

Spring 2004

Melding Art Forms: The Future of the Art Community

Bonnie White
College of DuPage

Follow this and additional works at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai>

Recommended Citation

White, Bonnie (2004) "Melding Art Forms: The Future of the Art Community," *ESSAI*: Vol. 2, Article 33.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol2/iss1/33>

This Selection is brought to you for free and open access by the College Publications at DigitalCommons@COD. It has been accepted for inclusion in *ESSAI* by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@COD. For more information, please contact koteles@cod.edu.

Melding Art Forms: The Future of the Art Community

by Bonnie White

(English 103)

The Assignment: Write either an informative, objective report or an argumentative position paper (your choice) on a research question of your choice that is related to your major or program of study. You may also elect to examine some issue/question from the perspective of someone in your field of study (for instance, how a psychologist might look at gun control).

The art world is one of great vastness and possibility. In this day and age, there are so many options for artists on how they can express themselves. The traditional roles of painter, sculptor, or writer have become a thing of the past. Why, here at COD alone there are so many art classes that a single student would find it next to impossible to study them all. Knowing this, imagine what the class selection would be like at Columbia Art School or even the Art Institute of Illinois. It is a forever changing market, affected by everything from war to technological advances. Artists, as individuals, are also changing, due to their desires to expand on what is considered art. This is where I fit in, as part of a new generation of artists seeking personal satisfaction in their work.

Currently I am majoring in visual arts as well as writing. One of my grandest dreams has always been to write and illustrate all my own work. This could be in the form of books, with occasional illustrations, 'word' painting, or even public art. I have to ask myself, though, if there is a future in the combination of visual and written art. If so, where is this future and what are the career options? You might also ask me, "Why are these two skills, or any artistic skills for that matter, so closely related?" We can explore the possibilities of these combinations by looking at certain artists like Keith Haring and Faith Ringgold who have done combination art work. We can also look to the world of children's books and author/illustrator Maurice Sendak. There are even writers who write specifically about art! Last, I will give you a glimpse into the future of the art market and show you *why* these two skills are so related.

The first way I would like to look at this question would be to explore it from a formal art perspective. I have been painting for about three years and writing poetry, short fiction and essays for seven years. I hope that one day I can be more widely published and have shows for my art. A lot of what I do would probably not be considered 'fine' art, due to its modern taste and subject matter. By no means does this equal amateur work, though. Many artists have followed in the footsteps of Andy Warhol, creating 'pop' art that reaches out to modern man, not art gurus. They create art work that is easily understood and can be appreciated by everyone. One artist in particular sprung up in the early 1980's: Keith Haring. While he was an art student, he was disgusted by the rules of classic art and longed to create his own vision: Art for the community (*Drawing the Line*). He also found himself very displeased with the modern world, and was not afraid to let it show in his work (Haring 124).

Haring is best known for his characters or symbols that he used in all his art. Whether it was a chalk drawing on an empty subway panel, a marker drawing on a t-shirt, or part of the large mural he did on the Berlin Wall, it would appear his largest vessel was semiotics. He communicated with his observers through pictures and phrases that had much grander meanings (see fig.1, Haring 244). Not only was his art public to view, but his messages were for the public as well. Haring loved to do large murals, and it was in these murals that he coined such popular phrases as "Crack is whack," and "Safe sex or no sex," (*Drawing the Line*). These are very simple statements, but in the mid to late 1980's, they meant much more. In a time where the artistic *and* working community were being ravaged by drugs and AIDS, his worked reached out to thousands of people across the world.

A very good point is made by Haring in the book *Keith Haring Journals*, in which he wrote, on

May 31, 1983: "The role of the image maker cannot be seen as the same as it was a 100 years ago. The rate of change is accelerating at an increasingly rapid speed and the artist has to change with it ... Our imagination is our greatest hope for survival" (82). This leads me to another artist by the name of Faith Ringgold. Faith grew up in Harlem in the 1930's, and despite the poverty of her community, got a degree in fine art and taught art at New York City public schools for 18 years (Bray). In 1983, she completed her first story quilt, which was a combination of three different art forms : painting, quilting, and writing. These story quilts came to be her trade mark and, ironically, her favorite thing to make as well. She would use the knowledge of her heritage to make the quilt itself, then her creativity to paint a moving picture on its surface and even accompany the picture with a story (*Faith Ringgold*).

In an article by Pamela Bray entitled "Faith Ringgold: Artist Storyteller," Bray talks about the significance of Ringgold's work and how effective it is in getting her point across. Bray says, "Because artists speak through their art, they must give careful consideration to the medium that will best deliver their message." This means that the artists must find how they communicate best. In the case of Ringgold, she used a quilt as her medium, and the combination of pictures and storytelling to communicate her deep relations with the African-American community. She branched out even further when she created a children's book entitled *Tar Beach*, which was based on a story quilt she had created years back. This book won the 1991 Parent's Choice award, and it's not hard to see why. The story is slightly autobiographical of Faith's childhood, as it's main character is an eight-year-old girl who lives in the Bronx in 1939. The story is touching, and the art work is beautiful in its child-like simplicity.

Children's books are cherished in our hearts forever, whether they are about the memories of ones that we read as kids or maybe books that we are now reading to our own kids. They are so simple, yet profound enough to make us remember them for the rest of our lives. So why, then, are the creators of these books perpetually put down as mediocre? What greater combination of written and visual stimuli can there be than the child's book? It takes a great amount of skill to capture a child's attention, and even more skill to hold it! Author and illustrator Maurice Sendak talks about this in his video interview *Getting to Know Maurice Sendak*. He talks about how the inspiration for one of his most famous works, *Where the Wild Things Are*, came chiefly from real life. He was the little boy, always ready to get into mischief, and the monsters were his older family members (who he thought looked 'scary' as child and 'ate him up' with their affection). Sendak states, "Why would a child turn a page? A child isn't polite ... If they hate the first two pages it's Whamo! against the wall and that's the end of the book. They don't care if it's won 18 Caldecott Awards, right?" He continues to talk about the art of sucking children into the world of the book, and he even compares the repetitious page turning to a rhythm of sorts.

Maybe now it is easier to see why we, as an artistic community, need to place more value in a good children's author/illustrator. Not only does their work create a different kind of challenge, but these books are also starting to be used as learning tools. Teachers in elementary classrooms are using visual art forms more and more as learning aids. Kathy A. Miller-Hewes wrote an article about such learning techniques called "Making the Connection: Children's Books and the Visual Arts." In her article she documents a few specific classroom exercises that are performed involving visual art. In one example, a group of children read *and* observed the contents of three different books involving dragons. The kids soon started to realize that their 'trained' idea of what a dragon looked like wasn't always right. Soon they started talking about what a dragon *could* look like, as apposed to what it *should* look like, and that the possibilities were endless. Miller-Hewes says that, "Using children's books to motivate learning in visual art can be rewarding for the teacher and the student."

So far I have found many sources on including written art with visual art. What happens, though, if you flip the spectrum and write *about* art? We just looked at how some teachers are using visual images to expand their students' concepts of art. Now we're going to look at something similar: using writing as an accompaniment and understanding of art. I have an exercise for you to try, if you like. Pick an object, any object, and study it in detail for about five minutes. When the time is up, put the object out of sight and try to write as many descriptive attributes about it as you can remember. After you can think of no more, give someone else the description paper and see if they can guess what you are talking about. This exercise is a great example of how much we can overlook minor details and descriptions, because we

feel them to be ‘common knowledge.’ Or maybe yet, we’ve just never opened our eyes to the world this way. The fact is, this is how the artist sees the world -- full of life and detail.

One teacher named Faith Zajicek wrote an article about having her students do such writing exercises. The article, entitled “Writing Through Art,” mostly talked about different ways the teacher (Zajicek) incorporated both her backgrounds in English and Art. While the class she was teaching in the article was an art class, she made her students do many writing exercises to increase their awareness of detail as well as of their feelings about a particular art piece. I can understand this very well, as my painting teacher has had me keep a specific art log for a year now. I fill it with notes, ideas, descriptions, definitions, thoughts, feelings, journalings, even drawings and clip art. It is incredibly helpful to be able to look back and reflect on what I have written about my artistic experiences and endeavors, and it also helps me to get out my ideas so I can look at them from another perspective.

Zajicek also notes that having students write down what they have seen and learned helps them to retain and remember their new knowledge. She ends her article with a powerful statement that “Writing provides a unique form of artistic expression, and the pen and paper belong in the art class along with paint, and the brushes and the easel” (Zajicek). How far fetched is it then, to think that you could write something based on or inspired by art? Unknown to many outside of the art world, there are hundreds of examples of writers and poets who create their work from artistic work. A wonderful example is a book by John Updike, the renowned American author from Pennsylvania. Published in 1989, the book is titled *Just Looking* and consists of commentary, reflection, and related facts and stories about artists and the art they created.

One such story is about a famous woodprint from the mid-1790’s titled *Catching Fireflies*. The story itself, called “Little Lightening,” is about the memories that the art evoked in the author’s mind, and how it seemingly brings him back to his own curious childhood behaviors (Updike 172-4). This is not surprising, considering Updike himself strongly feels that the writer’s first impression is what he should in fact write (*John Updike*). It is as if he were a visual artist at heart, but instead of seeing something, being inspired, and drawing, he picks up the pen and *writes out* his idea or ‘impression.’ One such impression that he had a few years back was stated in a videotaped lecture. Updike said, “I saw *Snow White* when it was a new thing. ... This very powerful medium [the film], struck me with a force that I suppose TV and video have for today’s impressionable young people” (*John Updike*).

Another example would be writer/painter Diana Chang and her poems about artists and their art. She was particularly interested in artists of the ‘action’ or ‘expressionism’ style of painting (Fink). As she saw it, these paintings were created through motion, and this reflected her thought process as well: in motion. In one of her poems, “Plunging into View,” Chang compares the paint itself to words when she says, “Things move as verbs thrown and present and ranging way over there vigilant in the faintest whitened viridian air” (qtd. in Fink 9-21). These ideas can be seen in an article by Thomas Fink titled “Chang’s ‘Plunging Into View,’ ” as well as lines from the poem itself. Fink explores the ideas behind Chang’s choice of work, as well as her delivery. As stated earlier, there are many more authors who have found their inspiration in art work. Chang herself painted as well as wrote. So why then are these two skills so closely related? Why is it that more and more artists are turning to multiple outlets for their creativity? Some say that a creative spirit knows no boundaries.

If there is one thing that can be said true about people who are very artistic, it is this: Everything they do, everything they see, breaks down into some form of art. When they are walking home from the store and look up at the beautiful sunset, they don’t just think, “Wow, that’s pretty.” No! They have to analyze the color schemes, the way the light plays off the clouds, creating puffs of pink, salmon, and purple. They will notice the dramatic shadows that are created by the sinking sun, stretching in vastness across the street and seemingly swallowing houses whole. They will feel something, whether it is awe for this oh-so-common phenomenon that millions of people don’t even care to notice, or it is sadness brought by the ending of another day, metaphorically bringing us closer to death. Maybe, they even will feel joy and rejoice that the silver moon has finally come out to play, and the spirits of the night dance in these new shadows. You think, breathe, eat, sleep, and dream art.

Keeping this concept in mind, why would you expect to limit themselves to only one form of

medium? It should come purely by nature to long to express in various way. As described earlier about Faith Ringgold, we have to find the medium that suits our purpose best. For some things, they may be best sketched in fine charcoal, others needs to be sculpted and physically made. Some unspoken dialogues are best *put* to words, meaning certain feeling are best expressed in written form, maybe a poem or story. More and more people every day are figuring this out and finding it harder and harder to categorize themselves. It has become unnecessary to categorize ourselves anymore; we are all just artists. Then, for those who feel they cannot create all they want themselves, they can team up to do collaborated work with other artists.

In about the late 1950's, these 'team-ups' were starting to become very popular. The general public was used to seeing artists work together on such things as public sculpture and murals, but this idea was a bit of a stretch to many. Many people thought that the combination of talents took away from the individual skill of an artists and that it was the individual skill that made it art in the first place! (Bricker). So how then, they asked, was this 'team effort' to be considered art? Ten years or so passed and the media changed its tune. They learned to embrace the collaborated art forms as representative of a genre. Many of the collaborated art pieces of the 60's and 70's were political or radical in nature. Many of the artists would team up because they shared a certain view point about war, or government, or freedom for women and people of color. Others, well, they just shared common interests, but these ideas still represented anyone who shared the idea as well.

In an editorial written in *Art Journal* by Deborah Bricker Balken, called "Interactions Between Artists and Writers," she fights to support group art, saying that in no way does it take away from the value of the art. In fact, she believes that solo art is one-sided because it only displays the thought of one human. While she uses many good examples to support her case, there is one that struck me as meaningful. She talks about when William S. Burroughs and Bryon Gysin teamed up to make their 'cut-ups,' as they liked to call them. Both men argued that "...through the process of collaboration an anonymous and disembodied voice is created. This 'third mind,' as they refer to it, is the outgrowth of two egos working in conjunction." Thus the meaning or the personality of the piece is not lost at all. Quite the contrary, they say, a brand new personality is born, and it asks the reader/viewer to participate.

Another simple, yet great example can be found in the video tape Artists of America Series: Anatomy of a Mural. It is a documentary that follows the creation of an immense mural on the outside of a mission in New Mexico. The three artists involved are Carlos Larca, Manuel Villamor, and Betsy Miller Kusz, and they all came from different racial and religious backgrounds. They all agree that they want the mural to be for the community, meaning it should appeal and speak to the community (*Anatomy*). Kunsz says that the mural must engage the community and draw attention to itself. It is "...not light or sentimental or sweet or neighborly, but a statement of great importance out on the street" (qtd. in *Anatomy*). While their medium for communication is mainly through semiotics, it makes communication just the same. In fact, the mural most definitely benefited from the three different view points of the world held by the three different artists.

After having looked at many different career options, ranging from formal art to children's books to formal writing, we can start to gather that it is not the limit of career options that are to be worried about. While I have mainly explored these few, there are other big name jobs on the market today that incorporate multiple talents. Some of these things might be comic books, web design, graphic arts, even advertising. The winds of change are blowing, and our human race is consistently changing its opinions and ideas of what art is. More and more artists are branching out to new things every day. As far as the success rate of these individuals goes, the proof is in the pudding. There is a very popular set of reference books called the *Who's Who* series. If you take the time to look in the most recent edition (2003-04) of the *Who's Who in American Art*, you would find some very interesting information. Not only is it a basic guide to every Tom, Dick and Jane who's out there making it happen in the art world, but it also gives you brief facts about the artist as well.

Included you might find listing of gallery shows, private shows, public work, even sold work (*Who's Who* vi). This book easily contains thousands of working artists, and because they *are in fact working*, you have to imagine that they have found a way to be successful. It did not take me long to see

a very distinct trend: collaboration. As well as stating facts, the books tells you what the artist is known for, or what their trade is. Almost half of the artists included bore more than one title, so they are known for more than one trade. In the first 17 pages alone, I counted five painter/writers, all with big lists of work and shows they had done. This is proof of the wide variety at which art can be used, bought, and sold.

There is another great book entitled *The Artist Almanac*, and it is a listing of thousands of different business that are looking for various art work. These business include corporate offices, publishing houses, magazine companies, advertisement companies, small businesses, restaurants, government offices, and the list goes on. All of these people are looking for various forms of artwork, from decorative sculpture to fine book illustration. The point is, there is obviously not a lack of work, nor lack of career options. So how does the future of the art market look? I think it looks absolutely promising and fantastic, full of possibilities and new horizons.

Whether I choose to write, paint, illustrate or combine them all, the future seems open to me. Technology may be taking over many branches of the job market, but a computer cannot be creative, or have an opinion. A machine cannot reinvent itself to be better. It is the human that must constantly strive to change and make things better. This is why the artist may be starving, but she is never out of demand. We have looked at possible career paths, and the people that fill them. By using specific examples of artists like Faith Ringgold and Keith Haring, I hope you can have a better understanding of how the art works, and why. I've even shown you how these different art forms can affect people, as how the children's books can affect learning and group art affects a genre.

The melding of art forms is indeed a special skill, one that we should be teaching more and more, just as Miller-Hewes did with her students. If we cut art out of our culture, or label it as something that is only for 'upper class' society, we are only shorting ourselves. The art community helps to round out the world, as if it were the balance between conscious and subconscious. I don't expect everyone to agree with me, for many are quick to scorn any art-related career as 'fake' or 'trivial.' You have to wonder, though: "What would the world be without art?" What would the world be without the art community to constantly push the barriers on what is considered art? Hopefully, we'll never find out.

Works Cited

- Artist of America Series: Anatomy of a Mural. Rick Goldsmith. Videorecording. Chip Taylor Communications, 1993.
- Bray, Pamela. "Faith Ringgold: Artist-Storyteller." School Arts 88.4 (May 1989): 23(4). Expanded Academics ASAP. Infotrac. COD School Lib. 12 July 2004.
- Briker Balken, Debra. "Interactions Between Artists and Writers." Art Journal 52.4 (Winter 1993): 16(2). Expanded Academics ASAP. Infotrac. COD School Lib. 12 July 2004.
- Drawing the Line: A Portrait of Keith Haring. Dir. Elisabeth Aubert. Nar. Gina Belafonte. Videocasste. Kulture International Films, 1989.
- Faith Ringgold: The Last Story Quilt. Dir. David Irving. Nar. Lowery Sims. Videocassette. Home Vision, 1991.
- Fanning, Eileen, Alison C. McGowan, eds. Who's Who in American Art. 25th ed. New Providence, NJ: Maquis Who's Who, 2003.
- Fink, Thomas. "Chang's 'Plunging Into View'." The Explicator 55.3 (Spring 1997): 175(3). Expanded Academics ASAP. Infotrac. COD School Lib. 12 July 2004. Haring, Keith. Keith Haring Journals. Eds. Julia Gruen, et al. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

- John Updike: In His Own Words. Paul Byers, and Kevin Conrad eds. Videocassette. Ronald G. Shafer, 1997.
- Miller-Hewes, Kathy. "Making the Connection: Children's Books and the Visual Arts." School Arts 94.4 (Dec. 1994): 32(2). Expanded Academics ASAP. Infotrac. COD School Lib. 12 July 2004.
- Ringgold, Faith. Tar Beach. New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1991.
- Sendak, Maurice. "Getting to Know Maurice Sendak." Sendak. Morton Schidel. 1985. Videorecording. Weston Woods.
- - -. Where the Wild Things Are. N.p.: Harper & Row, 1963.
- Updike, John. Just Looking: Essays on Art. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989.
- Zajicek, Faith. "Writing Through Art." School Arts 93.3 (Nov. 1993): 24(1). Expanded Academics ASAP. Infotrac. COD School Lib. 16 July 2004.