

Flip & Flap and altermodernity. Art education in an altermodern world

Robert Klatser 2010

Abridged version

Interculturalism does not yet have an automatic place on the curriculum in further education of the fine arts, although the belief that it should is gaining momentum. A multiform, radical and proactive arts education is inevitable in a mediated world in which young people – irrespective of their geographical location – can communicate with one another, share stories and images and move in the same cultural space, where they can develop and articulate their identity.

In this article I examine how contemporary, altermodern art can offer a point of departure for an arts curriculum that truly acknowledges interculturality. The central issue in this context is whether multiculturalism's currently problematic image can be overturned and transformed into a practicable concept.

In 2009, Nicolas Bourriaud coined the term 'altermodernism' to describe the work of artists operating in a global context rather than from their own cultural identity.¹

Bourriaud claims that this approach produces a wealth of new possibilities and alternatives for directing culture in a variety of ways.

The wabi sabi mystery, or, what is altermodern art education?

Art is no longer produced in the isolation of the studio but, primarily, in dialogue with others – even if those others are not physically present. The narrative is a key component of the work. Qualities such as the originality and posterity value of art works, which characterised modernist art, have lost some of their standing. The days when an artwork could be defined in detail came to an end sometime in the 1960s. What has remained crucial, one suspects, is a deeply rooted drive for personal immortality and continual self-reassurance: 'I exist!'

Our mediated world has democratised art. Any individual can now express themselves and make themselves known – a phenomenon comparable to when Walter Benjamin described the masses presenting themselves using film and photography at the beginning of the 20th century. People want to leave traces behind, no matter how trivial. Reinventing oneself, whether as an artist or as a person among others, can be interpreted as a continual regeneration of the identity. It is this need in particular that occupies young people's minds. Internet and mobile telephony have emerged as wholly

suitable as artistic media. Thanks primarily to the mobile telephone, we can exist simultaneously in multiple contexts or, as researcher into the 'ludic identity' Eva Nieuwdorp describes it, 'Viewed from the perspective of media-specific characteristics, mobile telephony has the potential to impact on traditional narrative elements such as coherence of location (setting), linear causality in time (plot) and the sense of a consistent, deliberate and autonomous character (unicity).'

Integrating a variety of cultures and artistic, social or personal approaches need not imply the decline of the arts in the face of superficiality or that artistic skills and formal aesthetic criteria are entirely redundant. Recent art works such as installations, films and blogs display no weakening of narrative or visual, artistic skills or formal qualities. Students, too, are well-placed to take advantage of the opportunity to relate their own aural, visual and narrative stories to those of others all over the world. Internet and mobile telephone applications are now broadly accepted as fully fledged artistic media.

But art consists of more than the technical procedure involved in creating it; the subject matter must also qualify as art, whether 'high' or 'low'. We must accept that opportunities for interpersonal encounters and interculturality are artistic material. 'Young people are often fascinated by experiences and non-rational, magical moments that they seek out with a voracious appetite,' says Eva Nieuwdorp. What the student thinks and does takes on a temporary form in the ongoing encounter with the other or others. This exchange of imagery and narrative need not necessarily take on tangible form beyond the virtual space in a forced attempt to create an 'artwork' in the conventional sense. The result's transitoriness and imperfection are qualities inherent to the medium and the method. These currently so highly valued qualities in art, with their emphasis on exchange and transition, are perhaps best communicated by the Japanese term *wabi sabi*, a concept that encapsulates the relationship between beauty and transience. Leonard Koren describes *wabi sabi* as, 'a beauty of things imperfect, impermanent, and incomplete.' He continues, 'I have [...] come to believe that *wabi sabi* is related to many of the more emphatic anti-aesthetics that invariably spring from the young, modern, creative soul.'

The contemporary altermodern artist is a cultural nomad who negotiates a global dialogue. The topical images distributed all over the world through the media, occupy a shared frame of reference. The broad exchange of images and stories through mass media will increasingly reinforce this shared context. This common frame of reference is where young people from diverse cultural backgrounds meet one another. Almost ten

years ago, Paul Duncum recommended that art education should actively increase students participation in the global culture made possible by Internet and other media: ‘Consciously engaging with global culture can contribute, creatively and critically, to the directions globalization takes.’⁴

Altermodern art education requires a change of direction and accompanying new connotations for artistic disciplines. It entails a deepening of knowledge and a shift of perspective on post-modernist notions of art education. These notions created new opportunities, but they are also marked by assignments and processes that are about the living environment, about mass communication or about cultural diversity. Students are asked to think, to discuss and to make work *about* their surroundings or the issues that are occupying them. I imagine that altermodern art education would not merely be *triggered* by the child's living environment, but also that it would *originate* there or, more than that, would come to form a component of that living environment and gain a place on the Internet and in the environment, community and thinking. There is no need for a distinction between the experiential world of the student and the artistic work they produce. Too often, extramural activities are ignored and the curriculum separates the ‘formal’ from the ‘informal’.⁵ Altermodern education focuses on having students articulate their confrontation with the multiplicity of narratives in the multicultural world and devise shared narratives without a predetermined, fixed outcome.

Bourriaud’s characterisation of contemporary art as ‘the arena of exchange’ describes well the virtual platform for encounter in which the student is participating. In altermodern art education, students operating from diverse cultural registers and backgrounds use multimedia techniques to experiment with and critically examine imagery and concepts. The conditional knowledge and skills are learned as part of the process and may develop differently for each student, depending on the needs of the student and the nature of the work. Knowledge and skill-learning is fully integrated, such that the student has the opportunity, just like the artist, to *feel* what is needed rather than to *know* what is expected – for this, according to Gadamer, is what distinguishes the artist from non-artists.⁶ The process takes its course – as artists’ processes often do – in a for the most part fundamentally unpredictable and non-goal-oriented way. It is the outcome of an exchange of one’s personal stories, activities and experiences with other people from different cultural backgrounds scattered around the world. Students study subjects that relate to their cultural identity. Ultimately, the essence of this alternative form of art education is interaction, between the global and the local, between the student's world and the art world. Or, more concretely, interaction between students’ ideas and work, and that of others – triggering reciprocal

inspiration for the development of working methods. This may produce work that is fleeting, but not superficial; technically skilled, but not traditional; temporary, but also timeless; virtual and location non-specific, but nonetheless phenomenal; and politically charged, but not ideological. The fact that students have the opportunity to operate within an artistic rather than an everyday form makes the everyday remarkable and the remarkable, everyday. To paraphrase Lee Emmerly, the traces their work leaves behind are the memories of it as proof that they were part of a culture at a certain place, whether virtual or physical, at a given time.⁷

The blending of cultures is of all times; a visit from Tulu-Tulu Land

In 1958 or thereabouts, it was announced at my primary school that we were to receive a visit that week from a very special man, from a far-off land. We were very excited when a tall, very black man entered. We had never before seen such a dark-skinned person in real life. He looked very different from the clichéd representations in children's books of black, savage-looking people with thick, red lips. He rolled up a towel in the form of a turban and draped it over his head, placed a zinc bucket upright on his head and proceeded to walk around the classroom.

He looked just like one of the cannibals in my favourite children's book about the little dogs Flip and Flap who go on an adventure in an air balloon. After a perilous journey over the ocean, they land on the tropical island Tulu-Tulu Land.

This kind of encounter and connection between cultures is timeless. Ethnic boundaries between cultures are fictive and partially virtual. The blending of cultures has taken place since deep in prehistory, through travel, commerce and war. Intensive communication made possible through technological developments means that cultures appear to be hybridising at an ever-faster rate into a global civilization. This means that people's commonalities are on the increase, while groups that fear these overwhelming developments tend to emphasise the differences that remain.

McCarthy, Rezai-Rahiti and Teasley call for, 'recognition of the vital porosity that exists among human groups in the 21st century,' and suspect that this porosity may hold huge potential for arriving at a new cosmopolitan ethos within education. The dominance of a social cultural background over national culture offers new opportunities but also produces tensions. In the virtual space created using high-speed communications, we can observe that people have playful encounters with one another that lead to the creation of new social environments. We may regard this intercultural zone in which young people now find themselves from a very early age, and which the philosopher James Tully defines as an 'area in between', as a common domain for

negotiation.⁸ The theorist on post-colonialism Homi K. Bhabha suggests that this produces hybrid forms of social interaction and art that did not previously exist in individual national cultures. In this way, shared values may be produced and internalised that can coexist with cultural differences.⁹ To the students who are continually in contact with each other in this way, this form of exchange is as natural as the air they breathe. No distinction is made between global and local. Rather, they complement and extend one another. Second and third generation descendants of immigrants grow up and are educated together with the native population and take onboard local youth culture, while also adding their own dimension. Digital media are a crucial instrument in this process.

However, in a global culture such as this it is impossible to survive and thrive if one chooses to hold on too tightly to a cultural identity built using the primary social building blocks of family, nation and religion.

If Flip and Flap had descended into the African wilderness 50 years later, they might well have landed on the filmmaker/artist Renzo Martens. There, in the middle of the primeval forest they could have enjoyed the sight of a huge neon sign with the words 'Enjoy Poverty'. Martens made a film showing how he transformed local wedding photographers into war reporters: in their original profession they earned less than a dollar a month; following his instructions and shooting heartrending images of the dying, they can earn far more. Flip and Flap's adventures and Renzo Martens' adventures are the products of two eras, two cultures; two worlds?

Making or looking at an artwork or listening to or telling a story of any kind can abruptly change one's outlook on life. The apparent contrasts and complexities, and the hybrid, porous and fluid nature of current developments in culture – and thereby people's cultural identity – provide an opportunity for art and art education to unlock new areas of meaning

Flip and Flap and the altermodern identity

The altermodern identity transcends cultural and geographical boundaries and times. It is rooted in a diversity of cultures and its character encompasses mobility and playfulness. It is context-dependent and adaptive. However, the altermodern self that unites characteristics of different worlds and relates to a variety of cultural registers does not step beyond the boundaries of the indivisible self. Everyone has access to multiple categories to which one can belong, such as religious grouping, race, family and profession. This allows the identity to both include and exclude others.

In our thoughts and actions, we resemble in many ways those close to us and members of the broader group we belong to and move within. This group undergoes expansion with the global exchange of ideas, experiences and imagery through modern means of communication.

This means that, despite their differences, young people from different cultural backgrounds increasingly have common ground and shared interests: they listen to the same music, play the same games, explore the Internet together and watch the same television programmes.

A person with an altermodern identity functions both in physical, everyday reality and in virtual worlds, swept along in the hectic, turbulent cultural current that typifies our era. This identity unites and embodies the characteristics of a variety of worlds and relates to a variety of cultural registers. Modern intercultural art education must focus its energies on the altermodern identity.

Altermodern art, from culture-bound wizards to boundaryless cultural nomads

Nicolas Bourriaud first used the word 'altermodern' for a new development in the arts he described in catalogue for the Tate Triennial Altermodern exhibition in London. In itself, this is not sufficient reason to grant altermodernism the status of new art movement. After all, what is so new and strange about Western artists taking on the idiom of 'primitive' societies and adapting them to their own background? In the past, artists have frequently drawn a 'pick 'n' mix' of ideas from a variety of cultures.

Interpersonal encounters and interculturality have been used as raw material for modern art for decades.

Diane Crane has developed practical criteria for assessing whether art that claims to be innovative, truly is. She asserts that an art movement is only truly innovative when it displays an alternative approach to aesthetic content or to social and political values, while also employing adapted methods of production and distribution.¹⁰

Applying these criteria, we can argue that altermodern art is indeed innovative in certain respects. Particularly those artists who emphasise communication through Internet, the sharing of narratives and the denial of the singularity of the artwork also approach production and distribution differently.

The artwork is a network. This is a key trait of altermodern art that allows the artistic conventions to be broken and reflection to take place on the nature of the artwork.

Bourriaud asserts that an artwork can no longer be reduced to an object in the here and now, but must be understood as a part of a sizeable network. The artists develops mutual connections and organises them. Only the individual wavelength conveys

signals that both belong to different cultural registers (heterogenous) and are drawn from different periods (heterochronic). The combining of the artist's own connections with a conscious and explicit breaching of the illusion of unity of style, location, culture and time appears to be evolving into a new artistic approach. Bourriaud takes as a metaphor the archipelago – a collection of islands that together form a region – to illustrate how culture consists of a multiplicity of cultures bound through dynamics such as migration, creating a single global civilisation, and how countless contemporary artistic practices seem to suggest a synthesis placed somewhere between modernism and post-colonialism; the artist is, after all, a cultural nomad. Clearly, the assembling of the Altermodern exhibition was a very different process from what preceded the 1989 Magiciens de la Terre exhibition in Centre Pompidou, that other great exhibition which also encompassed non-Western art. Back then, an artwork gained meaning from a specific ethnocultural origin and the traditional background of the maker, while now the notion of mixed origin has been breached and transcended. What was seen as progressive in 1989 is now problematic, and those who propagate it balance precariously in that suspect overlap between cultural relativism, nationalism and chauvinism. Nowadays, ethnicity and traditional artistic content is often quickly dismissed – in a somewhat overstated way – as folkloric and naïve, good only for the tourist industry. For this reason, it does not connect with young people's modern identity and fails to satisfy the criteria for a basis for cultural art education.

An altermodern approach in art education

Is it possible to introduce a form of altermodern art education into the existing system, one that is inclusive rather than exclusive, one that encourages participation rather than segregation, and one that can raise cultural awareness among all the students involved? Is it possible to develop a didactic method inspired by contemporary life – just as contemporary art is a reflection on contemporary life?

The potential of altermodern art education lies in its ability to create an open climate in which possibilities can be discovered within a visually interesting environment using currently available techniques. It also encourages students to explore personal stories that extend beyond the boundaries of the individual, the location, the culture and the era. It is intercultural in both an artistic and social context. The students can connect their own stories (be they narrative, auditive and/or visual) to those of other students all over the world. 'Increasingly, identities are shaped in an ongoing and fluctuating interplay of interactive communications between individuals.'¹¹

The various fields of influence within visual culture are the perfect arena for the arts to operate in. They allow for a huge diversity of connections between the direct experiences of students, social context and high and low art.

Contemporary art forms such as multimedia installations, interventions in public space, community arts, film, photography and digital art have the potential to inspire. Here, formal, aesthetic values and substantive and narrative qualities come together.

Everything possible should be done to provide space for openness, ambiguity, ambivalence, indecisiveness and conflict – conditions so crucial to contemporary art. Altermodern art education should be about not only what teachers and students do, but also about how they achieve it. How can teachers best create an inspiring and challenging learning environment? How can they determine the progress of a student, and how should this progress be evaluated? Altermodern art education presupposes open supervision and a flexible approach to the student and to his or her individual problems, ideas and social environment. The teaching style should advance a creative approach, foster the student's intrinsic motivation and influence the content and meaning of the work he or she produces. The student can choose between active or passive learning. And the teacher can choose either to teach or to guide the student through dialogue, depending on the student's contribution. The didactic bond is therefore based on mutual trust. The teacher respects the integrity of the student and has confidence in the questions posed and problems formulated, and points out potential avenues of approach to the student. The teacher should have the insight to pose questions and make remarks that give the students insight into what he or she is doing and how it relates to what he or she wants to say and achieve. The student is expected to accept the teacher as his or her coach. An open learning environment such as this demands carefully selected differentiated and preferably complex assignments that the student initiates in consultation with the teacher.

Altermodern art education is distinguished not only by its content and working method, but also by its didactic approach. Altermodern, intercultural art education emphasises commonalities without denying differences. Tensions and contrasts lend themselves well to this process and provide an interesting entrance for artistic translation, as do the fields of tension between the complex and concrete global culture, between national or religious identity and secular cosmopolitan values, between autonomy of the high arts and the popular creative industry, between authenticity and irony, and between the outsider who places himself or herself beyond the social order and new cultural citizenship. The teacher creates suitable preconditions and seeks to deepen the student's work, position it in the wider setting of art, place it in proper context and

raise it above the level of the purely personal. In this regard, altermodern art education does not prescribe the use of any particular material, process or form. It is the task of the teacher to avoid obstructing or stifling the creative process. The purpose of intervention must be to accelerate the learning process, add depth to the student's studies and foster a stimulating form of reflection. The teacher attempts to make a student conscious of his or her actions, the implicit thought processes involved and how they relate to other people's art or design. Students work individually or with others (whether friends or strangers) using current communication platforms. There is continual exchange (which may or may not be problematic or not, and may be complex or simple) between original image and copy, between ready-made and original, and between creation and reception.

Evaluation takes place in a discussion with the teacher or in an exchange of ideas with small groups of fellow students or those with whom the student communicates or cooperates remotely. If a student puts in effort, makes art works and is able to deal with artistic problems and enter into a didactic relationship with the teacher about them, then the student has satisfied the primary criteria. Supplementary criteria can be formulated in dialogue with the student. The procedure should be transparent and a teacher should remain receptive to queries and new points of view. This method of evaluation may require some getting used to for students in a result-oriented school system rooted in a competitive society. The end result will be assessed as a component of 'the story' in the broader context. It may be that the student creates an interesting environment rather than a tangible final product. David Buckingham writes on this subject, 'The product should not be seen as the end of the process, but as a stage within it- a starting point for reflection or a basis for redrafting'¹²

Dilemmas associated with the altermodern approach

The hegemony of popular culture

In the view of Efland, Gardner and others, popular culture may be gaining too much influence at the cost of traditional aesthetic values. Lee Emmery chuckles as he observes that when Gardner is discussing education of children, he calls himself a traditionalist.¹⁵ Arthur Efland believes that postmodern art education reflects neither a residue of the past, nor an interesting topicality, but rather the dominant arrangement of the world economy and of the prevailing culture.¹³ Howard Gardner writes, 'Whatever merits postmodern perspectives may have for the mature student or scholar, I think that they will stir up nothing but trouble for all but the most subtle-minded precollegiate students.'¹⁴ Efland denies the complexity and multiform nature of the

medium and underestimates children's powers of discernment, as well as underestimating the ability of teachers to influence these factors. 'Contemporary research suggests that children are a much more autonomous and critical audience than they are conventionally assumed to be.' (Buckingham, 2003, p. 12).

Repressive creativity, a double bind in art education

Currently, the student is expected to satisfy the teacher's explicit requirement to be self-reliant, creative and original. The student can only satisfy the implicit expectations of the teacher and create an illusory result that reflects the assignment's explicit criteria and that is therefore more likely to bear witness to a lack of freedom.

Elsewhere, in the context of repressive tolerance, I have referred to this contradiction in terms encountered in art education as 'repressive creativity'. Repressive tolerance is a technique employed by the ruling powers to provide a space for 'undesirable' ideas in order to defuse them. This saddles the teacher with a dilemma, because he or she is forced to place students in a classic 'double bind'. Psychiatry defines a double bind as a communication problem involving two or more conflicting messages, each negating the other. A similar phenomenon is all but unavoidable in art education, suggests the anthropologist Gregory Bates. Lee Emmerly (2002, p.8) has good reason to note that, 'The highly controversial, deliberately shocking and confronting nature of much contemporary art presents art teachers with new and complex decisions for curriculum planning.' For modern art education, we might well add: the often vicious, tough and ambiguous nature of life itself or of the world as they receive it through the media. Some assignments require that students – mindful of the principles of contemporary art – disturb, demolish or shock, preferably with as recalcitrant an attitude as possible. Be creative and critical and original – but not too much. Free yourself! Be creative! These conflicting messages are irreconcilable with true freedom, creativity or subversion. Furthermore, if the student is unable to ignore the command while simultaneously being unable to respond to the internal conflict, we can speak of a double bind. This either paralyses students or has the net effect of encouraging them to do what they think is expected of them. And of course the entire context of school with its rules, curricula, short lesson times, modular education and reporting culture, conflicts with the motto 'be free, creative and original'.

This dilemma that characterises arts education would be less prevalent in an altermodern art education context. Because the altermodern approach assumes a level of trust between teacher and student and a level of discussion precludes the forcing of the

student into a particular direction. Because this method makes clear to the student that the work is not *about* things, but that the work itself *is* the reality. Because it emphasises that evaluation takes place during, not after, the process of making a work. And because the teacher remains alert to the double bind dilemma inherent to education in the arts.

Altermodern education in the hands of policymakers

Altermodern art education can be both used and abused in the drive to mould children into cultural citizens. Altermodern art education appears to be the best option for ‘producing citizenship in a multicultural context’.¹⁶ Policymakers believe that young people acquire values conducive to citizenship through active and passive participation in art and culture. Soheila Najand, the director and driving force at the InterArt foundation, describes her organisation’s primary tasks as, ‘using multidisciplinary arts projects to develop a new grammar for communication that contributes to identity shaping and social cohesion in the world around us, which we find increasingly difficult to understand. [...] Through art, we can search for new values and hidden values that bind us.’ This is a noble aim, but there is an inherent danger that the originality, heterodoxy and freshness that spring from youth subcultures could suffer. And how should we view the problematic relationship between ‘good citizenry’ and the artist's freedom of thought? Youth subcultures that bind and mutually reinforce popular culture and a recalcitrant stance have a troubled relationship with the dominant, or ‘national’, conventional culture. In the hands of policymakers, altermodern art education will lead to something at odds with the very essence of altermodern art education.

1. An alternative approach to the student, based on mutual trust
2. No dominance of Western criteria
3. Emphasis on contextuality and connection
4. Fostering of a sense of responsibility for one's own actions
5. The right for each person to shape their own story

Altermodern art education propagates an artistic form of radical democracy and maximum autonomy. Of course, this is not what policymakers, those advance guards of good citizenry, are after. At best, their proposals will lead to repressive creativity. Altermodern art education is not a closed, isolated system. It adapts organically to the student’s and the teacher’s own personal preferences, as well as changes in artistic and cultural realities. Institutes must facilitate the teachers in their profession so that they

can continue learning throughout their working life. And it must entrust them, and their students, with a high degree of autonomy. By helping them to participate in the creative process, arts teachers and artists can help students find their way in a global, fragmented, differentiated, shifting and all-absorbing commercial world of images and stories. To this end, teachers and artists can work together and form networks. In an ideal world, we could take students individually or in small groups, switching to and fro between present and past, observation and imagination, reality and fiction, orthodoxy and unorthodoxy, here and elsewhere, and from spectacle to silence, from the surface to the depths, and from one culture to another.

Altermodern art education seeks to constantly shift accent, encouraging students' unique narratives and co-creating and co-observing the overwhelming visible world. Not only in order to achieve self-realisation, but also to further articulate a porous cultural identity in transition, connecting with others at the cultural interface. People achieve most if they take a stance that is multi-focused and multifaceted, even when and where resources are limited. People need to let go of the notions of learning as a linear process and of overly prescribed goal sets. If this is achievable, then teaching can be creative in the truest sense. Teaching can itself be an art.

Like the altermodern student, the altermodern teacher must be ambitious, activist and idealist. To paraphrase Dadier (Glenn Ford), the young, idealistic teacher in the film *Blackboard Jungle* (1955), which is also renowned for featuring the rock 'n' roll hit *Rock Around the Clock*: 'I want to teach to develop their minds, to help them shape their own lives.' For a teacher such as this, an altermodern curriculum would provide an inexhaustible supply of opportunities – assuming he or she is not too rigid, sees contemporary art as a guiding force and is not browbeaten or overburdened by blinkered institutions and their managers or the capricious requirements of policymakers. Let teachers be people who allow themselves and their students to be swept off by Google Wave to – like Flip and Flap – who knows where? There are plenty of opportunities in this sea, a sea with great depths and with turbulence at the breakers. It is the sea that connects all continents, regions and cultures. It is the same water that encloses Bourriaud's Archipelago and it is the ocean that Flip and Flap defy in their balloon journey to unknown adventures in far-off places. 'There they go in their big basket. All the way to Tulu-Tulu Land. I'll bet you've never seen a pair of dogs floating up in the sky and having such fun before!'

¹ Bourriaud, Nicolas (ed), 2009, *Tate Triennial*. London: Tate Publishing.

² Nieuwdorp, Eva, 2005/6, *Playful Identities. From Narrative to Ludic Self-construction*. Rotterdam: Erasmus Universiteit.

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