

# Three Approaches to Teaching Visual Culture in K-12 School Contexts

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**I**s “visual culture” important for K-12 education?

Presented here are compatible but distinctive approaches of three members of the art education faculty at Penn State. Each translates visual culture according to her own research and teaching strengths. We are not ascribing to a singular model, but share the view that visual culture suggests a way to look at culture. We consider visual culture in relation to cultural narratives, intertextuality, and values clarification.

**Coming to Terms with Terms<sup>1</sup>**

**Karen Keifer-Boyd:**  
**The Visual Culture Debate**

Art, Visual Culture, Material Culture, Media Studies, Visual Studies—what should art education in the 21st century comprise? *The Journal of Visual Culture's* first issue in April 2002 critiques, and finds inadequate, the term visual culture. Mark Poster (2002) argues that media studies is the better term to recognize the “material form in which the cultural object is received” (p. 68). This term, he believes, will avoid the “need to proffer claims of uniqueness about contemporary visibility” and will bypass the “suggestion of the autonomy of the visual, as subject or object” (p. 68). He elaborates on how the visual has always been “rendered in

and through the non-visual,” in which sight, sound, and text are merged (p. 67). Doug Blandy and Paul Bolin (2002) suggest that *material culture* is the more appropriate term. Material culture emphasizes objects of everyday use. Düttmann (2002) defines *visual culture* as the “cultural hegemony of the image” that “must posit a link between culture and vision if it is to prove somehow meaningful” (p. 101). Korean artist Bul Lee’s installation at MOMA, which included a dead smelly fish, dealt with issues that Doug Blandy (Blandy & Bolin, 2002) raised about *visual culture* privileging the visual over other sensory perceptions. She posits that vision is dominated by male privilege since the assumed viewer and creator are male:

What I’m trying to examine is the idea of representation and its relationship to the privileging of vision as the dominant esthetic

principle, and how this privileging of vision came about. If you trace the idea far back enough, the mastery that you acquire through vision was a distinctly masculine privilege, so all of the other senses were relegated to realms outside of high art.

While the fish can be seen as a representation, it also evokes—because of this other element of smell, which doesn't fit in to the traditional categories of representational strategies—a sense of the real, of object immediacy, of something that is prior to, or beyond, representation . . . In a sense I'm trying to reverse the traditional strategies of art, to disturb the supreme position of the image, or the privileging of image and visual experience in the traditional hierarchies of art apparatus. (Lee, 2002, [http://www.artnode.se/artorbit/issue1/i\\_bul/i\\_bul.html](http://www.artnode.se/artorbit/issue1/i_bul/i_bul.html))

As art educators shouldn't we be teaching about art? But what *is* art? Most people will probably answer that art is painting, drawing, and sculpture. Their answer might add that art is in art museums and decorates spaces. The walls of a seventh grader's bedroom might include posters of celebrities, advertisements, and popular mall art like *Magic Eyes* (N.E. Thing Enterprises, 1994). My neighbor has mass-produced figurines throughout her house. They are for visual and sentimental enjoyment. Is this what we as art educators should include in our curriculum?<sup>2</sup> The contemporary artist Stelarc puts hooks in his body and hangs over crashing ocean waves. The Artworld acknowledges this act as art.

If it's in an art museum then it "must be art." Of course, politics influence whose work is collected and exhibited (Guerrilla Girls, 1998).<sup>3</sup> In the 21st century, museums "are springing not from collections but from concepts" (Klein, 2002, p. 1). Impressionist works were exhibited in Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh in 2001 as part of the

show, *Light! The Industrial Age 1750-1900: Art & Science, Technology & Science* (Margolis, 2001). The focus was on the impact of technology such as gas lamps and scientific theories of vision. Are the Impressionists' paintings, in this context, science or art, or both?

So what's in a name: *art, visual culture, material culture, media studies*? (See Figure 1 for a selected bibliography in these areas.) Each of these terms is connected with a body of literature, a discourse, gatekeepers on what may or may not be associated with the term. Language evolves. What do we mean when we use the term *art* or *visual culture*?

**Patricia M. Amburgy:**  
**Visual Culture as Cultural Stories**

The term *visual culture* is a way of calling attention to visual qualities as important components of

cultural practices and includes non-exhibited dimensions of meaning such as context and power. Conceptual divisions between ethical, intellectual, and aesthetic aspects of life—between goodness, truth, and beauty—were distinctively modern inventions. They were created in European cultures at the same time Art with a capital "A" was invented (Staniszewski, 1995). Today, however, old divisions between high and low have become irrelevant in relation to issues such as identity, representation, and ideology. The same is true of conceptual divisions between ethical, intellectual, and aesthetic aspects of life; they are irrelevant to current ways of thinking about the value and function of images. Action, thought, and vision are interrelated in contemporary theory. All three are important aspects of the cultural practices that shape our lives.

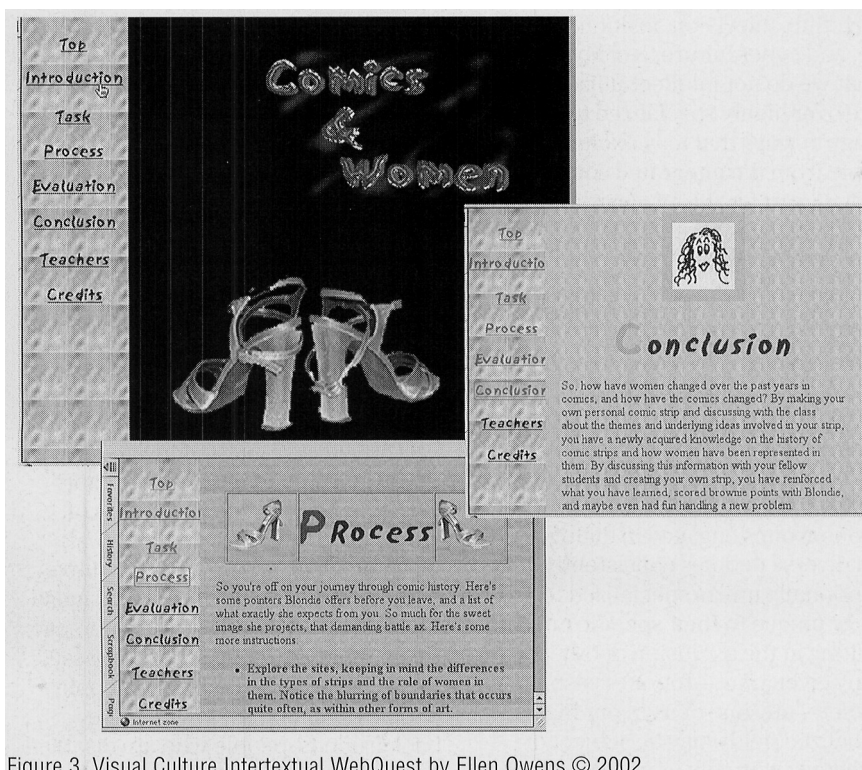


Figure 3. Visual Culture Intertextual WebQuest by Ellen Owens © 2002.

For me, *culture* is the crucial aspect of *visual culture* that differentiates it from modernist conceptions of Art, both in the kinds of phenomena that are included in visual culture and what is significant about those phenomena. Contemporary theorists maintain that visual culture includes paintings, prints, photographs, film, television, video, advertisements, news images, and science images (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001). Visual culture consists of fine and popular art forms, including toys, science fiction films, children's art—and more (Freedman, 2002). Visual culture includes images beyond the canon of Art (Duncum, 2001).

Visual culture is significant because it presents ideas and stories that shape people's lives. It "reflects and contributes to the construction of knowledge, identity, beliefs, imagination, sense of time and place, feelings of agency, and the quality of life at all ages" (Boughton, et al., 2002). The socially constructed nature of visual culture is different from the inherent characteristics of Art that, according to modernist theory, could be directly experienced. Contemporary theorists of visual culture no longer believe in aesthetic qualities that are "immediately" experienced, as John Dewey put it (Dewey, 1934). Nothing is immediately experienced without some sort of mediation and interpretation. The significance of visual culture lies "not so much [in] a set of things (television shows or paintings, for example) as a set of processes or practices through which individuals and groups come to make sense of those things" (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001, pp. 3–4; also see Hall, 1997).

Visual *culture* has important implications for art education in the selection of instructional content. Images are chosen, not for their inherent aesthetic value, but for their power (Freedman, 2002). The criterion is the power that images have as cultural narratives to present stories about what it means to be a man, for example, or how to view Arab nations. When teaching visual culture, we might choose Marlboro Man advertisements over David's *Oath of the Horatii* or television news programs over Ingre's *Turkish Bath*.

**Wanda B. Knight:  
Navigating  
the Waters  
of Visual  
Culture**

The intellectual debate over terms concerns me less than its practical application. I am not concerned with whether we refer to our field as Art,

Visual Culture, Material Culture, Media Studies, Visual Studies, Art Education, or otherwise, as I recognize that no terminology will likely ever fully represent all of the objects of study that pertain to our field in art, design, advertising, film, television, fashion, architecture, and cyberculture, etc. My concern is that we do not intellectualize or deliberate over highly specialized terminology in ways that may exclude certain people from the integrated social and academic art worlds of elitists. I refer to such specialized terminology as "FAT," or *fancy art talk*.

As assistant museum curator, I constantly received large helpings of "FAT," from patrons utilizing highly specialized jargon in an attempt to tout their intellectual superiority at the expense of others. "FAT" can serve to include or exclude certain populations. For example, during museum openings, various groups engaged in dialogue with diverse peoples consistently and intentionally utilize specialized terminology unique to their specific interests, resulting in the exclusion of others. At any given time—for one reason or another—any one of us in our highly specialized fields may be subject or subjected (wittingly or unwittingly) to

like behavior. So then, does the use of specific rhetoric or jargon or the discourse surrounding it have the potential to make us more mindful of our practice, or are we simply adding more FAT to our already proverbial full plates?

The cultural diversity tsunami (tidal wave) is breaking on every shore, creating a demographic imperative that art educators cannot ignore. I am afraid that we may "miss the boat" if we do not move beyond academic discourse to engagement in social change processes (Platt, 1993). This is not to say that academic discourse lacks value: it can refocus our energies and provide the foundation and direction for our future work. Rogoff (1998) asserts that "the emergence of visual culture as a trans-disciplinary and cross-methodological field of inquiry means nothing less and nothing more than an opportunity to reconsider some of the present culture's thorniest problems from yet another angle" (p. 16).

As we consider the challenge of redefining ourselves as a field, we are in a better position to ask ourselves a number of critical questions: Can how we define ourselves as a field help us better define or clarify who we are as a people or who we are as individuals? Will we continue business as usual? Are we capable of looking beyond our own cultural walls and making an objective assessment? Or as we recognize different systems of cultural values, beliefs, practices, and institutions, will we continue with the cultural mindset that regards our own culture as superior to others and consequently a model for all cultures?

Though current thinking about visual culture may encompass more "stuff" in our burgeoning fields of study, the philosophical, historical, psychological, artistic, and cognitive aspects of the visual experience must be approached from a critical perspective designed to empower the masses, particularly disenfranchised people, people of color or of low-income backgrounds, people who are disabled, gay or lesbian, and girls.

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## Journals on Visual Culture

**Callaloo: A Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters**, 18. For example, in volume 2 an article on Black Masculinity and Visual Culture (Gray, 1995).

**Iconomania** Studies in visual culture <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/icono/> since 1998, under construction note in 2000. 1 issue. ISSN: 1092-387X. Online published by graduate students at the Department of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles

**Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture** (4 issues, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002). "As the title suggests, Invisible Culture problematizes the unquestioned alliance between culture and visibility, specifically visual culture and vision. Cultural practices and materials emerge not solely in the visible world, but also in the social, temporal, and theoretical relations that define the invisible. Our understanding of Cultural Studies, finally, maintains that culture is fugitive and is constantly renegotiated." ([http://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/ivchome.html](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/ivchome.html))

**Journal of Visual Culture** [www.sagepub.co.uk/journals/details/j0376.html](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journals/details/j0376.html). © 2002 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) Vol 1

**Screen** <http://www3.oup.co.uk/screen/scope/> A leading international journal on film, video art, and popular television studies from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Published by Oxford University Press. Print ISBN: 0036-9546.

**Visual Communication Quarterly** <http://jmc.ou.edu/viscom/quarterly/index.html>. Visual Communication Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

**Visual Studies** subscriptions available through membership of the International Visual Sociology Association. New to Routledge in 2002. Editor: Jon Prosser, University of Leeds, Department of Education, Leeds. Volume 17, 2002, 2 issues per year. ISSN 1472-586x

Figure 1. Selected bibliography on visual culture approaches.

## Visual Culture and Teacher Education

### Patricia M. Amburgy: Cultural Stories as an Approach to Understanding Visual Culture

Teaching teachers to teach visual culture has presented new challenges, not only for my own understanding of theory, but in

practice. One challenge has been to find articles and books on visual culture that present current theory in ways that are both accessible and sufficiently complex. One of the textbooks that I use in an undergraduate course is *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Sturken & Cartwright, 2001), which is a fairly successful balance between accessibility to contemporary theory and complexity.

Finding materials that exemplify K-12 practice has been an even greater challenge than finding theoretical materials. I found a handful of lessons in *School Arts* pertaining to comic books and cartooning (Lappe, 2000; Skophammer, 2001; Wales, 2001), but the lessons focused on technical skills rather than the power of comic book and cartoon images as cultural narratives. A gallery card on Michael Ray Charles's work, based on the Consumption segment of the PBS series *Art for the 21st Century*, was a better example of teaching visual culture ("Consumption," 2001). In *Art Education*, an Instructional Resource dealt with advertising as "society's mirror" (Coleman, 1998), but the lessons focused on designing advertisements, not cultural narratives in ads. An article on Elvis as a social icon was closer to current conceptions of visual culture (Pistolessi, 2002). I found other examples of practice from DOCEO, a web site for teachers at the Whitney Museum ([www.whitney.org](http://www.whitney.org)), and the Media Education Foundation ([www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org)) (see Figure 2). These and other sources are promising, but on the whole I found that examples of K-12 instruction in *visual culture*,

conceived as both a broad range of images *and* an emphasis on cultural narratives in images, are still few and far between. Visual culture does not just mean a broader range of stuff. It also means a particular way of understanding that stuff.

### Karen Keifer-Boyd: An Intertextual Approach

In my courses we begin, not with images, but with what is meaningful to our lives today—the

concerns that affect our community, the larger world, and us. We look then for representations of those issues in the pervasive visual culture. I teach an intertextual approach to visual culture. An intertextual practice situates meaning within worldviews espoused by discourses from an image's changing contexts of reception. This practice questions who is the active agent and who or what is the object in a specific textual or visual representation. Meaning resides in the relationships between object, discourse, and viewer. Intertextuality is an aspect of the Internet's signification system, a system that implies nonlinear knowledge constructed by the viewer. Intertextuality is similar to contextualism, in that "it is the social context of an object that provides the framework necessary for understanding its meaning and function" (Perani & Smith, 1998, p. 5).

*The Visual Culture Intertextual WebQuests* (See Figure 3 for an example of a Visual Culture Intertextual WebQuest) that my undergraduate students have created for youths involve creative responses from critical interpretation and evaluation within an interdisciplinary, thematic approach to active learning.<sup>4</sup> These *WebQuests* are not based in Deweyian pragmatism. From the Deweyian perspective, creativity is individual self-expression, and what is valued is the originality of that self-expression (Dewey, 1934). From a postmodern social theory perspective, creativity is

## Videos from the Media Education Foundation

- Behind the Screens: Hollywood Goes Hypercommercial.*** (2000). VHS. 37 minutes. Directed and produced by Matt Soar and Susan Ericsson. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Examines the way popular films have become vehicles for mass merchandising through product placements, the sale of toys and action figures, and tie-ins with fast food chains. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- Constructing Public Opinion: How Politicians and the Media Misrepresent the Public.*** (2001). VHS. 32 minutes. Directed and edited by Susan Ericsson. Executive Producer Sut Jhally. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- Game Over: Gender, Race & Violence in Video Games.*** (2000). VHS. 41 minutes. Produced & directed by Nina Huntmann. Executive Producer Sut Jhally. Edited by Jeremy Smith. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Examines issues of gender, race and violence in video games. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- Jhally, S. (1995). ***Dreamworlds II: Desire, Sex, and Power in Music Video.*** VHS. 55 minutes. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Examines stories about sexuality that are told in the fantasy world (the "dream-world") of music videos. These constructed stories are told by men for men; they reflect adolescent male fantasies of women being constantly available for sex, always desiring sex with men, and wanting to be looked at and touched in sexual ways. The messages of Dreamworlds II are powerful. There is a warning at the beginning of the video that says watching it is a voluntary act and viewers may leave the room if they choose. The warning should be taken seriously. This is not a video to show to students without previewing it first. There is a study guide for Dreamworlds II on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- Jhally, S., & Katz, J. (in production). ***Wrestling with Manhood: Gender, Race and Class in Professional Wrestling.*** VHS. 45 minutes (full-length), 30 minutes (abridged). Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Release date: October 2002.
- Kilbourne, J. (1995). ***Slim Hopes: Advertising and the Obsession with Thinness.*** VHS. 30 minutes. Executive producer, director, editor, Sut Jhally. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.
- Kilbourne, J. (2000). ***Killing Us Softly 3: Advertising's Image of Women.*** VHS. 34 minutes. Producer, director, editor, Sut Jhally. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Examines the way advertisements shape our understanding of women's lives and bodies, and the relation of images in advertisements to social problems such as limited roles and occupations for women, sexual assault, and eating disorders. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- Mickey Mouse Monopoly: Disney, Childhood & Corporate Power.*** (2001). VHS. 52 minutes. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Examines constructions of race, ethnicity, and gender in Disney films and their impact on young viewers. The video includes interviews with Henry Giroux and other commentators on contemporary culture. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- Money for Nothing: Behind the Business of Pop Music.*** (2001). VHS. 49 minutes. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- Off the Straight and Narrow: Lesbians, Gays, Bisexuals & Television.*** (1998). VHS. 63 minutes. Produced, directed & edited by Katherine Sender. Executive Producer Sut Jhally. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- Playing UnFair: The Media Image of the Female Athlete.*** (2002). VHS. 30 minutes. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation.
- Tough Guise: Violence, Media, and the Crisis in Masculinity.*** (1999). VHS. 85 minutes (full length), 57 minutes (abridged version). Narrated by Jackson Katz. Directed by Sut Jhally. Produced by Susan Ericsson and Sanjay Talreja. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. Examines the construction of masculinity in music, films, advertisements, and other forms of popular culture. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).
- What a Girl Wants.*** (2000). VHS. 33 minutes. Produced by Elizabeth Massie for the Media Education Foundation. Music by Sean Eden. Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation. What a Girl Wants presents interviews with eleven girls aged 8 to 16 about the impact on their lives of films, music, music videos, teen idols such as Christina Aguilera (whose song is the basis for the video's title), and other aspects of media culture. A study guide is available on the Media Education Foundation's web site: [www.mediaed.org](http://www.mediaed.org).

Figure 2. Videos from the Media Education Foundation.



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## Journals on Visual Culture

**Callaloo: A Journal of African-American and African Arts and Letters**, 18. For example, in volume 2 an article on Black Masculinity and Visual Culture (Gray, 1995).

**Iconomia** Studies in visual culture <http://www.humnet.ucla.edu/icono/> since 1998, under construction note in 2000. 1 issue. ISSN: 1092-387X. Online published by graduate students at the Department of Art History at the University of California, Los Angeles

**Invisible Culture: An Electronic Journal for Visual Culture** (4 issues, 1998, 1999, 2000, 2002). "As the title suggests, Invisible Culture problematizes the unquestioned alliance between culture and visibility, specifically visual culture and vision. Cultural practices and materials emerge not solely in the visible world, but also in the social, temporal, and theoretical relations that define the invisible. Our understanding of Cultural Studies, finally, maintains that culture is fugitive and is constantly renegotiated." ([http://www.rochester.edu/in\\_visible\\_culture/ivchome.html](http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/ivchome.html))

**Journal of Visual Culture** [www.sagepub.co.uk/journals/details/j0376.html](http://www.sagepub.co.uk/journals/details/j0376.html). © 2002 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi) Vol 1

**Screen** <http://www3.oup.co.uk/screen/scope/> A leading international journal on film, video art, and popular television studies from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Published by Oxford University Press. Print ISBN: 0036-9546.

**Visual Communication Quarterly** <http://jmc.ou.edu/viscom/quarterly/index.html>. Visual Communication Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication.

**Visual Studies** subscriptions available through membership of the International Visual Sociology Association. New to Routledge in 2002. Editor: Jon Prosser, University of Leeds, Department of Education, Leeds. Volume 17, 2002, 2 issues per year. ISSN 1472-586x

Figure 1. Selected bibliography on visual culture approaches.

as they assume the roles of socially responsible citizens in our increasingly diverse human community.

## Conclusion

Perception is never passive, nor neutral. Images do not “flood in, essentially without error” as the empiricist philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries believed (Gregory, 2001, p. 57). Perception is active interpretation, or making meaning. In other words, what we SEE is not primarily based on sense stimulus, but on past knowledge, situational contexts, and cultural narratives.

Interventions reveal stored knowledge: mindsets, categorization systems we use, art traditions that we prefer, life experiences, education, associations, etc., that we use for “reading” the visual. Such a model, even when applied to an object that fits comfortably into fine art categories, expands the visual study of the object to its cultural bases. The connections between visual and culture suggest that this approach to art education is a study of visual culture.

Our purpose in presenting three approaches (i.e., cultural stories, intertextuality, and values clarification) is to emphasize that the visual is situated in specific cultural contexts of power and privilege. While we have distinctive approaches, we agree that intertextual threads in interpreting visual culture, including “high art,” should include questions of privilege, social desire, agency, power, representation, history, pleasure, and spectatorship.

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## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Thanks to Elizabeth Hoffman, whose art lesson, “Coming to Terms with Terms of Art,” inspired the title of this section.
- <sup>2</sup>Grace Deniston-Trochta (2000) suggests that “we recognize the social class asymmetry embedded in the art world's aesthetic standards” to help students remove the masks of silence and cultural assimilation and “aesthetics of the ordinary” in discussing the aesthetics in popular sentimental figurines such as those known as Precious Moments® (pp. 47-50).
- <sup>3</sup>For an art lesson dealing with the politics of museums, see Keifer-Boyd, K. (1997). Re-presentations in virtual museums, *Art and Academe: A Journal for the Humanities and Sciences in the Education of Artists, 9* (2), pp. 38-60.
- <sup>4</sup>The students' visual culture Webquests are at <http://sva74.sva.psu.edu/%7Ecyberfem/322/index.html>