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Art Education in the *Silent Gaps* of Visual Culture

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Abstract

In this article, I argue that the disjunctive narrative of collage, one of the most significant innovations of 20th century art, has implications for critical pedagogy in art education. It is within the silent, in-between spaces of collage fragments that students can examine and critique the academic knowledge of schooling and the consumerism of visual culture, and that they can learn to imagine and create new cultural understandings and representations.

The advocacy of silence expresses a mythic project of total liberation. What's envisaged is nothing less than the liberation of the artist from him [or her]self, of art from the particular artwork, of art from history, of spirit from matter, of the mind from its perceptual and intellectual limitations.... Silence keeps things open.

Susan Sontag (1969, pp. 17-18, 20)

"Collage is the central principle of all art in the 20th century in all media," claims postmodern author Donald Barthelme (1997, p. 58). Indeed, the disjunctive narrative of collage, its radical juxtaposition of images, ideas, and actions, is employed in the genres of cinema, photomontage, assemblage, video art, installation art, and performance art. Given its ability to entice consumption, it is coincidentally the prevailing mode of address by the mass-mediated systems of television, advertising, the news, the movies, and the Internet.

Collage enables us to experience everyday life in such a way that its disparate and idiosyncratic fragments resist coalescing into a unifying whole, which philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari refer to as "disjunctive synthesis" (1983, pp 12-13). Instead of a totalizing body of knowledge, the composition of collage

consists of a heterogeneous field of co-existing and contesting images and ideas. Its cognitive dissociation provides the perspectival multiplicity that is necessary for critical engagement. Dialectical tension occurs within the silent, in-between spaces of collage, as its fragments, its signifying images and ideas interact and oppose one another. Such complexity and contradiction represents the substance of creative cognition and cultural transformation.

Paradoxically, while the indeterminate epistemology of collage narratives like artist Robert Rauschenberg's *Monogram* resists synergy, such narratives nonetheless enable the apprehension of unstable and shifting images and ideas that deconstruct assumptions that are socially and historically determined. Art historian and critic Donald Kuspit argues that this paradoxical character of collage "makes uncertainty a method of creation" (1983, p. 129). For science philosopher Michael Polanyi, the knowledge that occurs in such uncertain conditions is "tacit," in that it anticipates the "indeterminate implications ... of an approaching discovery" (1983, pp. 24-25). Just as the uncertainty of collage narrative raises compelling questions in creating and interpreting art, it can also enable students' critical intervention in the diverse political and economic "collage" of visual culture.

In her 2004 installation and *i swore i wouldn't scream* ... (see Figure 1), Penn State art student Alexandra Sullivan presents a collage narrative in which the mutability in the in-between spaces of its rarified, "frigid" fragments engages viewers' unassuming conversations and interpretations. The installation consists of a miniature video monitor imbedded in a stack of

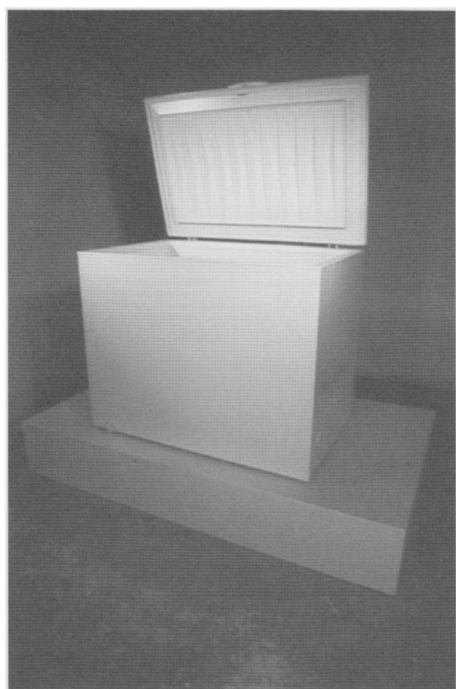


Figure 1. Alexandra Sullivan, *and i swore i wouldn't scream*, 2004, exterior view (photo courtesy of the artist).

raw, frozen meat strips at the bottom of a freezer (see Figures 2 and 3).

As viewers peer into the freezer, they see video footage of an egg with its hard shell being pierced and its soft yolk oozing out, contrasted with the stiff, frozen meat (see Figure 4).

The tiny video monitor seems like an eye returning the gaze of viewers from the “flesh of its body,” which in frozen confinement implies incarceration. Violence to the egg suggests the “blinding” and emptying of “vitreous humor” from the omniscient “eye of television.” Sullivan’s collage narrative evokes questions and suggests multiple interpretations that relate to the abusive practices by the science and meat industries on animals, issues about world hunger, the sexual objectification of women’s bodies, and women’s abortion rights.

Considering the surfeit of ephemera that is available in newspapers, magazines, and other forms of visual culture, virtually every classroom teacher has employed collage as a quick, easy, and inexpensive image-making process for students’ enter-



Figure 2. Alexandra Sullivan, *and i swore i wouldn't scream*, 2004, interior view (photo courtesy of the artist).

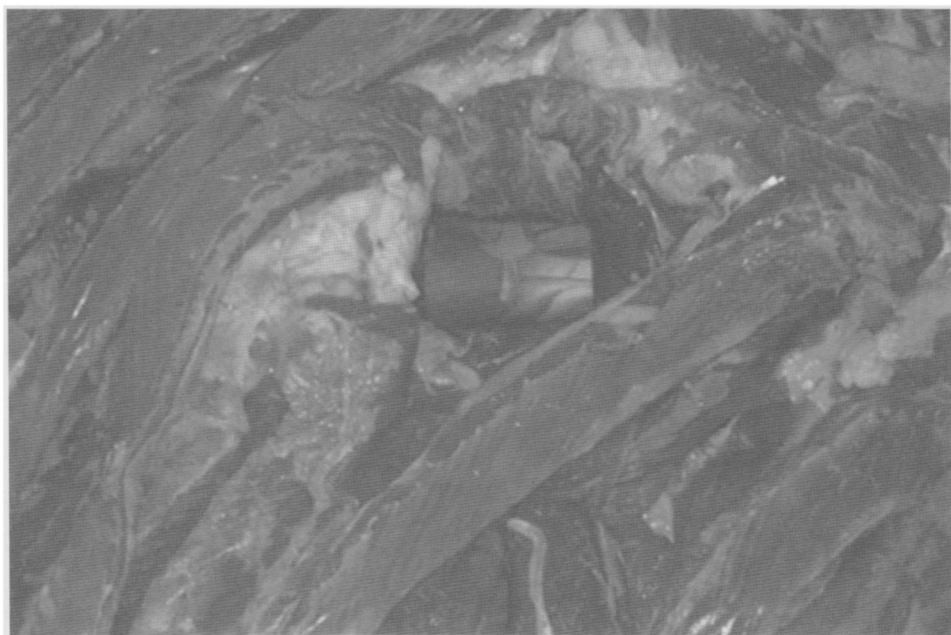


Figure 3. Alexandra Sullivan, *and i swore i wouldn't scream*, 2004, interior detail (photo courtesy of the artist).

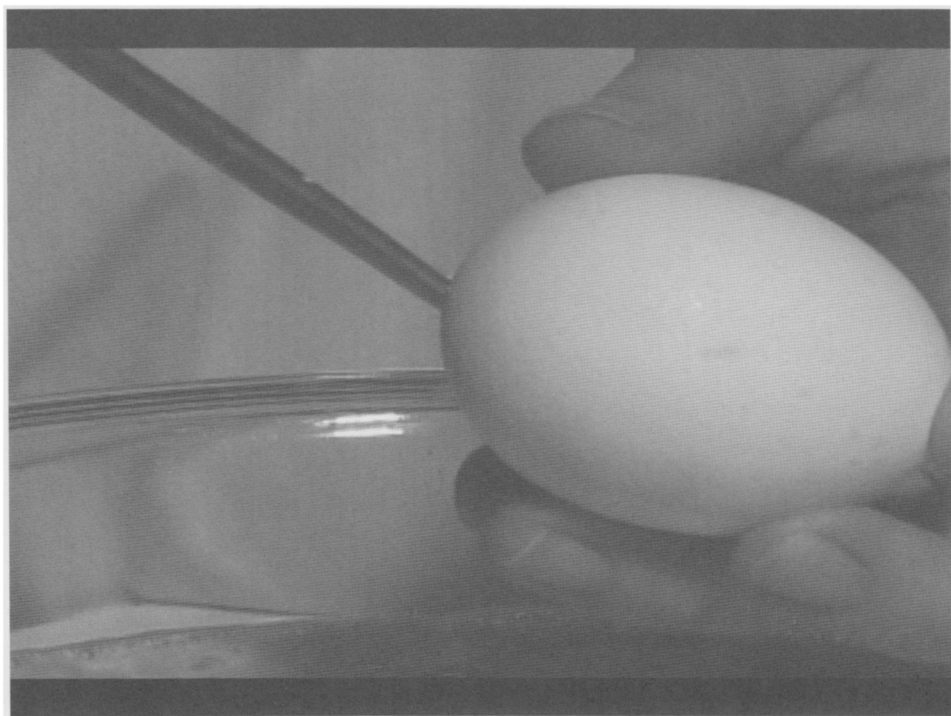


Figure 4. Alexandra Sullivan, *and i swore i wouldn't scream*, 2004, video still (photo courtesy of the artist).

tainment or their illustration of what they learn in the various academic disciplines in school. There are social studies collages, arithmetic collages, language study collages, health collages, and even physical education collages, apart from the use of this medium in art classrooms. Such ubiquity notwithstanding, there is little evidence that the aesthetic dimension of collage is understood at any depth in schools. It is within this dimension, in the silent, empty gaps, the exposed, in-between spaces of collage fragments, that a critical pedagogy is possible, in which students can learn to examine and critique the academic knowledge of schooling and the consumerism of visual culture, and in which they can learn to imagine and create new cultural possibilities.

In the epigraph at the beginning of this article, cultural critic Susan Sontag suggests a correspondence between the “open” phenomenon of silence and the empty open spaces of collage. She argues, “‘Silence’ never ceases to imply its opposite and to depend on its presence ... so one must acknowledge a surrounding environment of sound or language in order to recognize silence” (1969, p. 11). This was certainly the case with composer John Cage’s *4’ 33”* during which the performer sat at a piano and played nothing. In other words, the meanings of silence are defined by the cultural context in which it is situated; by never ceasing to imply, its meanings are indeterminate (p. 11). To illustrate, Sontag points to the “beauty of [comedian] Harpo Marx’s muteness [and how it] derives [meaning] from his being surrounded by manic talkers” (p. 11).

Similarly, the interpretations that occur in the empty, in-between spaces of collage narrative derive from the manic talking of their surrounding fragmentary images. Critical theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha (1999) refers to these silent interstitial spaces of collage as “the third interval” in which the struggle, the dialectical tension between a work’s surrounding fragmentary images, makes possible manifold interpretations (p. 43). In other words, the third in-

terval provides us with room to talk, space within which to respond and challenge the manic talking of the fragments’ assumptions and ideologies.

For educator Elizabeth Ellsworth (1997), the dissociation that is afforded by the disjunctive narrative of collage serves as pedagogical necessity in fostering critical thinking in students. Ellsworth argues that modes of address like those of collage narrative resist quick and easy conclusions. The discontinuity of their differing images and ideas impels an “analytic dialogue” as compared with a “communicative dialogue.” The “oscillating, slippery, and unpredictable” characteristics of analytic dialogue allow for diverse perspectives and unlimited creative possibilities, unlike communicative dialogue, which ends in resolution by striving for finite understandings (Ellsworth, 1997, pp 115-116).

In view of the fact that collage has such historical significance in the visual arts, the pedagogical responsibility for teaching about its aesthetic dimension lies in the visual arts classroom. It is there that students can learn about its undecidable narrative within the context of art making, art history, art criticism, and aesthetics and to further explore and examine their interdisciplinarity across the “collage” of school curricula and visual culture. The importance of collage notwithstanding, left to a “cut and paste” mentality, the conceptual profundity of its narrative is easily misunderstood as a pastiche of essentialized images and ideas. Without an understanding of its conceptually compelling process—its criticality—collage ends in nostalgic sentimentality, an immutable notion of history that philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1957) argues prevents creativity from occurring (pp. 17-20).

Artist Cristin Millett’s investigations into the history of medicine, namely its gendered stereotyping and stigmatizing of women’s bodies, are examples of the critical history called for by Nietzsche. In Millett’s recent installation *Teatro Anatomico* (see Figure 5), she created three concentric ellipses, the panels of which

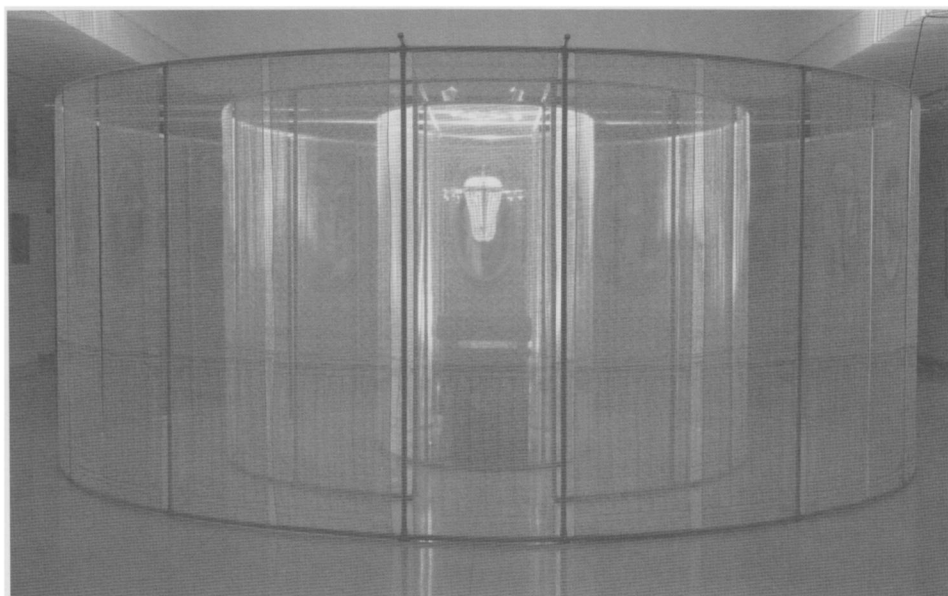


Figure 5. Cristin Millett, *Teatro Anatomico*, 2004, exterior view (photo courtesy of Rob Martin).

are covered with a skin of sheer chiffon, suggesting the sensuality of the female body as viewers gaze into its interior. Walking in the labyrinthine space of the installation implies movement through the passages of the body. Upon reaching the center of the installation, viewers find a chandelier constructed by Millett whose multifaceted forms represent the female reproductive system as they literally and metaphorically “illuminate” the interior space (see Figure 6).

Projected on an examination table below the chandelier is a video image of a female body undergoing abdominal hysterectomy. As viewers gaze at the image of the surgical procedure, a surveillance camera captures the image of their faces and streams it live onto the prone body of the patient (see Figure 7). In so doing, viewers’ awareness of being viewed exposes their own complicity in objectifying the female body as viewers. As a parody of Renaissance anatomy theaters that objectified the human body and led to the medicalized classifications of health and normality during the Enlightenment, Millett’s *Teatro Anatomico* exposes, examines, and critiques

historical tropes of the gendered body and in doing so raises questions about privacy and voyeurism.

Important for art educators to consider is Nietzsche’s “critical” conception of history, which in corresponding with the oppositional characteristics of collage narratives like Millett’s installation provides “the strength to break up the past, and apply it, too, in order to live” (Nietzsche, 1957, p. 21). Bringing history back to life in this way is a haunting prospect. While the fragments of collage provide us with the comfort of fixed signs and familiar codes of cultural history, the undecidability of their in-between, empty, silent spaces conjures *horror vacui*, a fear of empty places, which the philosopher Aristotle (1999) characterized as nature’s abhorrence of a void and its continual effort to fill it up. During the Middle Ages, *horror vacui* was invoked by the Church through the work of its manuscript illustrators who filled the empty spaces of their illuminations with canonical images to indoctrinate their congregations and to prevent any free-associations that might deflect their faith toward worldly thoughts. The fear of empty places also

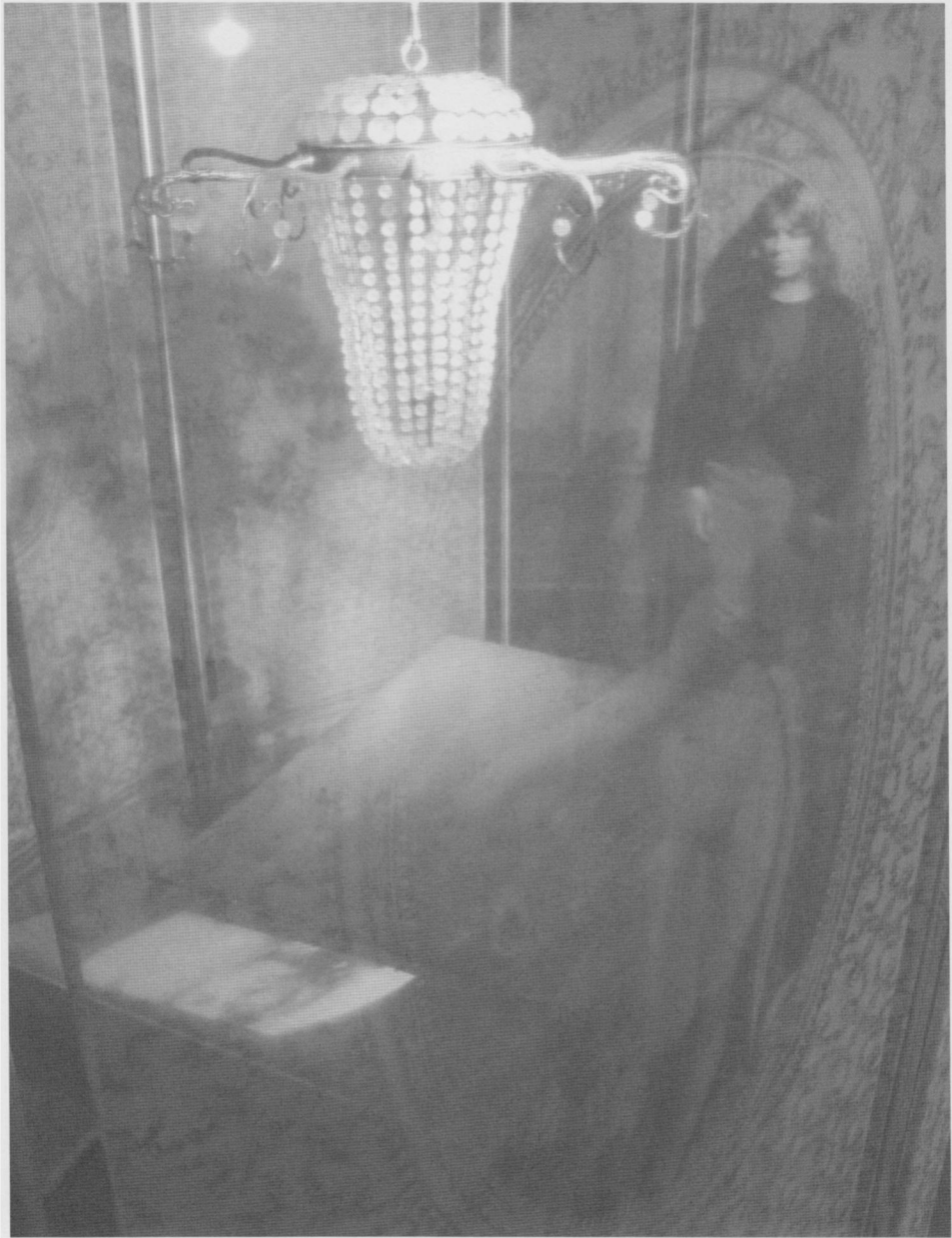


Figure 6. Cristin Millett, *Teatro Anatomico*, 2004, interior view (photo courtesy of Rob Martin).

evokes *tabula rasa*, the Enlightenment concept of education put forth by philosopher John Locke (1996) in which the mind was presumed an empty slate upon which reasoned knowledge was to be inscribed.

Educator Parker J. Palmer (1998) describes such epistemological horror as the “fear of live encounter” (p. 38). Perpetuated in schools, it consists of a “fear of diversity,” “fear of conflict,” “fear of losing identity,” and a “fear of changing our lives” (p. 38). For

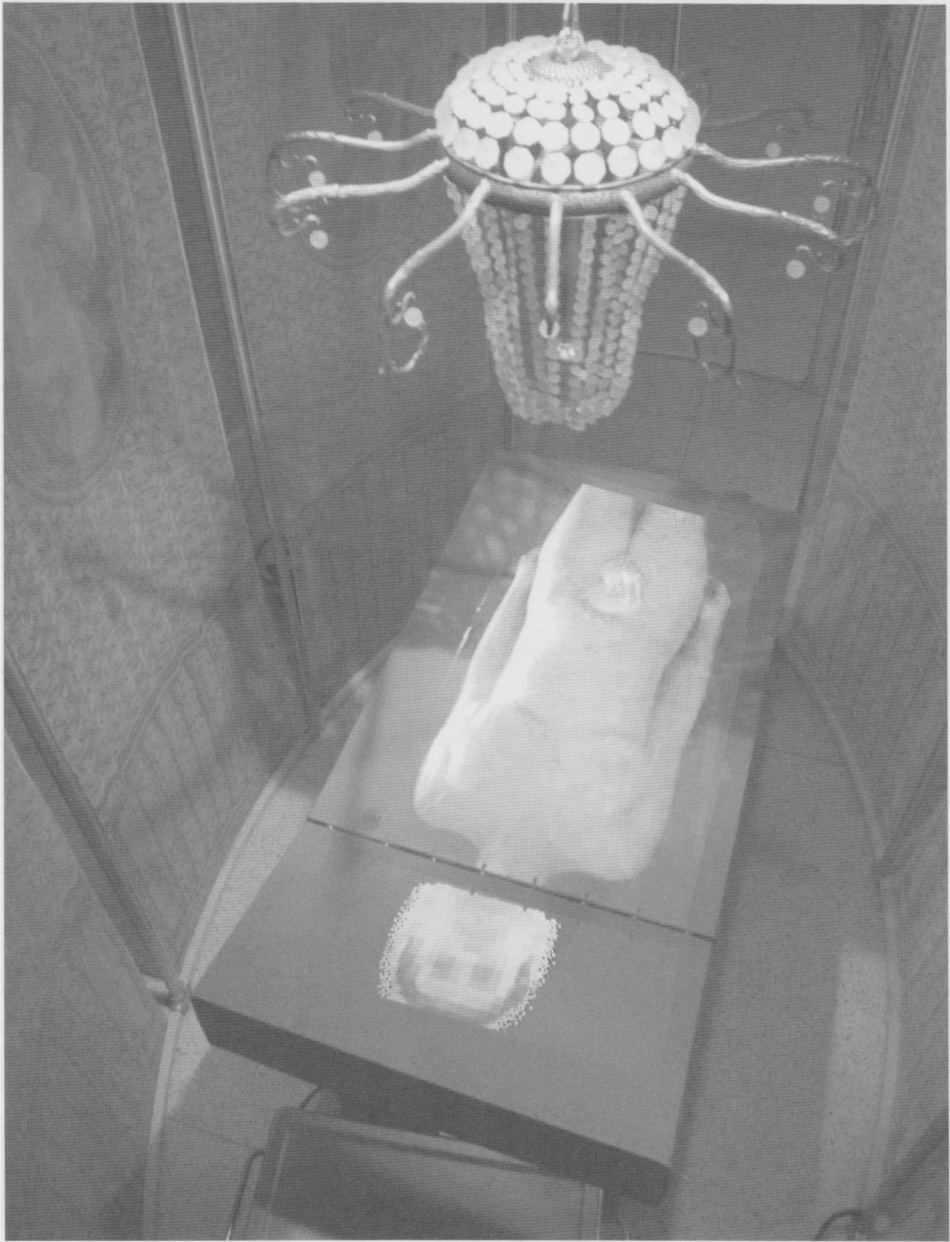


Figure 7. Cristin Millett, *Teatro Anatomico*, 2004, interior view (photo courtesy of Rob Martin).

Palmer, critical thought in the schools is made possible within a paradoxical space where an oppositional tension exists. For that tension to occur, Palmer builds the following six paradoxes into his teaching and learning spaces.

1. The space should be bounded and open.
2. The space should be hospitable and "charged."
3. The space should invite the voice of the individual and the voice of the group.

4. The space should honor the "little" stories of the students and the "big" stories of the disciplines and traditions.
5. The space should support solitude and surround it with the resources of community.
6. The space should welcome both silence and speech. (Palmer, p. 74)

A critical art pedagogy based on the undecidable narrative of collage offers the kinds of paradoxical spaces that Palmer is suggesting. For that paradox to exist, the discipline-specific content of art should be taught in juxtaposition with the other academic disciplines in schools and with the images and ideas of visual culture so that the dialectical tension between them yields multiple critiques, interpretations, understandings, and applications.

Such boundary-breaking education is transdisciplinary because it enables unlikely creative and intellectual associations. It is transpersonal because it recognizes a diversity of learning abilities and allows for students' expressions/performances of subjectivity. It is transcultural as students' memories and cultural histories are recognized as significant content in the classroom and allowed to interplay and intersect with one another as they expose, examine, and critique the commodity fetishism of visual culture and the academic knowledge taught in schools. Hence the critical pedagogy of collage enables students to transgress and transform academic and institutionalized assumptions into new cultural understandings and representations.

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