Volitional Aesthetics: A Philosophy for the Use of Visual Culture in Art Education

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This article is a philosophical argument that seeks to contribute to the field of art education by contributing toward and justifying a different aesthetic philosophy to support the use of visual culture in art education. Using the theoretical changes in art history and cultural theory as a backdrop, an aesthetic theory is constructed and labeled *volitional aesthetics*. First, it refocuses on the role of aesthetic experience and an integrated view of culture and society that situates art and the art world within culture—not as a hierarchy of cultural forms. Second, it sees people as actively participating in the creation of culture through dialog and creative choice. It will provide a new philosophical foundation for a curriculum that maintains the disciplinary structure of Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE), but broadens the category of instructional images/artifacts beyond that of fine art, to include the category of images referred to as *visual culture*. This contribution to theory will re-establish and reconceive the role of aesthetic experience, not only in human creativity, but also as it relates to ethics and morality.

There was a great deal of media attention surrounding the book, *The Da Vinci Code* (Brown, 2004), when the movie adaptation was released. The mystery, to a large extent, hinged on the messages or codes contained in sculptures, architecture, and paintings from the Renaissance period, most notably, da Vinci’s *Last Supper* (1498) and the *Mona Lisa* (1503-1507). As a result, these two paintings took on new layers of significance and were opened to new scrutiny. Plastered all over the covers of books related to, or about, the movie, they seemed to exemplify the facile flux of imagery in today’s culture. The two paintings that have represented the epitome of the traditional, Western art world were (and are still) being used for the same purpose as millions of popular culture images: to sell. This includes a movie, a book, related books, calendars, and by connection, some controversial theological and historical ideas. Thus, in spite of history and tradition, *The Last Supper* and the *Mona Lisa* are part of the ever-continuing, ever-changing conversation of culture: What do these images mean to us *now*?

This article seeks to contribute to that discussion and to the field of art education by creating and justifying an aesthetic theory that reaffirms the centrality of aesthetics and aesthetic experience in human creativity, education, and further, in morality and ethics. It does this by reconnecting aesthetic experience with understanding. The theory that I propose focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on the role of human agency and its expressions within society, as part of a dialogic relationship with others. Such a theory includes the goals of social reconstructionist...
art education, but does not give them primary emphasis. In this view, as visual culture is experienced and consumed, people are seen as creators and contributors to their own culture and that of others.

**The Horizon**

**Art History**

Over the last three decades, much of the scholarly focus in art history and criticism has shown the influences of postmodernist theory: examining and analyzing the ways in which images have functioned, been valued, and used, thus revealing the overt and hidden meanings or messages they conveyed to human society (Bryson, 1988; Holly, 1998; Rees & Borzello, 1986). While not intending to be a comprehensive list, many different methodologies have contributed to this movement: Saussure's constructivist signs (1966), Derrida's deconstructionist texts (1978), feminism, and psychoanalysis, to name some of the more significant. Social art history reads images mainly in relation to their political and economic role in society to understand the full, human dimensions of art. The more political aspects of this scholarship seek to show how art and the aesthetic are deeply political. Integral to this “new art history” is the assertion that images from the art world are seen as a part of the broader category of visual culture (Berger, 1977). These scholars argue that visual texts cannot be divorced from the other dimensions of culture. Meaning is drawn from the full complexity of an image’s social function, and further, continues to change long after its original context has passed (Gadamer, 1982; Moxey, 1994).

Wolff (1995), a social art historian, has made an important point, however, about the “sociological imperative” of postmodern art history that is relevant for art education. Concerned that critical theory too often reduces the aesthetic to the political and the ideological (a view that can be found among the critics of visual culture art education as well), she argues that generally art has come to be seen as autonomous from the social and historical factors that enabled its existence and that view remains despite critical theory. Thus, (1) art and the aesthetic sphere have been historically constructed in specific social conditions and in relation to particular social processes and interests, and (2) the social history of the arts also reveals the emergence of a relatively (emphasis, mine) autonomous aesthetic sphere in modern bourgeois society.

What she describes is an art world that exists within the larger context of visual culture and they both exist within the broader circle of society and culture. I agree with this view: An art world exists as another (not a superior) aspect of culture, alongside other cultural entities. Seen as such, there may be some unique ways of imaging and image-making that are possible because those makers and images have defined themselves as artists and artworks, as opposed to any other occupation or
artifact. However, their methods and ways of seeing are no less cultural products than others.

I have constructed the following diagram (Figure 1) to illustrate this view.

![Figure 1]

The largest oval contains all the multiple aspects of a society including politics, religion, family, sports, science, etc. The next smaller oval within contains the whole of visual culture, which includes all images reflecting the different aspects of society, such as advertising, films, photography, interior design, etc. The smallest oval contains what are considered art images that exist within the larger visual culture. They are not seen as separate from the milieu of society, but rather, are imbedded within it. The dashed lines of the concentric rings indicate the permeability of their boundaries and influences; content and form go back and forth between these cultural realms.

This diagram not only illustrates the relationships between society, visual culture, and the art world, it also provides a structure for creating curriculum. I will refer to this later in the last section of this article.

Cultural Theory

Raymond Williams (1963, 1965), considered the father of cultural studies as a discipline, used a socially centered definition of culture. He was the first to conceive of culture as an interconnected social organism
comprised of the different aspects of a society, without a hierarchy, which worked together to create the “structure of feeling” or “a particular community of experience” (Williams, 1965, p. 63). This differs from other cultural theories, which either arrange cultural forms into a hierarchy or divide them into “high” cultural forms for the elite and “low” forms for the masses (Arnold, 1960; Leavis, 1930; Leavis & Thompson, 1977). “Art” is given no privileged place in cultural studies, but is seen as part of many forms of cultural practices.

Paul Willis (1989, 1990) and John Fiske (1991), greatly influenced by Williams, see cultural forms or images as part of a dialogic activity as individuals or groups try to make sense of, and express, their lived experience. Culture is created out of the consumption of these texts/images and practices, functioning as “agents in the social circulation of meaning and pleasure” (Fiske, 1991, p. 123). It is an active, living process that can only be developed from within (as opposed to above or without) as people find relevance in the texts and images they encounter and consume. It is through relevance (the points of pertinence through which the experiences of everyday life resonate with a text or image) that any cultural text is made into popular culture.1

### Art Education

In the last 5 years, a growing body of art education theory and pedagogy has emerged from postmodern influences as well (Clark, 1996; Duncum, 1997; Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996; Freedman, 1994; P. Smith, 2003; Tavin, 2001, 2003; Wilson, 1992). Similar to goals of the new art history, this body of work re-envisions the focus of art education on the larger realm of visual culture rather than on the narrower focus of “fine arts and crafts.” Much of the earlier scholarship concerning visual culture art education (referred to as VCAE) consisted of justifying a reconceptualization of art education (Duncum, 1997), theoretical and pedagogical discussions of visual culture (Duncum, 2002; Eisner, 2001), as well as ideas for curriculum content (Barrett, 2003; Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2003).

Some scholars in art education and aesthetic education are cautiously trying to discern and argue for a middle ground that takes into consideration the contributions of critical theory and the use of visual culture, but still acknowledge the existence of an art world (Efland, 2004; Moore, 2004). Notably, Smith (2005) supports Efland’s attempts at this middle ground, salvaging the idea of aesthetic experience. He quotes Beardsley’s argument that cultural criticism does not eliminate or replace aesthetic criticism, but rather can embrace and build upon it. Duncum (2007) also encourages the use of aesthetic discourse to describe cultural and social realities, beyond its more traditional boundaries. He recommends the examination of more contemporary philosophers, Shusterman

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1The recent ad campaign for the Indianapolis Museum of Art focused on using the idea of relevance. Using the tag line: “It’s My Art,” (using the acronym of the museum) they have engaged local celebrities—including an Indianapolis race car driver, Danica Patrick—to share with the television audience “their” artwork from the museum’s collection. Further, they have put all 34 videos of the segments on YouTube for Internet viewing.
(1992, 1997) in particular, whom he feels may be able to offer some useful tools to art educators in this effort. Aquirre (2004), in a similar argument to my own, recommends the use of pragmatist philosophy, Shusterman in particular, as a solution for the use of visual culture in aesthetic education.

What is the role of aesthetics and aesthetic experience in visual culture?
The *Mona Lisa* and *The Last Supper* are functioning as all images do—including works of art: They mean something and carry import—some more, some less. The message of the new art history tells us that these meanings and values have changed throughout time and will continue to change as they interface with other cultural and social ideas—sometimes uncomfortably so. Why does this matter? Because, even with the changes in art history, aesthetics is the other side of that coin. This refers to both in the ways in which we experience images (aesthetic experience) and in the ways in which we value them (aesthetics value). It is this background of cultural studies and social art history that forms the horizon against which this proposed new philosophy for the use of visual culture in art education is foregrounded.

Descriptions of Aesthetic Theories: An Introduction
My argument proposes an alternative approach to art education that builds on the curricular structure of Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE)—utilizing the four disciplines of art history, criticism, aesthetics and production—but will place it on a different theoretical foundation. I call this alternative *volitional aesthetics*, which I base on the work of the following:

1. Willis’ (1989, 1990) *grounded aesthetics*. Simply put, this is a socio-political view that humans are active consumers and shapers of their culture. Their self-concept is not predetermined by other forces, but is shaped by themselves in the act of consuming culture. Self-actualization and meaning is achieved through consumption.

2. Shusterman’s (1992) *pragmatist aesthetics*. His goal is to reclaim aesthetic experience for the purpose of enriching life and for the possible salvation of the artworld by broadening its boundaries to include popular culture.

3. Bakhtin’s (1990, 1993) *philosophy of creativity*. It is not based on categories such as definitions of the aesthetic or aesthetic values, but on human relationships. His philosophy posits a unity of nature and humanity (and both cognition and action) in society that differentiates it from the first two theories, yet shares their vision of the interrelationship between aesthetics and life.

The philosophical grounding for a theory for visual culture will rest on these three footings that share the view of culture as the result or

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2For pedagogical and pragmatic reasons, I see value in using the four components of DBAE: art criticism, aesthetics, art history, and art production. I find no fault with the structure of that model. Part of my argument for changing DBAE’s substance is that the professional fields, upon which the four components are based, especially art history and criticism, significantly changed their philosophy in the 1970s and 1980s to embrace sociological and postmodern influences. The changes in the disciplinary fields do not necessarily negate their continuing influence and contributions. Therefore, I argue that the connection with the professional components remains important to the integrity of art education.
product of human activity. People are seen to actively select, reselect, discriminate and alter their cultural products, which are chosen from popular as well as high culture. They are not the victims or passive dupes of marketing machines. Further, following Williams’ (1963, 1965) view, rather than conceiving of aesthetic experiences as disinterested and separate from everyday existence, these authors see the act of consumption of a cultural object or event as an aesthetic experience or pleasure embedded in the everyday and which functions within human society, intertwined and inseparable.

**Grounded Aesthetics**

Paul Willis (1989, 1990) sees consumption as the practice in which people transform the things they buy, from something that is merely a possession, into something that is a part of their life—and may become part of their self-definition. He calls this process *grounded aesthetics*: “the ways in which the received natural and social world is made human to them and made, to however small a degree (even if finally symbolic), controllable by them” (Willis, 1990, p. 22). Grounded aesthetic value is never intrinsic to the cultural text or practice; it is always inscribed in the “sensuous/emotive/cognitive” act of consumption or how it is appropriated (Willis, 1990, p. 24). Willis sees the consumption of popular culture on the everyday level as a form of culture-making, a symbolic act of creativity.

Grounded aesthetics insists that popular culture is consumed on the basis of use, rather than on the basis of the supposed inherent and ahistorical qualities of a text or practice—as is the case with high culture (Storey, 1993). The meaning of a popular culture text, according to Willis, is undecided until it is used and becomes relevant to the person using it; whereas, in high culture, the meaning is seen to have already been decided (a “correct” interpretation). His fundamental point is that messages are not now so much “sent” and “received” as *made* in reception (p. 135). It is not that people are not influenced by the text-intentions of marketing, but they are seen to have the freedom to alter or contradict these intentions by making them relevant and meaningful to themselves. Consumption, in this sense, is an active, creative and productive process, concerned with “pleasure, identity, and the production of meaning” (Storey, 1993, p. 198). It is not a response to an object that *already* possesses aesthetic value; we put the value there.

**Pragmatist Aesthetics**

Richard Shusterman’s (1992, 1997) argument is a project to reclaim the human capacity for aesthetic experience. Deeply influenced by Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1987), he conceives of aesthetic experience as an integral part of life and as a profoundly human ability whose effects are life-enhancing, deeply felt, and reinvigorating. “Aesthetic
understanding must start with and never forget that the roots of art and beauty lie in the ‘basic vital functions,’ ‘the biological commonplaces’ man shares with ‘bird and beast’” (Dewey, 1987, p. 19, 20). Art’s role is not to deny the natural and organic roots and wants of humans to achieve some pure ethereal experience, but instead to give a satisfyingly integrated expression to their physical and intellectual dimensions (Shusterman, 1992).

There are two ideas at the heart of Shusterman’s argument that are useful. First, aesthetic experience is valuable in and of itself as a heightened, meaningful, and valuable phenomenological experience. Such experiences are an integral part of life that gives life meaning and passion, and to ignore them is to reduce life to a form of automation.

The second idea is that “in any of its rewarding forms, aesthetic experience will be strengthened and preserved the more it is experienced” (Shusterman, 1997, p. 39). As we construct meanings of our aesthetic experiences, we are subsequently drawn to find them in other places.

Shusterman’s method (1992) is to first redefine art as experience, connecting all aspects of culture through the use of aesthetic experience. For Dewey, aesthetic experience exceeded the limits of fine art; it was never meant to be constrained to that narrow realm, to be labeled with “necessary and sufficient” conditions. Shusterman’s goal is to indicate the direction towards which we could move to find experiences as a kind of aesthetic education. Changing the definition of art does this in two ways: (1) It encourages us to look for and cultivate aesthetic experience in our transactions with art by reminding us that experience (rather than collecting or criticism) is what art is about; (2) It helps us to recognize and celebrate those expressive forms which provide us aesthetic experience but which could provide us far more and far better, if they could be appreciated and cultivated as legitimate art. The pragmatist goal in aesthetics is not to do away with the institution of art, but to transform it. This can be accomplished by enlarging the concept of art to include popular arts, whose support and satisfaction spreads far beyond the socio-cultural elite; and paying greater attention to the ethical and social dimensions of artworks so that we can be more aware of high art’s ethical and socio-political agenda. This will help us to realize the extent to which we are determined by the very social and ethical forces we attempt to study through that interpretation.

The second step of Shusterman’s argument is the inclusion of popular culture within the sphere of art. He claims that as aesthetic experiences became artistically unavailable, people learned to satisfy this need outside the realm of contemporary art, and increasingly directed their search towards popular art. Shusterman defends popular culture’s perceived lack of “quality,” the extreme variation in media and technique, etc., by taking a philosophical middle position which recognizes popular art’s
grave flaws and abuses but also its merits and potential; it can and often does achieve real aesthetic merit and serve worthy social goals.

Shusterman's third step is to revalue art in a new way. Art, in this view, is not separate from real life, but is connected to it as a reminder to us what aesthetic experiences can be (Shusterman, 1997). I think that this has particular importance for art education at this time. Form and formal properties are usually the focus of aesthetic experiences with artistic objects. However, form alone is not static space, but the dynamic interaction of elements and principles manifesting a kind of accumulation of anticipation and fulfillment paired with emotional intensity. These are defining features of an aesthetic experience. Shusterman, quoting Dewey, says: “Such ‘formal conditions... are rooted deep in the world itself” in our own biological rhythms and the larger rhythms of nature, which gradually get reflected and elaborated into the rhythms of myth and art and science” (quoted in Shusterman, 1992, p. 7). Thus, art keeps alive the power of humankind to experience the common world in its fullness and complex wonder (Shusterman, 1992).

I am using Shusterman’s project to reclaim the fullness of aesthetic experience as an important piece for my argument. I consider the value of aesthetic experience as an imperative for the pedagogy of art education. He envisions aesthetic experience as deeply connected to life—not as a way to achieve some pure ethereal experience by taking us out of it. Pragmatist aesthetics preserves the integrated wholeness of aesthetic experience as a rich and vital reminder of what is powerful in life itself.

Bakhtin’s Theory of Creativity

Bakhtin wrote three essays from 1919–1924 that addressed creativity and its relational implications for human beings, particularly to explore the aesthetics of the creative process itself (1990, 1993). He was concerned with how humans give form to their experience: how they perceive an object, text, or another person, and how they shape that perception into a synthesized whole (Haynes, 1994). Although he shared with Kant the view of aesthetic experience as a uniquely human quality, he disagreed with the view of the artist/genius acting alone. He never defined aesthetics analytically, but similar to Shusterman and Dewey, treated the aesthetic as a sphere in which the cognitive-theoretical and ethical-practical spheres may be brought together, where reality and life interpenetrates with art.

The uniqueness of Bakhtin’s approach to aesthetics is that it is not based on terminology defining the aesthetic (object, attitude, or values), such as truth, goodness, or beauty, but is based on the phenomenology of self-other relationships, which are embodied—in actual bodies—in space and time (Bakhtin, 1990, 1993). He argued there was a moral
philosophy to creativity and art that saw aesthetics as, ultimately, a philosophy of life.

There are three concepts that are important to Bakhtin’s aesthetics: answerability, outsideness, and unfinalizability.

**Answerability.** Bakhtin claimed that in order for an artist to make a genuine, living connection with his or her work, he or she needed the accomplishment of two tasks: the *deed* or act and *obligation*. The event or “the deed” is the manifestation of answerability. Values such as truth, goodness, or beauty are only possibilities *until one acts*. The soul of someone is not visible, but it is to some extent finalized and identified through completed deeds. My action, according to Bakhtin, acts like a signature, incarnating in one moment, my personality, my ethics, my uniqueness that exists and occurs in a real time and place (Bakhtin, 1993). Through the creative act, we create ourselves. The artist’s individuality is actualized in the created object, set as a task to be accomplished through the object (Haynes, 1994).

**Obligation** is part of the deed. It is a kind of purpose of consciousness—consciousness that only comes to us phenomenologically. We live in the concrete world—real people and objects. To understand an object or another person means to understand my obligation in relation to that other—thus, presupposing my own responsible participation or my willingness to act. One can choose not to, of course, and then renounce responsibility, but for Bakhtin, to fully exist in life means to be willing *to act* (Haynes, 1994).

**Outsideness.** This is the awareness that we are always looking at another person from the outside. We cannot completely merge with another person; we can only go to the edge of our own boundaries. Therefore, creative activity takes place at the boundaries, where one consciousness meets another, where one viewpoint meets another.

This outside view of our self by another is essential, for it is only through another’s eyes that I can see myself. Only another person can see me, situated against the horizon they see; only they can see me in my context. We cannot author ourselves, because we cannot see the whole of ourselves. In the beginning, it is our parents who tell us who we are. Later, it is our friends, and eventually, the ones who come to love us. These are the others who help to “author” us.

**Unfinalizability.** This is Bakhtin’s word for the ultimate open-endedness of art and life. Even though a person’s life is finalized in death, that person’s work lives on, to be extended and explored by others, as will the work of an artist, even though the artist has finished with it. The artwork lives on, impressing itself on many others who will, in turn, continue the conversation with each of their subsequent acts or deeds. Bakhtin claimed that every age re-accentuates in its own
way the works of its most immediate past, thus “their semantic content literally continues to grow, to further create out of itself” (Haynes, 1994, p. 15).

There is neither a first nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue...

nothing is absolutely dead; every meaning will have its home-coming festival (Bakhtin quoted in Haynes, 1994, p. 15).

Haynes concluded that answerability was Bakhtin’s way of naming the fact that art and the creative activity of the artist is always related— answerable—to life.

In summary, Bakhtin conceived of aesthetics as a way to connect the artist to the world and others through the concepts of answerability, outsideness, and unfinalizability. Through the creative act, we answer to life. In dialogue with others, before and after, that act lives on with the possibility of transforming others indefinitely. Because we do not exist alone, as isolated consciousnesses, our creative work is always answering the other, if only we would recognize it.

Volitional Aesthetics

These three theories by Willis, Shusterman, and Bakhtin form the new philosophical grounding I propose for art education. I will, from this point onward, be collectively referring to the three theories of Willis, Bakhtin, and Shusterman as volitional aesthetics. Two commonalities connect them. First, they all share a view of human culture that is interconnected and complex. Culture is seen as a contested site where historically formed meanings and values are opposed, reconfigured, and sometimes created anew through the continuing process of human cultural activity (Surber, 1998). Second, they all share a belief in human agency. They all reject the view that cultural activity is merely a product or reflection of forces that lie beyond human control or influence. They see people as being able to consciously and unconsciously choose, create, and make decisions about their lives. Further, that people are connected to each other by the cultural decisions that they make. It is the actions of human agency that result in the connection of aesthetics with real life.3

Implementation

I have argued for a broader, more inclusive definition of culture, and with it, a broader definition and description of aesthetics, resulting in a picture of culture as all inclusive with art, popular culture, and the energy of ordinary life. This new aesthetic will provide a different theoretical base for the development of a revised art education curriculum,
one that both acknowledges the rich and varied ways that we encounter and negotiate visual images from our culture and also acknowledges the unique ways in which we take pleasure in and are transformed by them. This can be expressed in these two over-arching goals for art education:

1. Students will understand that all kinds of visual culture arise from a variety of social, political, religious and economic forces that are interrelated and based on human activities. The creation and consumption of images is part of the human struggle to create sense and meaning out of life’s events.

2. Art education will re-establish the role of aesthetic experience as an integral and essential ability that connects humans with the vitality of an experiential life. Aesthetic experience is then the catalyst for the consumption of visual culture.

These goals can be expanded into the following curricular principles, reflecting the viewpoint of volitional aesthetics:

The role of aesthetic experience is valued as a reminder or clue of how and in what ways meaning and value resonate with us. Aesthetic experience is not seen as something that enables us to transcend life/reality, but rather, reminds us of and grounds us in what is important and essential to our life. It is experiential, reminding us of what it means to be the most alive, most aware, and to know it. In this way, aesthetic experiences remind us of the difference between mere interpretation and understanding (Shusterman, 1997). To interpret something is to produce (at least mentally) a text. Understanding does not require such a linguistic device. A wink, an averted or sideways look may be all that is needed to indicate one has understood. However, the opposite is also true. The lack of feeling can be a clue that something is amiss—that the experience is somehow false or hollow. Shusterman refers to Frederic Jameson’s phrase “the waning of affect,” as a symptom of our postmodern condition and suggests one of the more important uses of aesthetic experience is to counter such a condition. “Rather than defining art or justifying critical verdicts, [an aesthetic experience] is directional, reminding us of what is worth seeking in art and elsewhere in life” (Shusterman, 1997, p. 39) (emphasis, mine).

Our relationship and use of visual culture is seen both as a creative act and as a dialogic activity. Images and image making are seen as part of a way to construct authentic experiences. Part of creativity, according to Bakhtin, is the awareness of the audience. The perception and understanding of how transactions function between cultural products and the public are integral to understanding our own response to them. Creativity is the place where beliefs, thoughts, and intentions are made concrete and reflect the new shape of our boundary or our self-ness.4

4 Freire (2000) wrote about the “authentic word” and stated that there are two aspects to a word: reflection and action—in such a complete (he calls it “radical”) interaction, that if one is sacrificed, even partly, the other immediately suffers. “There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world” (p. 87).
The role of human agency/volition is valued. Deconstruction of visual images to reveal the social, historical, and political forces will, or may, provide the necessary insight, empowering students to make independent and informed choices. Agency is also linked to creativity, not just creativity in making art, but creativity in relation to our own life and that of others.

Context/meaning is seen to arise from a variety of social and political forces, which are partially embodied by the formal qualities and partially supplied by the viewer, who is acting out of his/her own context. While the formal qualities of an image are seen as the means by which context and meaning are given form, the viewer also brings a context to bear, resulting in an interpretation or meaning that is the result of this merging of horizons. Creation is the result of some kind of social, political, and cultural interpretation, which is the result of previous creation, and thus, it continues unceasingly (Moxey, 1994). Further, just as the significance of the work or artifact is ever shifting and changing, so is its aesthetic value.

Implications for Instruction

A curriculum based on volitional aesthetics will not limit itself to those artifacts that have been identified as artworks, but will also include images/artifacts from the whole of visual culture to emphasize the role of content, value, and meaning. It focuses on instructing the student in the ways those attributes have been created through a dialogic process of social, political, and economic influences.

The historical, social, and cultural context and content of an image/artifact will have primacy over form or formal qualities. This change in emphasis will not negate the relevance of formal qualities of images in any way, but will reconfigure them as a vehicle to a broader contextualized and historicized understanding of the meaning and value of works of art. In this way, I see works of art instrumentalized, being viewed more accurately as the means through which creators of images express their response to their culture and context. The following section briefly describes how each of the four disciplines might be reconceptualized in light of volitional aesthetics.

Art History. This deals with the significance or the content, both at the time of its creation and possibly how it has changed through time. The cultural/historical context is given precedence—both that of the students and the image being studied. Ideally, each unit should begin with an image from the student’s own context that can be connected in some way with the unit through appearance, purpose, use, context, or media/materials, which then builds outwards and broadens to include other cultures and perspectives.
Art Criticism. Students look to see how the historical and social context influenced the use of particular elements and principles. It is a way of making the unknown, known to them and the familiar, strange. It is not to describe the work’s given and definitive sense, but rather to make sense of the work (Shusterman, 1992). This sense-making may begin with the artist’s intention and even the artistic and linguistic traditions that were determining his/her efforts, but then enlarges to include the wider context and the student’s own context.

Aesthetics. This deals with the value and meaning of the image, both at the time of its creation and possibly how it has changed through time. This includes notions of beauty and ugliness. Aesthetic experience is related to use and consumption. The images in this new aesthetic will be seen as a view of life; they will not be seen as devoid of any cultural messages.

Art Production. This is the core experience for culturally-centered art education. Art production is also part of the aesthetic experience. When we dance, we understand the sense and rightness of a movement or posture perceptively by feeling it in our spine and muscles, without having to translate it into conceptual linguistic terms. We cannot learn nor properly understand the movement simply by being talked through it or trying to read about it. It must become part of our experience; we must live our way to understanding (Shusterman, 1992). Art is not just about technique; it is about the forming of content.

I have delineated a pie section on this diagram (see Figure 2) that describes a sample art unit, using the theme of science for the image content and context to be selected. The context of the art unit is drawn from all the various subject areas that are connected to the various related aspects of society. The content of an art unit is then drawn from the images of that aspect of society, by drawing a pie slice from the center outwards. Local considerations of appropriateness and/or the developmental age of the students, which is represented by one of the two overlapping rectangles, circumscribe the kinds of images that may be used in a unit. The other rectangle contains the limits described by the topic of the curriculum.

Instructional images, for this example, would come from the entire visual culture of science. For example, if one started from the visual images used in the field of microbiology, working inward to popular culture, one could obtain a range of images thus: science → microbiology → molecular illustrations of cells, medical or computer generated images, electron microscope photographs → older illustrations/engravings from microbiology’s historic beginnings → images of “germs” used in print, advertising and television, germs and viruses as portrayed in comic books and cartoons → DNA Tower (2003, Dale Chihuly),⁵ the chenille stem sculptures of Lucky DeBellevue (which are inspired by the rhizomatic

⁵DNA Tower (2003) 20’3” x 5’5” x 4’8”, VanNuys Medical Science Building, Indiana University School of Medicine, Indianapolis, Indiana.
structure of cells). No hierarchy of “quality” of images is intended or implied—the order and importance of the images would be determined by the teacher.

**Conclusion**

It is necessary to re-establish the role of aesthetic experience in art education. Each aesthetic experience is a kind of recognition that occurs at the deepest part of our being. “What one experiences in a work of art and what one is directed towards is rather how true it is, i.e.: to what extent one knows and recognizes something and oneself.... The joy of aesthetic experience is the joy of knowledge” (Gadamer, 1982, p. 101, 102). We stop interpreting because we have reached a fuller, more complete understanding. “I do not interpret, because I feel at home in the present picture” (Wittgenstein in Gadamer, 1982, p. 346) (emphasis, mine). This kind of profound familiarity comes from what Gadamer calls “an accomplishment of life,” (p. 346)—or by living in the language. Instructing our students about their visual culture does not diminish their aesthetic education, but rather teaches them how we live in the images of our culture, thereby, showing them the way to a deeper understanding and a richer experience of aesthetics. It is a way for them to be the artist of their own lives—to take part in the conversation that has continued before, on, and through them.
References


