

CONTEMPORARY *Issues in* Education

Y V O N N E G A U D E L I U S

P E G S P E I R S

Contributors to this anthology, contemporary art educators from around the United States, Canada, and Australia, approach the teaching of art at the elementary level from multiple perspectives and present art in ways that expand traditional notions of elementary art. By using an issues-based approach we have the capacity to consider multiple ways to view art as a part of the school curriculum, alternative ways to view students, teachers, and their relationships with the local community, different pedagogical strategies to teach art, a critical selection of content to include in the curriculum, strategies to incorporate issues into teaching and learning, contexts as a part of understanding art, non-school sites for learning, and issues of difference.

The Traditions of Art Education

Before we proceed to the chapters and activities in this book, we shall introduce and discuss the traditional formalist, child-centered, and discipline-based approaches that have, in combination, long been the foundation of much of art education. Many of the authors in this book make reference to these traditions and it is important that readers have a basic understanding of the focus of each approach, recognize the differences between them, and understand the limits of each. In addition, we include overviews of other topics that have had an impact on art education in important ways and are referred to by some of the authors. These topics include: liberatory pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and social reconstructionism.

Before we begin these discussions we ask you to think about the art education that you received, especially in elementary school. What did you learn? What types of activities did you engage in? Did you ask critical questions about art or the world? What was the focus of your art education? Did you look at and talk about works of art? As you read the brief descriptions that follow, you may recognize your own experiences of art in elementary school.

Formalism

Immanuel Kant's eighteenth-century theory of aesthetic response serves as the philosophical underpinning of formalism. Over the next two centuries aestheticians, art critics, and theorists fueled formalism's development and sustainability. Kant's theory is based on aesthetic judgement, how people respond to works of art, how they interpret art, and how they judge it based on nothing but the work itself (Reese, 1980). Kant believed that when people view artwork without any personal or outside influences or contexts they make the same determinations about the work (Barrett, 2000).

Arthur Wesley Dow (1899) later introduced the elements and principles of design; formalist qualities in art developed from looking at the commonalities of artworks. A formalist approach considers line, color, shape/form, texture,

anthology, contemporary art educators from Canada, and Australia, approach the teaching of art from multiple perspectives and present art in ways that challenge elementary art. By using an issues-based approach to consider multiple ways to view art as a part of our lives, different ways to view students, teachers, and their communities, different pedagogical strategies to address content to include in the curriculum, strategies for teaching and learning, contexts as a part of understanding art for learning, and issues of difference.

Education

In chapters and activities in this book, we shall introduce traditional formalist, child-centered, and discipline-based approaches, in combination, long been the foundation of art education. The authors in this book make reference to the importance that readers have a basic understanding of art, to recognize the differences between them, and understand them. In addition, we include overviews of other topics in art education in important ways and are referred to as such. These topics include: liberatory pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and constructionism.

In our discussions we ask you to think about the art education you received, especially in elementary school. What did you learn? What did you engage in? Did you ask critical questions? What was the focus of your art education? Did you learn about art? As you read the brief descriptions that follow, reflect on your own experiences of art in elementary school.

The nineteenth-century theory of aesthetic response serves as the foundation of formalism. Over the next two centuries aesthetic theorists fueled formalism's development and sustained it. It is based on aesthetic judgement, how people perceive art, how they interpret art, and how they judge it based on their own self (Reese, 1980). Kant believed that when people are influenced by personal or outside influences or contexts they have different opinions about the work (Barrett, 2000).

In the late nineteenth century (1899) later introduced the elements and principles of art developed from looking at the commonality of art. This approach considers line, color, shape/form, texture,

space, value (the elements of art) and pays attention to how they are organized or arranged through balance, emphasis, proportion, movement, rhythm, repetition, pattern, contrast, variety, and unity (the principles of art). Combined to create a composition, Dow offered the art world visual qualities that could be used to determine what makes a work of art successful. The elements and principles of design are still considered by many to be the visual language of art.

In the early part of the twentieth century, art critics Clive Bell and Roger Fry promoted the idea of "significant form," which established the basis for the use of the term formalism when we talk about viewing works of art. As Marcia Eaton (1988) explains it, "formalists emphasize intrinsic properties of the object or event itself, not what it represents or expresses. When we look at a work of art, we should not attend to *what it represents* but to *how it presents*" (p. 79). Within the constructs of formalism, content in a work of art is irrelevant. A more recent proponent of formalism is Clement Greenberg who used the formal principles to champion the paintings of the abstract expressionists in the United States in the 1940s and 50s.

Critics into the 1960s and 1970s continued to support this path until artworks appeared that required more than a formalist approach to understand them.² In looking at these artworks an understanding of their content as well as the contexts surrounding them were and are necessary for interpretation. Some art critics today still use a formalist approach when writing about art but many others have embraced other criteria and contexts through which to interpret what they see. This change in direction in how we come to understand art reflects the shift from theories of modernism to those of postmodernism, a difference that is echoed when we look at modernist and contemporary art.

Modernist art can be recognized as a style that is based primarily on formalist philosophical and aesthetic ideas. Although modernism is seen as a historical period or milieu, scholars do not agree upon the exact dates that it began and ended. Formalism is a very influential aesthetic theory³ within the history of modernist art. In contrast to this, contemporary art, in other words art that is being currently produced, cannot be categorized as following a particular style. While many contemporary artists deal with social, cultural, and political issues in their work, they also pay attention to the formal elements and principles of the artwork. Those of us who come from a tradition of Western art history have learned to look at and value artworks based upon the artist's use and manipulation of the formal characteristics. What postmodern theory and contemporary art has enabled is a broadening of this interpretive framework.

Postmodern theory challenges the idea that everyone sees and understands the world in the same way and encourages us to accept multiple ways of understanding, making, and teaching art by critiquing the restrictive practices of modernism and exposing its limitations. As a theoretical framework, postmodernism offers infinite possibilities for more inclusive ways of participating in the world artistically and socially. However, modernism and the aesthetic theory of formalism has influenced the face of art and the teaching of art for most

of the twentieth century, and is still embedded in many elementary art curricula under the guise of teaching about the elements and principles of design.

Formalism holds art to particular standards and qualities that have been agreed upon as visually acceptable by people who are considered authorities in art. A formalist response does not consider the political ramifications of such action. It also does not include factors that could broaden the definition of art beyond its formal qualities, and as such, sets up criteria for dismissal when examining works that move/exist beyond this narrow set of parameters. A formalist approach to the teaching of art promotes certain visual and aesthetic qualities that viewers (teachers and students) come to expect in any art work and contributes to attitudes that form judgments as to what is and is not art, and what is and is not good art.

Formalism provides one set of criteria that can be used when making artworks or when viewing contemporary artwork, but within a postmodern framework there exist other criteria. The content of the art work and the contexts surrounding it (personal, historical, social, aesthetic, and cultural) all contribute to meaning and our understanding of art. Many art teachers at the elementary level consider it their responsibility to incorporate formal principles in their teaching of art to children. While we understand the value of formal principles and of studying the visual and aesthetic qualities in works of art and in the art education curriculum, we question the sole emphasis that is often given to this approach. We are not proposing the exclusion of formal principles when teaching art to children, but rather, we are proposing a shift in emphasis. Formal and aesthetic qualities will remain in the curriculum but they do not need to be the central focus for every lesson. In an issues-based approach, formal principles can still be discussed but such a discussion will occur within the context of how the formal qualities of an artwork are used.

The Child-Centered Approach

The name Viktor Lowenfeld is synonymous with the child-centered approach⁴ for teaching art. From the 1940s and continuing long after his death in the early 1960s, Lowenfeld's legacy to art education places the child, and a child's interests, abilities, and expressive needs in a central position in the teaching of art. From a child-centered perspective, art is primarily a means of expression that changes as children grow. The child is viewed as an individual whose artistic expression is a reflection of where the child is developmentally and how she/he relates to the environment. The child controls and manipulates materials as a creative expression of the self. A child-centered approach is grounded in developmental psychology and presents a theory of child development in art. Art education that is based upon this foundation uses the child's developmental stage as the precept for creating curriculum.

Within a child-centered approach, children should be provided with materials so that they may intuitively express themselves without any adult imposi-