Images of Women in Visual Culture

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This is not to say that women do not have agency or an ability to critically interpret, reject, or reshape visual culture. However, as Gaudelius (1997) noted, “Individuals appropriate characteristics of visual representation, adopting these representations as a description of himself/herself. From this perspective, people can be manipulated through images that are often antithetical to their individual natures” (p. 2).

This is not to say that women do not have agency or an ability to critically interpret, reject, or reshape visual culture. However, as Gaudelius (1997) noted, women are still in a vulnerable position to reject and reshape established systems of meaning defined by patriarchy and delivered by visual images. She stressed that women were historically deprived of “social positions” and “access to dominant systems of meanings, and therefore had no control over the ways in which these meanings are constructed and used against them” (Gaudelius, 1997, p. 133). Feminist scholars in the arts (Chadwick, 2002; Nochlin, 1971; Pollock, 1999) also noted that in traditional fine arts and contemporary popular culture women are often portrayed as sex objects, inferior to men, and their creative works are frequently excluded from mainstream Western art.

Therefore, increasing women’s opportunities to recognize the power and problem of visual culture and subsequently to create new meanings through visual culture is an important teaching goal of mine. I considered applying Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) and feminist pedagogy to support my intention of critically placing women and visual culture at the center of the curriculum. Few art educators, however, explicitly examine the (dis)connections and integration of these two pedagogical frameworks in order to critically facilitate gendered understanding of visual culture and its impact on women, their lives and self-concepts.

My first purpose here is to explore the possibility of integrating these two pedagogical frameworks. Second, I
I discuss a learning unit, Representation of Women in Visual Culture, in my college-level art appreciation course as an example of implementing Visual Cultural Art Education (VCAE) and feminist pedagogy. I also summarize students’ discussion and include their collage works to illustrate students’ critical and artistic examination of, responses to, and creations of visual images associated with women’s lives and self-concepts.

Visual Culture Art Education and Feminist Pedagogy

Before exploring connections between VCAE and feminist pedagogy, it is important to note the critique of VCAE. A growing number of art educators (Barrett, 2003; K. Freedman, 1994, 2003; Pauly, 2003; Tavin, 2003) support that an important purpose of VCAE is to call attention to problematic representations of gender, race, and class. However, they have not significantly explored women’s learning about the self, others, and the world through VCAE. Herrmann (2005) argued that many curricular ideas suggested by VCAE proponents are not always “relevant to the students’ lives” and “instead become teacher-directed activities focused more on modernist ideas of elements and principles or so called ‘self-expression’ than on investigation and communication of ideas” (p. 42). Because VCAE also utilizes critical pedagogy (Tavin, 2003), Ellsworth’s (1989) critique is worth noting. Her feminist critique suggests that critical pedagogy may create an uncomfortable learning atmosphere, in which students feel oppressed rather than empowered by their learning content and process and resist discussing their beliefs or criticizing others’ beliefs.

Indeed, with increasing attention on VCAE, art educators (Congdon, 1996; Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2004; K. Freedman, 2003; Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007; Lai & Ball, 2002; Tavin, 2003) are becoming ever more concerned about the content, context, and processes involved in teaching of visual images. These art educators question what forms of art and whose art should be included in the curriculum, and what pedagogical theories can help ground today’s art education. They support an art curriculum that not only incorporates traditional fine art, but also other products that are visually and culturally influential, such as magazine covers, theme parks, and MTV images. They add that through VCAE, students can develop and enhance artistic abilities, critical thinking, and learning skills crucial for sustaining social justice (Darts, 2006; Duncum, 2002; Tavin, 2003). In short, educators of VCAE argue for creating an art curriculum that empowers students to study various forms of visual culture, particularly a curriculum that is responsive to students’ lived experiences and social life.

From a feminist pedagogical perspective, educators in the arts (Ament, 1998; Chadwick, 2002; Congdon, 1996; Freedman, 2002; Freedman, 1994; Garber, 2003; hooks, 1995; Keifer-Boyd, 2003; Pollock, 1999; Staniszkiewski, 1995) are concerned about how gender inequality in art educational contexts hinders students from pursuing creative endeavors categorized as women’s domestic work or craft, appreciating works made by women artists, and actively constructing valuable knowledge. Although current research indicates that more female artists and art have been added to art history textbooks in recent decades, the visibility of female artists in such frequently used textbooks is still far less than that of male artists (Clark & Folgo, 2006; Clark, Folgo, & Pichette, 2005). When the majority of artworks appearing in art history textbooks are overwhelmingly created by male artists and interpreted by male critics and art historians, all students are deprived of opportunities to learn about female artists and their art. Female students become alienated from the stories of artists and artworks if they are only filled with the ambitions, psyches, sexual desires, and lived experiences of men.
VCAE and feminist pedagogy can be implemented to help foster a sense of empowerment through critical examination, self-reflection, and the exploration of social and educational inequality.

how dominant ideologies are at work in the dissemination of images, and thus how students' self-concepts can be shaped by visual culture imagery (K. Freedman, 1994, 2003; Pauly, 2003; Tavin, 2003). Likewise, feminist pedagogy supports critical examination of gendered assumptions and institutionalized power structures in educational processes, and how these marginalize women's ability to speak with their own voices and pursue self-understanding (Garber, 2003; Keifer-Boyd, 2003). Feminist pedagogy, as Keifer-Boyd (2003) put it, has "the goal of empowerment of all peoples to create knowledge, particularly pertaining to self-representation" (p. 316). VCAE and feminist pedagogy can be implemented to help foster a sense of empowerment through critical examination, self-reflection, and the exploration of social and educational inequality. Moreover, while VCAE advocates that students construct knowledge through actively making critical and meaningful connections between their lives and the visual arts, feminist pedagogy also places students at the center of knowledge construction processes, and this should lead to "students seeking knowledge on their own terms and in terms of group and collaborative learning" (Garber, 2003, p. 58).

Examining Images of Women in Visual Culture

VCAE and feminist pedagogy have helped me conceptualize and teach Representation of Women in Visual Culture. This learning unit provides students with an opportunity to critically and collaboratively analyze women's lives, experiences, and self-concepts as represented in visual culture. By examining images of women created mostly by female artists in different visual culture forms and socio-historical contexts, students learned to analyze, interpret, and uncover cultural and gender assumptions embedded in visual culture. Students also considered how artists have used various visual elements or symbols to convey meanings, emotions, or art styles. I prompted students to reflect upon assumptions or stereotypes that may have shaped ways they perceive themselves, others, and the world. Students concluded this learning unit by creating images of women that enabled them to represent their lives or self-concepts as women, critique visual culture's portrayal of women's lives, or their observations of women's lives.

Most students participating in this unit were undergraduate female adults. I implemented it toward the end of the semester so that I had already learned information regarding students' life experiences and personal background, such as age, race, religion, occupation, and parenting preference. This information helped me select visual culture—ranging from conventional fine art and popular women's magazines, to educational materials produced by our college—relevant to the students' lives and portraying women as adults in roles such as mother, homemaker, adult learner, or professional.

Following is a summary of some of the most discussed visual culture topics and issues. Some women students were compelled to discuss their sense of motherhood and womanhood. The nature-versus-nurture paradigm as embedded in representations of women's roles as mothers became a focus of debate. While some firmly believed that women are natural-born caretakers, others argued this belief was rather heavily shaped and reinforced by visual culture throughout history. They recognized that paintings depicting mother and child, such as Elisabeth-Louise Vigée-Lebrun’s Portrait of Marie Antoinette with Her Children, have been around for centuries. Thus, it is possible that women may adopt the representation of motherhood through this kind of visual image and believe that this is how a mother should look and behave. Viewing Alice Barber Stephens’ The Woman in Business, students noticed that Stephens’ painting portrays a new image of motherhood or womanhood, one in which the tender, motherly characteristics are diminished, and instead a masculine, haughty demeanor is emphasized. As more students reflected on their life experiences as women or observations of working mothers or professional women, they began realizing that their sense of motherhood and womanhood changed. Many found themselves no longer subscribing to the mother-as-the-only-caretaker image. They hypothesized that men could have similar
“motherly” characteristics, if only throughout history men were frequently portrayed through such images of tender caretaking.

Suzanne Valadon’s *The Blue Room* and Romaine Brooks’ *Self-Portrait* gave students a new perspective by which to appreciate art created by female artists. Guided by Chadwick’s (2002) critique, students understood and began articulating visual politics. They realized that Valadon’s painting rejects “the static and timeless presentation of the monumental nude that dominates Western art [which represents] the female body as a lush surface isolated and controlled by the male gaze” (Chadwick, 2002, p. 285). Similarly, to some students, Brooks’ painting was empowering, not only because it represents women in a powerful and intellectual manner, but also because the new image of lesbianism is rarely discussed in art appreciation classes. Some students began applying feminist critiques to ponder more deeply how female and male artists may create images of women differently, and whether female artists’ work should be judged against standards developed by male artists, patrons, and critics. In discussions, students also noticed that often women are represented in art as domestic, subordinate to men, exotic others, or overly emotional. Convinced by feminist scholars in the arts (Chadwick, 2002; Nochlin, 1971), students felt that such representations and stereotypes exist to satisfy the male desire and a male-dominated social order. And one way to bring equality to the art world is to recognize female artists and their creative works on their own terms.

The discussion about images in women’s popular magazines centered around students’ perceptions of and struggle with a “perfect” female body. They found it frustrating that having such a perception does not necessarily bring a sense of healthy and happy womanhood. Students agreed that portrayals of a “slim” or “sexy” female body type are not helpful in accentuating a woman’s intelligence and status. In contrast to popular women’s magazines, images in course catalogues, folders, and alumni magazines produced by our own college. When I asked students to consider how their experiences as female adult learners were being represented, they immediately commented on the non-sexual appearance of women and men in the publications, and discussed who the intended audiences and makers of images are. A few students noticed the images often depicted one female or male student learning alone. They stated that such photos do not represent their experiences as female adult students. Rather, they see themselves surrounded by family, friends, or co-workers, and their lives involving a variety of roles, such as mother, soldier, daughter, wife, or professional. They judged such images in the publications as emphasizing male-centric individualism.
Creating Images of Women

This unit concluded with an art project in which students used magazine images and other art material to create, briefly write about, and discuss their own collages of images of women. Here I highlight how some students’ collages and texts exemplify recurring interpretations of women’s lives and self-concepts, while consistently expressing concerns with the very visual elements used to portray such themes.

A few students’ collages expressed a sense of fragmented womanhood in the modern world. They utilized visual elements of fragmentation, repetition, multiplicity and overlapping to represent their own experiences. For example, Deb in Figure 1 playfully represented women through a collage of women’s shoes. Different shoes represent different events, hence, different types of work that women do. M.M.W. in Figure 2 recognized the multiple roles that she plays in everyday life. She felt that her life—just like the art form of the collage—consists of small pieces and does not necessarily comprise a harmonious unity. She listed on the back of her collage ten roles she perceives herself in, ranging from “artist,” “mother,” to “thinker” (M.M.W., personal communication, April, 2005). M.M.W.’s collage revealed another struggle in women’s lives. In creating the collage and list, she avoided highlighting or ranking certain images or roles linearly or by importance because women often assume such roles simultaneously.

Other students portrayed a more unified sense of self, with collages that utilized fewer visual cues, stronger focal points, and a combination of symbolic items that created centralized, modernist-like images. For example, Andy in Figure 3 expressed her self-image and struggle in today’s technology-saturated world. She perceived her body as a site of struggle between man-made and organic dimensions. While man-made objects construct the main body, the feather symbolizes the sense of nature, which she tries to use as anchor. She wrote: “Almost lost within the confines of the machines but able to see and touch the natural world...” (Andy, personal communication, April, 2005).

Some students critiqued gender, race, and/or heterosexual stereotypes in visual culture. C.B. in Figure 4 subtly critiqued heterosexism in popular women’s magazines. She also implied the disappearance of inter-racial relationships in visual culture. She wrote: “Advertising should depict all types of people. Some of my friends look like this...” (C.B., personal communication, April, 2005). Our discussions of Brooks’ self-portrait opened a door for students to display identity markers beyond gender, including race, sexual orientation, class, age, religion and so forth.

Implications and Suggestions for Art Education

Awareness of the critique of VCAE and feminist pedagogy will assist art teachers of different levels to empower students’ learning of women and art. Providing opportunities for students to initiate, discuss, and investigate issues relevant to their own lives and contexts (e.g., age, social life, educational level) may ensure a critical, empowering, and student-centered approach to art education. Ideally, teachers recommend that students choose visual images of interest for discussion. However, teachers may also make the selections of images to initiate or guide the lesson once they know their students and what is relevant to them at home, school, and/or workplace.

It is important to recognize that VCAE and feminist pedagogy may create alienating learning experiences. Students may feel uncomfortable discussing sexism or fear being seen as sexist themselves. It will take time and encouragement for students to feel safe to share their reflections and critiques. Attenborough (1996) asserted that some students “consider the class a safe place to speak out” (p. 123) and that teachers should consider creating activities for students wherein they can feel safe enough to express their thoughts freely. The collage activity, along with proper timing, provides some students a needed safe space for expression through visual forms.

As an artistic form, collage can be effective for VCAE and feminist pedagogy because as a “disjunctive, segmented, and often-disparate representation of visual forms” it echoes “disjunctive associations between and among cultural experiences—dissociations, which enable spectators to participate in the creation of meaningful yet mutable conjunctions” (Garoian & Gaudelius, 2004, p.308). Thus, when using collage to facilitate students’ exploration of women’s lives and self-concepts, art teachers should not attempt to promote consensus among or encourage “right” visual representations for women. As feminist scholars (Chadwick, 2002; Meskimmon, 2003) argued, attempting to do so actually creates further oppression and alienation because it collapses female into “the universalized category that was, in reality, heterosexual and white, not to mention middle class” (Chadwick, 2002, p. 11).

Finally, VCAE and feminist pedagogy should provide students with opportunities to analyze and appreciate art while practicing critical thinking and expressive skills. As Efland (2005) asserted, “To increase the capacity for critical consciousness in our students is the main reason why visual cultural study is important” (p.40). In creating their own images of women, some students achieved feminist consciousness-raising (hooks, 1995) by critiquing conventional representation of womanhood and creating new, more relevant, images of women. As students began understanding and articulating visual politics, they also recognized the power and problem of visual culture and were empowered to reject or reshape visual culture. If art educators believe that the purpose of education is to help students reach critical understanding of self and social justice through the arts, then VCAE and feminist pedagogy will serve this purpose very well.

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