Young adolescents' imagery preferences in art appraisal

學童在藝術鑑賞時對視覺圖像的偏好要素研究

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Abstract

Preference indicates a positive attitude toward stimuli and has been theoretically or psychologically associated with "personality development, exploratory behavior, and adaptive capacity". An assessment of children's imagery preferences identifies critical information on which children base their aesthetic judgments. From a constructivist perspective, such information can be used to provide meaningful art learning experiences. This paper reports several emerging characteristics that might have been factors in the imagery preference of a group of students of junior high school age. These possible factors are derived specifically from a web-based art appraisal activity in a computer-mediated art workshop developed and implemented by the author. The study of children's imagery preferences has significant implications for the development of constructivist art programs.

Keywords: Visual art education, imagery preference, art appreciation, art appraisal

摘　要

「偏好」是個人對外在事物的一種積極態度的反應，它和心理學人格發展、探索行為、適應能力等理論，有密切的關聯。評估學生對視覺圖像的偏好情形，可以發現學生美學判斷的準則，此類發現，有助於教師瞭解學生的視覺藝術判斷運用的情形，進而規劃出有意義的藝術教學活動。本文是一項教室個案研究，主要分析影響國中學生在藝術鑑賞時，對視覺圖像的偏好特徵要素，資料來自由作者所設計和測試的線上視覺藝術鑑賞活動。本研究發現，從建構主義（constructivist）的角度來看，在藝術教學的設計和規劃上，「偏好」研究具有重要的意義。

關鍵字：視覺藝術教育，圖像偏好，藝術鑑賞

Introduction

A constructivist approach to education uses student's prior knowledge and experience to facilitate authentic learning and instruction (Bruner, 1973). Art educators who embrace constructivist tenets design and implement curricula with students' interests, needs, knowledge, and attitudes toward art in mind. Visual images such as slides, art reproductions, postcards, and electronic images are prevalent and indispensable in the artroom because of their concrete manifestations of abstract ideas, art concepts, cultural meanings, and/or sociopolitical messages. Not surprisingly, when it comes to selecting visuals for classroom practices (e.g., classroom art dialogue, critique, and appreciation), art educators tend to rely on their own professional or aesthetic preferences. More often than not, art educators choose certain images based on the prime consideration of how such images can accomplish curriculum goals, a practice that often overlooks students' existing or prior knowledge. As regards aesthetic preference, the gap between those of art educators and their students is ongoing (Jeffers, 1997).

Preference indicates a positive attitude toward stimuli. Referring to Bezruezko and Schroeder's (1996) work, Salkind and Salkind (1997) pointed out that preference has been theoretically associated with "personality development, exploratory behavior, and adaptive capacity" (p. 246). Not only does preference serve as an agent that drives humans to acquire the knowledge and critical skills necessary for survival, but it is also a key element in human learning or intellectual development. In art education, it is generally assumed that when educational images [1] are selected and used based on students' artistic tastes, they are more likely to capture students' attention and keep them engaged in classroom tasks, which may ultimately increase the effectiveness of learning and instruction.

A review of visual preference studies reveals that research on imagery preference has consisted predominantly of quantitative inquiries conducted by perceptual or cognitive psychologists. Such studies generally ask subjects to rank order or choose from presented visual stimuli (i.e., pictures of art reproductions). An artistic preference test is

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[1] Referring to all types of visual images used for educational purposes.

normally administered to subjects to indicate their degree of preference on a Likert scale, for instance, the Salkind Art Preference Test (McWhinnie, 1989). These quantitative studies use large samples to obtain patterns of preference through typical statistical procedures such as frequency distributions, a method which often fails to give subjects ample space to state reasons underlying their respective decisions. As a result, these quantitative preference studies tend to produce overgeneralized outcomes for student aesthetic preferences. Moreover, because of the difficulty of controlling visual variables and the lack of a reliable measuring instrument, conflicting findings have also been reported. Most studies, for example, have concluded that younger children prefer realistic art to other styles (Hardiman, 1977, 1982; Miller, 1936; Ramsey, 1979; Rudisell, 1952; Rump & Southgate, 1967; Taunton, 1980). The same tendency has been reported for college age students; data from the Salkind Art Preference Test administered to a group of college students (McWhinnie, 1990) suggested that they prefer realistic art over "the more abstract as well as the more spontaneous and disorganized..." (p. 16). Jeffers (1997) claimed that people tend to favor realistic art unless they have prior art training. However, other studies have concluded that younger children prefer abstract art (Bowker & Sawyers, 1988; Gardner, Winner, & Kircher, 1975).

No matter the findings, it has been art style that has been the center of investigation in most studies. For example, Hardiman and Zernich (1977) examined the mediating factors that might have influenced children (grades 3-4, 5-6, and 7-8) on their preference responses to pictorial stimuli. They concluded that most children, across these three developmental stages, consider style a determinant factor in making artistic judgment, partly because most have not acquired adequate art knowledge to discriminate between different visual properties in a painting. Nonetheless, instead of focusing on style, some studies have asserted that subject matter and color are the two major determinants in young children's visual preference (Frechtling & Davidson, 1970; Machotka, 1966). Gender is another often reported factor influencing children's visual references. For example, girls tend to favor more personal and intimate subject matter and prefer sensuous, softer, or less expressive color (Johnson, & Knapp, 1963). A review of preference studies by Jakobsdóttir, Krey, and Sales (1994) summarized several characteristics of gender-related imagery references, stressing that girls like images that

are peaceful or colorful or that detail female characters, plants, and animals; whereas boys tend to prefer images that depict vehicles, danger, male characters, and action. Female adolescents tend to like female characters, with whose characteristics, sentiments, and emotions they identify (Pickford, as cited in Chalmers, 1977).

The investigation of imagery preference appears to be much more complicated than discussed above. It may be argued that, in addition to gender, preference involves other factors such as personality, age, social class, situated environment, education, maturity, and enculturation, all of which affect the ways in which people respond to visual images. Moreover, although some studies have claimed to control variables like color and subject matter in order to examine art style preference (Bowker & Sawyers, 1988), such control of visual properties also seems questionable in imagery preference research because an image or painting is composed of highly qualitative visual elements that go far beyond the three most commonly identified variables of style, subject matter, and color. Therefore, no one of these variables can be validly controlled for since variations exist within any particular variable. Additionally, one challenge of conducting imagery preference studies is analyzing to what extent one's imagery preference affects his or her artistic judgment. In most imagery preference studies, it is generally assumed that one's preference for a particular image would result in his or her favorable judgment about this image. Given this understanding of previous findings in imagery preference and the complexities involved in conducting visual preference studies, this present analysis is more concerned with identifying the possible characteristics or factors that may have influenced the junior high school participants' imagery preferences.

Research Purpose and Method

The purpose of this study was to (a) identify the emerging characteristics or possible factors that might have influenced the junior high school participants' imagery preferences in art appraisal and (b) pinpoint ways in which such understanding can be used to make meaningful learning and instructional connections.

In the fall of 2003, a computer-mediated art workshop was carried out for a group of junior high school aged participants from diverse ethnic backgrounds at a midwestern university in the United States. Ten students (4 male and 6 female) were enrolled in the

semester-long workshop that consisted of an orientation and two studio problems. As a constructivist teacher-researcher, I was especially interested in finding out more information about my students' artistic interests, concerns, and preferences in the workshop orientation so that subsequent lessons could be adjusted to enable greater instructional connections. The aim of the orientation was thus twofold: (a) to acquaint participants with computer imaging, and (b) to allow the instructor to gather basic insight into participants' artistic interests, needs, prior art knowledge, and learning experience. Data were collected through class dialogue, online forum, and a series of individual Web-based writing activities. This paper reports the findings specifically from a Web-based art appraisal writing activity given to all participants during the workshop orientation. This art appraisal activity was presented in the form of a Web-based survey consisting of a number of questions, images (visual stimuli) and text boxes for the participants to type in their responses. With the understanding that previous imagery preference studies were mainly quantitative, which use large samples to obtain statistical patterns of preference and often fail to give subjects an opportunity to state reasons underlying their respective decisions, I was more interested in finding out and analyzing students' comments or responses to the images shown to them in this Web-based art appraisal activity.

The Web-based art appraisal activity included 15 digital images in varied art styles, ranging from commercial and media images (e.g., a cigarette ad, a graffiti-style painting, an digital collage of 911 terrorism, a Japanese Manga picture, and a commercial Flash ™ animation) to fine art pieces (e.g., works by Leonardo da Vinci, Jackson Pollock, Salvador Dali, Roy Lichtenstein, and the American artist Mary Plaisted Austin). Two images of activist art by the feminist artist Barbara Kruger were also shown[2]. To introduce the Web-based art appraisal activity, I created a scenario in which the students were told to presume themselves established artists in their own communities who had been asked by the community art museum to judge 15 pictures submitted for an upcoming museum exhibit. First, the students (as jurors) had to rank each picture on a Likert-type scale of *excellent, good, average, below average*, and *not acceptable* and give

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[2] Due to the limitation of text in describing visual images, this Web-based art appraisal instrument and the images used are temporary available at
http://www.coe.uh.edu/arted/sheng_porfolio/porfolio/teaching/appraisal.htm
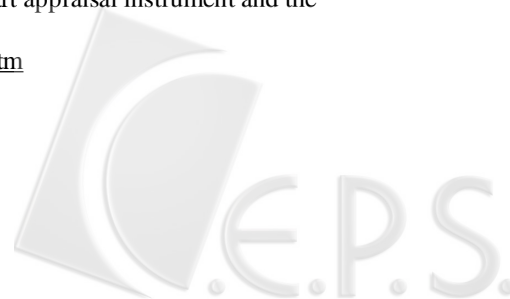
specific comments or suggestions in a Web-based text box next to each image to support their decisions. To do so, students were expected to read the meaning(s) in each work. The students understood that only pictures ranked *good* or *excellent* would qualify for display in the art museum. As planned, this activity not only guided the students to find potential meanings within each visual image but also revealed critical information on which they based their artistic judgments. The students took approximately 50 minutes to complete this Web-based art appraisal activity in the computer lab. Student data were then analyzed to identify several emerging characteristics that might have been factors in the imagery preference of this group of students of junior high school age. These characteristics or possible factors were morality, realism, exposure, originality, coloration, coolness, and relevancy.

Morality

Moral judgment was a persistently significant factor in students' artistic appraisal; most particularly, when they had to decide the appropriateness of artworks or visual images for the museum exhibit. For instance, all students completely rejected the image of a Joe Camel cigarette advertisement because of its blatant encouragement of cigarette smoking. Apparently, the students understood the potential heath problems associated with smoking cigarettes. One student, Lisa[3], criticized the surgeon general's warning label in the advertisement as being barely noticeable, adding, "I don't really support smoking, anyway." Another image rejected by six students was an art-world recognized graffiti painting by Jean-Michel Basquiat comprised of simplistic scrawled faces of street people, randomly unrecognizable marks, and ambiguous lettering. Even though two students did like the bright colors and mixed emotions in this painting, Jean regarded graffiti as "a form of destruction." Penny pointed out that graffiti artists "did not put a lot of work into it." In other words, being mainly interested in making unruly scribbles, they did not take their work seriously. Another reason the students disliked Basquiat's graffiti work was that they equated it with violence, destruction, urban pollution, and environmental unsightliness, all of which seemingly failed to reach what they considered

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[3] To protect the participants' identities, the names used in this paper are pseudonyms.

a morally acceptable standard. Sharing similar characteristics to the graffiti was the abstract action painting by Jackson Pollock, whose meaning the students were unable (or had too little information) to read. They made such neutral comments as "cool," "fun," "busy," "chaotic," "showing feeling," and "not much effort put into it." Thus, the students interpreted Pollock's abstract painting in relation to their emotions and feelings and did not see its resemblance to graffiti. Interestingly, since no moral conflicts were raised in this painting, none of the students rejected the painting on the same moral grounds as they had on Basquiat's graffiti. This suggested that the students involved their moral judgments in appraising art.

Further support for the symbiotic relationship between moral judgment and artistic appraisal emerged from the student appraisals of a montage about 911 terrorism from the Internet and a violent comic strip by the leading Pop artist, Roy Lichtenstein. Both images conveyed a similar message of violence and destruction. The 911 collage not only contained several graphic photographs—the collapsed twin towers, the moment of explosion, fire fighters performing various rescue missions, and President Bush in a moment of prayer—but had a catchphrase across the top: "This day should forever live in our hearts." Lichtenstein's contemporary painting also emphasized extreme violence, a man's head being punched by a strong fist in comic strip style with the word "Pow" exploding from the junction of the man's head and the fist to emphasize the force. Yet, even though both images depicted the same issue of violence, the students interpreted and appraised them differently.

Eight students thought the 911 terrorism collage a good or excellent work of art because it "shows the event in different ways," "supports our country," "helps remember the terrible events on September 11," " represents the people that have died," "has a lot of meaning," and "is put together nicely." They were not particularly reminded that images of the 911 terrorism appear frequently in newspapers, on TV, or on the Internet. For them, the collage was a meaningful visual representation that should be displayed in the museum for commemoration. However, the students did not view Lichtenstein's famous painting of a violent comic strip in the same light. Nine out of ten rated it an average picture, with Jean emphasizing that "[i]t is about violence and I don't like violence," and Cody adding, "Kinda creepy and it should be more artistic." The above observations

seemed to suggest that, when it came to art appraisal, the students cared less about whether the works they appraised had been done by recognized contemporary artists than about their own moral standards and current concerns. For example, even though the 911 terrorism collage was an everyday media image, the majority agreed that it was a good or excellent work of art. This finding has significant implications for the development of a social issues-based art program especially when it comes to selecting visual images for class exploration. It implies that a socially responsive art program may be more personally meaningful to students if the visual images explored in this program depict unjust social practices that resonate with or raise students' moral consciousness.
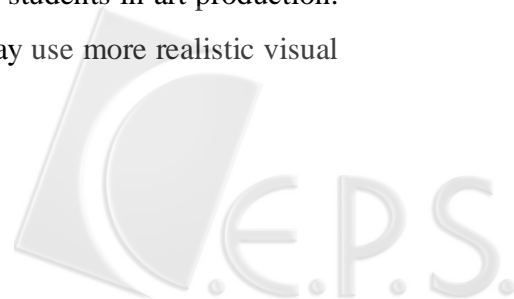
Realism/Degree of Exposure

From a developmental perspective, earlier art educators (e.g., Lowenfeld, 1947; Edwards, 1979) have reported that early adolescents (12 to 16 years of age) tend to produce "adult-like" artworks, making visual representations of real-life objects as realistic as possible, meaning their every attempt is to master drawing techniques fundamental to making a realistic work of art. According to Lowenfeld, because children at this stage no longer perceive artmaking as a spontaneous activity, they are increasingly critical of their own work. In other words, adolescents can become easily frustrated if unable to overcome technical barriers to making realistic art. However, this so-called crisis period in adolescent artistic development was not significantly evident among the junior high students in my workshop. Rather, regardless of gender, half of them also exhibited preference for non-representational art. For instance, five out of the ten student participants enjoyed experimenting with a variety of artistic styles such as fantasy-based rendering, graffiti-like lettering, personal symbol making, and abstract painting (i.e., the composition of shapes, lines, and textures). The popularity of fantasy-based drawing and especially graffiti-like lettering indicated that the students' visual environment had perhaps become an invisible teacher influencing their artistic development (c.f., Duncum, 1993; Wilson & Wilson, 1977).

One useful method for examining the extent of adolescent preference for realism is an analysis of whether they favor realistic over non-realistic paintings in an art appraisal activity. To illuminate this preference, I used a realistic self-portrait by Ellen

Day Hale (American painter, 1855-1940) and the well-known portrait of Mona Lisa by Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). However, to prevent students from making intentional comparisons or contrasts between them, these two images were not positioned next to each other on the computer platform during the art appraisal activity. In actuality, Hale's and da Vinci's portraits share many similarities in terms of realism, subject matter, artistic style, coloration, stage-like emphasis, the gracefulness of the women portrayed, and the overall tone of the painting. From the researcher's view, these commonalities, especially their comparable degree of realism, make it challenging for an art professional to choose one over the other. However, the students did not respond to these two paintings in the same manner.

Most students immediately recognized the Mona Lisa, and the majority (6 out of 9) pointed out that it was an excellent picture: "[I]t's the Mona Lisa; her eyes follow you wherever you go," "the artist seemed to capture her personality," and "I've seen it so many times." Interestingly, the same number of the students indicated that Hale's portrait was about average, not strong enough for exhibiting in the art museum. In addition, some of their responses to Hale's portrait were rather simplistic: "It's OK," "not enough color," and "it's too neat." It should also be pointed out that, because this Web-based art appraisal activity was individual, the students had no idea what their peers had said about each presented digital image of a painting. Four students simultaneously stressed that the colors in Hale's painting were too dull, meaning, as Erika specifically suggested, that "[i]t needs more color to be pleasing to the eye." Seemingly, the students failed to recognize the considerable similarity between the coloration in Hale's portrait and that of the da Vinci, because none of them suggested that the Mona Lisa needed more color. This difference in appraisal may result from the lesser exposure of Hale's art to the world (or the art world). The students' responses all seem to suggest that their preference for the Mona Lisa resulted from their familiarity with the painting (e.g., having been taught that it is a fine work), implying that artworks having the most exposure are more likely to be accepted by adolescents, including, in this research context, the junior high students participating in this class. In art classrooms, art teachers often facilitate class discussion about art with the help of visual images before engaging their students in art production. To increase student participation in discussion, art teachers may use more realistic visual

images or representational images that depict subject matter most familiar to their students.

Originality

Whereas degree of exposure remains an important aspect, student interpretations of four images in different art styles revealed that realism was not the exclusive criterion for the adolescents in my workshop to determine whether or not a work of art was acceptable for a juried exhibit. These randomly selected images represent the four artistic styles of realism (da Vinci's portrait of Mona Lisa), impressionism (an indoor still-life painting by the contemporary artist, Brian Curtis), abstract expressionism (the abstract painting Portrait of Juan de Pareja by Salvador Dali), and a Flash ™ computer animation of a woman's portrait by an unknown artist (taken from the Internet). The identity of the artists or creators of these four art pieces remained concealed while the students were assessing the pieces. As pointed out previously, most students immediately recognized the Mona Lisa and nine out of ten agreed it was an excellent work of art. Thus, students perhaps overwhelmingly favored the portrait not only because it exhibited realistic qualities, but also because they were familiar with it or already knew something about its background as a widely recognized work of art. Consequently, realism and frequency of exposure could still have been the two factors students most considered when ranking this painting excellent. In contrast, the class rated Dali's abstract painting from good to excellent with the majority (eight out of ten) indicating that it was a "good picture." Yet Dali's abstract painting—organic floating shapes and lines seemingly being swept by a giant cyclone through a deep black hole—gives the impression of a restless dream in a long stormy night, a difficult image for my junior high students to decipher without referring to its caption or further information. Notwithstanding, student reactions to this painting were considerably instructive: "It's very *interesting*," "it is *different*," "it could be the inside of somebody's mind," "very cartoonish and fun to look at," "it looks *different*," and "it seems to tell you something" [emphasis added]. Since decoding the meaning of this painting was almost impossible, the students used their feelings and emotions as a source of reference, and their responses suggest the importance of the very originality (e.g., being different and interesting) that makes Dali's painting successful.

Since the criterion of realism was never involved in their judgments of this abstract painting, it is highly likely that the students accepted Dali's abstract painting because it possessed this basic ingredient of originality and their knowledge that Dali is a famous artist.

Lowenfeld 's work (1947) suggests that children of this age group tend to create realistic art. Naturally they would evaluate a work of art based on its realistic qualities. In addition to the factor of realism as identified above, my students' responses further reveal that they would judge a non-realistic work art favorably if it appeared different and interesting to them. In other words, this illuminates that this group of junior high school students also values non-realistic artworks if they show some level of originality.

Coloration

Numerous earlier dialogues about art with K-12 students have indicated, more often than not, that in discussing what they liked about a work of art, students judge its success by its specific coloration, thereby stressing use of color over subject matter. Therefore, for my junior high participants, coloration might outweigh other factors for artistic preference. For instance, as shown above, the students thought a realistic painting by Hale an average picture; one student even pointing out that it was too dull and required more colors. In my prior teaching experience, I had particularly noted that younger children tend to express their predilection for bright (e.g., primary and secondary) rather than dull, dark colors. These junior high workshop participants also showed this tendency. For example, the next image appraised by the students was an impressionist work by Curtis who uses geometric shapes to construct a representational painting. This piece, a still life, consists of a desk as the focus and a large panoramic glass window through which is visible green outdoor scenery. The students rated it from good to excellent, giving comments such as "I like the reflection off the floor," "I like the colors that make the floor look like it has a reflection," "There was a good contrast in colors," "It is beautiful with all of the colors," and "I really like the way the artist put the colors together." Once again, the students had no knowledge of how others had appraised this painting. Surprisingly, the student comments overwhelmingly indicate that coloration was a determinant factor in their decisions about Curtis's painting. This evaluation
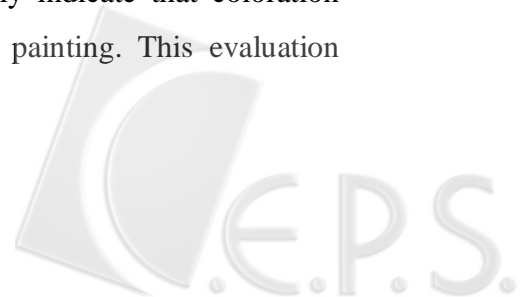
typifies numerous instances in which these junior high students expressed their liking for a painting because it showed bright, saturated colors. Art teachers of elementary schools have long noted that their pupils prefer primary and secondary colors and frequently use them in their artistic expressions. It is informative to learn that the reference for bright colors extends beyond the elementary school years. The majority of my junior high school students, as found in this study, also favor bright, saturated colors when it comes to art appraisal.

Coolness

To determine whether the workshop students would view computer-generated animation differently than traditional types of art, the activity also included evaluation of a Flash ™ computer animation of a woman's portrait by an unknown artist (taken from the Internet) showing several stages of a metamorphosis, from a variety of colored dots to lines to shapes and eventually to a female portrait. The students voiced surprise at the magical transitions as colored dots slowly turned into woman's facial features: "It's cool" (uttered by five people), "I like animation," " It's neat to see the transformations," "I like the way they put it all together," and " Nice way of bringing it up." Apparently, all students liked the rather magical, unexpected transitions of the animation and, therefore, approved it as a good or an excellent work, suggesting by their responses an actual preference for this animation piece over the "fine art" pieces of realism and abstract expressionism. In their own terms, the animation was "so cool." Thus, "coolness" became another notable, characteristic student judgment of artwork. Art teachers particularly, wishing to have better insight into student's artistic preferences, may start to wonder what the adolescent means by "cool" art. Despite the fact that teen's notion of coolness is highly complex and cannot be easily defined, Zolle (1999) offers a useful insight into teen's assessment of what is cool. He believes that a cool product for youth must be associated with quality. Here, the qualities of movement, unexpected transformation, coloration, novelty, and trendiness in this animation may contribute to what they believe to be cool.

Media critic Douglas Rushkoff, in the *Merchants of Cool* (2001), examined the symbiotic relationship between the youth media marketing and today's teen culture as

youngsters look to the pop media for the construction of identity. Because the notion of coolness has become an increasingly important element for today's youth and their pop culture, any business associated with such coolness is likely to be profitable. Therefore, the media marketing industry targeting youth has made every effort to identify what cool means to teenagers so they can create cool products to match teenagers' distinctive tastes. However, most such attempts have been in vain. Rushkoff argued that once coolness is identified, it immediately loses its validity and must be replaced; therefore, the notion of coolness in today's youth's culture is constantly changing and cannot be pinpointed. For teenagers, coolness can mean any cutting-edge element ranging from material possessions to social behaviors and personal attitudes. The connection between coolness and artistic creativity is evident in how teenagers dress in order to stand out as individuals among their peers. The junior high workshop participants (regardless of gender) overwhelmingly agreed that animation is much "cooler" than other types of art, suggesting that teenagers, when appreciating or judging art, are likely to value visual images or artworks that resonate with their sense of coolness.

The notion of coolness has critical implications for the development of computer-mediated art programs for adolescents in the age of digital technology. Advances in computer technology have dramatically transformed modern society into an arena where digital devices are now indispensable. The students of the digital generation are constantly immersing themselves in "cool" computer devices. If computer resources are available, art teachers may find success teaching an animation studio project to students who have formerly exhibited disinterest in art or conventional forms of art. Incorporating computer media into art education may convey a sense of coolness to junior high school students, help stimulate their learning experience, and allow them to recognize the pragmatic aspects of art education in contemporary life.

Relevancy

The art appraisal activity was one initial pre-assessment task that allowed the instructor to examine the students' general art knowledge and initial reactions to and perceptions of activist art in particular. Because one ultimate curriculum goal of this workshop was to empower the students to articulate and address their personal and social
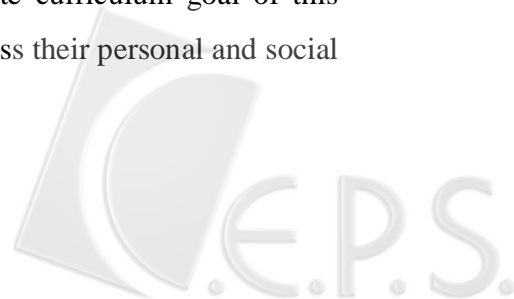
issues through a series of instructor-developed art learning activities, the activity included a number of images related to social issues. Contemporary activist artists (e.g., the Guerrilla Girls and Barbara Kruger) use commercial design techniques to create activist pieces that juxtapose and parody images from pop culture media with those from modernist art history texts. Their intention is to raise existing social problems and issues of equity and to advocate for substantial social changes through which to construct a more livable and equitable society. Among the images used for workshop discussion were the 911 terrorism collage by un unknown artist (referred to earlier), an image representing gender inequity by the Guerrilla Girls, a feminist photo collage entitled *You Are Not Yourself* by Kruger; and a collage about the war in Vietnam by the artist Mary Plaisted Austin (1919–1996). These four images were chosen because each explicitly addressed either the issue of gender, terrorism, war, or peace.

The large-sized poster by the Guerrilla Girls portrays a reclining nude female figure positioned to resemble Ingres's *Odalisque*, whose nude features have frequently been appropriated in classic Western painting to symbolize stereotypical female beauty. In contrast, the Guerrilla Girls' female is masked by a hairy, exaggerated gorilla's head while a line appearing in the work asks, "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" This question raises the critical issue of how female bodies have long been commoditized in the Western male-dominated art world. Given that the art appraisal activity was intended to pre-measure students' ability to read socially or politically responsive art forms, no caption or further information was given when each image was presented. Nine students rated this political piece from unacceptable to average, with four appraising it as average because "[i]t's an advertisement," "[n]ot very good artwork, but an important thing to think about," "[i]t looks strange," and "[w]eird." Two students acknowledged the critical question asked in this work but still did not think the artwork acceptable for showing in the museum. Near all students stressed that the Guerrilla Girls' work was an advertisement rather than a fine art piece, while eight did not seem to understand the feminist message this piece conveyed.[4]

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[4] Data were insufficient for the researcher to conclude whether or not these students understood this piece.

Similar reactions were elicited by the photo collage, *You are not Yourself,* by Kruger, a feminist artist widely recognized for her socially responsive photo collages that combine contemporary visual images from popular culture media and contexts. In her series of collages, Kruger challenges gender stereotypes and raises important questions about issues of cultural (mis)representations of power, identity, and sexuality. In *You are not Yourself*, Kruger juxtaposes several segments of a woman's facial features to form an incomplete head profile, the overall image seemingly torn apart by an extremely violent force. The title text is placed across the image to challenge viewer perceptions. Despite its powerful statement on women's identity in current society—one that questions women's social and domestic roles—only two students thought that Kruger's work "makes you think." Over half of the students were unable to decode its meaning. As a result, they rejected the work.

The focal point of Austin's collage is an American soldier fighting in Vietnam being crucified. Behind him, various collaged photographs depicting soldiers and civilians struggling to survive the battlefield, a portrait of Christ, and a segment of a newspaper article clearly demonstrate the devastation of Vietnam and the civilian longing for peace, a theme underscored by the large text "war/peace" written across the upper right corner of the work. Yet, even though half of the students responded that Austin's work "shows what happens in life," "has a lot of things to look at," and "is very interesting," overall they concluded that the work was not strong enough to be accepted by the museum. In addition, five failed to articulate why they thought the picture average.

Even though the theme of Austin's collage is comparable to that of the 911 terrorism collage the students would have displayed in the museum, they rejected Austin's Vietnam piece. This contrasting result might be attributable not only to the visual elements presented in each art work but also to the timeliness of the 911 terrorism attack viewed so many times on television by the students. Thus, the results from student evaluation of these four social issues-based images seemingly suggest a greater concern for social issues actually experienced in their world. In other words, gender issues and Vietnam specifically might be too experientially and historically distant for the students to comprehend immediately. The appraisal of these four social issues-related images yielded critical information about my students. First, they primarily employed formalist

approaches to decoding visual images, which was undoubtedly influenced by their prior art education. For instance, most students regarded activist collages as advertisements and three students coincidentally stressed that the collage "was put together nicely." Second, they were more aware of social issues closely related to their own lives.

From my teaching experience, I have noted that students in this age group seem to have little exposure to discussing social issues, or have surprisingly limited responses when asked to share their opinions about societal issues. This phenomenon seemingly confirms that they have just started exploring their social worlds as part of their current stage of psychosocial development which, according to Erikson (1968), sees them focus more on identity formation and forming peer groups than on societal issues. Nevertheless, the student evaluation of the four social issues-based images indicates that they have a greater concern for social issues actually experienced in their world. Relevancy is indeed an essential ingredient in any authentic learning and a critical factor in selecting visual images for constructivist art instruction. Art teachers should pay attention to whether or not their curricula or used visual resources are relevant to their students' everyday lives if they are to provide them with a meaningful art program.

Conclusion

In this age of computer technology, children are exposed to an increasing amount of electronic images in which are embedded, either implicitly or explicitly, a particular set of beliefs, values, and attitudes to which the children become cognitively susceptible. Those images to which the children can relate are most likely to have a major impact on how they think, act, and learn in their immediate environment. Pedagogically, such visual images are particularly important because they play an essential role in illustrating abstract ideas and concepts in the educational setting; indeed, they have become an indispensable instructional aid for initiating classroom artistic inquiries. Nonetheless, when educators select and use such educational images based on their own aesthetic preferences or professional judgments, the relevancy of such images to their students seems questionable. In contrast, when student imagery preferences are factored into art curriculum design and implementation, the students may be more likely to pay attention to and be engaged in learning tasks. Thus, art educators who strive for constructivist art

education should be knowledgeable about their students' art preferences and be able to connect them to existing curriculum goals to maximize educational outcomes. A basic understanding of the criticality of morality, realism, exposure, originality, coloration, "coolness," and relevancy in the imagery preferences of young adolescents should better equip art educators with the fundamental knowledge for making meaningful instructional connections and providing students with constructivist art learning experiences.

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