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Learning the Rules? An Anthropological Approach to Art Education Practices

Morgan Perkins

- 1 Consider how art is learned. What cultural factors exist in the acquisition of skill and artistic knowledge? Are there rules of presentation and behavior that are learned? Art education may begin early in some lives, but the process can be constant. Through an approach that I believe is equally relevant to anthropology and art history, I will address these questions through a preliminary cross-cultural study of art education that examines the acquisition of knowledge through artistic forms. While I have been involved in detailed studies of this process in particular cultural settings, I have found an increasing number of common factors that have prompted this current cross-cultural approach; one that, on this occasion, includes artists working with Chinese, Iroquois, and Nigerian forms.
- 2 If one of the primary goals in the anthropological study of art is to attempt to understand the framework for the interpretation and use of objects from the perspective of the producing culture, it is logical then to begin by examining the role of education, the foundation from which those who produce these objects first learn the conventions of different art worlds. I view art education broadly to include both the process of learning techniques and meanings throughout life, as well as the use of art to educate the artist and the viewer. Art education may take place in a formal studio or classroom as well as through independent study, apprenticeships or family and community gatherings. Some artists may then become art educators in academic settings, some teach in their local communities, and all communicate their different forms of knowledge through art forms.
- 3 Just as the ideology of the museum has spread globally with often unforeseen consequences, it is also important to consider how a Western influence on art education has often influenced the evolution of contemporary art forms and practices in different cultures. This influence varies greatly, ranging from the wholesale

adoption of academic models, to the influence of individuals such as James Houston on Inuit art or Geoff Bardon on Aboriginal Australian acrylic painting. In some contexts, an approach that I have used involves fieldwork on the institutional structures and practices involved with art academies, and their impact on the work of particular artists. Academic training is perhaps too often considered by many, including artists themselves, to be a basic dividing line between those who should be defined as artists and those who should not. As Western models of academic art training have been adapted to different cultural contexts, it has been natural for this perceived division to become increasingly established on a global level. Analysis of the history and conventions of these institutions can begin to reveal the cultural processes that are involved in training the skills necessary to handle some materials and to express concepts or emotions through form. Comparison of such institutional training with other indigenous forms of art education that may take place in a community or family setting begins to bring us to deeper levels on which art education functions in the creation of cultural knowledge.

- 4 While my discussion of knowledge formation through education is situated in the realm of art, it may be useful to consider the broader analysis of education as occurring in, and reproducing, communities of practice as described by Jean Lave and Étienne Wenger in their theory of “legitimate peripheral participation.” In brief, this concept refers to the many forms of acculturation and social learning that occur beyond the context of the specific learning goals framed within any educational experience. The range of different cultural contexts within which learning takes place often involves a subtle process that has less to do with instruction than with lived experience—a distinction between “talking about a practice and talking within it.”
- 5 In an artistic context, education has a broad social role in orienting an artist to the conventions and social practices associated with a particular culture. In some systems those conventions may involve acquiring knowledge about religious meanings, or using an object in a ritual or as a guide in telling a story. In other contexts, the conventions of use and behavior may involve framing or photographing one’s work, submitting work to juried exhibitions, the attraction of a dealer or the quest for funding—the rituals of Western art practice so to speak.
- 6 In an international contemporary art world artists from different cultures are often categorized as contemporary or traditional based upon their ability to innovate rather than maintain cultural forms. Those who learn the conventions of the different art worlds within which they circulate, can adapt old and new forms to changing cultural circumstances. Yet the works of contemporary artists are often subjected to a system of categorization that reflects the institutional contexts within which their work will appear. While some may be destined for ethnographic museums others may appear in a growing number of international contemporary art biennial or triennial exhibitions. The desire or ability to appear in the latter generally requires a familiarity with both the art forms and the social conventions of an art world that is associated with historical conceptions of avant-garde art. The increasing cross-cultural use of the term avant-garde is itself a reflection of the transformation of indigenous systems of art education. Such usage may misinterpret the historical use of the term, and become differentially associated simply with the creation of new, innovative and challenging forms. Yet in some ways the challenges to the institutions of art from varied cultural systems present reinvigorate the old avant-garde challenge to the very institution that

is art. Academies in some cultures may provide forums that encourage such experimentation and the development of individual styles. Indeed those who have been trained as artists in academic settings remain the most prevalent exhibitors in international contemporary art venues. Transformation of the social role of art or experimentation with form and concept may favor the inclusion of some artists in these venues, but these changes may also obscure indigenous forms of innovation and, in some cases, threaten some restricted levels or social functions of objects.

Three cases

- 7 As we consider the spectrum between continuity and innovation as it relates to education in three cultural areas, the process of learning artistic forms plays a central role in the acquisition of cultural knowledge. The material I highlight in each area focuses upon different aspects of education, but in each case the issue of academic training is prevalent in relation to the acquisition of knowledge and the engagement with traditional and experimental forms.

Chinese

- 8 Much of my fieldwork on art education in China examines the art academy system, a primary setting where artists first orient themselves towards the styles and social practices of classical art forms or those originally associated with the Chinese avant-garde art movement. As has been the case in many parts of the world, a Western influence on art education has played a vital role in the evolution of contemporary art forms and practices in China. Lin Fengmian and Xu Beihong, two Chinese artists who studied in Paris during the 1920s, were strongly influenced by the French model as they helped to found what continue to be the two most influential and politicized art academies in China—the China Art Academy in Hangzhou, where I have done much of my research, and the Central Academy of Fine Art in Beijing. The adoption of Western teaching methods became common as artists experimented with the relationships between Chinese and Western art. These experiments have also come to influence ink painters who in the past would rarely paint landscapes out of doors, in part because their goals involved the creation of idealized images rather than reproduction of what the eye perceived. The imagery of Chinese landscape painting comes from a number of sources including memories of personal experiences and the centrally important practice of copying the works of the Masters as an instructional method.
- 9 For example, this contemporary image portrays a student in the Chinese ink painting department at the art academy in Hangzhou, learning his technique by producing a copy from one of the paintings in the academy collection, many of which are also copies. Such practice is common in ink painting, indeed the styles of many of the masters are only known through copies of their works that have survived, copies that have great value. In the literati tradition students would generally continue to copy for much of their lives; they would only attempt to create a personal style after decades of training. Yet the current length of study has been radically shortened in contemporary academies with students expected to produce creative works during their fourth year of study. Such an early effort would be rare in the past, but the current emphasis on

creativity is in part, the result of a foreign academic ideology influencing indigenous practice.

- 10 It is very important to also consider the fundamental impact that politics has played in Chinese art academies and on the forms of artistic knowledge that students develop. When Mao Zedong's declared that art must serve the masses, he formed an ideology of art that continues to resonate in the education system. Soviet art instructors invited to teach drawing methods, for example, had a profound influence on the already prevalent focus on drawing. During the Cultural Revolution, all art education ceased, as the socialist realist form became the standard. When the academies reopened following Mao's death in 1976, the long prohibition against both traditional and foreign art forms left the next generation of Chinese artists with a blank slate on which to learn. This resulted in a unique and often chaotic outpouring of artistic experimentation. In the 1980s, the academies played a central role in the development of the Chinese avant-garde art movement that intentionally borrowed the French term to define their attack against perceived orthodox forms and institutions of both a classical and political nature. While art academies continue to play a role in the state's efforts to influence the Chinese art world, the academies also act as a social and artistic training ground. They provide access to material on both classical Chinese and foreign art forms, for artists interested in emulating classical forms and practices, or those concerned with experimentation.
- 11 One art teacher recently commented that the academies reflect the divisions that exist in the Chinese art world as a whole as students learn how to behave. "It seems like so many students want to be like these early avant-garde artists. But now I think it is the young ink painters, the ones who are going back to the past ways who are really avant-garde, they are going against the mass. The two groups of students don't have that much to do with each other, interact in two different worlds" (fieldnotes, June 2006). Just as the different forms of art are learned, so too are the different conventions of social practice, including engagement with the complex Chinese system of exchange and social relations that will impact their practice as artists.
- 12 One of the most innovative artists to have emerged from the avant-garde movement and achieve an international reputation is Xu Bing. While his talent and academic training is evident in this drawing that was collected by the British Museum, the range of works that have gained the most recognition are complex critiques of art and language that, in the case of this installation and interactive performance piece called *Square Word Calligraphy*, provides a fascinating cross-cultural critique of art education practices. Having developed a complex system for combining Chinese and English, he has faithfully presented it using the specific methods through which calligraphy is taught; using models based on the handwriting of master calligraphers with the direction and composition of each brushstroke meticulously predetermined. Members of the exhibition audience are then invited to take part in this exercise on contemporary art education

Mohawk

- 13 Although the cultural specifics vary greatly, during several years spent working on projects with Iroquois artists, a number of related concerns have arisen regarding art education in both formal academic and community settings. The museum on the

Mohawk reservation of Akwesasne (Mohawks being one tribe in the Iroquois nation) has always encouraged both Mohawk and non-Mohawk participation in traditional art programs that include basketry, pottery, and beadwork classes. Although these classes help to preserve and spread knowledge of the forms, the classroom forum also takes the practice out of the family settings in which many people still work and where most of the materials were generally produced in the past. Over the years, several of my students, again both Mohawk and non-Mohawk, have worked as interns on a number of projects including one in which Mohawk children curated their own exhibition after conducting interviews with artists from different generations. This unique approach to exhibition design—from a child's perspective—was particularly revealing as a measure of the degree of knowledge that is actually being passed on to this newest generation. In its efforts to educate and promote wider understanding among members of the non-Native public, the Akwesasne museum, like many other tribal museums, represents an active line of control between those ideas and materials that can and should circulate beyond the community and the knowledge and material that should not. I have found myself in this educational continuum as I discover what I should learn and what I may not.

- 14 One particularly relevant project that we are developing uses art to present the Haudenosaunee, (or Iroquois) historical perspective on American history to non-Native teachers as they develop teaching materials. In the exhibition stage of the project, one piece by Katsitsionni Fox, called the *Education of the Haudenosaunee*, uses transformed school lockers as a particularly poignant critique of education and the loss of knowledge experienced in the Mohawk community during the colonial era. Among the seven lockers, representing the traditional philosophy of responsibility for the seven generations, the black and white lockers represent the interruption of culture before a degree of revitalization began. Inside the black locker is this despondent image of the artist's nephew in front of an image of one of the boarding schools where members of her own community had been sent as part of the widespread effort to use education, including instruction in the arts, to transform the native population.
- 15 Fox often experiences the impact of that loss now that she has committed to teach art full time at a school on the reservation. While many of the young students are familiar with a number of symbols from their traditional culture, the deeper meanings are often lost on them. She says,

I come from a cultural family, we go to ceremony and are involved with revitalization but most people don't know about their own culture and they are embarrassed that they can't teach their kids. So there's such a need for education in our own culture and I do it through art. I think that some of the kids are uncomfortable with learning these things and some are hungry for it, but some of them are just lost. I had a kid in my class who had the Hiawatha belt tattooed across his back and he had no idea what it meant (interview, May 2007).
- 16 Fox's experience with different education systems includes study at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe, where I have done some research and where several other artists from Akwesasne have studied. The Institute has become a particularly prominent center for the education of contemporary Native American artists with orientations ranging from the traditional to the experimental. It was founded in the early 1960s and both the faculty and students are native with very few exceptions. Fox reflected upon the different educational environment that she encountered there,

before then coming to study and later teach for a time in the same art department as myself. She remembers that,

When I was in school in Santa Fe everything I saw was native art. I met so many other native people and I really felt that there was a lot of meaning in the work that the kids were doing there. Then when I went to university in New York I just didn't see it; it seemed like student work was lacking meaning, that it was all about technique. I suppose in some ways those kids were expressing their culture through art, but it seemed so detached (interview, May 2007).

- 17 Through a number of interviews with Native teachers and students of art, this common concern has frequently emerged. In addition to being taught the techniques and skills for study or for producing art in different media, they are also having the rules and philosophies of contemporary Western art thrust upon them. Many of them struggle with expectations that they be more creative and experimental when they are more interested in working with traditional imagery. In examining the institutions of art education, it is important to recognize how such cultural conflicts arise both in philosophy and methodology.

Nigerian

- 18 My final example comes from collaboration with the Nigerian artist Obiora Udechukwu for a recent exhibition called *Bag of Wisdom* that examines art education in the formation of Igbo knowledge. The title is based upon a commonly known Igbo proverb: 'Wisdom is like a bag . . . [and all people carry their own].' This is used as a metaphor for his own artistic knowledge and experience. His work draws on a complex range of materials including traditional Igbo painting, masquerades, imagery of political oppression, and multiple forms of language, including his own poetry often combined with imagery. He remains a leading member of a group of artists known as the Nsukka school, drawn together by their common experimentation with the female Igbo art form known as Uli and to a lesser extent the male form known as Nsibidi. Women would traditionally teach Uli to their daughters and they were often commissioned to paint the walls of shrines and draw on bodies during festivals. Uli is an endangered tradition for a number of reasons while Nsibidi remains more commonly used as a symbolic form associated with male secret societies. A number of different Igbo art forms were dictated by gender in the past, but the gender boundary has shifted over time so contemporary artists now experiment with a wide range of traditional forms.
- 19 The relationships between education and the formation of artistic knowledge come into play on a number of levels in this context. Central to the formation of Obiora Udechukwu's own artistic knowledge is the academic training that he received in art at the University of Nigeria at Nsukka. The art program was modeled on an American art curriculum, and Udechukwu's training has oriented him towards the institutions of international art practice with which he continually engages by exhibiting, curating, and teaching. His experimentation with traditional forms is not generally intended for viewing by the same audiences as would view the shrine or body paintings. While much of the traditional content of his work draws upon his own cultural knowledge, the process of learning the techniques and meanings associated with Uli has required extensive research and fieldwork. His experience differs from that of Uche Okeke, the founder of the Nsukka School, who learned Uli directly from his mother. Since the gender boundary had already begun to shift in the 1960s, Okeke's interest in using Uli

became an acceptable and central component in the creation of work by himself and the other Nsukka artists interested in an approach termed “natural synthesis” that combined Western techniques and media with traditional or current Nigerian experiences (interview with Udechukwu, March 2007).

- 20 Udechukwu’s process of learning and teaching about Uli has several components that highlight the relationship between social practice, knowledge formation, and art education as an ongoing process. While he learned the aesthetics of form in Uli, and the range of meanings for particular symbols—such as the kola nut and the spiral— he was also learning the social contexts of Uli practice, linking all of these with his own existing cultural knowledge. In some cases his imagery draws on the specific meanings of an Uli motif or a masquerade or proverb, yet the experimentation with this material or its use as pure form in some contexts, draws upon his more academic training in its experimental and conceptual framework. Understanding the learning processes involved in this fluid migration between different art forms and practices as well as the fusion of that material based upon the contents of one person’s particular bag of wisdom, so to speak, makes efforts to categorize particular forms and practices seem rather superfluous.
- 21 Yet the preservation of traditional forms of knowledge figures prominently in several aspects of Udechukwu’s work and one particular project is closely tied to interests that I have with indigenous methods of education. In the past, Igbo women in certain communities would repaint traditional shrines with Uli designs on a yearly basis, but the practice has begun to fade, threatening the continuity of traditional knowledge. In 2003 Udechukwu and other artists commissioned several women to repaint the walls of the shrine in Nri, Nigeria, and to educate a younger generation in the techniques and meanings associated with the paintings. While several elders watched as guides and critics, five younger women worked together on sections of the mural, laying out the main motifs and drawing details with sticks and their fingers. When the mural was done the women performed a traditional ceremony to celebrate their work and maintain a degree of continuity with past practice. As we discussed the creation of the mural for our exhibition, Udechukwu saw his piece as closely connected to these wall paintings and said that in the most sophisticated sense, “these paintings are forms of conceptual installation art; the women are really contemporary artists” (interview with Udechukwu, March 2007). While the different forms of education that he has received have profoundly influenced his own art, his work with communities and as a teacher himself places him in a very influential position as education about art forms in Nigeria changes.

Conclusion: Directions for anthropology and art history

- 22 Through this diverse range of cultures and activities a preliminary picture begins to emerge of the fundamental role of education in the formation of different forms of artistic knowledge and practice. As the foundations for artistic practice develop, a supple and complex relationship is formed between the styles and conventions of the different art worlds within which the individual may circulate. Categories of traditional and contemporary become increasingly obscure as members of each generation acquire

forms of cultural knowledge through art and learn the conventions of behavior associated with their art worlds.

- 23 To further understand this process, we can conduct detailed studies of specific education systems that range from the institutional frameworks to the social settings in which instruction in art forms is often combined with ritual. We can examine how talent is considered or what impact the personality of the instructor plays; consider how language is used to teach, and what words, tones and expressions emerge. Is there instruction in detailed reproduction of forms or is there encouragement to be creative? There are questions along these and countless other trajectories that warrant further study.
- 24 Effective anthropological fieldwork on these contemporary art education systems also necessitates extensive use of art historical methods and records. Documentation of the founding and development of art academies, and accounts of personal experiences in those institutions frames fieldwork and oral testimonies in a more complete context.
- 25 In each cultural system, the study of education can provide insight into the process through which artists gain an understanding of their own art historical traditions and orient their work in relation to that understanding. The art historical record may itself function as a model for contemporary forms, and the perceived authority of that documented history may challenge the authority of received knowledge or have a significant impact on the production of new art. Only a combination of anthropological and art historical studies of art education will provide broad insight into the relative degree of continuity and transformation in education methods. Such examination of systems of education can help to reveal the foundations for the complex mixture of individual and cultural forms that constitute the contemporary global art world.

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RÉSUMÉS

Consider how art is learned. Are there rules of presentation and behavior that are learned as skills and techniques are acquired? As a preliminary anthropological study of art education, this paper examines the acquisition of knowledge through artistic forms. It takes a cross-cultural approach to contemporary art education that includes artists working with Chinese, Mohawk and Nigerian forms. On one level, education involves training in the skills necessary to handle materials and express concepts or emotions through form. On another level, art education has a broad socializing role that orients an artist to the conventions and social practices associated with a particular culture. In an international contemporary art world where artists from different cultures are often categorized as contemporary or traditional based upon their ability to innovate rather than maintain cultural forms, such an examination of the foundations of artistic knowledge is essential. Varied conceptions of avant-garde art have come to influence the education process. The increasing cross-cultural use of the term avant-garde is itself a reflection of the transformation of indigenous systems of art education. A combination of anthropological and art historical studies of art education can provide broad insight into the relative degree of continuity and transformation in education systems in a global context. Examination of these systems reveals the complex mixture of individual and cultural forms that constitute the contemporary global sphere of art production.

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