THE UNEASY ALLIANCE:
THE RELATIONSHIP OF ART, ARTISTS, AND AUDIENCES
IN CONTEMPORARY UNITED STATES

A Thesis in
Art Education

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CHAPTER 4

PRAXIS:
THE PARTICIPATION OF ART EDUCATORS
IN THE REALIZATION OF CULTURAL DEMOCRACY

[S]chooling should be organized to help students enter into culturally significant domains for conversation, themselves representative of broader cultural traditions of knowing and doing. By placing the emphasis on entry into such conversations, I seek to ensure that students will emerge with knowledge-in-action rather than knowledge-out-of-context. By stressing culturally significant domains, I seek to ensure that education is organized around living traditions that look to the present and future as well as the past. And by stressing domains for conversation I seek to ensure that there is an emphasis on the structure and interrelatedness of ideas and experiences within a domain. Each of these is a significant change in emphasis from current educational practice; together they offer the possibility of a significant transformation in the way school functions.

~ A. N. Applebee, 1996 ~

A Brief Reprise

As introduced in Chapter 1, my examination into the history of public support for the arts in America and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and the controversies that engulfed that agency in the early 1990s resulted in the focus of my research being redirected to an in-depth consideration of the role of democracy, and more specifically, cultural democracy in art and the relationships of artists and their audiences in contemporary United States. My investigation of the history of public support for the arts in America and, most specifically, the history of the NEA is reported at length in Chapters 1 and 2. The results of this extensive examination led me to conclude that many of the challenges that so seriously undermined the arts agency’s status in the early 1990s shared characteristics of other cultural conflicts that surfaced concomitantly elsewhere in American society. Moreover, I concluded that underlying these various cultural debates was an essential struggle between those who upheld conventional understandings of how American society and culture should be “defined” and those who challenged these beliefs as demonstrative of a form of cultural hegemony or tyranny and who wished to extend our conversations of how to define American cultural identity so as to include those marginalized by traditional beliefs. My conclusions about the nature of America’s cultural divisions and conflicts and how they related to support for the nation’s arts and artists is what induced me to look more
closely at the issue and role of cultural democracy in contemporary society and, most specifically, how it perhaps could, and should, inform the work of art educators and artists in its realization. In Chapter 3, the results of this research are presented through a discussion of how in recent years the nation’s schools and the arts have been the sites of ferocious ideological struggles between adherents of orthodox/conservative and progressive/liberal worldviews.

The personal consequence of the research reported in these previous chapters is that I came to embrace a progressive understanding of the role of cultural democracy and, concomitantly, develop a desire to incorporate this new thinking into my teaching practices. I became convinced of my obligation to construct curricula that encourage students to critically examine the myriad ways in which art, art institutions, artists, and audiences intersect and to do so with thoughtful challenge and interrogation of their own participation in defining and mediating American cultural life in their work as artists. This change in my thinking led to a comprehensive reevaluation of the philosophies and purposes I had for the course I taught to university art students. This final chapter of the study charts the process of that reevaluation and its effects on the ways in which I identify myself as a teacher and scholar of the arts. I begin with a brief history of the art course that provided the focus for my examination.

**The History and Purpose of “Commentary on Art”**

In late 1995, the time when these transformations in my thinking began to coalesce, I was working as an instructor in The Pennsylvania State University’s School of Visual Arts where I was involved in co-teaching a writing-intensive art course entitled “Commentary on Art.” “Commentary” is considered a foundational course for the School’s art majors, thus it is expected that students will take the class fairly early in their university careers. The official University description for the course is simple and direct insofar as it describes the course as “an introduction to verbal commentary, both oral and written, about art. The development of critical and expressive skills is given emphasis” (Pennsylvania State University 1999). Because the course is designated as a “writing-intensive” course, it is also expected that considerable emphasis will be given in the curriculum to using writing-based exercises and projects as part of the course requirements. The highly general course description, as well as the freedom in curriculum design granted by the School’s administrators to course instructors, provides those who teach the class with broad discretion in developing the content of the particular curriculum they ultimately use in their classrooms.

At this time in 1995, the curriculum for the course was loosely organized around an
examination of the artwork of Rembrandt van Rijn and Jasper Johns. Writings by Zbigniew Herbert (Still Life with a Bridle), Leo Steinberg (Other Criteria), and Susan Sontag (On Photography) comprised the course texts. Course assignments were very direct. Students were asked to write three short papers over the course of the semester in which they discussed (in whatever way they chose) their direct observations of and responses to three different works of art. There was no particular requirement that the students' writings relate to or reflect upon the course presentations, discussions, or writings. Students were not, however, discouraged from using this approach if they so chose.

The structure of the writing assignments directly contributed to a privileging within the curriculum of the individualized act of gazing and looking as a principal means of understanding or making meaning of works of art. The curriculum tacitly upheld the notion that the private act of looking at a work of art by itself would somehow result in an aesthetic, emotional, or intellectual epiphany for an individual and that the resulting revelations could then be translated into a meaningful writing. In a very real sense, the structure of the course reinforced a central tenet of Modernist aesthetics that, in the words of Hilde Hein (1996),

focuses almost exclusively on subjective experience and a commodified work of art…. [wherein a]rt is taken to be the product of an individual and autonomous act of expression, and its appreciation is, likewise a private act of contemplation. (P. 1)

Although I believed the art and writings examined in the course to be worthwhile for study, I was frustrated by what I perceived as a lack of integration in the course curriculum between and among the different subjects and ideas these materials represented and with how they might be related to my students' experiences as viewers and as makers of art. As a teacher, I struggled with trying to create situations in which the kinds of class presentations and discussions that took place facilitated my students taking the disparate works and texts they were asked to examine and to contemplate and apply the ideas presented in ways genuinely meaningful to their future lives as artists as well as to their everyday lives as members of contemporary American society.

This frustration was experienced most keenly when evaluating my students' papers where, typically, I found two general strategies of writing being used. In many cases, my students' papers were either: 1) reiterations of language, terms, and ideas they encountered in their readings and then loosely applied (and, frequently, misapplied) to the works they had seen in what I perceived as efforts to appear stylish and sophisticated in the conventions of art and its language, or 2) self-absorbed ramblings about what their "feelings" were relative to the works of
art they were writing about. Rarely did the substance of the papers approach that of a thoughtful discussion or consideration of the relationship between seeing or experiencing a work of art and the student's examination or interrogation of their understandings of what purpose, function, or significance the work might have to their life or to society at large.

Although my students were satisfying the academic requirements of the course as mandated by the University, I nonetheless did not believe they were leaving my class having furthered their self-understandings of the role of art in their lives as artists or in society at large. Thus, in spring semester 1996, when I was placed solely in charge of teaching my own section of "Commentary," I was eager to initiate a serious rethinking and restructuring of the course curriculum so that I could begin to incorporate my newly embraced ideas about the role of cultural democracy in understanding the relationships of art, artists, and audiences in American society today.

As I began this process, I quickly became aware that to accomplish what I wanted with the "Commentary" course would require a complete rethinking of the curriculum. I further knew that achieving this transformation would entail more than just changing the content and topics examined and discussed—an entire reevaluation of the framework of my teaching practices would be required as well. I wanted how I taught the course as well as what I taught to encourage my students to employ a more open and critical inquiry into the relationships of art and society and to begin to see me, as their teacher, and themselves, as artists, as cultural workers—individuals whose activities are dynamically involved in the construction and mediation of cultural identity.

In the sections that follow, I present a two-part discussion in which I examine the process of redesigning the "Commentary" curriculum. Part 1 examines the relationships of cultural workers and critical pedagogy, the educational theories of Arthur Applebee, and Carol Becker's writings about the relationships of artists and audiences. Part 2 of the chapter presents a concise description of the "Commentary on Art" as I now teach it.
Part 1:
A Curriculum for Examining
the Relationships of Artists and Audiences

A New Teaching Philosophy: Cultural Workers and Critical Pedagogy

The persistent claims by dominant social groups to the existence of a transcendent moral authority (such as those described in Senator Henry Hyde’s memorable essay from 1992 in which he wrote about the nation’s so-called “culture wars”) have profound implications for those whose beliefs about concepts such as “good,” “true,” and “beautiful” contest the boundaries of reputedly traditional or mainstream values and understandings. Such claims have been especially problematic in the furtherance of cultural democracy in that the inclination implicit in such assumptions is toward what James Hunter (1992) describes as the tendency among antagonists in political and social disputes to strive for the “domination of one cultural and moral ethos over all others” (p. 42). On the issue of cultural domination, Hunter writes,

[...]let it be clear, the principles and ideals that mark these competing systems of moral understanding are by no means trifling but always have a character of ultimacy to them. They are not merely attitudes that can change on a whim but basic commitments and beliefs that provide a source of identity, purpose, and togetherness for the people who live by them. It is for precisely this reason that political action rooted in these principles and ideals tends to be so passionate. (Hunter 1992, 42)

The tendency toward the domination of one ethos over another seems to move inevitably towards a generalized invalidation of cultural difference. By delegitimizing the beliefs and practices of subaltern groups, this inclination serves to inhibit the possibility for conditions that foster what David Trend (1992a) describes as “the multiplicity of opinions so necessary to a functioning democracy” (p. 6). In a vital, functioning democracy the value of difference among citizens is affirmed, and alternative and conflicting voices recognized as essential strands of the multiple public discourses that, when taken together, shape and strengthen the fabric of a democratic society’s cultural, social, and political existence.

Efforts by social and religious conservatives during the past two decades to control the actions of America’s school boards, schools, and teachers; to influence the content of school curricula; to direct school funding; and to restrict (or rescind) public support for the arts are types
of political activities designed to transform social behavior and beliefs through civic activism. Although such actions are ostensibly democratic in that they utilize legitimate political practices, they nonetheless represent direct attempts by conservative activists to exploit and manipulate shifting and uncertain attitudes held by society at large about highly charged, culturally divisive issues—multiculturalism and immigration, religion, gender relations, and homosexuality—in order to foment hostile responses to practices, beliefs, and customs they deem immoral or unpatriotic. Even though these activities are cloaked protectively within a respectable guise of democratic action, they appear nonetheless to be informed philosophically by a desire to retain and/or achieve political and social power through a decidedly undemocratic form of cultural hegemony and tyranny.

In contrast to the cultural goals of many social conservatives, progressive understandings of democracy are more often premised on a belief in the validation of cultural pluralism and the notion that a collective society is comprised of multiple subcultures and groups, each having unique beliefs, attitudes, traditions, and standards of distinction. Moreover, progressives generally uphold that the contributions, involvement, and participation of all citizens in the construction of a society’s cultural identity are critical in the benefits they provide to society at large. For many cultural pluralists, defining the parameters of democratic participation requires crossing the borders of racial and ethnic distinctions to include broad ranges of human self-definition and activity including that of gays and lesbians, feminists, religious fundamentalists, the poor, and the physically and mentally challenged.

Building on a belief of broad inclusion, progressives assert that in a genuine cultural democracy, the implications of pluralism extend to a society’s political constructs—all members of society have not only the right of access to but the right to participate in, to act as decision makers in, and to contribute to the different institutions and activities (actual and symbolic) that constitute a society’s cultural domain. Consequently, progressive supporters of cultural democracy disallow the legitimacy or even the desirability of a singularly privileged form of participation in the construction of a society’s cultural self-understandings.

As sites for the mediation of symbolic discourse and representation, the arts and their associated institutions are, in any society, crucial places of cultural definition. In a democratic society, however, where the content of art must, ideally, be free to explore the meaning of human existence in its many different manifestations, the arts function not only as sites of cultural affirmation but as important public spaces in which artists’ conflicting visions of reality are presented, explored, and challenged. More importantly, within the tremendous intellectual and creative challenges so frequently encountered in the arts, members of a democratic society can discover and articulate multiple understandings of the differences that inform and enrich all
aspects of human existence.

By definition, the understandings of cultural democracy presented here and discussed previously in Chapter 3 implicate the activities of cultural workers such as artists and educators in the furtherance of democratic principles. Cultural workers—individuals who work in areas where ideas of cultural construction and understanding take place—occupy determining positions from which to influence the development of a critical awareness of the interplay between the different social, political, and cultural forces and ideologies that influence the human condition. By confronting and exploring problems in their work and activities that are based on the experiences of their audiences and students and the social, economic, and historic issues that affect their lives, artists and teachers can model a spirit of social activism and civic-mindedness (Klein 1992/93) that encourages and fosters a search for resolutions negotiated through communal participation.

In 1987, art educator and professor Douglas Blandy noted the singular importance of public dialogue to the success of democratic practices and declared an imperative for citizens in a democracy to participate in an informed way in “making judicious decisions on moral, ethical, artistic, and practical issues that affect the common good” (p. 47). Significantly, as a form of symbolic discourse or “dialogue,” the arts provide audiences with a unique forum for the presentation, interrogation, and the exchange of ideas relating to all aspects of their lives and the world in which they live.

The philosophies conveyed by Klein and Blandy incorporate characteristics of critical pedagogy; a practice of teaching Trend (1992a) identifies as representing a particular way of communicating in educational or teaching settings; one that he declares seeks to

- analyze the stories, tellers, and their times [that influence the making of a society’s cultural self-definition] and to encourage this analytic spirit in others. This practice involves the study...[of] the range [of] circumstances in which cultural forms are produced and received.” (P. 2)

The imperative for educators to model this type of pedagogical practice is one grounded in the essence of cultural democracy: by making space for members of a society to engage in a process of cultural examination, critical pedagogy enables students of different, and dissonant, inclinations to more thoroughly interrogate and evaluate the social structures and institutions that contribute to the formation of a society’s cultural identity. This is a condition Trend (1992a) claims necessary for the construction of a democratic social framework (p. 146).

Art education professor Dennis Fehr (1993) compliments the emergence of theories of
Fehr (1993) describes the visual arts as serving as a “monitor of cultural priorities” (p. 140) and claims that by practicing critical pedagogy in their classrooms, art teachers can assist their students in developing a heightened, and much needed, awareness of cultural power structures. Hence, for Fehr (1993), it is critical that art teachers assist their students in developing the ability to identify the agendas behind cultural production, to appreciate one’s constitutional right to free expression, and to employ the values necessary to respect the rights of those with whom one disagrees. (P. 140)

Defining the positive influence that critical pedagogy can have on art teaching practices and, consequently, on how students come to understand the role of art in their lives, Fehr (1993) writes:

To teach students to view art within the context of only artistic issues is to shield from their view the agendas—economic, sociological, political, [and] educational—that drive art. To teach art critically is to give students the tools that enable them to identify the commissars of culture whose decisions govern the issues that most affect their lives. (P. 204)

For Fehr, art teachers clearly have a responsibility to teach art in a way that looks beyond conventional understandings of works of art as discrete and commodified objects to the cultural functions of art. Moreover, so that art teachers may ground their teaching practices in an effective understanding, and modeling, of democratic civic principles, Fehr (1993) establishes very clear guidelines for what he describes as “good” art teaching:

A good art teacher guides the student on the middle ground between totalitarian rigidity and undisciplined ranting. A good art teacher instills in students a respect for freedom of expression as well as the maturity to exercise it wisely. And a good art teacher realizes that the mores of the local community are not to be trampled—nudged at times, but not trampled. Art can be the epicenter through which rumblings in the cultural substratum explode. Unfortunately—and this is the greatest problem confronting public school art programs—today’s artistically unschooled masses fail to understand the potential of art as a source of personal empowerment and as an agent of social remediation. (P. 140)
Like Trend and Fehr, I believe a fundamental reason for artists and teachers to incorporate principles of critical pedagogy into their work lies in the potential for such practices to reveal the cultural, social, and political structures that can both inhibit and further democratic practices. By striving for the conditions of agency intrinsic to democratic cultural practices, cultural workers such as artists and teachers can foster a climate that encourages audiences and students of all inclinations to participate in an informed and compassionate way in the political, social, and economic discourses that affect their lives.

**Redesigning the Framework of the Course: Curriculum as Conversation and Knowledge in Action**

My examination of critical pedagogy convinced me of its worthiness as a philosophical construct but failed to provide me with a curricular model that I believed most appropriate for the way I wanted to teach “Commentary.” For this, I turned to theories of curricular design posited in recent years by Arthur Applebee, Professor of Education at the State University of New York, Albany. In his book *Curriculum as Conversation*, Applebee (1996) places particular emphasis on the recognition of the role of tradition and, most particularly, that of what he describes as “living” traditions in our everyday lives:

> The social world of which any individual is a part is richly structured with traditions of knowing and doing that affect all aspects of life. Many of these traditions are encoded in cultural systems of symbolic representation—language, the arts, mathematics, science, religion, history. Each of these is a system of knowledge-in-action, a universe of cultural activity with characteristic ways of knowing and doing as well as characteristic content….For the individual, these systems of representation and the traditions encoded within them represent potential fields of activity, domains for entering into and taking part in culturally appropriate ways of knowing and doing….We each must learn to take part in the traditions that encompass the knowledge of the larger culture, and remake them as our own. (P. 5)

Within Applebee’s (1996) theories, understandings of “tradition” are not delineated by simplistic notions of romanticized or idealized traditions (p. 1) such as might be attributed to ideas posed by educators such as E. D. Hirsch, who in recent years has created taxonomic “lists” of cultural knowledge he claims essential for American students to know (Hirsch 1988) or to William
Bennett (Bennett 1995; Bennett & Finn 1997) and Lynne Cheney (1995), who have upheld the traditions of Western culture as representing both philosophical and moral ideals. By contrast, Applebee (1996) conceives of traditions as organic and ecological in nature, permitting and undergoing transformation in understanding and definition as conditions require:

[T]raditions enable and transform the minds of individuals raised within them, and are in turn themselves transformed by those same individuals. Traditions change as the circumstances that surround them change; in that way they preserve their power to guide the present and the future as well as to reflect the past. (P. 1)

Traditions, Applebee (1996) claims, “live through their use, not through the passing on of knowledge-out-of-context,” which “strip[s] knowledge of the contexts that give it meaning and vitality” (pp. 2, 3 respectively). Accordingly then, “living” traditions embody “knowledge-in-action” and that it is from our participation in such traditions that we construct our realities as we know and perceive them, and that to honor such traditions we [educators] must reconstrue our curriculum to focus on knowledge-in-action rather than knowledge-out-of-context. Traditions in this sense provide culturally constituted tools for understanding and reforming the world, tools of which we, Janus-like, are both heir and progenitor. As we move through life, we learn to draw upon many different traditions that provide alternative, often complementary, ways of knowing and doing—of defining the world and of existing within it. (Applebee 1996, 1–2)

Consequently, living traditions do not seek to fix the acquisition, or application, of knowledge within a fetishized understanding of the past. Rather, such traditions are “dynamic” and provide us with tools for “being in and making sense of the world” (Applebee 1996, 20). When considered in the context of educational curricula, the use of knowledge-in-context emphasizes the interrogation of why and how knowledge (of the past) is relevant to the present and, potentially, to the future. By contrast, however, when the focus of curricula rests solely on defining simply what is important to know rather than exploring or examining why something is worth knowing, knowledge becomes deprived “of the contexts that give it meaning and vitality” (Applebee 1996, 3) thus becoming learning based on “knowledge-out-of-context” (Applebee 1996, 3).

As conceived by Applebee (1996), the significance of traditions, and most especially “living” traditions, becomes particularly relevant in the evaluation of these two distinctly different
types of knowing: “knowledge-in-action” and “knowledge-out-of-context” (pp. 1–3). In his discussions pertaining to their relevance to the design of effective curricula, Applebee (1996) clearly privileges the former over the latter:

Knowledge-in-action shapes our expectations about the future as well as our interpretations of the past. Those expectations can be changed, as we act within or against the traditions of which we are a part….The traditions of knowledge-in-action in which we participate do not simply constrain us, but are open to analysis and change. Indeed, traditions remain vital only to the extent that they continue to address the present and the future as well as the past, providing satisfactory frameworks for addressing issues that concern us. (P. 17)

The use of knowledge-in-action honors the concept of knowledge as being both organic and dynamic in nature and embraces ways of learning that enable us to continually reconstitute our conceptions of the world by using knowledge to better understand our present and future. It is learning that actively resists commodification. In the design and implementation of curricula, a focus on using knowledge-in-action strives for an active and rigorous evaluation and contextualization of the significance of knowledge to and within our lives rather than just a privileging of the formalistic acquisition of facts or skills.

Through various types of classroom discourse, or what Applebee calls “conversations,” teachers and students are able to actively examine and negotiate their understandings of the cultural significance of knowledge as it might pertain to them individually as well as to society at large (Applebee 1996). Consequently, Applebee (1996) describes effective curricula as representing “domains for conversations” (p. 37) that are derived from the traditions of a particular discipline and the resulting conversations as the “primary means of teaching and learning” (p. 37):

Curriculum involves a selection out of…living traditions of discourse, a point that I try to capture through the emphasis on domains for conversation. Domains are selections of topics or issues out of a larger tradition, and as a set are overlapping and multiple rather than taxonomic….Rather than providing sharp boundaries of inclusion and exclusion,
domains define the saliency of different experiences to the overall conversation: some are more central, others less so, and there is usually a wide range in between. (Pp. 37–38)

A Domain for “Conversation”: The Uneasy Alliance of Art, Artists, and Audiences

Applebee’s (1996) notion of “overlapping and multiple” (p. 38) issues within conversational domains became an important metaphor for me to use as I sought definition for the content of the new curriculum I wanted to design. It was very easy to conclude that, in its most broad sense, the domain for the “Commentary on Art” course was the discipline of “art” since this was predetermined for me by the course’s academic description. Yet, how I chose to define, emphasize, and enter into the specifics of the “conversations” I introduced into the curriculum remained at my discretion.

I asked myself what issue, or sets of issues, did I believe to be most important to use as a unifying discourse for the curriculum and what connections could I make for my students between these different issues? How could these issues be revealed to my students as intersecting with their everyday lives as members of American society as well as with their future lives as artists? How might these topics relate to issues of cultural democracy? Or, to the concerns at large of contemporary American culture? How could I structure class discussions and presentations and projects to include what Applebee (1996) describes as “many different voices, including those of the past as well as the present” (p. 38)? How could I encourage my students to “talk back” to the topics and issues I introduced? To the different texts and readings we examined? Could my students’ various forms of class discourse (those conducted both privately and communally) be related to their art and art-making activities? As I developed a list of larger issues I wanted to address in the new curriculum, I realized that many of them resonated with the conclusions I had come to following my recent examination of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

My examination of the NEA and the different controversies that threatened the agency during much of the 1990s led me to conclude that many Americans are in general unconvinced that the arts and, by extension, the work of artists are deserving of public support simply because they are perceived as contributing an essential value to our individual lives or to our civic lives as members of a democratic society. My research made it apparent to me that many Americans found art expressions that they believe unduly challenge their religious or moral or patriotic beliefs to be especially undeserving of public support—even if these expressions are entirely
constitutional in a legal sense. This realization led me to conclude that the ambivalence that seems to frequently characterize public support for the NEA, especially during times of controversy, is merely symptomatic of a broader, dissonant relationship that exists in general between this nation’s artists and their audiences.

I came to characterize this relationship as an “uneasy alliance” wherein neither America’s artists nor their audiences communicate well with each other about their mutual understandings or beliefs about the social and cultural roles and functions of art in their lives or about the multi-layered purposes and meanings that typify much of the work created by many contemporary artists. I concluded that for this “uneasy” relationship to be transformed into a mutually supportive and respectful one—one that could better withstand challenges such as those that had confronted the NEA during the 1990s—the education of both artists and audiences needed to afford greater consideration to the different kinds of interactions that do, and should, occur between art, artists, and audiences in a democratic society.

These conclusions provided a “unifying discourse” for what would become the new “Commentary on Art” curriculum—I would restructure the course themes, content, and writing projects so as to focus on the relationships of art, artists, and audiences and do so through an examination of case studies about various controversies that had emerged in the contemporary American art scene, all of which addressed some aspect of what art educator Carol Becker (1994a) describes as the “issue of audience” (p. 101).

Carol Becker, Dean of Faculty and Professor of Liberal Arts at the School of the Art Institute Chicago (SAIC), has written extensively on the subject of artists, society, and social responsibility and especially on how this relates to the education of artists. In the article, “When Cultures Come into Contention,” Becker (1992) reflects on the intersection of contemporary arts in America with what she perceives as the responsibility of institutions, schools, and museums alike to enter the present debate rocking this country to the core—the debate over whose voice, whose perspective, whose point of view, and whose center will most inform and transform the prevailing ideology. (P. 59)

Becker’s interest in how contemporary anxieties over issues of social responsibility, identity, and difference intersect with the education of young artists manifests in several of her writings (e.g., Becker 1992, 1994a, 1994b). Her reflections on the potential of these issues to influence artists’ education are most pointed in those writings in which she examines two incidents from the late 1980s and early 1990s involving SAIC students David Nelson and Scott Tyler—events that directly threatened the SAIC and the stability of the school and its academic programs.
In 1988, SAIC student David Nelson chose to display a highly iconoclastic painting titled *Mirth and Girth* in a student exhibition. Nelson chose to depict the subject of the painting, the recently deceased mayor of Chicago, Mayor Harold Washington, in a manner found devastatingly insulting by many Chicagoans and most especially by members of the city’s black communities. The controversy that resulted around the painting and its exhibition cast the school in the difficult position of having to field charges of practicing racial insensitivity if not of condoning outright racism. One year later, SAIC student Scott Tyler chose to display yet another highly charged work, the installation piece *What Is the Proper Way to Display the U.S. Flag?* Like the Nelson work, this piece also invoked extreme reactions within Chicago. This time, however, the criticism directed at the Tyler piece focused on issues of patriotism and the attention given to the issue surged far past city limits to reach national media outlets as well as the floors of both the U.S. Congress and Senate. In each instance, the SAIC was highly criticized for its support of the rights of its students to create such highly confrontational works of art—works of art that deliberately challenged the cultural beliefs of their audiences about art and its appropriate functions.¹

For Becker (1994a), the local (and national) responses to Nelson’s and Tyler’s works of art reveal a disturbing underlying problem in how she perceives the roles and functions of art and artists in today’s society are understood—and frequently misunderstood—by contemporary audiences. She writes:

> The often unconscious expectations of a non-art world, non-visually trained audience are that art will be somewhat familiar yet also transcendent, that it will be able to catapult its viewers outside their mundane lives, provide therapeutic resolution to emotional ills, and, most significantly, that it will end in wonder….Many still bring this traditional expectation to the art object: a hope that something basic will occur to jolt the viewer with an experience of beauty, or the shock of pain. (Becker 1994a, 101)

In writings from this period, Becker frequently reflects on how artists and art educators should, as cultural workers, strive to introduce questions into their work that encourage their audiences and/or their students to interrogate the “cultural resources” (1992, 63) that inform artists’ works. Becker (1992) suggests that both artists and members of audiences must learn to ask

¹ Significantly, after the Tyler incident, SAIC was subjected to the punitive withdrawal of financial support by the Illinois General Assembly. For a highly intelligent and illuminating discussion of these two events and their implications to America’s support for its art and artists, see “The Bachelor Stripped Bare” and “Rally ‘Round the Flag” in S. Dubin’s (1992) book *Arresting Images*. 
from what point of view, from what place, from what political orientation, from what racial perspective, from what understanding of the issues of gender, from what understanding of class, from what linguistic base—from what configuration of all of these does one take one’s identity. Such are the tensions within which we now exist and out of which we must determine meaning. (P. 63)

Becker (1992) recognizes that issues of, and confrontations over, notions of identity, difference, and self understanding frequently emerge to interact and intersect in the oftentimes complex and deliberately multi-layered works of many contemporary artists. Becker (1992) also acknowledges that the hostilities that frequently manifest in these intersections often result in the respective “sides”—most notably artists and audiences—retreating to the safety of their own perspectives and beliefs (p. 67). Because of this tendency, vital opportunities are lost for the broadened and enriched understandings that could result from such moments of constructed tension.

Writing of this issue in general but referencing the Nelson and Tyler affairs specifically, Becker (1992) notes:

It seemed impossible for the groups within each confrontation to grasp the perspective of the other. The battle was always over which point of view would win out, with little attempt on the part of any group to step outside its own paradigm to look at the effect the work of art might have on someone else. (P. 67)

The Nelson and Tyler controversies sufficiently demonstrated the ability of art, as did many of the arts crises of the early 1990s, to “unnerve” its audiences (Becker 1994b, xii) when it is perceived by them as threatening conventional understandings of the roles of art and artists. Even more disturbingly, these incidents spoke to a basic, and potentially corrosive, breach in the understandings of art that exist between this nation’s artists and audiences:

These events revealed how misinformed about the intentions of art and artists and how easily swayed by politicians, art’s audience could be. It also became clear that the place and function of art and artists in American society had never been sufficiently articulated. (Becker 1994b, xii)

Becker (1994b) notes that frequently when artists’ work becomes the “object of rage and confrontation” (p. xiii) such as was evident in the arts controversies of the 1990s, artists often
choose “rebellion…as a method of retaliation” (p. xii) and

in so doing, they separate themselves from those with whom many actually long to interact. Hence the need to decolonize the imagination of artists and audience, to force us all to break the paradigms that perpetuate this mutual alienation and keep art from having an impact on society. (P. xii)

The isolation of artists from society carries substantial social consequence insofar as the positioning of artists at the margins rather than centers of society results in a generalized devaluation of the role that art can have in our everyday lives and an inhibition of artists as dynamic and active participants in society (Gablik 1984, 1991; Hein 1996; Lippard 1995).

The paradigms of understanding to which Becker (1994b) refers in her writing are ones that can be identified as having foundation within those of conventional Modernist aesthetic philosophies, which exalt the individual artist and the private rather than collective experience of art (Hein 1996). Becker (1994b) claims that the tendency within Modernist aesthetics to fetishize personal expression and experience gave rise to the mistaken perception that

freedom of expression consistently has been the central artistic concern, and [that] the artist has always lived in a marginalized or antagonistic relationship to society. Because history reveals that this is not the case, there needs to be a way to expand our analysis so that other possibilities are allowed to influence this paradigm. (P. xv, emphasis added)

Becker’s uneasiness with the continuing influence of Modernist thinking on audiences’ perceptions of art and artists as well as artists’ self perceptions is not unique. Similar ideas are found in earlier writings by art critic and teacher Suzi Gablik. In her 1991 book The Reenchantment of Art, Gablik also notes the residual influence of Modernist philosophies on our understandings of art and artists and comments on how she perceives such thinking as contributing to the unwillingness of many artists to see themselves as participants in a collective cultural experience. She writes:

Individualism, freedom, and self-expression are the great modernist buzz words. To highly individualistic artists, trained to think in this way, the idea that creative activity might be directed toward answering a collective cultural need rather than a personal desire for self-expression is likely to appear irrelevant, or even presumptuous. (Gablik
Gablik (1991) further identifies what she perceives as a critical need in society to change the paradigms for understanding the use, and usefulness, of art and artists from the prevailing focus on individualistic and isolated self expression and freedom to an aesthetic that embraces the social and ecological possibilities of art and artists as integral and dynamic participants in our everyday lives. For Gablik (1991), the consequence of embracing this new, integrated paradigm of understanding of art is one that has direct, positive implications for the relationships of art, artists, and audiences:

It seems clear that art oriented toward dynamic participation rather than toward passive, anonymous spectatorship will have to deal with living contexts; and that once an awareness of the ground, or setting, is actively cultivated, the audience is no longer separate. Then meaning is no longer in the observer, nor in the observed, but in the relationship between the two. Interaction is the key that moves art beyond the aesthetic mode: letting the audience intersect with, and even form part of, the process, recognizing that when observer and observed merge, the vision of static autonomy is undermined. (P. 151)

The idea that society as a whole might benefit from a deliberate and more dynamic consideration of the relationships of artists and audiences is central to Carol Becker’s 1994(a) article “The Education of Young Artists and the Issue of Audience.” This article, which in several ways is an educational manifesto, challenges those of us concerned and involved in the schooling of young artists to create educational settings in which our students are actively asked to consider their relationships with audiences in an articulated and deliberate manner. In her writing, Becker (1994a) acknowledges, however, that

the issue of audience is rarely raised in the art-school pedagogical process and by its omission it is usually assumed that work is being made to take its place within the art world context….It would be ideal if work could break out of categorical boundaries and be simultaneously avant-garde and popular but in practice, this is difficult to achieve. Given these hurdles, educators must set out clear programmatic goals to help students think about their work within a large societal context and to imagine who their audience might be. (P. 109)
As both a teacher and administrator at the SAIC, Carol Becker was witness to and participant in two of the most confrontational events to challenge the world of art school education in the late 1980s and early 1990s and the impact of these events on her thinking about art education is undeniable. My discovery in 1995–96 of Becker’s writings about artists and their relationships with audiences proved to be a philosophical revelation in which I found strong support for my (then) emerging conclusions about the need for the education of artists to include a more deliberate consideration of their relationships with their audiences. Her writings and ideas about artists’ education provided a convincing rationale for my impulse to locate the new “Commentary” curriculum in an examination of issues focusing on the relationships of artists and audiences in contemporary United States.

Part 2:
“Commentary on Art” Redefined

Taking curriculum as a domain for conversation….we begin with a consideration of the conversations that matter—with traditions and the debates within them that enliven contemporary civilization. The question then becomes, how can we orchestrate these conversations so that students can enter into them? (Applebee 1996, 52)

Choosing the “Conversations that Matter”

The pedagogical and philosophical issues and concerns discussed in Part 1 of this chapter provide a detailed outline of the underlying framework that informs the new “Commentary” curriculum. That discussion does not, however, examine the specific content—what Applebee (1996) might describe as the “conversations that matter” (p. 52)—that I have chosen to introduce into the classroom and with which my students and I currently work. The task of selecting these areas of discussion did not require me to look to completely new areas of research or study. By contrast, and perhaps not surprisingly, each of the topics I have selected for the new curriculum has connections to and resonance with my previous research into the National Endowment for the Arts and the issues of cultural democracy discussed in the previous chapters of this study—the same research that prompted my decision to redesign the course curriculum in the first place.
It was never, however, my intention or purpose to redesign the course curriculum as an explicit examination of public support for the arts or to transform “Commentary” into a course that “teaches” cultural democracy. Cultural democracy is grounded in a form of participation and support that must be voluntary and solicited without coercion; thus, its ideals cannot be enforced through education. Nonetheless, its principles can be examined in our classrooms and modeled in the practices through which we conduct our pedagogical discussions. Thus, I decided to select art-related topics and case studies that reflect contemporary concerns with different issues relating to cultural democracy and to discuss them in the context of how these issues connect with and impact the lives of my students as members of American society and as artists. The specific locus and referent for this examination is the relationships of artists and audiences in a democratic society.

The new curriculum for “Commentary on Art”\(^2\) is currently organized into five major areas of discussion: 1) Art as Commentary/Commentary as Art; 2) The Body Politic;\(^3\) 3) The Relationships of Art, Advertising, and Society; 4) Issues of Class and Race in Art Museums and Exhibitions; and 5) The Role of Public Art in Contemporary United States. The first topic serves as a general introduction to the historical and philosophical concepts examined in the course. The second looks at how throughout human history artists (or makers of symbolic images and objects) have used the human body as a referent and point of examination and how this practice has furthered our understandings of the body as well as heightened our concerns about it. The remaining three topics were chosen because they represent principal sites in which we experience symbolic images and objects in contemporary America and, no less importantly, because they are three sites in which I believe the relationships of artists and audiences have encountered some of their most strenuous challenges in recent decades. None of the topics examined in the new curriculum are considered or presented as discrete or unrelated areas of examination. Rather, they are perceived by me and discussed with my students as being both relational and integrated. Consequently, throughout the semester, I am very deliberate in calling attention to the different types of intersections that exist between the various topics.

\(^2\) The new “Commentary on Art” curriculum discussed here is used only in the sections of the course that I teach. I am not, however, the only faculty member that teaches the “Commentary” course at The Pennsylvania State University. Other faculty members who teach the course, quite appropriately, use their own curriculum. This reflects the broad discretion the University’s School of Visual Arts grants its instructors to design and implement the curricula they choose.

\(^3\) I wish to acknowledge that the concepts and ideas discussed in the first two topics of the new curriculum, in which the theories of John Berger and the art of Andres Serrano are examined, reflect aspects of content presented in Art 100 (Concepts and Creations in the Visual Arts), another art course taught at The Pennsylvania State University with which I was involved as both a graduate assistant and an instructor. Although my discussion of Berger and Serrano in the Art 122w curriculum differs substantially from the way they were presented in Art 100, my awareness of these individuals and the issues their work addresses began with that course and I want to credit the supervisor with whom I worked, Dr. Charles Garoian, with first introducing me to them.
The specific material discussed within the different course topics and case studies is presented in its entirety in The Appendix (see pp. 185–333) and readers are referred to that section of the study so that they may review the complete course content. An in-depth reading of the course material will provide substantial illumination of the rationales that inform the course and its content; however, in what immediately follows, I present brief synopses of each topic area and describe how they can be understood to connect to the issues of cultural democracy and to the relationships of artists and audiences that I encourage my students to reflect upon.

“Art As Commentary/Commentary As Art.” This first section of the course is used to provide a general overview of the philosophies that inform the entire curriculum. More specifically, it serves to acquaint students with the concept of art as a culturally constructed way of seeing and understanding the world. The first presentation, “Art As a Way of Seeing” (see pp. 185–200 of The Appendix), introduces the idea that the way we see and understand the world is influenced by what we already know or believe and that the ways in which we interpret what we see are largely determined by the various social, political, religious, and cultural constructs that shape our identity and help us locate ourselves within the world. The title of this discussion refers to ideas first presented in the book, Ways of Seeing, written in 1972 by John Berger. This discussion closely examines the (then) new ideas presented in Berger’s work and connects them with the more current thinking of Richard Leppert (1996), the author of the course textbook, Art & the Committed Eye: The Cultural Functions of Imagery. Like Berger, Leppert’s writings also examine the cultural foundations for the way we interpret the world and how this influences our creation and understandings of symbolic imagery but from a more current perspective.

The second presentation in this topic (see pp. 201–06 of The Appendix) focuses exclusively on a single painting by the contemporary artist Mark Tansey, The Innocent Eye Test, and does so through an open class discussion. At first glance, Tansey’s painting appears to be a humorous, tongue-in-cheek poke at the serious and oftentimes-grim atmosphere we sometimes associate with art museums. With closer examination and study, however, the painting is revealed as a multi-layered “text” that explores the serious philosophical question of how it is that

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4 With the exclusion of the Image List, the pages reproduced in The Appendix are taken directly from the course website and represent a formalization of the material I use in class, including slide images, written into article format. I would like to note that constructing a website for “Commentary” was not part of my original goals in redesigning the course curriculum. However, as I began to develop the material I presented in class, it became apparent that writing the course content as illustrated articles and incorporating them into a website would be very useful for my students as well as myself. The website has evolved into a fairly complex presentation and currently includes the course syllabus and schedule and areas for course announcements, project descriptions, and a web ring of links to course-related sites. The course topics continue to comprise the major area of the site and include illustrated articles, image galleries for each topic, a discussion bibliography, and all course handouts. My students have been very receptive to the site and I find that as it has evolved their use of it has increased dramatically in terms of both extent and effectiveness.
we arrive at the conclusion that an object is a work of art. Like the first presentation, this discussion addresses how our perception of objects as art is grounded in our cultural understandings and beliefs, knowledge, and experience. With our examination of Tansey’s painting, however, the discussion is located directly in the world of “audience” and, most specifically, my students’ experiences as audience members attempting to make meaning of a not-so-transparent work of art. Although the path of each class’s discussion of this work is unique, it seems invariable that every group of students arrives at the conclusion that the painting examines how what we “know” influences what we “see” in a work of art and, ultimately, our understandings and valuing of it. For most students, this presentation provides a first introduction to considering the “issue of audience” discussed so effectively in Carol Becker’s (1994a) article, “The Education of Young Artists.”

“The Body Politic.” The second topic of the curriculum acknowledges the axiom that one thing universal about life is that everyone experiences it through a physical existence—through living in a “body” and that it is principally through our bodies, and our self-awareness of existing within a physical body, that we understand the world and locate ourselves in relationship to it and to others. Consequently, I argue that the primary referent for discussions having to do with the human condition—physical or otherwise—is frequently the human body. The material presented in both sections of this topic references the metaphor that the body is both a physical sight (to behold and examine) and a sociopolitical site (for control, struggle, and containment).

In the introductory presentation, “The Body as Sight and Site” (see pp. 207–27 of The Appendix), I attempt to draw my students’ attention to the many ways in which historical and contemporary Western artists have, indeed, "used" the body as a focus for their examinations of all aspects of the human condition and how these examinations reflect various influences over the work of artists, including those of religious, cultural, technological, and political origin.

The second presentation, "Andres Serrano: Works" (see pp. 228–41 of The Appendix), is done in the form of a case study that focuses on the work of Andres Serrano, a contemporary artist whose photographs were (and remain) the source for much controversy over the ways in which contemporary artists examine the physical and social body in their work. This discussion begins with an examination of the controversy that erupted in the early 1990s over Serrano’s work, Piss Christ, but quickly moves on to focus on Serrano’s work as a whole and how Piss Christ can (and perhaps should) be examined in context with the various suites of photographs Serrano produced from 1985 through approximately 1997. The purpose of this case study is twofold: 1) to introduce my students to the work of Serrano and 2) to have them consider how
works of art that challenge their audiences’ ethical, moral, and religious beliefs are frequently the focus of many of our debates over the role of art in contemporary society.

This topic concludes with an open class discussion in which my students debate whether and under what conditions the work of Serrano should be exhibited in our local museum gallery. This discussion is based on a short writing assignment (see “What’s a Body to Do?,” pp. 338–39 of The Appendix) that requires them to assume various positions as members of a panel responsible for mediating a proposed exhibit of Serrano’s work.

Three critical intersections: Advertising, the art museum exhibition, and public art.
The final three topics of the curriculum are presented as representing especially important sites for the “intersection” of artists and audiences in contemporary America. These topics are also presented as places wherein strenuous challenges have been made regarding the roles of art and/or symbolic imagery in society. In the case studies presented in each area, particular attention is paid to how audiences have responded to particular works or situations that have been perceived as especially challenging or confrontational.

“The Relationships of Art, Advertising, and Society.” In the introductory presentation of this topic, “Advertising and Society” (see pp. 242–65 of The Appendix), I note that advertising and its related industries are significant, if not dominant, sources of employment for those of us who work in the arts today. Consequently, artists are by association implicated in the roles that media and advertising images and campaigns play in our lives. I also suggest that, in terms of exposure, advertisements constitute the principal site for the daily interaction of individuals and symbolic imagery in America today. Considering the numbers of advertisements we encounter daily, it is fair to assert, as have John Berger (1972) and Robert Goldman (1992), that advertisements comprise a social and visual environment that surrounds us and which influences us as assuredly as does the natural environment in which we live. As sites in which we are confronted with images that challenge our concepts of beauty, sex, race, and social status, and even democracy, advertising unavoidably plays an important role in how we perceive others and ourselves and in how we construct our individual and collective cultural identities.

The two case studies presented in this section examine the advertising images and campaign strategies of two major clothing retailers: the Benetton Group (see pp. 266–80 of The Appendix) and Calvin Klein (see pp. 281–90 of The Appendix). Each of these companies manufactures and markets products that appeal to young adults. Consequently, many of my students are familiar with their products as well as their advertisements. This is not, however, the principal reason I use these companies as the focus of the topic's case studies. For more than
two decades, Benetton and Calvin Klein have utilized advertising images and campaigns that periodically have been the focus of controversies over the role and appropriateness of advertising that attempts to reconstrue our individual understandings about particular issues. Benetton has used the idea of social responsibility as a central theme in its images and produces campaigns that address issues as diverse as multiculturalism, AIDS, gender equality, war, and, most recently, the death penalty. Calvin Klein is most noted for the extreme sexualization of its advertising and its focus on youths. The Klein campaigns that we study were highly criticized for 1) the presentation of youthful-looking models in almost pornographic settings and 2) the perceived glamorization of drug addiction as a fashion statement. The various controversies induced by the ads used by these companies provide fertile ground for the consideration of the role of advertising in society.

For our class discussion for this topic, I ask my students to bring to class one or more advertising images that they believe address the issues we touch upon throughout this topic. Working in small groups, I have the students deconstruct the ads they've brought in with regards to how they perceive that the ads “speak” to more than selling a particular product or brand name—in other words, how the ads may be interpreted as mediating our understandings of others and ourselves. It is usual during this discussion that students will debate the social and/or ethical questionability or appropriateness of images they find to be especially problematic. In this regard, I generally refrain from imposing my own judgments, preferring instead to permit my students to negotiate such issues among themselves.

“Issues of Class and Race in Art Museums and Exhibitions.” In contrast to advertising’s “informal” participation in the construction of cultural identity, museums represent sites for a formal or quasi-official recognition of our cultural and social understandings and histories. Museums are the primary places and institutions in which we preserve those objects, art, and artifacts commonly perceived to represent the highest achievements of our culture and society. Thus, we often assume that what is collected by and exhibited in museums is especially important and worthy of being preserved and studied. In this sense, the objects exhibited in museums can be described as the recipients of a particular kind of cultural approval, one that identifies them as having earned a special status in our society’s cultural heritage and memory. In the past, perhaps because of a deep-seated faith in the cultural authority of museums and those we entrusted to operate them, the bases for the decisions and/or policies established by museum officials and boards of trustees often went unquestioned. It was presumed that the expertise and knowledge of those who oversaw museums would lead them to make equitable and wise policies and decisions about a museum’s collections, exhibitions, and educational programs.
Consequently, what was left out of museums—what was excluded from collection and exhibition—was seldom afforded the same high status as that which was collected and/or exhibited within them. As a result, the significance of objects (or ideas) excluded from the museum setting was more easily dropped from our cultural and historical consciousness. We often “lost” our memories of these objects and the ideas they contained and the meanings they once had. The purpose of this topic and the case studies presented within it is to draw attention to the issue of representation in museums and to ask my students to consider the consequences of the processes of exclusion and inclusion to the construction of our cultural identity. To consider who and what is kept out of museums and who and what is allowed in, and most importantly perhaps, why.

The case studies examined here focus on two art exhibitions that each in their own way influenced our thinking about the issue of representation in museums. These exhibitions, Fred Wilson’s *Mining the Museum* (see pp. 295–302 of The Appendix) and Richard Avedon’s *In the American West* (see pp. 303–14 of The Appendix), are startlingly different in form and content; yet, each introduced into our discourse about museums questions about the role of historical and social narratives in exhibitions and who gets to construct them and how. What are the ethical concerns when one person or organization elects to “tell” the story of another individual or people via a museum exhibition? And, how do these decisions influence the making of cultural identity in both an individual and collective sense?

The class writing assignment (see “Museums As Cultural Gatekeepers,” pp. 337–38 of The Appendix) and discussion for this topic focus on the notion of museums as cultural “gatekeepers”—as sites through which enacted policies of inclusion and exclusion (of histories, objects, artists, etc.) exercise control over notions of “formal” culture and, thus, our understandings of our cultural identity. The writing assignment references David Trend’s (1992a) concept of culture as an “ensemble of stories” (p. 2) in which the world of art and the work of artists and arts institutions are implicated in the construction of individual and collective identity. This assignment asks students to consider such questions as “What role might art play in how we come to understand our world and ourselves?” and “How do the curatorial and exhibition policies and decisions of museums influence our understandings of our social and cultural histories?” This topic and its case studies and writing assignment are meant to prompt consideration of how the decisions and policies of the institutions of art impact the lives and cultural understandings of the audiences for whom they exist and how these policies can function to inhibit, and to further, the democratic representation and preservation of America’s diverse cultural and social histories.
“The Role of Public Art in Contemporary United States.” The final topic examined in the course is that of public art and, most specifically, the concepts of new genre public art proposed by Lucy Lippard (1995) in her introductory essay to the book *Mapping the Terrain*. For Lippard (1995), public art resides not just in the geographic, but also in the social, the activist, and the political. It is art that is constructed with sensitivity to, for, and with its audiences, community, and place. It is an art that consults, an art that respects, an art that challenges and involves. It is an art that works with and for its audiences, an art that is living, organic, and continuously ongoing, completed, and re-identified by its respective community and the people with whose lives it intersects (pp. 125–29).

This topic actively seeks to challenge my students’ notions of what it means for a work of art to be “public.” I ask them to contemplate questions such as: 1) What does it mean in our time for a work of art to be designated as “public” art?; 2) Is this title earned by virtue of a work’s location or site? Or, does a work of art become public because of its purpose and function?; 3) Can a work of art be both public and private?; and 4) Who should participate in decisions about the purpose, funding, design, and placement of public art? These questions figure prominently in efforts to explicate a definition of public art and what its function might (and should) be in contemporary society. Recent discussions and controversies have shown that deciding what constitutes public art today is an especially difficult task for everyone involved in the process—for artists and their audiences as well as for the individuals and agencies that fund the creation and placement of these projects and works.

The case studies presented in this topic examine two contemporary works of public art that each exemplify Lippard’s concept of a “responsible art of place” (p. 119) that recognizes, respects, and collaborates with its audiences. Since their creation in the 1980s, Maya Lin’s *Vietnam Veterans Memorial* and the NAMES Project *AIDS Quilt* (see pp. 329–33 of The Appendix) have each achieved a high level of significance in America’s cultural heritage as being both profoundly evocative memorials to the dead and also unique and highly cherished works of public art. Although both are individually distinct in design and appearance, they nevertheless share important similarities in function and purpose. Both works serve as a means for people to remember, to grieve, and to honor those that have been lost to them. Through the "naming of names" (Hawkins 1993, 752), the individuality of the dead is acknowledged and recognized. Although separated by history and circumstance, these works share the common achievement of having contributed to a startling transformation in how many Americans perceived and responded to the personal and historical consequences of two of this nation’s most controversial social crises, the Vietnam War and the AIDS pandemic, and to the individuals whose participation in and victimization by these crises resulted in their extreme marginalization from American society.
We study these works in “Commentary” because they serve as important chronicles of painful yet significant eras in our nation’s history and as evocative testaments to the ability of art to speak to and transform the lives of the individuals who are its audiences. Our study of them is, I believe, a most appropriate way to conclude a curriculum whose *raison d'être* is the examination of the relationships of art, artists, and audiences in a democratic society.

**Presenting/Introducing the Course Content**

The actual presentation of each topic examined in “Commentary” follows a fairly similar format and generally unfolds over the course of four to five class sessions or approximately two weeks of the semester. I first provide a general introduction to each topic and what I consider to be the most pertinent aspects of it. This introduction is then followed by the presentation of one or two case studies that focus on artists, works of art, or incidents particularly relevant to the topic. The examination of most of the course themes concludes with a class discussion, several of which are based directly on writing assignments the students have completed prior to that particular class period.

In redesigning the course curriculum and content I made a deliberate choice not to organize the class structure strictly around one particular method of teaching or type of student/teacher interaction. Instead, I have chosen to use strategies and methods that work to encourage the amount of and depth of interaction and discourse between my students and myself as well as among the students themselves.

I use traditional presentations in which I introduce material to the class, speaking to my students in an authoritative manner reflective of the depth of knowledge that I have about the topic at hand. At the same time, however, I encourage and accept questions from students as the presentation unfolds permitting the substance of our discourse to enter into new areas that are of interest and relevance to the overall topic.\(^5\) Class discussions, however, are very informal in manner and in them I try to provide a place for my students to give voice to their insights and ideas about the issues we are examining.

Because the size of each section is fairly large for a discussion class (generally 40 students), I’ve found it most effective to organize students into small groups so that they may initially discuss the day’s issue(s) in groups and then present their conclusions and questions to the class as a whole. This method provides opportunities for students to learn about negotiating

\(^5\) With the full development of the “Topics” section of the course website (see The Appendix), I am more comfortable encouraging this type of purposeful digression from the “formal” content of class presentations since I know that my students have access to the complete text of the original material and information I’ve written about the course topics.
positions and mediating dissonant viewpoints. It also allows them the sometimes-uneasy experience of presenting ideas before a larger group yet to do so within an intellectually safe environment. During discussions, I try to remain a facilitator rather than a director of the discussion—I introduce the question or sets of questions for discussion and make certain that the opportunity to make comment is spread equitably among the class but I try not to participate in an extensive way in the discussion. I perceive discussions as times when I should pull back from putting forth my opinions about an issue and, instead, permit my students to debate the merits of their ideas with each other. Happily, I can report very few incidents of disdain or disrespect exhibited even during those discussions that are heated and passionate.

Two other vital means of interaction between my students and myself include after-class chats and email. I find that while some students are reluctant to ask questions or to introduce ideas into class that they believe might be problematic, they are eager to share these with me in a more private way. Private conversations between teachers and students have traditionally been the means for this type of interaction to occur. Today, however, in this regard, email has assumed an equal, perhaps even dominant, importance. This is true in many class situations, and it is so for mine. As students have become more adept with using electronic communications and the Internet, I’ve found their messages have moved beyond traditional text-based notes or questions to become more “interactive” so as to include direct links to sites they find interesting to the course or art works or writings they’ve produced that they believe might be of interest to me. Email becomes particularly important during the last weeks of class when students are working individually on their final projects and their questions become more urgent.

The ways I have chosen to interact with my students and to encourage them to in turn interact with me and with their classmates represent a form of praxis grounded in theories of critical pedagogy such as those discussed earlier in discussion of the pedagogical ideas of Fehr (1993) and Trend (1992a, 1998). They are ways of teaching and interaction that seek to recognize the different types of authorities brought to a classroom by teachers as well as by students. As a teacher, I rightfully represent a source of authoritative knowledge in my subject area and it is important that I permit this to be evidenced for my students’ examination and critique, which I do through my presentations and the content material available on the course website. At the same time, however, I must also recognize the authority my students bring to my

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My use of this term warrants clarification of how my students use this as a means of communication. I have not, to date, incorporated a “discussion board” or “open-chat” area into the design of the course website. In truth, I am undecided about the effectiveness of either of these two methods of online discussions. I refer to my students’ use of “email” in a conventional understanding of online communications sent in the form of personal, one-on-one messages. My students’ email messages are sent to me personally and responded to in kind. They range from quick “can you clarify” questions to long, involved missives in which a student articulates his or her thoughts or responses to an issue from class or an assignment. Sometimes, these messages become ongoing “conversations” in which a student and I will correspond over several messages.
classroom in terms of their cultural and social knowledge and life experiences and, as a practice of cultural democracy, encourage them to recognize and respect this in each other. This is most actively accomplished within our class and small group discussions and in the ways I encourage my students to individuate the proposals they offer for their final course project (a more complete discussion of this follows in the next section). To do this requires fluidity and negotiation in the relationships I establish with my students and in how I use my “authority” as a teacher so that I can, as Kanpol (1994) writes, “create relationships of caring and nurturing that challenge oppressive gender, race, and class stereotypes” (p. 51) and to use these relationships to encourage a free and open acknowledgement and discussion of the differences, and commonalities, my students and I share as individuals and artists.

Writing Assignments and Projects

The process of redesigning the curriculum for “Commentary” included not just a rethinking of the course content, but a complete redesign (and reorientation) of course assignments as well. Writing continues to be the primary format for assignments and projects but the questions posed within the new assignments have been refocused to ones that directly ask my students to respond with consideration toward the functions of art and its institutions in society and how these intersect with their lives as individuals and as artists (see pp. 334–39 of The Appendix for the complete content of the course’s different writing assignments and projects). During the semester, students complete four brief (one-to-three page) papers, a mid-term exam, and a final project.

The brief papers. The questions introduced in the four short assignments relate to the course topics but in a way that asks students to consider them in relationship to their individual lives. These papers have become an important point of intellectual interaction between my students and myself. My responses to the short papers take the form of comments written as conversational remarks—a “talking back” to the ideas and thoughts introduced in the paper. I do this so that my students can begin to acquire a sense of how their ideas can evoke or elicit thoughtful response and challenge and not just rote “correction” from a teacher. I do, however, provide advice about the technical aspects of writing whenever it is most appropriate. I have found my students’ short writings to be extremely useful in understanding their comprehension of the course and its concepts and, in most cases, a joy to read and respond to.
The mid-term exam. I have, in the most recent semester, introduced a mid-term exam as part of the course assignments. Presently, the exam is structured in the form of multiple-choice questions that draw exclusively on the topic material presented on the course website. I introduced the mid-term so that I could measure the degree to which my students were using the materials on the website. It is possible that in the near future, I might use the site as a principal means of “presenting” the course material that I currently introduce in class. I am, however, struggling with how to design a mid-term that is more qualitative in structure and evaluation but which I will still be able to manage administratively. The number of students I teach in a given semester can total 100 and grading that many exams by myself and in a timely fashion presents certain logistical challenges that must be worked out before I can realistically move away from the multiple-choice test format.

The final project. The most important course assignment is the final project, to which the final quarter or four weeks of the semester are completely devoted. In their final projects students are asked to focus on one of the three final topics examined in the course (Advertising and Society, Issues of Class and Race in the Art Museum/Exhibition, or The Role of Public Art in Contemporary United States). The project is introduced as “research-based”; nevertheless, students have a great deal of discretion as to what form their project will take and to the specific issues they will examine. Consequently, students frequently arrive at new ways of thinking about the larger topics and of presenting their ideas.

The final weeks of the semester during which students are focused on the final project represent a radical shift in the rhythm of the class insofar as we stop meeting as a formal class. Instead, I spend class sessions meeting with small groups of (usually six to seven) students so that we can discuss their projects in a more relaxed, intimate atmosphere. As in the small groups used in class discussions, this structure provides students with an opportunity to speak out about their ideas. This time, however, their discussion is presented in direct relationship to a major project they have designed and on which they are working. This period also provides students with the freedom, and responsibility, to determine how to organize and manage their time and resources so that a major project can be completed well and on time.

The last three sessions of the semester are dedicated to individual class presentations, during which each student discusses some aspect of the work they did for their final project. Many students, when they first learn of this component of the final project, are apprehensive.

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7 I am, concomitantly, investigating how and whether I can fully adapt the curriculum I've developed for “Commentary” as an online course. Although the course is currently available online via The Pennsylvania State University's World Campus, the curriculum presented there was developed and is administered by another faculty member of the School of Visual Arts and is unrelated to that curriculum which I use.
about the prospect of speaking publicly about their work. This I believe because most do not have much experience with public speaking and are fearful of appearing foolish. As the project phases unfold, however, and they become more comfortable with the knowledge they’ve acquired about their specific project area, I find that most students acquire a greater sense of confidence and usually do quite well during the actual presentation. Additionally, the other students seem to enjoy hearing and asking questions about the different ways their classmates have “seen” the same broad issues they have examined in their final projects.

**Students’ Voices: A Review of Selected Final Projects**

The responses of students to the new topics and ideas presented within the revised Art 122w curriculum are perhaps best understood through consideration of the ideas and means of presentation they use in their final projects. Although the focus for the final project is placed on the course’s final three topics, it’s not unusual for Art 122w students to devise new and unexpected ways of “seeing” these topics, or of combining aspects from one or more themes for their work. A consequence of my students’ reframing of the suggested project topics is that each paper or project assumes its own unique persona and specific focus of research. In terms of format or means of presentation, a conventional research paper remains a popular choice—many students seem to enjoy the type of research required to write a longer (12–15 page) paper or essay. In recent semesters, however, I have actively encouraged students to use alternative ways to conceive and present a research-based project. Most particularly, I urge them to think of a way to design a project that somehow connects and intersects with their particular interests and involvement in the arts. I have done this because I believe it represents an appropriate evolution, or continuation, of an essential aspect of the course curriculum. Namely, that ideas of what constitutes a “text” need to be challenged, interrogated, and reformed and that the arts represent a critical site in which this should happen.

The consequence of encouraging “alternative” formats is that I have received final projects that include things as diverse as video productions, interactive web presentations, web-based essays, photo-essays, photomontages, small-scale illustrations, fictional works, poetry, and educational curricula. Examples from the most recent school year semesters (Fall 1999 and Spring 2000) include:

1. Interactive web presentations that examine issues as far ranging as the implications of the Pokémon craze to children to the public mural projects of the
city of Philadelphia to a satirical critique of the effects of advertising as seen within a futuristic setting that in itself is permeated with “ads.”

2. A piece of short fiction in which the story’s protagonist, a college student, attempts to explicate his understandings of public art and in the process of doing so encounters another, older student who shares with him her experiences of the NAMES Project AIDS Quilt.

3. A project that includes an examination of ethics in advertising in which the student created an advertising campaign for a fictional company that embodied the principles she believes exemplify ethical advertising.

4. A combined audiotape/slide project in which the authors examine the profusion (and infusion) of advertising in our daily lives. This presentation was done through the “eyes” and “voice” of a college student going through the course of a regular day all the while commenting on the advertising he “discovered.”

5. A project done by a student who wants to be a theatrical makeup artist in which she “constructed” the look of a Calvin Klein model associated with the so-called Heroin Chic campaign. She recorded the evolution of the “look” in a series of photographs that graphically depict the very lengthy process required to look “real” in an advertisement. This is accompanied by an essay in which the student examines the sociological history of makeup and how advertising distorts our perceptions of “naturalness” and “reality” through the promotion of beauty products.

The projects described above are just a few of the diverse ways my students have devised to create “texts” that speak of and to the different issues we examine in “Commentary.” It might, however, be useful to describe in greater detail several of the more exemplary projects students have authored in recent semesters. In the following, I discuss four projects I believe are especially worthy examples of how students respond to the spirit of examination encouraged in the course and to the issues discussed in the revised curriculum.

**Mirror, mirror on the wall...** The two student projects I wish to discuss first are ones in which the individual authors chose to explore somewhat related topics. Both projects were submitted as research papers and each examine how it is that young or adolescent girls perceive themselves. The first paper focuses very specifically on the influences that teen magazines have on the “self-image and behavior of the young women who read them.” The second paper studies the social history of the Barbie® doll8 and the implications of this “plastic princess of perfection” serving as a role model for the young girls who are its predominant fans.

In the opening statements to her paper on teen magazines, Emily D. quickly asserts her

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8 Barbie® is a registered trademark of Mattel, Incorporated.
Teen magazines definitely have an impact on the self-image and behavior of the young women who read them. Adolescence usually marks a shift in the focus of the lives of young women. Attention begins to be given to a girl’s changing body, and her self-confidence often plummets. Seeking solutions to her new “problems” or just simply curious, a girl as young as nine or ten may reach for a teen magazine. Within these magazines, the articles and ads are often difficult to distinguish from one another. They work together in an attempt to sell the idea of the “perfect” girl to impressionable young women. Ironically, the goals set by these magazines are virtually unattainable to their target audience. Even the models are airbrushed! By setting unreachable beauty standards and placing so much emphasis on the importance of these standards to achieving happiness, teen magazines create a massive market for “self-improving” products.

Emily goes on to explain that in her paper she will present a literature analysis of three issues of three teen magazines each of which are highly popular among young girls. Two of the magazines, *YM* and *Seventeen*, were chosen because of their levels of circulation (approximately 2 million issues annually). The third publication, *Girl’s Life*, was selected because of its targeted audience of 10–12 year-old girls. Emily also explains that she will “investigate the stories being told by the interplay of the ads and articles and the possible ramifications that these stories have on their audience.” A third component of Emily’s paper is a report on a brief survey she administered to 10 high school girls with whom she has regular contact.

The literature analysis that Emily provides is one that compares the percentage of pages devoted in each magazine to a particular subject (i.e., advertisements, clothes, body shape/weight loss, sex, school, etc.) to the magazine’s total page count. In each magazine issue, Emily reports that the percentage of pages devoted to advertisements is greater than any other single subject and that she found distinct correlations between a magazine’s articles and its advertisements. She writes:

In the issue of *Seventeen*, I observed that the first twenty-one pages of the magazine consisted strictly of advertisements, before even the table of contents. Following that are more large blocks of advertising, about five or six pages at a time with an occasional
article or feature. The articles, however, are short (one page) or don’t appear in their entirety. Each page of article is sandwiched between two advertisements. This presentation continues until page 126 where the first piece [article] longer than one page is printed without interruption. The large blocks of advertising continue throughout the whole magazine, bombarding the reader with an overload of sales pitches. And, although there are articles tucked in between ads, they are often thinly disguised advertisements themselves.

Emily observes that “[p]hysical beautification and presentation are, by far, the most heavily dealt with topics in all three of the magazines…Together, they make up almost a quarter of Girl’s Life, nearly half of YM, and a whopping 60% of the May 2000 issue of Seventeen!” Emily notes that the “transformation” offered in the beauty-related topics can be “superficial (makeup, clothing…), or it can be a real physical altering of the body (i.e., weight loss or plastic surgery).” She is particularly concerned about the impact of articles that suggest or seem to suggest the actual altering of young girls’ bodies:

Oftentimes, the articles claiming to advertise clothing for all bodies only offer tips on how to mask and conceal your body’s imperfections. What should be alarming, however, are articles such as YM’s May 1999 feature “Mirror, Mirror on the Wall, Make Me the Prettiest of Them All.” This article deals with cosmetic plastic surgery for teenage girls, opening with the question, “Pining for a smaller nose, bigger boobs, or thinner thighs? Plastic surgery for teens is becoming more popular” and citing testimonials from young girls who have already gone through with some of the procedures.

The ways in which these magazines present or discuss male/female relationships are also of interest to Emily. She observes that the relationships visualized (particularly in advertisements) are almost always of an idealized, romantic nature with “images of beautiful couples ecstatically embracing, kissing and otherwise intimately involved with one another.” Moreover, she notes that the magazine articles that discuss “guys” often focus on how girls can win the attentions of boys. In conclusion to her literature analysis, Emily notes what she describes as a “definite theme” emerging in the magazines:

When I take a step back from these magazines and take in the big picture, a definite theme emerges. The story being told in teen magazines is this: the ultimate goal for
which a girl should aspire is to possess and please a man, but, in order to get a man’s attention a girl must be perfect. The problem for you is, you are not perfect. Do not fear, however, because you can fool men into thinking that you are perfect by buying and properly applying our makeup, hair and skin products, perfume and clothing, following our weight-loss plan (or try liposuction), and behaving in the manner that we say men prefer.

But, she notes, the “message” sent by teen magazines is “contradictory” insofar as they promote the idea of being “sexy” while admonishing their readers from giving “in to the desires of the flesh.” Emily writes that “[t]his type of contradictory and confusing information is repeatedly given in the pages of teen magazines” and she asks, “What happens to young women when they buy into this image of femininity?” Emily attempts to answer this question in the third component of her paper, an analysis of a brief survey she administered to 10 girls who attend a non-denominational youth group and with whom she has regular contact as their youth group leader.

Emily describes her reason for administering the survey to this group of girls as “an attempt to begin to understand the impact of teen magazines on their consumer behavior, social behavior, and overall self image.” In the discussion of her survey, Emily very clearly acknowledges its limitations and recognizes that the results can’t be extrapolated beyond the 10 girls she surveyed. Of the young girls participating in Emily’s survey, she found that, in general, they “seemed less concerned with their appearances” than she had anticipated. And, that “their goals were focused on dreams for their own accomplishments and not simply a desire for ‘traditional goals’ (i.e., marriage, kids, etc.). She quickly acknowledges, however, that these results may very well have been affected by the influence of the group itself—“a weekly youth group focused on the teens’ spiritual, emotional and social growth and well-being”—and that had she administered the survey to a more random group, her results might have been very different. Emily concludes her paper by stating that although she believes

[teen magazines are certainly not the roots of the problems facing adolescent women in our country. Many factors determine the choices a young girl makes as she grows into a woman, however, teen magazines seem to play off of the insecurities that these girls already have, while planting the seeds for new ones. It is also alarming the amount of advertising that is published in these magazines. These magazines are self-sufficient; they create the “need” for improvement and on the very next page they market the solution.
In my evaluation of Emily’s work, I was impressed by the focus of investigation she brought to her research and how it connected to the type of interrelated thinking I hope to encourage in Art 122w students as they consider the course’s different topics. Although Emily’s paper definitely addresses issues of advertising, an analysis of advertising was not the paper’s purpose per se. Rather, Emily attempted to examine a particular aspect or area of teen culture that is infused with advertising and one that she perceives as having a potentially deleterious influence on young women’s self perceptions. Her research approach was that of a critical reader. She very deliberately looked at these magazines as complete texts that spoke to and of various cultural and social beliefs. She questioned what she found in them and looked for explanations within the magazines themselves, their readers, and in additional research studies and analyses about teen magazines. Most importantly, Emily recognized the magazines as representative of a part of teen culture that might potentially serve as sites where teens, especially young women, seek self definition and understanding and, through her research, attempted to come to her own conclusions about their impact.

In “The Effects of Barbie® on Cultural America,” Tara T. presents readers with a hilarious yet deadly serious deconstruction of this pop culture icon of American girlhood. Readers are made aware of Tara’s fondness for social satire early on in her description of the doll’s “roots”:

Ruth Handler, co-founder of Mattel, came up with the idea of Barbie. Handler wanted something for her daughter to play with that wasn’t a paper doll. She realized that as her daughter grew older and began to imitate adult conversations and the world around her, she needed a three-dimensional representation of the world as well. The actual doll was molded after the “Bild Lilli” doll, a sexpot plaything made exclusively for men (Lord 7-8). Handler took Lilli and transformed her from quasi-prostitute into all-American girl. And so began the 40 year legacy of the Barbie Doll. Barbie earned herself a high degree of respectability and became a figure girls wanted to emulate (Lord 5-7, 10-11).

Tara goes on to educate readers about Barbie culture and couture by describing how the doll’s maker (Mattel) enthusiastically creates a “separate world for Barbie: clothes, make-up, cars, houses, horses, bikes, pools, etc.” Tara also notes that the successfulness of Mattel’s marketing of the Barbie doll has made “Mattel the fourth largest manufacturer of women’s clothing in the U.S.” and that “there are presently more Barbie dolls in the U.S. than there are human beings.” The endurance of Barbie and her ability to transcend “decades of political, social, and cultural changes” is of particular interest to Tara. She writes:
Toys normally have a relatively small life-span because of how quickly fads come and go. Yet, in a world filled with uncertainty Barbie is an island of stability. She is one public figure who can be trusted never to lose the bloom of youth. As a popular culture icon, her clothing especially has become iconographic. Her earliest fashions adhered to the philosophy, “The doll sells the clothes and the clothes sell the doll.”

Tara also addresses the controversies that have been raised with regards to Barbie’s “body” and she notes that its “exaggerated proportions have long infuriated feminists and others who feel her body sets unrealistic standards of beauty for young girls.” She goes on to acknowledge the concerns voiced over the appropriateness of “this plastic princess of perfection” serving as a role model for young girls:

One of the most obvious flaws in the doll is her unrealistic figure. If Barbie were human sized, she would stand 5 feet 10 inches tall, weigh 110 pounds, and have a 39 inch bust, 23 inch waist, and 33 inch hips. You would have to remove her large intestine, lungs, bottom ribs, and uterus in order to fit the rest of her organs in that body (Asselanis).

Tara’s supporting research in this section includes discussion of studies that have investigated the influence of the toy on young girls’ levels of self esteem. She also comments on Cindy Jackson, a young woman from Ohio who has “undergone twenty operations” to “look more like Barbie.” Tara concedes that Jackson’s actions and those of other young women who have used Barbie’s features as models for plastic surgery may be “non-representative of how normal girls respond to the doll.” Nevertheless, she also writes that with

7 million women suffering from eating disorders today (National Association of Anorexia Nervosa), one has to wonder whether or not the doll could be playing a role. Shockingly enough, in 1965, Barbie’s slumber party set came with a miniature scale and a miniature book titled, “How to Lose Weight…DON’T EAT!” (Asselanis). There certainly seems evidence that links the suspect to the crime.

The sexualization of the doll is also of concern. Notwithstanding the absence of nipples on Barbie’s “breasts,” Tara notes that “Barbie is still, by all counts, a sexual creature. In both front and back, Barbie has a clear definition of genitals, though not explicitly vulgar.” This, Tara writes, begs the question “Why should a doll designed specifically for young girls be sexualized, with a
curvaceous figure and more than ample breasts?” and that “this is one of the most sound arguments defending the anti-Barbie campaign.”

Barbie’s appearance is not, as Tara writes, the only source of controversy over the doll. Tara describes how, in a 1992 version of a talking Barbie, Mattel programmed the doll to utter phrases such as “Math class is tough.” Citing the lack of political astuteness evidenced by this choice of phrases, Tara notes that several organizations, including the American Association of University Women and the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, took Mattel to task for using statements they perceived as depicting girls in a negative manner.

Tara’s assessment of Barbie and her influence on American girl culture is not, in the end, a negative one. Rather, Tara concludes her paper with an evaluation of the potentially positive, liberating influences of the doll. She notes that, as an adult doll, Barbie offers young girls the opportunity to dream and imagine beyond the confines of the more typical baby doll, which “only offers a child the opportunity to mother it.” Barbie,” Tara contends, “can be a doctor, an astronaut, a banker, a lawyer, a flight attendant, a fashion designer….[w]ith Barbie, a girl can be anything.”

Tara also finds positive influences within the realm of Barbie’s male/female relationships, noting that Barbie’s main partner, Ken, “plays a minor part” in Barbie’s life. She writes:

He looks good in a tux and he likes to surf. Other than that, he doesn’t do much. Barbie is always the one driving into some new adventure, while Ken hangs around the Dream House smiling. She does not stand around waiting for Ken to show up. Barbie’s life is about friends, female friends….Barbie’s female friends, her career, and her dreams are more important than Ken, and that is one of the positive influences that this doll has on America’s female youth.

In the ending paragraphs of her paper, Tara declares that the doll “reflects the times as well as influences them. It is as much effect as cause (McDonough). It’s a folly to assume that kids see and understand Barbie or any other toy exactly as their parents do.” In fact, she writes,
for us to do would be to lobby Mattel to make Barbie more realistic in her measurements (which they continue to work on), fix those silly arched feet, and continue to expand both the career choices for Barbie (Telemarketer Barbie with headset and cubicle, Firefighter Barbie with yellow fire gear and Dalmatian….as well as her leisure activities. How about Parachute Barbie or Motorcycle Barbie or Bowling Barbie? The possibilities are endless, and that’s the point, and that’s exactly why Barbie should stay.

As her teacher, I thoroughly enjoyed reading Tara’s paper. I found it to be infused with a playful humor and satire that seemed entirely appropriate to the not-infrequent silliness that seems to accompany the world of Barbie. Yet, at the same time, the paper also posed serious questions about the role of a cultural icon whose “presence” in American society extends far beyond that of an 11.5-inch plastic doll. Tara examined very effectively the various ways in which Barbie has potential to influence the children who play with her. In the end, her conclusion is that the doll itself shouldn’t be isolated as a solely negative influence but, instead, should actually be seen as a potential means of liberating play and self exploration. As in Emily D’s paper, the subject and focus of Tara’s paper is not easily assigned to any single theme or topic we discuss in Art 122w. Rather, Tara’s paper is an intricate fusion of several issues having to do with perceptions of the body, the influence of advertising and consumer culture, and the role of identity making in our lives. Thus I found it to be exemplary of how I hope students will consider and explore the interconnections that exist between the different course topics.

New media, new ways of seeing…The introduction of “alternative” formats into the milieu of the final project provides students with interesting opportunities to utilize various types of media as a means of examining and then framing their ideas. The use by my students of non-traditional means for presenting their ideas is, I believe, entirely in keeping with the spirit of the revised Art 122w curriculum since I actively encourage students to consider the many different ways we can define what constitutes a “text” and to consider how contemporary works of art as well as art works from the past can be perceived and interpreted as texts.

The following two projects are ones that were created to exploit the interactivity potential of the computer. Each of the projects addresses consumer culture in America in ways that exhibit the authors’ skepticism about the nature of consumerism and its impacts on our lives. Additionally, both projects utilize the interactive nature of the Internet and the World Wide Web (WWW) in ways that permit their audiences to exercise decision making in how they experience the presentations. The presentations themselves, however, are startlingly different in design and content and in this reflect the different computer and art interests of their authors.
The first project was created by Chris M, an art student who is involved in 3-D modeling and animation and whose research interests are amply reflected in the style of project he created, which is an animated short movie. Chris created his "movie" in a popular authoring program named "Flash"—one of a suite of web-design programs offered by the Macromedia software company. Macromedia (1999) markets "Flash" as the "foremost authoring software for creating scalable, interactive animation for the web" (p. 9).

Chris designed his movie to take on the appearance of a futuristic "advertisement" for advertising. The design of the movie interface is sleek and relies heavily on geometric shapes including circles, rectangles, and squares that impart a sense of being in an emotionally cool, technological "world." Adding to the cold "techno" feel of the screen image is the color scheme Chris chose to use, which moves among varying shades of a silvery stainless steel. Viewers are encouraged to access different screens or "scenes" via highlighted words or phrases or images. When a viewer accesses or "clicks" on one of these "hotlinks," a new screen rolls and tumbles into view.

The conceptual organization of the various "scenes" of the movie is that of a three-dimensional web. Viewers are able and encouraged to move around the different areas of the movie presentation via clicks of their navigational devices. In addition, the audience’s mobility is enhanced by a navigational globe located in the lower right-hand section of the screen image, which, when accessed, provides a complete site map that enables viewers to immediately go anywhere they choose within the movie.

The language Chris uses in presenting the textual content of the presentation contrasts rather sharply with the project’s sleek visual design. In each of the different scenes, or pages, Chris placed brief sections of text that frequently emulate the upbeat, folksy language found in many advertisements. Yet, infused within the language of these text “blurbs,” is a biting, satirical commentary on the pervasiveness of consumerism. Consider, for example, how Chris introduces the project:

My purpose here is to celebrate the greatness of the evolution of the capitalistic model and the art form of Advertising that has perpetuated it. It’s a good time now to grab a cool refreshing Pepsi, have some extra-smooth Camels handy, and settle down into your Flexiform EZ-Squeeze Chair. You’ve earned it. Indulge. Two decades have passed since the great Merger of the early 21st, when we put down the so-called “Culture-Jamming” anarchists and achieved the complete homogenization we’ve come to be content with today. The Rights of Consumption laws have brought advertising into your bathroom, your bedroom, your wristwatch...since when has buying ever been easier? At what better
time has the great Conglomeration’s product message struck the chords of your heart, ringing the glorious bells of Consumerism?

Sit, relax and learn about the glorious corporation of America!

[The text is accompanied by a waving American flag in which the field of stars has been replaced by a symbol of the American dollar sign.]

The introductory page of Chris’s presentation also provides immediate links for viewers to access the project’s four different sections: Culture Jammers, Culture Creation, The Art of Advertising, and Ethics of Advertising. Or, if a viewer prefers, the ever-present navigational globe can be used to move quickly to any part of the movie. Throughout these different sections of his presentation, Chris consistently provides viewers with a mix of commentary and factual information about advertising and consumerism in ways that attempt to draw viewers’ attentions to their impacts.

Although Chris has placed the time of his movie in a futuristic world that is understood to be utterly saturated and acquiescent to advertising, it is clear that Chris’s position is a critical one. His criticisms, however, are indirect and are offered through an exaggeration of the “goodness” that advertising and consumerism has brought to the “time” of his movie, thus providing alerts to viewers about the nature of his real positions. Here, for example, is how Chris introduces us to the “Culture Jammers” of the late twentieth century:

Uneducated in the arts of advertising and marketing, these Culture Jammers, which soon came to be known as AdBusters, failed to understand the important demographic that children represented. Television network executives summarily denied airtime for AdBusters’ anti-advertisement messages, proving yet again the futility of opposing the corporate machine. We owe much of the level of ad-penetration we have achieved today to the lack of public support for rabblerousers like AdBusters, and the work of television networks to suppress their message.

TV Turn-On Week begins April 22nd with a 72-hour 90210 Marathon. [This announcement is yet another example of how Chris infuses both satire and information into the presentation. Readers may be familiar with the TV Turn-Off Week effort, which is conducted annually during the last week of April. This action is promoted by various

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9 This term merits a brief explanation. In our section on advertising, I introduce discussion of the Media Foundation, an activist organization based in Canada. The Media Foundation sponsors various initiatives that provide critique on the social implications of consumerism. The phrase “culture jamming” has come to be associated with the Media Foundation and its publication, *Adbusters*, as a way for activists to work to subvert the influence of advertising and consumerism.
consumer and media watchdog groups in order to encourage viewers to literally turn off their television sets so that they may reflect on the impacts of excessive viewing.]

The text about “Culture Jammers” provides viewers with additional ways to experience the presentation, and Chris’s viewpoints: The phrases “important demographic” and “ad-penetration” provide links to pages that offer elaboration of these terms. The text for “important demographic,” for example, is titled “Targeted Advertising” and informs us that

[t]o maximize our level of consumption, thereby allowing you the maximum utility of your purchases, targeted advertising has been taken to a new level. All buying habits are tracked and recorded. Intelligent advertisements reference huge global databases. The advertisements you see all around you have been selected for your specific viewing pleasure. Feel honored! The industry has taken the time to do this so you don’t waste your time seeing ads for products they don’t think you want. Your day has been planned for you. Relax, and remember to keep your credit card handy at all times.

Once again, satire and information: a surface applause for the conveniences of targeted advertising all the while drawing our attentions to the uneasy intrusions that such highly targeted, demographic marketing can make into the realm of personal privacy. The second link in the “Culture Jammers” scene, “ad-penetration,” connects viewers to a new page that informs us about what Chris describes as the techniques of advertising: Jolts, Empathy, Unreality, and Hype. And, once again, these four terms are hyper-linked to other sections of the presentation.

Throughout his presentation, Chris evidences an astute awareness of his viewing “audiences” and this is especially apparent in how he makes a conscious effort to utilize the cultural knowledge he anticipates viewers will bring to the presentation about advertising, cultural icons, and the role of consumerism in everyday life. Chris’s presentation is an excellent example of how students can exploit the unique visual and intellectual environments provided by the computer and the WWW so that they can create projects that are provocative and challenging in their design and content for the audiences that will experience them. It is doubtful that Chris could have created this project in any other media and achieved the same impact. It is also worth noting that the WWW provides a particularly suitable place for the location of Chris’s project insofar as advertising “penetration” of the Web is at present a hotly debated topic. In a sense, Chris took his challenge to advertising directly “home” to a social and cultural site at the epicenter of the very debate he delves into.

Shawn H., a passionate cartoonist and web designer, created the second Web-based
project I wish to discuss. Shawn’s presentation is a multi-layered examination of the recent Pokémon craze and very much reflects its author’s interests in cartooning. In the past several years, the lives of children the world over have been greatly impacted by the introduction of Pokémon\textsuperscript{10} cartoon characters into their worlds of play. This phenomenon has played out in multiple sites, including video games, television programs, films, playing cards and figures, and a plethora of lesser consumer merchandise all aimed at capturing the hearts and minds of children held in the thrall of these colorful, cartoon characters. In his project, Shawn very deliberately examines the multiple issues raised by the excessive popularity and presence of the Pokémon figures in pop culture; but, unlike Chris M., he does not attempt overtly to persuade his audience to a particular point of view. Nevertheless, he does introduce questions and information about the characters that point to and highlight potentially disturbing consequences to the lives of children.

Like Chris M.’s presentation, Shawn’s Web project is also exceptional in design—its interface is visually exciting and intermingled with areas of texts, images, hyperlinks, frames, and pop-up menus. The visual ambience of the presentation is playful and lively, not unlike the cartoon characters that provide the project with its focus. Although Shawn’s presentation is heavily infused with colorful and entertaining graphics, it is also very dependent on the text that he uses to tell the “story” of his project. The content of the text is constructed from both Shawn’s personal experiences and observations (of the characters and their impact) and from external research, much of which was derived from online sources. Shawn conveniently documents these sources complete with hyperlinks in the “Resources” section of the presentation. Also notable, is the way in which Shawn places images of Pokémon characters on each of the presentation’s different pages. The individual images are designed as hyperlinks that will take viewers directly to an “official” Pokémon web site where a wealth of additional information can be obtained.

Shawn begins his introduction to the project by acquainting viewers with some of the history of the Pokémon characters and how they relate to various other toys that have achieved similar levels of popularity:

Every year a new toy or gimmick seems to appear that engrosses a majority of children across the United States. Cabbage Patch Kids, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, Mighty Morphin Power Rangers, Tickle Me Elmo, Tamagachi, and Furby, all have come and gone as hot selling “must have” items, which have been loved by children for varying periods of time. Now as we stumble into the new millennium, kids are carrying over their love for the latest craze import from Japan, Pokémon.

\textsuperscript{10} Pokémon is owned and copyrighted by Nintendo of America, Inc.
"Pokémon" is an abbreviation for "Pocket Monsters", which is a more commonly used name for the product in Japan. The concept behind Pokémon is the catching, trading, and battling of cute monsters, which come in a wide variety of forms. Currently, there are 151 different species of Pokémon. Some Pokémon are animal variations which have special powers (like "Pikachu", the electric mouse), while others are unusual and inventive creatures that have never been seen before.

So why has Pokémon become so successful in the U.S., Japan and the rest of the world? In this online report, we will look at the different advertising campaigns used in creating this marketing juggernaut, and the social effects that the influential product has been having on children.

In the next section of his project, Shawn introduces his “presence” as author and researcher—why he’s interested in the Pokémon characters as well as some of the questions he hopes to answer through his project. Notably, Shawn does not merely rely on secondary research from news articles or online sites—he also identifies how his personal observations (in a local shopping mall) contributed to his desire to investigate these issues:

As a big fan of Japanese animation for many years, I was naturally interested in finding out what the big deal was with Pokémon. When a franchise such as this one becomes so popular, one has to wonder how it came to be and how it is affecting our society.

Because of the amazing popularity of the Pokémon product, many parents have started to wonder what affect the games and cartoon show may be having on their children. This prompted me to do research on the social effects of Pokémon, both positive and negative. Right now many parents are in debate on whether Pokémon is a good or bad influence on their children, so in this report I will look and compare both sides of the issue.

Also as many people have noticed, Pokémon merchandise is everywhere, with nearly half the stores at the Nittany Mall carrying at least one Pokémon related product. The commercialism behind Pokémon can, in my opinion, only be described as insane. How is it possible that a children's video game has spawned such a never-ending empire of toys, clothes, candy and every other marketable form of merchandise available? To find out, I decided to look at the advertising campaigns responsible for making the word "Pokémon" a household name.
I hope that by creating this research project, it can help people to understand the overwhelming Pokémon phenomenon at least a little better.

The subsequent sections of Shawn’s presentation are titled: Social Effects, Ad Campaign, and Resources. In the introduction to the section “Social Effects” Shawn identifies the targeted demographic for Pokémon—children ages 4–12—and asks, “Should we be keeping Pokémania away from them, or helping them to embrace it further?” He then goes on to provide us with information about what have been identified as the positive and negative social aspects of Pokémon. In his final analysis of the effects, Shawn indicates that he believes that the characters themselves can’t be “blamed” as a “bad influence” and that, in the end, it is parental control and involvement that will determine whether children will be positively or negatively influenced by commercial products such as Pokémon. He writes:

My final analysis of the social effects of Pokémon, is that parents should (as always) be aware of what their kids are getting involved with. Parents should become involved with their children's Pokémon gaming, and learn what it's all about. If your child is playing the card game, than buy some cards and play with him! If your child is playing the video game, let him explain the game and what he's accomplished in it! By doing this, you can understand how your children are reacting to the product, and in the process teach them many important lessons. Otherwise children can become isolated in a seemingly virtual world, where they will make all of their decisions for themselves, good or bad.

The third section of Shawn’s presentation is dedicated to the advertising campaigns waged by Nintendo, the characters’ corporate owner, in their promotion of the various products associated with the figures. Shawn’s analysis focuses on the campaigns that were conducted in both Japan, the nation where the characters originated, and in the United States. He also examines how the campaign was “Americanized” when it was brought to the United States so that the Pokémon characters would be more enticing to American children. In his analysis of the advertising campaign, Shawn is admiring yet also critical of Nintendo and what he describes as the “gung-ho commercialism that has been used [by the company] to generate interest and familiarity with their product.” His criticism is directed specifically at the extreme saturation and “over-commercialism of a single product.” He writes:

You can't turn on the TV or step five feet outside of your house without being assaulted
by the image of an electric mouse or some other cute cartoon monster. Commercialism has always frightened me in the way that it operates, and Pokémon pretty much personifies my absolute idea of commercialism. Also this over marketing makes me wonder how long it will take before kids finally become sick of Pokémon. You would think with so much exposure everywhere, that it would have arrived already, but yet kids still seem to be enthralled by the entire franchise.

The final section of Shawn’s presentation reveals the essential nature of his project—which is that of a research paper. This section, titled “Resources,” provides his viewers with a bibliography of the extensive list of research materials Shawn used in developing the content of his project and demonstrates the strong base of research that underlies the web presentation. Notably, many of the sources are web-based and are inserted as hyperlinks into the bibliography, providing viewers with immediate access to Shawn’s research material as well as opportunities for additional education.

As his teacher, I was impressed by Shawn’s expertise in designing a web presentation that was as visually exciting as it was informative. Although Shawn’s presentation is very pedagogical in the sense that it “teaches” its viewers a great deal about various aspects of the Pokémon craze, it never lapses into pedantry. As a consequence, the presentation stays lively and engaging and incites an interest in viewers to learn more. Shawn’s project also represents the achievement of a particularly important goal of the Art 122w curriculum; namely, that students design projects that are relevant to their lives and work. Shawn is a cartoonist and as such is very interested in how cartooning and animation impact and influence the lives of audiences. Although “Pokémon” might at first seem very removed from the more “serious” art-related topics we examine in Art 122w, I believe Shawn’s examination is appropriate to his interests as an artist and pertinent to the broader issues of audience that we address in the course.
The Realization of the Art 122w Curriculum

The four projects discussed here are demonstrative of the unique perspectives and ideas that many of my students regularly bring to the work they do in the course. Quite appropriately, their papers and projects stretch the boundaries of the themes and topics we discuss in Art 122w and, as a consequence, they introduce their authors, classmates, and teacher to new ways of seeing and thinking about the issues we examine. It is satisfying to me, as a teacher, to find students pushing the limits of the course by reframing its concepts and topics in ways that are not direct reflections of the curriculum I present to them. It is also rewarding to find students claiming ownership of their ideas and presenting them within contexts relevant to their lives and work as artists.

The projects by Emily D., Tara T., Chris M., and Shawn H. each speak strongly of their individual authors’ beliefs and interests. Equally so, however, they also demonstrate the willingness of these students to look beyond the limits of private experiences and understandings to a consideration of the relationships of their projects’ topics to the issues of audience presented in the Art 122w course. In Emily’s, Tara’s, and Shawn’s projects that consideration was directly evident in the focus of the research. In these three projects, the identification and role of audiences—teen magazine readers, female fans of Barbie, and the children of “Pokémania”—were at the epicenter of these investigations. Shawn’s web presentation, however, addresses an additional aspect of audience. In the design of his project, it’s evident that Shawn is critically aware that his “audience”—those who will experience the project via the WWW—will be actively participating in the way in which the presentation is “read.” To facilitate this, Shawn had to envision his audience and anticipate their needs in navigating the presentation in a way that would be both engaging and educational. Like Shawn, it was also necessary for Chris M. to anticipate his audience as he designed his project. Indeed, in this project, we find Chris in constant and direct dialogue with his “audience” as he attempts to inform them about and challenge their thinking about the pervasive influences of advertising in their everyday lives.

It would be inaccurate to suggest that the projects described here, or my students’ works in general, directly examine notions of cultural democracy, a precept described as central to the ideological framework of the Art 122w curriculum. My goal, however, is not to “teach” cultural democracy; but, instead, to model it in my teaching practices. Through this I hope to encourage my students’ willingness to participate in the political, social, and economic discourses that affect their lives and thus facilitate in them a greater understanding of the principles of cultural democracy. A critical way to achieve this is to encourage a heightened awareness and
questioning of the different cultural power structures at work in contemporary American society. Notably, as art educator Dennis Fehr (1993) asserts, in order to teach our students how to better understand visual art as a “monitor of cultural priorities” (p. 140) we need to provide them with “the tools that enable them to identify the commissars of culture whose decisions govern the issues that most affect their lives” (p. 204). It is my belief that the revised Art 122w curriculum provides my students with one of these needed tools and that this is evidenced in the challenging and thought-provoking works described here.

Looking Back…and Forward

I believe the curriculum I use today in “Commentary on Art” makes it a much more relevant and interesting course for my students than it was when I first began teaching it five years ago and that as a result of my intense reconsideration of the course’s pedagogical purpose and structure, I am a much better teacher. My students frequently express an enthusiasm for the course that is both humbling and inspiring to me as their teacher and which sustains me in my desire to continue to see the course evolve, and perhaps, permutate. I recognize the worthiness of what has been developed so far, but I’ve also identified gaps and weaknesses in the curriculum that I hope to eliminate and to refine.

Most urgent among these is my desire to make the course more dialogic than it is currently. Much of the original material developed for the curriculum is presented in formal presentations, which by definition tend to privilege a monologic environment. With the full development of the course material on the class website, and my students’ increasingly effective use of it, I am preparing to withdraw from doing formal presentations (except for introductions to the topic areas) and, instead, reorganize our examinations of the different topics around small-group discussions and presentations in which my students take responsibility for presenting case studies they have developed about the major topics we study.

My evaluation and grading of students’ short writings present certain logistical problems for me. This activity is very time and labor intensive and, depending on the number of students I teach in a given semester, the time required to evaluate and to respond to these papers inhibits my ability to work on other, equally important aspects of the curriculum such as updating and refining the course material. Yet, I enjoy reading the papers and I know that my students value the depth of comments they receive on them. And too, the papers provide valuable insights for me about my students’ comprehension of the ideas and concepts we examine, which helps me in my interactions with them. I am currently considering instituting a system in which I use peer
review to evaluate a certain percentage of the papers written for any given assignment. This would permit me to continue to evaluate student papers from each assignment yet reduce the actual number of papers I read. It would also provide an opportunity for my students to read their classmate’s papers firsthand and to experience and participate in the process of formally responding to the ideas of another.

There has been much time and energy spent in the development of the original course material used in the curriculum and that body of work represents a substantial research effort. Nonetheless, it’s time for the content of the course material to be reviewed in its entirety with particular consideration given to its continued relevance as representative of “contemporary” issues in the arts. I’ve been able to update the material in small measures but in order to preserve the currency of the course, as well as my own enthusiasm for the material I present, I look forward to a comprehensive review of the course content.

Obviously, my goals for this course are not yet fully realized; nor should I wish them to be. An essential requirement of an effective curriculum is that it should remain dynamic and responsive to the changing circumstances of its designated domain of examination—its “conversations that matter” (Applebee 1996, 52). I look forward to the completion of this study so that I may turn my efforts to refining and updating the course material and the strategies I use to teach the class. Also too, as I worked on the curriculum redesign, I found myself conceiving of altogether different courses I would like to develop and teach, courses both related to “Commentary” and not, and I look forward to beginning that work as well.

**A Final Reflection**

This study began with a reference to words found in T.S. Eliot’s poem *Little Gidding (Four Quartets)* and I refer to them one final time:

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We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.
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Those words speak well to the intellectual and professional journey this study chronicles. I began my work here by turning my eyes and mind to what was for me a tantalizing yet abstract issue, the contradictory nature of public support for the arts in America, and I find myself at its conclusion pausing, but not stopping, before the altogether different issues of artists’ education
and my work as a teacher of the arts. What lies between is the development of a course curriculum that attempts to identify and explore some of the ways that these issues intersect and to make the research undertaken relevant to the lives and work of my students.

Several years ago, a much beloved and respected mentor reminded me that no matter what topic I chose to focus on in my dissertation, I must always remember that my discipline of examination is art education—that my work and research must be presented through the eyes and thinking of an art teacher. They were wise words and proved invaluable in helping to sustain me during this project. I hope the work presented here honors them and the worthy principles they embody. My research for this study has taught me much about the state of contemporary art and its support in America and it has helped me to construct an art course that I believe is courageous in the issues that it asks its students to contemplate. More personally, my journey through these issues has taught me much about my love for research and my desire to be a thoughtful scholar of the arts. But of even greater importance, however, is the realization that before I identify myself as either a researcher or a scholar, I first call myself a “teacher.” And, it is within this commitment to expressing my research through my teaching that my work finds purpose and that my scholarship may perhaps be found to have value. In the end, it is through the connections I make with my students in my classroom and the discoveries that they and I make there together that I believe my work can most legitimately claim participation in honoring the “living traditions” that so richly inform and contribute to our different understandings of art and the many ways in which it can be significant to our everyday lives.
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