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Quinn, Therese, Ploof, John, & Hochtritt, Lisa (Eds.). (2012) *Art and Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons.* NY: Routledge.

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If theory is understood as a set of material and contextual practices instead of a ready-made cognitive tool that embellishes arts lessons, a range of new possibilities for critical arts pedagogy and social justice education opens up; teaching becomes a contextual activity that shifts the focus of learning from creative self-expression to self-awareness, from artifact and skilled knowledge to cultural context and action. Viewing arts making as an act of theory moves the focus away from describing the content to describing the context. Art and Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons (Collanus & Heinonen, 2012, p. 84)

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The quotation above taken from Miia Collanus and Tiina Heinonen's essay "Arts Making as an Act of Theory" eloquently sums up the overarching theoretical and thematic concerns shared by the editors and contributors to *Art and Social Justice Education: Culture as Commons.* The often difficult to achieve nexus between context, active knowledge construction, critical pedagogy and sustainable cooperative, democratized classrooms — essential ingredients for successful implementation of effective social justice education — are explored in depth in this volume, as more than 80 educators, artists and scholars provide a plethora of philosophical and theoretical exhortations as well as examples of specific projects designed (with varying results) to help educators confront and ultimately subvert the still dominant discipline-based art education (DBAE) paradigm.

Acknowledging a debt to the work of Iris Marion Young and Nancy Fraser, the editors, Therese Quinn, John Ploof and Lisa Hochtritt, based the organizational structure of the book around three main themes: Commons, Our Cultures and Toward Futures, with each editor contributing a framing essay to introduce the contributions within that section. There is also a fourth section entitled, "Voices of Teachers," introduced by Graeme Sullivan, which is focused primarily on ways educators can facilitate "cultural recognition" and "personal and social transformation" (p. 145). However, it can be argued that the true philosophical center of the work can be glimpsed in the editors' introduction where they make the concise assertion that "context is everything" (p. xx). Whether referring to the ability to locate effective arts education in a given group of students' specific social and physical contexts or the important argument that DBAE practitioners often teach art as something fixed, static and removed entirely from its social and historical contexts, thus denying students a chance to view art as an agent of social change, the idea of context functions as a unifying element, adding a necessary level of conceptual cohesiveness to this radically disparate (in tone) collection.

In contrast to DBAE, the editors and contributors to *Culture as Commons* advocate for a more fluid, contextual and critically centered pedagogy that attempts to demonstrate to students that knowledge

production/construction is not static; that it is in fact an open negotiation that they can be taught to navigate and contribute to with enhanced critical and contextual awareness skills sharpened by a social justice centered approach. John Ploof, one of the book's three co-editors, outlines the importance of providing students "a glimpse of how knowledge is prepared" (p. 32), emphasizing the centrality of active knowledge production in successful social justice pedagogy as a direct counterpoint to the neutral, rigid DBAE approach which maintains that knowledge is a fixed, fully realized product to be consumed and art just another neutral object to be analyzed. Time and again this formulation of education "as a cultural-aesthetic practice that is engaged in the redefinition of knowledge" (p. 35) is forcefully reiterated.

An example of the importance of contextual awareness and the tension between contrasting views of knowledge as something fixed and neutral as opposed to being something fluid and dynamic is outlined rather brilliantly in "A Dialog between Theory and Practice," wherein the educators Carol Culp and Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez discuss these issues. Culp notes her frustration with her students' "focus on being 'good' at art" (p. 131). To remedy this she "decided to ask students to investigate themselves as a subject" (p. 131) as a way to get the students thinking about context and subjectivity, in many ways the first step to awareness and agency, and not about technique and reproductions, elements of neutrality that can negate contextual awareness. Gaztambide-Fernandez emphasizes the significance of the shift from "object to subject," noting that "Traditional art education is 'object'-centered and; it tends to place the 'art work' over experience with art and the relationships that shape those experiences" (p. 132). Focusing on the neutrality of art objects "as opposed to the context that makes the objects knowable as art" (p. 132) ultimately necessitates the move from object to subject Culp initiated in her classroom so that students could begin "investigating themselves as subjects and a focus on ideas rather than technique" (p. 132). Gaztambide-Fernandez notes the "difference between art education that seeks to build on prior knowledge and techniques removed from context, and art education that focuses on cultural production" (p. 133) as a process. Getting students to view art as an act of "cultural production" is an effective way for social justice

educators to combat the idea that art is only about objects and techniques. A fundamental conceptual understanding of "cultural production" makes it easier for students to grasp the concept of active knowledge production. This dialogue illuminates many of the core ideas and themes of the book in a very succinct manner and is one of the most impactful.

Critical thinking skills (as illustrated in the previous example) cultivated by critical pedagogical approaches are viewed by many contributors as the most efficient, effective tools capable of enabling students to begin to view knowledge production as an active process. Instilling within students the idea that knowledge construction should be viewed as an active process that they can interrogate, influence and contribute meaning to is interrelated to the concept of context because once students view knowledge in this fashion (something dynamic and pliable) they can then apply this newly acquired theoretical framework and understanding to other societal constructs, allowing them to also view class, gender and race as constructions that can and should be interrogated, contested, negotiated and hopefully remade. In other words, the students are given a crucial sense of agency.

With respect to agency, a practicing K-12 educator with limited time and resources may have some difficulties immediately discerning the practicality of some sections of *Culture as Commons*. These sections are apparently meant to function as theoretical beacons and many of them are inspiring, philosophically sound and carefully wrought, yet seem exceedingly difficult to translate into, not to mention sustain in, many classrooms. Is theory enough? Again, as before, we see a manifestation of the tension between theory and practice that many social justice educators continue to grapple with. A good example of this can be glimpsed in the essay "Social Media/Social Justice" written by Robert W. Sweeny and Hannah Johnston, wherein they discuss provocative artistic statements made through social media avenues such as *Blackness for Sale*, artist Keith Obadike's attempt to sell his skin color or "blackness" through eBay. While a fascinating read, it was difficult to initially see the overt connection between *Blackness for Sale* and a consistent pedagogical strategy a

K-12 art educator interested in social justice education principles could employ after becoming familiar with it.

But upon further examination the example of *Blackness'*s statement on the commoditization of the self, albeit virtually, is invoked to make a larger and extremely cogent point about social media's unique ability to grant art educators the "opportunity to address issues related to the body and creative expression, making physical the ephemeral interactions related to social media, and perhaps, more importantly, dematerializing the physical production that runs through many art educational traditions" (p. 44). Sweeny and Johnson choose a powerful way to introduce social media in this fashion, using it to de-emphasize "physical production" at the expense of "cultural production" (as advocated by Gaztambide-Fernandez), while also underlining the importance "that students understand social media in art and society at large" (p. 45), a critical point of emphasis because, although students may consistently use and consume social media, their true literacy and grasp of effects and dimensions should be adequately assessed and strengthened. Sweeny and Johnson further "propose that art educators look at the core elements underlying the sphere of social media to design lessons for the classroom which address observed changes in art and society" so that students are able to "critically process and respond to current media" (p. 45). While this is certainly important counsel, and media literacy is certainly an undervalued component of modern education that needs to be addressed, the authors ultimately shift the onus back to the reader, providing philosophical sustenance as opposed to practical guidance.

To be fair, the editors explicitly state that "our book's premise is that art can contribute in a wide range of ways to the work of envisioning and creating a more just world" (p. xx), a statement which indeed provides no overt promise or signal that the book was designed with a predominantly practical focus in mind. Having conceded such, it's fair to say that the work would be stronger had that been the case. There seems to be a persistent tension, hard to successfully resolve, between "envisioning and creating a more just world" (p. xx) and translating that vision into practical, consistent pedagogy and some contributions address that difficulty better than others. For

example, K Wayne Yang's essay on Kutiman's "It's the Mother of All Funk Chords" YouTube mash-up is interesting, but the author ultimately concedes that even he finds himself wondering "how can *my* students do this?" (p. 11). Yang feels that replicating the video, using found footage without exploiting the actors within it, would "pose an excellent challenge to students" (p. 11) and perhaps the intention of essays like this, which are admittedly impractical and symbolic, is to inspire the creativity of educators, providing a blueprint that will provoke innovative new approaches to social justice education. This suspicion is actually acknowledged directly in Nato Thompson's essay "Border Research Gone Molecular" where he examines the challenging work of the Tijuana based, ToroLab collective. Thompson views the ToroLab, characterized by their astute "tactical architecture" and "lived engagement with the conditions it studies" (p. 16) as providing "a lens from which to catch a glimpse of aesthetic pedagogic forms on the horizon" (p. 16). There is certainly value to be found in these essays, but more emphasis on specific ways the pivotal bridge between classroom and community is being built would impart even more. For example, how was the ToroLab's admirable, tenacious "engagement" with its community forged? Can their strategies be replicated and sustained by everyday arts educators or are they too context specific?

One essay that does manage to deliver specifics and successfully span the divide between and theory and practice is Olivia Gude's contribution "Cultural Conversations in Spiral Curriculum." Gude outlines specific classroom techniques that inspired "students to consider the there may be socially constructed walls that sharply limit their lines of sight as well as their insights" (p. 78). This is a perfect illumination of the aforementioned need to get students to understand the concept of knowledge construction and its intrinsic relationship to confronting and interrogating societal constructions and one of the strongest sections of the book. Gude delivers a fascinating analysis of how the confined physical space of traditional classrooms actually mimics the confined mental spaces resulting from the "socially constructed walls" she had previous alluded to, writing that "the world is too flat for the kids" (p. 78) and is in fact the very antithesis of the fluidity embodied by active knowledge production. Gude defines the goal of the

Spiral Curriculum/Workshop as creating "spaces of inquiry, spaces for experimentation in thinking and being" (p. 78). Essentially, Gude is implementing the aforementioned shift from object to subject in students by providing them a space to think and inquire about who they are and how they relate to those around them. But even beyond that, the Spiral Workshop is designed to create "frames for participatory investigation, enabling experiences that are deeply engaged and deeply reflective" (p. 78) by emphasizing the "collaborative construction of meaning" (p. 79). Gude stresses that the Spiral Curriculum is "planned in thematic sequences" influenced by the pedagogy of Paulo Freire and that the themes have "individual and collective import" (p. 79). Even more exciting is that the Spiral Curriculum "is designed to be useful in community and in public-school settings," (p. 78) making it practical and transferrable for educators inspired by its promise, an intoxicating blend of practicable theory.

The tension between theory and practice is addressed in interesting fashion by Collanus and Heinonen who characterize "theory and practice" as "actually inseparable" (p. 85) even though they often stand in awkward relation one another. Collanus and Heinonen, as the quote at the beginning of the review attests, argue that theory should be viewed as a process and if this idea is taken seriously we, collectively, would then be "in a position to rearticulate the theory-practice dichotomy" (p. 85). Part of how this would be achieved is to shift the "focus from the content to the context of making" (p. 85). They are advocating a similar shift from object to subject that deemphasizes the finished product or "art object" as the main pedagogical focus, choosing instead to emphasize the context of the object. They are quick to stress that they view proper understating of contexts "as relational cultural structures that are available for re-articulation in the making of arts" (p. 85) and that the responsibility of educators "is to make the relatedness of the contexts explicit," so that students may ultimately "produce better descriptions of culture" (p. 85) and not just objects. Collanus and Heinonen conclude that the "process of exploring the contexts to find cultural articulations, then deconstructing them into pieces and finally re-articulating the found elements in new and surprising ways is a powerful tool for imagining utopian futures and challenging hegemonic discourses" (p. 88). Finally, this

process will also enable students to "learn while making that culture is a result of various decisions that could always have been made differently" (p. 88). This is the most powerful articulation of many of the book's key ideas: the importance of context in its many forms and guises, the idea that knowledge and culture are dynamic, fluid things that can be re-defined and re-interpreted and that once this conceptual awareness and vision is imparted to students they are given a form of agency that allows them to re-imagine their cultural and societal constructs.

Culture as Commons is a fascinating, worthwhile work recommended for social justice educators, even though the sheer multiplicity of its voices sometimes hinders its ability to articulate a cohesive, practical vision for practicing educators. The tension between theory and practice is thoroughly explored on many levels and this is perhaps the book's greatest strength, and paradoxically also one of its weaknesses.

Reference

Collanus, M. & Heinonen, T. (2012). Arts making as an act of theory. In T. Quinn, J. Ploof, J., & L. Hochtritt (Eds.), *Art and social justice education: Culture as commons* (pp 83-88). New York: Routledge.

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