Interpreting Gender and Visual Culture in Art Classrooms

Kerry Freedman
University of Minnesota

The purpose of this paper is to present gender issues in the context of a broad definition of art education that includes many types of visual culture and a social reconstruction of the school subject. Specifically, the paper focuses on three gender issues: (a) the representation of females in visual culture; (b) females as respondents to visual culture; and (c) the gendered characteristics of cultural production by students. The foundational importance of presenting cultural context and connections of visual culture to identity are also discussed in relation to learning. The paper concludes with five recommendations for practice.

That's it, it's a problem of communication, i.e. translation. No doubt they do have a soul, but of a type different from ours, speak a language, but a bodily language (even their words are like things), they hear someone, but not us. We have to establish what they want. We record them every which way, like extraterrestrial beings. And, you'll see, we shall decipher their idiom, they'll end up by talking to us. They will want to know, like we do. They will enter our community. There will be no more hysterics. (Lyotard, 1991, p. 130-131)

Issues concerning the role of women in art and art education have been debated for generations and received particular attention from art educators in the last decade or so (e.g. Collins & Sandell, 1984; Stankiewicz & Zimmerman, 1985; Zimmerman & Stankiewicz, 1982). The debate in education has focused largely on the inclusion of women artists in the study of art history and the history of art education. Typically, the topic of women in art history has been addressed in education in terms of two main considerations: whether the work of women in fine art styles should be considered fine art, and whether women's creation of objects not previously considered fine art (such as needlework) should be considered part of art history. The focus of the gender debate on the inclusion of women artists in art education has resulted in the addition to the curriculum of some women fine artists and craft objects traditionally made by women. This is a positive step; but only a first step.

Lyotard’s statement above points to one of the reasons that much work remains to be done. His tongue-in-cheek recounting of men’s attitudes about the study of women illustrates a dilemma in the accomplishment of gender equity in scholarship. The dilemma concerns the transformation of gendered identities and forms of production as a result of the study of women, representations of women, and women’s education. Lyotard suggests that men intended to draw women into their professional communities and, in the process, re-create women to be more like men. Regardless of whether this re-creation was intended by men and whether women actually re-created themselves, a trans-
formation of gender has occurred, and the collective experience of women has changed as a result. For example, women artists have begun to be written into art history, but often appear as if injected into a story about “great men.” When women artists are included in mainstream art history texts, they are presented in terms of male models. The models used for male artists in art history tend to represent men as, for example, independent to the point of social isolation, individualistic to the extent of having a unique type of innate genius, and so progressive that they are able to separate themselves from their own history. Such a handling of women in art may be considered a positive development because its authors claim for women the male myths of independence and uniqueness. However, this representation reinforces an illusion about male artists and creates a new one about women. These models focus on individual personalities, rather than the social dynamics of creative communities, and on people and objects isolated from their cultural contexts. The appropriation of such mythical qualities of male artistic production and appreciation have resulted in piecemeal and superficial representations of women in mainstream texts because women typically do not fit into these models.

In this paper, I will argue that to deal effectively with the issue of gender in art education requires attention to the relationships that exist between student gender identity and visual culture. I use the phrase visual culture to refer to forms of human production that function as manifest images. Teaching visual culture involves a curriculum that encompasses the peculiar sociopolitical, as well as the sensory, formal, and material characteristics and effects of fine art, and goes beyond fine art to include the expressive foundations and implications of multicultural and mainstream artifacts; advertising and other mass media imagery; and designed objects, arrangements, and environments. Such a definition of art education is not new. It has a long history and some art educators, such as Chapman (1978), Feldman (1970), Lanier (1980), and McFee and Degge (1980), have argued extensively for the inclusion of such content in art education. As well as a more inclusive content, requiring a broad conceptualization of aesthetics, teaching visual culture involves a social reconstruction of pedagogy for personal fulfillment and social change. From this perspective, teaching is not only to promote knowledge for students’ personal gains, but to engage students in thinking about knowledge as part of social life.

The broad definition of art education as teaching visual culture will enable an analysis of the relationship between gender identity and curriculum. The following focuses on three aspects of teaching visual culture related to gender: (a) females as the subject of various forms of visual culture; (b) females as respondents to visual culture; and (c) the gendered characteristics of cultural production by students. To understand these aspects of identity requires attention to the gendered (male and female) character of imagery and response, the power of representation through imagery, and the visual construction of stereotypes and other forms of gender definition that become reified in visual culture. The first section of this paper contains a historical overview of issues of equity in art education, particularly concerning philosophical and scientific conceptions of children’s gender differences in artistic production and problems with the notion of common culture. In this section, I will use the term “art” to represent the general content of public school art education in order to be consistent with historical language of the last hundred years. The second section focuses upon
interpretive responses to fine art and other forms of visual culture. This analysis
draws upon poststructuralism, feminist critique, and literary theory (e.g. de
summarize a study of adolescent responses to advertising images of women and
relate it to art education. Related recommendations for practice are provided
following this section.

Equity in Art Education of the Past

In the past, equity has been dealt with in art education through a focus on two
issues, both of which concern identity: the role of the individual as a self-
expressive maker of art, and the reflection and reproduction of a “common”
culture through common art experiences for all students (Freedman, 1989a).
The first of these has been called child-centered, the second, discipline-cen-
tered. Embedded in these conceptions of art education has been the assump-
tion that focusing on individual self-expression at one level, and the promotion
of a common culture at another level, would override cultural differences and
promote equity. However, as Bersson (1987) put it, art education from these
perspectives has been “neither socially relevant nor culturally democratic”
(p. 78).

Concerns About the Focus on Individualism

Several historical models of artistic development have represented the char-
acteristics of children’s art as universal and biophysical. Except for these as-
sumed similarities between children, each child has generally been viewed as
completely natural, entirely unique, and without attributes of culture. Such a
conception of individualism enables the possibility for belief in a fictional free,
self-expression in school (a social institution) through the teaching of art (a
product of cultural communities). The focus on this conception of “natural”
individualism in curriculum has resulted in a neglect of cultural similarities and
differences. Universal developmental models have begun to be questioned as
research has shown that similarities between children’s drawings are often
copied from popular cultural sources (Wilson & Wilson, 1977) and vary be-
tween cultures (Brittain, 1990). However, the sociocultural attributes that con-
found this notion of individualism, such as the influence of schooling, mass
media, and gendered/ethnic experience, have received little attention by re-
searchers in art education.

In part, the focus on individualism in school emerged from eighteenth cen-
tury Enlightenment philosophy and the writings of Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and
Froebel on early conceptions of a “natural” education. For example, Rousseau
represented boys as living independently and in harmony with nature and girls
as being socialized to serve certain purposes. This definition of a natural educa-
tion based on “male” characteristics, and “natural” differences between the
sexes (male individualism and independence, female socialization and depend-
ence), was reflected in Froebel’s writing and reinforced from the historical
beginning of early childhood education in the United States through the use of
art activities. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, promoters of
child study and other early scientific conceptions of education continued to
claim to allow boys and girls to develop “naturally.” Scientific representations
of “natural” development were limited to a range of norms presented as objec-
tively determined but actually laden with social meaning. For example, eugeni-
cists claimed that biographical reports of renowned men were proof that North-
ern European males were superior to other human beings.
Although affluent girls’ education in the nineteenth and early twentieth century tended to include a focus on arts activities so that they could later entertain men, keep a pleasant house, and pass culture on to their children, it was assumed by many that girls’ artistic potentials were inferior to boys’. For example, child study psychologist G. Stanley Hall (1911) stated that “boys distinctly excel girls of the same age. The latter more rarely draw figures in motion and still less often attempt humorous themes, are better in conventional classroom courses, but inferior in originality” (p. 498). This view that boys had superior artistic capabilities had not significantly changed in developmental psychology by mid-century. That which was considered “natural” to boys was valued and promoted; what was thought “natural” to girls was not. For example, girls made more details and “extraneous objects” in their drawings than boys and were judged frivolous and inefficient (Gesell, 1940). In contrast, boys’ drawings were viewed as efficient; containing no extraneous marks, wasted movements or time. Boys’ drawings were interpreted as displaying only the essential elements of objects and a greater capacity for rational abstraction. This interpretation was then considered a part of the scientific support for a description of “normal” male character as inherently more rational and creative than female character. Collins and Sandell (1984) argue that the belief in a qualitative difference between boys’ and girls’ art has persisted. They state, In Teaching Children to Draw — A Guide for Teachers and Parents by Marjorie and Brent Wilson [1982], the authors claim that ‘In the United States, for example, boys’ drawings contain a profusion of violence, of villany, and vehicles; girls’ drawings are full of benign animals, bugs, and blooms.’ Suggesting that boys are more influenced by the media, the Wilsons go on to say that ‘The realities that they reinvent are often richer, more complex, and more dynamic than are those of girls.’ . . . the assumption that stereotypical masculine imagery sparks children’s art of higher aesthetic value, that is, ‘richer, more complex, and more dynamic’ needs to be examined for its possible equation of masculine values with human art values. (p. 36-37)

The definition of good art as male art became mingled with clinical psychology near the turn of the century and resulted in a therapeutic purpose for art education by the 1920s. Progressive educators promoted a therapeutic art instruction to keep children “naturally” healthy in a potentially damaging society (Rugg & Schumaker, 1928). However, what was thought of as natural was culturally shaped through the influence of the notion of self-expression in the fine art community, upper-middle class interests of progressive private schooling, and a political economy of freedom and social mobility (Freedman, 1989a). At this time, educators’ ideas often conflicted when it came to determining the art education of girls. At one level, many teachers sought a gender specific form of schooling appropriate for the sex-differentiated work and adult life of the students. At another level, progressive educators wanted the girls in their care to develop the same strengths of character as boys.

By the end of World War II, American art educators had become captivated by an ideal of the autonomous, male fine artist who worked alone in a studio, freely self-expressing and intuitively creating. The ideal was merely symbolic; fine artists were actually part of a professional community shaped by cultural norms and values. Guided by an image of the individual artist, art educators became even more immersed in the practice of a therapeutic art education in
the hope that this practice would confound the development of authoritarianism and nurture a perceived independent personality in children (Freedman, 1987).

The history of art education illustrates that female student artistic production and response to art have been given little consideration in curriculum. Although there was a growth in research on artistic preference differences between boys and girls in the 1970s and 1980s, the relation of gendered responses to art instruction has not been given much attention in research. One reason for this lack of attention is a strong tradition of teaching common culture in general education and art education.

Problems with the Notion of Common Culture

The assumption that the dispersal of “common” culture would benefit all has been maintained in art education in the United States through the promotion of Western models of aesthetic value and an appreciation of work produced by a male-dominated fine art community. One purpose of such an art education has been to instill in students a knowledge and appreciation of the symbols of socioeconomic success and the values held by people who have such success (Freedman, 1989a; Hamblen, 1990). Such knowledge has been seen as part of the cultural capital necessary for social mobility.

This purpose of art education is problematic for at least three reasons. First, teaching common culture has been represented as democratic because it appears to make the elite available to everyone, and yet the notion of an elite reflects a power structure not conducive to democratic life. As part of this conception of art education, the aesthetic values of a few are presented as universal and, in their presentation, become “common.” In this way, elite and gendered values shape the values of all social groups. It is a strength of education to enable the appropriation of knowledge by those who are excluded in order to provide avenues for empowerment, thereby defeating culturally reproductive agents that maintain the status quo; however, art education has historically been reproductive in that it has acculturated students without providing the critical foundation necessary for analyzing underlying assumptions of aesthetic value.

Second, visual culture (“common” or otherwise) is continually fragmented and dispersed. When curriculum is constructed from a visual culture perspective, the pluralism that exists in life is given attention and the impossibility of real and stable cultural boundaries is acknowledged. People’s experience of culture in the United States differs widely, often in relation to their membership in certain groups, and these experiences then work to further transform culture. The production and appreciation of modern fine art exemplifies this ongoing transformation through its shaping by a variety of social forces and conditions. The knowledge that culture is in a state of continual flux and different people experience culture differently suggests that there is little that is common about “common” culture.

Third, the assumption that a common culture can be distributed to students contains a certain irony when juxtaposed with traditions of individualism prevalent in art education. Neither children’s nor adults’ artistic responses can be entirely individualistic or universal, because they reflect cultural similarities and differences. When children enter school, they have similarities and differences in, for example, gendered experience, cultural tradition, and socioeconomic status. Children’s artistic production and appreciation are also bound by
the commonalities of schooling. It is an illusion to assume that students can adopt a universal model of aesthetics when they are viewing art, yet conceive unique ideas when producing art. Students gain experience in relation to their cultural contexts and cannot simply put it aside when the demand to view or produce art is made.

**Gender Stereotypes in Visual Culture: A Methodological Example**

An important aspect of the gendered character of visual culture and response is the integration of new information with previous knowledge that occurs in people's minds when they encounter images. Theory from literary studies illuminates this process through the concept of *intertextuality*. The term intertextuality was coined by Julia Kristeva (Moi, 1986) and based on the work of Mikhail Bakhtin (Kristeva, 1969/1986). Originally, the term referred to the relationship between texts of a certain time and place and suggested that any text draws, to some extent, on a variety of (text-based) sign-systems, such as poetry, novel prose, academic discourse, etc. The term has also come to refer to the connections made by a reader to other texts read by that person in the past (Ashley, 1989). Therefore, intertextuality might be said to refer to the conceptual space between texts. That is, it concerns the relationship between texts, rather than a single text, isolated from other texts. Intertextuality allows people to develop an understanding of a new text by relating it to others and enables authors and artists to use techniques like simile, analogy, and metaphor. Intertextuality is fundamentally about learning how to read and respond to a text based on other textual experiences.

The same type of interdisciplinary, conceptual space exists for the relationships between various forms of visual culture. When confronted with a new visual form, the focus of cognition often becomes the relationship between visual forms and their associated meanings, rather than a particular object. This *intergraphicality* is at work when images cue references to and cognitively integrate with other images, building a conceptual network of imagery and meaning. For example, as my students have pointed out, when looking at a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* in a book about fine art, they recall the kitsch they have seen that includes that image. The cognitive networks students construct based upon imagery they encounter from a variety of sources, influences their understanding and response to visual culture in school.

Intergraphicality is reflected in the production of visual culture, as well as its analysis. Consider the example of student production of stereotypical representations of gender. Little disagreement exists among art educators that the use of pictorial stereotypes begins early in life. As mentioned above, the influence of visual culture on such aspects of student imagery has recently been researched. This research has resulted in several vital conclusions, among them that students copy many of their images from graphic sources found in general culture, such as advertisements, cartoons, and other children's drawings (Wilson & Wilson, 1977; Wilson et al., 1982). Even young children display a type of learning about the relationships between images in their recycling of stereotypical symbolic forms (such as triangle skirts to indicate females) and content (such as occupations) in their work. In the process of recycling images, students modify them in ways that are dependent, in part, on gendered experience.

Conceptions of gender that have been developed and reified through visual and other types of material culture also influence identity. Research has indicated that representations of gender in popular culture influence the ways
females see themselves (e.g. Radway, 1984; Press, 1991; Tannen, 1990). For example, Radway (1984) concluded from her study of middle-class women's reading of romance novels that the women tended to identify with the romance heroines who began the stories as independent and free-spirited, but in the end, were represented as defining themselves in relation to a male sexual partner. Although the women in the study stated that they understood that the story was fictional, they also believed they could learn from the text. Of course, women's responses to visual culture are influenced by many conditions in addition to gender, including socioeconomic level, ethnicity, and age. However, the young women in Radway's study, and other school-age females (Press, 1990), tend to respond to popular culture in ways that are most dependent on gender.

The ways that women are represented in popular culture has come under scrutiny precisely because such representations influence gender identity. The topic of women as a subject of fine art has also been recently reassessed by historians and critics. These analyses suggest that the focus on the female figure in fine art has overwhelmingly been an objectification of women, a fulfillment through representation of men's desire, and an accepting destination for "the male gaze" (e.g. de Lauretis, 1987; Parker & Pollock, 1981; Raven, Langer & Frueh, 1988). Art educators have begun to be concerned about representations of women in fine art as being intricately tied to students' conceptions of gender and, therefore, about the use of certain works of fine art in school (Blandy & Congdon, 1990).

Many cultural conditions continue to exist that define a pervasively male way of doing things as the only way to do things (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Consider the following example which relates to visual culture and education. A clear casual relationship has been established between the viewing of violence and subsequent violent acts (Miedzian, 1986). Research has also shown across ethnic backgrounds that boys take part in more violent acts and demonstrate more interest in viewing violence than girls (Miedzian, 1986). However, a desire to see violence is inferred of all viewers by people in the mass media. As a result, it is difficult for anyone to watch television or attend films without being forced to see violence. A mass consumer identity with male attributes has been created and transmitted through the use of imagery.

In sum, research suggests that visual representations of gender have a great potential for influencing student identity, artistic production, and understanding of visual culture. Also, student responses to visual culture inside and outside of school appear to be intimately related and dependent on gender. Therefore, the study of the character of student response to gender representations in various forms of visual culture could contribute to art education.

**Lessons From a Study of Gender Stereotypes in Advertising**

In order to study students' responses and abilities to critically assess gender stereotypes in visual culture and gain an understanding of the ways that images work to shape student identity, I did a research investigation with a colleague using advertising images (ads) and stories in popular teen magazines (Beach & Freedman, 1992). A summary of the results of the imagery portion of the research follows.

The study involved 115 eighth and eleventh grade boys and girls from two middle socioeconomic level suburban school districts. The students were asked to respond to four magazine ads that contained images of females: Mopar oil filters, Speed-Stick deodorant, Coty Musk cologne, and Zum Zum prom gowns.
The ads were previously ranked by adults in this order as having increasing degrees of female stereotyping. Over a period of three days, students were given the ads in random order and asked to do a freewriting response to each. Students were then asked to respond to the questions: “Would you like to be one of the people in this ad? Why or why not?” The students also rated the characters in the ads on semantic differential value scales, wrote a story evoked by the ad, and stated an inference about the message of the ad.

Like many other producers of visual culture, people in the advertising industry attempt to define a cultural stance by inviting viewers to become members of an intended audience. The study made clear that the students had previously learned to adopt the stance and identity of a consumer audience member through which they associated certain cultural meanings with the ads. For example, most of the boys and girls adopted the stance of an admirer when viewing the characters represented in the ads and desired to emulate the apparent power and status of these characters.

Across the data collection activities, the participants tended to blur fiction and reality by treating the characters in the ad images as if they were real. For example, a student described the female character in the Coty Musk ad in the following way: “She thinks she’s Miss Wonderful or something. She has the look on her face like ‘Ha ha, he’s mine and you can’t have him. Stay away.’” The student described the character as addressing her personally, which suggests that the student conceptualizes the character as real or has placed herself in the fictional world of the ad. Many of the students assumed that the fictional characters should conform to their real world assumptions. As a result, they judged the characters as if they were real. For example, in response to the Zum Zum ad, one student responded: “The ad really bugs me, because prom is next week and no one dresses up in these kinds of suits for prom.”

The reasons students stated for “liking” the ad characters (and seeing them as role models) consistently reflected idealized personalities and lives they created in the minds for the characters. In these fantasy versions of reality, students separated the identity of the role model part of the image from other associated meanings. For example, rather than stating that they would like to be the character lying on a deck in the Speed-Stick ad because they wanted to be in the environment pictured (blue sky, mountains, a lake, etc.), the students typically responded in ways similar to the following: “This woman is a physical, strong, healthy type of woman. She goes for the gold in life and does her best at things. She looks as if she would be smart, for she is smart enough to be exercising. She is independent and free-spirited. Yes, I would like to be like her. I like to exercise and try my best at things. I also like to be very independent in what I am doing.” Many of the female students tended to respond to the ads by integrating their personality with their idealized conception of the characters, creating ideal identities for themselves.

Like many others, the characterization by the female student in the previous paragraph included the traditionally male ideal of extreme independence. Both girls and boys considered independence an important message in the images. In these ads, advertisers had used representations of independence to appeal to adolescents’ developing identities and convince them to buy the product. The students frequently valued the ad characters as being totally independent people, not bound by the restrictions of the students’ lived realities nor by the context of the consumer purpose of the image. They were unable to see that the
images were general cultural influences that, in a sense, defined their identity for them.

As part of these cultural influences, the students encountered several contradictory juxtapositions in the imagery. A pervasive juxtaposition in these ads, and one that is often used by advertisers, was that of nature opposed to culture. For example, in the case of the Speed-Stick ad, the image was composed of a female character located in a scenic landscape. The character appears to have just completed a rigorous outdoor activity, as suggested by her attire, reclining position, and glistening skin, that suggests natural health while advertising a deodorant (a body treatment that is to stop natural perspiration and odor). The students rarely noticed these contradictions, tending to focus instead on their creation of identities for the characters.

The students’ responses also reflected a cultural stance based on gender stereotypes. Most of the males (and some of the females) in the study responded to the females in the ads from the stance of the male gaze, objectifying the characters in terms of sexuality. For example, in response to the Coty Musk ad, one male student stated: “the sexy, good-looking girl is the first thing that catches your eye.” Another commented, “this girl is hot.” Neither boys nor girls undertook much critical analysis of the ads. Only 12% of the students were critical of the most stereotypical ad image. The storylines of the narratives developed by the girls and boys about the stereotypical ads were often as one student stated, “boy-meets-girl; they fall in love, get married, and live happily ever after.”

The male students more consistently preferred the stereotyped female characters than did the female students. The fact that males responded in this manner reflects the influence of the invitation of a male gaze cultural stance. The female students preferred the less stereotyped ad females and were more likely than the boys to write about the interpersonal relationships between characters represented in the pictures. Although the boys liked to look at the women characters in the ads, many indicated that they could not relate to the perspectives presented by female characters in either the ads or stories. Consistent with other studies of reading (e.g. Bleich, 1986; Flynn, 1986), the male students distanced themselves from the stories, sometimes by taking an evaluative stance. However, such distancing by the boys occurred less with the ads.

The results of this study contain several points that illustrate the importance of the social reconstruction of art education: (a) visual culture other than fine art is encountered daily by students, (b) students create meaning based on the visual culture they see every day, and (c) students attend to representations of gender (and other concepts, ideas, people, etc.) in visual culture, relating such representations to their own lives as they create meaning. A socially reconstructed art education could enrich student understanding through the inclusion of teaching about the immense power of visual culture, the social responsibility that comes with that power, and the need for the integration of creative production, interpretation, and critique in contemporary life.

Recommendations for Practice

A pervasive approach to handling gender issues in curriculum has been the recommendation that teachers simply supplement published or unpublished curriculums, largely built on models of the disciplines of Western fine art, with female and multicultural content. Stuhr (1991) has equated this activity with the first, and least effective, level of Sleeter and Grants’ (1987) five levels of
multicultural education. In part, the pervasive use of this approach to solving social problems through art education results from government and school district officials’ particular responses to demands for equitable schooling. Their attempts at multiculturalism and gender-fair education have often been couched in terms of content “distribution” or “treatment,” suggesting that what is needed is a certain number of lessons about a particular culture or a special (perhaps therapeutic) set of activities where women and men of color are concerned. In school, such legislation becomes a requirement that curriculum contain a specified number of artifacts made by women and men of various cultures. For example, until recently, a school district in Minnesota required that each art lesson taught must include examples of art made by people of at least three different cultures, one of which could be “women.” This inclusion may be helpful, but it misses the point of teaching art in a socially responsible manner.

The use of such models and quota systems can become patronizing and result in inappropriate juxtapositions of culture which misinform students and further disenfranchise the groups the curriculum is to support. This occurs, in part, because the technical and formal attributes of artifacts are often focused upon in art curriculum, making vitally different cultural artifacts appear to be similar. It also occurs because art has long been taught within a discourse of extreme individualism, without attention to the ethnocentrism and gendered character of this idea.

To respond to these foci of art education that make creating a gender-fair pedagogy difficult, teachers could put greater emphasis on analyzing visual messages, as well as the formal and technical qualities that enable those messages, which include issues concerning the ways that meaning is created through the use of visual culture. In order to understand message and meaning, curriculum must include the social dimensions of aesthetics. Such discussions could be of particular importance to students as they develop a broad critical awareness and begin to view social life in relation to gender. The following are recommendations for practice for gender-fair art education that go beyond a focus on the work of women artists.

1. Define art education broadly to include various forms of visual culture. In part, fine art is linked to advertising, television programming, commercial films, etc., through representations of gender. Attention to gender representations across forms of visual culture in curriculum could illustrate the ways that visual messages and meaning are created. Students can use methods of feminist critique to analyze gendered representation in visual culture (e.g., Garber, 1990, 1992; Hicks, 1990). Through these investigations, students can develop an understanding of the ways in which social groups and cultural issues are represented visually and how images work to reify ideas. These investigations should include discussions of the purposes of production, analyses of the influences of imagery, and student response as well as adult interpretation. Teachers can approach these topics, for example, by having students write a dialogue between two characters in a single or two different works of fine art or advertisements, or between themselves and a character in an image. Then the students could analyze what influenced them in their creation of character personality. These influences could be located physically within the image, but may be only cued by the image, connected with other images, or relate to some other previous knowledge. Also, students could act out their conception of a scene...
that would follow the scene depicted in a painting, photograph, sculpture, or television commercial and discuss how they decided what was to be next.

2. **Promote an understanding and acceptance of differences in student interpretations of visual culture.** Middle and high school students, particularly, can take part in sophisticated levels of critique and reflection on visual culture they see every day, such as television. By adolescence, students become acutely aware of gender differences as portrayed by family, local, and media culture, as well as the culture of their peers. These students also place a great emphasis on social rules and mores, and in the process, question as well as accept cultural conditions. Creating a safe environment for analyzing visual culture can help students of all ages understand that multiple interpretations can be enriching. Such an environment can be established, in part, through small group or paired critiques and opportunities for students to write their interpretations.

Some students' most expressive work occurs when they tell a story through imagery (e.g. Wilson & Wilson, 1977; 1982). Doing pictorial commentary on visual culture is similar in quality to telling a story. By responding visually to works of fine art, advertisements, or popular films, students can represent relationships of visual culture that may not be verbalized as effectively. For example, students could draw, paint, or sculpt their interpretation of a film, video, or television program and explain how they arrived at their interpretation and imagery.

3. **Address gender issues represented in student and professional imagery.** Gendered representation is a part of student, as well as professional, production. Often students make sexist or other offensive images in art classrooms under the guise of free self-expression. However, students should be made aware of the fact that they are at work in a public institutional environment that does not afford a right to offend. This principle can be communicated through discussion between classmates where, for example, girls are asked to explain to boys about their responses to sexist imagery.

An example of an important underlying aspect of gender representation that could be discussed even with young children is the dichotomous character of stereotypes. Stereotypical representations of gender in visual culture are related to other cultural dichotomies such as Black/White, establishment/anti-establishment, art/non-art (de Lauretis, 1987). Such dichotomies tend to be made up of two parts that are thought of as unequal in value and reduce complex relationships. However, the reduction creates different complexities resulting from the establishment of polarity between the parts. Although the use of dichotomy can be an effective tool to promote concept development in students, discussions of the profound similarities between the two parts of common dichotomies, such as those ranging from art/non-art to man/woman, human/animal, and animal/plant can help students avoid polarizing the worth of each part.

To address issues concerning visual culture inside and outside the classroom, students can use sociological and anthropological methods, such as interviewing other students, fine artists, commercial designers, etc. in the community (Stuhr, Petrovich-Mwaniki, & Wasson, 1992). For example, students could ask male and female fine artists questions, such as: What influenced you to become an artist? What is the thing you are most proud of in life? What is the relationship of your work to rest of your life? Then, the students could discuss similarities and differences in the responses given by the interviewees.
4. **Use the relationships between images (and between images and other things) to enhance learning.** Children and older students are often interested in the interdisciplinary, symbolic, and metaphorical attributes of imagery. Instruction in these attributes illustrates to students that the importance of fine art and other forms of visual culture go far beyond the formal qualities of the objects themselves. For example, students could be questioned about the relationships they see between various forms of visual culture in order to develop an understanding of intergraphicality. Students might analyze an advertisement that contains a reproduction of a work of fine art for the ways and reasons the advertiser used fine art to sell something. Art educators know that students rarely analyze the formal aspects of fine art without guidance. Other aspects of visual culture (deep meaning of content, contexts of production and appreciation, etc.) are no more self-revealing.

5. **Develop group learning activities that accommodate male and female interests.** When given a choice, females tend to talk to each other and work differently from males (Tannen, 1990). In general, girls have conversations facing each other; boys talking together tend to look elsewhere. Even when discussing an object, such as the image on a computer screen, girls tend to look at and talk to each other, while boys tend to address the object (Freedman, 1989b). In many art classrooms, students are expected to work in ways that accommodate male preferences. They work alone or face away from each other in large group discussion. For example, my observations of critiquing procedures in art classrooms at all levels indicate that students are usually taught to critique by sitting in a large group, facing and speaking in the direction of the objects being discussed. The method helps to focus students on the objects. It also objectifies commentary, so that criticisms do not seem personal and some measure of protection is given to student artists and critics. However, directing students to take part in small group or paired critiques, which can also focus discussion and be less threatening because it is more intimate, could effectively utilize a conversational style that is more comfortable for many girls.

**Conclusion**

Art education demands a deep understanding about the range of diversity issues by all those concerned with schooling. A focus on the social reconstruction of art education, like the social reconstruction of all school subjects, is emerging in teacher education programs and schools as educators begin to work together to develop this understanding. The future of art education will depend on teaching visual culture and interpreting vital social issues, such as those concerning gender, in school.

Many of the discussions about gender in art education have focused on simple additions to curriculum content. Of course, some teachers have gone far beyond this focus. However, efforts to improve art education cannot be accomplished by any single individual or solely on the level of written curriculum development.

As illustrated by the research on gender stereotypes in advertising, the messages students encounter in visual culture are often mixed and fragmentary. Without guidance, students typically develop only limited understandings of the complexities of visual culture. Although popular visual culture is often considered simplistic, and therefore inappropriate for the classroom, the meanings associated with it can be highly complex. A focus on creation, use, and response concerning visual culture can help students understand these com-
plexities.

References


