

ARTFUL INQUIRY ACROSS BRAIDED BOUNDARIES

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Artful Inquiry Across Braided Boundaries

A common theme found in postcolonial histories of art education is the influence of dominant cultures and the impact of theories and practices across political, social, educational and artistic divides. In most cases the pressure for change occurs in a one-way direction, which reflects a difference in power and authority and a capacity to adapt to changing situations in response to perceived needs. The enviable or the exotic is hard to resist, especially if there is a desire to look beyond immediate circumstances in the quest to improve things. Effective change, however, is hard to manage if the source of change is believed to reside with others. Importing theories of art education from other cultural geographies therefore creates problematic patterns because art education theories do not travel well. Whether viewed as a colonial artifact in the past, or as a global commodity today, art education theories carry with them excess conceptual baggage that is difficult to dislodge. This is not a surprise, for any educational theory has its own provenance, position, and praxis, and these are crafted in response to particular needs and contexts. Curriculum theory in art education, for instance, comes equipped with definitions of art, assumptions about cultural values and the role of art, and descriptions of art learning and art teaching. If art education theories resist migration, is this the case with art ideas generally? Perhaps it is ideas rather than the theories that grow and flourish in other places; intuitions rather than the explanations that can guide thoughts about change; proposals rather than projects that can be adapted to local needs; or concepts rather than curricula that promote new forms of theory and practice.

Art curators, whose business it is to communicate and educate using ideas, do not usually act as cultural poachers or post-colonial collectors these days. Under their artful eye, contemporary art exhibitions that present cultural positions do so with a plurality of perspectives in mind. Here, cultural and educational discourse draws from a multiplicity of centers where philosophical, economic, and political ideas form a basis for exchange and communication. If ideas and issues are to spark actions, then there is a need to discuss them in order to create structures and approaches that can help us think in new ways. When considered from a global perspective the logocentrism of the “center” as the primary source of insight and action is disrupted. The curator, Shuddhabrata Sengupta (2003) explains that those who believe they occupy the center are culpable of an “asymmetry of ignorance.” He adds, “we, on the fringes of the global space, know more about the global space than those who are at its core know about us” (p. 49). So being on the edge rather than the center offers a better perspective. It is a discourse opened up by artists, curators, and the like, who seek new forms of engagement with

ideas that are raising interesting questions for art educators, irrespective of within which culture or community they reside.

To explore the potential of art ideas as agents of cross-cultural change in art education this paper examines a series of concepts, events, and actions found in some examples of contemporary art encounters in South Korea. These connections with artworks and artists are framed around my recent experiences in collaborating with artists in my changing roles as an art teacher, researcher and artist. In seeing a need to look more closely at the cultural currency of art ideas, rather than art education theories, I am consciously stripping back the rhetoric of educational application, which to my mind often takes on an excessive instrumentalist purpose as political expediency can cloud educational purpose. The standards movement is a case in point where the reasonable argument of wanting to raise standards has now become the basis for a form of educational standardization that is numbing the senses to what learning can be. For many, standards and standardization are synonymous—this is surely not the case. Another educational trend that has the potential to fracture rather than fuse educational communities is the enthusiasm for integrated curricula. Here the collective benefits of learning in discipline areas is rightly seen as a connective thread that should be exploited to enable students to support and reconcile understanding across the curriculum. Unfortunately the theory is rarely matched in practice as political efficiency, administrative convenience, and educational rationalization often turn an important educational idea into a questionable management exercise. Perhaps it can be argued that innovative development and change in art education can be best approached from the perspective of contemporary art practice in all its rich complexity. Artists, after all, are migratory as they explore physical traces that navigate pathways across cultural places and conceptual spaces.

Changing the Sightlines

The image of the artist as a migratory individual who moves purposefully within and between cultures has a particular resonance these days. This is especially so with artists who reside on both sides of the mythical East-West divide, and even more so with artists for whom their Asian heritage is the core experience from which they launch their artistic journeys. Whether traversing physical places around the globe, or traveling within virtual spaces, there is a dual sense of critical distance and embedded engagement that characterizes much of contemporary art. This certainly was a feature of the group exhibition, *How Latitudes become Forms: Art in a Global Age* (Vergne, Kortun, & Hou, 2003), from which the quote by Shuddhabrata Sengupta above is taken. What is evident in this exhibition is the sub-text about how ‘latitudes become attitudes’ where the insights offered by artists about the pervasive and often perverse impact of globalization is shown in powerful, graphic forms. The role of

the contemporary artist as a cultural critic carries a degree of credibility if direct experience, insider understanding, adaptive knowledge, and critical distance, are seen to inform the ideas used to frame their art practice—and these cues provide ample points of entry for those who encounter their art.

The identity politics that is so characteristic of many Asian artists' explorations of cultural memory and social dislocation often uses the body as a site of interrogation and this speaks eloquently to discourse about individuality amid systemic and personal change. For instance, when talking about his art practice in relation to his terminal illness, the late Chinese artist, Chen Zhen, explained that he used his body “as a laboratory to widen my vision of the world and of art (Heatney, 2003, p. 50). Chen’s vision “of the world and of art” is characteristic of those who move between and among cultures as their art reveals connections and opens ruptures in how we think about who we are. Melissa Chiu describes the art of Chen Zhen this way:

Although Chen left a great legacy in his artwork when he died in 2000, another legacy was his concept of ‘transexperience’, a notion he developed for his own art practice, but one that can be applied to a more general consideration of diaspora. According to Chen, transexperience “summarizes vividly and profoundly the complex life experiences of leaving one’s native place and going from one place to another in one’s life”. This condition, characterized by in-betweenness, has similarities to many other descriptions of the diaspora, but the departure from convention lies in the way that Chen considered transexperience as a creative catalyst. On an individual level, transexperience allowed Chen to incorporate his Chinese training and experience into his work without resorting to a dichotomous relationship between China and the West. On a broader level, Chen’s concept facilitates a more sophisticated conception of the diaspora that accounts for the present and future as much as the past embodied in the homeland. (2003, p. 33)

As well as the important insights about cultural exchange and dislocation being opened up by individual artists, the increase in international contemporary art biennales across Asia since the 1990s that profile contemporary Eastern art alongside Western art is helping to flatten out the conceptual and aesthetic geographies that previously favored cultural hegemonies.¹

For many contemporary Asian artists, their work exists in what Fred Myers calls “intercultural space” (2002, p. 6). What he means is that artworks produced within a community or culture, and used

¹ Periodic international contemporary art exhibitions have become a common feature in Asia since the 1990s, and include the Taipei Biennial in Taiwan, the Gwangju Biennale and Busan Biennale in South Korea, the Shanghai Biennale and Guangzhou Triennial in China. Other exhibitions seek to profile Asian artists for Western audiences, such as the Asia Pacific Triennial that began in Brisbane, Australia in 1996.

to communicate and connect with others, do so in ways that are multiple, mutual, and where meaning is continually negotiated according to various perspectives, practices, and positions of power. Therefore, as carriers of meanings, artworks are not objects whose messages are only contained within the forms themselves, or entirely embedded in the circumstances of how art is made. Encounters with art, therefore, do not take place in a cultural void. Rather, they occur in an intercultural space as a site where cultural representations reside, interpretations are made, and meanings are communicated, but unless everyone is listening there may be just as much “talking past” each other as there might be in “talking back.” These are precisely the circumstances that not only need to be considered, but can also be seen to open up the interpretive space in a culturally responsive way.

When seen as a form of hybrid cultural practice the physical movement of artists between countries and continents positions them strategically to carry out their imaginative and intellectual critiques. Many pursue a practice that often features curatorial collaborations where the various roles of the theorist and the practitioner easily interchange. Yet, within these settings, the issue of cultural representation remains paramount where the curatorial task, according to Alice Yang (1998), involves articulating forms of identity that are “not subjugated to the demands of dominant representation” (p. 97). In discussing the problem of situating contemporary art from China within an exhibition context in the West, Yang sees the task as one that “might free us from the constraints of both the fields of traditional Chinese art history and modern western art criticism, both of which make their claims on Chinese contemporary art, bringing to the enterprise different biases and blinders” (p. 101).

Notwithstanding these interpretive constraints, when approached from the perspective of artists, the issues confronted take on board a theoretically profound and culturally rich blend of politics, position, and hybrid aesthetics. An example drawn from the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Webb, 1999) serves to illustrate this point. Ah Xian is a Chinese artist who left Beijing around the time of the events in Tiananmen Square in 1989. His dilemma is one shared by many expatriate artists who struggle to reconcile the cultural values of their homeland with that of new social contexts they find themselves in. For the APT exhibition Ah Xian created a set of porcelain busts titled the *China. China Series*. The irony for Ah Xian is that it was after he left China to live in Australia that he discovered a passion for certain cultural practices and he had to return to China to train with master potters and porcelain painters. According to Ah Xian, one way to confirm the value of the human spirit and to challenge the politics of control is to reinvigorate past histories in new ways. In his hands porcelain becomes a vehicle through which to think in a distinctive way about the old and the new, the East and the West. This goal sits nicely within the critical minds of artists who transcend cultures, politics, and geographies.

Art Encounters in Korea as a Source of Educational Ideas

Encounters with art are first and foremost personal experiences that resonate with a mix of surprise and the sublime as feelings and thoughts excite other habits of mind to connect the unknown with the known. Mostly these encounters are brief, but sustaining. For me, there is an ecological aesthetic that draws us back as there is a continual renewal of experience as artworks sustain engagement and reveal more through re-visits. And these new encounters can be sparked by a fragment of figment as much as by a further encounter with the ‘real’ object, for learning is a dynamic experience where sensory and cognitive networks connect and collate the old with the new. This is why we continue to re-live experiences through postcards collected from museums, quick sketches made on-site, or re-visiting places through virtual visits on the Internet.

In order to explore the intermittent and fragmentary nature of art encounters across cultural spaces, and to consider the possibility that art ideas have an important role to play in helping inform art education theory and practice, a series of brief experiences with art, artists and art teachers in Seoul, South Korea, follows. These personal accounts of artistic encounters are no different to the kind of experiences many of us have as we pursue our interests and explorations on a daily basis for art and education are intensely human practices.

Seoul Mates

Meeting up with the Korean curator and cultural critic, Sae Kwon Oh, in Seoul, South Korea in 2004 to exchange conversation, visit museums, participate in presentations to his students, and to share in an exhibition of Streetworks photographs,² opened up a forum of ideas that is still in progress today. Despite a language difficulty, our mutual interests in contemporary art meant that images and objects seen in galleries and studios served as the focus around which comments and conversations could be translated. A case in point was the art of Heung Yeul Wang, an artist who describes his work in terms of concepts of similarity and non-similarity. He explains:

Oriental art and Western art have had its differences in its roots and principles. For example, when drawing an object, western art placed emphasis on the form or color of the object which can be measured scientifically and geometrically. On the other hand, oriental painting

² Streetworks, an exhibition of site photographs by Graeme Sullivan, Bisang Gallery, Seoul, October – November, 2004. See <http://streetwrksart.com>

emphasized the expression of essential mentality hidden in the external appearances. (Wang , 2004, p. 18)

In melding his interests in traditional paper, brush and ink methods and his knowledge of Western modernist traditions, Heung Yeul Wang uses both images, events, stories and metaphors to weave his visual journeys. For instance, when he included stones as objects in his work in the mid 1990s he described this process as a search where “I wandered and strived to find the answer to what the ‘Koreanness’ was” (Wang, 2004, p. 21). Being surrounded by the creative energy that resonated throughout his studio gave a sense of intensity and absorption that is often lost when artworks are taken out of the studio and transplanted onto white gallery walls. Looking at artworks half completed revealed a little of the struggle with forms, images and materials, yet also helped to identify connective themes and threads with other bodies of Wang’s work. And all around the studio the remnants of visual and verbal conversations with books, commentaries and clippings by others, and picture and postcard artworks, resulted in scratched and scraped drawings on paper and just about any other surface available. What was obvious was the sense of the purposeful inquiry and the incessant tempo it seemed to convey.



Heung Yeul Wang in his studio.

For me, a crucial element in my encounter with the art of Heung Yeul Wang was the interpretation of his work within the context of studio-based research that Sae Kwon Oh discussed in his article, *A Dialogue for Establishing a relationship between Scholarly Studies and Creating Art* (Oh, 2004). Prior to my visit to Seoul I had not been aware that Professor Oh was interested in the ways artists use their studio practices as forms of research and inquiry as strategies for dealing with historical, theoretical and cultural issues. In commenting on the art of Heung Yeul Wang that was exhibited as part of his doctoral dissertation Sae Kwon noted that “now the time has come when an artist needs not only creativity, but also scholarly aptitude” (2004, p. 58). It was obvious that Sae Kwon Oh and I shared a mutual interest in the important role artists have as creators of new knowledge within the art world and the academy as they use their studios as a site for research (Sullivan, 2005).

Everyday Encounters with Contemporary Art

A second encounter where contemporary art could fuse with art education occurred during a second visit to Seoul a year later when I was invited by the Korea Art & Culture Service (KACES)³ to give a lecture and to hold a workshop for art teachers. The topic was *Arts Education: Making Meaning from Contemporary Art*. The purpose was to explore ways for art teachers to find purpose and meaning in contemporary art so as to be able to use it more effectively in classroom contexts. Being aware of thriving gallery districts such as Insa-Dong, the Heyri Art Valley in Paju City on the outskirts of Seoul, and emerging alternative art spaces and non-profit organizations such as Ssamzie Space,⁴ it was obvious that Korean art teachers had plenty of access to high quality contemporary art. They did not need a foreigner to show them new art from New York. But there is a common concern shared by art teachers today, whether they teach in Busan or Brooklyn, and this is a felt need to be able to respond in a creative and insightful way to contemporary art so as to use examples in classroom contexts. Rather than merely show images of artworks I decided to ask the Korean art teachers to pose questions about how they might engage more effectively with the art around them.

Several activities were presented that involved the forty or so participants who attended the session, which was held at the National Museum of Art, Deoksugung. The first was an illustrated lecture, expertly translated by Borim Song, a Korean doctoral student from Teachers College, Columbia University, which explored the various roles that most art teachers take on that include

³ The Korea Art & Culture Service (KACES) is a government body that fosters and supports arts education in schools and in society in general in close partnership with the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of Korea. See <http://www.iarte.or.kr>

⁴ See <http://www.ssamziespace.com/>

practice as an art teacher, artist and researcher. Although for many these functions compete for attention they are roles that define the complexity of practice that characterizes the contemporary art educator. The second activity was designed to have the participating art teachers reflect on the various roles they take on and to create a personal art, culture and educational ‘map’⁵ Participants were asked to answer a series of questions that showed the networks, groups, and professional and personal connections they belonged to; the roles they took on in their professional, public and private life; the projects and programs they were involved in within the school and the community; and to identify the various places, sites and venues where these activities took place. From this list, participants were asked to create a ‘map’ or diagram that showed how all these aspects and activities related to each other.

Once the individual ‘culture maps’ were completed these were displayed and discussed. Participants talked about the complex roles and responsibilities they took on; the beliefs and values they held that compelled them to do these things; the relationships they have with others (such as students, fellow teachers, artist colleagues); and the kind of philosophical bonds that bind these relationships. What was apparent was that each person’s ‘map’ was distinctive in its design and showed the unique ways that individuals fit within a community or culture of ideas and actions. What was also apparent was that there were many areas of commonality where ideas and actions stretched across many different perspectives. The theme drawn from this activity was that ‘similarity’, ‘difference’ and ‘connection’ were not only features of the culture maps of each individual, but were also characteristics of contemporary art. To explore this further, a second activity was presented.

Strips of black masking tape were used to mask off a series of large framed areas about a meter square. I tossed one of my shoes into a frame and asked the participants to do the same. After we all looked at this random arrangement of shoes of different shapes, sizes and styles I asked the question if this ‘installation’ could be a work of contemporary art? After a tentative start as we all became comfortable with the physical awkwardness of resting on one foot, and the unease of my questionable cultural sensitivity, some lively discussion ensued. Reasons flowed about why the pile of shoes could, indeed, be an example of contemporary art as ideas about artistic intention and possible meanings were argued. Almost the full range of aesthetic theories were enlisted as arguments based on formalism, expressionism, symbolism, metaphor, narrative history, and political critique were presented as the shoes were re-arranged to create different visual configurations. For some, the idea that this loose collection of shoes could be ‘art’ of any kind was a little hard to digest as arguments about history,

⁵ I am indebted to my colleague Professor Olga Hubard for introducing me to this idea.

tradition, and skill were useful in establishing aesthetic criteria for helping determine what is and is not art. As we talked more it seemed that prescribed criteria, firm definitions, and categorical standards closed down rather than opened up rich discussions about art. The generative nature of the discussion was enhanced further when comparisons were made between the stance taken by each participant and their culture map as it became apparent that interpretations were very much informed by the individual interests and experiences of each person.

To extend the discussion about ways to think about contemporary art a third and final activity was used to build on the culture maps and the shoe installation. Part of the discussion turned to the process of creative and critical inquiry that characterizes much of contemporary art. Reference was made to an example used in the lecture that showed the art of the Korean artist, Yong Soon Min. Her work had been discussed as an example of a contemporary artist who could be described as a creator, critic, theorist, teacher, and activist. These roles were seen to be typical of the practice of many contemporary artists. A sense of historical and cultural critique was seen in an example of the art of Yong Soon Min, her 1992 photographic installation, *Defining Moments*. Yong Soon Min described the work this way.

All of the images and dates of *Defining Moments* refer to dates with personal significance that have uncanny connections to important events in Korean and Korean American history. The year 1953 was the year of my birth as well as the year that the Korean War ended. The next date is known in Korean as 'Sa-il-gu' or 4/19, the date of the popular uprising in South Korea that overthrew the Syngman Rhee government which I witnessed as a child. This event allowed our family to leave Korea. 5/19/80 refers to the Gwangju uprising and massacre, an important turning point in Korean history that served as a catalyst in my growing interest in current Korean history. The last date, 'sa-i-gu' or 4/29 refers to the LA riots which also happens to be my birthday. (cited in Hwa Young Choi Caruso, 2004, p. 201).

To explore artistic inquiry as a creative and critical practice a collection of materials retrieved from the streets around Seoul was randomly dropped inside the masked off framed areas. This array of 'trash' comprised all sorts of everyday objects and materials that in most circumstances would not be considered to be fine art materials from which works of art could be created. However, using issues and questions raised in earlier discussions about personal values, interests and insights, and collaborative knowledge about art gained through discussion and agreement, each group created a mixed media assemblage that represented some artistic intent.

The intentions, processes and creative resolutions used to compose and create each floor installation were subsequently presented by each group and opened up even further discussion about

contemporary art. Issues of similarity and difference in personal convictions, aesthetic interests and educational intent were readily seen to infuse decisions made as individual and group connections were made and meanings exchanged. In summary, I was able to highlight the animated actions and insightful comments that characterized the lively creative and critical process that had occurred. That these were processes and practices similar to those used by contemporary artists was a point that was relatively easy to understand and appreciate .



Using street materials as an idea for art—sometimes removing forms can be as creative as adding forms.

Conclusion

In this paper I sought to question the tendency to import art educational theories and practices from across cultural boundaries. The temptation to believe that others do things better is a natural inclination that is as much a consequence of a desire to improve things as it is the outcome of media mania that propels a message for the culturally dominant. In terms of educational exchange, however, I argue that pedagogical theories do not travel well as they tend to implode under the weight of their own theoretical baggage. Art ideas, on the other hand, are presented as robust and generative sources that have the capacity to enliven thinking about culture, community, and curriculum, once they are re-energized within local contexts. Because art ideas have great resilience and lend themselves to continual change and adaptation ownership can be readily claimed by others. There is a longstanding eclectic tradition in art practice as the old and the vapid become an important source of ideas about for the new and the vivid. The cultural currency of art ideas is used to good profit by the creative and

critical minds of contemporary artists and this is readily seen when encountering art anywhere in the world. And this exchange and re-location of art ideas can happen in small, incidental ways as reported in my brief encounters with art, artists, and art teachers in Seoul. For in my role as an art teacher in these situations my purpose is to excite others about art and to introduce them to a culture of artistic inquiry that helps enhance their creative and critical capacities. This is very similar to my art practice as I make things where the surprise of not knowing something serves to disrupt expectations. This is an idea that knows no boundaries. In art making and art teaching personal vision and public voice share a cultural space that is *braided* rather than bordered, and this not only builds on individual and collective ideas within communities, but also creates conversations across boundaries.⁶

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⁶ My conversation about art, culture and education with Korean colleagues continues. In February 2006 an exhibition and conference titled *Virtual Conversations across Visual Cultures: Cultural Identity in Korean Computer-Mediated Art* was held at Teachers College, Columbia University. Two concurrent exhibitions were held; one at the Macy Gallery at Teachers College with Korean contemporary artists working in digital media, and the other featuring the work of art students held at the Barom Gallery, Seoul Women's University. The conference keynote speakers were Professor Sae Kwon Oh, Dankook University, Professor Taiho Kim and Taejin Kim Seoul Women's University, Seoul, Korea.

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