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# ART WORKS AS A RE-PRESENTATION OF RESEARCH

**JILL SMITH**

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This article is based on the catalogue from my exhibition, “Talking my way through culture”, held at the Blue Orange Contemporary New Zealand Art Gallery, 30 Sept – 21 Oct 2007.

**ABSTRACT** *A critique of meanings and interpretations of culture that have a connectedness with art and art teaching, teachers and students, and society within and beyond schools provided a critical framework for my doctoral research, completed in 2006. This research, which was motivated in part by my role as a Pākehā/New Zealand teacher educator, investigated secondary school art teachers’ understandings of culture, diversity and difference within the framework of the arts curriculum, and expressed through their pedagogical practices. In this paper I explicate a number of the interpretations of culture encountered in the literature which raise issues of how art is represented and classified. These interpretations inspired me, post-thesis, to generate a series of art works during 2007. Based on the concept of the Talking Stick and presented in a Talking Stick Circle, the examples included in this paper represent works from my exhibition, “Talking my way through culture”. The aim of this paper is to show how I used the talking sticks to demonstrate that art works can function as a multi-layered interpretive act, as a re-presentation of a literature review and as a ‘voice’ with which to challenge pedagogical practices in art education.*

## **KEYWORDS**

Culture, Art, Art education, Talking stick, Talking stick circle

## **INTRODUCTION**

*The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2000) states that “the arts and culture are inextricably interconnected” (p. 104). Students’ learning is to include “developing an understanding of art forms in relation to the tangata whenua, to biculturalism in New Zealand, and to the multicultural nature of our society and traditions” (p. 7). Examining the relationship between art, culture and curriculum is a critical dimension of my teacher education programmes. A focus on Māori art education and biculturalism is an important dimension of that approach (see Smith, 2001, 2006, 2007b). The arts curriculum, my understandings of tikanga, and the multiplicity of interpretations of culture reviewed in the literature informed the conception and presentation of my series of talking sticks. First, I will introduce the concept of talking sticks and their roles. Second, I will present eight cultural interpretations which influenced the creation of the talking sticks. Within each of these sections I will present three sub-sections: an explanation of the cultural

interpretation; a brief description of the art works; and an explanation of the ways in which they challenge those cultural interpretations, and the classification of art and culture in the arts curriculum. Finally, I conclude with a brief summary.

### **THE TALKING STICK AND THE TALKING STICK CIRCLE**

A long-held interest in ngā rakau tu marae, the Māori ceremonial staffs of the marae, influenced my decision to use the talking stick as a vehicle for artistic expression. Mead (1986) describes the different forms used by orators to indicate authority and mana, and to make important announcements, as the taiaha, a long staff or weapon; walking sticks, which are hooked staffs based on British forms; the rakau whakapapa, a genealogical staff used as a memory aid for the recitation of whakapapa; and tokotoko or rakau kōrero, talking sticks decorated with symbolic imagery, often with human figures arranged in the manner of a totem pole. Mead explained that some elders have several tokotoko to choose from whenever they go to a hui, that some sticks have been carved and gifted to orators, and that some are named and have been “passed down the male line to their present owners” (p. 178). At a modern hui, possession of a tokotoko signals that the owner is an orator, that he has authority to speak, and that the group with whom he appears “recognises tacitly his right to speak for them” (p. 178).

Talking sticks appear in other cultures and are used for various purposes. In Hawaii, the stick is called ‘paoa’, which means, “talking from the tree” (LewAllen, 2006, p. 1). Australian Aboriginal people used ‘message sticks’ as a means of communication within neighboring groups (Matthews, 1897). These message sticks were made of pieces of wood of varying lengths and sizes, and the ornamentation on them consisted of notches, dots, strokes and curves. The design, decoration, and detail of each stick depended on the artist who constructed it and on the tribe to which the stick belonged. According to Matthews (1897), message sticks could be used for organising a corroboree (a ceremonial meeting), conveying messages or reminders between friends, planning festive gatherings, making announcements in cases of sickness or death, and summoning a gathering for hostile purposes. The *Message Sticks Film Festival*, held in Sydney in 2006, attests to the continuing significance of this communication medium.

The talking sticks of the Northwest Coast First Nations peoples have many functions. As well as being a prayer stick, as a representation of the property to be given away during the Potlatch ceremony, and as a Gwispeck staff carried by the herald who went from house to house to invite people to events, it is used to manage the conversation in informal and formal meetings (Grimes, Kramer & Hill, 1996). The talking stick is regarded as a respectful way to give each person the opportunity to speak. When the leader of the meeting, usually a chief, finishes speaking the stick is passed to the next person, and no one speaker talks too long for fear of upsetting the spirits in the stick. Sometimes members bring their own talking sticks. The imagery on Native American talking sticks differs from the imagery on the Māori tokotoko (which emphasises the human head or figure) in that it usually includes symbolic items of nature. Hence, a wide range of sacred animals, among them ravens, bears, eagles, salmon, and whales are depicted. Decorative elements

often comprise feathers, leather, beads, fur, bone, and shells. The head of a talking stick in my collection, carved by Peter Charlie (a member of the Salish Nation of Northwest Coast Native people), features the raven which symbolises creation, knowledge, and the Bringer of the Light. A snake, symbolic of the life force, is entwined on the body of the stick. The significance of the talking stick for these indigenous people was reinforced at the *Talking Stick Festival 2007: A Kaleidoscope of Aboriginal Art and Expression*.

The concept of the Talking Stick Circle was used for the presentation of my talking sticks. The talking stick circle, an ancient tool for improving decision making and strengthening communities, is regarded by the First Nations people as a key symbol for understanding life's mysteries, since much of nature in the physical world is circular. The circle has also been described by Baldwin (1994) as "a mechanism of self-empowerment in which the leadership rotates, responsibility is shared, and the group relies on Spirit to hold and focus energy" (p. 1). Within the New Zealand context, Metge (2001) has developed a procedure, drawn from tikanga Māori, for talking together (tahi kōrero) and for managing group discussion in settings where Māori and non-Māori from differing ethnic backgrounds meet to talk about common concerns.

My talking sticks do not replicate or appropriate the forms and cultural significance of the tokotoko of Māori, nor the talking sticks of other indigenous peoples. Rather, I drew upon the concept of the talking stick and re-conceptualised it so that the talking sticks themselves have a 'voice'. The sticks in my exhibition thus 'spoke' of differing interpretations of art and culture. The concept of the talking stick circle was also re-conceptualised. Rather than being passed around the circle my sticks were mounted on pedestals to make the 'reading' of them more accessible to the viewer. Each was positioned in the circle within sub-sets of cultural frameworks.

## **THE METHODOLOGY**

The methodological approach which underpinned the conceptual framework of my exhibition employed five interpretive steps: a re-examination of the literature articulated in my doctoral thesis (Smith, 2007a); the selection of interpretations of culture which I considered particularly potent for challenging the ways in which art is considered, interpreted, and positioned in the arts curriculum and embedded in the pedagogical practices of art teachers; reflection upon the artistic and physical means by which the cultural interpretations could be conceptualised in the form of talking sticks; the creation of the sticks themselves; and the presentation of the sticks within the construct of a talking circle.

## **EIGHT INTERPRETATIONS OF CULTURE WHICH INFLUENCED THE ART WORKS**

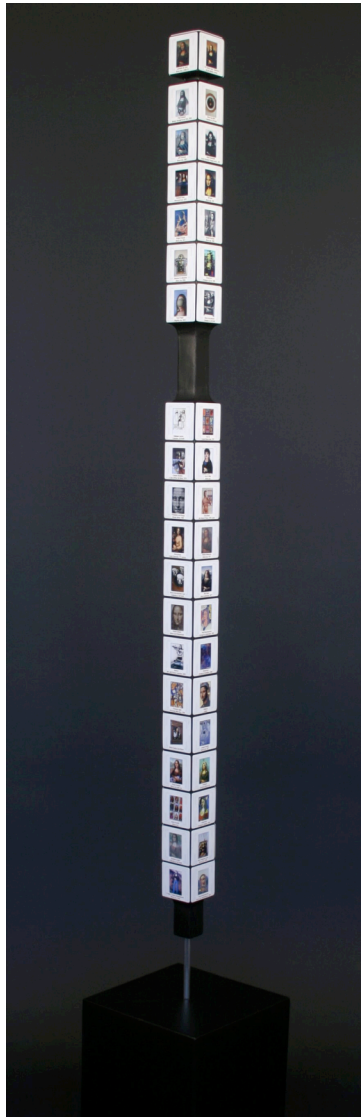
### **Culture of the Western aesthetic**

The first interpretation that inspired my art works was the idea of culture as a hallmark of civilization. This notion became widespread during the Enlightenment,

a phase in cultural history that emerged during the seventeenth century and reached its height in late eighteenth century Europe. When the writers, philosophers and scientists of the eighteenth century referred to their period as “the Enlightenment”, they meant that they were breaking from the past and replacing the obscurity, darkness, and ignorance of previous European thinking with the ‘light’ of truth (Hooker, 1996). This philosophical movement encouraged people to apply human reason to religious, political, economic and societal issues. It was thought that rational consideration of such problems would lead to progress, with society moving gradually towards perfection. Nineteenth century cultural theorist Arnold (1882) described culture as having its origin not in mere curiosity but in a love of ‘perfection’. Contrasting culture with social chaos and anarchy, Arnold advocated for culture as a pursuit of human perfection through the acquisition of excellent ‘taste’ arising from intellectual development. Culture thus became linked with social cultivation and the progressive refinement of human behaviour. Pursuing cultural activities was one way in which admirable human beings could be cultivated.

The belief in culture as an essential quality of a civilized person remains a characteristic of modernism, a term which covers a variety of political, cultural, and artistic movements rooted in the changes in Western society at the end of the nineteenth century. Modernist concepts, derived from the rationalist epistemology of Western Enlightenment, emerged in France from the 1880s. Forward-looking artists, thinkers and writers embraced science, logic, perfection, and especially progress, in order to escape previous academic and historical styles (Levenson, 1999). This was based on the assumption that what is new is a progressive reform of past practices. The modernist interpretation of culture, however, promoted theories of ‘high art’ criticism and aesthetics which were inaccessible to all but a few (Clark, 1996). Culture in the European world was, in these terms, associated with elite notions of art and aesthetics. Cultured people knew about and took part in pursuits such as ballet, classical music, drama, literature and the fine arts. Defined as “those appealing to the mind or to the sense of beauty ... or which appealed to taste” (Tulloch, 1997, p. 556), the fine arts comprised a limited number of visual arts forms. Painting, sculpture, and printmaking were included, but not photography or design. These fine arts forms, which became an integral part of the Western ‘canon’ (a canon of books, music and art that is thought to have been highly influential in shaping Western culture), remain an enduring dimension of modernist culture. The canon lists works considered to have the greatest literary and artistic merit. It is a canon which holds that the “best art in the world has been produced by Europeans ... men ... and ... individual geniuses” (Chalmers, 1999, p. 173), although the majority of figures considered significant are described by critics as mostly Dead White European Males (DWEM).





**Photo 1.** *The ultimate cultural icon* – timber, acrylic paint, slide transparency mounts, archival photographic paper, 1240 x 55mm

My first talking stick, *The ultimate cultural icon* [Photo 1], featured eighty representations of the *Mona Lisa* by the “individual genius”, Leonardo da Vinci (1452-1519). This painting was selected to illustrate a supreme example of high culture, High Renaissance perfection and the Western art canon. The *Mona Lisa*, immortalised in its high-security frame in the Louvre Museum, has been canonised in art and art historical discourse and held up by art historians, theorists, critics, and the public at large, as the ultimate cultural icon. The head of my talking stick was topped by an image of the attested ‘original’ painting by Leonardo, below which were four paintings claimed to be the original (see Storey, 1980). My use of the slide mounts on the stick parodied the ‘projection’ of the *Mona Lisa* image in a

multiplicity of art, cultural and educational contexts. As an artistic device, the slide mounts reinforced the ways in which this most famous of art works has ‘captured’ the imagination of other creators. Their re-presented images were, in turn, captured and projected.

In my thesis, I postulated that examples of Western art and their European cultural contexts continue to pervade art (and art history) education in New Zealand secondary schools. *The ultimate cultural icon* drew attention to a continued reverence for the ‘high art’ of the Western aesthetic. It sought to challenge educationalists to consider how the Western art canon, predominantly the products of DWEM, resonates with the lives of young people. It was designed to provoke teachers to examine the arts curriculum and the pedagogical practices they adopt with students living in a contemporary, multiculturalised society and globalised world.

### **‘High culture’ versus ‘low culture’**

An examination of the literature on art and culture of the Western aesthetic, which emphasises the difference between high culture and low culture, provided a rich source of ideas for a number of my talking sticks. Classified as ‘high culture’, the fine arts and other élitist cultural activities were elevated above forms of low culture. ‘Low culture’ has been described as those cultural elements that prevail in any given society and that result from ordinary people’s daily interactions, needs, and desires and from the cultural moments that make up the everyday lives of the mainstream population (Bullivant, 1993; Efland, Freedman & Stuhr, 1996). Designated as ‘popular culture’, or the culture of the people, its forms find expression through the mass circulation and consumption of technologically-driven mass-produced products such as calendars, postcards, tea-towels, ornaments and other forms of memorabilia. Representations of well-known items or icons, another source of popular culture, are disseminated in a world of cultural fluidity by the media, corporations and advertising. McCarthy, Giardina, Harewood and Park (2003) have argued that the realm of the popular “drives and is driven by national (and nationalistic) identities and significations” (p. 452). The kiwi bird, black singlet, plastic tiki and buzzy-bee are construed as unmistakable icons of New Zealand culture, just as the kangaroo and koala are connected with Australia and the panda with China. These forms of popular culture are considered by the art élite to be nostalgic, romantic, sentimental, entertaining, decorative, patriotic or ‘cute’. Set against the norms of the Western aesthetic, popular culture is abhorred for its tendency to endorse a limited experience of life through ‘common’, unsophisticated feelings and attitudes, and an emphasis on the banal, the superficial, the capricious and the disposable. On the other hand, McCarthy et al. (2003) are among those who claimed that popular culture provides greater insight into “the tensions and contradictions of contemporary society by observing and interpreting popular culture ... than by analyzing canonical texts” (p. 453). They argued that “the popular arena is perhaps the clearest window into the contextual specifications of ... life” (p. 453).

Folk art is also excluded from the modernist, hierarchical, Western cultural hegemony (Chalmers, 1999; Efland et al., 1996). Dismissed as naïve, unsophisticated or primitive, folk art is considered static, unchanging and rooted only in the past. However, proponents such as Congdon and Blandy (1999) maintained that folklore, the study of traditional aspects of culture, has long recognised the dynamic aspects of cultural traditions; that folk art is usually intended to be used in everyday life among members of small, close groups; that it displays cultural symbology known to a specific group; and that it frequently functions as a remembrance of the past or a demonstration of respect for ancestors or older adults. In their view, the folkloric creator is simply using a different language from the art-school-trained artist.

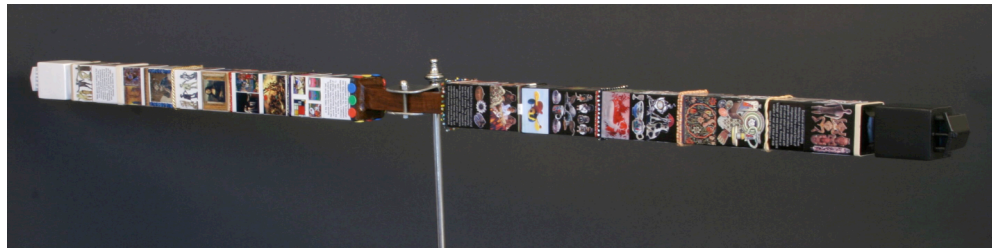
A further exclusion from high culture is craft. Historically the work of women (see Wayland Garber, 1995), craft has been omitted from a hierarchy of fine arts that reinforces the values and beliefs of the powerful and suppresses the experiences of others. While the inception of the feminist art movement in the early 1970s has brought about a commitment by feminist artists and art historians to break down this historically-determined hierarchy, the aesthetic qualities of craft remain largely overlooked or celebrated. Parker's (1986) description of embroidery as both a site of construction of the feminine, which also allows for creativity and pleasure, and as a resistance against such constructions encapsulates the conflicting ideological strains of aesthetics, expressive outlet and repressed femininity. The West tends also to overlook crafts created in non-Western countries. Herald (1992), for example, argued that while Westerners admire, import and even take inspiration from these craft objects they also undervalue them because they are both anonymous and inexpensive.

Exclusive and dominating discourses of modernity also classified the cultural forms of indigenous and non-Western peoples as inferior in aesthetics and value when compared with European fine art. 'Primitive' or 'savage art' was patronisingly viewed as quaint. Its very existence was largely ignored in school curricula and, in the case of New Zealand, the art of the Māori was despoiled by some of the early missionaries who saw it as idolatrous. Zerffi (1876), an instructor at Britain's South Kensington (a system of art education imported to the colonies, see Smith, 2007a), referred to Māori and Pacific Islanders as 'Oceanic Negroes': "He never goes beyond geometric ornamentation ... His reasoning faculty is very limited, his imagination slow ... He cannot create beauty, for he is indifferent to any ideal conception" (pp. 23-24). In contrast, Zerffi (1876) maintained that:

To him (the white man) exclusively we owe art in its highest sense ... He surpasses the other ... groups of humanity, not only in technical skill, but especially in inventive and reasoning power, critical discernment, and purity of artistic taste. The white man, alone, has produced idealized masterpieces in sculpture and painting. (p. 26)

Over a century later similar attitudes were expressed by United States art educator, R. Smith (2006), who argued that while the history of art engenders an appreciation of difference and contributes to cultural literacy, it is Western art

history that provides an undeniable record of artistic accomplishment. For him, “historical creative moments ... make us proud of our equivocal humanity” (p. 120). The issue of excluding non-Western and indigenous art, and the marginalisation of other cultural forms that do not fit the Western aesthetic, were an important dimension of my research and led to the conceptualisation of the pivotal talking stick in the exhibition.



**Photo 2.** *The 'best' and the 'rest'* – timber, archival photographic paper, lace, ribbon, muka, braid, beads, 1240 x 45mm

Placed in the centre of the talking circle, *The 'best' and the 'rest'* [Photo 2] was a double-ended talking stick presented in a horizontal position. The two ends of the stick, separated by a handle, were painted in white and black to denote the dominance of high culture (white) and low culture (black). This distinction was further reinforced by the white classical temple, illustrative of the 'best', and the black whare (Māori meeting house), representative of the 'rest'. On both shafts of the talking stick five bands of indicative images were separated by divisions of selective 'linear' media which parodied cultural lineage. Each band of images was supported by a passage of text extrapolated from my thesis. Thus, the 'rest' commented upon the marginalised forms of tribal art, folk art, the decorative arts, the popular arts and the craft work of women. Conversely, the 'best' featured predominantly the work of male artists. Here, images and text drew attention to the art works of classical antiquity, the Middle Ages and Christianity, the Renaissance, modernist art of the nineteenth century and critically acclaimed works of the twentieth century, mostly by men. This double-ended talking stick could be held horizontally by a speaker to demonstrate belief in a conception of culture in which the 'rest' of art is as important as the so-called 'best'. To turn either end of the stick to an upward position was to express a preference, advance an argument or engender debate.

The literature consulted for my research was dominated by the colonising traditional views of European male authors. The emphasis given in and through art to the voices of male artists was thus countered in the talking stick, *The women's circle* [Photo 3]. The clear acrylic tube provided a 'window' into the significance and pleasure of the lace-making, quilting, beading, sewing, knitting and embroidery circles of women. Positioned on the exterior and within the tube, six circular bands of text and images celebrate female creative output. Contained within the stick were fragments (memories) of my own embroidery, knitting and patchwork quilting with which I adorned myself during my time as a secondary school art teacher in the 1970s.



**Photo 3.** *The women's circle* – acrylic tubing, timber, aluminium, archival photographic paper, fragments of knitting, embroidery, beading, quilting, 1300 x 70mm

### **Material culture as cultural signification**

Material cultural objects or artefacts are frequently used as identifiers or manifestations of a culture. In this third interpretation of culture, focus was upon the material culture of objects created or modified by humans which derive from the culture's norms and values. These objects may have their sources in extinct human cultures which disclose something of the way in which people once lived, or they may be manifestations of living cultures. Stott's (1987) anthropological approach to material culture was to examine the object itself, its context and the process of the object's manufacture to determine its functions, meanings and aesthetic qualities. In comparison, Dant's (2004) interest lay in the impact that

material objects have on contemporary life. Dant challenged the well-established idea that consumerism is the principal relationship that we have with material objects in our lives. He argued that it is through physical interaction with the objects around us that we confront our society. Similarly, Hodder (2003) claimed that artefacts are “not simply a passive by-product of life ... that material culture is active” (p. 159). Although artefacts may be regarded as a form of silent or muted discourse, Hodder argued that they can represent the intentional, if covert, exercise of power to limit or remove individual resistance. In his view, artefacts are produced “so as to transform, materially, socially, and ideologically” (p. 159).

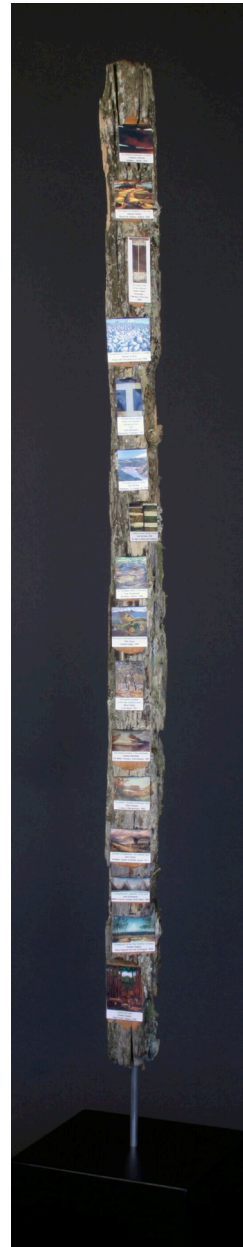
A number of theorists held the view that art education, at least in Western nations, has been bedevilled by this conception of culture (Efland et al., 1996; Chalmers, 1999). On the one hand, there is a problem, originating in the Western view of a single and pre-eminent culture, of the dominant use of European artefacts within the fine arts as signifiers of a culture. On the other hand, this view of Western superiority gives rise not only to the assumption that indigenous peoples are inferior species, but also to the belief that their cultures, artefacts, languages and ways of life are culturally insignificant. Chalmers (1995) cited instances in which the artefacts of the Northwest Coast First Nations Peoples in North America were considered “objects of ethnological interest” or a “quaint variant of ‘real’ art” (pp. 113-116). This implied that cultural artefacts can be looked at with curiosity, but without knowledge and understanding. Parallels exist in New Zealand where Māori artefacts, referred to as tribal art rather than understood as taonga (cultural treasures), are held up as signifiers of the Māori culture or even the wider New Zealand culture.

The talking stick, *Bottled Godzone* [Photo 4], contained cultural objects and artefacts bottled in clear acrylic tubing. Kiwis, plastic tikis, rugby balls, sheep, buzzy-bees, jandals, kete, paua shell, Māori dolls, the silver fern and other items of ‘New Zealand’ paraphernalia were presented as identifiers of ‘New Zealand culture’. Anchored in place by a cork, these iconic manifestations of life in Godzone, many of them plundered from key-rings and tourist outlets, were also employed as active signifiers of souvenir consumerism.

A further challenge to the perception of material culture as cultural signification was the talking stick, *Hands on the land* [Photo 5]. Images of ‘New Zealand’ landscape were framed within carved niches on an old, lichen-covered, half-round totora fence batten. Dating from the 1840s to the present day, these images signified both the ‘managed’ and the ‘imagined’ land. They spoke of the culture of New Zealand, from its colonising practices of propagandist paintings to attract immigrants and the response of settlers to the new land (albeit painted in the Romantic landscape style imported to the colony from the Mother Country); the breaking in and destruction of the land both in the interests of survival and economic potential; the response of its first generation of home-grown artists; and the subsequent expression of successive generations of New Zealand-born artists. On one level, this talking stick provided a ‘snapshot’ of the history of landscape painting in this country. On another, it questioned superficial material representations of New Zealand culture. Together with *Bottled Godzone*, this stick questioned curriculum and pedagogical practices that persist in treating material

culture as passive by-products of life. Both challenged art educators to address how active manifestations of material culture can impact upon and be used to confront contemporary society.

**Photo 4.** *Bottled Godzone* – acrylic tubing, cork, tourist paraphernalia, 1230 x 80mm (left image below)



**Photo 5.** *Hands on the land* – totora fence batten, archival photographic paper, 1150 x 65mm (right image above)

### **Symbolic forms as conveyors of culture**

A view of culture that holds symbols to be both the practices of people and the context that gives such practices meaning was a fourth conception interrogated in the research and in the exhibition. In this model, Geertz (1973), a champion of 'symbolic anthropology', saw culture as an organised collection of symbolic systems in which people's cultural behaviours are based on the meanings of signs and symbols that sustain their social life. In declaring that "man [sic] is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun" (p. 5), Geertz (1973) took culture to be those webs. Arguing that without people there can be no culture and, more significantly, that without culture there can be no people, Geertz (1973) asserted that "man is not just the producer of culture, but, in a specifically biological sense, its product" (p. 26). Further, he believed that each culture is unique and can only be understood in a culturally relative way. Consequently, there cannot be a universal epistemology or science of human motivation common across different cultures. In this conception of culture, primacy is given to the role of symbolic forms such as words, images and behaviours that are seen as guiding how people represent themselves to themselves and to one another. Culture is seen as 'text', a construction of symbolic signs. Commenting on the legacy of Geertz (1973), Cohen (1985) wrote of the "symbolic gloss" that allows people in society to use common symbols, which he defined as "things standing for other things" (p. 18), to communicate and understand each other while still imbuing these symbols with personal significance and meanings. Cohen stressed the relational aspect of a community, by which symbols and their enactment in ritual mark the community in relation to other communities. In this conception of what Cohen called 'personhood', symbols make culture possible, reproducible and readable.

My talking stick, *The power of black: New Zealand made* [Photo 6], illustrates the dominance of 'black' in politics, sport, literature and artistic expressions. This stick spoke of the powerful use of protest art and political proclamations by contemporary Māori artists and writers (see Smith, 1992). It encapsulated the "symbolic gloss" of manifestations which instil community and national pride through promotion of sporting heroes, New Zealand teams and symbolic identifiers (black caps, black socks, black singlets and the black boat, to name but a few) that speak of New Zealand culture.

It has also been argued that the concept of the 'self', as it has been understood in the West (the interest of the self as an individual), is very different from the sense of personhood in non-Western cultures. Referring to the latter as "alternative cultures" (p. 167), Smith (2006) suggested that an inseparable link can exist between art and life in non-Western cultures because of the more cohesive sameness of people in those cultures. Smith's notion of "life approximating art" (p. 168) implied that, for him, Geertz's (1973) theory of cultural relativity manifested through symbolic systems was more applicable to non-Western cultures. A non-Western conception of culture and symbols, framed in terms of culture-as-symbols, is implied in the arts curriculum. While students are encouraged to study "ritual, motif, and symbol from a variety of cultures" (MOE, 2000, p. 78), it is possible that



a limited perception of culture, which does not extend beyond the superficial use of such motifs or symbols, could be considered adequate.

The talking stick, *Ukulele lady: A tourist's guide to the South Pacific* [Photo 7], illustrated the cultural stereotyping that results from the superficial use of symbolic forms as conveyors of culture. A doll of indeterminate Pasifika ethnicity (purchased from the Two Dollar Shop) crowned this stick. 'Pacific' words, images and motifs were presented as a guide to the symbolic representation of the happy-in-a-Pacific-paradise, ukulele-playing, lei-adorned hula girl.

**Photo 6.** *The power of black: New Zealand made* – dowel, acrylic paint, archival photographic paper, paper, transparency film, 1240 x 40mm (left image below)



**Photo 7.** *Ukulele lady: A tourist's guide to the South Pacific* – doll, baluster, archival photographic paper, kete, shells, beads, lei, 1220 x 45mm (right image above)

At the exhibition, this stick was presented alongside another which challenged cultural stereotyping. Also crowned by a two-dollar-shop doll, the shaft of *Blonds have more fun – yeah right* [Photo 8] featured photographs of famous blonds with glamorous facades and sad lives, and provocative soft porn images, mostly by male artists, of semi-clad nudes. Further adorned with the trappings of glitz and glam, this stick commented upon perceptions of the culture of the 'blond'. The third talking stick in this sub-set, *I'm not a Chinese takeaway!* [Photo 9], was crowned by a Chinese New Year Barbie doll reconfigured from the long-legged, pouting stereotype of the original American Barbie.

**Photo 8.** *Blonds have more fun – yeah right* – doll, baluster, archival photographic paper, bling, lace, silk flowers, beads, ribbon, fur, sequins, 1240 x 45mm (left image below)



**Photo 9.** *I'm not a Chinese takeaway!* – Chinese New Year Barbie doll, baluster, archival photographic paper, chopsticks, braid, lace, tassels, 1170 x 45mm (right image above)

Accompanied by images of beautiful women of unspecified Asian ethnicity, clamped between chopsticks, this stick spoke, similarly, of the commodification of the bodies of individuals, as well as those of culturally-specific groups, as a resource for pleasure. Each talking stick in this sub-set drew attention to the perpetuation of cultural stereotyping which results from generalising and simplifying others' complex identities. Each called for transformative practices in art education which consciously work against racism and exclusion in all its forms.

### **Culture framed as identity**

A fifth conception of culture, framed in terms of 'identity', connected with this research and its re-representation in art. Drawn from discourses on identity formation, which suggest how culture and identity are linked, the term 'identity' has been used in many ways to emphasise different facets of how humans define themselves. For example, Erikson's (1975) psychosocial theory of social development encompasses a life cycle of eight stages and recognises the impact of society, history and, in particular, culture on personality. Drawing on Erikson's theories, Côté (1996) differentiated between social identity, which designates a person's position in a social structure, personal identity, which denotes the more "concrete aspects" of individual experience rooted in interactions and institutions, and ego identity, which refers to the more "subjective" characteristics of an individual's personality (p. 420). An alternative model was articulated by Kumar (2000), whose concern was to differentiate between identity and 'self'. Kumar referred to self as the acquisition by an individual of the social values that allow him or her to operate in multiple ways within a social construct and to fit and behave within different cultural contexts. However, there is a limitation to framing culture in terms of individuality in that a person's cultural identity is affected by factors of race, religion, age, economic status, geographic location, gender, sexual orientation, language and political affiliation. It is also affected by the position the individual takes with regard to each of these factors, and by what an individual chooses to privilege.

In my exhibition the concept of identity was framed not within the ways that humans define themselves, but within the ways art is used to privilege identity. *Gendering identity: Reigning cats and dogs* [Photo 10] spoke of the ways in which women and men are represented 'differently' in art works. The history of art is abundant with images of people portrayed with animals, in particular cats and dogs. A feature of the great majority of the images of women with cats is that neither the female nor the feline is identified by name. On the other hand, men and their canine companions are usually named. Thus on this two-part, three-sided talking stick, images were presented as Female/Feline/Not Identified and Male/Canine/Identified. Positioned within gendered settings of pink and blue, and framed by cat and dog collars, these images called attention to what artists and society choose to privilege. They demanded a re-examination of the assumptions that may prevail, by teachers, students and society, about taken-for-granted interpretations of art.

### **Race and ethnicity as definers of culture**

As a term, 'race' has a much longer history than ethnicity, having been used from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries in the "categorisation and classification of species (primarily plants and animals), based on their physical characteristics and traits" (Adams, Clark, O'Neill, Openshaw & Waitere-Ang, 2000, p. 85). By the nineteenth century, physically different human groups were being classified into races, for example, Caucasoid, Negroid and Mongoloid. As a consequence of this linking of the concepts of race and biology to culture, the term 'race' attracted negative connotations. In the 1960s, the term 'ethnicity' became widely used as an alternative and more acceptable word for culturally different groups (Adams et al., 2000). While acknowledging the difficulty of defining ethnicity or an ethnic group, these authors condensed the components of various definitions to include:

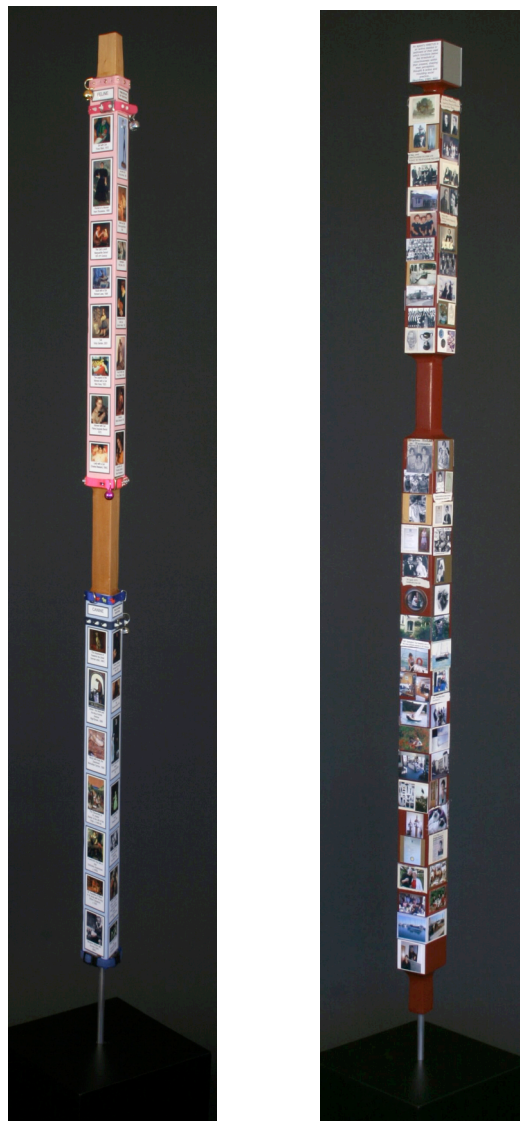
some combination of a *distinctive* and *shared: cultural* heritage (for example, common language, food, music and religion); *ancestral* heritage (for example, ancestry, national origin, entry by birth and bloodlines ...); *physical* heritage (for example, common physical characteristics ...); and sense of *group identity* and *belongingness* (often termed 'peoplehood'). (Adams et al., 2000 p. 88)

For Adams et al., these four areas, in some combination, "comprise the *ethnic markers* and delineate the *ethnic boundaries* of the group" (p. 88), although they conceded that such a conglomerate definition does not sufficiently deal with the proliferation of cultural diversity. May (1999), however, warned that ethnic descriptors can be "disguised" as cultural definitions. As such, they can be used as blanket categorisations, often of ethnic minorities, who are seen as being of one culture. In his words, "New racisms can be portrayed as a form of *ethnicism*" (May, 1999, p. 12; see also, Rata, 2003).

My analysis of New Zealand curriculum documents, and the findings of my research, showed that in both policy and practice culture is thought of primarily in terms of ethnicity (Smith, 2007a). The question of how to avoid confirming the concept of ethnicity as "a set of fixed cultural properties" was raised by May (1999, p. 27). He suggested that Bourdieu's notion of habitus was a way of addressing the "recognition of power relations in the structuring of ethnic and cultural identities" (p. 27). Bourdieu (1990) described habitus as "a system of dispositions common to all products of the same conditionings" (p. 59). Those dispositions exist within, and arise out of, the conditioning that a person's social and cultural experiences engender. Bourdieu saw habitus not as an ideology but as a tangible actuality which members of a group acquire, move within and alter. For him, habitus embraces all the social and cultural experiences that shape an individual as a person. In this interpretation of culture, habitus inherits and generates histories that will persist after the original conditions from which they arose have disappeared. In this sense, members of a social group can inherit, as much sub-consciously as consciously, elements of a social and cultural past even when they live in the different present. Habitus is not static. Rather, it is responsive to changing economic, technological and political conditions. Although habitus exists within a climate of conformity,

individual dispositions permit singularity and difference. In this sense, habitus does not deny the importance of, for example, ethnic traditions and histories, but recognises that they are likely to be contributory to new regimes of culture. To attempt to return to the historic condition as a model for contemporary living would be to challenge the inevitability of change.

**Photo 10.** *Gendering identity: Reigning cats and dogs* – timber, acrylic paint, archival photographic paper, cat and dog collars, 1240 x 50mm (left image below)



**Photo 11.** *Why am I like I am?* – timber, archival photographic paper, paper, 1240 x 45mm (right image above)

My most personal talking stick, *Why am I like I am?* [Photo 11] spoke both of my ethnicity and elements of my habitus. The head of the stick announced the framework for my cultural opus and invited viewers to look in a mirror and consider theirs. The top part of the stick presented images which comprise the 'ethnic markers' (Adams et al., 2000) of my ethnicity: my distinctive and shared cultural, ancestral and physical heritage and the sense of group identity and belongingness born of being one of identical triplets (the "we three" of Jill, Judith and Joy). The lower part of the stick spoke of my habitus, those social and cultural experiences that have shaped me individually as a person. These images encapsulated a selection from the cultural moments of my inherited social and cultural past, even when I live in a different present.

In my thesis, I argued that while the majority of the art teachers observed in the study were respectful of the ethnicities of the students themselves in their classrooms, all thought simplistically of culture in terms of race or ethnic categorisation. This talking stick challenged art educators to acquire greater cultural knowledge and awareness of the individual differences of students within their cultures, and to implement culturally inclusive pedagogies that permit the individuality of each student's 'voice' to be heard.

### **Effects of globalisation on culture**

The effect of globalisation on culture – and on art – was a seventh interpretation which resonated with my research. While globalisation is not a new phenomenon, the effects of the multiple ties and interactions that link people across the borders of nation-states are altering conceptions of culture, identity and nation-state. National or ethnic groups and cultures are becoming increasingly entangled, irrespective of their origins or group identities (Kennedy & Roudometof, 2002). It has been argued that the new nation-state comprises a progressively hybridised population, where "practices of identity construction are no longer bound by physical borders" (McCarthy et al., 2003, p. 451). It has been suggested that neither prevailing cultures nor arriving cultures can sustain independent identity, despite their efforts to do so (Chalmers, 2002). Conversely, globalisation and transnationalism have been seen to lead to increased recognition of the importance of ethnic, national and cultural diversity. Stephenson, Rio, Anderson and Millward (2004), for example, argued that the dynamics and contradictions of the dual process of cultural convergence and cultural fragmentation are played out daily, as "indigenous, colonizer, and migrant populations interconnect" (p. 1). For these authors, global trends impact on cultures at two fundamental levels. As groups that are brought together in the process accommodate new ideas, knowledge and experiences, at the same time their deeply embedded and previously taken-for-granted norms, values and beliefs tend to become reaffirmed and practised with a conscious deliberation.

The global transformation of culture raised complex questions for my research as to what can today be labelled the 'art' of art education. As members of society, we are dependent on visual images and artefacts to help us make decisions ranging from what we wear to what we watch (Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). This persuasive popular culture no longer permits us to ignore its cultural impact, international in



The effects of globalisation and transnationalism on art align with the rapid development of technology, itself a ‘third culture’ that has joined the cultures of the sciences and humanities (Kelly, 1998). Kelly’s assertion that a “culture of youth” has emerged, and that culture is now controlled by technology, is reinforced by the technological practices employed (1988, p. 993). Considered to be the aesthetic and creative tools of the future, these practices favour flexibility, mobility and repositioning in relation to cultural regimes. My talking stick, *Technology has seized control of culture!* [Photo 13], articulated how technologically-conveyed messages, under the influence of consumerism and capital accumulation, now permeate people’s daily lives. Technological representations of communication were thus suspended in a time-capsule of acrylic tubing. Metaphorically ‘wired around the globe’, and caught in a relentless beam of pulsating light, these devices referenced the ‘techno-speak’ of mapping expressions, encoding experience as data, digital processing, numerical representation, modularity, automation, variability, trans-coding, gesture-based input and the multi-touch interface, to name but a few.

This stick encapsulated Grierson’s (2001) warning to art educators of the danger faced when knowledge is produced and furthered primarily through the instrument of technological advancement. Her argument, that technology is “touted politically as ahistorical and apolitical, neutral, [just] as rationalized governmentality is touted as neutral in policy formations” (2001, p. 15), demanded close scrutiny. Grierson maintained that in these formations cultural analysis, which may be a compelling and potent vehicle in art education, is left out of the frame.

### **Cultural diversity and cultural difference**

The politics and practices of art education, framed within understandings of culture, diversity and difference, were the prime foci of my research and the source of inspiration for the final talking stick presented in this paper. In the literature which underpinned the study, polarised views were expressed by those who argued that cultural diversity lies at the very core of a multicultural perspective (Kalantzis & Cope, 1999; Nieto, 2004), and by those who considered this notion untenable (Barry, 2001; Boyd, 1996). Kalantzis and Cope (1999), for example, considered that attention to cultural diversity, framed within the paradigm of critical multiculturalism, was essential for bringing about “the increasing interrelation of differences” (p. 247). Bhabha (1995), however, called attention to the interchangeable use of the terms ‘diversity’ and ‘difference’. Drawing a distinction between the two, he said:

Cultural diversity is an epistemological object – culture as an object of empirical knowledge – whereas cultural difference is the process of the *enunciation* of culture as *knowledgable*, authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification. (Bhabha, 1995, p. 34)

For Bhabha, the term cultural diversity positions culture as static, totalized and historically bounded; as something to be valued but not necessarily lived. He considered that the term implies the ‘other’; some constructed and bounded identification that can be generalised, as occurred in 1970s multicultural ideologies.



Bhabha (1995) argued that cultural difference, on the other hand, involves a dynamic conception of culture, one that recognises and incorporates its own ongoing fluidity and constant change. What needs to be challenged, using the concept of difference, are assumed and generalised norms that conceal the variables and hybridities. Bhabha (1995) saw the dichotomy of empowered/disempowered (we/they) interpretation of cultural identity as not only insufficient and deficient, but also dangerous, in that it sustains hegemonies of power under the cloak of enlightened rationalism. For Bhabha, cultural difference “demands an encounter with ‘newness’ that is not part of the continuum of past and present” ... but “becomes part of the necessity, not the nostalgia, of living” (1995, p. 7). He concluded:

The aim of cultural difference is to rearticulate the sum of knowledge from the perspective of the signifying position of the minority that resists totalization ... where adding *to* does not add up but serves to disturb the calculation of power and knowledge, producing other spaces of subaltern signification. (Bhabha, 1995, p. 162)

*The Arts in the New Zealand Curriculum* (MOE, 2000) stresses the need for teachers to respond to the cultural diversity of their students. In her critique of the curriculum, Mansfield (2000) argued that when the representation of art is promulgated within the formalist and expressive Western aesthetic, rather than through a politics of difference, it operates as “an ideology which works to dispossess art of its meaning, to ‘sanitise’ the aesthetic, conditioning students’ orientation to art” (p. 308). The result, she claimed, is “cultural neutrality” in curriculum (Mansfield, 2000, p. 306). Similarly, Grierson (2003) argued that the construction of knowledge, which is neither neutral nor ahistorical, must be contextualised to reflect and engage with conditions of contemporary society, and must include the worlds of students. This, she said, would “open pedagogical procedures to new discoveries and innovative practices that may engage the politics of representation in wider fields of visual culture” (Grierson, 2003, pp. 97-98). Grierson’s emphasis was upon replacing the modernist focus on identity with a postmodernist focus on difference.

The final talking stick presented in this paper was titled *Ethnically classified ... but culturally different* [Photo 14]. A globe, representative of the peoples of the world, sat atop a circular stick. The length of its shaft featured the cut-out faces of people ‘bound’ together in concentric bands. These people – among them members of the families of my husband Peter, my sister Joy (Azlina) and her Malay husband, my sister Judith and her Vietnamese husband, my brother Bryan, our parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and my closest friends – are bound together by ethnic classification. Each person is culturally different. This talking stick challenged educators not only to “recognise the diversity of individual students within particular cultures” (MOE, 2000, p. 104), but to avoid ‘sameness’ in their pedagogical approaches by taking account of the individual ‘differences’ of students from diverse cultures living in a contemporary globalised world.



**Photo 14.** *Ethnically classified ... but culturally different* – dowel, archival photographic paper, binding, globe, 1350 x 50mm

## CONCLUSION

My paper explicates a number of interpretations of culture that are significant for the pedagogical practices of art teachers working with students in a culturally diverse society. I have explained how these interpretations were re-conceptualised into a series of talking sticks. Employing the metaphor, 'talking my way through culture', I used the sticks as a tool to reinforce and challenge perceptions about the relationship between art, culture and curriculum. The intention, also, was to show that the 'voice' of art works can be a creative means of re-interpreting and re-presenting research.

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The talking stick, *I'm not a Chinese takeaway!* was in part inspired by the digital prints of Ellen Hsu (2005) which comment upon cultural stereotyping. Ellen, a student in my secondary art education course in 2006, generously gave me permission to include segments from her images.

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If you are interested in reading the full catalogue, please contact the author by email: [j.smith@auckland.ac.nz](mailto:j.smith@auckland.ac.nz)

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