Art Education as Culture Jamming

Public Pedagogy in Visual Culture

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I begin this chapter with an epigrammatic manifesto: Art education is a political project that engages visual representations, cultural sites, and public spheres through the language of critique, possibility, and production. Art educators help students examine, understand, and challenge how individuals, institutions, and social practices are inscribed in power differently; to expand the conditions for freedom and equality, and radical democracy. These are the elements and principles of a politically engaged and socially just art education. This is art education that takes seriously the notion of public pedagogy in visual culture.

As Giroux (2000) argues, investigating the notion of public pedagogy in visual culture “is crucial to raising broader questions about how notions of difference, civic responsibility, community, and belonging are produced ‘in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies’ (Hall, 1996)” (p. 352). This chapter attempts to address these broader questions around public pedagogy and visual culture in two ways. First, I provide examples of culture jamming as social practice and embodied curriculum by pre-service art education students. I use culture jamming here to refer not only to specific forms of material activism, but also to a dialogic engagement with everyday experiences in order to understand how certain visual texts are both “performing” through public pedagogy and being “performed” on through active interpretation (Tavin & Robbins, 2006). Consequently, the space inside and outside the classroom can become a site of embodied curriculum and performativity. As Giroux (2000) notes, “public pedagogy is defined through its performatives, its ongoing work of mediation and its attentiveness to the interconnections and struggles that take place over knowledge, language, spatial relations, and history” (p. 354). The students described in the first part of this chapter were enrolled in a graduate art education course at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago (SAIC) that focused on the intersection of visual culture, cultural studies, critical pedagogy, and art education. Students targeted cultural sites in and around the city of Chicago. The examples from the class point to the need for a new insight into the field of art education in which teachers recognize how cultural sites, discursive practice, and politics intersect with relations of power, agency, and knowledge production.

The second part of the chapter recounts an attempt to culture jam at a State Art Education conference held at McDonald’s Corporation’s Hamburger University, in Oak Brook, Illinois. I provide the story of an attempt to deliver a paper, at the epicenter of capitalism, on how corpora-
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Institutions produce knowledge about the world, distribute and regulate information, help construct identity, and promote consumption. The planned presentation never happened. Although the presentation was never delivered, ironically, McDonald’s own actions, which can be understood as a form of corporate public pedagogy, made the case instead (Giroux, 2004). Since much of visual culture is linked to corporate imperatives, this story builds on the course projects at SAIC and underscores the need for art educators to be attentive to public pedagogy and proactive in visual culture.

Art Education Towards Critical Citizenship

As outlined in the manifesto above, the case for art education in contemporary times is one that argues for developing a deeper and more profound understanding of quality in our lives and the lives of others. Art educators have long argued for the importance of an education that encourages and supports qualitative self-expression and political agency (Efland, 1990). Many of these arguments call for responsible and critical citizenship. Critical citizenship begins “with the principle that individuals and communities should have a direct role in the determination of the conditions of their own lives” (Sholle & Denski, 1994, p. 26). Critical citizens are individuals who are self-reflexive—setting themselves and their world in question—and have a deep concern for the lives of others. Teaching about and critically learning through public pedagogy offers opportunities to work toward critical citizenship, where students see themselves as agents of change. By connecting creative expression, theoretical knowledge, everyday experiences, and social critique though art education students may have a stronger basis for investigating the implications of public pedagogy (Tavin, 2003).

The goals laid out above—to develop a critical citizenship in response to public pedagogy—are the underlying goals for a graduate art education course that focuses on cultural sites and the public sphere.1 In this course, pre-service art education students investigate how particular forms of visual culture are understood within and across different circuits of culture that, in turn, characterize the wider society and everyday life. As Giroux (2000) contends, central to any project that investigates public pedagogy is the need to begin at those intersections where people actually live their lives and where meaning is produced, assumed, and contested in the unequal relations of power that construct the mundane acts of everyday relations. Public pedagogy in this context becomes part of a critical practice designed to understand the social context of everyday life as lived relations of power. (p. 355)

Visual qualities, as perceived, exert their force on personal and social experiences in everyday life. Formal qualities and symbolic meanings exert influence on what and how we think. In this sense, students explore how individuals and groups are affected by particular forms of visual culture that constrain and/or enable various forms of agency in the context of public pedagogy.

At one point in the semester, individual students present their critical response to readings on public pedagogy (e.g., Giroux, 1992; Kellner, 1995; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997) and engage the class in a dialogic seminar that encourages discussion, debate, and exchange. Through this seminar, students link theoretical issues with wider practical and pedagogical concerns. Students are encouraged to position themselves as reader, author, critic, and participant by situating the selected texts within a field of other texts, and knowledge in the context of other knowledge. Put differently, students respond to the articles on public pedagogy through their own experiences and concerns, discovering and sharing “the connections between the text and the context of the text [and] the context of the reader” (Freire as cited in Shor & Freire, 1987, pp. 10–11).
During another point in the semester, individual students engage the class in an art-related presentation where they make connections to the production of art or the teaching of art through projected images, DVDs, guest speakers, or other collaborative projects. At the end of the semester, each participant in the class analyzes and interprets a cultural site, text, image, and/or set of images through critical theories that investigate what, when, and how discourses are produced, consumed, and regulated in the context of public pedagogy. Emphasis is placed upon visual phenomena and their influence on our thoughts and actions. The final project culminates with an outside field trip, culture jam, or other critical activity led by an individual student. In the past, students focused their attention on specific public and cultural sites in and around the city of Chicago. Many students engaged these sites as forms of public pedagogy and responded appropriately through different types of culture jamming. According to Keys (2008), culture jamming is a form of public activism which is generally in opposition to commercialism and the vectors of corporate image. The aim of culture jamming is to create a contrast between corporate or mass media images and the realities or perceived negative side of the corporation or media. (p. 101)

One example is from a student led “fieldtrip” to the Hard Rock Café in Chicago, one of approximately 110 chain restaurants in over 40 countries. Participants were guided through the restaurant and asked to explore the visual narratives and artifacts deployed on the walls. One student pointed out a large proclamation, “All is One,” spread across the wall in gold letters and surrounded by rock and roll icons, video screens, and other memorabilia. The students handed out a flyer that discussed what the proclamation might signify as a form of neoliberal multicultural discourse contextualized within corporate public pedagogy. Framed in this way, corporate public pedagogy refers to a powerful ensemble of ideological and institutional forces whose aim is to produce competitive, self-interested individuals vying for their own material and ideological gain. Corporate public pedagogy culture largely cancels out or devalues gender, class-specific and racial injustices of the existing social order by absorbing the democratic impulses and practices of civil society within narrow economic relations. (Giroux, 2004, p. 74)

One of the conclusions made by students was that problems of race, class, gender, and sexual identity in the music industry are erased, and complex relations of global power get lost amidst the celebration of individualism and consumption in the Hard Rock Café.

With these ideas in mind, the class took note of who was represented, how the stories about those individuals were signified, and what stories were missing in the many narratives of popular culture on display. Students also discussed the corporate ownership of the restaurant chain, including the various locations around the globe and how the corporate structure functions in particular contexts and communities (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1997). After discussing these issues together as a group, individual students in the class began to talk with some of the workers and guests. In one sense, all the conversations dealt with how public pedagogy constructs and helps maintain particular cultural memories—where ideology, belonging, pleasure, and passion anchor into corporatized hyperreality. These conversations, while not necessarily a blatant activist intervention, are forms of culture jamming since they attempt to expose various registers of power produced through the Hard Rock Café, “their specific manifestations in different places [and] the manner in which struggles of meaning and identity articulate with struggles over resources” (Kenway, 2001, p. 61).
Another student from the course at SAIC led the class to Niketown, a corporate mega-complex replete with swirling shoes, video rooms, museum cases, and thousands of retail products. The student divided the class into 5 sections, asking each group to focus on one element from *The Circuit of Culture: Identity, Representation, Production, Consumption, and Regulation*, based on readings for the class (Du Gay, Hall, Janes, Mackay, & Negus, 1997). Participants were asked to analyze and interpret representations of athletes (their gender, ethnicity, sexual identity, nationality, age, etc.), promotional material, architecture, consumers, and the placement, type, and cost of Nike products. Students inspected product labels to determine the country of origin and then contextualized the materials within the discursive space of Nike’s self-promotion as innovative, youthful, irreverent, authentic, fun, and all-American (Tavin, 2003).

Like Caffrey and Hunter (2002), the students understood that “Nike promotes athletic participation and discourages discrimination here at home, while the workers in the factories halfway around the world can barely afford to live” (Conclusion section, ¶ 3). The students then discussed how visual representations throughout Niketown cultivate a particular notion of political efficacy through consumption and fantasy (Cole, 2000). In the end, members of the five student groups compared and contrasted notes from their cultural jam and together wove a discursive tale of the all-encompassing corporate pedagogy of Nike, while critiquing Nike’s self-promotion and marketing of authenticity as a form of inauthentic authenticity. As a way to help mobilize oppositional practices that demand corporate and social responsibility, and respect for human rights, all the students brought into focus the contrast between constructed reality and the lived contradictions for Nike factory workers.

Another type of culture jamming involved “peeking into the past” at American Girl Place in Chicago, where corporate culture celebrates “girlhood through enchanting and fun play” (American Girl Place, 2009). Established first as the Pleasant Company and later acquired by Mattel Inc., American Girl Place has stores in Chicago, New York, Los Angeles, Atlanta, Dallas, Boston, and Minneapolis. The company developed and now makes huge profits from “historical” characters sold as dolls and marketed in books, magazines, and everywhere else on their cultural horizon. The company sells “Just Like You Dolls,” “Bitty Babies,” and has “American Girl Place Boutiques and Bistros.” According to their website, 23 million people visit and shop in their stores, and 14 million dolls have been sold since their first store opened in Chicago to celebrate the life and dreams of girls.

The participants in the class at SAIC wanted to know what girls were being celebrated and at what cost (financially and ideologically). In order to position the theoretical work they learned about public pedagogy against corporate power, the class was once again divided into teams to cover all four floors of the superstore. One group of students investigated the lower level of the complex where large dioramas of each doll’s life are on display. Students considered what and whose history was being exhibited. The group concluded that all the dolls, regardless of the temporal context (1774, 1854, 1864, 1904, or 1994), were represented in a safe, one-dimensional ontological zone—living a simple, wholesome, innocent, and privileged life, free from the struggles, conflict, and atrocities of the past. The only possible exception was Addy Walker, an African American doll whose life takes place during the Civil War era. However, the students recognized and discussed how Addy’s story was a site for both corporate pedagogy and commodified exoticization, failing to contextualize issues of race as part of the wider discourse of power and knowledge.

Other participants in the class researched different areas of the mega-store, including the bistro, theater, clothing, and other retail sections. Students explored American Girl books, toys, computer games, accessories, make-up, beach towels, blankets, and raised questions around the consumption of those products. Each group in the class problematized the American Girl
products and the company’s philosophy using a particular set of questions from Brady’s (1997) article, Multiculturalism and the American Dream. These questions included: “Do these texts provide the opportunity to name the experience of oppression and then identify structures of dominance that function to cause the oppression?” “Do [these products] erase America’s shameful character?” and, How does American Girl Place “legitimate diversity as a marketing strategy” (pp. 219–226)? While the students did not engage in direct “action” with consumers or repurpose a particular product in the store, for example, their insight and questions around how American Girl deploys public pedagogy can be understood as a form of culture jamming through its performative function. Their questions about the norms, values, and roles taught through American Girl Place directly problematize how corporate power operates and connect visual representations with their material effects.

A final example comes from another student who escorted the class to Chicago’s Rock and Roll McDonald’s, a massive site of glass, overcrowded dining rooms, and cased collections of memorabilia, American icons, and images from the 1950s and 1960s. As Duncum (2001) states, McDonald’s is “arguably the single most important icon of global culture” (p. 6). The student provided the class with a 15-page self-produced zine, complete with appropriated articles and essays, and questions to consider. The readings included critiques of McDonald’s practices by Kincheloe (1997, 2002) and Ritzer (1996), and other articles from the McSpotlight website (www.mcs spotlight.org), a site developed by British protestors who were sued by McDonald’s. In addition, the zine contained promotional material from McDonald’s and other pro-McDonald’s essays from business journals and magazines. After reading the material, a student leader asked the class to consider the following questions: How does the production and consumption of McDonald’s commodities affect the global and local environment? How does McDonald’s $2 billion advertising budget influence the construction of your identity and other collective and regional identities? How has your life and the life of others been affected by multinational corporations, such as McDonald’s, encroaching on all areas of the globe? What are the working conditions and labor practices of McDonald’s in the United States and abroad?

The projects outlined above interpreted and mobilized public pedagogy to analyze, critique, and challenge real life issues regarding real life struggles. During these projects, students operated on and through contemporary theories learned in class (for example, Du Gay et al., 1997; Giroux, 1992; Kellner, 1995; Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1997) to set their world and themselves in question. Students challenged each other to become politically engaged by confronting specific and substantive historical, social, and/or economic issues, “drawing upon provided cultural signs [and] resignifying them to address the local politics of home” (Morgan, 1998, p. 126).

In art education practice informed by public pedagogy, the analysis and interpretation of public and corporate spaces, for example, should engage students in confronting specific and substantive issues. This does not mean, however, that there must be predefined political entailments or culture jams that offer emancipatory guarantees (Tavin, 2001). It merely suggests that art educators engage in a political project that addresses public pedagogy while recognizing a whole host of complex issues and problems confronting students when negotiating identities within the terrain of visual culture. Telling students what to think and what to do about public pedagogy in visual culture, for example, is inadequate and irresponsible. It plays into the logic of traditional teacher authority where educators speak uncontested truths that erase the complicated relationship students have to everyday life. Instead, educators should address issues of how to question visual culture, through multiple perspectives, performative interpretation, and meaningful production. As Buckingham (1998) states:

If we want to enable students to explore theoretical issues in a genuinely open-ended way—rather than simply using practical work to demonstrate our own agenda—we have
to acknowledge the possibility that they will not arrive at the correct positions that we might like them to occupy. (p. 85)

Building on Buckingham’s gentle warning, the student culture jams from SAIC could be seen as a “contextual practice which is willing to take the risk of making connections, drawing lines, mapping articulations, between different domains, discourses and practices, to see what will work, both theoretically and politically” (Grossberg, 1994, p. 18). With this contextual practice mind, I now return to the McDonald’s corporation as another site for, and a different attempt at, culture jamming. This time the (attempted) jamming took place at a State Art Education conference held within the epicenter of corporate culture.3

McDonald’s and Public Pedagogy

A few years ago, I drove from my home in the city to an art education conference in the suburbs, practicing the words of my presentation for the entire ride. When I arrived at the Illinois Art Education Association (IAEA) conference site, I registered and picked-up my conference folder. Inside, there was a newsletter and information on the organization and the three day “professional” meeting for art teachers from across the state. In the association’s own words, I believed we were all there “providing support, direction and advocacy for quality art education” (Illinois Art Education Association, 2009).

The conference was held at Hamburger University, McDonald’s Corporate Office Campus, in Oak Brook, Illinois. Through a one-hour presentation that had been accepted by IAEA nine months before the conference, two students and I were prepared to present our case on public pedagogy in visual culture. One of the students was the leader of the “field trip” to Rock and Roll McDonald’s, and the creator of the zine used as a form of culture jamming. All three of us were prepared to argue that mega-corporations, mostly interested in profit-maximization, have revolutionized childhood and education through public pedagogy. Our main point was that art educators should understand the circuit of proliferation, dissemination, and consumption of images in general, and how visual representations help mold and regulate relationships of power between people in particular. We were going to discuss how art teachers might investigate through public pedagogy corporations such as McDonald’s—how they produce knowledge about the world, distribute and regulate information, help construct identity, and promote consumption. The students and I were going to provide examples of corporate power managing dissent, constraining agency, and impacting our ability to act as critical citizens. The planned presentation, however, never happened. Ironically, McDonald’s made the case for us.

The trouble started shortly after I registered for the conference. Unlike the other attendees, many of whom placed various colorful “pins” associated with art supplies and images on their name badge, I positioned a 2” x 3” “sticker” on my name-tag. It read “McProfits Exploits Workers.” I brought to the conference a sheet of my own stickers downloaded from the McSpotlight website (www.mcspotlight.org), as a form of culture jamming. I wanted to bring to the attention of others the plight of workers in the fast food industry. In addition, I wanted to raise awareness, through the stickers, about how workers in overseas factories that make the toys used in “Happy Meals” have protested against exploitative conditions for years. I believed it was not only my right but also my responsibility to voice my opinion, albeit in a gentle manner. In addition to using my name badge as a site of culture jamming, I distributed a handful of stickers to my art education undergraduate and graduate students during the IAEA lunch. Four or five of them placed them on their name badges. This did not sit well with the agents of Hamburger University.

After lunch, the two students and I found a small area outside of our conference room to prepare for our presentation. While we were discussing the order and structure of our panel, two
administrators from McDonald’s approached us. They inquired about the “McProfits” sticker. One stated, “Wow, that’s so interesting. Where did you get that? Can I have one?” I explained that the sticker came from a website and that we would be addressing the content of the sticker and website at our presentation. I invited both of them to join the audience. The same administrator who asked for the sticker stated that they might attend later; however, they really wanted the sticker at that moment. I told her a sheet of stickers were included in folders prepared for distribution to audience members at the time of the presentation. She then asked (smiling the entire time) if she could see one of the folders.

Similar to the zine used for the course at SAIC, the packets contained articles from the McSpotlight website, promotional materials from McDonald’s, images of canned food products, reproductions of artwork, art education unit plans, suggested activities and references, and a half-sheet of black and white “stickers.” I displayed some of the contents of one folder to the administrator. I then explained the purpose and content of the presentation relative to information in the packet, and within the context the IAEA conference. I invited the administrators (still un-named and smiling), once again, to attend our presentation. At that point, the only “verbal” administrator asked if she could photocopy the information from one of our presentation folders. In a final attempt to engage them in an open forum, I once again suggested that she come to the presentation where I would be “happy” to supply her with one. She smiled and asked if she could photocopy it instead. After some unease, I obliged. I believed she and the other administrators would recognize that the folder contained a variety of information on McDonald’s (as well as other fast food and slow-food companies) that was contextualized. A few minutes passed and the same women came back with my original documents in hand. She gave them back and left without incident. Or so we believed.

We continued to plan out our presentation when the IAEA conference coordinator (a career art teacher) along with four more unidentified administrative employees of Hamburger University approached us. The IAEA conference coordinator was visibly shaken. With downcast eyes, she told us “we have a problem; they are going to shut down the entire conference.” At that point, I suggested we talk somewhere together to sort out the misunderstanding. The six of us (my students were not allowed to join us) walked slowly through the halls of Hamburger University to a corporate boardroom, where, once again, I believed I could straighten everything out through dialogue.

I stood in front of the McDonald’s administrators and the conference coordinator and asked, “What might be the problem?” One man (the other three employees were women who were never allowed to speak) told me I was not allowed to distribute stickers to anyone in the corporate site. In addition, I was told that my students and I could not hand out any literature for our presentation or discuss McDonald’s in anyway, or at any point during the conference. If I refused, he stated, the entire art education gathering (three days, 400 attendees, including parents, students, and teachers, and numerous presentations and award ceremonies) would be shut down, immediately.

I started to explain in detail the content and context of our presentation, and the reason for the stickers. I tried to explain, once again, that our presentation, which was accepted through peer review by an art education committee months earlier, and not Hamburger University, was not solely about McDonald’s or McDonald’s workers. I said it was about postmodern approaches to art education, visual culture, and public pedagogy. At that point, I was told by the administrator associated with Hamburger University that our presentation could not go forward in any shape, form, or manner. I then asked why our presentation would be seen as a threat to McDonald’s. My answer came in the form of expulsion from the room. I was told to leave the room while further discussions ensued.
After 10 more minutes of listening to continuous threats by Hamburger University faculty made to the IAEA conference coordinator, and now the President of IAEA, seeping out through the half-closed door to the boardroom, I approached the administrator in command as he walked out the boardroom and volunteered to leave Hamburger University. I asked only that they would allow the conference to continue, my students to present their portion of the presentation, and an open acknowledgement of my treatment. At that point, I noticed a hand in front of my face. The administrator raised his right hand and declared “I’m finished speaking with you.” He turned to walk away.

I was told by another McDonald’s employee to leave Hamburger University immediately, remove all remnants of our presentation, and never return. Furthermore, according to my colleagues who were not forced to leave, security guards told all remaining conference attendees to disperse from the presentation area and refrain from discussing my expulsion, through the continuing threat of a conference shut-down. In other words, even after I was forced to leave Hamburger University, McDonald’s agents continued to censor, regulate and control the actions, words, and gestures of art educators, students, and principals from around the state of Illinois. Angela Paterakis (personal communication, November 2000), a Professor of Art Education at SAIC and witness to the events, asserts “The representatives of that corporate campus were holding the entire conference hostage, using guerilla tactics.”

McDonald’s regulation and control of content at a state art educational conference is a blatant example of the often invisible power of corporations to construct and maintain a worldview through public pedagogy, and subjugate and censor any challenges and resistance to that pedagogy. In this sense, McDonald’s transcends the status of a mere business establishment and enters into the social imaginary—how we imagine others and ourselves—through circuits of power, pedagogy, and affect. In other words, McDonald’s, as well other multi-billion dollar corporations, are the teachers of the new millennium—supplanting conventional classroom practices with advertisements, toys, happy meals, animated films, and an array of other visual representations and objects enthusiastically consumed by children and youth (Tavin & Anderson, 2003). As Mirzoeff (1999) and others have pointed out, it is not only a part of students’ everyday lives; for many, it is their everyday life. Erasing our presentation from a professional art educational conference satisfied the corporate sponsor and disregarded the relevance of this urgent area of research—public pedagogy and visual culture.

Conclusion

However horrible the incident at Hamburger University was, it also represents a “wonderful” pedagogical space for analysis and intervention. In this sense, pedagogy is a process of education, linking the production of knowledge to issues of politics, ethics, and power. Through the examples from the course at SAIC and the attempt to culture jam at Hamburger University, critical questions about public pedagogy arise. For example, What does it mean to be an active and engaged citizen in a world that has been radically altered and controlled by corporations? How do we enhance and vitalize the public sphere when the citizenship and democracy are so often tied to consumption and free market ideology? What alternative information is available, to both teachers and students, in a world where fewer and fewer mega-corporations are controlling both the production of images and the policing of the ways in which those images are circulated, talked about, and understood? Art education as a political project should respond to these questions and the issues posed by public pedagogy. Central to this response is the need to analyze how (corporate) power reaches into our everyday lives. Art educators, artists, and indeed, all of us need to be critically attentive to the cultural influences around us, while attempting to
understand and intervene in specific problems that emanate from the interrelationship between culture and power—public pedagogy in visual culture.

Notes
1. The course goals and some student presentations are also described in Tavin and Hausman (2004).
2. Hyperreality is a term that usually describes a postmodern phenomena where it is difficult, if not impossible, to tell the difference between “real” experiences and reproductions of reality (Baudrillard, 1988).
3. A narrative of the “events” at Hamburger University is also presented in Tavin (2000).

References


