

# What Should an Art Educator Do?

Organized by the NAEA Women's Caucus, a group of 16 art educators met at NAEA in New Orleans to discuss relevant issues that build on the past, are of the present, and look to the future.

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e have been reading, debating, and discussing the current presidential election. Voting, as seen in the primaries, is challenging traditional estimations of influence and predictability. News media, commercials, and Internet sites provide a plethora of images that convey societal references and iconographical associations. Political imagery should not be ignored in art classrooms. These pictorial statements are a hot source to motivate critique, to study the formative process of visual culture, and to apply critical investigations to creative revisions.

Some of us are already asking in our classes, "What are students' responses to media representations?" For example, Read Diket used McCain's double portrait image from Newsweek (Feb. 11, 2008), on a college art appreciation quiz. Students readily associated the formal means by which the "Making of McCain" article was introduced to readers. Subtle differences in interpretation, such as gender, age, and experience, provided ideas for discussion in the post-quiz review. Centering discussion on an image afforded students an opportunity to study visual culture in action, while holding personal preferences apart from the conversation. Young children are actively contributing to national dialogues about issues. Their images and conversations were regularly included in media coverage during the early primaries, and the absence of their commentary in the media now conveys a shift in emphasis from the future to the now.

By default, the primaries and presidential elections always have been about race and gender because of the absence of women and people of color. This should not be avoided in our discussion. However, we can enlarge the discussion by including race and gender matters with issues of socio-economic class. This discussion could also include concerns about healthcare, housing, education, disparities, and war. How do news and other media visually convey each contemporary issue? Which issues are important to students but are not addressed? How can art educators motivate students to imagine the future in ways that do not follow trajectories of violence, poverty, and social disenfranchisement? What would such a world look like?

Here are resources and strategies to guide students to critique portrayals of presidential candidates and issues, and help students to visualize the world from an informed perspective that challenges conformity with media, peers, and other social forces that limit imagination.

# **Resources and Strategies**

- 1. The uses of images in the presidential campaigns are intended to persuade. Ask students to make associations with the images they see. Do these associations match the candidates' plans for United States? What values are conveyed? For upper-level students, questions could include: What is the intent of the presenter of the image? Was this image conveyed to the public by the entourage of the candidate, or was it intended as a rebuttal of claims or a suggestion of a darker side of the candidate by those who support an opponent? What are the historical and contemporary pictorial referents that subliminally supply additional content and metaphoric associations? How familiar does the viewer have to be with these pictorial devices to "upload" the intended meaning? How does chance play a part in the formation of a powerful photograph considering light sources, juxtaposition of human forms, prominence in the
- composition, subordination of individuals within the picture plane, and other elements and principles of composition in dynamic action.
- 2. Watch the videos created for the Internet. For example, "Mad As Hell—Media Bias and Sexism Against Hillary Clinton" http://www.nowpacs.org/2008/hillary/videos/player/index.html?featured=20 is comprised of news media clips that portray Clinton in pejorative ways. Ask students about these portrayals. Are they accurate portrayals of sisters, mothers, and other women they know? Do they represent an individual or a stereotype? What formal means underlie the intended, subliminal, or plausible interpretations?
- Compare different portrayals on a single issue such as No Child Left Behind. Some sites include:

Hillary Clinton: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pYcsGmP9new

Barack Obama: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SsVimwm6xQ4

- John McCain: http://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=KGnhQM3PRlQ
- 4. There is a constant tension between the desire of campaigns to maintain control over what is available in the media and the inherent decentralized control of Web communication. High school and higher education media arts classrooms can ask students to examine specific strategies by which campaigns negotiate this conflict. Essays in the following books can be useful in helping students to examine production techniques and to analyze how and to whom the content is targeted.

### REFERENCES

Foot, K., & Schneider, S. (2006). Web campaigning. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

Howard, P. (2006). New media campaigns and the managed citizen. New York: Cambridge University Press.



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