

Like French or Spanish, Art is a language that can be learned and understood. It is a form of communication that one can learn to read and speak through study and practice. Reading art means understanding a visual statement. Speaking art means creating a visual statement. When art seems strange or meaningless, it is only that this language is yet to be understood.

(Goldonowicz, 1985)



Form + Theme + Context

Balancing Considerations for Meaningful Art Learning

BY RENEE SANDELL

Today's students need visual literacy skills and knowledge that enable them to encode concepts as well as decode the meaning of society's images, ideas, and media of the past as well as our increasingly complex visual world. How can art teachers help students understand our increasingly visual/material culture, as they comprehend the prevalence of extreme "makeovers" of bodies and living spaces, discern repetitive images of all kinds—whether they are shocking prison atrocities, twisted political ads, or the increasing plethora of colorful artifacts designed for continual material acquisition? Art teachers are responsible for teaching art as a qualitative language that, like poetry, explores *how*, in contrast to *what* something is, through creative expression and critical response. This process is both informative and transformative. Through the *informative* process of critical response, students perceive, interpret, and finally judge ideas connected to visual imagery and structures, past and present. Through the *transformative* process of creative expression, students generate artistic ideas that they elaborate, refine and finally shape into meaningful visual imagery and structures.



Front Pages/Nancy Chunn: Interview With the Artist by Gary Indiana, Nancy Chunn, Diane Publishing Co., 2001. Photographs by author.

Balancing Components of Art as a Visual Language

As we teach about art, artifacts, and visual/material culture, we need to help students engage in inquiry and discovery of an artwork's depth in order to accurately discern its meaning and value. As students become informed by/about a work of art, whether scribbles at early developmental levels to exemplars by master artists, they discover that the creator has made many artistic choices when expressing ideas. Similarly, when students engage in creative expression through artful problem-solving, they connect with decision-making processes that are filled with choices. To clarify for parents, school administrators, and the community, as well as to remind our students and ourselves, of the vital and multidimensional nature of art as a visual language, we can use a more balanced approach that replaces our traditional overemphasis on media and form.

To more fully understand an art image/object/event in its entirety (as well as the artist's voice), we need to help students both create and discern layers of meaning in an artwork in terms of its **form**, **theme** and **context(s)**, revealed in the following equation with each component described here:

ART = FORM + THEME + CONTEXT(S)		
How the work "is"	What the work is about	When, where, by/for whom, and WHY the work was created (and valued)

Form refers to *how the work "is"*. Here is where we discern the artist's many structural decisions—artistic process that leads to a final product. Form includes:

- the selection and use of art elements (lines, shapes, colors, textures...) and principles of design (balance, unity, variety, rhythm, pattern, contrast,...) inherent in the artwork's actual organization/composition and structure,
- the artwork's two- and three-dimensional qualities as well as its size and scale, and
- the artist's choice of media/ materials used to create the work in accordance with skills, handling and processes/methods leading to a specific and sometimes unique style.

Theme or subject matter refers to *what the work is about*. Here is what the artist expresses through a selected overarching concept or "Big Idea" (Walker, 2001)—what choreographer Twyla Tharp (2005) refers to as "the spine" in a work of art. The big idea, explored through specific themes and sub-themes, is revealed by the artist's chosen expressive viewpoint or perspective that reflects his or her culture and era. In exploring an artwork's theme, connections to other big ideas emerge in related visual sources, art historical references, and literary sources as well as similar topics explored by the performing arts such as music, theater, dance and film. In addition, thematic associations with multiple intelligences are revealed through the subject areas of math, language arts, science, social studies, and physical education. Such connections help link art to life.

Context refers to *when, where, by and for whom, as well as why the art was created (and valued)*. Here is where we comprehend the authentic nature of the artwork by investigating the conditions for and under which the art was created and the nature of the artwork under present conditions from our perspective in contemporary as well as those of foreign and old cultures. With contextual information, we can perceive the intention and purpose of the artwork. Our ability to interpret and evaluate the art is enriched by identifying personal, social, cultural, historical, artistic, educational, political, spiritual, and other contexts that influence the creation and comprehension of the work. As we distinguish how the form and theme work together within specific contexts that reveal the function of the artwork, we can also note its relevance and significance for the creator within his/her culture or society. This can lead to greater understanding and appreciation by the contemporary viewer.

Seeing the Art Lesson as a Balanced Work of Art

As art teachers, we engage in the processes of creative expression and critical response as we artfully research, design, implement and evaluate art instruction for different age groups and levels. Like works of art, our art lessons share the components of form, theme and context as indicated below (Sandell, 2003):

ART Lesson = FORM + THEME + CONTEXT(S)		
How the lesson "is" (Structures)	What the lesson is about (Big Idea)	When, where, by/for whom, and WHY the lesson was created (Purpose/Relevance)

Many art lessons tend to focus primarily on formal aspects such as elements of art and principles of design (*School Arts*, 2001), with less emphasis on engaging students with big ideas (Walker, 2001) and meaningful contexts for learning (Gude, 2004). The following "palette" is intended to help generate/elaborate a balanced menu of ideas and choices for enriching art lessons and teaching units. It addresses the many choices in structuring **formal** considerations for art learning experiences contained in art lessons: composition, art elements, design principles, two-dimensional and three-dimensional qualities, size/scale, media/ materials, skills, art processes/methods, and style. **Thematic** considerations of a lesson can focus on a big idea which includes subject matter; "viewpoint" or perspective, visual sources, art historical references, literary sources, connections in the performing arts (music, theater, dance, film) as well as other subjects (math, language arts, science, social studies, physical education, vocational education). Finally, **contextual** considerations specifically address for whom the lesson is planned and when, where and most importantly why students should learn this information. Here one explores the intentions and purposes of the lesson, which is tied to as many kinds of contextual relevance as possible, including personal, social, cultural, historical, artistic, educational, political, spiritual, and other dimensions surrounding human experience.

The three-column, form, theme, context (FTC) palette (p. 36) presents considerations for composing, inspiring, and varying art instructional planning.

Whether used to construct or deconstruct lessons, the form is guided by the query: *How does a balance of formal, thematic, and contextual aspects of art engage students with meaning?*

Balancing Choices

How do art teachers navigate through a plethora of choices for teaching (Hume, 1998)? What drives an art teacher's decision-making? It might be the availability of art materials or reproductions or simply a new idea we would like to explore based on our students' needs. It could perhaps be the need to improve working with specific media and processes. For example, from my experience as a student and teacher, I have always felt that the popular crayon engraving lessons are under-utilized. Students spend much time preparing the ground by heavily applying different colors, followed by covering them with another heavy layer of black crayon. Generally, these assignments place too little emphasis and time spent on the expressive drawing experience more attuned to formal considerations such as point, line, texture, and color towards creating a unified composition.

To imbue the media and process with meaning, I selected a theme for the fourth graders: "My Room at Night." Students made several sketches of their rooms and contents, and selected their favorite view that they would later draw on their crayoned grounds. I showed students art exemplars depicting night scenes and we discussed how at night when lights go out and after the immediate blackness, lines and shapes emerge as our eyes adjust to the darkness. Sharing the best view of their rooms but also the meaningful context of exploring personal/private space at home motivated the students. They consciously viewed their personal space, collections, and memorabilia in order to represent their private environments as a night scene. (Of course, the context was changed for one student when her beautiful creation was selected and re-titled "The Night Before Christmas" for an international bank's greeting card.)

The timing of our art lessons is another criterion for balancing instructional choices. This past fall, in my preservice course Visual Thinking Through Media, PK-12, we began a study of the *Front Pages* art of painter Nancy Chunn.

Throughout 1996, Chunn claimed daily the front page of *The New York Times* as her artistic canvas. "Using specialized rubber stamps and bold pastels to enhance, eradicate, and alter images and text, she created a commentary—colorful, intense, smart, compassionate, visually explosive—on the year's events

and the power of the press." (<http://www.1wdb.com/cgi-bin/women/12964.html>) As part of our class exploration of Chunn's work and exhibitions, we also learned how her work had inspired a Maryland middle school art teacher and his students to put an "artful spin on the news" during the winter of 2003. A colorful photo essay on the students' art installation, included the following caption in *The Washington Post* on June 19, 2003:

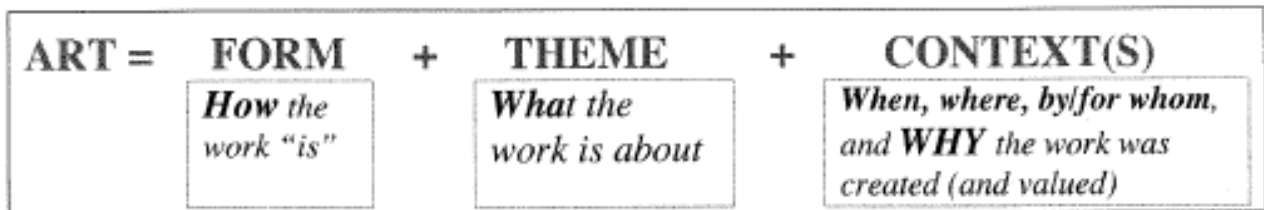
An enclosed two-story atrium at Roberto W. Clemente Middle School in Germantown has been overtaken by the news. Art teacher Jeremy Lundquist's students spent the semester drawing pastels on the front pages of *The Washington Post*. The pages were filled with plenty to captivate them: war in Iraq, sniper suspects, and snow. The students colored in photos, colored over them and had their way with words. An hourglass obscures a page that told of a deadline for Saddam Hussein's cooperation. When President Bush announced the nation would go it alone if it had to, he was given a commando suit and a military rifle.

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The Washington Post, June 19, 2003.

**Form + Theme + Context:
An Art Teacher's Palette for Composing Meaningful Lessons**



Generating a Menu of Ideas and Choices for Art Exploration!

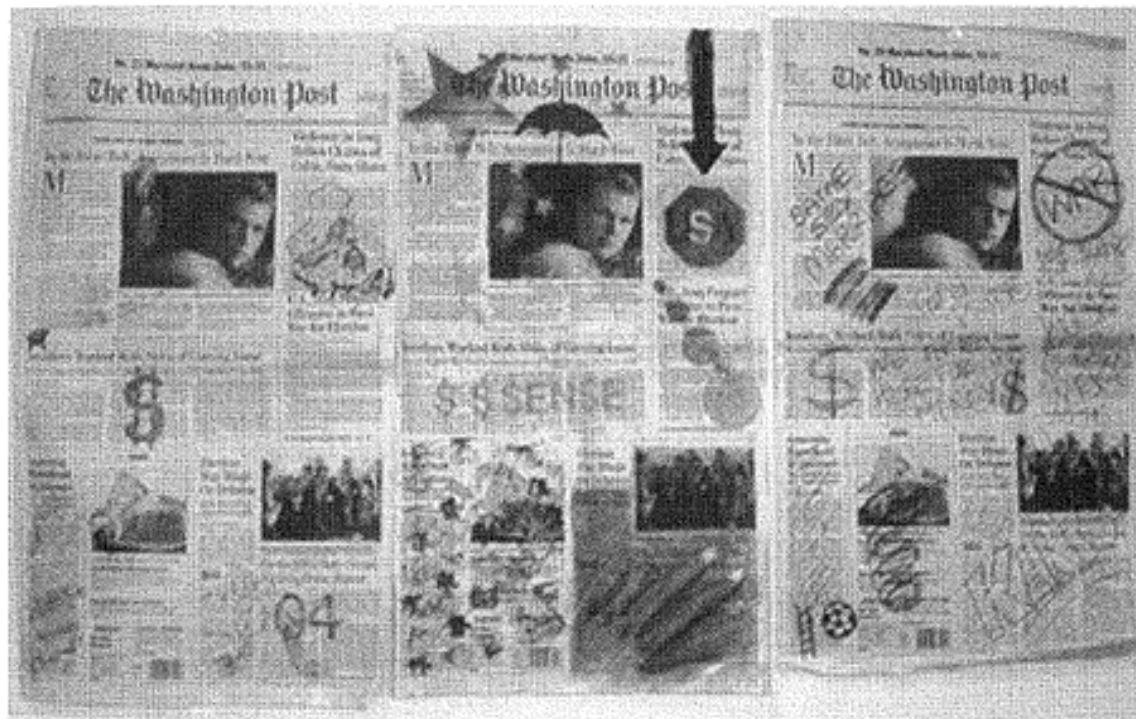
Lesson: _____

How does a balance of formal, thematic, and contextual aspects of art engage students with meaning?

FORMAL	+	THEMATIC	+	CONTEXTUAL
Actual Composition: Art Elements: Design Principles: 2D&3D Qualities: Size/Scale: Media/ Materials: Processes/Methods: Skills: Style: Other:		Broad Subject/BIG IDEA: Subject Matter: "Viewpoint"/ Perspective: Visual Sources: Art Historical References: Literary Sources: Other Arts Connections: © Music © Theater © Dance © Film Other Subject Areas: → Math → Language Arts → Science → Social Studies → Physical Education → Vocational Education		WHEN: WHERE: BY/FOR WHOM: WHY: Intention/Purpose(s): Relevance/Significance: ♦ Personal ♦ Social ♦ Cultural ♦ Historical ♦ Artistic ♦ Educational ♦ Political ♦ Spiritual ♦ Other:

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Figure 1. Form + Theme + Context: An Art Teacher's Palette for Composing Meaningful Lessons, Renee Sandell.



Three preservice art teachers' work. Photograph by Tisha Burke.

Inspired by the middle school project, my art education students decided to replicate Chunn's process. They chose a front page of *The Washington Post* during one week in September 2004, then visually responded to the events in selected columns, using pastel, crayon, and other media directly on the newsprint.

When the works were mounted on the wall, students immediately saw both similarities and differences in their graphic responses, while visually and verbally realizing how mass media attempts to control society through its images and commentary. After shared responses, we used the FTC palette to deconstruct this art experience, seeking a balance of formal, thematic, and contextual aspects for meaningful engagement. Working back and forth among the three columns, we generated different formal possibilities through materials and their application for the assignment. Some of the big ideas incorporated bias inculcated by mass media, including popular newspaper columns, and informational "priorities" as reflected on the front page of the newspaper. Students also came up with pertinent art historical references and connections to imagery such as Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* and graffiti, as well as works by Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat. Students related other thematic topics: folk songs, rap, *The Daily Show*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Wag the Dog*, and John Sayles's films, as well as other subject area issues ranging from money and sports to weather. With only 36 days until the impending 2004 presidential election, the context of being located in the metropolitan Washington, DC area fueled the students' artistic responses. They became increasingly engaged with the newspaper and contemporary art work, both dealing with the big ideas of how we treat each other in current society as well as how society records its events.

The powerful sense of preservice art teachers' responses helped create a time capsule with diverse kinds of relevance that increased the value of the art experience for teaching and learning. As a result of reflection on the form, theme and context

in decoding the experience of reading Chunn's work and creating their own, the preservice art educators were filled with possibilities for teaching art in a balanced, deep and significant way.

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

The author gratefully acknowledges the critical comments on earlier drafts from Drs. Eldon Katter and Shirley Hayes. The author welcomes feedback on the utility of the FTC Palette for all educational levels.