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ART & FILM NOTES

BAM/PFA
UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY ART MUSEUM & PACIFIC FILM ARCHIVE



Visual Literacy in a Tech-Heavy World

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Students love their technology. It wouldn't surprise me if I saw someone watching a flat-panel TV, listening to an iPod, composing an e-mail with one hand, and playing games on a tiny screen with the other—all in the same moment. As technology pervades nearly every aspect of daily life, I can't help but wonder how we can continue to process and respond to this ever-growing sensory onslaught. To what degree do we hear but not listen, or see but not observe? And how can BAM/PFA incorporate this cultural phenomenon into its own efforts to understand and address visual literacy?

Based on the idea that images are a language, visual literacy is the ability to interpret and use images, whether conventional arts or contemporary media, in ways that advance learning, thinking, decision-making, and communication. A study released in July 2006 by New York's Guggenheim Museum asserts what many arts educators have known intuitively for years: teaching students how to describe and interpret art can improve fundamental skills in thinking and literacy. Part of what makes this study unique is that it comes from a museum, validating the powerful role museums can play in contributing to visual literacy. While mass media has exploded in society, higher education is just now catching up to its profound impact. For BAM/PFA, it is essential that we provide resources that help the University embrace the visual world in its endless pursuit of knowledge and truth.

One inspiring example of visual literacy is showcased through the exhibition **A Rose Has No Teeth**. In the 1960s, Bruce Nauman drew upon his knowledge of mathematics, science, philosophy, and literature, as well as the Bay Area's vibrant new dance and music scenes, to nourish his art. He did not compartmentalize these disciplines into separate realms, but rather integrated them into a new visual language. For him, art is not about the end product, but about the ideas behind it. Visiting our exhibition, students can begin to make their own connections as well.

College art museums are especially suited, given their inherent connections across campus, to place the visual arts in a number of contexts. Last semester, 1,335 students from a range of departments made study visits to BAM/PFA. Students studying the Mongol conquest of China viewed selected Asian objects. Computer science students studied prints to explore the art and science of photography. A literature class on "infernal texts" attended several films in the **Beat-Era Cinema** series. An anthropology class attended two screenings in the **Radical Closure** series, which asked how cinema can respond to a history shaped by violence. And students from numerous and varied departments annually curate two festivals, the **Women of Color Film Festival** and **Film and Video Makers at Cal**. For all of these students, ideas are transfigured by a change in medium, from words in a textbook to art in a gallery or films on a screen.

Our commitment to visual literacy extends to our programs as well. **How to Read a Film**, an annual PFA workshop, arms high school teachers with the ability to guide students in understanding the diverse and complex images that surround them. **Digital Culture 0101**, our new public course launched last spring, explored such questions as how digital media influence our perception of time and space and reflect and interact with culture.

We could choose to look at emerging media as powerful distractions, or as creative potential and learning tools. At BAM/PFA, we opt for the latter. It's our principal aim to give students the critical skills necessary to master—and enjoy—the visual culture of the twenty-first century. Please take advantage of our resources to exercise your sight.

Kevin E. Consey

DIRECTOR

Ken Goldberg: *Ouija 2000*, 1999; ongoing internet installation, including XY robot, software, rugs, tent, plastic hardware for tent, metal candlesticks, crocheted shawl, tablecloth, Parker Brothers' Ouija board game; purchase made possible through gifts from the artist and Catharine Clark Gallery, San Francisco.

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