

Truth and Community: Reality Construction in the Visual Arts

John White

In his essay, "Are philosophical questions insoluble?"¹ Alstair MacIntyre proposes that some philosophers need to justify the question "Why teach philosophy?" to the general population. He claims that although philosophy does give "excellent training in lucid writing, in analytic skills and in problem solving" this alone is not justification. The same was said to be true of Latin and that certainly has been expunged from our classrooms. Rather, MacIntyre suggests that we look to the question "Why teach philosophy?" and note that it, in itself, is a philosophical question and, furthermore, that such questions form an ongoing and interactive part of our personal and social consciousness. As such, there is much to be gained from learning from those who deal with philosophical questions well, ie philosophers and their texts.

Similarly, we can employ much the same rationale for the study of art. Images and the discussions that take place in relationship to them, form an on going and interactive part of our lives. As with philosophy, the most exhaustive and well developed examples of issues related to images intersect and are developed in works of art and the texts that we associate with them. That is, by people who make and talk about art well.

This dissertation will not use as a rationale for art education the development of specific skills, such as eye-hand coordination, creativity, visual memory, problem solving, lucid writing, analytic skills, although such skills will be developed in any well constructed art education program. This document will assert that an essential goal of art education is the development of a population which has the tools to grasp and recontextualize a complex and resonant image world. Works of art, as meaning structures, provide us with multidimensional maps for the exploration of this complex and interactive world of thought.

Our understandings of these maps, our resonant recontextualization of our image encounters, and the consciousness of the terrain that they reference expand as we attempt to either reframe (construct a theoretical envelope) or disfigure (deconstruct or unfold a meaning gap) our world. In either case, closing the gap or opening it up, the visual arts, its texts and its objects, map the terms of our multi-faceted and inter-subjective identities.

For the purposes of this paper, both works of art and writings about art will be viewed as texts² associated with the term "art". Educational pedagogy and curricula related to these texts will be viewed as primary components associated with our definition of the term art, not transparent

vehicles used to uncover preexistent and objectified interpretations of art and its objects. As such, I will maintain that art education plays an active role in the construction of art experiences and that, as such, the world of art and the world of art education are inextricably linked.

In the postmodern, the differences of one term to another are central to the formation of any term's identity. To know the meaning of any term in such an environment is to know the historical contingencies within which that term has been lodged. The central terms that will be investigated in this dissertation will be works of art and the differences that conspire to develop them. As texts, these objects will be seen to derive value from the greater cultures from which they come and from which they are interpreted. Below are a list of questions that will be explored in an effort to construct a theoretical foundation within which a postmodern art education can take shape.

1. What implications do theories of art based on poststructuralist semiotics hold for our understandings of works of art?

While we can all be reasonably assured that there is an objective world which exists outside our particular ways of knowing, our intellectual access to such a space can never be outside of systems of representation. Some strains of structuralism attempted to lodge forms of representation within universal principles that were trans cultural. These theories claimed that we had different forms of representation that were hard wired into our consciousness. In such a conception our brains had slots into which the environment inserted particular localized versions or evidence. This was an intellectual world in which phallic symbols, archetypes and linguistic syntax were all decontextualized compartments waiting for a culture's initiation rituals to fill the voids.

Poststructuralism, in contrast, necessitates a theoretical foundation in which any theory of representation which reduces our understandings to a particular decontextualized representation is suspect. In this construct, symbols do not hold fixed referents but rather oscillate in a contingent field of connotations with ever evolving associations and meanings. It is a space which sees any term as knowable only through its relationships with other terms and for any text to be knowable only through its relationship to other texts. Nelson Goodman's "worldmaking" and Richard Rorty's "vocabularies" both speak to this point. Their positions and terminology will be employed to address this issue.

Semiotics offers a way of speaking about representation that is specifically concerned with the relationships that occur as we make meaning. In as much as art can be seen as a vehicle through which we generate and articulate cultural knowledge, viewing art as a function of a system of sign relationships allows us to look at how texts mean and to what terms these texts refer. Poststructuralism affords our investigation greater latitude in

mapping meanings shift as terms move into alternative historical and cultural contexts.

Our present condition, in which representations are continually subjected to shifting contexts, requires a more fully developed and articulated construction of how representation functions. This tool, semiotics, will provide the dissertation and art education a language with which to speak about representation. Representation is important to speak of in that works of art, as texts, are themselves embodied representations. The study of how they mean and what their meanings are is well within the range of what semiotics attempts to investigate.

While semiotics provides us with a way of speaking about representation, it, as a discipline, does not have a particular grounding, a particular conception of truth which it envisions as reality. Semiotics is merely the study of signs, not a particular theory of how we come to understandings as to how these signs mean. Consequently, it is appropriate to make explicit that theory of meaning which is applicable to the semiotic perspective which this dissertation implicitly endorses.

2. What implications do theories of meaning based upon a pragmatic philosophy hold for our understanding of works of art?

Theories of truth traditionally as based on either correspondence, coherence or belief. However, American philosophical traditions from James and Peirce, through Dewey to Rorty, West and Shusterman have proposed an alternative perspective, the pragmatic. Meaning in pragmatism is a deeply contextual account of the use to which any term is placed. Although use here is the operative concept, pragmatism should not be confused with utilitarianism with its instrumentalist and closed ended view of how terms function. Pragmatism rather is dependent upon two driving conditions. First, pragmatism states that any meaning is deeply imbedded in the historical context of that term or text. Second, pragmatism states that the meaning of any enactment is dependent upon the future contingencies and uses within which that term or text is to come to be imbedded. Pragmatism suggests that we allow ourselves the flexibility to see that our intentions toward our encounters will yield to new meanings which the original intentions could not have perceived. The goal of a pragmatic philosophy would consequently be to encourage the development of a theoretical foundation that would allow for changes in meaning to occur with the acquisition of unforeseeable framing experiences.

A radical pragmatism opens up an intellectual belief space or theoretical foundation which I believe can best accommodate an assumption that forms of meaning are contextually based. In the first place, "use" in pragmatism is contingent upon those histories which are brought to a text, be it the author's or the reader's. Second, in the reading of the text meanings are to emerge in the wake of unforeseeable future uses by unforeseen agents.

While we lose a sense of a firm and unshakable grounding in this process, we are granted a dynamic which acknowledges the intersubjectivity of our interpretations and the validity of our own contextualized perspectives. It in no way diminishes the relationships that the author intends, in fact pragmatism's historical component, like post structuralism's, maintains the necessity that this knowledge be obtained.

Pragmatism offers a grounding which has its contextual roots in an American history. The promise of such an attribute is not to engage in a form of xenophobia, but rather to simply maintain that contextual contingencies are as applicable to philosophical issues as they are to all forms of inquiry. The contingencies of pragmatism have parallels in continental philosophy, a reasonable outcome considering the interdependency of our cultures.

Pragmatism provides us with an open concept of meaning as we proceed into an evolving and indeterminate future. At the same time, meaning is contextualized within the histories that diverse agents bring to our experiences. In this paper, I will maintain that pragmatism provides a theory of truth as a foundation for this inquiry. In this process I will investigate how such a perspective will open up a theoretical position which will alter the way in which art objects, art texts and art education might develop. Part of this opening will explore the possibility that the use of the term "art" in art education may develop a specific contextual dynamic.

3. Is truth in art a viable concept? How does it impact upon our conception of art and art education?

The role that art plays in society, specifically in terms of our intellectual history, has traditionally be a central topic in philosophy. Plato gave the arts a negative rating both in terms of their function as a third order truth and as a distorted lens of partial truths. Postmodernism in its concerns for contextualization has called into question the trans historical and universal in all forms of knowing. Truth in postmodern thought, as Goodman³ so aptly puts it, is contingent upon the framing context within which it sits.

In education, the issue of truth needs to be placed as a central feature to our concern for what should be taught. Activities which afford us access to the truths that our society acknowledges would be activities which would be worthwhile to teach. If the arts, and art education, cannot make a claim that they provide a unique frame within which to experience truth or a search for truth then their function in the school could be seen to be superfluous.

As in Plato's era, contemporary versions of truth have defined an intellectual space which sees the arts as second to another more revealing and direct form of knowledge. In our case, that direct form is to be found in the sciences and in logic. Goodman suggests the truths that are to be found in truth statements such as "It is 80 degrees outside today." are only one of the many forms of truth under which we operate.

The purpose in answering the question of artistic truth will be to provide for an intellectual space which will acknowledge the strength of the arts in the formation of our realities. As such, it will be argued that the acquisition of a knowledge of interpretive structures that apply to the arts and an acquisition of the skills to interpret texts related to the arts will be crucial for the student of contemporary life and thought.

4. How might works of art, as symbols which make reference, interact with meaning structures from other domains?

In a paradigm in which the world is seen as comprised of particulars which are unique essences, each form has its own parameters and can be isolated and known in and apart from other forms. This was the ideal world of Plato as it was also the world of a positivist philosophy of science. In such a world, works of art, processes in art, individual artists etc. could all be envisioned as having unique properties which were the timeless locations of the unique particulars which inhabited the world. These positions provided a grounding for initiatives in art which included the searches for such diverse loci of truth as mimetic forms, pure form, the creative self, laws of design, etc. In this view, art could be isolated into categories which were thought to be inclusive taxonomies. For example, the academic academy divides instruction into such fields as painting, drawing, sculpture, etc. from which unique experiences are to be gained from investigations into these areas.

Postmodern thought explicitly seeks to avoid any reductive theory, whether it lies in an epistemology or ontology. In place of any a priori structure, postmodern thought suggests an ecology of knowledge which is dependent upon an inter subjectivity of all intellectual activity. Works of art, as texts, derive and contribute ideas and values from our interpretations of their culture of origin.

There are two implications to this proposition. The first implication is that the interpretation and production of art proceeds from understandings that are not distinct from but are rather directly related to other areas of thought existent within a culture. Because of this, linkages between visual art and other fields of study and ways of being in the world are not a tangential concern to the arts but rather are fundamental to the discipline. Part of this chapter consequently will look to possible implications of these relationships.

Second, the understanding and production of texts related to the arts is dependent upon an acknowledgement of the range of ways of knowing both within any given student and between different students and different cultural groupings. The questions that come out have to do with how we might come to speak of possible relationships between ways of knowing. How might the practices and theories of one cultural community come to be known by another group? How might we come to avoid reductionist views and allow ourselves to experience the world through alternative intellectual positions?

Such an understanding is fundamental to an educational agenda which recognizes the intellectual history that any student brings to a situation. Our access to an understanding of the student's intellectual history is fundamental to our ability to provide opportunities for that student to develop and integrate additional language strategies into her or his collection of intellectual tools.

5. How might Danto's premise, that art is an embodiment of an idea, the grasping of which is like knowing a person, help us to generate a conception of art and art education?

When we understand meaning to function within the context of a correspondence theory of truth, we understand the search for meaning to be the discovery of a preexistent reality. In such a context, the role of education is to collect and identify true correspondence. In such a belief system the student's authorship becomes a search for a determinate feature or meanings within a text.

Danto's aesthetic suggests that a work of art, as any term, is grounded in its history. In addition, however, Danto maintains that the work of art is in conversation with those texts that have preceded it and, as such, it recontextualizes the meaning of the term "art" and reconstructs our interpretations of the histories from which it developed. The grasping of art consequently is a reflective act.

This conception of art will be shown to have two fundamental consequences for art education. The first consequence is that works of art will to be viewed as embodied and active frames through which previous texts are interpreted. Works of art assume, as texts, an interpretive posture and as such become a form of critical inquiry positioned to recontextualize history from within alternative cultural spaces. Art education, in order to teach art within this context, must address a view which sees art as the result of acts of a shared consciousness which is developing as we share our reframing experiences. In addition, works of art and their interpretations can disfigure or unwrap meaning structures that have functioned unnoticed within works.

The second consequence of Danto's position is that our contemporary recontextualization of the term "art", through embodiment, exemplifies the dense contingencies within which we apprehend our world. Danto's conception is the neo-Hegelian position that art is the embodiment of an idea and that that unit (embodiment/idea) is to be inextricably linked to the belief systems of a culture if it is to come to be valued as art. The consequence of this aspect of Danto's position is that our reframings must be symbolic expressions which arise from out of cultural spaces within which we dwell⁴. To know works of art is to know the consciousness of the terms of their production. The consequence for art education is that student reframings must attend to the belief systems within which they function.

All student recontextualizations must attend to their own diverse cultural contingencies.

6. What might a conception of art education, which embraces the emergence of consciousness as a viable goal, need to address in order to succeed?

The "art" that we have seen being developed in art education has changed considerably over the years. Some of these programs came to produce what was to be labelled "school art". This term refers to a course of study within which particular assignments were delineated and student products in the form of art objects were produced. Value was placed on the degree of craft or inventiveness that the student produced within the constraints of the project.

While the label "school arts" may now present us with an unsavory taste it is nevertheless a reasonable position to assume that "art" in public education, because of the particular context within which it is employed, will take a shape made unique through that context. The problem consequently may not be that "school art" is an inappropriate category, although it does assume a homogeneity of educational pedagogy, the problem may be that the activities to which this term is directed are misguided or inappropriate interpretations of what art education should be. Rather than the creation of programs which value a unified vision, art education must become conversant in a language that sees works of art as the embodiment of parialities, of the relationship of difference.

The present educational environment includes two major schools of thought. Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) proposes that the study of art should take its structure from higher education and look to those disciplines which study art for guidance. Consequently, DBAE has looked to Fine Arts, Philosophy, Art History and Art Criticism for a model of what a study of art should entail. The other major player in the development of educational reform is Harvard's Project Zero and the Arts Propel project. Arts Propel takes a developmental approach, which stresses studio production and personal research. While Arts Propel may appear to be more open because of the individual research, its structure implicitly and explicitly rewards a particular view of art based upon individual creativity. DBAE on the other hand, while appearing to be more top down, in fact has a potentially infinite range of possibilities depending on developments within the disciplines.

DBAE has managed to break the hold that an "art for art's sake" aesthetic had upon the study and production of art, however it is a questionable assumption that art is only looked at through these four disciplines. In recent years we have seen considerable work being done by anthropologists, sociologists, etc. From this perspective, it would make more sense to continue the work that the pioneers of DBAE have developed but to take Victor Burgin's lead and condense all investigations of art into the single

realm of interpretation⁵. The subjective perspectives through which we apply our interpretations, such as historical, critical, philosophical, Euro-American female, etc., as well as the forms of our interpretive acts, such as writing, painting, photographs, would all contribute to the dimensions of our conversation which address such questions as "What is art?", "How do we value it?" and "What does it mean?". Interpretation in this context is a form of authorship in which the speaker is engaged in a conversation with the histories that converge around the subject of art.

In addition, this project cannot be decontextualized from the educational setting within which it sits. This setting includes the presumptions that we hold about the goals of public education as well applicability to the lives of the people involved. Taking the lead from Danto's notion that art is an embodiment of the ideals of a culture or subculture and knowing works of art is a reflective act, this dissertation will support the claim that "school art" should be comprised of interpretive acts which recontextualize the historical meanings, including values and ideas, that have colluded to define the term "art" and its associated texts. The goal of such a program would be to develop an emergent space in which an empowered electorate whose image consciousness could be used to reconstruct the cultural signs which come and are brought to bear upon their lives.

Footnotes

¹MacIntyre, A. (1993) in Cook, P ed., (1993) **Philosophical imagination and cultural history: Approaching historical traditions**, Durham: Duke University Press.

²Texts will be used here in the broad semiotic sense rather than the narrow verbal sense. Any sign will be referred to as a text. In a similar manner, "language", "vocabulary", etc. will be used metaphorically to refer to visual imagery. It will not be the purpose of this dissertation to identify the degree to which visual art is to be treated as a language. Here the similarity that is to be recognized is in the degree to which both verbal and visual forms are forms of signification.

³Goodman, N., (1978), **Ways of worldmaking**, Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett.

⁴Pragmatism would maintain however that interpretations as to the veracity of these reframings would be determined in an indefinite future.

⁵Burgin, V. (1986), **The end of art theory**, Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International. Burgin speaks to the need to condense aesthetics, history and criticism into critical theory.

References

- Alpers, S. (1983). **The art of describing: Dutch art of the seventeenth century**. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Barthes, R. (1964). **Elements of semiology**. New York: Noonday Press.
- Benjamin, A. (1991). **Art, mimesis and the avant-garde**. London: Routledge.
- Bryson, N. (1991). **Visual theory: Painting and interpretation**. New York: Harper Collins Publishers.
- Buchler, J. (1955). **Philosophical writing of Peirce**. New York: Dover Publications.
- Burgin, V. (1986). **The end of art theory**. Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International.
- Danto, A. (1981). **The transfiguration of the commonplace**. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Dewey, J. (1989). **Art as experience** (Vol. 10). Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press. (Original work published 1934)
- Dickie, G., Sclanfani, R. & Roblin, R. (1989). **Aesthetics: A critical anthology**. New York: St. Martin's Press
- Eco, U. (1992). **Interpretation and overinterpretation**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Eco, U. (1990). **The limits of interpretation**. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Freedberg, D. (1989). **The power of images**. Chicago: U. of Chicago Press.
- Gilmour, J. (1990). **Fire on earth**. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Giroux, H. A. (1990). **Postmodernism, feminism and cultural politics**. Albany: State University of New York.
- Goodman, N. (1976). **Languages of art**. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett.
- Goodman, N. (1978). **Ways of worldmaking**. Indianapolis, Indiana: Hackett.
- Hausman, C. (1989). **Metaphor and art**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Hesse, M. & Arbib, M. (1986). **Construction of reality**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hilary, D., Bohman, J., & Shusterman, R. (1991). **The interpretive turn: Philosophy, science, culture**. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Lakoff, G. (1987). **Women, fire, and dangerous things: What categories reveal about the mind**. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- MacIntyre, A. (1990). **Three rival versions of morality**. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press.
- O'Brien, M. & Little, C. (1990). **Reimaging America: The arts of social change**. Philadelphia: New Society Publishers.
- Rorty, R. (1989). **Contingency, irony and solidarity**. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rorty, R. (1989). **Philosophy and the mirror of nature**. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Shusterman, R. (1992). **Pragmatic aesthetics**. Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers Inc.