



Kunstgeschiedenis in het secundair onderwijs: een oncomfortabele zone
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Summary

Art History in Secondary Education: An Uncomfortable Contact Zone

The art history curriculum of secondary art schools in Flanders limits itself to a history of styles and iconology. The first is part of a formalistic method that aims at the classification of artworks; the second studies the content of artworks. Both approaches explain form and content through a reconstruction of the past. Because the art history curriculum is predetermined, the task of art history teachers is reduced to knowledge transfer.

Mostly, students are not aware that the knowledge transmission method of teaching ignores their critical and creative thinking. Some students passively assimilate the taught knowledge when making their own creative works, while others in the same situation reject all art historical knowledge because they want to work autonomously. The way the latter group thinks about their autonomy corresponds to the narcissistic phase of development that each adolescent must pass through to become an adult (Kristeva 2010). Both the curriculum and the attitude of some students prevents the establishment of a critical relation with the world in which they live, which, paradoxically, is one of the aims of the curriculum in question. Furthermore, the curriculum does not take into account the critical approaches to art that have emerged from the discipline of art history and from other disciplines such as gender studies and semiotics.

This study revolves around the following questions: what happens when art history is reduced to style history and iconology? What is necessary to establish an equal relationship between artworks, students and a teacher who represents academic knowledge? How can art history lessons help students build a critical and creative relationship with the surrounding world? How can their interpretations of artworks contribute to the building of new (academic) knowledge?

To answer these questions, I use examples from my own art history teaching experience at the secondary art school Sint-Lucas in Ghent. In the same way as in action research, I aim to examine new approaches from an existing situation and “to share that knowledge and learning that led to the creation of that knowledge” (McNiff and Whitehead 2011: 13).

The way of teaching that I propose in this study makes use of an interdisciplinary approach and a number of new theoretical insights. Narrative

semiotics, psychoanalytical concepts and gender studies not only allow an innovative analysis of what my students say and write, but also of artworks and historical texts. In addition, they offer the opportunity to discuss and question hidden prejudices. Narrative semiotics seeks to understand what happens between a story and its reader or between a painting and its viewer. Word choices and the use of personal pronouns, verbs and punctuation are signifiers that affect the reader's perception. The same can be said about the formal aspects of sculptures and paintings, such as the body language of the figures, particular details and the way in which colour and texture are used. Combining semiotics and psychoanalytic concepts helps me to analyse the unconscious desires that are embedded in a cultural context and that contribute to the process of meaning making (Bal and Bryson 1991). Gender studies encourages reflection on how gender differences are culturally represented. The combination of these different methods potentially can lead to a revision of received art historical knowledge.

Following the cultural analyst Mieke Bal, I propose a form of art historical education based on a dialogue in which the different participants speak *with* instead of *about* each other. When my students, artworks and academic texts interact, they form a "construction zone" in which new knowledge can grow. This pedagogic flexibility takes seriously what students write and say (Briant 2005). For instance, in a class in which Parmigianino's painting *The Madonna with the Long Neck* (ca. 1534) is discussed, my student Bert remarks that the painter is laughing at the viewers, while Stijn compares the lower left part of the painting to a theatre play. While I consider these interpretations as creative thinking, this does not mean that my students or I are free to say whatever we want about an artwork. Creative thinking entails the formation of performative subjects (Culler, 2000). Together, we have to take responsibility for our choices and understand that these are shaped both by cultural aspects such as language, values, norms, history and social changes, and by the conditions created by the painting.

Some artworks become theoretical objects because they show the visual strategies they use to engage the viewer in the space and time of the artwork (Damisch 1995). Made explicit, this process provokes an uncomfortable encounter between viewer and artwork. When, for example, my students see Constantin Brancusi's sculpture *Prometheus* (1911), they assume that the abstractly sculpted head signifies death. However, at the same time the prominent place and realistic

representation of the ear suggests that *Prometheus* is listening. Thus, a story arises in which the sculpture and the viewer address each other as “I, here” and “you, there” (Bal 1999). This deictic entanglement changes the way meaning is created. Instead of an objective reconstruction of the creation of the sculpture, a meeting takes place in the present. The deictic relation between the artwork and the viewer also rejects the exclusive explanation of the form and content of the artwork by the influence of one artist on the other. The bodily, psychological and intellectual responses of the viewer, when related to the formal conditions the artwork imposes, develop into an event that can never be given a definitive meaning. This loss, which, according to the psychoanalytical theorist Jacques Lacan, is fundamental for any process of meaning-making, ensures that we continue to look for new contents.

When the existence of a deictic entanglement as a ground for meaning is accepted, an “uncomfortable contact zone” arises during art history lessons. As a teacher and researcher, I have to work with a large number of artworks, art history, the interpretations of my students and new theoretical insights. This way of working is not only complex but risky, given that the results cannot be known in advance. Furthermore, there is a persistent tendency to choose a comfortable position. My students also find this way of working difficult. They prefer to memorise information and feel insecure when their critical and creative thinking is encouraged, since this learning process continually demands different approaches. To provide them with self-confidence and self-worth during the process, I decide, as a teacher, to examine how their interpretations can lead to new academic knowledge. By discussing the results of this research with them, I hope to produce a mutual recognition between the knowledge of my students and that of the academics I, as a teacher, also represent. This leads to both self-respect and a true sense of belonging. According to Bart van Leeuwen, self-respect, self-confidence and self-worth are the moral conditions for the development of personal autonomy and social attachment (Van Leeuwen 2007).

The first three chapters of this study describe what happens when the content of art history lessons is reduced to an overview of style history and iconology. The last three outline what happens when art history lessons assume an equal relationship between artwork, student and teacher-researcher. Each chapter of this study is preceded by an intermezzo containing images of artworks, art historical texts, exercises and interpretations by my students en myself, an advertisement and a magazine cover. I use these intermezzos to challenge the traditional discipline of art

history, prejudices and habits of thinking. Through the intermezzos, I hope to transfer the knowledge contents that emerge within specific interactions in the classroom to the general field of a critical and creative art historical education process.

In chapter one, I examine which type of art historical consciousness Ernst Gombrich's *Story of Art* (1949) and Horst Janson's *A History of Art* (1962) produce. The titles, prefaces and introductions of both books – examples par excellence of style history and often used as handbooks – are compared. Janson explains style changes by referring to the artwork's context of emergence and to the influence of one painter on another. At the same time, he connects style to invariant factors such as the myth of divine creativity and the inherent value of harmony. His history of art belongs to the traditional historical consciousness, since the artists he selects are viewed as examples of eternal social values and norms. In contrast, Gombrich rejects the myth of divine creativity. He discusses what artists learn from their predecessors but at the same time frames their learning processes and considered choices within an eternal history of action and reaction. The work of the artists he selects is thought to show how the innate feeling of harmony can be developed by learning from predecessors. Gombrich's art history belongs above all to the exemplary historical consciousness. This study views both approaches as problematic because they do not encourage a critical historical consciousness or the involvement of students in the creation of knowledge.

In chapter two, the findings of chapter one are transformed into a critical exercise. The texts written by Gombrich and Janson about Parmigianino's *The Madonna with the Long Neck* are analysed using narrative semiotics and close reading. Understanding what is written and how can make my students conscious of hidden assumptions and prejudices, and of the way both authors want to involve them in the production of knowledge. Gombrich and Janson include Parmigianino's painting in their style history, but the painting challenges their choice. Gombrich considers the painting the result of a pathological perception. He explains this by representing Parmigianino as someone who does not love harmony, which, in turn, is seen as the result of the confusing times in which the painter lived. In this way, Gombrich encourages his reader to closely observe a painting the form of which cannot lead to the development of the innate sense of harmony. Janson uses another strategy. He incites his readers to compare the grace and movement of Parmigianino's painted figures to those of the Renaissance painter Raphael and Byzantine art.

Because the comparison does not work, Janson positions Parmigianino's work as visionary, as an exceptional aesthetic category in the sequence of styles. Moreover, both authors regard Parmigianino as a precursor of modern art, an anachronism that helps account for their selection. To further implement the critical analysis of texts in my lessons, at the end of this chapter I propose an exercise with a Wikipedia text about Jan Van Eyck.

In the third chapter I discuss Erwin Panofsky's method of iconology. When art history lessons are based on style history and iconology, a comfortable pedagogy arises. Two exercises illustrate the difference between a "comfortable zone" and an "uncomfortable construction zone". The first one consists of a stylistic analysis following a strict procedure, which aims to facilitate the assimilation of new knowledge. The second one juxtaposes my students' interpretations of *The Madonna with the Long Neck* with an iconological explanation of the same painting. This comparison leads to the following question: what happens to the emotional reactions and the creative thinking of my students when they do not fit with the iconological interpretation? I propose to use their answers to change the traditional way of teaching art history. This requires not only working with curricula that are not set beforehand, but also students, together with teachers, taking responsibility for knowledge building. There are, however, some factors that may hinder this way of working. That students who follow art history lessons think creatively is, for example, taken for granted but not always the case.

In chapter four I analyse texts my students wrote about their use of art history when they do creative work. The concepts of "recognition" and "difference-respect" help me to understand their different points of view: some students reject all art historical knowledge, some feel obliged to remain loyal to the discipline and how it was taught to them, while others simply follow the rules they learned. On the one hand, my students want to identify themselves with the culture to which they belong and, on the other hand, they are adolescents striving for autonomy.

How can texts in which my students either reject art historical knowledge or idealise it become meaningful in art history lessons? My student Elisabeth, for example, writes: "in art history lessons we see artworks that are surely much more captivating than painting on a small paper bags, and that just makes you jealous". Her emotion can be explained through psychoanalytic ideas about desire, idealisation and resistance. The words "small paper bags" function as a metaphor for Elisabeth's

simultaneous feelings of desire and loss. Her words also acquire meaning through the art historical discourse that privileges the value of harmony. Sam rejects Parmigianino's painting with the words: "To be honest, such a subject does not appeal to me, I prefer wars or mythological subjects". His dissident voice contains a prejudice concerning motherhood and heroism. To deconstruct this prejudice, I use insights from gender studies and Jacques-Louis David's painting *Sabine Women* (1799).

The comments of Elisabeth and Sam interpellate me as a teacher. Mona Hatoum's installation *Corps étranger* (1994) contains a visual strategy that interpellates the viewer. Working with the confusion the installation causes is only possible if the viewer willingly accepts the force the artwork exerts. Assigning meaning then becomes an event in the present in which the experience of the viewer, in this case my reaction to the filmic images of Hatoum's body, becomes the object of reflection. *Corps étranger* disrupts the belief in our ability to control the world through perspective construction. Instead of control, the unpredictable images of *Corps étranger* give the viewer the opportunity to act performatively. Performativity presupposes taking responsibility for our choices, which should be made with respect for difference.

In chapter five I use ways of looking such as fascination and voyeurism, feelings such as guilt and shame, and narcissistic and heteropathic forms of identification to understand how artworks help to create difference-respect. My case studies here are: Caravaggio's painting *The incredulity of Thomas* (ca. 1601); my students' question "But ma'am, what are you doing over there?" when I stand inside Hatoum's installation, moving chaotically; and my own experience in *Corps étranger*. In their interpretations of Caravaggio's painting, my students articulate their fascinated looking at Thomas, who sticks his finger deep inside Jesus' wound. My student Montaine uses past norms to blame Thomas and to justify her resistant response. My students' question when they see me in Hatoum's installation arises as a consequence of the voyeuristic way of looking that the work provokes. Fascination and voyeurism point to the unpredictable in others and the self. Fascination leads to a feeling of guilt and voyeurism to one of shame. Shame is a reticent but also hopeful attitude because it offers the possibility of looking at oneself through the eyes of the other.

The filmic projection of Hatoum's body on my own transforms me into a formless but beautifully coloured Gestalt. Combined with the question posed by my students this makes me reflect. I am reminded of the desublimating, formless art of the 1960s and the sublimating, gothic windows of abbot Suger's Saint Denis church. . All these artworks involve a bodily participation that co-determines the process of identification, but later I understand that only *Corps étranger* offers the possibility to distance oneself from a narcissistic identification. Instead, a heteropathic identification arises, a touching of two bodies that are different yet still moving towards each other, without ever fusing. I conclude that artworks that encourage a voyeuristic way of looking, a feeling of shame and heteropathic identification promote difference-respect.

In chapter six I examine how Brancusi's sculpture *Prometheus* and Parmigianino's *Madonna with the long neck* encourage the viewer to participate bodily, emotionally and intellectually. What my students write about these artworks is developed into academic knowledge. According to my students, *Prometheus* simultaneously represents life and death. The figure is dead but still listens. Which voice *Prometheus*, who is alternatively considered a man, a woman and a child, listens to cannot be answered by referring to the iconographical pretext, an existing art historical text and psychoanalytic insights into the consequences of the loss of attachment to the mother. Therefore, I suggest an anachronistic approach. Brancusi's sculpture and Parmigianino's painting both draw attention to a perception in which looking and touching are entangled. The study of the interaction of these two senses contains the possibility of giving new meaning to both works.

If deictic engagement and difference-respect are accepted as components of teaching, prejudices have to be made explicit. In their texts, my students consider the sculpture of *Prometheus* alternatively as a man and a woman. An advertisement from a popular magazine helps to situate these different attributions in a cultural frame. Some of my students do not know what to do with the androgynous representation of the angel in Parmigianino's painting. To show that the concept of androgyny has been interpreted differently throughout time, I have them compare the angel to the androgynous model portrayed on the magazine cover.

The answers to the main questions of this study are complex but can be summarised as follows. Style history and iconology prevent interaction between the observation and knowledge of my students and the artworks they study. In order to

establish an equal relationship between artworks, students and a teacher who represents academic knowledge, the recognition of difference-respect is necessary.. For art history lessons this means that the form and setting of the artwork are not the only conditions for the formation of knowledge; the physical, emotional and intellectual involvement of the viewer with the artwork also encourages reflection. This reflection presupposes a deictic relation between the viewer and the artwork, which situates itself in the present and is shaped by unconscious desires and the culture in which we live. The study of the latter aspects creates the possibility to understand and deconstruct presuppositions and prejudices, as a result of which a critical and responsible relation to the world around us can come into being. The new way of art historical teaching this study propagates above all requires the analysis of what and how my students write about an artwork, so that they are given the chance to learn to speak *with* artworks rather than only *about* them.