Patrick McNaughton’s view of African art history encompasses more than just Africa, more than just art, more than just history. “Art is political,” says McNaughton, professor of art history at IUB. “It’s social, it’s spiritual, it’s economic, it’s educational, it’s everything.”

McNaughton’s self-described “galactic” perspective allows him to fit African art into a framework of aesthetics that includes M-Tv, popular films, Western clothing fashions, and billboards.

“Far too many people think of aesthetics as being about taste, as being about beauty, as being a little bit elite,” he says. “But I consider aesthetics to be a strategic manipulation of any kind of form—social form, material form—to have a better life, to get the things you want, to garner power.”

McNaughton’s all-encompassing approach and engaging teaching methods have inspired students and resulted in numerous teaching awards, including a 1995 President’s Award and two consecutive Dean of the Faculties Instructional Development Fellowships for Outstanding Undergraduate Teaching. His research on the art of the Mande people of West Africa has also earned McNaughton a 1992 Smithsonian Senior Post Doctoral Fellowship at the National Museum of African Art, a current Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, and most recently, promotion to full professor. In addition, McNaughton’s first book, The Mande Blacksmiths, was a finalist for the African Studies Association Herskovits Book Award in 1989.

McNaughton has been aggressively innovative in his use of computers in the classroom. With the support of the Teaching and Learning Technologies Lab at IU, McNaughton developed a software package for interactive, multimedia classroom presentation that allows him to respond to virtually any question or comment with a click of the mouse. “This is interactive in the sense that somebody can say something to me, and man, I’m just two clicks away from anything I might want,” McNaughton says. “It’s not restricted by the linearity of pages in a book or slides in a projector.”

The software, which he calls Komo after a type of West African mask, enables McNaughton to actively engage the large groups of students that he typically deals with in his introductory courses. “You hate to just see kids taking notes and taking a test and then forget about your subject after that,” McNaughton says. “You’d like them to really be thinking on their feet in the classroom, and especially if they’re thinking on their feet about things that relate to their lives. Then maybe you’re actually giving them something useful.”

McNaughton’s Guggenheim fellowship has relieved him of his teaching duties for a year, allowing him to concentrate on a new book about aesthetics and form. “Form is so much more substantial than people think,” he says. “It’s not just the surface of things, it’s the essence of things. Form is thought. And aesthetics aren’t just principles of taste and beauty, but rather strategies of manipulating any kind of form.”

McNaughton’s point of departure for the new book is a collection of Mande ideas about clarity and obscurity. “I want to argue that this demonstrates how important art can be in people’s lives, how important artistic gestures can be in people’s lives, and, more to the point, how important aesthetic strategies can be in people’s lives. People are complex and conflicting and driven, but also lots of times loving. This collection of Mande ideas really allows you to see people in their full-bodied richness and complexity.”

At one point in his research, McNaughton was suddenly struck by the notion that clarity and obscurity was more than an aesthetic concept. “I started thinking, ‘Well, wait a minute, clarity and obscurity, that’s theory.’” McNaughton says. He now recognizes clarity and obscurity as Mande artistic and social theory, invented by individual Mande and augmented, reflected upon, and developed over the years.

Ever critical of the way Western art historians routinely apply Western theory to African art as if there were no African theory, McNaughton has offered as a tentative title of the book, Theory by Africans: The Consequences of Form in Modern Day Life. “If I were to ask, ‘What’s the difference between theory and ideology?’ in a lot of cases the answer is, ‘Ideology is the stuff that those people have to live their lives, and theory is the marvelous stuff we invent to study them, because they aren’t reflexive, but we are,’” McNaughton says. “The heck with that! Africans generate their own theory, and it’s not just ideology, it’s not just dogma, it’s not just mores and principles of life. It’s theory, and they recognize it as theory and they treat it as theory.”