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Presentation: *Incorporating Visual Culture in Studio Classes: A Reflection*

Photography by Emily Beltz, MA Teaching + Learning in Art + Design 2009

THE LARGER INFLUENCES OF VISUAL CULTURE

You may recall that what used to be the History of Art and Architecture Department at RISD was recently renamed the History of Art and Visual Culture. Renaming the program involved interesting philosophical questions. A number of art history departments around the country have incorporated the nomenclature “visual culture,” reflecting that the traditional discipline of Art History was not equipped to account for the proliferation of visual sources and global categories that artists have increasingly engaged since the 1960s. It’s not that art history as such is no longer relevant, not at all. But its objects of study and methodologies evolved historically from western (European) modes of assessing and classifying aimed at developing standards of connoisseurship for collectors and scholars. This is still essential to the world of art museums, auction houses and the buying and selling of art objects, but is of limited use if we are to account for the kinds of visual forms that shape experience today – graphic novels, videos, movies, websites, You Tube, Facebook, gaming, fashion, performance, product design, and vernacular image production of all sorts. It became clear that these proliferating “others” of art history needed to be brought into critical discourse of visual art and design.

When I was an art student thirty odd years ago, there were very bright lines between what you talked about in critique and what you talked about outside the studio. The studio was an isolated and rarified world where the terminology, theory, problems, and history of art (as it was taught then) were divorced from the contingencies of lived experience and any other kinds of knowledge. Painters couldn’t even talk to sculptors, for goodness’ sake! It has been exciting to witness the seismic shifts in cultural discourse and production since then, changes that transformed the Humanities across the board. And I was pleased to do my bit to hasten these along in my intertwined roles as artist, teacher and critic.

As a teacher, I’m always messing with my courses and changing my syllabi. Even if I’ve taught a course a million times, I treat each occasion as though it were the first. This keeps it

fresh for me and it amazes me how different (and more fun) my teaching is today than when I started out. But my ideal as teacher has been consistent – to push my students to a more rigorous level of critical engagement with the subject at hand, whether it is their own studio work or a set of issues/problems in how we think and write about art and design practice. One challenge we have here at RISD is that in liberal arts elective courses, we have a wide range of students, not only in terms of their disciplines, but also in their levels of experience and preparation. It's quite a challenge to design class discussions and assignments that engage all of the students where they are so that they can teach and learn from each other as well as the teacher.

START WHERE THE WORK IS

At RISD, we have a “liberal arts is over here” and “studio is over there” mentality, so it's difficult at times to get students in studio classes to read even a short article. They think, “That's what I do in liberal arts. Why are you asking me to read in studio?” It is a challenge to break through this. The best way, I've found, is to start with the self-interest of the students; they want to present their work and hear what others have to say about it. So start where the work is rather than with some abstract idea you might think is good for them to engage. If you assign a reading or introduce a discussion topic that has no clear connection to what the students are actually doing, then they won't read or respond. It's that simple.

So rule number one in studio teaching is: start where the work is. You can make the theory apparent because it's already there, in the work (and by “theory” I mean the informed articulation of one's working context and philosophy as an artist/designer). Even if a given student is resistant to others' readings of the work, there is still the rest of the group to bring into the conversation. Use every opportunity to introduce visual and cultural references that are related to the work under discussion while soliciting others from the students. That way the burden is lifted from the student being critiqued and allows that individual to become a collaborative participant in a larger multilateral conversation rather than an object of unilateral scrutiny and judgment.

TOPICAL COURSES

A new kind of course that we are inaugurating in the photography department at RISD is a topical studio elective, two of which are required over the course of the major. A topics course might be on The City; Fact and Fiction in Documentary; The Photographed Body; Photography and Public Space; The Virtual Photograph. Each topical class is taught by resident or visiting faculty according to their own interests as practitioners and topics change each semester. In this kind of teaching and learning context, students and faculty focus on one topic together, seminar style, and dig deeply into its histories, expressions and possibilities. Readings and discussions are integrated with student projects related to the topic. I have taught such courses in different institutional contexts (guest lectureships,

workshops) and have always found them immensely rewarding and mind-changing. Self-selection is the key; everyone is there because they are interested in the topic and see its connections to their interests and work.

VISITING ARTISTS

A vigorous visiting artist program is essential, so students aren't just exposed to the same voices and inputs over and over. Of course, that means resources and funding and depending on the institution where you teach, you may have to battle for that; but I think it is a vital part of studio pedagogy because students get exposed to a much broader range of practices than you could hope to provide in the regular curriculum. It is always advisable to look for other departments or programs with whom you can pool resources to invite guest lecturers and this has the advantage of opening up more cross-disciplinary conversations, too.

NO UNIVERSAL VIEWER

One final point about visual culture in studio teaching. In the critique, it can be difficult for students to discuss cultural differences or differences among their value systems or identifications, either in relation to their own work or the work of others that they encounter. There is a fear of embarrassing somebody or calling attention to issues in the work that its maker might not be aware of. (Perhaps this is more endemic to photographic technologies where realism and representation are almost always central questions.) These situations can be delicate. One thing a teacher learns quickly is that students hate being "othered" without their permission or being psychoanalyzed. If the work at hand presents issues that the student seems oblivious to, or that seem unintentionally (or even intentionally) provocative, then this needs to be brought forward for discussion rather than passed on in silence. Too often I've observed teachers who refrain from bringing up issues of cultural (e.g. sexual, ethnic, class) diversity for fear of getting out on a limb or making folks feel uncomfortable. But is discomfort always such a bad thing if it leads to greater insight? It is important not to give silent acquiescence to the assumption that all of us in the room are white, affluent, and straight – appearances (sometimes) to the contrary. We need to call out the pernicious but enduring myth of this un-named, universal viewer for what it silences: the significant differences among us that really, really matter in how we perceive and give visual form to our experience.

DEBORAH BRIGHT

Through her roles as an educator, critic, curator and multimedia photographer, Deborah Bright investigates art as a cultural product across many fields of experience. Her photographs are in the collections of the Whitney Museum of American Art, the Addison Gallery of American Art, the Fogg Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum and the National Museum of American Art. In 1989, in response to RISD's search for people who could teach both the practice of photography and critical theory, Bright joined the faculty with a dual appointment in the History of Art and Visual Culture and Photography Departments.

