



UNITED STATES SOCIETY FOR EDUCATION THROUGH ART

INTERNATIONAL ZIEGFELD AWARD 2013

Helene Illeris

Dear all. Thank you for selecting me for this prestigious award. I am honored to stand here today and to give this speech.

Before I start my talk I would like to say that it is a big and indeed rather unexpected thing for me to receive such recognition for my work from the United States. I am deeply grateful to the USSEA (United States Society for Education through Art) for selecting me as recipient for this year's International Ziegfeld Award and to my American and Finnish colleagues and friends Liora Bresler, Mira Kallio-Tavin and Kevin Tavin who have nominated me. Thank you.



HELENE ILLERIS

I have always thought that a beautiful thing about art education as a field of research, is that it brings together people with many different backgrounds and often with unpredictable (and almost incredible) life-stories. At our annual European InSEA-congresses, for example, you will find people who at the same time work as educators, artists, designers, philosophers, art historians, and even musicians, all of whom share a common interest in developing the strange, hybrid field that is art education.

- Why is this?
- Or to ask in another way:

JUST WHAT IS IT THAT MAKES TODAY'S ART EDUCATION SO DIFFERENT, SO APPEALING?

Looking at pop-artist Richard Hamilton's famous collages (1959, 1992) called *Just what is it that Makes today's Homes so Different, so Appealing?* you can't miss the irony of the title. Yet, my intention by reusing it is not really to be ironic. Like I believe pop-artists were *truly* in love with their contemporary world of new, fascinating, and glittering commodities, I am *truly* in love with this field. Not only because of its always appealing and glittering surface, but also because of its deep and innate paradoxes; paradoxes that continuously destabilize the very being of the field, and that forces it to always question itself.

One fundamental paradox of art education is of course to be found in its premise, namely the attempt to combine art and education into a single subject. Since the process of autonomisation of social fields and systems took speed during the 19th century, the contrasts between the interests and aims of the field of art and those of the field of education have been noticeable. While the field of education was born out of an enlightenment will to be constructive, to show ways, and to prepare mankind for better futures; the modern field of art has been constructed around a *doxa* of uniqueness and an innate need to problematize and deconstruct many of the very same social myths that education and schooling prepare pupils to accept.

Personal background

In order to illustrate how this paradox has both intrigued and affected me, a few words about my own professional background. After spending some years studying in Italy, in 1987, 24 years old, I was among the selected few that made their entrance to the Royal Danish Academy of fine Arts in Copenhagen. To be officially admitted to the field of fine arts was a truly exclusive experience - and as students we felt that was in our own interest to help maintaining the exclusivity of the field by subscribing to our own postmodern version of Ad Reinhardt's old motto: *art is art, everything else is everything else*.

Almost 10 years later, after having had a short career as independent artist, I was accepted as a PhD-student in art education at what was then called the Danish School of Educational Studies. At the beginning of this new professional career I did not realize fully, what a profound and rather difficult shift this would be for me. Not because doing research is so different from doing art, but because the field of education represented very different values from those of the field of art. While at the Academy I had learned to consider art to be a self-enclosed endeavor; education seemed to be committed to almost the opposite values: To reach, to collaborate, to make grow, to understand, to respect, and to try to be humble. I must say that I was overwhelmed - in contrast to my past career, becoming an art educator just seemed to be so very different, so *appealing*.

Now, after 17 years as a researcher in art education, I can see how the tension between the discourses of art and education, that I experienced on my own body, run like a red thread through the field. I can also see how difficult it has been for art education to handle this tension, because it always shows its head in new ways. To art education 'art' - both as a practice, an institution and a myth - represents its most important object of love and hate.

The more specific question that I would like to address in this speech regards how the old contrast between art and education is handled within one of the newest discourses in the field, the discourse of visual culture. In order to do so I will briefly return to my own experiences as a researcher in art education

Visual culture pedagogy

When I entered the field, Scandinavian research in art education was dominated by critical theory. During the 1970's and 80's, my supervisors Kristian Pedersen and Ingelise Flensburg had been the Danish pioneers in the process of transforming child-centered art education of the 60's, into what Pedersen defined as *critical-constructivist art education*.

In 2002 I finished my PhD, and together with colleagues and former students, especially Ingelise Flensburg, Mie Buhl and Karsten Arvedsen, we began to develop even more far reaching ideas for the transformation of art education than those introduced by critical-constructivist art education. In line with a growing international tendency we began to work with *visual culture pedagogy*.

From that moment, visual culture became - and it still is - 'my' answer to what art education should be about. Visual culture is about trying finally to get rid of old myths about the creative child, the emancipated picture, the hidden truth in art, and, not to be forgotten: the old fashioned focus on modernist conceptions of form, style and techniques. To me trying to transform art education into visual culture pedagogy has been to place myself at the center of the contemporary world, accepting it as it is: globalized, rhizomatic, fascinating, and powerful. By educating future generations to take actively part in this world - instead of just being skeptical about it - is to educate them for the actual present.

Seen through the poststructuralist lenses of visual culture pedagogy, at a first glance the whole idea of ART could easily be dismissed as belonging to our modernist, anthropocentric past of rigid categorizations. On the other hand, also the field art has been through some changes: changes that might have made the field more porous, bringing it closer to the field of visual culture.

In spite of these developments, it is my belief that the paradox between art and education has not really been overcome - neither by visual culture pedagogy, nor by contemporary art. To try to frame this belief just a few more points about visual culture pedagogy and its relationship to art:

1. Visual culture pedagogy focuses on all kind of visual phenomena in a contemporary globalized world. Thereby 'art' is basically reduced to a visual order among many others and should be treated as such.
2. An important part of visual culture pedagogy is to *produce* visual phenomena through processes of selection, framing, combination and transformation of visual materials of all kinds. Thereby the interest of visual culture pedagogy shares some of its interests with contemporary art forms, but it often tends to reduce these art forms to a kind of 'design' by leaving out much of its critical potential.

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3. Another important part of visual culture pedagogy concerns 'ethnographical' explorations of *existing forms* of visual culture with a special focus on contemporary 'everyday cultures' such as urban communities, clubs, teams etc. Also here parallels to contemporary art could easily be drawn, but the less exclusive term of visual anthropology might be more appropriate.
 4. Visual culture pedagogy pretends to be closer to the interests of the pupils than art. While child centered art education pretended to be close to the interests of children as *nature* and critical art education pretended to be close to children's interest as *future*, visual culture pretend to be close to students' interests here and now as *culture*: Facebook, Fashion, Football.
 5. Visual culture pedagogy considers itself as a part of the present. Thereby it also tends to mirror values of the present, including what now must be considered neo-liberal values such as fluidity, flexibility, innovation and creativity. By reflecting the present at large, visual culture pedagogy seems to connect more to the broad interests of the educational field, than to the narrow interests of the field of art, even the field of contemporary art.

I want my paradox back

What has happened to me, is that by listing up these points I have begun to feel that visual culture might have become just too appealing, at least to researchers. I begin to ask myself if it might be that the good old modernist paradox between art and education could need to be revitalized? Maybe it still has some potential in order to keep the field alive and give its critical and political potentials some fuel?

In order to initiate this discussion, I do have a few questions to visual culture pedagogy in general and to myself in particular.

The first question is *if* visual culture pedagogy is running the risk of promoting a one-dimensional friction-free worldview, even if this world-view is by definition multi-dimensional? If, for example, we claim that 'art' is nothing more than a 'position' or a 'gaze' among others within the field of visual culture, wouldn't we also imply that the modernist potential of art as an eruptive and imprevedible agent has been erased or reduced?

The second question is if we could be more open and reflexive about the fact that art actually tends to play a special role even in visual culture pedagogy? If we consider art a position among many other possible positions, why do we still let art-discourses slip in everywhere? Might it be because 'art' or at least contemporary art forms still tend to have a stronger critical and emancipatory potential than other visual phenomena?

The third question, that until now has been posted mainly by researchers who are against visual culture, is if through visual culture we risk to take away all the 'strangeness' of art education, placing it so close to the everyday visual life of the students, that it loses its power of representing otherness? To me this question has been actualized more than ever through the experience of the global crisis of capitalism and the following so-called 'crisis-consciousness', that has made students (an myself) feel much more insecure and vulnerable than before. As a consequence I cannot help to see that visual culture might have been too optimistic – sometimes almost cynically optimistic – about offering an alternative to the promise of transformation that is given to us by the good old modernist myth of art.

By asking these questions I do NOT mean that we should return to art education in its traditional forms. I believe that visual culture pedagogy responds much better to the actual and practical needs of students to understand and produce visually in contemporary and future society at large, than did art education. What I mean is that we should ALSO keep the paradox alive. If 'art' (whatsoever) stands for the mysterious, out of reach, awkward, creative and even genial and utopian ideas and sensuous experiences, that we can only dream about, we do need to keep on admitting that we think of 'art' as an alternative to other visual orders. Not just a part of 'visual culture'. Not just accessible and absorbed. Also absurd and elitist. While education has to respect kids' need to be an integrated part of contemporary society, however problematic that society might be to us, 'art' still has the possibility to stand for something else.

To me the 'art-part' of visual culture still represents a unique possibility to work against society's idea of education as an evidence based machine, to open strange doors, to propose alternatives that might be unfashionably naive, ideological, ethical or even 'religious' or 'fundamentalist'. I think keeping alive the paradoxes between art and visual culture and between art and education, especially in this time of crisis, might actually be one answer to JUST WHAT IT IS THAT MAKES TODAY'S ART EDUCATION SO DIFFERENT, SO APPEALING

Thanks again for selecting me as a recipient for the award. I will try my best to be worthy.