Exploring citizenship through contemporary art

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Abstract: The paper does not dwell on old paintings or the sculptures in museums, or on aesthetic contemplation, to appreciate, rather, the beauty in and of itself, by addressing the issue of how art can "inform" the debates about the identity of art and civic education in schools. With a specific attention paid to the aspects of teaching, the paper carefully examines art education in its social dimension, as part of a research and development on a large scale, making reference to a curriculum on “Images and Identity: Improving citizenship Education through digital Art”.

Riassunto: Il saggio pone l’accento sulla bellezza in sé e per sé, affrontando il tema di come le opere d’arte possano “informare” i dibattiti sull’identità dell’arte e la formazione civica nelle scuole. Con un’attenzione specifica rivolta anche agli aspetti didattici, il saggio approda, poi, a un’attenta disamina dell’educazione artistica nella sua dimensione sociale, nell’ambito di un progetto di ricerca e sviluppo, su larga scala, di un curriculum denominato “Immagini e identità: migliorare l’educazione alla cittadinanza attraverso l’arte digitale (I&I)”.

Keywords: Citizenship, Contemporary art, Curriculum.

1. Introduction

Whereas this paper IS about art it is NOT about old master paintings and sculptures in museums. Nor is it about aesthetic contemplation and appreciating beauty per se. True it features contemporary artworks that have collector credentials but the focus is on how these might inform discussions about identity in art and civic lessons in schools. The contrast with the topic outline for this monograph is striking therefore. But from an educational perspective the focus on art that engages with contemporary social issues reflects the way art teachers in many European countries encourage children to engage with and respond to artworks at the present time.
Context

The context is a large-scale research and curriculum development project called *Images and identity: Improving citizenship education through digital art* (I&I). The project will not be detailed here since information can easily be accessed on line at http://www.image-identity.eu/. Briefly, it was funded by the European Commission (EC), involved six member states and lasted from 2009-2011. Art educators working in universities and schools in Germany, the Czech Republic, Malta, Ireland, Portugal and the United Kingdom collaborated with Citizenship educators on planning and teaching interdisciplinary lessons organised around the theme of citizen identity, resulting in the production of cross-national teacher education materials.

Method of curriculum development

The approach adopted to curriculum development was to involve national teams in each country in school based action research in secondary and primary schools. They experimented with integrating citizenship education content, resources and methods into art lessons organised around the theme of identity. The first step was to survey existing educational resources for Citizenship and collect relevant images of work by contemporary artists. After which they developed strategies for engaging school children in critical reflection and discussion of them and in art making as a means to representing and constructing their personal and group identifications within the context of Europe. The end product was teacher education materials consisting of:

- A rationale.
- Teacher guidelines.
- Case studies of classroom practice.
- An image bank, of work by contemporary artists and images children have selected and created.
- Instructional materials (16 schemes of work with over 80 lesson plans).
- Supplementary resources.
2. The curriculum theme

Identity is widely debated in postmodern societies and theorized in diverse ways. Psychologists most commonly use the term to refer to personal identity, understood as the idiosyncratic things that make a person unique. Sociologists focus on social identity, understood as the individual's self-concept derived from perceived membership of a social group/s (Hogg, Vaughan, 2002). Apart from the level of self, individuals are widely understood to have multiple social identities and different social contexts can trigger us to think, feel and act on the basis of, for example, a family, ethnic or national level of self (Turner, 1985). Citizen identity is an even more complex construct. Whereas it is typically defined in national terms, a range of factors influences it: for example it could refer to a legal status and to how people define themselves both as individuals and with a broader collective identity (Falk, 2002). The EC’s requirement that the project promote European citizen identity was extremely challenging given that the notion of the EU as a supra national community is widely perceived as a myth (Kerr et al., 2009). Because it is difficult to state emphatically that citizenship embodies either a personal or national identity, the project elected to encourage school children to question, express and share their own understandings of their personal and group identities within the context of Europe.

Identity is a recurring theme in both Civics and Art curricula but interpreted differently. Art teachers typically value art making as a means for exploring experimenting with and communicating personal feelings and ideas (Mason, Richardson, Collins, 2013). Citizenship teachers prioritize civic identity understood as the legal and political status of citizens within democratic societies and rights and responsibilities of various kinds (Huddleston, 2007). The citizenship educators participating in this project understood the way art educators engage with identity as overly subjective and autobiographical. On the other hand their own discipline has been widely criticized for delivering political and civic knowledge in a manner that is factual, boring, and dry (Cogan, Derricott, 2000, 3). The hypothesis underpinning the curriculum experiments was that Civics and Art teachers could learn from each other.
3. The artworks

Contemporary art was chosen as a stimulus because identity is a central theme for many artists today who searching for, define and question what it means. (For example, the individuality of people in an anonymous crowd, what lies behind a name, relationships between physical manifestations and ideas of self). The project compiled an image bank of contemporary artworks with potential to motivate relevant lesson ideas. Contemporary art is an experimental symbolic field characterized by creating open situations in which new forms of signs and symbolic meanings are bought to light. Moreover it is absent from most school curricula. In hindsight it turned out be a very good analogy for the complex debates about identity that are ongoing today. Indeed various strategies and theoretical frameworks of contemporary art correspond directly how it is examined in social science theory and research. As the following brief discussion of some images in the project data bank shows, it offers complex, multi-layered interpretations of identity that can be utilized to interrogate it in diverse ways.

Antony Gormley’s Field Sculptures, consisting of 40,000 anonymous terracotta figures with small holes for eyes, poses the fundamental question, ‘Who am I?’ Gillian Wearing’s videos and photographs, for which she uses masks and silicon prosthetics to conceal her subjects’ identities, are useful for stimulating discussion about physical appearance, identity and self-image. (They could also be used to explore public expectations, peer pressure and culturally imposed standards of beauty). Dutch artist Rene Dijsktra’s photographs of adolescents attending nightclubs in the UK represent them as anonymous, vulnerable individuals. They can be used to explore the crisis of identity that takes place at this critical life stage (Coté, Levine, 2002). The Portuguese artist Rui Noronha’s photographic portraits of circus people depicting them as a social group set apart from mainstream society, offer possibilities for exploring intergroup conflict and the role in-group and out-group self definitions play in identity formation.

Many contemporary artworks challenge commonsense assumptions about identity, gender, ethnicity and race. Some examples, explored in a previous paper (Mason, Vella, 2013), are Valie Export’s early guerrilla performances; Yinka Shonibare’s photographic series entitled Victorian Dandy and Sylvia Sleigh’s paintings of nude males. According to Phinney (1996), ethnic identification refers to an individual’s sense of belonging to a par-
Figure 1: Chris Saint Fournier Tourists (2007). Photograph.
p ticular ethnic or racial group – usually the one in which they claim heritage. The phrase ‘identity politics’ is frequently used to signify a range of artistic activities and discourse rooted in the experiences of oppression and injustice shared by members of marginalised ethnic or racial groups. Whereas some artists simply explore ways of understanding a particular group’s distinctiveness, others are more confrontational. Their work draws on critical theory to actively engage with the politics of difference by challenging gender and racial stereotypes and/or seeking out strategies with which to destabilize confining representations of self.

The focus of lessons about citizen identity in most EU member states is national (Ross, 2003). Saunders (2009, 9-11) suggests that an individual’s national identity has a collective component that refers to so-called national characteristics and traits, and another that refers to an individual’s sense of self as a national (i.e. as German French, Maltese or Dutch). The feeling of national identity is not an inborn trait but is shared with a group of people regardless of citizenship status and as a direct result of the presence of common points of reference in daily life. Artworks such as Chris Saint Fournier’s photograph Tourists, (date) deliberately set out to question these shared feelings of national identifications. In this instance, it is the fair skinned complexions of the Maltese couple the photograph depicts (who are in fact nationals) that conflicts with the stereotype Maltese citizens hold of a physical norm.

Baljit Balrow’s artworks are more overtly political. Her series of Self-portraits (1998) representing her British-Asian cultural identities is helpful for facilitating discussion of hybridity and the significant changes taking place in the traditional project of nationalism across Europe. Generally speaking school children find political constructs like ‘the State’, ‘democracy’, ‘citizenship’ and ‘government’ difficult to comprehend. But project team members in Germany used De Bevolkerung (1998), Hans Haacke’s controversial installation in the German Parliament building, effectively to engage secondary school students critically with the concept of national identity and consider how civic, political, and personal identity sometimes collide.

European identity is a contested concept, even though the Council of Europe has promoted it for over three decades (Osler, 2011). Entropa, the massive sculpture Czech artist David Cerny created for the European Council headquarters in Brussels in 2009 exemplifies this scepticism about European citizen identity. (The member states found it so insulting it had
to be removed). A more positive response to the EU initiative would be to consider the work of socially activist artists who promote shared humanitarian values enshrined in the European constitution. Examples discussed in the paper mentioned previously include Mark Wallinger’s State Britain (2006), a recreation of a peace campaigners protest; Towards a Promised Land (2005), Wendy Ewald’s interactive photography project aimed at empowering disenfranchised migrant children in Britain; and the site specific actions of contemporary Situationist artists in the Czech Republic intended to activate local groups to effect their own forms of social change.

4. Examples of schemes of work

This last section of this paper summarises three schemes of work developed by project team members in schools. In the first, Michael de Brito’s oil paintings provided a stimulus for Portuguese middle school students to consider identity formation within the family. In the second, at-risk students in Ireland explored their national and European identifications whilst comparing tourist postcards and Seán Hillan’s photomontages. In the third example, students at a German Gymnasium engaged with the concept of citizen identity stimulated (at least in part) by consideration of political posters, together with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This part of the text draws directly on case studies written by the teachers concerned and a critical analysis of the project schemes by Collins and Ogier (in Mason, Buschkühle, 2013).

5. Family and Citizenship

Michael De Brito is a contemporary realist painter, whose parents migrated from Portugal to New York. European masters like Rembrandt, Manet and Velázquez influence his large oil paintings. Their subject matter is moments of everyday life, especially kitchen scenes, in which his family and guests sit around a table sharing conversation, food and drink. The Portuguese national team used them to encourage students, aged 10-11, to reflect on the changing nature of family as an agent of socialization and how this influences citizen identity. (One reason the paintings are relevant for this theme is that children can compare what they see in them with
Figure 2: Michael de Brito: *Dinner Guests* (2007). Oil on canvas.
their own family backgrounds. In so doing they may discover aspects of family life they can and cannot associate with). The teachers concerned drew on postmodern critiques that problematize mythical and stereotypical representations of childhood and family relations to challenge the students internalised conceptions of normal family life and awareness of multiple viewpoints. Moura and Sá’s case study (in 2013) explains how this scheme unfolded.

Figure 3: Puppets created by students at Escola EB 1, 2 & 3, Viana Do Castelo.

Family was selected as a topic with the aim of advancing education for citizenship and learner awareness of «the fundamental values of cooperation, solidarity and respect for others» (Idem, 180). Patrimony and family values are deeply embedded in societal structure in Northern Portugal and initial discussions suggested the students held ethnocentric
and “stereotypical perceptions of identity” (Idem, 183). Engaging with de Brito’s paintings greatly facilitated discussion of their preconceptions and development of their “critical thinking skills” (Idem, 183). De Brito’s images of his Portuguese family in the Diaspora stimulated enquiry-based conversations in which, the students exchanged stories of their own family lives, customs and traditions. Sharing these experiences and ideas, alongside exploring the artworks, enabled them to come to terms with the idea that family is not the same for everyone. Consideration of a broader concept of family was enhanced through the practical activity of making puppets representing family members. In the process of creating the puppets they were encouraged to reflect on their changing perceptions of family and challenge stereotypical views of how it is experienced. In the final activity they photographed the puppets and created picture postcards from them using digital media for the first time.

6. Greetings from Europe

Postcards featured centrally in the second scheme developed at a Special Education Centre in Ireland that engaged with ways in which space and place are intrinsic to our being in the world. As Holt-Jensen (1999, 216-27) and Knox & Marston (2004, 505) point out, dominant images of landscape frequently function as icons of national identity and quite specific vistas sometimes turn into deifications of a ‘national landscape’ conjuring up ideas of distinctive national pasts. In the mid 1990s the Irish artist Sean Hillen produced a body of elaborate paper collages known collectively as Irelantis, from fragments of postcards and other found materials, depicting seemingly impossible landscapes that challenge stereotypical Irish representations of place.
Tourist postcards often transmit idyllic or picturesque impressions of real places that represent what tourists ‘should’ rather than actually do see. Hillen accentuated their myth-making qualities by adding images of edifices that appeared to have gone astray in a land to which they do not belong. For example, in his *Great Pyramids of Carlingford Loch* (1994), three
Egyptian pyramids rise up out of lush green Irish landscape. In this scheme students aged between 13-16 studied tourist postcards and compared them with Hillan's artworks. In her case study report, Keogh (2013) summarised what happened as follows.

Throughout this scheme classroom discussion focused on national identity and on diversity and interdependence across Europe. The brief the students were given was to «create an innovative greetings postcard that incorporated image and text and represented their own perceptions of contemporary European culture» (Idem, 205). Initially they rejected the idea that postcards are a relevant form of communication and a visit to a local tourist shop was arranged. Keogh reports that they were shocked by the images of Irishness the postcards portrayed, accusing them of failing to reflect present day Ireland or the views of their age group. «A great discussion of Irish identity and stereotypes» followed as a result (Ivi, 207). The lessons in which they considered national identity, diversity and interdependence within EU countries were less successful because the students’ knowledge of Europe was very limited and they had to undertake a lot of research. After this, the group collected images from the Internet and magazines that «looked Irish or European» (Idem, 208), and each student made a selection from this pool to incorporate into a composition for a greetings postcard. Their final task was to employ digital photomontage techniques to create an image of «new, strange place in Europe they would like to visit themselves to send to a named recipient» (Idem, 209).
7. Freedom and Identity

This scheme of work was developed in a Benedictine school in Germany with students aged 14-15 years. As Collins and Ogier (2013) point out, it demonstrates the educational strengths of combining discussion and image-based learning very well. In his case study Buschkühle (2013, 255) informs us that the students comfortable home backgrounds and disinterest
in politics was a significant factor influencing the strategy he developed to extend their perceptions of identity and engage them with political themes. The first task was to photograph themselves out of school and although the resulting self-portraits were of “an astonishingly high quality” (Ivi, 255) they revealed limited socialization with other cultural groups. Next, he showed them historical posters of youngsters involved in the Hitler Youth and Young Pioneers movements “as a way of confronting the unknown?” (Ivi, 259). Comparison of these images with the students’ photographic self-portraits stimulated intense discussion about what it means to be free in the context of European society today. Questioning images and challenging the students’ ideas stimulated some rich discourse about European identity. Whereas the students existing knowledge provided the starting point it was the questioning and whole-class discussions of unfamiliar images and ideas that moved their thinking forward. One such dialogue centered on the meaning of these words from the first Article of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in the spirit of brotherhood (1948).

The concepts of ‘freedom and dignity’ were explored further during a discussion of a poster by Urs Grünig that featured in an Amnesty International campaign. The students’ initial understanding of this image of a woman’s face with red tape over her mouth and eyes was naïve, but through careful, supportive questioning, they began to grasp its metaphorical meaning. The students’ final task in this scheme was to create their own posters representing freedom and dignity digitally in the computer room.

8. Discussion/Findings

This paper is primarily descriptive. However it will end with some evaluative comments on strengths and weaknesses of the project and the interdisciplinary curriculum approach.

The project proposal submitted to the EC argued that art education has potential to improve citizenship teaching on two counts: (i) art teachers use art criticism to help learners interpret the messages conveyed by visual im-
ages in the environment that strongly influence identity formation; (ii) in art making they encourage learners to express their own ideas about themselves and the world. Broadly speaking the citizenship educators participating in the project concluded that these art based learning strategies had achieved some positive results; and that they had successfully countered the criticism that their school subject is demotivating and dull. However they expressed concern about the emphasis on personal and/or individual identity in the majority of schemes of work and the paucity of political, civic and legal curriculum content.

For Gearon (2013) the project outcomes show only limited consciousness of citizenship issues and concepts and that art educators do not possess the necessary critical tools to interrogate them in depth. He argues for a more nuanced aesthetic theory also that necessitates reflection, by both art and citizenship teachers, about «what art, as well as political consciousness, is for». Whereas I am sympathetic to this criticism, the history of Art Education is marked by multiple, conflicting instrumentalist justifications for the school subject, and reconstructivism is the one that is fashionable now. As Siegesmund (1998) points out, «reconstructivists are openly dubious of the value of classical theories of aesthetic appreciation. They believe art education has a special role and responsibility to go beyond the reproduction or reinventions of existing society and serve as an active agent for social change» (Ivi, 203). As such, art education programs should help students to critically analyze the societal systems that place aesthetic value on objects and seek to achieve critical awareness of artworks rather than appreciation. Ultimately, of course, this rationale shifts the balance away from art as a subject in and of itself. Moreover in the present educational climate, essentialist rationales are unlikely to interest project funders who are cautious about supporting ‘art for arts sake’. However I suspect interest in justifications based in theories of art and beauty may be on the rise. I am supervising a doctoral student right now, who is investigating children’s experiences of beauty, using their digital photographs as a stimulus.

Notes

1 For a fuller discussion of these artworks see Mason, R., Vella, R. (2013), Lessons about Identity from Contemporary Art. For copyright reasons it is not possible to reproduce images of these artworks here and readers are recommended to refer to the individual artist’s websites.
2 Yinka Shonibare’s *Diary of a Victorian Dandy* for example, inverts the traditional status of black people in the history of European art by depicting himself as an aristocratic ‘gentleman’ surrounded by white servants.

3 The words *De Bevölkerung*, lit up as neon signs in Haacke’s installation, re-worked and contested an earlier expression of German national sentiment carved into the portal of the original building in 1916.

4 Mark Wallinger’s *State Britain* (2006) is a faithful replication of a peace camp Brian Haw set up outside the British Parliament in June 2001 as a protest against economic sanctions in Iraq. In 2006, following the passing by Parliament of an act prohibiting unauthorized demonstrations within a one-kilometre radius of Parliament Square the majority of his protest was removed. Wendy Ewald’s photographs of refugee children in Margate from the project *Promised Land* are political in the sense that they raise questions about UK policies for asylum seekers. Situationist artists like Katerina Šedá stress the importance of human freedom without political and economic boundaries. Their artistic projects resemble social experiments and are staged interventions in everyday life that involve active collaboration with local people.

5 For full accounts of all three schemes, see the case studies by Moura and Sá, Keogh and Buschkühle, published on the project website.

6 Adhering to postmodern theory implies recognition and acceptance of children’s voices in determining their own world-views. It places children’s expectations and the concept of childhood itself in conflict with many established institutions such as the traditional family or the authoritarian school. This view is accompanied also by a new vision of children’s rights apart from and even in opposition to their parents. See *Theories of Childhood*. http://www.faqs.org/childhood/So-Th/Theories-of-Childhood.html. Accessed 01/02/14.

Author’s presentation:

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