Hitler’s people’s car for the Third Reich. Thus, cuteness has an edge in the hermeneutics of Volkswagens. The hermeneutics advocated here is aware of the complexity of meaning making, of the effort to make sense of art, that no pristine interpretation exists. No form of art analysis or art criticism can claim a privileged position that enables the production of authoritative knowledge. Art critics like all other “knowledge producers” must always judge art in relation to something else in the world—in relation to an aesthetic theory, an art canon, a political system of meaning, a social theory, etc.

We are all—Karel Rose and myself included—shaped by these dynamics which, in turn, shape our views of art. We all see art in the world

and make sense of it within the world's boundaries and blinders. Our purpose here is to bring to consciousness the ways our and other people's views of art are shaped by these boundaries and blinders. When we are aware of the forces that shape the ways art is viewed, we are able to provide more compelling insights into the nature of art and its relationships with the cultural, political, cognitive and educational domains. With these hermeneutical concepts in mind, we can move to new levels of aesthetic understanding. We can become smarter about both art and the world.

Hermeneutics, Art and Politics: The Shifting Sands of the Postmodern Landscape

At this point it is important to note that the process of aesthetic judgment, of making meaning in the artistic domain, is not some frill that relegates art to an isolated and rarefied plane of human activity. We are operating here in both the intrinsically valuable domain of art and also in the commerce and politics of the lived world. The process of interpretation, of meaning making is central to the cultural and political process; it shapes questions of justice and power and determines quality of life for the world's inhabitants. The cultural politics referenced previously is intimately tied to these hermeneutic issues. Cultural politics, simply stated, is a struggle over meaning and as such a contest it works to shape identities. A particular articulation of cultural politics wins a battle when a collection of individuals come to make meaning of art and other social texts in a particular way.

In the "Sensation" controversy, for example, various cultural politicians sought to engage individuals in interpreting the works in ways that resonated with their cultural politics. Were the productions filth, as Mayor Giuliani contended, or were they innovative works of art as maintained by Brooklyn Museum of Art director Arnold Lehman? The cultural politics of "Sensation" was not simply about how we view art but involved the way we make sense of the world, our moral, ethical and political sensitivities and how we view ourselves as human beings. This is why the controversy was so important in Karel's and my class: It illustrated the connections between art and life in a very concrete and explicit manner. Indeed, it brought the importance of the hermeneutics of art into a crystal-clear focus.

If we can enter into the study of art with these interpretive dynamics in mind, we can make connections with a variety of social, political and psychological domains that provide us with a much more mature and

complex view of the world and ourselves. Social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (Dunn, 1998; Brown and Szeman, 2000) argues that the hermeneutics of art demands that we understand the relationship between art and power, the forces that have shaped the discourse of art criticism and the cultural context that has constructed the consciousness of those within the discipline of art. With benefit of these insights, he maintains, we are empowered to reflect critically on the social, cultural and political forces that shape us, our interpretations of art and our artistic productions. We become sophisticated analysts of cultural politics, an essential skill of citizenship in a postmodern era where political consciousness is more likely to be constructed in the cultural realm than on the traditional terrain of politics.

The postmodern era of the last thirty to forty years has witnessed an amazing political phenomenon—the death of the traditional political domain. Public political issues arouse much less passion than in previous eras in the United States. Issues concerning the improvement of the public sphere or social progress in areas of justice and the extension of the democratic process are viewed as irrelevant in the postmodern politics of cynicism, so why bother with them? A key understanding in this political domain that makes the meaning making process of cultural politics and the interpretation of art more important than ever involves the fact that the cultural domain has become the most important *political* arena. Areas that were once considered trivial venues of entertainment by political analysts are now used for profound political “education.”

Thus, the cultural politics of art with its hermeneutics and meaning making shapes our political sensibilities. The mayor of New York inserts himself into a controversy ostensibly over art; presidential candidates discuss their favorite movies with Oprah; political organizations fight over the role of Hollywood in public life; the funding of art museums becomes a key issue in various political campaigns—the times they are a changing, *again*. Indeed, the questions we are raising here about what an artistic production means; what is “high art,” “low art,” “bad art,” “good art,” the questions “Sensation” raised about “immoral art” and “morally inspirational art” are profoundly contentious inquiries in the early twenty-first century. I don’t think it hyperbole to argue that over the past 25 years these questions and questions like them concerning how aesthetic and artistic standards are determined with all their related moral, ethical and political implications have torn American society asunder (Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Dunn, 1998; Brown and Szeman, 2000).

Aesthetic Trespassing: Art, Interpretation and Context

The postmodern turn with its questions about the rules of artistic and authentic judgment was deeply resented by the guardians of artistic tradition. As postmodern analysts promoted the development of an interpretive distance or cultural arbiters and their constructions of aesthetic value, conservatives and traditionalists denounced such activities as markers of cultural and moral decline. Drawing upon the affirmative and democratic aspects of postmodernism, we promote a deeper understanding of artistic interpretation that engages the role of connections and contextualization in this complex process. Pushing the interpretive envelope and its intimate connection to the cultural, political, cognitive and educational, we maintain that context profoundly influences artistic evaluation as it shapes individuals' choices of what aspects of the world to connect to the domain of art.

Like hypertextual links on the Internet, what we connect to can dramatically affect our interpretation of a text. Context provides meaning to a work of art no matter how much the guardians may claim the essential form of the work determines its value. Thus, our aesthetic hermeneutics insists on the analysis of the context, the cultural circumstances of a work's production and reception and the ways these processes surrounding a work of art shape the political, cultural, educational and conceptual nature of our lives. With these hermeneutical insights and a focus on the context in which the artistic process takes place, we seek to promote a form of art analysis and art education that respects the complexity of the interrelationships connecting art to the political, cultural, educational and psychological domains. In this spirit we use the term *complex aesthetics*—a concept to be extended later in this chapter (Heck, 1998; Best and Kellner, 1991; Stossel, 1998; Allen, 1995; Kester, 1997).

With our notion of complex aesthetics we reconceptualize works of art education. In this reconceptualization works of art, art criticism, museums, patrons, art history and artists themselves are carefully viewed in their social, cultural, political and aesthetic contexts. Our original questions are seen in a new light as we come to view the historical circumstances surrounding the inclusion of a particular object and artist in the canon—equally important, of course, are the canonical exclusions. Here we ask with the benefit of context how such decisions related to the owners of canonized or excluded art and the social roles such artifacts have occupied over time. Of course, the artistic/aesthetic context created by Western colonialism is important to our complex aesthetics and the ana-

lytical concerns and education it supports. To understand the history of world art and Western art we cannot continue excluding the insights provided by a detailed awareness of the effects of Western colonialism.

Without such discernments official art studies continue to confuse a view of art filtered through colonialism with what the guardians refer to as “the story of art”—that is, the truth about art. Again they are unaware of the complex aspects of interpretation and fail to see the impact of Eurocentrism on their interpretive schemata. In the curriculum of complex aesthetics, for example, a rigorous historical analysis of the beginnings of European art’s appropriation of non-Western art in the late nineteenth century and the cultural, political and economic forces connected to the cooption would be an important element of study. In this educational context we would spend significant time with students making sense of the influence of such intercultural encounters on not only art but on the subsequent political, cultural, social and educational character of the twentieth and now the twenty-first centuries.

What happened when European artists found that African, Native American and other indigenous forms of art played a different social role than did Western art? How did Western artists interpret the non-Western spiritual uses of art as incarnations of specters and deities with the power to shape everyday lives? How did indigenous artists and other community members interpret the activities of Western art “collectors” in their villages? How did these encounters affect the Westerners? The indigenous peoples? The indigenous works collected by the Western colonialists were for the most part relatively new pieces of art. They were represented as ancient pieces from the most “primitive” beginnings of human civilization. The hierarchical thinking embedded in such characterizations and its quick acceptance as truth by Westerners provide significant insights into European racial and self-conceptions at the turn of the twentieth century.

That official art history continues to perpetuate these colonialistic perspectives in the twenty-first century should be sobering to those concerned with the development of a complex aesthetics and issues of cultural and racial justice (Jordan and Weedon, 1995). Non-Western art is viewed as a trip to “a land that time forgot,” “that civilization passed by.” These artistic rides in the time machine bring us face to face with “wild men from Borneo” and the artifacts their “ancient” ancestors produced. It really doesn’t matter when they were actually produced; because of the lack of cultural progress, contemporary artistic production is stuck in the same primitive mode. Many assume that great progress has been made in the West over the last few decades concerning cultural reflection about

these manifestations of colonial representation. Unfortunately, however, a survey of exhibitions of non-Western art in American museums even in the past decade reveals an alternate story. Western artistic colonialism lives on in the twenty-first century.

Fecal Hermeneutics: Art, Interpretation and the African Other

During our “high art,” “low art” class, Karel and I were fascinated by the way these hermeneutic questions about art and race emerged in the “Sensation” controversy. At the center of the controversy was artist Chris Ofili’s painting, “The Holy Virgin Mary.” Mayor Giuliani and many cultural conservatives had labeled the work as sacrilegious and an affront to all Catholics. Ofili’s Virgin Mary is a black woman encircled by angels constructed by cut-out buttocks from pornographic magazines. Importantly, her breast is formed by elephant dung. It was the use of this medium in the painting that seemed to elicit such powerful reactions from observers in New York and around the country. Interpreting his own work, Ofili told observers that dung was a key element employed in many of his paintings to give them a sense of connection to the earth. In an interview with the *New York Times* he referenced the hermeneutic dimension of his artistic use of dung, pointing out that even though it is “incredibly simple,” it elicits a variety of meanings and interpretations.

But dung, like many other materials, cannot be separated from the many inscriptions and meanings made of it in different cultures and different historical periods—contemporary U.S. culture notwithstanding. Indeed, there are many cultural and historical meanings of dung—some Christian, some Western, some pantheist, some African, some indigenous, some scientific, and so forth. Needless to say, dung’s meaning is in the eye of the perceiver and the constellation of meanings he or she culturally and historically brings to the observation. In the rural Tennessee fundamentalist Protestant world of my father, there was no way around it—dung, by whatever moniker, was dirty and references to it were vulgar. There was no cultural contingency here; fecal hermeneutics were clear cut and obvious no matter how dung might have been used in Africa. And in light of the cultural differences between my father’s rural Protestant and Mayor Giuliani’s urban Catholic mutual interpretation of the meaning of feces and African people’s architectural and medicinal uses of the multiply inscribed substance, we begin to see the complexity of an intercultural hermeneutics of art.

Even among Africans themselves there was profound disagreement, with Christian Africans often taking issue with the fecal hermeneutics of those with more traditional African religious precepts. While there are profound exceptions to this breakdown, many Christian Africans argued that Africans have no special penchant for dung and that Ofili's work cheapened African-based art. Individuals with traditional African religious viewpoints seemed more inclined to interpret the painting's use of dung as a celebration of African culture. Thus, the context in which a perceiver operates, in this case transcending mere cultural location and involving religious orientation, exerts an impact on the way interpretation is made.

Others coming from specific academic theoretical traditions read other dynamics into Ofili's painting of the Virgin. Social theorist Coco Fusco, for example, employing a psychoanalytic art criticism contended that Ofili knew either consciously or subconsciously exactly what he was trying to do. By the use of dung in his paintings, she wrote, he was constructing an allegory about the place of black people and his own place as a black man in the contemporary world of art. Whether we buy Fusco's entire psychoanalytical interpretation or not, one point she raises cannot be discarded in a complex hermeneutics: Ofili's work cannot be removed from the inscriptions of meanings circulating around race in contemporary New York, U.S., Western and even global societies.

Ofili's race, the African and black cultural references of the painting, the explosive racial politics of New York at the time of the "Sensation" exhibit, Mayor Giuliani's controversial role in defending the New York police against charges of racism, the cultural and racial politics of the Brooklyn Museum as a bulwark of the European artistic canon in a racially diverse borough of New York City all generated a context for making sense of the racial significations of "Sensation" and "The Holy Virgin Mary." There was something combative about Ofili's painting viewed in such a highly charged interpretive context. Whether he consciously or unconsciously intended it or not, "The Holy Virgin Mary" walked into a spider web of racial significations and volatile racial emotions. Multiple meanings of such images were going to be made in New York City in the fall of 1999—investment in the hermeneutic racial economy was much too high. Ofili's significations of racial difference with his use of the African artistic technique of assemblage combining diverse elements and textures (dung, in particular) spontaneously combusted in the oxygen tent of Gotham semiotics (Consentino, 2000).

Art, Interpretation and Multiculturalism: Culturally Inscribed Meanings

All cultural entities and cultural behaviors are texts that derive their various meanings from the context(s) in which they are encountered. Stated another way, all textual meanings are socially constructed, not pre-arranged, fixed and absolute. Drawing upon our previous discussion of the “Sensation” exhibit, what is the transcultural, absolute meaning of dung? In light of the different social contexts from which we may view it—we come to appreciate the complexity of its meaning in general and in Chris Ofili’s art, in particular (Allen, 1995). Thus, if meanings of cultural texts and in our case, works of art, are contextually dependent, then the possibility of challenging meanings that hold hurtful consequences, that construct racism, gender bias and class condescension exists. A complex aesthetics is grounded on this recognition and its ethical imperative to act. In the last three decades of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century, we have recognized that meanings of social texts in America have been shaped by a variety of factors. Race is particularly important in this context (Kincheloe, Steinberg, Rodriguez and Chennault, 1998; Rodriguez and Villaverde, 2000).

Particular ways of interpreting the world and its objects become dominant modes of seeing in specific cultural and historical settings. Based on power relationships between various racial and ethnic, gender and class groups, some interpretations come to seem as if they are more than mere opinions—they come to be viewed as commonsensical, even natural. In the first few centuries of the American experience the belief that African Americans and Native Americans were inferior, incapable of rational action was accepted as one of these “natural interpretations.” With the civil rights movement of the mid-twentieth century, many of these “commonsensical” racial meanings were challenged, and the society engaged in a protracted debate over racial matters.

By the end of the 1960s many white Americans came to believe that the civil rights movement had “gone too far” and that the foundations of white supremacy were being challenged. New interpretations of race began to emerge in a variety of social, cultural, political, economic and educational spheres. Aaron Gresson (1995, 2002) labeled these new ways of making meaning as a form of “racial recovery”—in this case the effort to recover the perceived losses of the civil rights movement. In this recovery of white supremacy new ways of interpreting cultural objects began to arise. Contrary to overwhelming empirical evidence to the contrary, the

new interpretations assumed that racial minorities had achieved greater power and opportunities for success than whites. African Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans and even women, the interpretation alleged, had gained an unwarranted privilege at the expense of white Americans, especially white males.

The omnipresence of the “recovery interpretation” produced and still produces white anger. Emerging from such an interpretation have been many texts that depict white Americans as a people under siege. Movies such as *Falling Down*, the *Lethal Weapon* series and the *Die Hard* series, for example, presented stories of white male rage and dissatisfaction (Allen, 1995). In this recovery context, consider Ofili’s work in “Sensation.” Did the sense of whites under siege, as the new victims of racism combined with the racial tensions sparked by the NYPD’s shooting of African immigrant, Amadou Diallo and the brutal sodomizing of Haitian immigrant Abner Louima have an impact on New York City’s conservative white community’s reading of “Sensation”? Many conservative white New Yorkers felt the police were being persecuted because they were white men trying to control crime in the black community. Of all the work in the “Sensation” exhibit it was Ofili’s painting of the African-inscribed, black Virgin Mary that elicited the most comment and outrage from conservative white New Yorkers and their spokesperson, Mayor Giuliani.

Would the painting have elicited such vitriolic reactions in another cultural context and another time? The racial politics of New York City in the fall of 1999 combined with the larger white recovery context, I contend, profoundly shaped the meaning of Ofili’s “The Holy Virgin Mary, as it was exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum. In our socially constructed context we understand that the painting did not simply *have a meaning*. Even Ofili’s explanation of its meaning in terms of connecting the image of the Virgin Mary to the earth is somewhat irrelevant in relation to the socially constructed interpretations of the work. Indeed, Ofili may have produced the work, but he lost control of its meanings as soon as the painting entered the highly charged and socially inscribed political, cultural and racial context of New York City in the fall of 1999.

Jungle Boogie: Meaning Is on the Lam

As Maxine Greene (1988, 1995) has frequently argued, if a work of art is to have meaning, individuals viewing it give it meaning. In this constructivist context artistic meaning is created in the interaction of the act of

viewing, the work of art and the world. Since the world and the viewer are always in a process of changing, the interpretations of a work that are constructed will always change. Thus, in the case of Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary," those who view the painting, for example, in the year 2017 or in Japan, may provide a significantly different interpretation of it than their end-of-century New York counterparts. Operating in a different social context, they may look back at the reaction of many New Yorkers to the painting as bizarre and difficult to comprehend.

This argument, of course, flies in the face of the view of art and aesthetic criticism delivered daily by the guardians of high art. In this effete context artistic meaning exists behind glass and is guarded against upstarts with divergent ways of discerning the meaning of such cultural treasures. A complex aesthetics is interested in art as it is viewed in changing contexts and in diverse cultural climates. I am interested in watching, for example, what happens to Ofili's "The Holy Virgin Mary" over the coming decades. Will it still elicit such emotion? Will it fade into artistic obscurity? Will it become a classic? Will it take on new meanings and significance for a new generation? No one knows for sure, but we can safely predict that its status and interpretation will change.

An example of an earlier racially inscribed work of art might help extend our analysis of culture, race and artistic interpretation. In 1943 Wilfredo Lam produced a painting entitled, "The Jungle," that attempted to celebrate the spiritual energy of primitivism in lieu of Western modernism. Lam wanted to proclaim the power of Africa and the Africanized Caribbean and its value for Westerners alienated by their culture's hyper-rationalization, urbanization and despiritualization. Typical descriptions of the painting reference its primitive vision of nature marked by deep greens and blues and body parts shaded with browns and oranges. Observers wondered where plant life ended and human life began in "The Jungle," as they observed green plants with female breasts, bamboo shoots with hands and/or feet and faces where there could be flowers. As he rejoiced in these images, Lam confided that Western "progress" beyond this primal state of being was not really progress at all.

In 1943 and the years immediately following the debut of "The Jungle," many avant-garde, progressive critics celebrated the racial liberalism of the work. As Lam argued, he wanted to shock the racial oppressors with his bold primal images. But as the world changed and colonized peoples around the world began to revolt against Western domination, Lam's painting began to be interpreted differently. The only way Lam provides Westerners to recover from the ravages of their cultural elitism

is through an encounter with primitivism in the African jungle. And such a move, many non-Western and nonwhite critics insisted, is dangerous as it associates African people with a primeval state that removes them from modernity.

Lam, like so many others before and after him, held a simplistic view of interpretation. If he said the painting was meant as a celebration of the genius of Africanness, then that would be the way others would make sense of it. But, as we know, meaning making is not that simple. By the last three decades of the twentieth century, Lam's association of Africanness with primitivism was seen as giving aid to racist agendas that relegated black people and their culture(s) to an inferior position. The painting had come to be viewed as an affront to people of color, a stereotyped view of the African "other." Lam, despite his progressive intentions, could not control the meaning of "The Jungle." As some observers have commented, the slaveowners of the nineteenth-century Americas would probably have enjoyed Lam's painting—much to his horror and disbelief (Padgham, 1988; Allen, 1995; Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

Transgressive Hermeneutics: Resisting Analytical Closure

A complex hermeneutics uses "The Jungle" to teach an important lesson about the artistic domain: beware of a final pronouncement of textual meaning. Such a position opens a possibility of resistant readings of art, even high canonized art, that edify not only our aesthetic sensibilities but our cultural and political understandings as well. Many avant-garde artists of the 1960s understood this dynamic, as they worked to bring the audience and its meaning-making ability into their artwork. Robert Rauschenberg asked the audience to help make sense of his so-called white paintings as they were subjected to various shadowing and lightings. John Cage often rebelled against the imposition of meaning by artists from diverse media, insisting that his audiences participate in determining the meaning of his music. Such conceptual moves successfully highlighted both the importance and complexity of a hermeneutics of art.

In this recognition of complexity single views of canonicity are subverted; patriarchal and Western artistic exclusions are confronted and the diverse and often hidden forces that construct artistic meaning are exposed. Learning from a variety of non-Western and indigenous cultural knowledges, the complex hermeneutics of art taking shape here is concerned with the way artistic analysis takes place without adequate exami-

nation of its own values, assumptions and discursive rules. Indeed, such a way of viewing, studying, helping produce and teaching about art refuses to bow its head in the presence of the authority of the guardians of tradition. This emerging complex aesthetics stakes no exclusive claim to the domain of expertise. It simply and humbly offers these ideas and analytical processes for consideration in the emporium of artistic interchange (Wilson, 1993; Benschhoff, 1999).

Such transgressive acts of artistic and political analysis are essential to the emerging global society and contemporary American society. The United States has not yet come to terms in the first decade of the twenty-first century with the fact that it is not simply a white Eurocentric nation. The nation's social and cultural institutions, for example, do not operate on the appreciation that very shortly the majority of American citizens will not be classified as white. Where exactly does women's, African American and indigenous art fit into the pantheon of white male art? How is American society going to deal with that question and all of the other similar questions arising in related cultural, social, economic and political domains? These are the great questions of our time, despite the fact they are being successfully repressed in the cultural commerce of everyday life.

As usual, Maxine Greene (1988) puts it well when she maintains that the dictates of democracy demand that the world of art and art education open themselves to "voices seldom heard before." Such previously excluded artists can provide fresh insights into the ways Americans structure their experiences and interpret their everyday lives. This refers to the importance of seeking out and attending to multiple points of view. Such action helps us invalidate efforts to end the dialogue about canonicity, as we come to understand that no disciplinary analysis can ever be complete. There is always another perspective to consider, another way of seeing that makes our previous certainty seem naive, parochial. The power of subjugated knowledges in all domains, in this context the artistic sphere, provides hope in its delineation of what is *not* present and what is still left to be represented, said, referenced and exposed.

In this domain of inclusivity, multiple voices and diverse ways of making meaning we can all feel good about our generous spirit, our effort to bring the excluded into the discourse of art and art criticism. A complex aesthetics, however, understands that such liberal self-congratulation is premature, that the question of inclusivity and analytical openness is far more complex than previously assumed. Many who read this work will possibly assert that the contemporary art establishment is not racially or ethically exclusive—indeed, many will argue, there's too much nonwhite,

“ethnic” art being shown. It is true that throughout the twentieth century “artists of color” have been included in many artistic contexts. The question that is central to our efforts to make sense of art and its relation to the cultural, political, cognitive and educational domains concerns more the *conditions* of the incorporation of African, African American, Latino, Asian, Native American art and other “ethnic” work into Western institutions and disciplinary configurations.

A transgressive hermeneutics of art, a complex aesthetics is concerned in this “inclusionary context” with the way nonwhite artists and their art are reduced to ethnic artists and ethnic art. Such a process of otherizing removes them from the universal artistic narrative, coldly relegating them to the separate domain of the particular. And while their work may be extolled, it is honored “in its place”—as cilantro in the pico de gallo, spice in the entree, entertainment to break the monotony of the established. What is being referenced here is the “exoticization of the other,” a process that has reached new heights in the last two decades. Such an exoticization is a new more complex form of racism that seductively whispers, I want you as it limits the way the racial other is understood: the tragic magic of the sensual, the physical and the emotional. You can be like Mike as long as you buy my Nikes. What emotional power Chris Ofili’s work possesses, as he taps into the primitive animism of his African ancestors. Jungle fever. This neoracism of exoticization determines racial abilities, thus limiting possibility (Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

Struggling with the Aesthetic: Avoiding Reductionism

As we now realize, aesthetic questions are sticky. Even the definition of aesthetics eludes attempts for simplicity. Having alluded to the notion of a complex aesthetics, I will not attempt to be more specific about the meaning of such a concept. In his thoughtful book, *Critical Art Pedagogy: Foundations for Postmodern Art Education*, Richard Cary (1998) writes of the complexity of the word “aesthetics.”

The word “aesthetics” appears often in everyday speech. Most people use it with some degree of confidence to refer to a set of meanings revolving loosely around the idea of attractive appearance. Integrated within the art world, these various meanings center on the engaged personal experience of attraction or appeal an individual feels while encountering the art object or phenomenon semantically, intellectually and emotionally. As a result of an encounter, one decides whether the art object or phenomenon is aesthetically appealing and hence, whether it

possesses aesthetic value. We tend to think of the “amount” of aesthetic value as a function of the degree of attractiveness. (If this everyday usage seems circular, it is because it is circular.) (p. 270)

Of course, aesthetics has something to do with questions of beauty, pleasure, art, music, poetry and feeling. Furthermore, as Cary maintains, it involves the relationship of these dynamics to the analysis and discursive shaping of art and the nature of human interaction with art. Landon Beyer (2000) contends that aesthetic experiences involve a focus on both humanly produced objects of art and naturally created phenomena that possess qualities that engage us. Central to these understandings of the nature of aesthetics is the knowledge that individuals for thousands of years have debated what exactly constitutes the nature of aesthetic experience and how exactly art and aesthetic encounters should be understood. The relationship of the domain of aesthetics to other spheres of human endeavor has also been debated throughout history.

In the Western art establishment of the past few centuries, aesthetics has been closely associated with beauty viewed in terms of harmony and order. In this context beauty was seen as a universal good that was to be pursued as an end in itself. It didn't seem to occur to the guardians of the artistic tradition that in certain contexts beauty might be viewed as offensive. In times of tragedy, war or social strife, for example, an artist's dissolution of art's ties to the political, social, economic, ethical or moral domains in the pursuit of beauty might be viewed as an act of insensitivity. Traditional Western canonical perspectives on aesthetics consistently operated to limit the concerns of aesthetics, to contain it in the rarified air of high art and remove it from the lived world of social commerce.

Drawing upon Cary's notion of critical aesthetics in our effort to avoid reductionism and to define a complex aesthetics, we seek a mode of engagement with art that refuses to position aesthetics as a series of non-negotiable facts and approaches to art and artistic judgment. In a complex aesthetics the rules of artistic criticism, analysis, production and social meaning are always open, always in process of changing, expanding and growing. The expansion and growth in this context takes place in the relationship between art and life. Indeed, a complex aesthetic is interested first in life and art's relationship to it. Art in this situation alerts us to the world; John Dewey argued that aesthetic experience should be reintegrated into the normal process of living. This Deweyan reintegration process is central to a complex aesthetics as it helps us understand the

interrelationship of various domains of experience, especially the connection among art, a continuing education and life itself.

As historians of art have in the light of contemporary artistic debates generated by many of the issues referenced here reexamined the historical origins of the term aesthetics, they have uncovered some interesting insights. In early Greek philosophy, for example, many scholars located the aesthetic realm at the intersection of one's private body and its sensations with the so-called body politic. In this insight we discern an early articulation of our notion of a complex aesthetics that appreciates the complexity and social constructedness of the aesthetic realm. Indeed, as argued here, dominant culture and the power it exerts play a key role in understanding the ways aesthetic experience, high and low art and good and bad taste are defined. Aesthetics cannot be abstracted from social and political processes, reduced to form and technique, or separated from the larger dynamics of material (economic) production.

Thus, the foundation of a complex aesthetics rests on the understanding that the aesthetic is not a separate domain or an abstract realm—it is an integral aspect of life and the educational act. As such aesthetics, social awareness, ethical sensitivity and transformative action are inseparable, as artistic knowledge and experiences move us to see alternative manifestations of what could be, political critique of accepted institutional arrangements and empathy into the hurt and damage of oppression. As Karel Rose writes in this volume, such connections are central to the aesthetic experience and should be drawn on in the educational domain to connect the outside world to the classroom. Making these connections seamless is important to the creation of a rigorous and engaged pedagogy. Such an education helps students gain the intellectual and emotional insight necessary to the task of challenging racism, gender bias, class discrimination and homophobia (Brown, 1995; Heck, 1998; Kester, 1997; Beyer, 2000).

Like the surrealists, a complex aesthetician believes in the revolutionary potential of art. As art transforms political consciousness, it leads to awakened individuals who can change the world and use the social and cognitive power of difference to gain new perspectives on the human impact of existing social arrangements. But learning from the mistakes of transformative agents such as the surrealists, advocates of a complex aesthetics develop a far more sophisticated view of power and the ways it can reestablish social hierarchies even in the midst of revolutionary activity. These sociocognitive and political aspects of art and aesthetic experience are not commonly understood in United States society or education. The

assumption of a complex aesthetics that an interconnected art raises complicated issues and highlights often suppressed perspectives is often met with befuddlement by the public in general and students in particular. Why are they displaying these works? they ask. Why don't they just paint some pretty pictures (Jordan and Weedon, 1995; Becker, 2000)?

Power Aesthetics: Gaining Authority

All aesthetic activity involves the previously discussed process of making meaning—and all meaning-making processes involve power. A complex aesthetician is especially interested in the way individuals and organizations gain the authority to provide the official version of what a work of art means. In this power context a complex aesthetician explores art history in a way that gets beyond a chronological account of the works of great men. Such a transformed art historian searches for the asymmetries, contradictions and erasures of canonical history, as he or she attempts to uncover the hidden power dynamics that shaped the official story. As one interested in culture, one who is fascinated by the relationship between art and life, I promote an aesthetic power consciousness that grants art the social importance it merits.

Art history, criticism and production and aesthetics are central forces in constructing and perpetuating prevailing ways of seeing the world. Thus, the power of the artistic and aesthetic domain involves not simply art but cultural politics in general. Art shapes us; aesthetics makes us who we are. As we have seen in regard to the racial aspects of modern art, the relative power relations between different cultural groups affect the nature of art, but art contributes to the perpetuation and extension of these asymmetrical relationships. The self-representations of non-Western peoples who had been colonized by Westerners were excluded by Western agents of the artistic canon with the power to dismiss such "primitivism." Such guardians of artistic tradition validated the work of Western artists who delineated their own representations of African, Asian and indigenous exoticism, eroticism and emotion.

The point in this contest that is so important to a complex aesthetics involves the power of Western arbiters to present a hierarchy of cultures and their artistic production. Power shapes the consciousness of both those who exercise it and those who have it exercised on them. In the case of Westerners, the authority to designate good and bad art as well as cultural worth in general has created a disturbing sense of privilege and entitlement. The Western self-concept, in fact, cannot be understood without

an acknowledgment of the way Westernness has been defined in relation to non-Westernness with all the positive and negative binarisms that attend this depiction. The power relations of this cultural dualism have been so formidable that even well-intentioned artists could not escape its gravity. Works such as "The Jungle," for example, that attempted to celebrate non-Westernness ended up reifying the cultural hierarchy. No wonder the Western powerbrokers of art were not frightened by modernist avant-gardism (Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

In the context created by a critical aesthetics, it is totally understandable that the young British artists of "Sensation" should have sought innovation, disrespect for the canon and even shock. Indeed, Karel and I can understand that many of those who proclaimed the exhibit "sick and disgusting" were in part responsible for the "sick and disgusting" racism, poverty, class bias, gender bias and homelessness of contemporary life in their unwillingness to confront such travesties. Those disgusted by "Sensation" often come from the ranks of those wielding power in contemporary New York city and New York State. In the power analysis of a complex aesthetics, I would maintain that the "Sensation" artists were operating in a political context shaped by the influence of economic globalization on Britain over the last couple of decades.

These economic changes have worked to disempower many British young people by exacerbating social inequality and the rule of the free market. An examination of many of the pieces of the show reveals the sting of this political process. At the same time, however, there is no attempt to explain it, to bring together artistic, aesthetic, historical and social analysis for the purpose of providing insight into the malicious power dynamics at work. While in no way do I want to dismiss the importance of artists expressing anger and disillusionment in their work, a critical aesthetics with its power consciousness nudges artists to name oppression, power asymmetries and destructiveness. After identifying these dynamics, it is important that artists operating within the context of a critical aesthetics use their creative abilities to address these sociocultural pathologies.

I don't sense in "Sensation" a flood of compassion for the marginalized, a possibility for change in their situation or a future vision of what could be. Reading "Sensation" from the perspective of a critical aesthetician, I find the show fascinating, iconoclastic and filled with striking images. As I celebrate these dynamics, I am nevertheless left a little hollow by the celebration of the superficial, the absence of cultural and aesthetic history, the lack of social analysis and the vacuum left by the ignor-

ing of power. Does all great art demand the inclusion of such features? Probably not. But in the context of a complex aesthetics, artists do need to deal with these dynamics on some subjective level (Walsh, 1999).

Through “Sensation”’s striking images of eviscerated cows and dysfunctional families, I come back to “The Holy Virgin Mary.” It still stands out as one of the few pieces that moves us to new levels of commentary and analysis. None of these comments are meant in any way to detract from the social importance of the exhibit: the phenomenal juxtapositioning of “Sensation” with the racial climate of New York in the fall of 1999 created an unprecedented planetary alignment in art. As such, fascinating social, cultural, political, cognitive, educational and aesthetic dynamics swirled around it. Understanding all of this in the context of the commodification of contemporary artistic production, the exhibit raises questions in these domains that will occupy us for a long time.

A Complex Aesthetics and Cognition: Pursuing New Realms of Human Being

A great piece of art in the context of a complex aesthetics moves us to see anew, to move beyond common ways of viewing an entity, to make new connections, to interpret the world in new ways. What we are referencing here is cognition, the nature of our thinking. In this domain we begin to peer into even more aspects of the relationship between art/aesthetics, culture, politics, cognition and education. In these interrelationships we set out on a journey to discover the types of thinking that art makes possible. Operating in this way we make, in Maxine Greene’s words, “a new commitment to intelligence” (1988, p. 126). Consider the nature of the complex relationship that connects these divergent domains and how this new commitment to intelligence, and, I would add, social justice is achieved.

As we study art, art criticism and our notion of a complex aesthetics with its concern with art’s connection to life, we begin to enhance our intellectual abilities. In Karel and my course on “high art” and “low art” and the relations between these concepts and the “Sensation” exhibit, we worked to help students make connections in these domains that led to cognitive growth. As we discussed various ways of using, producing and judging art, we began to uncover the close connection between these dynamics and cultural context. As a result we realized that in a complex aesthetics, learning about art cannot take place outside of rigorous cultural analysis. The criteria for artistic evaluation in a particular context

can always be traced on some level to parallel currents in the larger culture.

In the “Sensation” affair, for example, we could clearly see reflections of the passionate reactions to the artistic works in the “cultural war” taking place in New York in particular and the United States in general at the end of the twentieth century. There was no way to understand “Sensation” and the spectacular reaction to it without an appreciation of the cultural struggle between those who believed our culture was being debased by filth and lowbrow aesthetic production and those who maintained that U.S. culture was retreating to Eurocentric, patriarchal and elitist perspectives valued as universal and unquestionable truths. Such insights provided students windows into not only the construction of their own consciousness but a new understanding of the political domain.

In this situation they began to gain a more textured perspective not only on the political currents of the day and where they stood in relation to them but on the nature of power and its connection to cultural politics and artistic evaluation. Art like other cultural phenomena does not exist in a power vacuum. It, like other artifacts, is shaped by dominant and subordinate forms of power and gains its meanings only in this political context. Students began to discern the various ways power relations shaped the meanings “Sensation” assumed in the larger society. An art education that understands these aesthetic, cultural and political interrelationships can never be the same. It can never retreat to slide shows of canonical works with a unidirectional, decontextualized delineation of what a particular work means to students—students who, by the way, simply memorize such data and spit it back to the teacher on an “objective” test.

This, of course, is not the artful teaching that Karel and I are writing about. Such canonical imposition stupidifies rather than enlightens, closes off rather than opens up possibilities and undermines any larger commitment to intelligence. Indeed, this commitment to intelligence involves the cognitive dimension of our constellation of interconnections—art/aesthetics, culture, politics, education and cognition. It is on this cognitive dynamic that we now focus our attention. A basic cognitive dimension of art involves the ability of aesthetic experience to empower individuals to attend to that which was previously missed. In this manner individuals become cognizant of those elements and especially those relationships that elude everyday perceptions. As their eyes, ears, modes of analysis, intuitions, ways of seeing are attuned to the unseen, students and teachers gain a thicker view of the world and a deeper understanding of themselves (Cary, 1998; Greene, 1988).

In my own cognitive experience I was always infatuated by the consciousness-expanding power of surrealist art. In the surrealist context, art provided glimpses of alternative rationalities more like the cognitive processes of a dream experience than formal analysis. Instead of proceeding by linear argument derived from empirical facts or logical principles, surrealist cognition employed metaphorical modes of analogy that operated to recast experience in an emotional/affective context. In this manner new ways of conceiving and interpreting scholarly concepts and everyday life were constructed that in my case directly led to new articulations of cognitive theory. See my work on postformalism (Kincheloe, 1993; Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1993; Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins, 1999; Kincheloe, Steinberg and Hinchey, 1999; Kincheloe, Steinberg and Villaverde, 1999).

Addressing the Complexity: Surrealist Insights and a Cubist Cognition

Viewing scholarly concepts and everyday life from the vantage point of surrealist art allows us to take the numbingly familiar and make it strange. In its new strangeness we begin to discover what was previously not present to our perception. Such insights recast the meaning of the experience in a new light. One of the reasons we use the term *complex*, as in a complex aesthetics, is that the more we understand about the world, the more complex it appears to be. In this recognition of complexity we begin to see multiple causations and the possibility of differing vantage points from which to view a phenomenon. It is extremely important to note at this juncture that the context from which one observes an entity shapes what he or she sees. The set of assumptions or the system of meaning making the observer consciously or unconsciously employs shapes the observation.

This assertion is not some esoteric, academic point—it shapes art, art criticism, artistic production, art education, social analysis and political perspectives. Acting upon this understanding, advocates of a complex aesthetics realize that art, aesthetic theory, cultural artifacts and the art curriculum hold more within them to be analyzed than first impressions sometimes reveal. In this sense different frames of reference produce multiple interpretations and multiple realities. The mundane, the everyday and the aesthetic dimension are multiplex and continuously unfolding—while this is taking place, human interpretation is simultaneously constructing and reconstructing their meaning. This is a complex situation, and all of us need to understand it as such (Lincoln and Guba, 1985;

Denzin and Lincoln, 2000; Briggs and Peat, 1989; Slaughter, 1989; Kincheloe, 2001).

A complex aesthetics promotes a spatial distancing from reality that allows an observer diverse frames of reference. The distancing may range from the extremely distant like astronauts looking at the earth from the moon, to the extremely close like Georgia O'Keeffe viewing a flower. At the same time, a complex aesthetician values the intimacy of an emotional connectedness that allows empathetic passion to draw knower and known together. In the multiplex, complex aesthetic view of reality, Western modernist linearity often gives way to simultaneity, as texts become a kaleidoscope of images filled with signs, symbols and signifiers to be decoded and interpreted. William Carlos Williams illustrated an understanding of such complexity in the early twentieth century as he depicted multiple, simultaneous images and frames of reference in his poetry. Williams attempted to poetically interpret Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, with its simultaneous, overlapping representations serving as a model for what a complex aesthetician might label a cubist cognition.

Teachers who pursue the artful teaching that Karel Rose describes understand these concepts. Such educators work to extend their students' cognitive abilities, as they create situations where students come to view the world and disciplinary knowledge from as many frames of reference as possible. In a sense the single photograph of Cartesian thinking is replaced by the multiple angles of the holographic photograph. Energized by this cubist cognition, teachers informed by a complex aesthetics come to understand that the models of teaching they have been taught, the definitions of inquiry with which they have been supplied, the angle from which they have been instructed to view intelligence, the modes of learning that shape what they perceive to be sophisticated thinking and the ways that art has been represented to them, all reflect a particular vantage point in the web of reality.

Like reality itself, schools and classrooms are complex matrices of interactions, codes and signifiers in which both students and teachers are interlaced. Just as a complex aesthetics asserts that there is no single, privileged way to see the world, there is no one way of representing the world artistically, no one way of teaching art, no one way of writing art history. Once teachers escape the entrapment of the guardians of art and their monocultural, one-truth way of seeing, they come to value and thus pursue new frames of reference in regard to their students, classrooms and workplaces. In this cubist spirit, teachers begin to look at lessons from the

perspectives of individuals from different race, class, gender and sexual orientations. They study the perspectives their African American, Latino, white, poor and wealthy students bring to their classrooms. They are dedicated to the search for new perspectives.

Drawing upon a complex aesthetics in this cognitive and pedagogical pursuit, these educators, like liberation theologians in Latin America, make no apology for seeking the viewpoints, insights and sensitivities of the marginalized. The way to see from a perspective differing from that of the guardians involves exploring an institution such as Western art from the vantage point of those who have been marginalized by it. In such a process subjugated knowledges once again emerge allowing teachers to gain the cognitive power of empathy—a power that enables them to take pictures of reality from different vantage points. The intersection of the vantage points allows for a form of analysis that moves beyond the isolated, decontextualized and fragmented analysis of modernist reductionism.

Cognitively empowered by these multiplex perspectives, complexity-sensitive educators seek a multicultural dialogue between Eastern cultures and Western cultures, a conversation between the relatively wealthy Northern cultures and the impoverished Southern cultures and an intracultural interchange among a variety of subcultures. In this way, forms of knowing, representing and making meaning that have been excluded by the modernist West move us to new vantage points and unexplored planetary perspectives. Understandings derived from the perspective of the excluded or the “culturally different” allow for an appreciation of the nature of justice, the invisibility of the process of oppression, the power of difference and the insight to be gained from a recognition of divergent cultural uses of art that highlight both our social construction as individuals and the limitations of monocultural ways of meaning making (Dobrin, 1987; Mandell, 1987; Talbot, 1986, 1991; Welch, 1991; Bohm and Peat, 1987; O’Sullivan, 1999; Kincheloe, Steinberg and Hinchey, 1999).

Taking advantage of these complex ways of seeing, a whole new world is opened to us. As cognitive cubists, teachers, students, artists, art critics and cultural analysts all come to understand that there always multiple perspectives. No conversation is over, no discipline totally complete. The domain of art is best equipped to teach this concept, as it exposes new dimensions of meaning, new forms of logic unrecognized by the sleep-walking dominant culture. As a cognitive wake-up call, art can challenge what Herbert Marcuse (1955) called “the prevailing principle of reason” (p. 185). In this context we come to realize that art and other aesthetic

production provide an alternate epistemology, a way of knowing that moves beyond declarative forms of knowledge.

Literary texts, drama, music, dance, sculpture and painting empower individuals to see, hear and feel beyond the surface level of sight and sound. These aesthetic forms can alert individuals to the one-dimensional profiles of the world promoted by reductionistic researchers and art critics. Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory was acutely aware of this cognitive dimension of art and linked it to what he called a critical politics. Art assumes its liberating value, he wrote, when it is viewed in light of specific historical conditions. Thus, for Marcuse aesthetic transcendence of repressive social and cultural reality is a deliberate political act that identifies the object of art with the repressive social situation to be transcended. This, of course, is what I was attempting as we explored the racial dynamics of modernist avant-garde art and the ideological forces operating in that context.

Following Marcuse's arguments and the sociopolitical concerns of a complex aesthetics does not mean the promotion of art as propaganda for a particular point of view. This would be a misguided and disastrous interpretation of the ideas promoted here. Engaging in a critical aesthetics does not mean following a blueprint for sociopolitical action—instead it implies the opposite. It does seek justice but is always attuned to new perspectives on what this might mean and how the well-intentioned pursuit of justice may unintentionally oppress particular groups and individuals. To lessen these possibilities a complex aesthetics promotes a rigorous self-reflection and self-criticism. It is obsessively concerned with the ways our consciousness is constructed and our worldviews are formed and how these dynamics shape our interactions.

Thus, a complex aesthetics embraces an art and artistic analysis and criticism that illuminates the problematic, as it constructs new concepts, new angles from which to view the world. In this way, art with its producers, critics, cultural analysts, historians and educators gives birth to new meanings, as it breaks through the surface to explore the submerged social, political and aesthetic relationships that shape events. When it takes such dynamics seriously, education and the artful teaching that emerges in this context are characterized by acts of defamiliarization. An education grounded on a complex aesthetics seeks not only to defamiliarize the commonsense worlds of students but to create situations where student experience can be used to defamiliarize the world of schooling.

In this form of education educators employ artistic concerns with the “now” to defamiliarize the modernist school's unfortunate tendency to

functionalize the role of instruction and to join with students to seek pleasurable ways of remaking the institution in line with a respect for intelligence. Overcoming the educational tyranny of an exclusive bourgeois reliance on delayed gratification and the mistrust of pleasure that accompanies it, teachers operating in the zone of complexity promote cognitive abilities unbowed by the mystifying power of the given. Emerging from this playful haughtiness is the realization that the arts can promote a form of teaching that requires interpretation and a form of thinking that seeks new experiences that facilitate interpretation. Such interpretation, Maxine Greene (1988) writes, exposes the forces that suppress “the spheres of freedom to which education might some day attend” (p. 130) (Bronner, 1988; Adler, 1991; Kincheloe, 2001).

Thus, cognitive cubism produces a multidimensional form of knowledge that is always open to new interpretations in its hermeneutical connection to larger processes. Such knowledge can never be final because it cannot control the differing contexts within which it will be encountered. In this absence of interpretive closure a complex aesthetics moves understanding away from reductionism into a more complex realm. This cognitive vis-à-vis hermeneutic dynamic reflects Karel Rose’s concern with multiple ways of knowing and their ability to help students appreciate their own imaginations, creativities and intelligences. When we rely on particular ways of knowing usually associated with modernist linearity and positivism, teachers and art teachers in particular, operate in a manner that teaches students—particularly those who see the previously unseen—that they are capable.

The guardians of tradition both in the aesthetic and the cognitive domains are uncomfortable with admitting outsiders into the community of the “cultured” or the fraternity of the “intelligent.” This multiple-ways-of-knowing idea is dangerous, they argue, because such openness is the first step down the dangerous road to a loss of standards. The only cognitive and educational alternative to this subversion of standards, the guardians maintain, is a unyielding protection of official ways of seeing and the certified canon of “true art.” In this context, those of us who point to the boundaries and limitations of Western logical thought and its tendency for domination, ethnocentric arrogance and brutality are often faced with the anger and revenge of the guardians. Our call in our complex aesthetics to not only include previously marginalized art and its ways of seeing in the aesthetic canon but to bring these aesthetic/cognitive/political/educational perspectives to the effort to rethink the nature of aesthetics has not been warmly received (Heck, 1998).

Despite the mainstream resistance to these concerns, a complex aesthetics continues to promote art and modes of cognition that are: (1) capable of identifying ideological inscriptions in aesthetic criticism, the artistic canon and other cultural forms; and (2) able and willing to challenge them. In the context of the “Sensation” conflict the highly sophisticated and urbane art community was unable to argue the point to Mayor Giuliani and other advocates of censorship that an important aspect of artistic production in a democratic society involves social, cultural and political critique. Few in the art world could articulate the importance of protecting the work of artists whose perspectives on the social order contribute to our cognitive, political, ethical and aesthetic development.

Some individuals did argue for artistic freedom from censorship—obviously an extremely important issue. But in this particular situation, such an argument did not address the variety of issues raised by the reactions to “Sensation.” What was at stake was the cognitive and political role of art in confronting and changing human consciousness (Becker, 2000). As art breaks through parameters of expectation and reveals new ways of seeing and thinking, it performs a unique and valuable role in a democratic society. Once this process is closed off and limited to only what is “acceptable” to particular forms of dominant power, another thread is removed from the democratic tapestry; another perspective is erased from our multiple ways of seeing. The human state of being is reduced.

A Complex Aesthetics and Social Action: From the Cognitive into the Political

Art is dangerous—unregulated, it is subversive to the status quo. It tends to confront thoughtlessness and expose ignorance. When art is banished from the curriculum as a frill or censored because of its insult to “the things we hold dear,” we lose a valuable agent of moral, social, cognitive, political and educational change. The cognitive change initiated by art in a complex aesthetics is an initial step in a larger process of sociopolitical action. In our concept of a complex aesthetics we cannot simply be spectators in the cultural and artistic realms who sit back and let the world come to us. We must gain the ability—art educators must teach the ability—to translate our aesthetically generated artistic, social, political, cultural, psychological and educational knowledge into ethical action.

The point is that as we connect the cognitive to the political in the context of a complex aesthetics, we engage in personal growth and sociopolitical change. As a teacher and a scholar interested in the cultural realm in relation to the political, cognitive and educational domains, I am fascinated with art's ability to transmit alternative views of the world and self, values and ethical insights. A complex aesthetic carefully attends to the specifics of this process and uses the sensitivities gained in its larger project. Such sensitivities and their cultivation rest at the heart of a democratic politics, higher-order thinking and a rigorous progressive education. With them we can better trace the forces that have shaped our consciousness and in the process become both more self-directed and connected to our peers.

Indeed, a complex aesthetics is interested in the way art connects us to the world. It rejects an art that removes us from interaction with the world and sequesters us in the elitist shelter of high art and elite culture with all the condescension toward the unwashed that this entails. As we are connected to the world in a complex aesthetics, we gain the opportunity to raise questions about those perspectives that are "certified"—a cognitive and political act that is prerequisite to social action. Like many before us, including members of traditional African cultures, we believe that works of art are much more than pictures, sculptures and other *objects*—they possess a special power, if not magical then at least sacred, that can not only connect us to the world and each other but produce a better, smarter, more progressive society (Dunn, 1998; Heck, 1998; Beyer, 2000; Greene, 1988; Jordan and Weedon, 1995).

Thus, we cannot separate the transformation of consciousness from the political domain. In much of my previous work I have referred to the effort to politicize cognition, that is, to expose the fact that the way we describe and act on our understanding of cognition always has political consequences (Kincheloe and Steinberg, 1993; Kincheloe, Steinberg and Villaverde, 1999; Kincheloe, Steinberg and Tippins, 1999). Thus, the way art enhances our cognitive ability is a political function—though it is rarely recognized as such. When art challenges the modernist hyperrationalism and the positivist epistemology that supports it, it is directly challenging existing power relations in the United States in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Without such challenges, public conversation ceases; the political realm atrophies—as it already has in this society (Heck, 1998).

In this book, Karel Rose implores us to take advantage of the ability of aesthetics "to open new vistas, blur traditional boundaries and reach

out to new definitions.” The critical aesthetics referenced here requires intercultural conversations in art as a catalyst for Rose’s vision. As we have explored the connections between art, culture, politics, cognition and education, we used racial examples involving the whiteness of the Western art establishment vis-à-vis the nonwhite outsiders both within the United States and other Western societies and African, Asian and indigenous artists. One of the quickest and most important ways to open new vistas, blur traditional boundaries and reach out to new definitions, I contend, involves social action that institutes full racial and ethnic participation in the various dimensions of artistic work.

In addition to the intrinsic justice of such social action the power of difference and the consciousness it creates would benefit everyone. Race, racism, ethnicity and ethnic bias would no longer be viewed as problems of so-called people of color but the responsibility of everyone. Focusing on anti-racism and anti-ethnic bias, a critical aesthetics would make art a primary force in the quest for just multicultural societies. Like other cultural institutions in the United States, the art establishment has had great difficulty coming to terms with the nation’s changing racial composition. We could clearly see this dynamic at work at the Brooklyn Museum, as the “Sensation” controversy began to unfold. How much better informed we are to read “Sensation” after grappling with the questions raised in the various chapters here. How much better equipped we are to recognize the multiple dimensions of the power of art in the cultural, political, cognitive and educational domains. In this context art realizes its potential as it steps boldly into the social arena.

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