

PICTURING THE PUBLIC GOOD

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Like any subject in the school curriculum, art can educate for the public good, but it depends on whether or not schools have a vested interest in teaching toward the public good. I know what you're thinking. What else would schools be about if not the public good? It seems like a no-brainer, right? But the public good is a dicey proposition. Since attitudes, ideas and values are ever shifting in definition, policies and practices, in my view, unless administrators and teachers alike have a positive regard for developing curriculum that acknowledges the rich tensions embedded in the term then the good may not be so good. In *Picturing the Public Good* I offer an example of the ways education in the visual arts could construct, challenge and contribute to the public good.

AMERICA MY MIND

Picture this: New Jersey, (Exit 148) the early 1970s; Woodstock is fresh in people's minds. The late 60s race riots are still being cleaned up in major cities across the US and young men, barely old enough to shave are still losing their lives in Vietnam. It was a time of peace and free love, drugs, sex and rock and roll; a time where doing your own thing meant what the State's mandated art education curriculum could have had as its subtitle, "Don't Dump your Values on Me!" With all good intentions, at that time, what was believed to be in the interest of the public good was to teach a "values free" curriculum.

An undergraduate, in an art teacher preparation program at the William Paterson College of New Jersey, the instruction I sustained consisted of training in the formal elements and principles of design, which entails the teaching of the technical dimensions of art making and appreciation. This is the equivalent of recognizing how a sentence is constructed by studying its grammatical components and punctuation without actually engaging the subject of the sentence. In short, where form is the content. Modernist at its core, art for art's sake alone was the mantra of the day. In this way art making and appreciation referred only to itself—the subject matter never ventured beyond its borders to re-present worlds outside the frame.

We were taught, like the Monty Python boys meeting the Killer Bunny in the *Holy Grail*, to "Run away, run away" from controversial and potentially dangerous personal and social content. During the months just preceding my student teaching experience, which by the way was divided between an urban junior high school and

in an institution for young offenders, I was given “The List.” The list could have been something from a George Carlin routine. Come to think of it, he was at that time flogging a similar perspective in his act *The 7 Dirty Words*, which referred to words you could not broadcast. The art education List of NO-NO-s had at least seven words that dealt with potentially contentious topics that we were NOT to speak about in our classrooms.

Given the historical time period, it’s no surprise that unlike Carlin’s words that mostly derived from the body and its functions, our list of words pertained to issues of gender, class, race and ethnicity. The list was meant to protect, to keep the peace, to maintain the status quo and leave well enough alone. So, equipped with the burden and blessing of being one of the first women in my family of Italian immigrants to go to college, (by way of waiting tables 30 hours a week for 3.5 years), a strong desire to do well, please my professors and get an A, (read, get a job after graduating) I committed the list to memory.

Once in the classroom, who would have guessed that during a lesson on the most efficient way to fold cardboard— to score it first— I would encounter lewd, albeit clever, comments from the largely Italian-American grade 9 boys in the class. I added, “to score” to the list. American as apple pie, to score from the nation’s premiere pastime, baseball, in this context refers to its second favorite pastime. But the list I added it to, was a list that ran counter to the society and culture the No-No List intended to control. At 22 years old, I wouldn’t have explained it as I am today, 35 years later. But it was The List and my alternate list that eventually taught me that curriculum is never values free. Any position we take, even a non-position is riddled with complex assumptions about what is good and bad. Finally, education in the guise of training, does not serve the public good, if by public good we mean education that contributes to the development of critically minded, personally and socially well citizens.

CROSSING THE BORDER

No longer just an Italian-American, having aced the citizenship test five years ago makes me proudly Canadian too. But before my arrival at the University of New Brunswick in 1989, years before I made the decision to become a dual citizen, I had a regard for Canadian art history as a repository for examining what we mean when we take up the challenge of defining the public good. For example, in *Kanata* (Fig.2), artist, critic and educator, Robert Houle vividly challenges traditional explanations of Canada’s past. Through an appropriation or re-working of Benjamin West’s *The Death of Wolfe* (Fig. 1), Houle re-writes history, tells an alternate story and ultimately re-shapes what we know and believe about history generally and who we are as Canadians.



Fig.1 Benjamin West, *The Death of Wolfe* (1771)



Fig.2 Robert Houle, *Kanata* (1992)

As Houle (1992) explains:

Maybe somehow ... I can ... say to the viewer, 'Look, as Native people we are just voyeurs in the history of this country.' [In "Kanata"] the Indian is in parentheses, the Indian is surrounded by this gigantic red and this gigantic blue and is sandwiched in that environment ... And that is reality because the English and the French are still the major players in the making of this history, history as it was. That is what I would like to get across.

Robert Houle's *Kanata* serves the public good not in a conclusive way, but in ways that open traditionally uncontested explanations, that ultimately teach us that we have the right and responsibility to question. We must ask how, why and in whose interest does this version of historical events serve?

In *Integrating Text and Image: Teaching Art and History* (1997), Gerry Clarke and I invited grades 3 and 5 students in elementary classrooms in a New Brunswick school into a conversation about the phrase on Quebec license plates, “Je me souviens” which led to conversations about the Battle of the Plains of Abraham, Benjamin West’s *The Death of Wolfe* and Robert Houle’s appropriation, *Kanata*. Just 8-10 years into the world and they wanted to know what happened to the women and children during the battle, and who was the Indian and why was he posed like Rodin’s *The Thinker*. The students own visual appropriations provide us with other possible historical accounts including a comparison of the aboriginal character to Rodin’s *The Thinker* that chronologically came later in 1902. In a bit of serendipity, Sylvester Stallone poses on the cover of *Vanity Fair* making it possible for us to engage visual definitions of masculinity and question the stereotype of the noble savage (Fig.3)



Fig.3 Vanity Fair Magazine (2003)

When asked what history is, one young scholar said history is “monumental.” He was referring to the monuments he had seen in public squares including downtown Fredericton. And he was right. Histories can be monumental, built to last and meant to remind us once and for always of what is good. What Houle teaches us and the recent toppling of the Saddam Hussein sculpture looped over and over again on CNN confirms, is that the “visual” is a powerful means by which we can explore, experience and examine the deconstruction and reconstruction of the complex dimensions of what constitutes the public good.

THE UGLY TRUTH ABOUT THE “B” WORD

The Faculty of Education at UNB has as its mandate, a concern for social justice. In *Staying hungry: It's not just about the money* (Pazienza, 2010) I ask what my work,

as a painter has to do with social justice? In what way does it serve the public good? By extension I ask how the art making experiences of students in our public schools, those that include the contemplation and re-creation of the beautiful, as part of their overall visual literacy education, get at questions surrounding our understanding of the public good. It is the tricky relationship between perceptions of beautiful things and beautiful actions, ugly things and ugly actions that has in part contributed to a dismissal of the beautiful in late 20th century artistic and academic circles.

As if mutually exclusive, artists and critics, philosophers and educators belittled the beautiful in favor of socially, culturally, and politically charged content. Weighed against a concern for social justice, for some the beautiful is trivial and potentially dangerous. But, for Elaine Scarry (1999) in *On Beauty and Being Just*, and for me beauty compels what she calls replication, a begetting, what I call re-creation—the means by which we renew our search for truth and our concern for justice. Robert Houle's *Kanata* is one such example. It is a beautiful painting. As part of our critical engagement with it, can we in its presence slow down and experience a kind of radical de-centering, an un-selfing, a giving up of ourselves as the imaginary centre? Can we rather than promoting the self, become self-forgetful, where all of our efforts of protecting, guarding and advancing ourselves are free to be in the service of something else? Then, maybe we can picture the public good.

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