

Potentials for a Transcultural Art Education in Germany

by Tim Proetel

This paper is based on my experiences as an art-teacher, teacher-trainer and curriculum-developer, as well as experiences in the management of a secondary school in Germany. I intend to report about transcultural issues in German art-education. To establish this we locally work together in a group of art-teachers and globally with university-staff, researchers and artists from different countries. We work on a publication, that bundles and reflects our experiences and gives advice to teachers, authors of school-books and teacher-trainers. Our publication is related to the project *Exploring Visual Cultures, in which we cooperate with partners in Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon and South Africa (URL)*. By this, we reflect the teaching-experiences. In our discussions and propositions we doubt a lot, we struggle about content and meanings. This is due to the fact, that there are great uncertainties about the right way of teaching transcultural and to publish about it. It is a politically explosive terrain, but we face the dispute.

I am very thankful to be here and to have the chance to listen and to understand something about art and education in African countries, to learn from artists, writers, film-makers, researchers and teachers. I suppose the requirements and resources in Germany are very different to those in many African countries. So I would also like to take the chance to communicate about the aims we have in common.

Based on the experiences with the issue in our workgroup, I will illustrate our approach by the interplay between European and African 'visual cultures' from both a practical and a theoretical perspective in three case-studies:

- Investigation of school textbooks
- the interplay of visual languages by the use of Ghanaian Adinkra-symbols
- diverse history of the Benin-bronzes

Talking about art education in secondary schools, I mean *Visual Arts* as a general subject with theoretical and practical activities. Normally kids in Germany attend it in one or two weekly hours on their timetable, in additional courses some more. It is not about training future artists, but about competencies, every student should acquire, regardless of her or his professional or academic ambitions. These competencies are based on the experience to design and to realize ideas, to express thoughts and emotions and to take part in creating society with everyone's very own individuality. Art as a tool to communicate with others and to define the own personality. It is a basis for constant improvements in different techniques, in looking at art, expressing themselves, discussing art-contexts and learning about history.

In recent years the necessity and popularity of intercultural issues increased a lot. Other subjects like history, politics, philosophy, geography and languages made important progress, e.g. by publications and material for teachers and learners. Moreover in the business-world workshops train employees along intercultural policies, as they understand the necessity of knowledge about other behaviors and the acceptance of diversity for successful communication in commercial networking. Although some non-verbal aspects, e.g. advices to culturally conditioned differences in body-language, are found in handouts for business use, they concentrate on the linguistic aspects of interaction. Looking at corresponding efforts in art-education, we have to state a dismaying lack of concepts. Efforts in practice are made, but they seem to be less orientated and convincing than they could, regarding the huge potentials of the subject. The issues in art-education should make a clear difference to the economically orientated ones. We should focus our unique qualities as artistic thinking and designing people.

My main proposition is: As images play a major role in a globalized world, intercultural competencies are a general key to visual literacy in art, design, fashion and architecture. A concept for transcultural art-education has to focus on the unique potentials of diverse images for knowledge and cognition.

The specific dealing with images in various cultures gets too little attention. Raising the awareness for different traditions in producing images, for their roles in identity-building, the iconic significance of

certain images and, not to underestimate, taboos, need to maintain a higher importance in art-education. Under this premises the challenge is to implement this in both the theoretical and the practical sequences of the subject. So, let's think about how this can be done.



Discovering blind spots

In this teaching project, the pupils will take current art textbooks and evaluate them according to the origin of the artists they feature and present the results in information-posters.

The history of art I grew up with, as I learned it in lectures at school and the university, as I used to perceive it in museums is very much a European narration. The internalized canon seems to represent, what one should know about art and its development from one decade to another. Aesthetic and formal inventions play a major role in this story.

In meantime museums, universities and the media are increasingly taking a critical look at the established canon in art, design and architecture. The European repertoire of masterpieces is clearly being questioned. This creates awareness of the social conditions, automatism and power relations that condition any canon. Education in school also forms a certain understanding of the world through the artists, epochs and regions dealt with in the classroom. Every textbook contributes to the reproduction of a certain (Western) understanding of art through the selection of reproduced and discussed works. This western art-canon is highly selective, excluding and selfish. It not only refuses to represent diversity, as it does not represent the global cultural heritage, but it also simplifies and claims hierarchic values.

I discussed this with my students. We stated three main factors for the selection of artists and works, a student has contact with in school:

- the decisions made by teachers
- the exhibited collections in museums
- the selections found in textbooks, we use at schools

So we started a small investigation: We looked at textbooks for art and checked them in terms of what they mainly represent. We count the reproductions and assign them to gender and origin of the artists, architects and designers. We put the amounts in relation to each other and compared them, continent by continent, country by country. And although expected, the result was striking, some of the students reacted almost angrily. We recognized blind spots and huge gaps. I.g. this map shows the frequency of a country represented with art-pieces and artists in the book „Fundamente der Kunst“, representative for most of the other books we looked at. The dark blue countries have the most frequent quotes, the white countries are not mentioned.



The students visualise the evaluations of the data in a poster-like form. They design illustrations in a meaningful, pointed or humorous way. Instead of the usual pie- or bar-charts, vivid images should be found, that make the issues of equality and intercultural representation visible. Usually as a student you don't doubt the facts in your schoolbooks. I think the power of this experience might force the students to question common viewpoints and to open the related canon.

Dianne Minicucci, subject leader for photography and a teacher of art at *Thomas Tallis school* in London, mentions: „All this begs the question of what can we do as teachers of art, design, craft and photography in order to diversify and decolonize our curricula. How do we make the invisible visible? How do we ensure that artists of colour are fully visible to our students so that they can never again be erased from culture?“ And she discovers „we must, first and foremost, engage in deep research. Part of my own research involved discovering a range of contemporary black artists. What can I learn from them in order to design engaging schemes of work? My growing knowledge of their work helps me think about the relevance of art, craft and design for young people today so that they can understand the world and can change it for the better.“ (<https://www.explore-vc.org/en/lab/decolonising-and-diversifying-the-art-curriculum.html>)

Learning from other cultures and transformation

Minicucci outlines the basic consequence that teachers in western influenced countries must transform in their teaching-methods: researching artists outside the common repertoire, to introduce them in class. Discussing important contemporary artists from the African continent like El Anatsui, Michael Armitage and Sethembile Msezane or Romuald Hazoumé decolonizes art education. On the one hand it opens new perspectives on relevant social and political topics, on the other hand the students learn general aspects on sculpture, painting or performance-art. It's essential that the classical art-categories cannot be occupied by one dominant cultural region.



Let me now present a school-project that illustrates, how we can learn from another through collaborative action. The idea arose when teachers from the *University of Education* in Winneba, Ghana visited Munich. Our guests brought with them teaching materials on the West African Adinkra symbols, which illustrate universal values. Based on a co-teaching of mine with experts from Winneba, an innovative appropriation of the symbols was developed with age 16-17 students at my school in Munich.

Interpretation of Adinkra-symbol

Split up in four groups (5 students/group). Each group is supported by an expert from Winneba.

Following the form of an adinkra, decode the symbol. Discuss different interpretations.

The students worked out the symbolic content of individual Adinkra motifs and then translated these meanings into arrangements of objects familiar to them. Using photos and stylizing sketches, new symbols emerged from the arrangements.



Step by step the students developed their sign from a photograph over drawing and stencil to an etching in glass.

Transformations

- Transformation of the symbolic sign from one culture to another
- Transformation of the material
- Object → photography → stencil → glass-etching
- Transformation of ideas: learning specific issues from experts, combining them, so they turn into something own

They transformed the traditional symbol in a new, somehow sampled pictorial language.

Preparing the glass-etching: stencil forms are cut in plastic tightly stuck to the glass. Font-writings are plotted on adhesive-films. The paste etches only the glass, plastic resists.

The transformation takes place on different levels:

- Transformation of the symbolic sign from one culture into another
- Transformation of material
- object → photography → drawing → stencil → etching in glass
- Transformation of ideas: learning specific cultural issues from experts, combining them, so they turn into something own.

Finally, these „Munich-Adinkras“ were placed next to each other with their models - on self-etched glass panes. This made the appropriation process doubly transparent. A series of the glass-etchings are

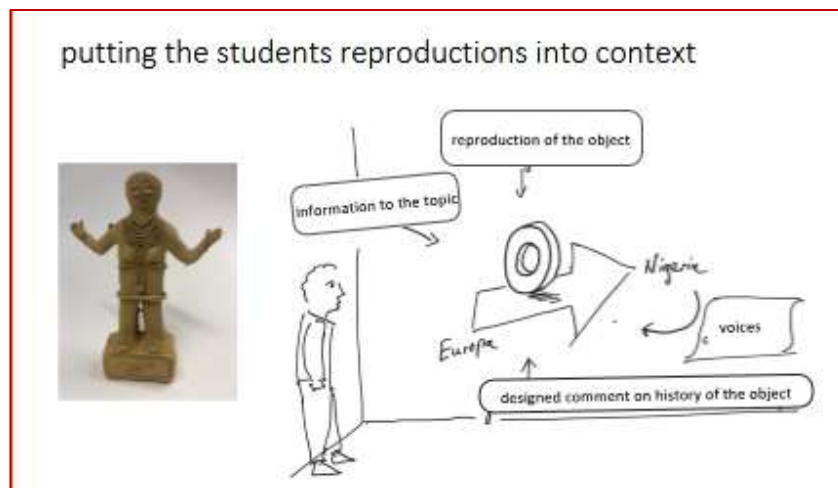
presented inside windows in the school in Munich. I also sent a selection of them to Winneba, so there remains a constant materialized memory of the cooperation in both countries.

Restitution: Benin-Bronzes

My next suggestion for a criterion of the intercultural potential is the diverse history of an object. The history that combines different nations or cultures, even in a painful way. Together with students from a graduating class, I currently develop an art-project on the Benin-bronzes. The project focuses the current and the historical aspects of the bronzes, also reflecting the process of restitution.



It is supposed to lead to an exhibition, informing about the striking aspects of the objects and the debate about restitution of looted artworks. The students work on replications of the bronzes in clay. This first step is very handicraft, it has to do with close perception and imitation, but also demands transformation into another material.



For an installation these will be framed by information and comments. We are interested in views, comments, voices from Nigeria that shall accompany the presentation. The replications will be contextualized, so their eventful history becomes visual. What do they look at, and how do we look at them? In my view the interesting aspects of working with the bronzes are:

- Involving the students, as to make the bronzes part of their concern
- What story can they tell about their time in Europe?
- How can the bronzes become a means of communication?

It needs knowledge about history, about different cultures, about the global socioeconomic conditions. As these conditions are in a current change, competencies to cope with sudden changes in power, in viewpoints, culture are of general importance. Art might lead to very comprehensive ways of perceiving others and to a personal, uncommon, honest articulation of own concerns.

Criteria for lesson-design **multi-perspective views**

The students learn to ...

- question the European art-canon and widen it,
- explore a visual expression from another culture,
- collaborate with extern partners in order to get a multi-perspective view on the topic.



Araya Rasdianmrearnsook Two Planets 2008

In the German working-group of art teachers we set up some basic criteria for lesson-design, that could establish a model: The students learn to ...

- question the European art-canon and widen it,
- explore a visual expression from another culture,
- collaborate with extern partners in order to get a multi-perspective view on the topic,

This is branched out in the following aspects:

- expanding the area of relevant topics → overcome the Eurocentric perspective
- recognizing mutual influences in modern and contemporary art, fashion, design and architecture
- taking a critical view to the common narration of art-history → decolonizing
- learning from the other → cooperation
- reflecting the importance of the cultural heritage for social development and the role of art in society

The job is now to implement this into art education: in curricula, schoolbooks and teacher-training.

Effort for change

- compelling reasons
- sufficient resources
- fruitful experiences



Effort for change

In art education we often deal with the perception of unfamiliar images. Encountering something new is one of the main sources, to get impulses for the lesson. To stimulate the perception of my students, to activate their reflection, to discuss the ways of decoding and interpreting what they see, it might be helpful to show strange things. People react differently to strange things. They might react in a curious, amused, irritated, repelled, cool, or perceptive way.

New approaches in art education seem to be reactions and to give answers to an unacceptable present praxis. To what is frustrating, false, or elapsed. To what denies relevant facts and changed preconditions in our societies. Usually it is hard work to bring around changes in the praxis of school-education, as many factors have to be renewed: didactic material like books and the collection of images, preparations of lessons, the curricula, tests. Teacher-training has to be adjusted to new topics. Teachers have to change their usual way of dealing with the subject matter, even if it seems to be convincing and successful. Every change is a risk. Only these difficulties show how well justified intended changes have to be, in order to implement them in the educational system. What is needed are:

- compelling reasons,
- fruitful experiences,
- sufficient resources.

Otherwise teachers will not be willing to change their routines. But the most difficult step is to clear away favorites, to “kill the darlings”.