

# Visual Culture and Gender Constructions

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## Abstract

How can art educators facilitate criticality and feminist pedagogy? The purpose of this article is to share teaching strategies that creatively employ social networking technologies that encourage and promote an understanding of how visual culture constructs gender. I theorize pedagogical approaches through practical examples of classroom activities in which students explore their own lives, and contemporary times, within the context of a transnational world. These strategies foster criticality regarding issues of gender equity, which is intertwined with social, economic, and environmental justice. Activities involve exposing culturally learned meanings and power relations concerning gendered constructions of human worth that involves creation, consumption, valuation, and dissemination of images. I employ four themes to organize the inquiry processes: (a) politicizing gender constructions, (b) facilitating feminist critiques of visual culture, (c) creating well-being, and (d) challenging and changing harmful constructions with new media intertexts. In the final section, I raise questions intended to form a transformative feminist coalition that acknowledges interdependence of difference in developing students' ability to conceptualize the personal for political mobilization to change systems of oppression.

**Key Words: feminist pedagogy, visual culture, cyberfeminism, transformative identity politics, architecture of participation**

[If] the other is left to be different, separate, independent; no connection is acknowledged; thus the refusal of identification is a form of indifference ... a recognition of difference and of power divides is not enough; if we want to do politics together, we need to cross through the lines that divide us, to take the risk of actively identifying with others very different from ourselves. (Weir, 2008, p. 124)

Gender constructions are political in the sense that transformative identity politics of gender involves exposing, in order to eradicate, internalized sexism. For transformative identity politics to matriculate, all those involved in the transformation need to investigate why sexist perceptions are in place, in order to figure out how to challenge and change sexist thinking and practices. One way to expose the politics of gender constructions is by examining visual culture for who is addressed by whom and for what purpose—through questioning who is being sold, or persuaded, and what is assumed. With a Google search of “Indonesian women,” or any race or ethnic term in front of the term *women* or *girls*, the search will yield, first and foremost, many sites selling women’s bodies assumed for male consumption. A search with a race or ethnic term adjacent with the term *men* or *boys* does not produce the same assumption of consumption. Search “feminist women”—and discover that sites on women’s health, empowerment, rights, liberation, resources, histories, theories, economics, humor, and political actions comprise most of the 11,500,000 sites as of September 19, 2009. Other Internet sites marketed to women based in capitalist investments in cosmetics and fashion put “their money behind mass-media campaigning which trivialized women’s liberation by portraying images which suggested feminist were big, hypermasculine, and just plain old ugly” (hooks, 2000, p. 32).<sup>1</sup> Keep in mind, as you consider visual culture and gender constructions that “the goal of global feminism is to reach out and join global struggles to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (hooks, 2000, p. 47).

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<sup>1</sup> To counter, t-shirts that state, “This is what a feminist looks like,” are worn by people whose age, gender, race, and other identity constructs differ from patriarchal media-driven stereotypes of feminists.

Beyond critique, transformative identity politics need alternative visions to stereotypes of gender. We are socialized to have anxiety over masculinity, femininity, and about our body as a gendered, raced, and (dis)abled construction. Feminist cultural critic, bell hooks (2000) reminisces that “one of the difficulties we faced spreading the word about feminism is that anything having to do with the female gender is seen as covering feminist ground even if it does not contain a feminist perspective” (p. 112). Sociologist, Michael Kimmel (2008) argues, “feminism will make it possible for the first time for men to be free” (p. 15). Visual culture and gender constructions impact everybody. Leanne Levy’s (2008) film, created with high school girls and embedded as part of her article, *The Skinny on This Is My Body: Filmmaking as Empowerment Intervention and Activism*, presents girls’ despair and anxiety about their body to the point of self-mutilation to ease emotional pain by attention to physical pain. Intervention in the socialization processes of self-hatred is through gradually changing one’s relationship with one’s own body by internalizing alternative ways of being beautiful, valued, and respected than portrayed in the dominant visual cultural narratives that encase the body. This is everybody’s issue and responsibility—to make gender and privilege visible, and alternative perspectives possible.

The purpose of this article is to share teaching strategies that encourage and promote an understanding of how visual culture constructs gender entangled with representations of race, age, sexuality, social units, (dis)abilities, and social class. I present activities in which students explore their own lives, and contemporary times, within the context of a transnational world. These strategies emphasize issues of gender equity, which is intertwined with social, economic, and environmental justice; and the premise that gender and sexuality are historically variable and conditioned by social and political demands. Activities involve exposing culturally learned meanings and power relations that engage and surround the creation, consumption, valuing, and dissemination of images concerning gendered constructions of human worth.

The visual culture and gender construction strategies presented in this article are based in more than 30 years of teaching young children, youth,

intergenerational and intercultural groups, adults, preK-12 art teachers and pre-service teachers, and students in different cultural contexts. I focus especially on recent examples from my teaching and student transformative learning in a visual culture and gender constructions course that I taught in spring 2009 at Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt in Austria. Students in my courses collaborate in a critical interpretative process of visual culture to expose and work towards ending sexism, racism, and other isms that belittle humans. I employ four themes to organize the inquiry processes presented here: (a) politicizing gender constructions, (b) facilitating feminist critiques of visual culture, (c) creating well-being, and (d) challenging and changing harmful constructions with new media intertexts.

## Politicizing Gender Constructions

Shift from a metaphysical to an ethical and political model of identity: from a static to a relational model of identity; to a model of identity that focuses on what matters, what is meaningful for us—our desires, relationships, commitments, ideals. (Weir, 2008, p. 111)

Identity as a girl or woman is a political dilemma for feminists in that if commonalities do not exist then “what is the basis, the ‘essence’ of feminist praxis?” (Hesse-Biber, Gilmartin, Lydenberg, 1999, p. 4). Alison Weir, and other feminists, help us out here—identity is not about essence or a static category such as woman or man, but is always in the making, always becoming. Some metaphors of a relational model of identity include Gloria Anzaldúa's (1987) *mestiza*, Rosi Braidotti's (1994, 2002) *nomad*, Mariá Lugone's (1987) *world-traveler*, and Chandra Talpade Mohanty's (2003) *border-crossing*. Donna Haraway's (1991) *cyborg* and Iris Marion Young's (1990) *city*, are metaphors of collective identity. These are all metaphors that break from a modernist view of essence. Each metaphor, as the words imply, suggest a confluence, movement, hybridization, and interdependence of difference. Each of these relational identity concepts suggests ways to re-envision identity in order to make possible collective mobilization for

activism in the form of counterpoints to stereotypes that limit difference and potential ways of being a respected, valued, socially responsible human.

Cultural narrative mapping is a strategy to expose an individual's narrative center or world from which constructions of others are located. As an example of politics of location in construction of identity, i.e., how identity changes because of the social situation, Mohanty describes, "Growing up in India, I was Indian; teaching high school in Nigeria, I was a foreigner. ... Doing research in London, I was black. As a professor at an American university, I am an Asian women ..." (p. 190). These experiences form the praxis of Mohanty's theory of border-crossing and her call for a relational transformative feminist coalition of difference united by the "common context of struggles against specific exploitative structures and systems that determines our potential political alliances" (2003, p. 49). Identity with an issue is necessary for political coalitions to improve conditions for all people. Examples of questions I pose for a *mapping identity* exercise include:

- What categories do you occupy?
- Is that occupation willing or unwilling? Natural or imposed?
- What do the categories *men*, *women*, *gender*, and *sexuality* signify to you?
- What categories matter most to you, when discussing your own identities and those of others?

Use of Web 2.0 applications enable an "architecture of participation" (O'Reilly, 2004, p.1), i.e., the use of free or open source programs available on the Internet such as *VoiceThread*, *iGoogle*, *Google Docs*, *Diigo*, and *Second Life*. These programs can be used for collective mobilization, re-envisioning, and re-directing ways of collaborative interaction that encourage difference rather than sameness. Examples of how to use these programs, as pedagogical strategies concerning politics of gender constructions, are interfused in this article. Information architecture is a new media artform. New media feminist artist, Victorial Vesna, provides a theoretical history of database aesthetics that broadens notions of art, particularly in relation to architectures of participation. For example, she describes that "Marcel Duchamp's establishment of concept over object in

art and his eventual decision to give up painting entirely in order to become a freelance librarian at the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris not only challenged the museum system and the idea of what can be counted as art, but also drew attention to the intersections of information and aesthetics” (Vesna, 1999, p.2).

Using an architecture of participation, Deborah Smith-Shank and I, as editors of the *Visual Culture & Gender* (VCG) journal offer the following prompts related to the articles in VCG volume 4 to generate stories. We encourage you, with your students, to share stories about visual culture and gender from a feminist perspective.

- Share a story about aging, especially one that is different from stereotypes of aging and exposes issues of power and privilege.
- Share a story about becoming, or of constructing subjectivity, or intersubjectivity.
- Select a family photo and share a story of family.
- Share a story about mothering, especially one that differs from stereotypes of mothering.
- Share a critique of patriarchal visual culture.
- Share a story about masculinity, especially one that differs from stereotypes of masculinity.

Youth and adults can read the visual essays in volume 4 of the journal, *Visual Culture & Gender*, discuss them in class, and generate stories they can record directly on the Internet using *VoiceThread*.<sup>2</sup> This is one way to nurture and promote difference in politicizing gender constructions through the collection of diverse and individual counterpoints to gender stereotypes. Use of *VoiceThread* in this way enables a multivocal encounter, which (re)directs personal experience toward a political presence.

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<sup>2</sup> I set up *VoiceThread* with directions on how to use at [http://www.emitto.net/visualculturegender/vol4\\_toc.htm](http://www.emitto.net/visualculturegender/vol4_toc.htm)

What is a feminist perspective, you might ask, or what are some ways to facilitate feminist perspectives in student responses? Briefly, I outline what I mean by feminist perspectives and then provide some ways that I have facilitated the transformation of stereotypic views of feminism in visual culture portrayals that bell hooks summarized as quoted in the first paragraph of this article. There are many feminist theories (liberal, ecofeminist, socialist, essentialist, womanist, postmodern, postcolonial, cyberfeminist, etc.), and these theories have expanded “since many feminist theories emerged in response to critiques of one or more preceding theories, successor theories tend to be more comprehensive and/or compensatory for factors or groups overlooked by previous theories” (Rosser, 2006, p. 40). Feminist perspectives, as articulated at a particular time and place, can be understood in two overarching, sometimes overlapping, approaches: reform or radical feminism. Some feminists work to reform the patriarchal social system, and others work for radical change of the system. Some combine both reform and radical transformation. “Cyberfeminist projects [as example of reform and radical feminism] do not work as a massive front in a manner of counter cultural movements, they are subversive, infiltrating the mainstream with ironic breaks, citations and deformations” (Stermitz, 2009, p. 10). Feminist reformists seek to “grant women civil rights within the existing white supremacist capitalist patriarchal systems” (hooks, 2000, p. 110). Radical feminists attempt to change a “culture of domination with ... a global ecological vision of how the planet can survive and how everyone on it can have access to peace and well-being” (hooks, 2000, p. 110). Radical feminists promote decolonization, anticapitalist critique, and solidarity (Mohanty, 1997, 2003). In the 1990s, “radical feminists were dismayed to witness so many women (of all races) appropriating feminist jargon while sustaining their commitment to Western imperialism and transnational capitalism” (hooks, 2000, p. 45). A neocolonialist perspective perpetuates gender exploitation and oppression. A feminist perspective addresses the politics of gender construction in a way that does not re-inscribe Western imperialism, sexism, and misogyny.

Discussion and activities in my courses include students identifying the sources from which they have learned about feminism and patriarchy.

Typically, students' understanding of feminism will be from what is learned from patriarchal media, although patriarchy is *unmarked*. Patriarchy with its ubiquitous invisibility, like the air we breathe, is a powerful influence on our behaviors and beliefs, while feminism is misconstrued from how it is *marked* in patriarchal media. Students, in my courses, are guided to find critiques of patriarchy in visual culture as feminist interventions and actions. This strategy teaches students to expose, critique, and alter visual culture stereotypes of what is assumed to be ways of being male or female humans.<sup>3</sup> Misinformed views of patriarchy and feminism are exposed in this activity.

Common assumptions that need to be dispelled are that patriarchal systems are primarily of a father's surname given to his children to mark the father's kinship lineage. While this is one marked visual manifestation of a patriarchal social system, it is the unmarked aspects of a patriarchal system of institutional and family hierarchies that needs to be critiqued. Hierarchy is a patriarchal social system, even if women dominate. This needs to be exposed since corruption, coercion, violence, and injustice are aspects of domination power—the type of power inherent in a patriarchal system. Matriarchy is not an opposite system to patriarchy, just as democracy is not the opposite of socialism as is sometimes suggested in mass media propaganda in the United States, which resurfaced surrounding President Obama's promise of healthcare reform, i.e., healthcare for all. In fact, socialism cannot be achieved without political and economic democracy, and if there is no socialism, there is no true democracy (Foot, 2000). Matriarchy cannot be achieved without feminist principles of a non-hierarchical system of an integrative power for co-creation of the present and future. Matriarchy involves participation in community in a form of shared power that does not take away from others for the benefit of a few.

“Patriarchal violence in the home is based on the belief that it is acceptable for a more powerful individual to control others through various forms of coercive force” (hooks, 2000, p. 61). To explore the politics of gender construction in visual culture in terms of different forms of power inherent in patriarchal and feminist practices, students can gather images

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<sup>3</sup> See Kimmel (2008, p. 6).



that are part of their everyday world, and respond in visual dialogue with the images to questions of who, when, where, and why does anyone have the right to use force to maintain authority. Students can also create artworks to envision change such as responding visually to the question, *What are liberatory visions of masculinity?*

## Facilitating Feminist Critiques of Visual Culture

To interpret visual culture, it is important to look at conditions for the cultural artifact's production in relation to socioeconomic class structures, gender-role expectations, and specific visual codes of the time, as well as how those codes have changed over time. One way to do this is to gather responses from other people regarding the object or image in blog commentary, movies, news, and personal interviews. Also, a *Google Image* search discloses how the object/artifact is used in a variety of websites. Take one website that frequently refers to the object, and put the URL to that website in *regender.com*. Read the revised regendered story to discern if and how the meaning has changed. Discuss as a group or class the various meanings of the artifact, paying particular attention in your discussion on issues of social class, gender, race, and sexual identity in relation to the privileging or devaluing of the artifact. In regendering, consider how the meaning has changed by the discursive space throughout time and place that surrounds the visual cultural code of the visual artifact. This process reveals multivocal interpretations in which assumptions are challenged in explorations of self-constructions intertwined with issues of power and privilege.

Queries to investigate gendered cultural codes in cultural artifacts include: From where do the meanings you associate with a selected cultural artifact originate? Are the meanings from knowledge you have gained from your own observations of life? Are they from imaginative associations, or are they from society's ideas of the "true nature" of the artifact? What are some of the various meanings of the visual artifact?

In teaching one session of a combined undergraduate and graduate art education course at Northern Illinois University, as a guest professor in October 2009, I set-up a Web 2.0 application, *VoiceThread*, for students and

those outside the class to critique the students' digital video stories by responding to the following questions.<sup>4</sup>

- How is subjectivity constructed in the image, and whose subjectivity is constructed?
- Who is addressed by whom and for what purpose?
- What prior knowledge is assumed?
- In what way is this image an example of patriarchal visual culture, or how is this a critique of patriarchal visual culture?
- Discuss the image in terms of the type of power it suggests, and why you interpret that it could embody domination, consensual, or transformative power.

There are many strategies to expose the politics of gender constructions. In Chapter 7 of *Engaging Visual Culture*, I with Jane Maitland-Gholson (2007) discuss four effective strategies—empty space, overlay, spotlighting, and repositioning. In a recent version of teaching these strategies to gender studies students at Klagenfurt Universität, I provided the following directions.

Gather images that seem to contain gender specific objects. Cut out those objects and paste them into three different contexts or situations so that the meaning of the gender construction changes to shift oppressive display contexts to spaces that respect diversity. Present the objects from different points of view, by visually manipulating the contexts using strategies such as denoting empty space, overlaying, spotlighting, and repositioning. *Empty space* is used to draw viewers' attention to what is missing. *Overlay* is used to layer other meanings onto a familiar object or image. *Spotlighting* is used to provoke viewers to question accepted ways of thinking by highlighting something in the image that they would normally minimize or marginalize. *Repositioning* is used to reverse race, gender, social status, age, and other stereotyped identities.

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<sup>4</sup> Audio-recorded responses are at <http://explorations.sva.psu.edu/voicethread/stories.htm>. I encourage you to critique the works using *VoiceThread* and the set of questions, and invite students that you teach to do so too.

You might use a graphic software program to change them, or make a 3-D diorama in which you rearrange the images or replace images. Discuss how the object's meaning changes when placed in different contexts.

One male student responded with an overlay in which two words were added, on a shirt worn by a young woman, in an image he found on the Internet. The shirt originally had the message, "I love dick." *Dick* in American English is slang for *penis*, but in German *dick* means *thick*.

The significance of the changed meaning would only make sense to viewers who knew both German and English. The shirt now read, "I [heart shape] dick und dünn," which in a German speaking context means, "I love thick and thin" people.

Another male student manipulated media images that promote an ideology of masculinity—"no sissy stuff ... be a big wheel ... be a sturdy oak ... and give them hell"—to expose the harmful consequences of this ideology (Kimmel, 2008, p. 6). According to Jason Zingsheim (2008), a communication scholar concerned with mediated representations and performance of identity: "Masculinist ideology seeks to whitewash scholarship, to bleach anything that seems remotely personal, ... [and] the line between the personal and theoretical is not so distinct" (p. 2).

There were many creative applications of the four visual manipulation strategies by the Klagenfurt students; yet, even more significant is that students found these strategies used as critiques of prevalent patriarchal visual culture in ways they had not noticed or understood previously. For example, one student drew the class's attention to an Alpen-Adria Universität Klagenfurt women group's activist response to a Universität Klagenfurt party flyer, which was made by a graphic design business. This flyer was plastered around campus. The women's group countered the spring break open party invitation—in which the bikini-clad blond woman with open, wanton lips and voluptuous breasts that dominated the poster, which offered viewers entitlement to her vulnerability—with a new poster. They replaced the woman with bookend like images of an empowered flirtatious pose of a man leaning out of the picture frame dressed in a black skirt, white blouse, and boots.

Also, in preparation for the *Visual Culture and Gender Constructions* (VCGC) course, (a one-week, eight-hour per day course that I taught at Klagenfurt Universität), three months prior to the first class meeting, students made selections from guidelines I developed for research, writing, artmaking, and presentations. These are referred to as “preliminaries” in the Austrian university context in which students prepare for a course with a group, or individually, by selecting a preliminary guide for self-initiated research. One student selected the topic of Marc Quinn’s sculpture, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, for presentation on the first day of class. In following the guide, she studied socio-political contexts of both the artist and the doubled-human scaled white marble statue modeled on Alison Lapper, an artist and soon-to-be mother, who was born without arms and shortened legs. The sculpted body is without clothes seated on a large pedestal that was exhibited in front of the National Gallery in Trafalgar Square, London, from September 2005 to April 2007. There are other sculptures on pedestals in this pedestrian square, of men who had fought in battles. The context of artist and artwork, including the context of its production, and the overt and covert messages in the work that concern gender, race, and social class, are two corners of an intervisual critique triad. The third area of inquiry concerns viewers, i.e., the reception to the work by self, artworld experts, and a diversity of viewers. A feminist critique examines this triad (artist, art, viewers) by rethinking socially accepted ideas and values, accepting personal meaning in the analysis and valuing of art, and exposing stereotypes of gender, race, (dis)ability, sexuality, and social class concerning artistic production and valuing. I ask students to support claims by evidence that is triangulated by three different sources. The following questions can guide such an inquiry:

*Feminist Questions about Visual Culture:*

- What are the overt or covert messages in a work that concern gender, race, and social class?
- What is your perspective on these messages?
- What does the subject matter mean to you?
- How does the work impact you?

- If a work of public art offends a particular group or individual, what are the rights of the group or the individual?
- If a particular group lobbies to have public art removed because of strong historical reasons for objecting to it, how should their concerns be addressed? Refer to content, issues raised, and themes from at least three chapters in *Feminism is for Everybody* (hooks, 2000) to argue and substantiate your position.

After another student presented on Niki de Saint Phalle's *HON* (1966), and another referred to Gudrun Kampi's, *Hölzerne Venus* (1997), we decided to examine the cultural codes of "Venus" as a familiar cultural artifact that many viewers associated with all three sculptures. Marc Quinn's *Venus*, *Alison Lapper Pregnant*, crosses through lines of male/female and wholeness/disability bifurcations. To joggle students' entrenched views from popular visual culture portrayals that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, students used *regender.com* as a repositioning strategy.<sup>5</sup> They each entered the URL of one website with text about a particular Venus representation in *regender.com*. This program reopens English text with male and female pronouns (e.g., his-her) and other ways language is gendered (e.g., God-Goddess, Queen-King, Paul-Paula) from male to female, or female to male. In *regendering*, students explored how the meaning changed by the discursive space of gender constructions that surrounds the visual cultural code of *Venus*.

## Creating Well-being: A Visual Culture Pedagogy

According to bell hooks (2000), feminist practice is the only movement for social justice in which conditions for mutuality can be nurtured. Feminism is concerned with economic self-sufficiency and employment time schedules that meet social needs and responsibilities. To reach this goal, feminist activism might envision and implement job sharing; government subsidized

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<sup>5</sup> See feminist sociologist, Michael S. Kimmel's (2008) critique of the oversimplification of gender difference in the popular culture metaphor that men are from Mars and women are from Venus, and his argument that men and women are more similar than different in their political need to make gender visible, in order to change work, family, and intimacy for societal well-being.

care of children, elder parents, and the home; participatory economics; and online university and graduate programs for those who do not have the economic means or freedom from dependent care to further their education for self-betterment leading to fulfilling economic self-sufficient careers. New visual culture narratives can challenge perspectives that women in the workforce are seen as an enemy to men, and can begin to articulate a reverses with collective organizing around issues of poverty and equitable employment opportunities and salaries. For those who doubt the disparity between men and women's salaries in the United States, refer to the USA Congress report that compares women and men's salaries (Sherrill, 2009), or the 2009 statistics reported in *Paycheck Feminism* (Kornblum & Homer, 2009). Look at the visual cultural narratives<sup>6</sup> and ask: What are the conditions that sustain poverty? What are the conditions for solidarity to change poverty "to envision a world where resources are shared and opportunities for personal growth abound for everyone irrespective of their class" (hooks, 2000, p. 43).

Students in the gender studies courses that I taught in Klagenfurt informed me of the complexity of Carinthia's (i.e., the southern Austrian region) socio-political history through the visual culture and gender constructions dialogues. For example, one of many things that stood out in the *Vienna's Lost Daughters* film was a comment by one woman that she feels ill when she sees dirndls and long white socks.<sup>7</sup> This caught my attention because one student in my VCGC course said on the last day of

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<sup>6</sup> A multimedia online exhibition, *Economica: Women and the Global Economy*, which can be viewed at [economica.imow.org](http://economica.imow.org), provides photo slideshows with accompanying essays that offer alternative cultural narratives in the form of resistance to globalization and the economic crisis.

<sup>7</sup> *Vienna's Lost Daughters* (Unger, 2007) is a film of eight elder women living in New York City. They were of nearly 10,000 children, during nine months in 1938, whose mother or grandmother saved their lives by sending them to a sponsor in London from Vienna, and from other Nazi occupied countries, on the *Kindertransport*. The film concerns many issues. One theme that emerged over and over again in the interviews of the eight women in this film is their call for everybody to stand up to injustice, whenever bullying is enacted. It was an extremely difficult decision for mothers to send their young daughters on the *Kindertransport*, and the daughters come to terms with this decision that took on new significance when they had children. The women's views of issues of aging, and of their past ("wounds heal but the scars remain," and another refers to "in the bones") in the present, and of life—is so important to bear witness by watching the film. I found it fascinating the importance of music, smells and tastes of foods, and the different relations each had to the German language.

class that when she signed up for the course she thought she would not learn anything new because she had already taken a gender studies class, however, after the first hour of class she said she had learned so much already. I thought about what we did in that first hour that made such an impact on this student's learning. I had taken photos of the shop windows at the city center, the day prior, and selected some to ask questions using a feminist inquiry process described below. Two sets of two juxtaposed images stimulated an hour discussion, in the first hour of the course. (See Figures 1 and 2.) Figures 1 and 2 would not be in the visual culture found in the United States, and if I showed these images in a U.S. class, there would not be the same socio-historical-political relationship to them as the Austrian students found.

The images we spent time talking about were dirndls and lederhosen featured in store shop windows, which are traditional clothes for weddings and other special events in Austria. Most of the women in this class owned several dirndls. These have aprons. I asked about associations with aprons. Where are they worn, who wears aprons, to do what activities? Students had not previously thought about dirndls in this way. They discussed the cooking and cleaning activities, in caring for others, that aprons as visual culture suggests. The other set of images we talked about were two posters in storefront windows on either side of the main entrance to a shoe store. Both images were intended to entice men and women to buy shoes, but the strategies differed.



**Figure 1.** Klagenfurt's *zentrum* (city center) shop windows of dirndls and lederhosen. When are these worn? Who wears them? Consider race, ethnicity, age, gender, sexuality, social units, and social class. What activities does one do in wearing an apron, or in wearing leather shorts?



Students, who are experienced in their Austrian Germanic language, felt empowered to interpret the visual culture of their hometown, switching the role of expert from the teacher to the students. I set-up the motivation and guided the discussion. Students interpreted the text, which led to their interpretation of the images and insights into how the images constructed

femininity and masculinity. In the shoe store images, the text above the woman translated to English states, *Can they resist?* (*Können sie Widerstehen?*). She appears to be serving the shoe she holds, with lips parted and looking upward with an expression of desiring or longing. The text by the man, translated to English, states *Shoe-addict?* (*Schuh-süchtig?*). He faces the viewer in a pose of confidence and control over what he does, challenging anyone who denies that a man can have it all.

I was told in a Fulbright overview letter about the Austrian culture, and by another professor in the United States that had taught in the same program, that Austrian students expect lecture and do not participate in dialogue as is more typical in classes in the United States. I did not find that to be the case. I use processes very purposefully to generate dialogue among students, such as including visual cultural artifacts of the specific cultural context of where I am teaching, and ask the students to teach me about their visual culture.

I learned from the students that homophobic, racist, and, to a lesser degree, sexist attitudes persist in southern Austria known as the Carinthian region. All three of these oppressive attitudes are visually present throughout Klagenfurt. In spring 2009, a book, displayed prominently in my furnished

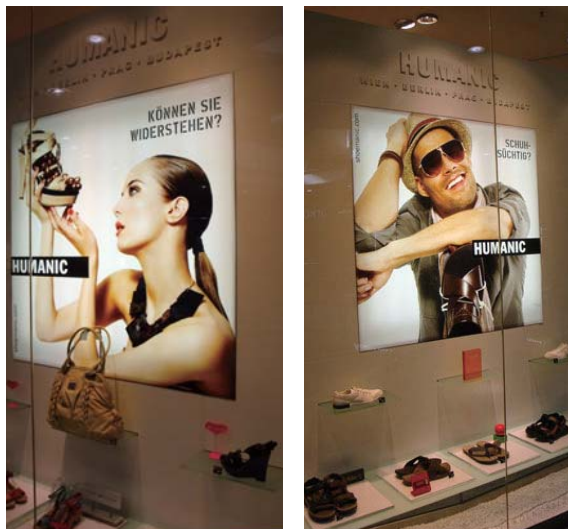


Figure 2. Klagenfurt's *zentrum* (city center) shoe store window displays.



Klagenfurt apartment, praised Jörg Haider. On return to my house in the U.S., I came across an article about Jörg Haider in the *Intelligence Report* published by The Southern Poverty Law Center titled, “Xenophobic Leader Dies, and a Long-Held Secret Spills” (Eisenstein, 2009). It describes his fatal car accident in October 2008, and that he had been romantically and sexually involved with Stefan Petzer. This was the secret in that Haider condemned homosexuality and the public knew him with a wife and children, yet Petzer was his “hand-picked successor” of the “Movement for Austria’s Future,” formed in 2005. Based on the extreme-right and neofascist positions in this party, the article stated that “In protest, the European Union imposed sanctions against Austria and Israel recalled its ambassador from Vienna in 2000” (Eisenstein, 2009, p. 71).

A 27 year-old man from the U.S., who had been studying at Klagenfurt University for three years, pointed out how his license plate, like other non-Austrians’ license plates, is marked as an outsider, and thus he has been harassed as an outsider. Unmarked hides privilege.

Attitudes to nudity are relaxed in Carinthian (and Europe in general) more so than in the U.S. as men and women in Austria are comfortable sunbathing nude and (un)dressing in semi-public mixed gendered places. Yet, objectification of women is clear in the posters and shop window displays throughout the city, in the music, and in the experiences of these Austrian students.

## **Challenging and Changing Harmful Constructions with New Media Intertexts**

To become producers of a socially just world, I ask students to enact critical public pedagogy with cyberNet art concerning social justice, which could include critique of entitlement, privilege, and oppression; unjust power relations, reproduction rights, poverty, education, healthcare, ending violence, anti-racism, gay rights, challenges to homophobia, accessibility, exposing exploitation, and social and environmental responsibility. In looking at examples, which I direct their attention with bookmarked sites, students learn about the complexity of these issues. New media intertexts that students experienced and studied in this June 2009 course included:

**(1) Public Pedagogy Participatory Democracy**

- MediaShed (2006) @ <http://mediashed.org/>
- Operación Digna (2003) @ <http://www.thing.net/~cocofusco/dignaeng1.html>
- Participatory Media Literacy (2007) @ <http://www.socialtext.net/medialiteracy>

**(2) Cyberfeminism: Interventions in Patriarchal Systems**

- Art & Activism at Mejan Labs @ <http://transition.turbulence.org/blog/archives/002904.html>
- Critical Art Ensemble @ <http://www.critical-art.net/>
- Electronic Civil Disobedience (2007). Archive of e-actions @ <http://www.thing.net/~rdom/ecd/ecd.html>
- Yee, K.-P. (2005). *Regender: A different kind of translator* @ <http://regender.com/index.html>
- @TMark (2000) @ <http://www.rtmark.com>
- Yes Men (1999) @ <http://www.theyesmen.org>

**(3) Cyberfeminism: Cyborg Border Crossing**

- Humanfuture (2008) @ <http://humanfutures.fact.co.uk/>
- Kulunčić, A. (2004). *Cyborg Web Shop* @ <http://www.cyborg.com.hr/about.php>
- subRosa (2004). *Cell track: Mapping the appropriation of life materials* @ <http://www.cyberfeminism.net/>

**(4) Ecofeminism and Collective Activism**

- Department of Space & Land Reclamation (2002-2008) @ <http://www.counterproductiveindustries.com/tour/>
- *DissemiNet* (Stryker + Brooks, 1998–2001) @ <http://disseminet.walkerart.org/>
- *RadarWeb* (Brooks & Stryker, 1999) @ <http://www.thing.net/~sawad/radarweb>

These examples introduce students to approaches by artists who use simulation, interactivity, collaboration, and intertextuality.<sup>8</sup> What follows are some practical strategies and pedagogical processes for challenging and changing harmful constructions with *new media intertexts*.

Net art characteristics often include: (a) visible palimpsest traces (e.g., Google Docs or wikis provide a history of revisions based on each time the document is saved), (b) perpetually changes so that there are no stagnate categories (e.g., use of hyperlinks in a blog), (c) an interplay of surface and depth forming a multifaceted critical pastiche (e.g., links to YouTube with open forum commentary in which all can contribute their views, and links to other media or texts, to present an issue from different perspectives and concerns), and (d) enables participation. Multivocal participation built into the design of Net art can facilitate a socially responsible public pedagogy. For example, in the *Gender Studies and Activist Art* that I taught in spring 2009, students—through guided visualization—thought about a recent specific event or moment of encounter that created a strong visceral reaction. Privately, each wrote about the encounter he or she visualized. The act of writing, followed by reflection on what is meaningful about the experience, generated the themes for developing activist art. Students placed what we referred to as *discernments* of their experiences in a hat. I had worn a hat to class, which I took off to become a place to collect their anonymous statements. I typed these discernments on a Google Doc. During the next class session, students worked individually, or with a partner, at a computer to remap, recode, relocate, and reconstruct this digital space of a shared Google Doc. I encouraged a dialogic process for transformative identity politics with the following directives: *Between another's words put your own. Change another's words—scale, color, add, erase. Draw. Add images. Erase the cell walls. The connection is not to presume sameness. There are lines of power that divide us. Cross through the lines.* This Google Doc served as an emerging assemblage to disassemble and reassemble for transformative identity politics. Alison Weir's writing on collective action in transformative identity politics suggests how change can occur through such a dialogic process:

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<sup>8</sup> For elaboration of this cyberNet activist art pedagogy see Keifer-Boyd (2009).

When I identify with you, I am reconstituting myself, my identity, through traveling to your world; through coming to know you, by listening to, witnessing your experience, I am expanding myself to include my relation to you. But rather than assimilating you into myself, assuming sameness, or simply incorporating your difference without change to myself, I am opening my self to learning about and recognizing you: I cannot do this without changing who I am. And because this process changes our relationship to each other, it also changes you—more so, of course, if the process of identification goes both ways. (Weir, 2008, p. 125)

I was surprised how intensely students engaged in the Google Doc. Their enthusiasm for the process was expressed in a reflective debrief held after the experience. It was a stimulating real-time, in-the-same-space *dialogue* using a Google Doc. Perhaps the success was because it allowed for anonymity along with responsibility to each other. The architecture of participation possible with the Web 2.0 Google Doc enabled students to cross through the thresholds that divide to identify with others in ways that led to brainstorming actions that they could do together in order to challenge and change oppressive and harmful social practices. For example, several students created the following statement, which included links, images, and combinations of their writing with individual insertions:

I felt as ‘the other’ and knew, that i had no voice. So I kept my mouth shut. But in Berlin I noticed, that there are other ways of thinking . . . I try to find my way through reading and discussion with other people. . . . Our collective activism is the organization of an online borderfree ‘festival’ on the Upstage [<http://vimeo.com/6389617>] platform. People can meet online from all over the world and try to break down borders in their head by sharing experiences and trying to relate to experiences of others, so everybody has the chance to be of the ‘community’ . . . Film it, put it on YouTube and share it with the world . . . such as The GayClic Collab Against Homophobia (from France)<sup>9</sup>” (personal communication on the course Google Doc, June 6, 2009).

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<sup>9</sup> The URL below requires verifying your age and then opens the video at [http://www.youtube.com/verify\\_age?next\\_url=/watch%3Fv%3DUV26OMSb\\_VQ](http://www.youtube.com/verify_age?next_url=/watch%3Fv%3DUV26OMSb_VQ).

## Concluding for Future Action (Re)Courses

The spiral of asking questions, gathering and analyzing data from my teaching, planning a pedagogical and/or curricular action, reflection, and sharing with others continues in my critical action research about these pedagogical approaches presented here. My goal from reflection on these strategies is to connect students with whom I work to global perspectives in order to end sexism and oppression. This involves developing students' ability to conceptualize the personal for political mobilization to change systems of oppression. Multivocality and transcultural dialogues possible with Web 2.0 architectures of participation are necessary to mutually articulate an interdependence of difference for collective action. Redefining with visual manipulation strategies of empty space, overlaying, repositioning, and spotlighting expose epistemologies of ignorance and present counterpoints.

Visual culture embodies cultural beliefs of a society in the visual output of that society. Look closely at visual culture for how gender is constructed. Are there a narrow range of ideals of men and women in terms of what is valued and respected? Raise awareness of limiting and oppressive ideals in gender ideology. Construct alternative, counter, and wider portrayals that do not limit human potential to live responsibly in the world. To view personal injustice as political look at the specific exploitative structures and systems that produce the conditions for that injustice. From this vantage point, relational identity can be formed for a transformative feminist coalition acknowledging interdependence of difference; and specific solutions for social, economic, and environmental justice.

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