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Contesting Terrain: Writing in, Writing out

Visual culture's blind spots

Art education is dependent on visual culture as a teaching method for inquiry into cultural practices, objects and their meanings within specific communities. In responding to such inquiry, the availability of knowledge affecting visual culture requires constant redefining, restructuring, and rewriting. In so doing, it anticipates the notion that visual culture remains in a state of flux or unrest as new knowledge re-establishes understandings. Knowledge also accumulates not in isolation, but within the sphere of civilization. Bodies of knowledge influence each other when we interact, so it is incumbent upon us to consider different approaches to what constitutes knowledge, similarities and differences, and the hybrid nature of such engagement.

In the last decade or more, the recognition for greater inclusivity of perspectives, art-making, and aesthetic appreciation, from outside the Western canon grows in its momentum. It is within this expansive framework of rethinking visual culture that one questions the legitimacy of what we construct as educational content and its relevance to a global audience.

The term 'visual culture' or 'visual studies' is difficult to tabulate as this is a study without a chronicled beginning or end. The spectrum of the visual is vast and so is that of culture. Any attempt to rationalize these within the context of educational interpretive methods of feminism, social history, post-coloniality etcetera, adds to the challenge. The uncertainty that exists resides in the practice of looking and appreciation – even though we may not understand what it is we are looking at or the context within which it was produced. This uncertainty may be due to historical duration and geographic positioning that exists within visual cultures, particularly in the Southern hemisphere. The struggles that the visual arts find itself in is a tussle between the acknowledgement of knowledge generated in the Northern and Southern hemispheres, and that both are challenged by the same beast, coloniality. It is the colonial tension that is central in the arguments that surround studies of the visual. Jason Wallin references Deleuze's and Guattari's (1994) contention, that "a concept (coloniality) is not

a name attached to something but a way of approaching the world and what this approach does” (Wallin, 2010, p. 1).

Elizabeth Coleman presents a succinct explanation of Europe’s lack of engagement with colonised communities’ art practices: “the freedom of disinterestedness” (Coleman, 2011, p. 57), that removed any prevailing ‘civilised’ presence and denounced any aesthetic value in non-European artefacts with power vested in “the central motif of self/other, subject/object” (White, 2002, p. 413). In creating the ‘other’ instilled with notions of inferiority, difference and being uncivilised, a hierarchy is immediately referenced displacing all cultural attributes in the other. This does not mean that cultural representation did not exist. Denis Ekpo claims that “African educational thought has already been determined, the challenge that exists is the legitimising of African thought since Europe covered Africa with its cultural blanket” (Ekpo, 1995, p. 122). The unsettling reality is a need to rationalise appreciation for artmaking in both hemispheres. If we accept that aesthetic appreciation is a culture-specific currency and the commonality in cultures includes an appreciation for the purpose for which an artefact is made, material, skill, thought, and time invested we can remove the blinkers of adornment that we once treasured.

In responding to notions of reflection on history, art history, visual studies, or art education, it is agreed that an urgent need to write in details that were omitted or incorrectly prescribed is necessary. In embarking on these activities, it becomes a concrete response to colonialist ideas fixated on European achievements only. Such vital interventions are evident in the literary works of Ngugi wa Thiong’o, in his quest to write a corrected history of Kenya (Sicherman, 1989). However, Achille Mbembe was not wrong in his assessment that the task of “decolonisation is a struggle in itself” (Mbembe, 2016, p. 35), especially when Eurocentric art education has stood the test of time.

There will always be some resistance to writing certain areas of history out of the frame of art history, but how do we write areas of history that have been neglected, in – for example, women, and in particular, black women artists? Just as race, class, and gender impacted the entry of black women artists into the political arena; these factors played a crucial role in the determination and documentation of a specific South African art history. In Marion Arnold’s publication, *Women and art in South Africa* (1996) she acknowledged the neglect of an archive of South African women artists when she proclaimed:

In South Africa we have not yet retrieved our female histories. As a result, writing confronts two problems: we must make women of the past visible; simultaneously we must present a contemporary post-colonial critique, cognisant of international theory, African circumstances and the new South African dispensation (Arnold, 1996, preface).

In this post-colonial era, how does one begin to write out content to allow for new matters for discussion and appreciation? Of course, the fixation is on fear and failure,

the fear of not knowing what to write out or write in, resulting in trauma as the cultural blanket begins to lift. The process of self-reflection is difficult, however. Rediscovery and recovery of communities and their artmaking that were deliberately written out need to be positioned with arts education so that gaps within cultural understandings are reduced. Divergent views and the availability of ‘non-Western’ artefacts found in various private and public spaces indicate the expansiveness of art histories and how an acceptance of these as valuable could serve towards understanding communities and communal practices in the arts. By asserting the equality of art practices globally, we can embrace the cultural capital that contests the celebratory notion of Europe as a central cultural hub.

In South Africa, expectations – mainly from ‘non-white’ students and academics – are that the educational content offered should be reviewed post-1994. However, almost 30 years later the curricula remain predominantly Eurocentric in content. The frustration is that South Africans have not fully addressed apartheid deficiencies in its South African curriculum apart from attempts at decolonising its content. Danielle Becker highlights further educational challenges:

While there have been continued attempts to revise South African art history, and to insert historical art from southern Africa into the canon, it appears the discursive problem of difference has been painted over by a focus on the contemporary and the commercial so as not to have to deal with the past (Becker, 2017, p. 128).

The move in curricula from art history to visual studies, once again traverses into the contemporary with little regard for the past. This has resulted in “many students lack(ing) an understanding and appreciation of historical African art and so perceive contemporary forms to be based either in the Western canon or as separate from any historical referent” (ibid., p. 207).

Art in any community serves as a visual voice that recorded “periods of culture and civilisation in time: past, present and a projected future” (Serote, 1999, p. 14) and it was a way in which artists make sense of the world (Tomaselli, 1989; Koloane, 1999). Becker reasons that,

[H]istorically, both exhibitions and written texts about the art of ‘Africa’ in Europe and America before the latter part of the twentieth century follow an ethnographic model, one defined by a view of Africa as a continent without a credible history, as being primitive, undeveloped and therefore, static and one whose people made objects that were of anthropological interest but could not be considered worthy of the term ‘art’ (Becker, 2013, p. 4).

Unfortunately, the paucity of information on many cultural histories in Africa makes it difficult to argue for its inclusion into the sea of Western cultural history for fear that it may remain at the periphery. Although tears within the fabric of art education exist, cultural histories of objects and spaces are currently being resuscitated as colonial fires had extinguished their presence. A way forward in repairing these tears is to ask

why certain communities of artmaking were marginalised, erased or omitted from the visual world and work back the smudged history.

Conclusion

Art education is about crossing cultural borders and history is an accumulation of events and experiences that are subjective. In Olugbemi Jegede's view, to understand either a European or African art history, one has to acquire an understanding of that culture, which means coping with two world views (Jegede, 1997, p. 145). In light of border crossing, we should be open to a variety of world views so that our capacity to learn, share, and educate is enhanced. Lesley Le Grange's argument for "a curriculum founded on the philosophy of Ubuntu, 'I am because we are'" (Le Grange, 2016, p. 9) moves away from professed individualism to an extended 'individuality' of how we experience the world. This extended view allows for the decentralisation of European-based reading, shifting the power relationships within the text. Extended individuality embraces communities and in so doing widens the rim of learning.

Those who educate must be open to new pedagogical thinking about the world and how this exists within frames of education, globally. Such flexibility assists in understanding and lessening the complexity of differences that is envisaged when one considers the gamut of art education. A revisiting of entrenched art education content should consider the fact that a curriculum is a 'living' framework that supports learning. Learning that is inclusive and respectful of different perspectives in artmaking and aesthetic appreciation has far-reaching consequences, as the recipient of such learning negotiates the art world effectively. This journal as a platform for new ideas, positioning and repositioning divergent perspectives on aesthetics and cultural ideas is integral to arts education as these will elicit conversations and discussions that transform and inform current thinking within the arts.

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