

Art Education in the Age of Guantanamo

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The fact is there are many people in the world who will take advantage of something like music or performing and use it for their own sinister purpose. Arts and culture is something that carries with it a patina of goodness and purity, but it can be misused, and it's our job to see if somebody is trying to do that. – Stuart Patt, State Department Spokesman, December 2002

Introduction

Since the return of Picasso's *Guernica* to Spain, a tapestry version has hung just outside of the United Nations Security Council chambers as a reminder of that august organization's fundamental mission, the avoidance of war. Picasso's powerful piece transcends the world's language barriers and is perhaps the premier example of political art. But prestige is one thing, and inconvenience is another. In February 2003, for the first time ever, the *Guernica* tapestry was concealed from view. The reason for the blue drape cover was not a lack of aesthetic understanding by the world's diplomatic corps; rather *Guernica*'s powerful symbols did not offer the desired backdrop for U.S. Secretary of State Colin Powell to present his country's arguments for the invasion of Iraq. (Knight, 8feb08.story) The covering of *Guernica* is far from the only example of censorship of political art. In 1934, for example, Nelson Rockefeller destroyed Diego Rivera's Depression era mural at the Rockefeller Center because Rivera refused to remove the image of Lenin.

Institutionalized censorship is more subtle, but it can be more effective than the post facto midnight destruction of a fresco or the covering of offending artwork with blue drapes. In the 1950s, the CIA, in collaboration with the Museum of Modern Art "deployed abstract expressionism as a Cold War weapon" (Stoner p. 279) to counter social realism. The CIA's interest had nothing to do with the nature of art. What did matter was that the

look of abstract expressionism transmitted the illusion of freedom of expression (that could only be possible in a democracy) without the inconvenience of political content.

Parallel examples of censorship exist at the school level. For the kids at Olympic View Elementary school in Seattle,

...it's the day the music died. Their popular music teacher didn't come back to the Seattle school this year. Their arts instruction has been left with a gaping hole. The reason why seems so ridiculous: Instructor Mary K. McNeill -- "Mary K" to everyone at the school -- made the "mistake" of encouraging kids to write and sing songs about love and peace during the U.S. war in Iraq. (Jameson, 10/24/03)

Two years later in Woodland Hills, California,

A doctored poster of President George W. Bush -- sporting Groucho Marx's dark eyebrows, mustache and stogie -- was supposed to promote a high school play. But for award-winning drama students at El Camino Real High School, it turned out to be a stark lesson in free speech. The poster was close, but no cigar. After one student complained last week, school officials ordered a hundred of the posters ripped from the Woodland Hills campus on grounds they promoted smoking and political preference. (Bartholomew, 5/27/05)

School Art

Many students struggle individually on a daily basis with a subtle form of art censorship. Child art is defined as . . . “those drawings that are done by themselves for themselves . . .” (Wilson & Wilson 1982). Typically in pencil on lined notebook paper, these outlaw drawings depict culturally taboo subjects, such as sex and violence and are profoundly personal. In school, children surreptitiously draw, taking special precautions to protect themselves from the teacher’s gaze. As one child explained, “You get behind your social studies book because that’s the tallest one. Then, you scootch down real low in your seat,

and they can't see you." Children learn early in their school careers that nothing good can come from getting caught drawing the ongoing saga of Super Turd versus Toilet Paper Man.

One art form that has managed to evade censorship or subject matter controversy is *School Art*, a term Arthur Efland (1976) coined 30 years ago. "... School art is an institutional art style in its own right ... a style that has little or no counterpart either in the personal spontaneous expression of children or in the culture outside of the school." (p.38) "What is so amazing about school art is that it doesn't exist anywhere else except in schools ..." (Ibid). The "free and creative look" (p 41) of 1970s school art has degenerated in the last thirty years. Like Elvis, single subject elementary school art teachers have "left the building," leaving the job of teaching art to inadequately trained classroom teachers. While school art now includes cookie cutter, look-alike projects, the criteria that define all school art remain the same; "The style would need to be one that is relatively free of cognitive strain. It needs a lot of manual activity rather than one that involves the use of the head." (p. 42)

School art supports the latent function of school. Efland, quoting Merton (1968) and Illich (1971), described the manifest and latent functions of school. The manifest function of school includes respect for one's individuality, nurturing of democracy, scholarship, (p. 40) and other noble ideals upon which school practitioners agree. The latent, unspoken function of school lurks beneath the consciously acknowledged manifest function of school.

This latent function of school, as relevant now as it was thirty years ago, "... involves socializing the individual into accepting the authority of the school as a prelude for accepting the authority of other institutions. Once he accepts the authority of the school, he is able to accept the authority of the corporation, the military, and the welfare bureaucracy." (Ibid) In the present repressive environment, school art, intellectually vacant, skill and concept free (but colorful), transmits the illusion that school is "fun." Only those not blinded by bright construction paper, cotton balls and paper plates will

recognize school art as numbing, yet highly developed and institutionalized. It is kitsch. In school, kitsch now plays the role that abstract expressionism played in the 1950s in the sanitizing of subject matter.

Efland did not blame art teachers, but rather the repressive latent functions of school where “ . . . art comes to be regarded as time off for good behavior.” (Ibid) In contrast to the art education of the 1970s, art education now directs teachers to teach standards based, substantive art curriculum that is culturally engaged and driven by issues and ideas. However, while art education has changed, the latent function of school has not. In these times of intense feeling concerning war, peace, and the condition of our planet, teaching culturally engaged, issues based art education in the repressive conditions of school can be like walking on eggs.

Sedition, Censorship, and Art Education

The same forces are at work on college campuses. In fall, 2005, a small group of instructors and I created an installation called “The Peace Project” with our collective students. I gained several insights, both theoretical and practical. I learned that the latent function of school exists at the university level, that the subject matter of peace is a threat, and that an “opt out” clause in a syllabus can avoid problems down the road.

The Peace Project has roots in the Vietnam War era. In the folk tradition of art education, I learned about it from a colleague who taught doll workshops for children. At the heart of the project is the transformation of little green plastic military war toys into non-lethal, magical, peaceful creatures. The only rule for our students was that the weapons could not be cut off; rather they had to be transformed into non-weapons of some kind. I had already done this project with my own pre-service college students several times over the years, post Viet Nam and pre Iraq. Each time students also created tiny outdoor dwellings made of natural materials to house their transformed “peace creatures.” (Natural dwellings would, via wind, rain, and time, eventually return to nature). Tiny

surrogates, like their human counterparts need places to live in neighborhoods and communities.

With the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, this project gained added relevancy. Gold Star mother Cindy Sheehan, Veterans for Peace, and other similar organizations openly challenged the fraudulent justifications for war, and personalized its costs. By fall 2005, opposition to peace marches in Los Angeles had undergone transformation. Pro war counter demonstrators were no longer present, and large groups of well-organized military families now joined the marches calling for an end to the war. The military families were undergoing transformation. Using the model of play in the way children make big issues manageable by miniaturizing them, I reactivated the Peace Project. Viewed in this way, the peace project was nothing more than a reflection of what was happening around us.

Part I: Creation of the project.

The design of the project was based on the theme that peace is a primal human need. This theme is large enough to accommodate multiple points of view, and variety of artistic expressions. The Peace Project was an ensemble effort of four instructors and approximately 200 students. Using a wide variety of materials, each instructor brought a different slant to the project. Some classes created artist inspired transformations. Other students imagined transformations from military to civilian jobs, or to fantasy creatures. The transformed army toys had a playful “1960s” sweetness to them, and even humor. The site chosen for the installation of the dwellings and the peace creatures was the untended patch of dirt in front of the campus ROTC building. The choice of that site counterposed opposite transformations. The installation took two days. It expressed optimistic ideals of community. Students constructed miniature neighborhoods by connecting the individual dwellings with roads and paths of colored sand and yellow cornmeal.

Part II: Interpretation of the project.

Once the installation was completed, it was in the public eye and as public art it became open to all kinds of interpretation that may have had little or nothing to do with the intent of the artists. A college newspaper reporter called it an anti war protest. For some students that was the intent, but not for all. The colonel in charge of ROTC was outraged, and expressed concern that his cadets would be uncomfortable when they walked by the ankle high peace installation in front of the ROTC building. Indeed, out of earshot from the colonel, one cadet told me that he didn't want to go to Iraq. Our interaction with cadets was friendly, and marked by open informal discussions.

Due to high winds, the installation was in the public view for only a week, after which the peace figures were "rescued." Another instructor and her art education class, not previously involved with the project, constructed a tiny refugee camp for the transformed ex-soldiers on the art department grounds. Since the Katrina disaster was in the news, students were very sensitive to the needs of refugees, and built miniature electrical power lines, latrines, showers, a recreational area and special tents for families. Since this was an evening class that met only once a week, the refugee camp was created from start to finish in only three hours. Protected from the wind by large bushes, the miniature refugee camp with its tiny occupants existed unmolested for over two weeks.

Conclusion

No matter how briefly the original installation existed, it did exist, and everybody was free to say or think what he or she wished. I was falsely accused by the college newspaper of abusing my academic freedom and forcing students to do the project. Students wrote letters contradicting this accusation and their letters were ignored. I found that my most effective weapon was satire. The school paper finally allowed me to write an opinion piece wherein I urged that Dr. Pistolessi be sent to Guantanamo.

The history of art is filled with the history of artists' responses, interpretations and protests of the politics of their time.

What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who only has eyes if he's a painter, ears if he's a musician, or a lyre in every chamber of his heart if he's a poet or even, if he's a boxer, only some muscles? Quite the contrary, he is at the same time a political being constantly alert to the horrifying, passionate or pleasing events in the world, shaping himself completely in their image. Pablo Picasso (painterskeys.com)

The Peace Project was an ankle high installation of transformed army toys based upon a decades old children's doll workshop art lesson and sheltered by tiny earthen dwellings. The theme of the project—peace—was a threat to some, and opened a university wide debate about the war, academic freedom, and the presence of ROTC on campus. The project caused a flurry of articles and letters to the editor of the school paper. There were active and open classroom discussions.

There have always been boundaries for subject matter within schools, especially for the arts. One objection by a parent of a student is usually enough to derail an art project with obvious or even minor political themes. There is nothing new about censorship in the schools. The question at present confronting the arts is how much the noose of censorship may tighten. In this era of the perpetual (so-called) war on terrorism, even the plaintive theme of peace is seditious by (so-called) patriots on a university campus. The restrictions for pre-collegiate art education are likely to be even more severe. It thus becomes not only a compelling act of conscience to defend such themes within art, but also essential to the discipline of art itself. The alternative is a spiral into bland, meaningless, but safe exercises masquerading as art.