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Engaging Visual Culture

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To teachers and learners willing to engage seriously with the visual culture meanings vital to fostering social justice in a democratic society
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Introduction

“[Visual culture] exists within networks of culturally learned meanings and power relations that surround the production and consumption of images.”

—Art educator Nancy Pauly

We enter a public building or a friend’s home, or visit a Web site. We drive by billboards, past store signage, through upscale and architecturally designed communities or through patchwork neighborhoods of mass-designed and -produced structures. We wait in a doctor’s or dentist’s office, viewing the art on the walls or browsing through the magazines. We might feel superior, belittled, comfortable, or awkward without naming the response or really thinking about the surroundings. These visual events are not just the neutral background of our lives—they have meaning and we absorb these events as knowledge because of that meaning.

Images as Cultural Meaning Systems

In her teens, a young woman might flip through hundreds of magazines and sit through endless hours of films, television programs, and commercials. She is immersed in a visual culture. The women whose images she sees there are predominantly young and extremely thin with flawless skin, perfect hair, and designer clothing, no matter their socioeconomic status. The meaning is clear. This image of womanhood is normal. By its very pervasiveness, it suggests a standard against which all women are measured. This meaning becomes knowledge. If a woman does not measure up to these standards, she is flawed. Similarly, young men are presented with images of maleness that suggest physical power—a dominant, take-charge attitude with overtones of violence. For children, youths, and adults, the process of internalizing meaning from images is the same. While the visual events are temporal, the meanings endure.

Meanings derived from images are built on both past and current interpretations of images. For example, why does the cowboy archetype continue as a cultural mythology? Because the meanings associated with those images—power, assertiveness, and violence as the solutions to conflict—still persist as a shared cultural consciousness.

Meanings absorbed from images are part of the present, since they refer to what we know at this moment. Ubiquitous in many homes are images from television news coverage. The news reports are secondary and often interpret the journalists’ photographs in only one way, planting the seeds for how we are to see news images.

Further, meanings we make from visual information are foundational to future understandings. Images that communicate their very identity to young people today impact who and what they will become as adults.

Why a Visual Culture Approach

Because of this disconnect between reality and the world portrayed through visual culture, we need to examine critically the formation of meaning and knowledge from images. As teachers whose work contributes to maintaining our democratic society, we hope to guide young people toward a respect for social and political equity for themselves and others. Teaching about visual culture can be an important avenue for encouraging this respect.

We must first recognize that this visual knowledge, absorbed as assumed truths, can bestow privilege on some people while oppressing or limiting the potential of others. If in doubt, we need only ask who is left out of the pervasive flow of images flitting across our perception day after day. The elderly? The poor?
The differently-abled? If we take note of the images seen in a day, it becomes clear how limited the representations are of people and their sexual identities, ages, occupations, race, and ethnicities.

Active examination of the meanings of visual culture that surround us can point to ways in which many differences can coexist peacefully. If we ask a class of young people to choose “the best” from a set of objects or images, we can immediately experience and demonstrate an in-the-moment case of difference. If we then ask them to defend their choices, sets of shared principles will emerge across the group. Four different students will likely choose very different images. Perhaps they will each express a liking for different colors. At this point, we can show that, even in their expression of difference, they share something—a liking for color. Beginning with such a simple demonstration, lesson after lesson, shows the complex elements not only of how we read and interpret the visual that make us different, but also of what we share.

**Expose, Explode, Empower**

This book is intended to provide guiding principles and hands-on strategies for helping learners to interpret and build meanings from the pervasive flow of visual imagery in our world. Through a series of explorations that inform and diversify visual interpretation, we “expose” learners to a variety of ways of thinking critically about visual culture and how its meanings impact their lives. As learners will see, these include the hidden assumptions that influence how we see the world. Next, through a series of explorations that inform and focus visual interpretation, we “explode” passive acceptance of expert authoritative knowledge, arguing instead for an awareness of how mind-sets and symbols influence individual thought.

Finally, we provide strategies to “empower” students to participate in the construction of meaning—through re-envisionings and re-creations—of the visual culture that pervades their lives. Empowerment also involves strategies for students to create new possibilities, new visions that are not yet recognized or readily apparent in their visual culture.

Before a society can change its behaviors, beliefs must evolve through a self-reflective process. Looking at and articulating beliefs about the visual images that surround them can help students to develop explicit processes for thinking through beliefs and the behaviors that rise from those beliefs. The possible objects of such reflection are endless—a controversial work of local public art, a handmade object from an unfamiliar culture, a provocative Web site.

We believe that the key to unlocking a door to thoughtful interpretation of visual communication is process, hands-on, and immediate. We believe in teaching through modeling. For example, in order to model our belief in experiential learning, we encourage teachers to use the activities presented in this book to better understand, through doing, the significance of learning from an application of this teaching approach to visual culture. Through active processing, we can uncover beliefs that fuel behavior and ultimately foster change.

Individual self-reflective transformation precedes societal change. The first step toward this transformation is to identify and articulate deeply held beliefs. The strategies in this book provide ways to identify assumptions that inform how we see and make meaning of the world, construct knowledge from that meaning, and act on that knowledge.

**What Do We Mean by Visual Culture?**

Visual culture is the place where visual objects meet their cultural contexts. Visual culture study is the
pursuit of the meaning of imagery that includes fine art, folk art, mass media, design, popular culture, architecture, and other constructed categories of visual phenomena in the everyday life of diverse societies. The significance of visual culture for art education rests not so much in the object or image but in the processes or practices used to investigate how images are situated in social contexts of power and privilege.

**A Social Theory Approach**

Which images are relevant to study, and how we approach the study of images, are ongoing issues for art educators. A social theory approach to the study of art as visual culture has been present in art education literature since 1980, with the first volume of the *Journal of Social Theory in Art Education.* A social theory perspective toward art education holds that art communicates cultural values and beliefs and that the study of art involves investigation into the social values that inform the work. Further, from such an approach, the nature of art is questioned and expanded to include diverse cultural narratives of the imagery that is privileged in societies. The meaning of an image cannot be extracted from its context and measured as if it might mean the same as a similar image in another context.

Visual literacy is possible when symbols (visual, verbal, or kinesthetic—gestures with shared and individual meanings), the maker's sociocultural world, and the viewer's sociocultural world are woven together through understanding the context of the three complex networks of production, display, and consumption of visual culture. A context can be described to some extent, but it is as much, or more, a construction of the individual who is recording the description. To best understand ourselves and others, it is necessary to consider the threads of individual

“texts”—that is, our perceptions of the texts and images we see—and how they are experienced.*

**Our Approach to Activity-Based Learning**

First, at the core of our teaching, we believe that complex, visually based concepts are best taught through engagement in carefully crafted activities that require learners to physically “act out” the concepts, creating a firsthand experience of the idea, followed by dialogue, reflection, and internalization. This is by no means a new approach but builds on the theories of early-twentieth-century educator John Dewey and other proponents of experientially oriented teaching.³

We also believe that, in a participatory democracy, agency involves active creation of the meanings of visual culture. Those who make communicative images generate dialogue that drives context-specific visual meanings.

**The Activities in This Book**

Fueled by these beliefs, many years of collaborative teaching have gone into developing the core activities in this book. We have designed, tried, revised, and used the visual culture “lessons” in this book many times with children and students of all ages. With careful attention to developmentally appropriate adjustment, primary, intermediate, and secondary

*Discussion of a visual culture approach in art education has been ongoing at the National Art Education Association conventions since 2002, and it was the theme of three art education journals in the spring of 2003 (*Studies in Art Education*, *Art Education*, and *Visual Arts Research*). While visual culture studies have taken many different emphases, with various terms promoted to describe these differences (e.g., mass culture, material culture, and popular culture), the premise of this book is critical social theory and experiential-based pedagogy. (Appendix A provides a bibliography for a social theory approach to visual art and to other forms of visual culture practiced by art educators.)
school learners, college freshmen, preservice and in-service teachers, administrators, and university colleagues have engaged in these activities. For example, in classrooms, workshops, and conference presentations, we have used the Draw a Chair exercise (Chapter 1) to guide participants—including a group of six hundred freshman engineers, small and large groups of parents, and classes of elementary-aged students—to actively understand aspects of their own and others’ visual information processing style, which affects how visual messages are read. The Art, Not Art activity (Chapter 2) has been used effectively with both children and adults to help them understand the complex sets of art ideas that contribute to how they view, judge, and value visual culture.

**The Intervisual Process**

A premise of this book is that interpretation of visual information is directly affected by what we know, how we know it, and by the physical, psychological, and sociocultural surroundings in which we encounter images. To address this, we introduce a teaching strategy for interpreting visual culture that we call the “Intervisual Process” (Chapter 3). When successfully implemented, this process reveals the influence of various contexts of images, their viewers, and their makers.

We choose not to highlight famous artworks but rather to guide the viewer to seek meaning in visual phenomena that exist both inside and outside institutional definitions of art. Using a thematic approach, this book guides art educators to facilitate exploration of a rich variety of visual imagery that includes fine arts, public and folk arts, film, video, and digital media. Furthermore, we attempt to challenge canonical thinking not only in what we say but in the way we say it. A declarative, didactic approach may challenge canonical thinking with words but not by example.

**How This Book Is Organized**

The book is divided into nine chapters, each titled to evoke the broadest central concept supporting the chapter content. Each chapter is further divided into five sections. The first three sections introduce the chapter’s key concept through activities that expose, explode, and empower. The fourth section, “Reflect,” provides questions to critique the theory that underlies the chapter’s concepts. The fifth and final section of each chapter, “Catalyst,” provides practical classroom and age-level appropriate strategies, as well as suggestions for how to teach for student engagement and principles for curriculum development.

Chapter 1, “Beliefs,” shows how a simple drawing can tell volumes about individual and shared beliefs. Participants in a categorization activity explode underlying assumptions about how people organize visual information as it relates to diverse mind-sets. Finally, students are empowered through an activity in which they create personal symbols that communicate their sense of identity.

Like a drawing, a simple physical act can reveal a great deal about one’s operating definition of art. The activities in Chapter 2, “Definitions,” reveal the multiple approaches to art that in turn can inform viewers’ attitudes and biases.

Chapter 3, “Processes,” introduces our Intervisual Process, used here for constructing meaning from public artworks. Starting with a specific activity involving a real work of public art that exists in a specific place, we provide strategies for extending the process to any work in any context.

In order to uncover sources of art attitudes and beliefs as well as patterns of visual thinking, Chapter 4, “Origins,” provides strategies to reflect on childhood art experience and to consider how that experience can be reshaped in images. Theories of visual language development (notably that of Piaget)
indicate ways to understand how children’s environments influence their visual thinking.

An exploration of symbolic visual codes exposes conceptions of self that are largely derived from shared understandings. These understandings draw on portrayals of the social groups with whom we identify. In Chapter 5, “Codes,” we suggest ways to layer still life painting and drawing lessons with visual culture explorations. The strategies help to build a visual vocabulary that integrates technical art terms, art history terms, and visual culture codes.

“Power”—commonly assumed to be synonymous with domination, authority, and control—is the subject of Chapter 6. Here, we provide strategies to expose deep-seated understandings of power, to explode notions of power that affect how we interpret images, and to create images for transformative and collective power.

Juxtapositions, use of empty space, overlays, spotlights, and repositionings are visual strategies emphasized in Chapter 7, “Politics,” to expose how meanings of art and other artifacts of visual culture are shaped by contexts that either privilege or diminish the value and influential power of the object. We present accessible classroom and age-appropriate suggestions to explode museum exhibition politics, to empower learners to re-envision display in virtual and physical spaces, and to generate critical dialogue.

Narrative portrayals—whether oral, visual, or textual—are means to understand experience and to envision possibilities. In Chapter 8 we focus on the stories that designed environments—such as digital games, shopping malls, and neighborhood meeting places—communicate. The activities explode notions of story and of the meanings conveyed by a place.

In the last chapter, “Synthesis,” we discuss strategies to expose cultural narratives in film and video and to explode concepts presented in the preceding chapters—beliefs, definitions, processes, origins, codes, power, politics, and stories. These strategies empower learners to question visual cultural homogenization and to construct their own moving pictures, reflecting what is important to them.

**Why It Is Important to Do the Activities Described in This Book**

The exercises presented in the following chapters employ an everyday approach to visual culture. We encourage all of our readers, students and colleagues alike, to fully engage in this book’s activities in order to experience the ideas and to better understand the impact of learning prior to facilitating the lessons with others. Moreover, in doing the activities, teachers learn about their own values and beliefs and can bring that understanding to teaching visual creation and to critique of individual, shared, and diverse experiences and possibilities.

There are many ways to approach the objective of exposing beliefs and behaviors that impact how we see the world. Such activities are presented from a visual culture orientation in successive chapters of this book. The larger goal is to make apparent how cultural contexts shape beliefs about images. What becomes important is not the image itself but rather what it reveals about the people who made it, the people who look at it, and the social context within which it functions.

**Notes**

Chapter 6
Power

Our deep-seated understandings of power affect how we relate to images. In turn, the creation of images can help us attain personal and collective power. Have you ever taught a lesson or unit that involved team projects in which a group of students were required to decide on and execute a work of visual culture that communicated a shared vision? Whether it’s a mural of ceramic tiles in the school’s entry hall, a student-made quilt raffled for a student-selected cause, or a student-produced video or Web site, when people come together to communicate their perspectives, a positive and powerful synergy happens.
Activity: Power and Influence
To identify the types of power that impact your life, make a list of what you perceive to be powerful influences on your life. Use the space provided below. As you read about the types of power discussed in this chapter, review your list and note the ways in which different types of power influence your daily activities.

Expose: Images Have Hidden Power
As prevalent and memorable elements of experience, images can be either empowering or disempowering. Visual impressions often outlast the spoken word, and what is seen is often more influential than what is said. An old adage declares, “I’ll believe it when I see it,” and Missouri residents proclaim themselves to be from the Show Me State. Implied in both the adage and the state’s motto is the belief that the power of visual experience can’t be denied, and that knowledge comes from observing the world. Indeed, visual information helps us learn, explain, reflect, imagine, and understand the world. The power of images can also be used to persuade, to coerce, and even to subjugate. In this chapter, we discuss different types of power and how those who wield these types of power employ a range of strategies, including images, to impact human behavior and societal

6.1 Fabric collage (20” x 14”).
practices. As a prelude to this chapter’s discussion of the types of powers, we encourage you to participate in the activity described in the sidebar on page 82 in order to provide a real world context within which to think about conceptions of power and its influence on our lives.

In order to explore the relationship of power to visual culture, we ask our readers to engage in the activity described in the sidebar on this page.

**Interpretative Activity**

Task: Look at Figure 6.1. In the space provided, describe in detail what you see.


After you have studied and described Figure 6.1, interpret it. What do you think it means?


Factors: Read what you wrote and briefly describe any factors in your life that may have influenced your description and interpretation of Figure 6.1.
Dialogue: Interpretations and Factors

*Interpretations:*

Fred: It looks like a parade with people dancing and banging cymbals together.

Carol: I thought those were wings on angels who are protecting the town.

Kathy: A Mexican community celebrates their right to liberty, justice, and having work and bread.

Jake: I think the people are making noise and forming a protest line to demand their rights.

Sam: It looks like a scene from *South Park* where moms are out on the streets looking for Kenny.

Sandy: I thought the women came out of the houses to visit each other.

*Factors*

Fred: We have an annual parade in our town.

Carol: I’m Catholic and we honor saints as guardian angels.

Kathy: I traveled to Mexico last summer and it looks like the small villages there. I learned a little Spanish, too.

Jake: I’ve seen anti-war protest marches on the news lately. This kind of reminds me of that. I know a few Spanish words, too.

Sam: I watch a lot of TV and *South Park* is a favorite, so I thought of the way those images look.

Sandy: I live in a quiet neighborhood where we all know each other and we often socialize in the street.

To introduce the concept of power in imagery, we begin with an object of visual culture that, as the dialogue on this page shows, might easily be construed as childlike, and by association, not powerful. Yet, when understood within its cultural, historical, and economic contexts, the object may be seen very differently. Let us continue to peel back layers by revealing these contexts.

*Chilean Arpilleras in Context*

In September of 1973, a CIA-supported military coup installed Augusto Pinochet as dictator of Chile. A reign of terror ensued; thousands of Chilean men and boys, suspected by the revolutionary council, or junta, of opposing the new government, were rounded up, and never heard from again. Women were usually spared from arrest because of a traditionally accepted idea of women as powerless.¹

After the 1973 coup, women congregated everyday at jails, courthouses, and tribunals to inquire about family members who had disappeared. They often held pictures of loved ones who, they were told by the government, had never existed. With their families’ traditional breadwinners gone, women were left with the responsibility of feeding their families. Since all Chilean girls were taught to sew, this became their means of both emotional and financial support. They created arpilleras (are-pea-yair-uhhs) using familiar techniques such as appliquéd, patchwork, and embroidery. They collected scraps of material and met in sewing circles where they talked about their missing loved ones, exchanged information, and incorporated images of their dire circumstance into their arpilleras.

*The Power of Art*

The arpilleras contained symbols that communicated ideas and information in a visual code undetectable
by the government’s strict censorship. It was dangerous to depict Pinochet and the junta’s actions overtly, but the women were able to get information out of the country when their sewing projects were marketed internationally as folk art.

In the 1980s, Chilean arpilleras were distributed and exhibited in Oregon, Florida, and New Mexico, as well as Holland and Germany—anywhere humanitarian groups aided Chilean political exiles. Although the international news media had not informed the world of the humanitarian crisis in Chile during Pinochet’s reign, Chilean women were able to accomplish this with their scraps of fabric and sewing skills.

Creating the arpilleras became empowering for these Chilean women. It gave them a sense of dignity, hope, and a political voice. It enabled them to tell the rest of the world about their experiences in Pinochet’s Chile. The women were ultimately able to effect change in Chile’s power structure by their dedication and courage in communicating the situation in Chile through the arpilleras, which prompted international pressure on Chile’s government to revert back to a democracy with presidential elections. The national Chilean community, previously splintered into eighteen political factions, rallied around one candidate, Patricio Alywn, who, as a result of their united support, won the election against the former dictator Pinochet.

**Explode: Power Ideology**
In the folk art form of Chilean arpilleras, we find a story of apparent disempowerment transformed into a story of personal and community empowerment. To further understand the relationship of power to visual culture communication, we’ll consider three types of power: domination power, consensual power, and transformative power.

<table>
<thead>
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<td><strong>Domination</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Situational power</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of obligation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Belief in expertise</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coercive power</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Consensual</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Traditional legitimization</td>
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<td>Representation</td>
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<td>Affiliation</td>
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<td>Identification</td>
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<td>Persuasion</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Transformative</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Integrative and synergetic power for personal growth and societal improvement</td>
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Dialogue: Domination Power

Sandy: So the Pinochet dictatorship is an example of domination power. But I’m wondering what has happened in Chile since the 1970s?

Jake: I remember something from a twentieth-century history class. There was a plebiscite in 1989 that ousted Pinochet as dictator. Eighteen different political factions voted for Patricio Alwyn. But then Pinochet had the constitution changed so that the military had control over the presidency. Guess who headed the military?

Sandy: But didn’t I hear something about Pinochet being indicted or something? And he’s a really old man, now.

Carol: In the late 1990s, Pinochet went to a clinic in England for back problems. He was in his eighties and retired.

Jake: Right. A Spanish judge requested that the English authorities have Pinochet extradited to Spain to stand trial for murder, torture, and conspiracy. Switzerland also decided immediately to request his extradition.

Carol: French citizens, mostly mothers, pressured the French government to request that Pinochet be extradited to France to stand trial there for his involvement in murdering French citizens in Chile in the 1970s and 1980s. A London court ruled that he could not be extradited to Spain because he had immunity from crimes committed as part of his position as Chile’s head of state.

Jake: Like Nixon had immunity when he went to China in 1972. Otherwise, the communist government of Vietnam might have requested his extradition to Ho Chi Minh City to stand trial for crimes against humanity during the Vietnam war.

Carol: Spanish lawyers appealed the lower court decision in the highest level court in England, the House of Lords, similar to the Supreme Court in the United States, which overturned the lower court’s decision and found that murder, kidnapping, and torture of foreign citizens does not afford immunity to a head of state. But then the British Home Secretary refused to extradite him and all the warrants for his arrest were dismissed. At age 90, he was in the news again. One of his former aides finally spoke out about Pinochet’s crimes. If he won’t ever see justice in a court, at least his crimes won’t be forgotten, in part because the women who banded together to tell their stories in arpilleras won’t be forgotten.

Domination Power

Domination may be the most commonly known and used form of power. It involves holding power over someone or something and implies a subject/object distinction. That is, one entity (subject) acts upon another entity (object). Dominating forms of power are part of hierarchical systems. For example, within a traditional corporate setting, a boss can have power over his or her employees through real or perceived threats to the employee’s financial security. Corporate hierarchies are also based on win/lose situations in which an entity outbids, outwits, and outperforms competitors to succeed financially while others fall by the wayside.
Coercive power is a typical form of domination power. Dictatorships, in which the head of a government holds the power of life and death over citizens, is an obvious example. At a more personal level, parents, spouses, and siblings will sometimes use coercive power or threats of “punishments” to achieve their goals. But there are other, more subtle forms of domination (see the sidebar on page 85). Situational power, a common form of domination power, involves a specific situation in which one person has power over another. When the situation changes, the power balance may change. For example, a receptionist in an office has the power to keep you from reaching someone in a position to help you. But the gatekeeping receptionist may feel powerless when required to seek “expert” help from an auto mechanic. Further, belief in expertise coerces payment for poor services. Often, we feel a sense of obligation to those that have the means and are in a position to help us.

Consensual Power
Consensual power is an agreed-upon power arrangement. For example, to obtain an academic degree, students agree to pay money, invest their time, study, take tests, write papers, complete projects, make class presentations, and do what is expected of them to earn that degree. Our society gives traditional legitimization to teachers and academic advisors who require students to perform various tasks necessary to complete their education successfully. Another form of consensual power is through representation, the basis of the American democracy. Citizens vote for candidates who, hopefully, will represent their views while exercising the power of the government. Sometimes responsibility and power may be divided in a relationship of affiliates, whether in a friendship, marriage, work situation, or sports team. No member in this affiliation form of power is above another. Instead, each contributes according to the spoken or unspoken arrangement. Identification with a famous actor, sports hero, or political leader is a form of consensual power, since the desire to be like that person places that person at a perceived superior level. After

Dialogue: On Power
Sandy: I always feel powerless when something goes wrong with my computer. I have to rely on others to help me fix it.

Carol: What can you do? You can’t be an expert at everything.

Jake: But a basic knowledge of the things that are part of everyday life is a good idea.

Sam: Sometimes I wonder if what I am asked to do by my teachers is really worthwhile.

Kathy: Do you do it any way?

Sam: Yes, at least enough to get a passing grade.

Kathy: That goal is not enough for me. I want good grades, but if I don’t see the purpose in an assignment I’m in trouble. I have trouble just trusting in the expertise of my teacher. Sometimes I can talk to the teacher to figure out a way to make an assignment meaningful to me.
Hitler was appointed chancellor of Germany in 1932, he was given consensual power by the German people, and then exerted domination power over much of Europe until the end of World War II. Persuasion is also a form of consensual power, since a convert to a particular point of view decides to believe that it is a true and supportable position.

**Transformative Power**
Transformative power is power that comes from within a group of people who feel equal to one another and is developed through the support, encouragement, and team effort of the group. The making of arpilleras was a form of transformative power. Transformative power is an integrative power that brings about personal growth and societal improvement. It involves the participation and honest communication of individuals in a group or community acting to improve a particular situation.

Creative thinking is involved in all critical thinking endeavors and both are aspects of transformative power. Creative thinking is imaginative, constructive, and generative. Creative thinkers see the framework of their thoughts and are able to go outside that framework, or “think outside the box.” Creative practice involves responding productively to new situations, generating new solutions to problems, and forming new insights in tangible or experiential works.

**Empower: Creating Transformative Power**
In keeping with our experiential approach to learning, we address the idea of empowering our visual culture interactions by inviting participation in the activity described in the sidebar on page 89.

This task provides a model for creating an activity that reinforces the discussion of visual codes from Chapter 5, and it draws attention to the types of power conveyed in visual culture to interpret the impact of visuals on society.

**Debriefing an Example**
The creation of imagery representing disempowerment offers an excellent opportunity for full- or small-group discussion. For example, if the image in Figure 6.4 were shared within the context of images of power, we might ask the following questions as a way to reveal its meaning:

1. Using the Intervisual Process presented in Chapter 3, what are the “visual” aspects of this image? That is, what do we see in the image itself? (We see a clock with a person as a puppet in the positions where hands of the clock should be.)
Transformativ Power Activity

**Preparation**

To do this task with best results, gather a variety of art supplies including colored pencils, markers, crayons, various papers such as construction, tissue, gift wrap, brown paper sacks, string, ribbon, yarn, fabric scraps, aluminum foil, glitter, scissors, and glue. If you have sewing supplies available, including a piece of “blank fabric” (muslin, burlap, canvas), scrap fabric, needles, threads, etc., you may want to use them, but you can make an arpillera with paper and glued fabric scraps.

**Visualization**

Close your eyes for a few moments and calm yourself, then read the following script slowly, carefully, and out loud if possible.

**The Script**

- Move back in time and remember a situation in which you were treated unjustly or something unfair was done to you.
- With eyes shut for a few moments, re-create the situation.

*This is very important. Locate a specific event. This can be a recent experience, but go back as far as you need to in order to locate an experience about which you feel strongly. Remember, the experience should be one about which you have strong feelings of being treated unfairly.*
- What is happening? What are people saying? What are you saying?

*It is important to remember as much detail as possible. Place yourself back in that setting. Be there!*

How is this making you feel? Excited? Angry? Hurt? Sad? Betrayed?

**Transition to Task**

Right now, in the present, if asked to make your own arpillera that would communicate what the injustice was and how it made you feel, what might you do? Among those materials you have gathered, what would best convey the event? Is there a particular color that would capture the idea or feeling?

Where could you begin, with a particular shape, image, or material? Starting with a blank rectangle of fabric (or paper), where in that “page” would you place that shape or image?

**The Task**

Now come back to the present and make a visual/tactile arpillera that communicates what your powerful experience was and how it made you feel. Share your arpillera with another person or group of people. Record the responses of others to the issue raised by your arpillera.

**Transformation**

Now, how could you change the situation? What could be done to make this situation just and fair? Is there a way to change an experience of domination power into an experience of energizing power? Make a second image that represents the transformation.
2. What is the context for this image? That is, what are the circumstances surrounding the creation of this image? (The maker was directed to think about a situation in which she felt disempowered. It was made within a larger context of a culture obsessed with time and productivity.)

3. What might the maker have had in mind? She appears to be concerned with being time’s puppet. In this case, the maker articulated two views:
   • Clocks are a means of coordinating efforts. We need the clock so that our efforts are synchronized and tasks are completed.
   • People who are puppets of the clock grow old before their time because internal rhythms are consumed.

4. What does the viewer bring to the exercise? The viewer is a student who is concerned about always feeling rushed when attempting to finish his or her schoolwork, especially in art class.

Transforming an Image of Domination Perhaps, instead of seeing time as an external condition that is
in conflict with our internal rhythms, the clock could be seen as a mere tool, useful for coordinating and synchronizing our efforts, but not in control of every situation. Perhaps the puppets take off their watches!

**Reflect: Power of Images**
With thoughtful facilitation, students participating in this chapter’s exercises will be exposed to alternative ways of thinking about power. Starting with the folk art Chilean arpilleras, we can extend the exploration of visual responses to social or personal injustices to images encountered daily. For example, students may have a dynamic discussion that examines the ways in which advertising, especially in magazines for children and teens, is meant to either empower or disempower them.

**Catalyst: Seeking Social Justice**
Because learners of all ages are drawn to the idea of communicating and acting on perceived injustice, we’ve found that students from all levels responded positively to the Transformative Power Activity.

**Making Activities Age Appropriate**
As always, it is important to adjust the activity appropriately for various age groups.

**Primary** If we consider Piaget’s concrete operations stage (discussed in Chapter 4), at which children are fascinated with determining the concrete rules of any situation, then we find that the arpillera activity is well suited to primary-aged children. In fact, young children are perpetually stung by perceived injustices and unfairness, more so because they often feel voiceless and powerless to change things. This exercise allows them to give voice to times in their lives that they feel deeply about, but often cannot verbalize (See Figure 6.5). Students often have a desire to discuss their particular powerless situation after creating their arpilleras, but we do not require them to talk about it. Similar to the use of symbols in the Chilean arpilleras, students can use symbols to protect themselves from perceived or actual harm that might result from the disclosure of a personal or social injustice. Very young children tend to focus on personal injustices, while older children and adults express social injustices, often from their personal experiences of those injustices. For example, one kindergartner’s arpillera represented his perception of injustice when he was not allowed to sleep in his parents’ room. Another arpillera depicted the injustice felt by a student who thought she should be allowed to use the garden hose, but her father thought she was too young. It gives young students the opportunity, in terms explained in Chapter 4, to picture their experiences. The key to success is the structuring of the visualization exercise as outlined in the "Teaching for Student Engagement" section of Chapter 4.

![Image of an arpillera](attachment:image.png)

*Figure 6.6 A four-year-old’s arpillera about the injustice of not being able to “move his bed into mommy’s room.”*
Intermediate Older children will be motivated by the opportunity to communicate about perceived injustice or unfairness. However, for these children the aspect of transformation will become more central because at this age children are making gains in their sense of self and their internal will. For this age group, debriefing in small groups may become a potent part of the lesson. Out of this small group debriefing, a plan to correct some shared injustice felt by the entire group could be a strong motivator.

Secondary With formal operations achieved, the work created by older students ranges from very concrete incidences of unfairness (a D on a midterm, a hurtful comment by a classmate, a conflict at home) to much more abstract injustices represented with metaphorical imagery. The teacher/facilitator must be open to the expression of ideas that may be unpleasant, but the debriefing should be open enough to allow for the free airing of differences of opinion. This is part of the transformative process.

Teaching for Student Engagement
An important aspect of teaching the activity is to see it as having two phases. First, the visualization is built around a perceived injustice. This encourages learners to focus on a specific, concrete event. This is very important, since to tell their stories, students will use “real” imagery that they associate with the events. This will help them create a more complex work of visual communication with multiple layers of information.

Second, whether it is built into the visualization, or it is presented as a second part of the activity, it is very important to present the transformative element of the activity. That is, give students the opportunity to share the event and then suggest a way in which they might change the whole dynamic of the event so that they feel empowered in the situation.

Finally, if possible, arrange your teaching space so that it encourages discovery and sharing rather than one-way, expert-to-audience communication.

Principles for Curriculum Development
Transformation is an important overarching goal of teaching from this perspective. We believe in the importance of developing a curriculum that incorporates creative and critical thinking. In order to do this, we must view knowledge as dynamic rather than as complete, definite, and fixed. An empathically interactive lesson moves students toward a transformation of their assumptions about discrete events in their lives and toward new paradigms and definitions by seeing the visual as a tool of power, especially their own.

What might some potential goals be for the activities in this chapter?
• To merge higher-order thinking skills, including critical (analytical) thinking, creative (innovative) thinking, and problem-solving skills. By addressing controversial issues in the classroom, students examine their own biases, attitudes, and sensitivities. Dialogue that relates to personal views and experiences helps to promote understanding as students become aware of the diversity of views on issues important to them.
• To promote interaction among students as they learn by asking open-ended questions (encouraging creative thinking and response), and by giving students sufficient time and guidance in ways to deliberate on the responses to these questions.
• To encourage students to find connections between what they are learning and their prior experiences, beliefs, and knowledge.
• To consider the various types of power inherent in visual culture in order to critique the power of the images in our lives, and to become socially responsible when critiquing the role of images that promote local and national policies and agendas.

Young people are aware of social and personal injustices, and art education can provide a vehicle for seeking positive and creative solutions to real issues that affect our lives. We have found that the activities in this chapter promote critical and creative thinking through processes of art making and dialogue.

Notes