

Cool Timing: Temporality, Art and Learning

Warren Crichlow

For some time I have been pursuing a project that I used to call “Adolescent Learning in Art Galleries and Museums.” The project is really about the idea of the school excursion or field trip to art galleries and museums. I have been interested in what it means to the idea of learning for a teacher to take his or her class out of school into an art gallery or museum to think about art objects?

The project brought me into a circle with a type of educator that I had not previously been in contact with—the proverbial ‘education curator.’ I have since learned that that is a bad word in art galleries and that people tend to call themselves ‘education officers’ or simply ‘museum educators.’ I have been talking to people who do this kind of work and it has been interesting to see how they work, how they begin to think about the objects that are in the collection, how they try to link those objects/artifacts to certain kinds of curriculum needs and how they actually plan to execute learning experiences in those institutions. The Being on Time exhibition changes all of that for me. It reverses the polarity of the whole experience of learning from art objects because it not only brings art objects into the school but it actually engages the process of producing those objects. Also, the exhibition engages adolescents with practicing artists in the production of artworks that are then made available to us, the community—not just the community of adolescents but the wider community around the school and the art community itself.

The question of Being on Time changes the whole space-time idea that I had in this project and it really enforces the idea that we may not always have to go out of the school into the art galleries or museums to think about learning from art, but that that very process can come into the school itself in the very unique way that has been provided by the Being on Time exhibition. So in my view the Being on Time exhibition is an extraordinarily innovative endeavour. It brings contemporary visual artists and high school students together to collaboratively inquire into time, art and learning and what these categories individually and collectively might mean for the future of community, both inside and outside the school. I found this approach, what I call an inter-generational as well as an inter-spatial dialogue as having very important pedagogical implications for the conduct of art and education in public schools. I don’t say ‘art-education’ because I think it is important to separate art and education by the

'and' (that fundamental sign 'and') because sometimes art in schools is in art and sometimes it is in education. And so the time-space question I think is quite significant to considerations of art in the context of public schools. Foremost, in my view, the exhibition as an intervention embodies and enacts the fundamental refusal to separate ideas about images, symbolic representations and surface qualities of art objects from the actual events and lived circumstances of contemporary culture. I think that is quite different from what you would normally find about art and education.

In contra-distinction to a popular imaginary of the teenager who is deliberately slow and laxed, sauntering in your face, too cool to care or to be on time, this exhibition shows how spot-on young people are about learning in the visual arts and understanding how diverse practices of cultural representation might inform active ways of making change from the seemingly limited and intractable history of our present environment. The collaborative installation projects produced for this exhibition by the high school students and practicing artists raise significant questions about cross-cutting cultural/political predicaments and subjective passions with which we live. At the same time, these works also insistently remind us that the potential to imagine creatively and differently is not yet spent. In regards to the critical practice of *Being on Time*, I propose the trope "Cool Timing" to characterize the way this exhibition slows time down, encouraging the viewer to pay attention to art and artists, to construct a different time relation in which to experience and reflect upon objects created by others for us.

Wandering the hallways and stairwells of the Art Centre at Central Tech one looks at, but also must engage with, curiosities of art located in unusual and unexpected locations. A piece in the girls' bathroom challenges our ideological desires for a mirror image; another encourages us to listen carefully to a soundscape of muffled adolescent fears between the dark and foreboding rows of lockers. Art in the making is available to us as it degenerates with each scuffmark of the shoe. This exhibition asks us to choose to be addressed by artists of our time, young and older. Educators like Maxine Breen and Deborah Britzman and others firmly believe that in making such a choice we choose to make ourselves into new publics who may exceed what everyday thought tolerates as normal.

This kind of demand is not the typical one we find in schools of art. In fact, I would argue that the time for art in schools can no longer be imagined unproblematically as a "Cool Time" — the time of the joy of learning from the uncertainties and difficulties, the freedom that possibilities of creativity demands. I suggest that now, today, time for art in school can only be understood as a dilemma. The intensification of the question of

time is filled with more and more demand and accountability, calls for pragmatism and the usual refrain “we can’t teach everything.” Time for art in school has always been imagined as a different kind of time. Art has been seen as a time for creativity. The art time has always differentiated itself from the other school subjects by claiming the territory of creativity as its exclusive domain. Creativity means not simply time for learning about art objects, more importantly it ought to be a time for learning from the responsibilities of originality—of what is at stake once the imagination is released. A time for accepting uniqueness as difference and exploring self and other as part of the cost of realizing freedom. But art time has always been subject to increasing constraints—the constraints of time itself, of exclusiveness, of the high low culture divide, of budgets, of materials and their particular temporality (usually those that fit a criteria of safety and expedience). In the curriculum there is the ever-present restraint of positivism in the guise of formalism if not rationalist standardized evaluation, the enduring question of uniformity and expectation of accomplishment. There are also the constraints found in the time of day the subject is offered, usually in the afternoon or on Fridays and the limited and decreasing space devoted to art studios and for classrooms in the school building. As it is well known in the province of Ontario and in North America, South and North, beyond the commodification of art in the marketplace, we have entered the time of a lowered and lowering status of art in the curriculum. Despite the reception of postmodernism into art education (and I would note in the Ontario Curriculum document terms like interdisciplinary, theory, creation, analysis and an emphasis on linearity in structure) there remains the old recycling of a Western artistic canon to a certain pastiche of artistic styles. A detachment is implicit in the constant learning about language within the curriculum guide. This distance relies, in increasingly clever ways, on the containment and absorption of the decentering difference that art from other cultures and the diversity of art styles threatens to provoke. Namely here I refer to challenging practices emanating from artists of the Aboriginal First Nations Indigenous Peoples movements and the post-colonial diaspora, feminists and queer artists as well as the heterogeneous popular culture of youth and new media art of the late twentieth century. Despite its best rhetoric and practice, our thinking about art and education in the official curriculum seems caught in a time warp in relation to the broader questions which are raised by the rapid changes in our understanding of representation. All of these factors have led to the institutionalization of time and space for school art and for art to be experienced by youth.

I think that it is rare that we have art classes where people of various ages can learn from one another in a site like this one, where there is a

mixture of high school and adult art practitioners and those learning from art. Time made positive in art would give value to the tremendous fluctuations in both skill and imagination that may be found among students of any class. Particularly in a multi-cultural, multi-ethnic classroom space like the artist school community of Toronto, there ought to be more of a recognition of the heterogeneity of abilities—that ought to be the rule rather than the exception.

In art education, and education generally, once the well-known critique of schooling has been made, it is difficult to overcome its overwhelming despair and pessimism. But I think that with *Being on Time*, we have gone a long way towards overcoming that kind of exhibition, and perhaps even moved closer to a more interesting representational future.