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Critical Interpretive Inquiry: A Qualitative Study of Five Contemporary Artists' Ways of Seeing

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Contemporary art practice is a complex coalition of conditions that influence artistic production and frame the way interpretations are constructed. The renewed interest in the practice of discipline-experts as models of learning requires a deep understanding of what they do. This study used computer assisted qualitative analysis to inquire into the practice of five artists who responded to an exhibition challenge posed within the constituency of the artworld. Four themes emerged which focused on influence and collaboration; co-constructing meaning by thinking in a setting; achieving an insider's perspective; and the concept of agreeable difference. Findings suggest the complexity of contemporary art practice offers a rich range of models of art learning and can be seen as a site for reconciling the cognitive character of artistic practice and postmodern interpretive stances.

Contemporary art can be considered a site of complex realities in that it mostly deals with a multitude of concepts, ideas, and images. To engage in a meaningful way with what artists have to say it is necessary to employ a variety of approaches for encountering artworks. A useful assumption is to consider the complexity of contemporary art in a similar way to the stance taken by qualitative researchers who seek to understand multifaceted realities such as life in communities or classrooms. There are many strategies used in qualitative studies that help discover meanings in naturalistic settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Sherman & Webb, 1990; Strauss, 1987). This focus on emerging patterns of understanding has become more theoretically robust with the development of computer software to support qualitative data analysis (Fielding & Lee, 1991; Tesch, 1990; Weitzman & Miles, 1994).

Adapting interpretive methodologies to help reveal insights into contemporary art in a way transposes and extends Eisner's connoisseurship model (1991). Whereas Eisner applied the practice of the connoisseur and the art critic to educational inquiry as a means to render the realities of educational settings, the procedure of using qualitative research methods to make meaning out of contemporary art practice can be equally revealing (Stuhr & Freedman, 1989; Harris, 1990). Further, the diversity of current theory and practice in critical discourse has expanded the options and perspectives available for critical inquiry into contemporary art. Some contemporary artwriters, for instance, eschew the connoisseur's role and question the merit of a stance which may inadvertently or knowingly filter responses through a position of assumed authority. Lippard (1990) has argued against any exclusivity which she believed ignored the expression of those seen to be beyond the mainstream. She advocated a broader understanding and "the negation of a sin-

gle ideal in favor of a multiple viewpoint and the establishment of a flexible approach to both theory and practice in the arts" (p. 14).

Interpretation as Critical Dialogue

In light of moves in art education to position classroom discourse about art in relation to the professional practice of art writers much has been written about the central role of interpretation (Barrett, 1994a; Danto, 1981; Parsons, 1992). The formalist assertion that the art object must speak for itself, or the structuralist belief in the logocentrism of meaning, has been challenged. The skirmishes which blew open the interpretive terrain signal the changing relationship between the object and the interpreter: Barthes (1968) pronounced the death of the author; Nochlin (1971) questioned the inequity of Eurocentric male views of art history; Gadamer (1975) filtered judgements through lived, cultural contexts; Derrida (1978) deconstructed the claim for dominance of one mode of representation over another; Fish (1980) redefined the text so the reader also became a writer; Danto (1981) described the transfigurative function of the artworld; Jencks (1986) highlighted the wry hybridity of double coded references; Pollock (1990) decoded the semiotics of images of women in popular culture, and Tarantino embedded disjunctive narratives into seamless Pulp Fiction. As a result of critiques such as these, the one-to-one correspondence between the interpreter and the object has been replaced by a coalition of conditions that influence the way meanings are made.

Claims that have positioned critical inquiry in art as a process of 'surrounding' an artwork whereby the interpretive power emerges from dialogue have been taken up by art educators (Anderson, 1993; Lankford, 1992). Barrett (1994b) described principles of interpretation that respect the cultural embeddedness of artworks and, while the lifeworld of the viewer was acknowledged, this filtered rather than shaped critical response. For Barrett the interpretive process was characterised by informed argument that drew conclusions without foreclosing on other possible meanings. Further, effective interpretations exhibited consistent and coherent reasoning and took into account all relevant details. As Lankford (1992) noted "good interpretation is one which conforms with the evidence and illuminates the meanings of a work of art" (p. 21).

A comprehensive view of interpretation is offered by MacLachlan and Reid (1994) who invoke the popular metaphor of framing as an interpretive strategy. The concept of framing relies on the assumption that the viewer or reader consistently infers by drawing on knowledge and experience in order to fill in the gaps in missing information. The visualisation process, for instance, makes use of perceptual schemata to direct and modify what is seen (Neisser, 1976). In cognitive psychology these conceptual structures have been identified as 'scripts' (Nelson, 1986) and help code and retrieve information so as to place it in interpretable contexts. While cognitive frames assist in dealing with everyday information, an individual's knowledge base also provides a reference for assigning interpretations to classes or genres. Without this sense of connection or 'intertextuality' (Marshall, 1992), texts would lack identity, reference, and meaning. 'Text' is used here in the poststruc-

turalist sense and refers not only to oral or written discourse, but includes any event or situation which can be interpreted, such as cultural practices or artefacts .

MacLachlan and Reid make the point that interpretation involves more than applying linguistic knowledge to decode words and sentences in which they are embedded. They assert that interpretation relies on invoking certain types of framing mechanisms and four are identified: "Extratextual; intratextual; intertextual", and "circumtextual framing" (p. 3-4). Extratextual framing is external to the text whereby interpretation is dependent on other knowledge which serves as a mediator or lens to shape understanding. Intratextual interpretation is dependent on framing devices used by the artist/author within the text. Interpretation that involves a process of assigning or referencing a text as an instance that belongs to a class of information is referred to as intertextual framing. Circumtextual framing highlights the way interpretation is dependent on the physical or material contexts in which a text is presented. The interpretive frameworks described by MacLachlan and Reid provided suitable theoretical parameters to inquire into the practice of artists in this study.

Procedure

The focus of this study was drawn from an exhibition called "Ways to See: New Art from Massachusetts," held in 1992 at the Institute of Contemporary Art in Boston. Five local artists were invited by the ICA to respond to the question, 'Who inspires you?' The artist-cum-curators were Paul Bowen, a sculptor; Maria Magdalena Campos Pons, an installation artist; Carlota Duarte, a photographer; Gregory Gillespie, a painter, and Tony Oursler, a video artist. Each artist had to serve both as an exhibitor, by presenting some of their own work, and as a curator, by choosing the work of others who they felt challenged them to see in new ways. Contemporaries, as well as artists of the past were selected, and in all, over thirty co-artists contributed.

Each of the five artists participated in a tape recorded interview comprised of a similar sample of questions. These included probing the idea of influence set by the ICA; descriptions of typical working processes; talking about the processes and problems posed by their role as curators; getting a reaction to their collaboration with the ICA staff, such as participating in the video production; discussing audience expectations; eliciting the artists' response to observations and interpretations made by the author; and obtaining their view of the critical response generated by the exhibition. Branka Bogdanov, a resident video producer at the ICA who made an accompanying documentary which was on view throughout the duration of the exhibition, was also interviewed. All interviews were subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Those forms of documentation that were produced in association with the exhibition, or as a result of the show, were collected for content analysis. No exhibition catalogue was published although some short wall texts of artists' statements were included. Additional biographical details and background information were sup-

plied by some of the artists. The ICA video was also analysed as a source of documentation. Finally, eight reviews that appeared in the local press were analysed.

The author's personal responses to the exhibition were spoken into a cassette recorder. The general task was to talk about anything that came to mind. To help spark reactions some basic questions were posed such as "what images am I seeing? what ideas am I seeing? what does this mean to me?" While verbalising responses had obvious limitations, it was a process that created a link with the artwork as the viewer asked questions about what was seen. This process of "muttering to your mind" yielded surprisingly rich material as more focused responses were brought into play during subsequent visits. To support these personal encounters, sketches and notes were also kept in a journal.

To make full use of the artists' commentary, author's responses, and exhibition documentation, there was a need to establish a strategy for critical analysis that could be applied systematically and would serve as a valid basis on which to ground observations, make interpretations, and seek out meanings. Data analysis was based on the process of analytic induction and the principle of triangulation. According to Guba and Lincoln (1981) three major aspects to consider in analytic induction are "bounding, focusing, and rigor" (p.86). Bounding decisions were defined by the parameters set for the study. The structures and strategies used to mount the "Ways to See" exhibition, and the intention to use qualitative methods to interpret contemporary art, provided the boundary conditions for this study. A further procedure was focusing, and this followed a converging and diverging pattern of data analysis. Focusing provided for the ongoing process of converging on concerns and issues from various perspectives, which were used as a lens to diverge and gather additional information that helped clarify or resolve matters. This involved a 'deconstructive' approach used to investigate, collect, and organize interpretations, followed by a 'reconstructive' process whereby the implications of the responses generated and proposed tentative interpretations were checked. When related to critical inquiry, the processes of deconstruction and reconstruction invoke the notion of 'revisiting.' This was a crucial concept as it involved revisiting a work of art, reviewing collected materials, or reflecting on initial responses. In the act of revisiting a work of art, other sources of information became necessary as issues and ideas were played out and the various perspectives examined were brought together to shed light on emerging interpretations.

Rigor was the other methodological concern identified by Guba and Lincoln (1981). To ensure validity and reliability, certain procedures needed to be maintained during the critical process. The method of triangulation proved useful and involved comparing sources of information and identifying recurrent themes. As well as being a corroborative procedure used to confirm and clarify views, the plausibility and adequacy of alternative suggestions and rival interpretations could be explored. This helped validate interpretations as it revealed how meanings extract-

ed from an encounter with works of art were grounded in evidence collected during the process of critical inquiry.

Computer Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis

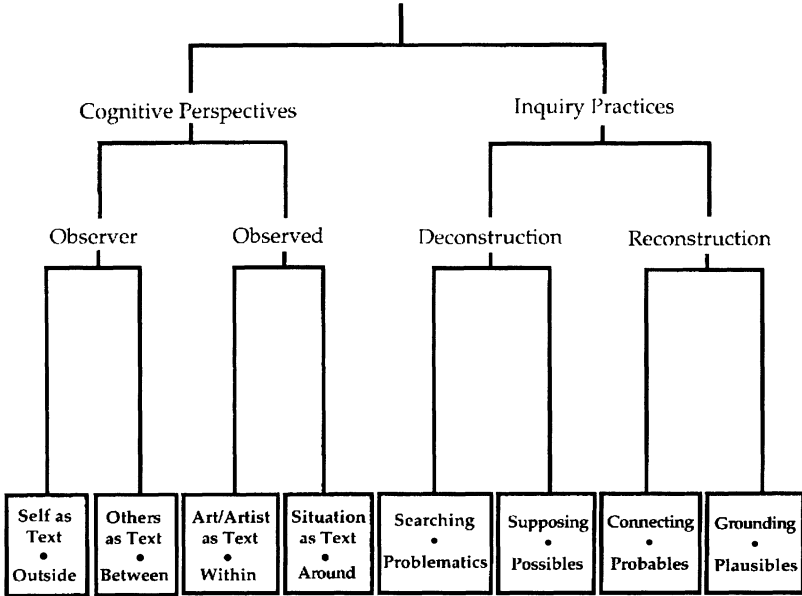
The software program NUD•IST (Non-numerical Unstructured Data Indexing Searching and Theorising) was used to analyse the data (Richards & Richards, 1991; 1994). This program was found to provide the management tools needed to help describe the complex information generated from the different data sources while facilitating the interpretive process of critical inquiry. Unlike many computer-based qualitative research programs that rely on code and retrieval procedures, NUD•IST helped describe and organise complex data into an emerging index or category system as well as facilitate the possibilities for exploring ideas and theories. The flexibility of maintaining direct access to source data as well as theorising about emergent themes served to maintain the critical distance necessary for viewing things close up and from afar. Further, all points of decision making regarding the deconstructive and reconstructive process of analytic induction were logged leaving precise audit trails.

The NUD•IST program provided two basic methods for managing and exploring qualitative data: the Document System and the Index System. The Document System allowed the data collected from the ICA study (interview transcripts, field notes, reviews and commentary etc.) to be recorded on-line as computer files. Computer access to these documents allowed the data to be organised and searched in a variety of ways. The subsequent exploration of ideas made use of the Index System. NUD•IST utilises “tree structures” as an indexing system and this branching process builds according to the categories developed. A useful device is that the pattern of categories created from the data is represented graphically as a tree structure shown on screen as well as being recorded as text.

Strategies for data analysis included creating categories as they emerged from searches of the information collected. As well, these were framed in relation to prior theory dealing with the interpretive perspectives identified by MacLachlan and Reid (1994). The categories stored descriptive details about data sources, sites, and other factual information. The process of coding and indexing data was done by recording ideas about emergent categories in memos and modifying these in light of more robust interpretations and understandings. The index structure allowed data analysis to proceed by linking texts for description, analysis, and interpretation within and across category sets. This provided a means for triangulating the data sources and category descriptors and helped corroborate the analysis.

This process of qualitative analysis can be seen to move from problematic queries through to proposing possible, probable, and ultimately, plausible interpretations. In terms of the deconstruction and reconstruction of the NUD•IST index trees the process was akin to removing branches of the emerging tree structures and repositioning them in places that were more theoretically stable. A useful image that helped conceptualise the dynamic nature of this qualitative process of analysis was to conceive of the tree structures as mobiles which rotated through three dimensions

Figure 1: Critical Interpretive Inquiry



* Conceive of Figure 1 as a mobile that rotates allowing components to be analyzed in relation to each other.

and allowed all categories to be aligned in proximity to others. The dynamic nature of the model can be illustrated by the way the components can be seen to move like a Calder mobile whereby the proximity or sequence of the components can be changed to suit different questions and situations. For instance, by rotating the *Cognitive Perspectives* to take into account the viewpoint of the *Observed* and the *Observer* (Self, Others, Art/Artist, Situation) data was explored from various vantage points while also considering these views in relation to each other. Further, applying any of the cognitive perspectives in isolation tended to yield a limited (or unbalanced) view. This interactive analytic process countered doubts raised about structuring knowledge as a ‘tree’ (Efland, 1995) and provided a realistic representation of the fluid and interactive way ideas and theories emerged. The model for critical interpretive inquiry can be seen in Figure 1.

The *Inquiry Practices* of *Deconstruction* and *Reconstruction* described divergent and convergent processes respectively whereby information was collected from a range of sources, analysed (i.e. deconstructed), and categorised (reconstructed) into interpretive forms. This analytic inductive procedure involved moving from a position where information and ideas were searched out and speculated upon; tentative interpretive stances taken; and data sources revisited as moderating and confirmatory evidence was sought. By rotating the deconstruction and reconstruction arms of the model this re-visiting, re-cycling, and refining of interpretations was undertaken. The principle of triangulation provided a way for the various interpretive per-

spectives adopted, and inquiry practices used, to help produce plausible interpretations.

Discussion of Results

The qualitative analysis using the NUD•IST program converged on a final index of interpretive themes about the work of each artist. These categories provided the conceptual cues for writing individual artists' profiles although these have not been included here. For the purpose of this article, results of a comparative analysis of the artists' practice have been organised around four themes that are seen to have significance for art education. These include influence and collaboration; co-constructing meaning by thinking in a setting; insider perspectives; and agreeable difference.

Influence and Collaboration

The curatorial responsibility of the ICA exhibition gave the artists an added interest in thinking about influences on their own art practice. In her review of the "New Art from Massachusetts" exhibition, Christine Temin of *The Boston Globe* made the point that "one of the best ways to understand art is through other art" (Sept. 18/92). Like several of the other reviewers, she responded positively to the idea of having artists map some of their sources of inspiration and influence by selecting and exhibiting the work of others.

The sculptor Paul Bowen made the comment that in responding to the question of influence he had to think in terms of people rather than things. The precise nature of influence was difficult for Bowen to detect, making its relevance in the more public context of a gallery even more problematic for him. Despite Bowen's misgivings his curatorial response to the issue of influence and collaboration proved to have self reflective value. For Bowen, reasons varied for choosing the other artists to include in the show. Factors included local connections, such as Blanch Lazelle's white-line block prints developed in Provincetown during World War I. Myron Stout, another artist selected by Bowen, shared a stylistic connection and his abstract shapes directly derived from the Provincetown region showing the curve of the Cape, and the breakwall. These shapes shared a formalist connection with Bowen's large wooden constructions exhibited. The inclusion of works by Sal Scarpitta made more of a personal reference to a like mind and a kindred spirit forged through friendship.

Carlota Duarte's response to the problem posed by the ICA exhibition reflected the challenge she sets herself with documenting her way of seeing. The photographs she included were part of a series taken over a period from 1974 to 1992 as a way for her to get to know the people in the South End in Boston. As a Catholic nun she had a certain degree of entree, and by photographing the people and going back to give them copies, she eventually came to be invited into their homes and accepted as part of the community. For Durate, the process of time, placement, and community was most important to capture.

Duarte professed she was not so much inspired by the other artists she selected to participate in the ICA exhibition, but by the power of her own ideas and convic-

tions. For her, the question of inspiration was firmly wrapped up in her own social and political views and the empathy she felt with human resistance and cultural identity. The connection she shared with the other photographers was the way they were all able to portray an insider's perspective not always available to the wider public. Duarte, however, believed she learned a lot about her art and the views of others as a result of the collaborative process. Her dealings with the other photographers helped her position ideas and reconsider what was important to her. Having to define and defend views to peers, and having the power to shape the way the work of others was shown, told her a lot about the process of negotiation, personal beliefs, and decision making.

Tony Oursler's ideas about the critical edge that existed between art, technology, and human engagement were given expression in the installation prepared in collaboration with a group of fellow artists. In inviting eight former students from Massachusetts College of Art to work together to produce a group artwork, Oursler saw many of his notions about art explored and extended in new ways. In considering the curatorial task, Oursler wanted to provide his co-artists with as broad a brief as possible. Oursler also wanted to take the opportunity to work with a group of artists whom he saw as part of a "micro-generation" in that these young people had the necessary knowledge to accept or reject notions such as computerisation as an art medium. For Oursler this meant they had much more power over these technological tools than earlier generations whom he felt were dazzled rather than challenged by newer media.

In responding to the task posed by the ICA exhibition, Maria Magdalena Campos Pons used two basic strategies. She drew on her beliefs about what she saw as the responsibility of artists to engage critically with complex human issues. She also sought to profile a range of artists whose work she believed would cause viewers to see things in new ways. In seeking diversity Pons acknowledged that the artists she selected did not necessarily share her point of view; however, amid these different voices, there was a common focus on dealing with the intersection of art and aspects of everyday life.

For Pons there was a need to document more formally some of the ideas and activities involved in preparing the exhibition. Although she was able to compile a small booklet to accompany her contribution to the show, it was not possible to give accurate details of the research undertaken. It was these aspects she felt were revealed in part by Branka Bogdanov's ICA video which documented some of the underlying themes that emerged as part of the collaboration. Tony Oursler also saw the ICA video as a useful means to help address preconceptions about art and technology. For Oursler, part of the problem with engendering critical audience response lay in the perceived alienating nature of technology and the different ways one has to be prepared to engage with art produced in multi-media formats. In the hands of his young fellow artists, the issue of technology was seen as a pervasive and embracing system that melded easily with psychological, biological, and sociological systems in giving shape to human functioning. The video footage showed a lot of over-the-shoulder construction activity being carried out by the artists. This

served to demystify the concept that technology was the controlling agent and showed how electronic media was used as a means for mediating interactions. Carlota Duarte also found the ICA video useful in helping “demystify the process and let the audience see for themselves how things are done and what some of the ideas behind things might be” (Artist interview, Nov. 13/92). She felt it would have been of great benefit to have students or the public come through the exhibition while it was being assembled so as to give some idea of the processes involved in making museums work and how decisions are made. For Paul Bowen, however, there were reservations about the inclusion of a video as part of an exhibition. He acknowledged the opportunity to profile general background information about artists and their work, yet he didn’t want the video to “substitute for how the work is on its own terms, or rather to substitute for the success of the work” (Artist interview, Oct. 10/92).

Co-constructing Meaning by Thinking in a Setting

This theme described the interpretive dialogue which was seen to occur between the viewer, artwork, artist and the setting. What became apparent in the way the artists described their expectations of the audience was that they saw the encounter with art as a process of co-constructing meaning. Carlota Durate felt there was a close connection in her role as a teacher, an artist, and a Catholic nun. She believed her background as a painter helped her to be open to change and innovation in the way she approached her life and art. There was also a connection between her inquiring mode of thinking and her teaching, which, for her, was a process of helping students find things out for themselves. Durate also saw this educational brief as central to her art practice in that her social, political, religious, and artistic conventions were predicated on the idea that one needed to be informed and aware of those around them. In this sense the artist was also a teacher who sparked and facilitated learning. For Gregory Gillespie, a painter whose works contained many images depicted in super realist detail, the encounter with his art was likened to a meeting of the minds. While he conceded that some images in his paintings often had elusive personal connections, others were included for compositional reasons.¹ For Gillespie, therefore, the complex realities in his works only revealed themselves slowly and often in different ways to different viewers.

The means by which the co-construction of meaning occurs makes use of the distributive cognitive processes. According to Perkins (1992), distributed cognition

¹There was an intriguing compositional device used by Gregory Gillespie. He described the way he looks around his studio and finds something that can be added to his painting. Often these will be selected for no obvious reason, but if they work compositionally, and, to a lesser extent symbolically, he may decide to add them to his work. These potential images can be placed ‘in’ the painting by propping them against the canvas or suspending them from above so he can get a good idea how the final image will appear. This method suits Gillespie as he works mostly life size and in precise realist detail with most of his paintings taking several months to complete. For Gillespie the use of this 3D compositional strategy “sure makes it easier to compose, you know, because can you imagine painting something, and saying oh, I don’t like it there I have got to erase it and paint it some place else” (Artist interview, Oct. 28/92).

refers to the way thinking takes place within an interactive system that includes the self, others, and the artefacts we use (p. 133). Tony Oursler's video art, for instance, explored the intersection of these distributed cognitive fields as the relationship between the artist, idea, medium, and the viewer was challenged. Through the use of electronic technologies Oursler sought to blur assumptions such as the artist being the primary creative source, the medium being the expressive vehicle, and notions that meaning was embedded or contained within the art form. For Oursler, these foundational elements became texts that were open to manipulation and interpretation by the artist and the viewer. The critical engagement therefore did not involve the viewer in any linear analysis of the transfer of an idea into a medium of expression, but rather a negotiation and reconstruction involving the interaction of the three texts: the artist as messenger; the idea as message; and the electronic art form as the medium.

In challenging the viewer to invest in the art encounter as a critical process of negotiating meaning for themselves, Oursler used a process he described as "layering." The use of time-based technologies meant the TV monitor became the electronic field where this artistic encounter was played out. While the TV screen was assumed to reflect reality it could also be considered to be a construction of layers of ideas and images that were mobile in that they could be seen to emerge from, and recede into, what Oursler called a "muffled kind of electronic grid" whereby meaning was seen to "bubble to the surface" (Artist interview, Nov. 24/92). In terms of personal response, Oursler conceded that individuals had their own experiences and references which shaped the nature of their engagement. These personal proclivities could be seen as texts that mediated what was brought to, and taken from, an encounter with his art. As such, interpretations, and therefore meanings, were continually constructed rather than assumed as finite.

The variable degree of influence each cognitive component played in moderating interpretations could be seen in Paul Bowen's reference to the work of others as a way to shed light on his own art practice. One wall text he included was a small postcard of a painting by Roger Van der Weyden (1399-1464) titled *Men Shovelling Chairs*. The image was organised around a semi-circular composition with a series of figures standing on the curving baseline, and they were 'shovelling chairs' into piles. Bowen commented that "it could almost be a bizarre kinetic construction, done, it would seem, without irony or humour, its narrative now elusive to us, 500 years after its making" (Artist interview, Oct. 10/92). At least two concerns could be drawn from this postcard reference that contributed to emerging impressions of Bowen's large wooden constructions. Firstly, there was the obvious emphasis on strong composition. The semi-circular form and the figure and chair structures shared a resemblance to Bowen's tightly wrought works. And there was the idea that although the original meaning was lost, there is no need to get too worried and to take the image for what it was.

Further emphasis on the variable feature of the cognitive coalition of artist, viewer, artwork, and setting in the co-construction of meaning was provided by Carlota Duarte. In discussing the significance of the role of the art critic, Duarte highlight-

ed the importance of the viewer's emotional investment in the critical process. Duarte saw a need for critical response to be shaped in part by a personal connection being forged with the artwork around which more diverse contextual issues can be identified.

I think good description is partly important. In the absence of visual things in front of you there has to be something to enable people to get a sense of what is there. Some sense of context is important, where this is in relation to history, art, photography. So writing in terms of an educational thing. But I think also, something which gives, no matter how objectively stated, some of the emotional response of the person who saw it. And I know the more intellectual approach favoured by more contemporary views, but when I read them I want to know what the person who is writing it, felt. Not only what they thought, but what they felt. (Artist interview, Nov. 13/92)

Co-constructing meaning about art also can feature a correspondence of views. For instance, narrative was a primary means used by Maria Magdalena Campos Pons to critique the cultural dislocations observed in her Afro-Cuban heritage and served as a framework for dialogue. In the following extract from an interview the author conducted with Pons, a possible reading of her ICA installation *The Seven Powers Coming by the Sea* was presented and responded to by the artist.

Author: With the work, there are a lot of levels of symbolism, from the obvious symbols of people, through to images of destruction and hope. In one of the figures there was some plant root systems hanging out of the figure, as if that whole person was a metaphor for a culture that had its stuffing ripped out from inside, it was disembowelled, both individually and culturally. Is that a reasonable interpretation?

Artist: Yeah. You're on the right track. My last solo exhibition was called 'How the human body is a tree'. And the whole piece was a kind of metaphor about that, a natural way to deal with the body - what is stripped out, what is in: a kind of dialectic.

Author: And even with all the photographs of people on the floor, it was almost like a family tree in the sense that these people had certain ancestral beings which were shown as the larger figures.

Artist: You follow the piece. One of the ideas also is about anonymity because this was pretty much the history of the people. And then I decided to play with the idea of not including faces in a collective portrait. There is something about a common group identification. (Artist interview, Nov 17/92)

Insider Perspectives

This theme described the vantage point required when inquiring into socio-cultural concerns and attempting to go beyond merely acknowledging cultural diversity. Two elements were evident in the work of those artists who openly embraced cultural politics. First, there was a real attempt to share an insider's perspective as a way to give visible form to those concerns which were often hidden when various cultural centrisms were applied. The second approach was to use a theme as a link

that not only revealed common convictions but highlighted them through quite different means.

Central to Carlota Durate's work as an artist was her belief that although the artistic process involved the artist and the viewer, it should privilege the subject. From the perspective of photography, the people shown in her photographs were also seen as participants in this process. For Durate it was not a case of the photographer seeing subject matter through the lens according to the artist's sole view and construction. For her, a good photograph was one that went beyond presenting mere information. It left something unsaid. It invited the viewer in but did not dictate the terms about what was seen. In this sense it was not so much the case of the photographer interrogating or interpreting the subject, but those shown in the photographs confronting the viewer by gazing back and asking forthright questions of their own. The perplexing way the images played on viewers' responses was evident in comments made by reviewers and noted responses made in the author's journal, one of which noted that "there is almost a challenge thrown to the viewer whereby anything less than acceptance is abruptly sent back, and the deficiency is with the viewer, not the subject" (Oct 8/92).

For Duarte, the power of art to create a dialectic that gave voice to cultural concerns that were real was predicated on the need to see things from the insider's point of view. She commented:

I always felt that this project belongs to the community—it's not really mine—it belongs to the people in the photographs who lived in the old buildings that were demolished... These people went through a lot of painful struggle in order to retain their community. My photographs document that sense of togetherness, that familial bond to a physical place as well as a spiritual community. (Artist interview, Nov 13/92)

A challenge to perceptions about the role of art and the forms it could take was central to the approach Maria Magdalena Campos Pons took with her response to the exhibition brief. Pons chose the theme of 'displacement' as a powerful and pervasive concern which she addressed in her own art practice. She also felt displacement described the experience felt by many in society who were isolated by a culture shaped and dominated by monopolies, monocultural views and vested interests. She explained:

Displacement brings together different artistic discourses, approaches, and activities. During meetings with artists in research for this exhibition, I have thought about artistic production, as well as the ways in which artists situate themselves in response to contemporary issues such as the family, ecology, education, race and gender intolerance. It is difficult to contain a diverse group of artists within the traditional structure of thematic or stylistic affinity. I will say that here their difference constitutes their unity. (Maria Magdalena Campos Pons, *Displacement*, ICA Exhibition Publication, 1992, n.p.)

Pons included six artists as part of her contribution to the ICA exhibition and each featured a quite different discourse about notions of displacement. As part of her curatorial role, Pons remained open to what the other artists had to offer and

sought to see things through their eyes. In doing so she was intrigued, surprised, and informed by what she found. This was well illustrated by her description of her encounter with Netty Schwarz Vanderpol's needlepoint artworks. These featured partly abstract forms yet expressed in a simple, elegant way deep seated memories of experiences endured in a concentration camp during the Holocaust of World War II.

When I saw the piece by Netty I was shocked and for me it was really difficult because what was being done with the technique was craft. We relate needlepoint with craft. But when I saw what she was talking about and how she arrived at a language as a concept in this pattern, in an almost abstract painting manner, well I felt really strongly towards it. And maybe that would get people thinking. I know it was the first time they had needlepoint at the ICA. But I was really set on it, it was a strong piece. And not only because it was a challenge from what we always see in mainstream institutions, but she had something really interesting to say...I had other concerns to. For example, how it [needlepoint] is really a feminine tool and I thought how my mother makes it. This work is about a lot of our history and a lot of our memory and I feel a big connection with her work. I thought about this person working slowly on this, alone in the house working without any pretensions. And this is how people work, often alone, over a long time and put it into their experience and memory. This for me was really moving and important as an idea. (Artist interview, Nov. 17/92)

Agreeable Difference

This theme described the way views and interpretations could vary, yet readily co-exist as alternative responses. In one instance disagreement centered on the power of others to influence the way response to art could be shaped. A contention about the art of Paul Bowen arose from some interpretations made by Branka Bogdanov, director of the ICA video. When discussing the importance of history in his work, Bowen felt it would be a mistake to make too much out of the implication that his interest in materials was because of any sense of human connections. According to Bogdanov, she found Bowen to be a very contemplative character and sought to portray that aspect using strategies such as silent interludes and shots that panned structures of the landscape and dissolved into sections of his sculptures. This ability of the editor to construct meanings was somewhat unnerving for Bowen. He explained:

There was one scene, right at the very end - there is a piece of slate on the beach which I pick up and make a comment as I skip it across the water. And what I said was something to the effect that I wonder if a hundred years ago a relative of mine in Wales working at one of the slate factories might have split this piece of slate—and I said, probably not! And she cut that out. (Artist interview, Oct 10/92)

Other views of the same video scene were equally varied. In response to the slate-skipping scene, the author related an impression noted as a journal entry as reading the action as one whereby Bowen was tossing away vestiges of his past and not taking it all too seriously. However, another contributing artist to the ICA show, Gregory Gillespie, felt the scene revealed a lot about Bowen's art, his connection to

Wales, the environment, the sea, and his love of working with wood all revealed and captured in a way that was “very poetic and beautiful” (Artist interview, Oct. 28/92).

Carlota Duarte found the most difficult part of the curatorial process associated with the exhibition to be dealing with the attitudes about art and photography held by the artists she selected. While the other photographers all shared a certain insider view of the communities in which they worked, Duarte still felt an “artificial distance” existed between the artist and the subject. This she believed was partly a result of the way the photographers managed to maintain control over the subject matter through the selective editing of the camera lens. For Duarte the formalist aesthetic of modernist photography was very apparent in the work of her colleagues.

Several photographers also expressed firm views as to how black and white photographs should be displayed. Duarte felt there was a certain “elegance” in the final presentation, achieved mostly by adhering to expected conventions for exhibiting black and white photographs. The stylistic presentation was something Duarte sought to diffuse with her ideas about presenting a more interactive installation. A common feature of Duarte’s exhibition noted by reviewers was the way the installation served as both a record and a metaphor for cultural diversity. A communal feel was partly achieved by the sharp counterpoint in the placement of many images, particularly those that confronted the viewer on rounding a corridor of images, or “street corner” of the installation. Christine Termin picked up on Duarte’s challenge to the viewer noting “she has put peepholes in an exterior wall, inviting you to play photographer, observing the life along Boylston Street” (*The Boston Globe*, Sept. 18/92).

An element of disagreement evident in Tony Oursler’s involvement in the exhibition concerned what he saw as a perpetuation of the “star structure” as part of accepted artworld practice. In inviting eight former students from Massachusetts College of Art, Oursler hoped to profile the way his co-artists helped him to see in new ways. Yet it was Oursler who attracted almost all of the publicity and reviews associated with the work. Even with the ICA video, Oursler felt that it would have been opportune to have interviewed some of his co-artists so as to get a sense of the equity sought with the collaboration.

In seeking diverse interpretations in response to the theme of displacement, Maria Magdalena Campos Pons actively sought difference as a viable and valued element of artistic expression. ‘Cartoonish’ paintings by Stephen Grochowski dealing with issues of incest, Netty Vanderpol’s needlepoint symbols of her holocaust experiences, and Hubert Hohn’s computer simulations of nonlinear feedback systems presented as art marks represented a degree of curatorial risk on Pons’ part. Pons’ selection of artists and the range of work exhibited proved perplexing to some reviewers.

Conclusion

Several implications can be drawn from this study which have a direct bearing on art education. It seems obvious that in mapping the cognitive character of artistic practice there is a need to move towards a reconciliation of the psychological

view that describes art learning as thinking in a medium, and the philosophical position that describes aesthetic knowing as thinking in a language (Parsons, 1992). The distributive way the artists in this study pursued their practice by engaging personal drives in relation to other people, things, and situations gave rise to the notion that cognition in art involved “thinking in a setting.” This was strengthened when the environment was considered to be a cognitive coalition of artist, artwork, viewers, and situation; and these interpretive perspectives served to frame responses in the co-construction of meaning about art. If, as Danto (1981) asserts, “to interpret a work is to offer a theory as to what the work is about” (p.119) and interpretation is partly “governed by what the artist believed” (p. 129), then multiple means of inquiring into art need to be pursued to capture this complexity. In this study the use of qualitative methods to help reveal insights into contemporary art served this purpose.

A popular claim in art education is that discipline-based experts should serve as learning models (Efland, 1995; Koroscik, 1990; Short, 1995). Any adaptation of professional art practice to general art educational contexts needs to be based on a clear articulation of what it is that artists and art writers do. What is apparent is that the modernist notion of the artist working in social isolation has mythic appeal only. While this study provided profiles of artists’ responses to specific challenges posed within the constituency of the artworld, embedded in the outcomes was a variety of characterisations that described the complexity of the artists’ practice. At various times they became involved as artists and educators; as collaborators and colleagues; as researchers and documentors; as curators, critics, and cultural commentators. It is the richness of artistic practice such as this which needs to be embraced as part of a model for learning by art educators.

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