

Artistic activities in school as a question and a challenge: dilemmas about the boundaries of art education

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ABSTRACT

The current state in the area of visual art creation, characterized by a continuous as well as a radical expansion of its boundaries, sets forth an issue for an analogous diversification in the art teaching field. Within this context, various questions and proposals are set forth as to the direction that a teaching intervention, able to promote and handle subjectivity, fluidity and relativity in the artistic work, may take. Should we promote a “safe” approach, should the educational condition further “loosen”, or should the cognitive field be radically transformed? These concerns constitute three essentially different viewpoints, all of which are examined in this article. Within the scope of the approach hereby adopted, a synchronization with artistic reality urges art education towards an exceptionally wide and multifaceted teaching approach, strengthening the need of children to perceive, comprehend, interpret and criticize the variety of visual forms available to them.

KEYWORDS

Art education, artistic creation, education, subjective teaching, creation

RÉSUMÉ

L'état actuel de la création de l'art visuel caractérisé par une expansion constante et radicale de ses frontières soulève une question en ce qui concerne une expansion analogue dans le domaine de l'enseignement de l'art. Dans ce contexte, de diverses questions se posent surtout sur la direction que pourrait prendre une intervention didactique, qui aurait comme objectif la promotion et la gestion de la subjectivité, la fluidité et la relativité du travail artistique. Doit-on adopter une approche « sécuritaire », peut-on « relâcher » davantage la condition éducative ou bien serait-il préférable de choisir une transformation radicale du champ cognitif ? Ces trois questions importantes, qui constituent trois thèmes distinctes, seront étudiées dans le présent article. La synchronisation avec la réalité artistique dirige l'éducation artistique vers un enseignement plus ouvert et plus varié qui renforce la capacité des enfants à percevoir, à comprendre, à interpréter et à critiquer la variété des formes visuelles.

MOTS CLÉS

Éducation artistique, création artistique, éducation, enseignement subjective, création

Reality in the area of artistic creation, with its continuous readjustments, its diverging trends and its unforeseen practices, incessantly relativizes the places where art instruction used to find fixed points of reference, high-lightening more extreme –as well as more interesting– challenges, than the concern over the formulation of teaching material or for the establishing of

“good practices”. Most contemporary art creations diverge from traditional trends; furthermore, the process of form creating of any type may be absent, since it is quite possible to use even unprocessed objects. This constant theoretical and material expansion of art foundations indicates that the distinctiveness of a visual art creation cannot be defined on the basis of the sum of its morphological characteristics, without running the risk of excluding a substantial part of art creation (Danto, 1981, p. 33-39; Le Witt, 1999).

Facing an environment so fluid, with such a variety of practices, attitudes, values, purposes and means, all certainty about the nature of visual as well as of the instructional act seems to be shaken. Dilemmas are consequently posed, that are frequently deemed as problems in methodology: how can an educational intervention be justified, when it has been organized in reference to a cognitive subject, whose definition is not fixed, but relates to subjectivities and can be examined from a number of viewpoints. Should we promote a precise and “safe” approach, should we look for a more “freely” and “loosely” constructed teaching intervention, or should the cognitive subject be radically transformed? The above dilemmas form three completely different approaches, which will be examined in this article.

SEARCHING FOR A “SAFE” APPROACH

Recognition of fluidity and multiplicity in artistic activities, constitutes the prerequisite in relation to all other assumptions, and as such is rightly placed at the starting point of any educational intervention. This notion, commonplace as it may be in artistic circles, is far from being generally accepted in the area of art education, to the extent that, despite whatever declarations and theoretical views, in practice the dominant perception seeks, either directly or indirectly, some form of regulatory definition for the meaning of the artistic phenomenon, aiming at assuring a greater stability in educational practices. Within the above mentioned context, and in order to achieve some kind of control over the wide variety of artistic propositions, it is assumed that a somewhat “safer” approach is needed, and therefore the fundamental question “what is art?” should reopen, and, depending on our answer, to formulate an appropriate educational intervention.

The desire for the safety that a fixed definition would offer, is maybe justified, but the dead end it leads is also quite obvious: the number of answers is so wide, that in essence it would nullify the question about the nature of art, since they only reflect the wide variety of ways humans discovered to look at themselves and the world around them. Visual forms do not adhere to some inherent elegance nor are produced without reason; instead, they are invented by a variety of needs and circumstances, and intertwine – at all times in history – with dissimilar priorities, intentions and methods. The term “art” itself is used universally to describe diverse purposes, views and paths.

It is of interest to note that these diverse functions do not cancel one another, they are all equally legitimate. The ceaseless transformations in the area of arts, do not constitute an evolutionary path, where the most recent version is striving to be seen as more “complete” and “credible”, or where new forms endeavor to improve and complete previous attempts. Every artistic creation, every action, every new suggestion does not revise nor retract previous ones; instead, it opens up a new point of view which is added with equality into a vast and polymorphous composition as Gombrich (1995) says in the Introduction of his illustrious *Story of Art*. It’s not just the definition, it’s the entire line of questioning about art that is being reshaped and transformed under the pressure of this relentless redefining process. Searching for a permanent definition is therefore a proposition without substance, especially when its aim is to accommodate the totality of a single and concrete answer.

In compliance with the purpose of expression, the artistic act doesn't conform to generalized methodological restrictions, it escapes codification and formulated interpretation. The practices used for the artistic act extend beyond – without restrictions – all boundaries of “normal” forms and ideas, all conventions and restrictions, creating new unpredictable correlations and combinations. Similarly, the personal involvement of children in the creative act, despite whatever peculiarities, should not be dismissed and differentiated from artistic acts involving adult artists. The act towards expression, which resists standardization, must remain at the forefront, else it clouds a fundamental and substantial aspect that teaching should primarily strive to emphasize.

MINIMIZING EDUCATIONAL INTERVENTION

The curious attraction exercised by the stereotypical idea of the artistic creation as a spur of the moment inspiration, i.e. as an act whose unpredicted beginning is confined to the spontaneity of a single and unique moment, despite its ancient origins, remains quite resistant to time. At the same time, the superficial understanding of the meaning of multiplicity in artistic expression, seems to meet just as superficially with educational perceptions aimed at personality development through creative activities (Lowenfeld & Brittain, 1975, p. 12, 14). The meeting between these two parameters gave rise to the myth of the unmediated “self-expression”, which in fact is an obstructive factor in the efforts for the artistic development of children. Artistic creation is acknowledged on the basis that it is a wish for wandering without a specific prerequisite, aim, motive or limitation, consequently as something unfeasible, and hence there is no obvious reason to attempt to teach it. To the extent that art is viewed as the main stage of unprocessed sentiment, art education, in its effort to escape standardization, disengages itself from structured thought, aspiring chiefly to emotional outlets via artistic playing.

However, an educational condition exists when an action constitutes an opportunity to garner experiences and high-lighten specific contents. The educator's duty is to intervene, creating all the prerequisites so that the child learns about art, and also through art, honing their ability to investigate, to apprehend, learn, judge and reason (Gaillot, 1997; Ardouin, 2000, p. 105). A different viewpoint would be far removed from the purposes of art education, and at the opposite end from artistic act, since art is one of the ways through which man moves from the point where he just accumulates experiences to understand and process them. Personal involvement and systematic interaction with organized knowledge are prerequisites for aesthetic evolution and define the necessary parameters in the design and implementation of educational programs (Eisner, 1972).

LOOSENING THE EDUCATIONAL AREA

Postmodern theories move towards different directions; they advocate an appeal in favor of fluidity in the aesthetic field, and arrive in essence at a point where they renounce the autonomy of art as a distinct cultural area (Mouriki, 2003, p. 11). Even though the term “postmodern” is being used liberally, it hasn't been explained semantically. However, the loosely connected considerations subscribing to “postmodernism”, display – to a degree – a shared number of arguments, since in the place of rationalism, cultivated by modernism, they juxtapose their own multiplicity of rationalities, fragmenting every attempt for a complete and cohesive narrative (Kondylis, 2000). To the extent that art discards aesthetic and/or other limitations, it is transformed into a completely open concept, placed in a vague and confusing context, where everything, through powerful mediation systems, can be presumed to have an artistic quality.

Correspondingly, the intense commercialization of artistic production, its association with consumer products, its use in show business, and the market imposed trends, allow for greater flexibility in the aesthetic evaluation of any object, in order to turn it eventually into a merchandise.

Consequences in the area of education are not trivial. As art liquidates and disperses into the wider sphere of cultural production, all attempts for a cohesive narrative are deconstructed, and arguments are put together for a similarly daunting dispersal of visual arts education into the frame of cultural studies. This creates a convention (an environment), allowing for the coexistence of the most diverse and disparate forms of cultural expressions, without the need of a connective substrate. The problem, in such a case, arises through the danger of dismantling the semantic context, which permits an understanding of the meaning and content of art, an awareness of art's social functions and, especially, the exhibition of art's uniqueness and differentiating element.

Reservations, when facing such a development, does not entail proposing to evade the issue out of fear of what it entails. In any case, "postmodernism", as far as it concerns visual arts function, has been incorporated in teaching as one of its organic parts; one that broadens its scope, and – as is the case with every artistic expression – provides it with new aspects and areas of contemplation. Pluralism of ideas and arguments, multi-modality in visual forms, disengagement from the established west-oriented artistic values, repudiation of traditional discriminatory practices and reaction against established hierarchies – as parts of postmodern considerations – are all elements that enrich dialogue.

Critical pedagogy approaches attempted to utilize selectively a number of chosen aspects from the many manifestations of postmodernism, especially those corresponding to a cultural interpretation that accepts differentiation, seeks to promote various relationships of interaction and questions the domination of closed models (McLaren & Farahmandpur, 2005). Similar items enriched cultural studies programs, whose aim is the development of students' critical thinking, so as to enable them to recognize and interpret latent ideological messages in various visual forms. For the area of visual art education each new issue proposed in both the scientific field and in that of artistic production is an added challenge. The reverse would signify inability to coordinate with basic aspects of contemporary art, as well as incompetence in handling the ceaseless inversions and refutations that contribute to its character, though this does not mean that the cognitive field disintegrates under the weight of uncertainty, fracture or deconstruction.

ENLARGING THE AREA OF RESEARCH: A PROBLEMATIC REGARDING THE VISUAL OR THE END OF ART IN EDUCATION?

The dominant role of images in the moulding of thought and the structuring of identity, the multimodality in modern media and the variety of codes of expression, the flood of visual messages and the ideologically charged techniques used for their transmission, have all been perceived – for quite some time – as constituent ingredients of a cultural, primarily visual, landscape that needs to be explored. This wide spectrum of forms, as well as the ideas, values and opinions that surround them, and also the influence they exercise, has been termed visual culture and includes, along with visual arts, every type of creative expression addressed to vision (Arnheim, 1969; Kress, 2005). The ability to create meanings and concepts with the use of imagery has been defined as visual literacy, indicating a new and substantial educational duty.

For the area of visual arts education the approach of visual culture discloses an extremely interesting research area, but, simultaneously, presents a field for intense

contemplation (Duncum, 2002a, 2002b, 2003, 2010; Barrett, 2003; Freedman, 2003, 2011; Tavin & Anderson, 2003; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Stankiewicz, 2004). While the stagnation and certainties of traditional academic practices are still visible in school teaching, another perception has been rising, arguing that visual arts education ought to be renovated, in order to become the main study area of the visual culture. In its extreme version, this proposal is based on postmodernistic approaches, and considers the object itself as something lacking substantial meaning, when facing the new challenge of decoding images, without taking into consideration their aesthetic dimensions. This caused a shift in art education, from its traditional preoccupation with art production and creative expression, towards a dialogue about art as a socially constructed object, or as a social activity, or about art as being manipulative, colonizing and disenfranchising (Freedman, 2003). Even in cases where supporters of visual culture in art education (VCAE) recognize that art production is still part of the educational program, even then they raise issues as to how such an educational program promotes individualism, competitiveness and focuses excessively on western art, ignoring other, non-western, cultures. This shift and treatment of art and artistic education as visual culture, results thus into leading some others to voice concerns about whether VCAE may be the beginning of the end of art in art education (Dorn, 2005).

Preoccupation concerning the examination of the content of visual art lessons is only natural, but discussion about their incorporation by cultural studies is not always productive, especially when the subject studied is solely defined on the basis of its visual entity and/or whenever a point is reached where the art object is excluded or equaled with any other product created by the visual culture.

Surely, teaching should not be defined by the dichotomizing view about high and applied art, cultural optimism and the assurances forthcoming by modernistic proclamations, nor by a formalistic attempt to evaluate and classify visual forms. Equally unquestionable is the need for continued readjustments and radical changes in the scopes and practices, so as to incorporate both pluralism and multiculturalism in artistic viewpoints, as well as research regarding the power of images and its use as a means of inducement. All the above do not cancel the need for a systematic study of the phenomenon of art, and the necessity to designate it as a special territory with its own perceptible characteristics and functions.

The striving to keep up with current developments, which indeed should be a constant preoccupation, places the entire issue on a different basis. During art's evolution many different forms have been encountered, depictive, symbolic or conceptual, while elements are incorporated from all kinds of visual material (graphs, charts, advertisements or consumer products) when deemed suitable for teaching visual culture (Taylor & Ballengee-Morris, 2003). Comic books, graffiti, posters and the use of modern technologies, move along a wide range of multimodal expressions, allowing no rigid compartmentalization of visual work. On the other hand reproduction technology makes art imagery seem fleeting, available at any time and present everywhere, released from their original premise and the function they served in the past (Berger, 1972; Benjamin, 2008). Viewers are always called to examine visual information integrated in art works with a critical eye, process it and give a meaning to it. Therefore, synchronization with artistic reality induces the necessity in art education for an exceptionally wide and multidimensional nurturing of visual perception, empowering children in their need to perceive, comprehend and interpret all types of depictive material (Tavin, 2003).

The ability to recognize and interpret the codes from all types of images, which constitutes visual literacy, is of particular value in education and is closely associated with visual arts education, to the extent that it is not devoid of a deeper cultural content. Otherwise children are left with a passive stance, and consequently later, as adults, they will accept the fact that a complex institutional environment of experts undertakes, without their own participation, to present them with the attitude they ought to have towards visual realities, and

by association, their attitude towards all expressions of social life. However, when the area of arts becomes vague and ambiguous, then the meaning of art is in danger of becoming uninteresting, neutralized by abuse (Mouriki & Vaos, 2010). Despite declarations –arguments made for sometime now– about the demise of art, art is still existing, is a living reality, and accessibility to this field of culture is a social need and an obvious educational obligation.

This leads to a larger concern, in relation to the question as to the extent visual arts education, on its own, can respond effectively to this role. In broader terms, this concern is about the possibility that such an effort has a chance to succeed when, being confined to only a part of school life, it is asked to overcome the ceaseless flood of visual stimuli coming from outside the school. The concept of image study is extremely wide and needs to continually involve some sort of research, one that shouldn't stay confined to just one area of the school curriculum, because it requires the collaboration of various scientific fields such as aesthetics, semantics, psychology, sociology, anthropology or cultural studies (Pleios, 2005; Grosdos, 2010). Within this context, the proposals for a systematic study of visual culture are actually placing a claim for the expansion of boundaries and substantial interdisciplinary involvement, not restricted to the area of visual art education but education in total. When students familiarize themselves with the range of visual culture, they gain the ability to discover complex meanings, perform multiple interconnections as well as enhance their ability to create and have a critical stand, through the investigation of ideas, issues, opinions, and conflicts. In this way they are becoming aware of the world they live in (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004, p. 826).

Visual arts education is certainly a privileged area towards such an endeavor, so long as it manages to avoid being self-restricted and self-confined by contemporary pursuits. Images can be understood in a deeper level when visual conventions are properly decoded, when children, through their own participation, perceive and comprehend the reasons and means with which these images have been created. Of course such an endeavor by the area of visual arts education is beyond and above its own conservative and traditional context. As a matter of fact it has to become extensively enriched and reshuffle several of its practices, in order incorporate actions that allow understanding of the various forms associated with everyday experiences, which include meanings that escape conventional perception. Within this wider context the realm of visual arts education is vastly enlarged and gains multiple facets, as it acquires the rights to actively participate in cultural and social life. It is therefore necessary for it to seek out new connective links, in order to spread all over and permeate the entire school, through all cognitive subjects, all aspects of school life, the entire formal and informal curriculum. This awakens an attitude that is more active, a gaze that is more penetrating, more critical and more reflective in front of any type of visual form, any type of human creation. However, it would be completely contradictory if such a need leads to a chaotic diffusion of the subject in the constantly expanding sphere of visual culture.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: SEARCHING AND PROMOTING THE EXPRESSING ENDEAVOR

At this junction a critical point arises, that needs to be addressed and clarified: when art education is attempting to consider variety, mobility, ambiguity and even instability, as attributes of contemporary art practices, should it also incorporate such characteristics, considering them its own? From the point of view relative to our educational purposes, a serious risk of self-cancellation exists, since such arguments can only lead to further bewilderment and confusion. It should be made clear that we are not searching for a teaching setting where, in the name of plurality and ambivalence we may sacrifice its autonomy or make it subjective, vague, relativistic or contradictory; instead we are looking towards an educational

intervention that recognizes, promotes and, mainly, is able to handle subjectivity, vagueness, relativity or contradiction.

The content of visual arts education is a body comprised on the basis set by the various traits of the artistic phenomenon, it promotes its historical and cultural dimension, showcases the enormous complexity, the constant revisions and reassessments, while, at the same time, it places all of these under critical examination (Bamford, 2006). This research based viewpoint, which abstains from standardization as well as relativism, does not convey nor reproduce certainties. Evolution in art is founded on incessant confrontations with whatever may be seen as standard, and teaching owes to advance an area that is quite vast and offers variety, flexibility in options and is constantly changing. This pursuit introduces a different field, one with discernible characteristics, and this is where we should search for the unique contribution of art education as well as the tools and components for our intervention in education.

Involvement in the visual arts endeavor presents the opportunity to perceive and comprehend in practice essential concepts about art and art creation, to develop relative abilities and illuminate the relationship of all these with other sectors, areas of knowledge, aspects and situations of social and cultural life. Towards that direction, involvement in the visual arts endeavor is utilized in order to achieve the basic aims of art education, in other words to become aware of the reasons visual art is created, the processes used to produce it and the ways it should be considered (Herrmann, 2005; Costantino, 2007). Highlighting these aspects is possible via a teaching process which is tuned with the dimensions and the characteristics of artistic activity, one that accepts, allows, promotes and assures the authenticity of the children's experience while at the same time it enriches and supplies with additional knowledge.

For the educational condition, which is founded upon the special characteristics of visual art activities, this fluidity is an even bigger challenge. The unique character of the expressive effort is a fundamental factor and needs to be promoted, for the exact reason that it allows us to advance, comprehend and interpret the plurality of forms, the vitality, as well as the contradictions in contemporary art. The term "didactics of art" refers to the systematic investigation for appropriate prerequisites and suitable methods with which the educational intent becomes possible allowing effective contact with the phenomenon of art, in all aspects, expressions and dimensions.

The uncertainty resulting by the multitude of theoretical arguments on art doesn't mean that we should abandon our quest. The issue about the way we may identify the elements which can provide the basis with which we can proclaim a work as a work of art is constant and critical. "Without a discernible difference between art works and common objects there is not rational basis for us to decide what to teach" (Efland, 2007, p. 40). In other words, there is always a need to be able to identify something as art, even if the item fails to exhibit any fixed characteristics or specific pre-set qualities. This means that there is a need for us to be able to recognize something as different from other forms of expression or daily routines or other spheres in our lives. And this particular "something" may be approached, in a quite broad and not static way, as an object or act which incorporates different ideas and meanings every time, and which teaches us to see and ultimately gives us something to think about, as no analytical or other work or common object can (Merleau-Ponty, 1993, p. 114). Art captures the many and varied ways with which a human projects the meaning of his relation with his own self and the world. From this point of view, art is a term highlighting the meeting between an object, which bears the imprint of human presence at a specific time and a subject who sees, feels, thinks and lives in a specific social and cultural environment.

As a result and in proportion with all of the above, art teaching recognizes that access to the field of artistic expression doesn't require consolidation of a mechanistic system of aesthetic or morphoplastic standards, to be used as the basis prescribing the path a creation ought to follow. It is formed accentuating the significance of a *personal attitude*. Therefore, the

stake for visual art classes is the formation of the prerequisites and conditions that facilitate development of this “attitude” by encouraging, a) the effort towards expression, b) the searching for the different in every instance ideas and /or meanings that are integrated in a work of art. As we noted also elsewhere “Placing the expressive effort in the very beginning of both artistic creation and educational intervention, provides the key to understand the principal reason for which art transcends rules, standards, and more so stereotypes and at the same time shows that the practice of art is in itself fulfilling” (Mouriki & Vaos, 2010, p. 136-137), because “it satisfies certain expressive needs and cultural functions through the making of objects that objectify meaning” (Dorn, 2005, p. 50).

Gombrich’s phrase “there is no art, just artists” was never before more to the point, although in an apprehensive way, as it describes the freedom to utilize unlimited possibilities and expressions. Every artist can use an infinite combination of means and techniques, to adopt any kind of attitude, merge styles from different times, exploit works from the past and be able to draw simultaneously from all kinds of disparate sources. As for the observers, if the past restricted them to a universal visual standard, while modernism provided them a giant step ahead, now, it’s possibly their turn to play the defining role; they are expected to give meaning, interpret, decide, choose and judge. It may be that teaching cannot hide any longer behind the safety of a fixed definition that it needs to cultivate and propagate, it can however utilize and motivate an attitude; that of persistent reflective and critical vigilance in view of a multidimensional field, one that ceaselessly expands and rearranges itself.

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