In an essay called “Reclaiming the Aesthetic” George Levine described a radical transformation that had taken place in the field of literary study in colleges and universities in the 1970s and 1980s. These changes registered as a shift from questions about what texts mean to questions about the social systems that contain them. A second was a resistance to the idea of literary value, particularly to the idea of literary greatness. A third was an increasing emphasis on the necessity for interdisciplinary study where, in effect, literary study was an adjunct to anthropology and other social sciences. A fourth was contempt for formalism or the use of formal analysis to study the structure of art works, while yet another was the determination that all works of art are political. Collectively, these changes were characterized as a “reductive assimilation of literature to ideology” (1994, pp. 1–2).

With some slight adjustment in terminology, Levine’s depiction of the changes within literary study could easily fit the present trend in teaching the visual arts and music as well. In the visual arts the shift became known as the study of visual culture. At the present moment the idea of a category of objects, having a special or unique character identified by such terms as “fine art” or classical music is all too often demeaned as a mode of upper class domination or eliteness, while aesthetic experience is equated with mystified ideology. Levine’s project was to rescue literary study from its potential disappearance into culture and politics, and the question I raise is whether this objective should cover all the arts?

The Problem with the Arts

Shall we defend the fine arts and serious music as significant cultural achievements worthy of study in their own right? Obviously yes, but how does one do this? Is the present shift toward cultural studies in the arts a difficulty brought on by a nasty bunch of Marxists who would have us shift instructional emphasis from the fine arts in all their
pristine purity to studies of culture and politics? I think not. Rather, I see the problem with the arts as originating within the arts themselves.

In Beyond the Brillo Box, the philosopher and critic, Arthur Danto, (1992) described the cultural landscape as a map bounded by various zones. His map lays out zones like the art world, the mass media and the popular culture. But the boundaries that once kept these zones apart have either disappeared or are in the process of erasure. For example, the lines that separated the fine arts from popular culture either have become imperceptible or are marked as disputed territories.

Danto described the situation in the visual arts as getting its start in the 1960s. Pop art eliminated the boundary between high art and low art; minimalism erased the distinction between fine art and industrial process. The border separating mass-produced things from the images of fine art housed in museums has disappeared from the landscape. Another is the distinction between objects appreciated as exemplars of cultivated taste and the objects of the ordinary person’s life-world including comic strips, soup cans, and cheeseburgers. No longer does art have to be beautiful or to resemble nature; indeed there is no longer any difference between works of art and what Danto calls “mere real things.” (pp. 4–5) Danto also notes that, “you cannot tell when something is a work of art just by looking at it, for there is no particular way that art has to look. The upshot was that you could not teach the meaning of art by examples.” (p. 5)

If so, what does one teach?

Once our purpose was defined by a dedication to particular objects having a special or unique character identified by such terms as “fine art” or “classical music,” objects created by the conscious use of the imagination to produce aesthetic objects, objects housed in museums or performed in concert halls – objects set apart from the concerns of daily living, but now, the differences that once isolated these from other things has dropped from view. Without a discernible difference between ordinary things and works of art, there is no rational basis for deciding what to teach.

**Visual and Cultural Studies**

The waning of modernism. Throughout the modernist era which began roughly at the end of the nineteenth century, the modernist avant-garde established a hierarchy of values which placed the fine arts above such forms of popular culture as the folk traditions of art making, industrial, interior, package and graphic design, photography, commercial illustration, and the like. In championing a striving for purity in art, critics such as Clement Greenberg advocated the view that modern artists and critics should be disdainful of the imagery of popular culture and commerce. Indeed, Laura Kipnis once defined modernism “as the ideological necessity of erecting and maintaining exclusive standards of the literary and artistic against the constant threat of incursion and contamination” (1986, p. 21). Referring to popular visual culture as “kitsch,” Greenberg dismissed it as an unfit subject for serious study in favor of the high art of the avant-garde. When artists such as Warhol and Lichtenstein began to appropriate imagery from popular culture and commerce, Greenberg and many others within the art world had difficulty accepting this as art (see Wallis, 1984, p. 2).