

30.apr.98—31.may.98

Whose history
is it anyway?

Whose history is it anyway?

30.apr.98—31.may.98

Organized by Claudia Hernández and Gregory Sholette

Since 1984 Visible Knowledge has reinterpreted the practice of art education as an interdisciplinary process, a collaboration between a diverse population of high school students, contemporary artists and teachers, and the Education Department. The program advances high school curricula through dialogue, action, reflection, and artistic production.

Whose knowledge is it anyway?

Western philosophy has been described as an attempt to see what lies behind the merely visible. Since ancient times, philosophers have worked in the hope that hidden truths, once revealed, would serve as the foundation for all branches of knowledge. But this quest has always been bedeviled by the problem of appearance. How does one explain the dazzling presence and variety of the visible world if it is only a partial truth at best? For the metaphysician, when it comes to acquiring knowledge the realm of the visible is, to quote Macbeth, “a dagger of the mind, a false creation.”

Several powerful visual metaphors are associated with theories of knowledge — the notion of the mind as a mirror of nature, Plato's fire-lit cave, Marx's camera obscura, and Freud's magic writing tablet. The ever-present potential for optical distortion or outright illusion expressed by these metaphors — a warped surface, shadows, inverted images, or erasure — gives rise to skeptical inquiry in assessing the nature of reality. In other words, doubt about what you see is essential to learning.

Modern philosophers like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, and Luce Irigaray have shown that the very quest to seek out what is behind the “mirror” is itself an act of revelation and unconcealment, both metaphors that are of an optical nature. It would seem therefore that visibility and knowledge are very much bound up with each other in a relation of dependency as well as contradiction.

For the New Museum's *Visible Knowledge Program*, such abstract concerns have special relevance for the day-to-day needs of teachers and students in high school classrooms. Paradoxically, contemporary art can function as an interdisciplinary medium for challenging the primacy of the visible. Many artists have carried into the realm of public culture the philosophical critique that challenges the notions of founding truths waiting to be disclosed from behind the appearance of things.

The artist-instructors affiliated with the *Visible Knowledge Program* bring to students the practices of contemporary art. In doing so, they expose the students to the processes of learning, seeing, and making objects through the use of aesthetic, social, political, and historical examples and discussion. In sum, *Visible Knowledge* is a discursive, critical pedagogy that rejects any claim to universal meaning or fixed rules of teaching. Instead it weaves visual, tactile, and material

aspects of artmaking into an interdisciplinary process that is noisy, often contentious, yet always engaged in an intellectual and sensory practice that reflects the ideas and methods of contemporary art.

Whose history is it anyway?



Whose history is it anyway? is the first *Visible Knowledge* exhibit *Downstairs* at the New Museum. It links offsite collaborations to the ongoing programs within the Museum and offers artist-instructors, teachers, students, and the interested public the opportunity to experience the *Visible Knowledge* process at work. Rather than a simple display of individual student artworks, *Whose history is it anyway?* presents a series of interactive projects bringing together student installations, audience participation, features drawn from classroom curricula, classroom-based images and text, and student writings. The aim is to focus on contemporary youth issues and perspectives based on social and historical themes and to highlight individual aesthetics and styles. The exhibition also provides an opportunity for the public to engage intimately with these themes as well as with alternate approaches to discovering knowledge.

Whose history is it anyway? explores past and present events, situations, and characters using student-generated objects, photographs, video performances, and oral and written texts to reveal unique ways of sharing and exchanging information, ideas, and experiences. An interplay of these elements in the gallery space permits the emergence of complex relationships between language (both oral and written), nonverbal communication (gestures and body language), and material objects (artifacts and clothing).

The overarching theme of this exhibition is the continuing struggle for individual and group rights on the North American continent. Out of this curricula, three projects emerged. Each was a collaboration between a *Visible Knowledge*-affiliated artist-instructor and one or two teachers and students at Robert F. Wagner, Jr. Institute of Arts and Technology in Long Island City, in Queens, New York. The first, a joint effort of artist-instructor Lynne Yamamoto, history teacher Pam Simon, English teacher Michelle Zabarra, and 16 students, was based on course material developed by the American Social History Project which covered the vast period between the pre-Columbian era to the end of the period of Reconstruction following the U.S. Civil War. In this connection the students were given instruction on the geography of the area that would become the United States and on the social conditions of Native Americans, European settlers, and African-Americans from the pre-Columbian time through the 1890s.

Yamamoto began the *Visible Knowledge* phase by exposing the students to a variety of works by such contemporary artists as Marian Gutierrez, Diosa Summers, David Hammons, and James Luna, who have explicitly challenged the standard representations of “American” history in textbooks. After this and other visual, textual, and hands-on presentations, the students began work on their own individual art projects. Each selected an imaginary, historical persona to “inhabit,” based on Simon's curriculum. Some students became Native Americans, others Spanish colonists, still others runaway slaves. Zabarra helped the students

research their characters' background and the human qualities required to survive. The highlight of this phase of the project, titled "tangible intangibles," was the creation of artifacts by the students that were expressive of their chosen personas. These included a totem pole, a jaguar figure, a crucifix, and a letter from a battlefield in the Civil War. Other exercises involved transporting the characters to such eras as the Industrial Revolution and the Westward Expansion of the U.S. The student-characters expressed themselves in terms of the impact of labor exploitation, race and gender discrimination, and class differences on themselves and their families.

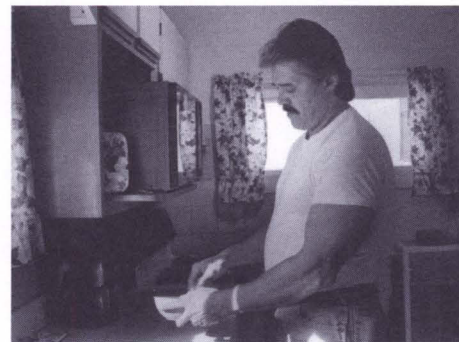
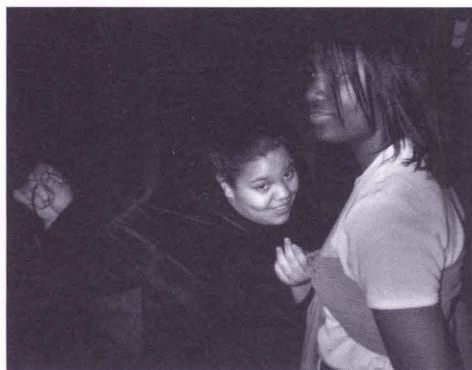
In final phases, the students were photographed individually holding the artifacts they had created. Elaborating further, the students developed monologues and costumes, and staged short theater works utilizing techniques developed by performance artists of the last 20 years. These student performance works are documented in a video made especially for *Whose history is it anyway?*

From the beginning of the project the students were encouraged to rethink the way history is represented and passed along. By taking ownership of their personas they were able to reflect on a wide range of experiences, feelings, and issues that bear on their own lives. They also learned to reconsider the relationship of visual representation to cultural identity and carry what they learned back to the classroom. As a result, Yamamoto, Simon, and Zabarra helped their students become active participants in the process of learning about history. The students in turn collaboratively engaged the three instructors in the same dynamic. The instructors devised a group project using contemporary art to advance history curricula and, working together with their students, succeeded in transforming the discursive and analytical into the material and aesthetic.

A second collaboration and work in progress was designed by artist-instructor Judite Dos Santos and American History teacher Mario Quiñoñes. This project involved exploring the cross-cultural traditions of three groups of peoples — Native American, African Americans, and European settlers — and focusing on their points of mergence through cultural dress and dress codes. Each of the seven participating students was asked to identify with one of these groups and to study its dress traditions and the function of dress in the group's society. The exercise was meant to encourage students to reflect upon the relationship of clothing to class structures and to the building of identity and self-perception.

This project also focused on how specific cultural traits are shared, transferred, and assimilated into ordinary life. Students first examined illustrated materials from the past and the present, then began creating an assortment of interchangeable costumes and accessories. In audio-taped discussions the participants discussed the role their cultures

play in forming their own personal, cultural, and social perceptions. This process is revealed in the exhibit by means of an interactive display of items both purchased and made which could be tried on, showing in an everyday and familiar way how identities are created, embodied, and shared.



Family portraits developed by six students, in collaboration with artist-instructor Aresh Javadi and Spanish teacher Regla Guzman, in the third project in *Whose history is it anyway?*, are a part of a work in progress investigating family relationships and generational histories. With photography

as their principal medium, the students engaged close family members in day to day conversations in informal settings. These dialogues helped the participants uncover personal and shared interests, values, and traditions. Juxtaposing these dialogues with photographic images and written interviews resulted in a deeper understanding of the positive role that the documenting of oral traditions can play in building in a sense of family history and solidarity.

The three projects that make up *Whose history is it anyway?* vary widely from sculptural objects and installations, to costume design, texts, photographs, videotapes, and digital images on the Internet. They do not represent the culmination of a process of teaching "art" but rather are instances of critical pedagogy transformed by human labor into visible knowledge. The process is ongoing. The unique experience that is *Visible Knowledge* extends from the classroom out to the many diverse spaces where dominant and local cultures collide. These include the room where the family watches television; the street corner; the basketball court; the transit routes in and out of Manhattan; the journey to and from school and home; the neighborhoods under siege by developers or polluters; the afterschool jobs where one first experiences issues of race, gender, and class; the chat rooms and zines of the Internet, and ultimately the galleries of the New Museum of Contemporary Art.

Whose history is it anyway? is a new step forward for the *Visible Knowledge Program*, now in its fifteenth year. This exhibit inaugurates a series of student, teacher, and artist collaborations for the new project space, *Downstairs* at the New Museum. These installations are part of the Museum's *Public Access* program which organizes participatory art projects merging both educational and curatorial concerns. The answer to the question "Whose knowledge is it anyway?" is to be found in the projects exhibited here. They tie together both the philosophical and artistic critique of the visible world and the struggle to rewrite, reimagine, and relearn the history of this continent.

Gregory Sholette, *Curator of Education*
 Claudia Hernández, *Associate Educator*

COVER Ismaris Molina, *Untitled*, class of Lynne Yamamoto, Pam Simon, Michelle Zabbara

FAR LEFT Karen Grabie, *Cherokee Indian Girl*, class of Lynne Yamamoto, Pam Simon, Michelle Zabbara, photo by Terry Born

LEFT Students making historical costumes, class of Judite Dos Santos and Mario Quiñoñes

ABOVE Damaries Lopez, *Art at Work*, class of Aresh Javadi, Regla Guzman

Lesson Plan

The curriculum and art project outlined below approach the teaching of history through contrasting points of view as well as through concepts of contemporary performance art. It is based on a 1997–98 Visible Knowledge collaboration between Pam Simon and Michele Zabbara, both teachers from The Robert F. Wagner, Jr. Institute of Arts and Technology, and the artist Lynne Yamamoto.

Introduction

This course requires students to evaluate the struggle for civil rights in the United States during the nineteenth century from the perspective of Native Americans, Europeans, and African-Americans. When studying the presidency of Andrew Jackson (1824–1832), for example, students must consider the challenges faced and the choices made by the average person within each of these three groups of people. Initially, students examine the way Jackson's distrust of centralized banking prompted many working class Americans of European descent to consider him a populist. Then, they reevaluate this picture of the seventh president by learning about his program of forced "relocation" of Native Americans and the Trail of Tears (1827–1830). Finally, the class studies the everyday lives of African slaves and African-Americans during this period, and in doing so learns about the Abolitionist movement, its impact on the national debate over slavery, and its effect on the approaching war between the states. After becoming familiar with these larger historical narratives, each student then constructs an imaginary representative from one of these three broad groups of people, and becomes that character. In the guise of the characters, students must face serious conflicts over personal or collective rights and think about ways to overcome them. Among the possible individuals a student might select are an African-American abolitionist from Boston, a carpetbagger traveling from New York City to the post Civil War South, a small town shopkeeper who is also a secret member of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, a white Quaker in Pennsylvania who operates part of the Underground Railroad, a Cherokee adolescent walking the Trail of Tears, or a coal miner in Colorado.

The concepts raised in this lesson can be summarized through the following questions

- Where does one learn history? At school? In the media? At home?
- What do these media versions of history look like, and how are we expected to "read" them?
- Who is shown in these media representations, and who is not shown?
- What forms of alternative historical images exist, and who produces them?
- Is history a single story, or does it represent multiple or even conflicted narratives?
- What is the relationship of fiction to documentation, of story telling to truth?
- Do artists contribute important knowledge about the past, or simply illustrate it?
- How can a knowledge of history become a tangible part of one's approach to living?

Basic Readings

The material in this lesson plan is found in the textbook *America: Pathways to the Present* (Prentice Hall, 1995): "The Age of Jackson," unit 3, chapter 5; "The Civil War," unit 4, chapter 12; and "Reconstruction," unit 4, chapter 13.

Other useful readings include: chapters 7 through 11 of Howard Zinn's book *A People's History of the United States* (Harper Books, 1995); Eduardo Galeano's book *Memories of Fire, Volume II: Faces and Masks* (Norton, 1998); Volume One of The American Social History Project's book *Who Built America* (Pantheon Books, 1998); or excerpts from Susan Hazen-Hammond's book: *Timelines of Native American History* (Perigee Books, 1997).

1. WHERE IS HISTORY FOUND?

Ask students to describe where they have encountered historical representations outside of a school situation. Consider such things as current movies and television programs as well as advertising and theme parks. Facilitate a discussion about these images and experiences.

Some questions you may wish to ask include

- What do these media interpretations of history want to teach us?
- Compare these histories to those learned at school. What differences can you find?
- Who is teaching history to you, and for what purpose?
- What would your life be like if there was no such thing as "history?"

Suggested Procedure

Show students your own collection of clippings from the media. Select images of people who have not been represented by traditional versions of American history, including: Native Americans, African-Americans, Latinos, gay or lesbian people, women, disabled people, working people, and young people. Try to find occasions where members of these groups are presented in an historical context in order to sell a product, illustrate an editorial, or advertise a movie. Provide a critique of these images that focuses on the pictorial, social, and historical aspects of each representation. Have students start their own scrap book or *image journal* using similar images. Ask them to write a short analysis of each clipping based on the questions raised above.

2. HOW MIGHT WE PICTURE HISTORY IN A DIFFERENT WAY?

Look at examples of contemporary art that challenge traditional views of history. Artists whose work you might show to students include Dennis Adams, Tomie Ari, Todd Ayoung, Judy Baca, Richard Fung, Marina Gutierrez, Hans Haacke, Glenn Ligon, James Luna, Alan Michelson, Juan Sanchez, Fatimah Tuggar, the REPOhistory collective, Barbara Jo Revelle, Gerhard Richter, Lynne Yamamoto, Kim Yasuda, Kara Walker, Carrie May Weems, Pat Ward Williams or Fred Wilson.

Discuss the impact of the fictional novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe on the actual fight to abolish slavery. Read the first person oral histories of former slaves Sojourner Truth and Nat Turner. Read excerpts from the fictional "memoir" *The Education of Little Tree* by Forest Carter.

Facilitate a discussion about the use of fiction to retrieve history. Have the class consider the way visual art, literature, and storytelling provide alternative versions of events from those found in textbooks. You might try contrasting the use of fiction and documentation in the telling of a single historical event. Consider contrasting the film *Glory* (1989, directed by Edward Zwick), which tells the story of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment of African-American soldiers during the Civil War, with Ken Burns account of the same men in his documentary *The Civil War*.

Some questions you might raise with students include

- If history is composed of different narratives, what do these multiple histories teach us?
- Does the idea of historical accuracy have a place in this discussion? Why or why not?
- How do artists of different cultural backgrounds visualize history in their work, and how does this differ from the way history is presented in the media or at school?

Suggested procedure

Ask students to produce a portrait of their chosen character based on their research and diary entries. This portrait can be a drawing, a collage, or a photograph. If available, consider using digital technology to construct this imaginary representation.

3. WHOSE HISTORY IS IT ANYWAY?

Read Bertolt Brecht's poem "Questions For A Worker Who Reads" to your class. Facilitate a discussion about the way different people have been portrayed by historians and in popular culture. Make a list of the different types of people that lived during this period. This list might include farmers, freed slaves, abolitionists, missionaries, Native Americans from many different tribes and locations, plantation owners, businessmen, trappers, homesteaders, or teachers. Discuss with your class how these individuals had to pay the bill, as Brecht puts it, for a "grand history" peopled solely by "great men."

Some questions you may wish to ask include

- Is history the same thing for all people?
- Who is remembered and who is not?

Suggested Procedure

Ask each student to choose one person from your list that they want to personify. Have them research their selection in order to provide details about this individual's daily routines, manner of dress, material possessions, social position, and political or religious outlook. Each student will transform a portion of their *image journal* into a fictional diary written from the perspective of their chosen character. From these writings students will gradually produce a short theatrical monologue that will further flesh out their character.

4. PERFORMING THE PAST

A. THE USE OF PROPS

Show students documentation and/or videos of performance art, or have a performance artist visit the class. Consider presenting the work of Ana Mendieta, Jimmie Durham, Lorraine O'Grady, Ethyl Eichelberger (as Jocasta), Dan Kwong, James Luna, Johnny Moses, Alison Pou, or Anna Devere Smith. Consider the way performance, unlike many other art forms, can incorporate many different media while presenting an event in time rather than a unique object to contemplate. Focus on the way these artists use images, objects, sound and the voice to produce repetition and rhythm. Discuss the way these artists use props to tell their story.

Some questions you might ask students include

- How does this work transform the intangible nature of memory into something tangible yet still temporary?
- How do these artists use props and historical artifacts to tell their story or develop a character?

Suggested procedure

Pass around an artifact or historical prop that you have found, purchased, or fabricated. Ask students to imagine the kind of person that might have used this object. Show them the artist Fred Wilson's work documented in the book *Mining the Museum* (The New Press, 1994). Discuss the way in which objects, props, or artifacts can help produce an alternative historical narrative. Ask students to consider what sort of prop or artifact the fictive character they have chosen might possess or encounter.

B. CONSTRUCTION OF AN "HISTORICAL ARTIFACT"

After discussing the use of the artifact as a device for focusing memory, students should choose one of their own. Students should first make a list of possible objects to consider, and then select from this list one artifact to fabricate. Suggest ways of altering the object that will help to indicate its symbolic status, such as use of exaggerated scale, color, or texture.

The artist-instructor demonstrates various fabrication techniques for making these artifacts. Possible media include paper and cardboard, fabric, plaster, clay, papier-mâché, or found objects. Over the next few weeks students also continue to refine both their objects and their character's monologue.

C. WHOSE HISTORY IS IT ANYWAY?: THE PERFORMANCE

A performance is generated by stringing together the monologues that students have developed. The students rehearse these performance sketches using the artifacts as theatrical props. Set a date for a dress rehearsal as well as a full performance to be presented to other students, parents, and teachers. The performance should, if possible, be documented on videotape.

D. EVALUATION

Lead students in a critical discussion about the project. Use the videotape of the performance (if available) to anchor the conversation.

Discuss the objectives of the course and how well these goals were met by the collaborative process. Consider ways of modifying the project so that it will work even better in the future. The collaborating teachers and artist should also spend time evaluating the working relationship that developed over the semester.

Question From A Worker Who Reads

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?
In the books you will find the names of kings.
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?
And Babylon, many times demolished.
Who raised it up so many times?...
The young Alexander conquered India.
Was he alone?
Caesar beat the Gauls.
Did he not have even a cook with him?...
Every page a victory.
Who cooked the feast for the victors?
Every ten years a great man.
Who paid the bill?
So many reports.
So many questions.

—Bertolt Brecht, 1935

from "when i was a young soldier for the revolution": coming to voice"

The struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice — that way of speaking that is no longer determined by one's status as object — as oppressed being. That way of speaking is characterized by opposition, by resistance. It demands that paradigms shift — that we learn to talk — to listen — to hear in a new way.

—bell hooks, 1984

Teachers' Resources

Cayton, Andrew, Elisabeth Israels Perry, and Allan M. Winkler. *America: Pathways to the Present*. Needham, MA.: Prentice Hall 1995.

Carter, Forrest. *The Education of Little Tree*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986.

Stowe, Harriet Beecher. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. New York: New American Library, 1997.

Turner, Nat. *Confessions of Nat Turner and Other Documents*. New York: St. Martins Press, 1996.

Zinn, Howard. *A People's History of the United States*. New York: HarperCollins, 1997.

Hazen-Hammond, Susan. *Timelines of Native American History*. New York: Perigee Books, 1997.

Galeano, Eduardo. *Memories of Fire. Volume II, Faces and Masks*. New York: Norton Press, 1998.

Zwick, Edward (dir.). *Glory*. Tristar Pictures, 1989.

Hours

Mon closed
Tue closed
Wed 12.noon—6.pm
Thu 12.noon—8.pm Free 6.pm—8.pm
Fri 12.noon—8.pm
Sat 12.noon—8.pm
Sun 12.noon—6.pm

Admission

\$5 general; \$3 artists, students, seniors. Free for members. Free for visitors 18 and under through the support of The Chase Manhattan Bank.

Directions

Subway 6 to Spring Street or Bleecker Street; N, R to Prince Street; A, C, E to Spring Street; B, D, F, Q to Broadway / Lafayette Street.
Bus 1, 5, 6, 21 to Houston Street or Broadway.

Membership

To join and receive information on special events and programs, please call the Membership office at 212.219.1222 or Email us at newmu@newmuseum.org

Visit the New Museum web site at newmuseum.org and the *Visible Knowledge* web site at vkp.org

The *Visible Knowledge Program* is supported with funds from the Albert A. List Foundation, New York State Council on the Arts, Keith Haring Foundation, and Consolidated Edison. Teacher training programs are made possible by the Chase Manhattan Teachers Workshop Fund.

Whose history is it anyway? is made possible by generous grants from the Charles E. Culpeper Foundation and the Jerome Foundation to establish the *Public Access* series of exhibitions.

The New Museum of Contemporary Art receives general operating support from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs, New York State Council on the Arts, and the Institute of Museum and Library Services, a federal agency.

© 1998 New Museum of Contemporary Art. Design by Jason Ring.
