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Effects of Photography-Based Public Art on the School Environment

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Abstract

This article analyzes how public art commissions provide opportunities for informal dialogue and alternative forms of inquiry within the secondary school environment in Europe and North America. Through case studies of site-specific works produced between 1995 and 2012, I examine how permanent photography installations question and reinforce educational authority, encourage critical thinking, and raise social consciousness among secondary school students. Techniques used by Susan Bowen, Rita Marhaug, Dennis Adams, and Frank Video include murals, montage, backlit display, and object-integration. The diversity of the works profiled, which alternately invite and avoid student participation, as well as references to local history, demonstrates that no single formula yields works that provoke, encourage, and inspire students. Using different means, these artists reflect the values of their host communities, enabling educational facilities to feel less institutional. Beyond placemaking, school-based public art can incite viewers to question how images are made both within and beyond the art education classroom, strengthening emotional and cultural literacy. In bringing the past alive, public art also breathes new life into the school environment.