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In Sync with Visual Culture

Stanley Madeja

Recently visited a city considered to be the showcase of visual culture. It's a city that's part of our visual fantasies. It's Gotham City, the home of Batman, the backdrop of Superman’s Metropolis, and the setting for the death of King Kong. It has been a venue for cutting-edge visual environments and performance art, the Electric Circus in the 70s and the Blue Man Group in the 90s, and two retrospective exhibits of the artwork of Nam June Paik. It’s the home of Madison Avenue, the machine that drives the image production of our popular culture. It is the originator of television at a World’s Fair in 1939, and the home of Metropolis magazine. If you haven’t already guessed, I’m talking about New York City, the site of the National Art Education Association’s attendance-breaking convention in 2001.

Where the Action Is

Why does New York have such appeal to art teachers? Because it’s where the “art action” is! So it’s appropriate to use New York as an exemplar to introduce you to popular culture as a metropolitan area that has reinvented itself in a variety of ways in the past century and continues to do so in this one. The 20th anniversary issue of Metropolis magazine (2001) has documented twenty years of visual culture in the city and the genre it has created in design and architecture. The magazine represents and propagates the importance of visualization of sense data in human development and in society as a whole. It also reminds us of the importance of educating the public and developing an audience about these phenomena. It defines the paradigm shift in visualization that has taken place in the last twenty years—the movement from text/print based communications systems to image, text, and sound-based electronic systems.

This volume could be termed an encyclopedia for visual culture in design, advertising, and architecture in the last two decades. It also notes the importance of art and design as carrier activities for much of the visual culture we are exposed to.

In the last century, the arts have become commodities that are continually increasing in importance. Film, imagery, and music are among our most profitable and expansive exports to world audiences. The products of our movie industry, American films, and their antecedents in TV and the recording industry are our second-largest export next to airplanes. These commodities are vehicles for defining visual culture to the world.

Art Education Out of Sync

What does this mean for the teaching of the visual arts? It’s obvious that the engine that drives the visual arts today is not the same as that of yesteryear. The reference point for the visual arts is now a world audience reached through print and electronic imagery. Visual culture plays a political, cultural, aesthetic, and social role within our daily lives. It effects such mundane decisions as what we buy at the grocery store to some of the most important decisions as to that of electing a president. The questions this poses for art education are: “Can we ignore and set aside today’s visual culture in our curriculum?” and “Is art education and the art curriculum in concert with what is happening in this new environment that Metropolis magazine has documented?”

My answer to these questions is that art education is like the malfunctioning movie machine of old where the images are “out of sync” with the soundtrack. It means that art education is out of sync with:

- the art world and what artists are doing today;
- how images are used and what they communicate;
- the way in which people use imaging and images to express themselves;
- the economic impact of the subject matter that we’re teaching; and
- the content that the Metropolis magazine is presenting to us, and the mass media that supplies the content for a world audience and defines the visual culture.

A New Role for Art Education

Visual culture, as I define it, is the visual intrusion that alters the natural order of our environment. It frames the question that faces us, that is, “Can the visual culture we have created enhance and complement the natural order or will it conflict, distort, and/or destroy the natural order?” Art education must work toward, and be about:

- establishing and promoting harmony and order between the natural and constructed environment;
- educating the public to be visually literate in a society that is dominated by visual imagery; and
- understanding that imagery has an impact on what we know.

Can art education play a role in this literacy movement? As art educators, we need to educate our population about the importance to visualization and understanding of visual culture. The traditional art object has been the primary reference for the art programs in our schools and universities. These objects are now overshadowed by the images.