

Running Head: THE INFLUENCE OF VISUAL CULTURE ON STUDENTS' ARTMAKING

WHAT'S THE MEANING OF THIS?

THE INFLUENCE OF VISUAL CULTURE ON STUDENTS' ARTMAKING

By

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Capstone Project
Presented to the College of Fine Arts of the University of Florida
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Summary of Capstone Project
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The purpose of this capstone project was to understand how, and to what extent, visual culture influences high school students' creative decisions as represented in their artwork. Visual culture permeates our everyday lives with very little resistance and much influence. An art education that includes studies in visual culture would likely foster the creation of a society that can think critically about the images it is exposed to daily and therefore, make informed choices.

This research was conducted qualitatively by examining artwork produced by high school students at various museum exhibitions and on various websites that feature student artwork, including the AP College Board website that shares images of student artwork that has been created to earn college credit. I also had the opportunity to speak with a high school art teacher about her experiences with teaching art to adolescent students and the images they create for their art projects.

The results of this research indicate there is a strong connection to visual culture in the artwork of the student works I examined. Many of the students used elements such as consumer products, current events, religious belief systems, and comics as in the style of Marvel® and manga. There were a few of the student works that displayed a more personal message and these particular artworks relied on visual culture from experience such as places of residence, environment, and biology. The use of visual culture elements in artwork is a way for students to understand the contemporary world in which they live. “To know ourselves we must also know the world and understand ourselves in relation to that world” (Wilson & Wilson, 2009, p. 22). With modern technology rapidly firing visual images and messages all around us, the contemporary world of children today is where their foundation for understanding the world begins. For art educators, visual culture studies provide a window into the lives of their students to learn what influences their creative processes. This research indicates that adding a visual culture studies component to a high school art curriculum would be beneficial in assisting students in the development of artwork that has deeper meaning and that fosters an understanding of the world.

**WHAT'S THE MEANING OF THIS?
THE INFLUENCE OF VISUAL CULTURE ON STUDENTS' ARTMAKING**

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

We are bombarded with images of visual culture in our daily lives, (Eisenhauer, 2006). Whether we are paying attention or not, these images have a profound influence on the choices we make and the way we view the world (Chung, 2007). Being able to navigate this sea of visual media by deconstructing images so that we may comprehend the messages embedded within them will help us to think critically and better understand the world in which we live. Visual culture studies will also help students make informed choices and create a socially responsible citizenry. The focus of this capstone project was to investigate how visual culture influences artistic decisions of high school students.

Students are exposed to a plethora of social and cultural constructs through television, movies, magazines, billboards, and video games, to name only a few, that may have a profound influence on whom they perceive themselves to be and how they view the world. I've gathered qualitative data by examining student artworks at museum exhibits and various websites dedicated to art education, as well as discussions with a high school art teacher. I have learned that visual culture plays a dominant role towards influencing the artwork that is created by high school students and will explain some of the images that were of particular interest that had visual culture references to place, science, identity and popular culture. Images of a particularly strong example of a student's use of popular culture and identity are also included. The information gleaned from this research is practical to both students and art educators in providing an overview of some of the visual culture influences that appear in student artworks, as well as

providing reasons for the importance of visual culture studies as part of a complete high school art curriculum.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

In what ways do visual culture influences appear in students' artworks? What kinds of popular and visual culture subject matter appears in contemporary high school students' art works? Understanding how visual culture influences our daily choices can help us to make informed decisions, as well as understand the world and our place in it. A visual culture curriculum can be a valuable avenue in the art classroom for helping students to think critically, and create artwork with deeper meaning (Freedman, 2003).

SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

This research informs art educators about some of the influences on students' creative ideas in art making and encourages students to be more reflective about these influences. "By structuring art projects to introduce students to relevant contemporary art and thus to postmodern principles—strategies for understanding and art making today—students will gain the skills to participate in and shape contemporary cultural conversation" (Gude, 2004, p.13). Finally, this research provides high school art teachers with valuable justifications for including visual culture studies as a component to their curriculums.

METHODS AND RESEARCH HYPOTHESES

Using qualitative methods of research I examined students' artworks in museum settings and on websites dedicated to art education. Many of the artworks located on the websites as well as all of the artworks in the museum setting did not have an artist statement. Therefore, I looked for imagery that dealt with popular culture, ethnic culture, consumerism, religion, and current events, while remaining careful not to exclude other images that may have dealt with less

obvious visual culture material such as science. The images I viewed on the AP College Board website had artist statements with them as this is required as part of the portfolio examination. These statements provided me with valuable insight into the students' ideas regarding their artworks. I had informal conversations with a high school art teacher in which she explained to me the various elements of visual culture that she noticed in her students' artworks. She also helped me to understand the AP College Board process for the 2-D design portfolio examination. I have selected artworks from one of these AP student portfolios as an example of how visual culture influences students' artworks.

KEY CONCEPTS

Much has been written about the use of a visual culture curriculum as a means to develop critical thinking skills through deconstruction (Amburgy, 2011; Chung, 2005,2007, 2009; Chung & Kirby, 2009; Duncum 2002, 2010; Efland, 2005; Freedman 1997, 1997b; Herrmann, 2005; Tavin & Hausman, 2004) suggesting that critical thinking helps one to understand the world and one's place in it. Freedman (2003) even suggests that visual images influence students' perceptions of self and one of the conditions for art production in the classroom should be the examination of "the role of production in the formation of student identities" (p.40). Furthermore, Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy and Knight (2003) advocate for providing students with "experiences that allow them—through reflective thought—to gain a great knowledge of self" (p.50). So much of who we perceive ourselves to be is cast upon us by images in our everyday world. In order for students to relate to the lessons being taught in the classroom today, art educators should include the study of images from popular visual culture into the curriculum. Freedman and Wood (1999) state,

. . . students may also feel more comfortable interpreting meaning from popular culture images than fine art because they usually have a greater experience with the content of the imagery. If this is the case, curriculum should include ways in which students can interpret fine art through association, and build on their previous knowledge about popular culture. (1999, p. 140)

Juxtaposing current visual culture with fine art is a viable approach to teaching students how to critically think about and derive meaning from their own cultural surroundings (Lanier, 1984), which should not be discounted.

This research project explored the theory that visual culture is influential in the development of high school students' artwork. Helping students to understand the messages embedded in visual culture provides them with a basis to understand the world in ways that are not taught in any other subject. This understanding provides students with opportunities to develop ideas and create artwork with deeper meaning. Through this research, I have discovered that visual culture is heavily influential in the development of creative ideas of adolescent students. A society dedicated to the best education of its students can no longer afford to not educate them about contemporary issues.

WHAT IS VISUAL CULTURE?

Visual Culture encompasses objects of the everyday experience such as, but not limited to, film, television, billboards, magazines, music videos, fashion, toys, that "present ideas and stories that shape people's lives" (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy & Knight, 2003, p. 46). For this research I considered visual culture in the broadest sense of the term. I realize, however, that every culture will have a concentration of subject matter that is more relevant to them and it is

this area of the popular visual culture that should be the starting point for exploration and deconstruction.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

To prepare and guide me through this research I've reviewed numerous books and scholarly journals associated with visual culture and how it relates to a contemporary art education. I have also read textbooks that deal with studio art practice for students, understanding the nature of why children draw, and ways of thinking about their artwork. I've reviewed the websites of the Advanced Placement College Board for studio art so that I might understand how students attribute meaning to their artwork. I have discovered that although much has been written over the past few decades about visual culture and its place in an art education, I feel that practice of teaching visual culture studies in the art classroom is should be increased. In this chapter, I explore visual culture and its possible implications for contemporary art education curriculum as a source of meaning making and academic subject matter essential for a well-educated society.

VISUAL CULTURE AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR ART EDUCATION

In the second edition of their book, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture*, Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright explain visual culture as “a wide range of forms, from fine art to popular film and television to advertising to visual data in fields that we tend to think of as distinct from culture – the sciences, law and medicine for example” (p.347). Included with the fore mentioned criteria for what constitutes visual culture, Sparman (2006) also includes “ideas and values” in her explanation. In order to make meaning of the modern world in which we reside, today's students require an art education that explores contemporary themes. “The concept of visual culture refers to the specific relation between vision and knowledge. It is in this

relation that meaning is negotiated” (Sparrman, 2006, p. 114). It is our duty as educators to aid our students in understanding what they are seeing.

Understanding that not all students in the art classroom will pursue an arts vocation, yet realizing that all students will need to be prepared to understand the increasingly visual world in which we live, and be able to make meaning of their place in it, requires us to teach art in a way that relates to all of our students in a 21st century context. This demands an art education that teaches beyond the cannon of what is considered traditional art and includes concrete examples of themes that reflect the experiences of contemporary students. Vallance (2008) notes that much of what can be seen in museums today was once a part of the everyday lives of people, just as the current visual culture permeates our lives. She continues, “visual culture studies (have) allowed us to take seriously the visual design in otherwise overlooked creations” (p.50). Eisner (2001) claims “the study of such phenomena [of visual culture] makes it possible for students to become acquainted with the sociological, historical, cultural, and especially the economic factors that have influenced those forms and, even more importantly, their social consequences.

This is not to say that studio practice and knowledge of design principles is not a worthwhile activity, but design should not be the only focus of art education today if we are truly dedicated to the education of all of our students. Efland (2005) suggests avoiding an ‘all or nothing’ approach to art education when he states “No valid educational purpose is to serve by limiting the range of visual culture either to the realm of the everyday or to arts that transcend the everyday, but if each has the other to serve as a basis for comparison, then the special attributes of each genre can become clear” (p.39). I am in agreement with Eisner (2001) and his assertion that what “we should do with the study of visual culture is to integrate aspects of it in our art courses” (p. 9). In order to teach students “that art making is more than just the creative use of

art material, but also about the transformation, deconstruction, and reconfiguration of ideas “ (Hermann, 2005, p.46), we must keep our art education pedagogy relevant to the lives of the children we teach. Therefore, studio practice in the art room should engage students in deconstruction of images and opportunities for investigation along with development of technical skills. Furthermore, as stated by Hermann (2005), “it is not acceptable to teach an outdated view of art simply because that is how the curriculum was originally written” (p. 9). When we teach our students to make meaning from their own lives and the world around them we teach them how to think critically about their experiences.

Paul Duncum, a leading proponent for visual culture art education (VCAE), in “Seven Principles for Visual Culture Education” (2010), outlines a foundation for teaching visual culture and why it’s important to teach students these fundamentals in today’s visually navigated world. In his article, “Clarifying Visual Culture Art Education” (2002), he discusses misunderstood ideas about VCAE and explains that the VCAE model suggested by Buckingham and Sefton-Greenis, (1994) “is founded on a framework of critical pedagogy within which students are encouraged to explore issues for themselves---by focusing on making images that combine critical questions for meaning making” (p.7). What will be remembered long after the students have entered their adult lives is the meaning they personally derived from their own observations, explorations and creative endeavors. Duncum (2002) posits that a VCAE approach requires a paradigm shift and that it includes historical, cross-cultural, and values aesthetics as well a social issues. This model indicates that art students will need to combine knowledge learned in the classroom with experiences outside the classroom, and teachers will need to do this as well. In today’s world, there are many films, music videos, and advertisements that make reference to fine art and popular culture and many of these representations may have conflicting

meanings. Freedman (1997b) reasons that students must be knowledgeable about various forms of visual culture “in order to understand any associations and references to fine art and popular culture” (p.50).

Lanier (1972, 1974, 1975, 1976, 1980, 1984, 1987) advocates for aesthetic literacy as the main focus of art education with studio courses being offered as electives. This might be the best solution towards an art education that educates all of our students about the visual world that surrounds them and their place in it. It is hard not to agree with Lanier’s ideal that, “the proper single purpose of art education should be aesthetic literacy” (Lanier, 1980, p. 19), especially in light of the increasing technology and availability of a multitude of images that students are now exposed to in their daily lives.

Art teachers need to approach art education as the scholarly subject matter that it is if they ever expect to receive the overdue esteemed status the field deserves. As Eisner (2001) states, “we find ourselves trying to protect our flanks by justifying our presence in schools by our putative contribution to academic performance and too often by making claims for which there is little or no evidence. We want to be taken seriously, but most of us don’t want to sell our souls to achieve it” (p. 9). As art educators we need to prepare our students to be able to critically think on their own by providing them with the ability to deconstruct images and messages in visual culture so that they are able to make informed choices.

USING VISUAL CULTURE AS A FORM OF CREATIVE MEANING MAKING

Creativity is a process of being fully engaged with the subject matter at hand. “If we want art education to be intellectually challenging as well as enjoyable, we must tackle the difficult job of teaching art knowledge and how art becomes meaningful” (Freedman, 1997b, p. 51). Karen Keifer-Boyd suggests rather than beginning with images, art instructors should begin

with what is meaningful in our modern lives then look for representations of those issues in visual culture (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2003).

The adolescent artwork that I viewed showed that many students are including visual culture imagery in their art production. Many of the students' artworks relied on imagery that was first found on the Internet and then modified to create the students' desired ideas. This act of utilizing the Internet to search for imagery makes students' active users of visual culture. The proliferation of cell phones, which at the very least have the capability to take photographs, also creates active users of visual culture. Students take photos and upload them to any number of social media sites including Facebook and YouTube, where they can share with their friends their thoughts, ideas, and imagery that speaks to them. Sturken and Cartwright (2009) claim, "the impact of computers and digital media on visual culture has often been compared to the impact of perspective during the Renaissance" (p.198). Furthermore, Sturken and Cartwright refer to the well-known writing of Walter Benjamin (1936), to make the point that the mechanical altering of these images changes their meaning. The question then begs, "Did the students understand the meaning before the alteration and how they changed the meaning to fit their needs?" Students who are able to create meaning from their artwork exhibit that they can critically think about their world. It is these critical thinking skills and the meanings derived from them, and not the technical skills of art class, that will foster a life-long understanding of the arts for most of our students. Eisner (2009) stated it best when he wrote, "the teaching of art is about more than the teaching of art" (p. 10).

In this modern society there is no escaping visual culture. Students look upon images and personalities from this visual culture world as role models and they identify with images and actions that make a connection to their own personal belief systems or that help them fit into

particular groups. I have heard art teachers express concern with the fascination of anime and manga amongst their students and how they believe it is counterproductive to students' creative growth. What these well-meaning educators do not consider is that the story lines and characters of anime and manga are reflective of a need to find one's place in the world for many students. "Stories that include archetypes as characters may serve not only as maps to self-discovery and cues for being known by others who 'are like us' by virtue of having made 'similar choices' in literature, but also, consequently, may serve as a vehicle for changing our perceptions of who we are or want to be" (Manifold, 2009, p. 172). Therefore, the study of visual culture art forms such as manga could be a good place for both students and teachers to begin learning lessons that create deeper meaning.

Because visual culture is so entrenched in our daily lives it is important for students to understand how it influences the choices they make and the way they see themselves in the world. "By approaching visibility as a significant constitutive force in society, it becomes possible to reflect upon the important role visual culture can play in the continuous process of, for example, people's identity construction" (Sparman, 2006, p. 114). In a study of adolescent portrait drawings in reference to concepts of identity at a secondary school in Barcelona, the researchers found that "students' choices of subject matter, such as (sports, music, foods), disclose the impact of visual culture media on their adolescent identities and their fascination with hero worship, beauty, and the good life (music, fun, food)" (Stockrocki, Hernandez, Kivatinetz, Lopez, & Macian, 2009, p.223). Similarly, Wilson and Wilson (2009), state:

One function of art in the culture has always been to show the viewer a way to look at the world or one aspect of the world: one reality.... art holds up the images of the culture as a mirror in which we can see ourselves reflected....as children use

their own drawings and fictions to work out life's dilemmas and to construct their own realities, they rely on models from the art and literature of the culture. And the models that children know best are those of the popular media. (p.66)

When we help students to understand how the images they see relate to them, we give them an opportunity to create artwork with deeper meaning.

CHAPTER 3

DESIGN

This was a qualitative research project in which I examined artwork created by high school students that was exhibited at various local museums and available on websites devoted to art education. I also had conversations with a high school art teacher, which informed my understanding of how students might develop ideas for their art projects. These sources of information were beneficial for aiding me in my pursuit of determining what connections, if any, existed between the artwork that adolescent students were creating and their visual culture.

POPULATION

This study focused on artwork created by high school students both locally, nationally, and in the case of the AP College Board website, internationally. The artwork was viewed in museum exhibitions of student work as well as on websites that are dedicated to art education.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The inability to speak directly with students about their artwork limited the study to my own observation of artwork. Without actually talking with students or reading a statement about their artwork, one cannot truly know what the meaning is behind the work. Therefore, at best, the results of my research are based on my personal deconstruction of the artworks I viewed, and the knowledge I have obtained through extensive reading on the subject of visual culture.

ANALYSIS

I viewed artwork created by high school students locally, nationally and internationally in museum setting as well as online. I examined these artworks for subject matter such as references to popular culture, consumerism, ethnic culture, current events or science that may have led to a connection in visual culture. Well over 200 individual student artworks were

viewed during my museum visits; nearly all of them were 2-D. The artwork that I viewed on the AP College Board website included a selection of students' work dating as far back as 2001. I made notes while viewing the artwork in the museum settings, which included the grade level of the student/artist, the title of the artwork and the components of the image. Photographic documentation of the artworks located in the museums was prohibited. The artwork that I viewed on the AP College Board website included an artist statement from each of the students, which required less theorizing on my part about the intended messages conveyed in the artworks. My analysis of the artworks without available artists statements, by no means suggests that I know what these students were trying to accomplish, or whether or not they actually made artwork that was meaningful to them. Only the artist can tell you for certain if the artwork and, or, the creation of it was meaningful to them. What I was looking for were indications of visual culture references in the artwork.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

The creative ideas portrayed in many of the artworks I examined indicate that visual culture plays a significant role in students' art making. Some of the artworks I examined seem to suggest a connection to a sense of place and identity. One of these artworks was of the twelve places a student has called home over the last 17 years. These images are layered with text, including the year she lived at a particular place, and images of a special attribute or memory from each place. Another student's work represented old and new worlds, symbolizing the world his parents emigrated from and his new life in the United States. This image is heavily layered with old waterways, topographical mapping elements and native animal symbols. They seem to evoke a spiritual longing to connect his two worlds. In an artwork titled "Chained to My DNA" another student incorporated an image of hands bound by chains and attached to a double helix structure. I was immediately drawn to the implied connection to identity in this particular artwork. Sturken and Cartwright (2009) write about scientific looking and science as visual culture. On imagery of hands and DNA they conclude that the hand is a symbol connected to ones individuality and because

. . . we have come to know life through a biomedical paradigm and we have begun to experience our bodies at the scale of the molecular, a scale we cannot exactly see, but which we conceptualize through systems of scientific representation such as genetic code. It is at the molecular level that we understand and engineer life itself in the twenty-first century. (p.349)

A student artwork I viewed while at another local museum was titled “Tell Me Who I Am.” This ethereal image contained a face with numerous, small human images floating out of the top of the head. These students art not using popular visual culture references such as advertising or images from entertainment industries in their artwork, but nonetheless, they are using what constitutes their own personal visual culture.

On the AP College Board website, located under 2010 studio art 2-D design concentration samples, international student Nathan Moy provides images of popular visual culture in his art work. Reflecting on the theme of his artwork he states,

“We are surrounded by illusions and the things around us are not always what they seem to be. We use masks as a tool to become incognito, but in the process of wearing these masks, our identity could be lost. I wanted to capture in my pieces the idea that human beings rely on objects or ideas to deceive either themselves or others in order to put on another identity more suited for the world that thrives on superficial impressions. I began to first take a self-exploration and depicted how people can use the Internet to mask themselves (Figure 1) or my awareness of my own identity (Figure 2). I then turned towards the media because the media itself is very incognito for the news that they broadcast are often opinionated and biased though we as the viewers take it in as fact. Many truths are masked by the media through reports such as those on celebrities (Figure 3) and current events such as the Haiti and Chile earthquakes. People are eager to seek acceptances of themselves so in their attempts to blend in, they tend to conform to the group they want to belong to (Figure 4), so in that process, they lose their identity. Their individualism becomes incognito.”

(http://apcentral.collegeboard.com/apc/members/exam/exam_information/214494.html)



Figure 1: Internet as a mask



Figure 2: Awareness of Identity



Figure 3: Masking truth using celebrity



Figure 4: Incognito

This student has unmistakably created artwork that contains elements of visual culture, that conveys a deeper understanding of the images and messages that permeate his world.

My conversations with the high school art teacher provided insight to the daily activities of the art classroom, of which I have little experience. The focus of this art class is on the elements and principles of design. Not having a background in visual culture studies, this instructor was interested in knowing how her students develop their creative ideas beyond the required understanding of the elements and principles. With class sizes exceeding 24 students, and roughly 50 minutes of daily class time, it is difficult to spend time with each student every day. However, she sees how visual culture plays a role in her students' lives and finds its way into their artwork. Amongst other topics, her students have been creating artwork that deal with war, science, and displacement. She feels that a course in visual culture studies would not only help them to understand the world, but would provide a better understanding of the concentration portfolio process they will each undertake for the AP College Board exam in studio art.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The results of this research indicate the field of art education is rich with theories to be explored in the area of visual culture art education. Future research into this subject will need to go into greater depth than what I have been able to accomplish here if a definitive answer is to be had regarding the effects of visual culture on how students create meaning in their artwork. Where possibilities exist for observing a single student, or an entire high school art class, for an extended period of time, perhaps one or two years, they should be acted upon. These long-term studies would provide evidence of growth in the students' ability to understand complex issues and meaning-making through art. I am convinced that the ultimate goal of art education should be to provide students with opportunities to critically examine the culture that surrounds them, both popular and that of the museums. In this critical analysis they will learn to understand the mechanics of the world and how they can make their place in it. At the very least, we owe this type of education to the leaders of tomorrow who sit in our classrooms today. To this end, I offer the following recommendations to any secondary art teacher interested in implementing visual culture studies in their curriculum.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SECONDARY ART TEACHERS ON IMPLEMENTING VISUAL CULTURE STUDIES TO THE CURRICULUM

Art teachers who are interested in including visual culture studies to their curriculum can do so by incorporating the following recommendations to their praxis:

1. Provide students with an overarching theme or idea at the start of each new lesson. This helps students to focus on the big picture.
2. Know the current issues and trends your students have an interest in, such as music, fashion, technology, social issues, social media, etc., and use these issues as a starting point for formulating your lessons. Students show greater interest when they can relate to the topic and how it affects their own lives.
3. Help students to critically think about how the messages in visual culture affect their daily lives and issues that they are concerned with. This helps them to become active participants in society.
4. Juxtapose images of visual culture with that of fine art to show how messages are changed, or remain the same, over time. Imagery from fine art has been used in consumer ads to sell ideals that companies wish to have connected with their products. Recognizing these nuanced messages and deconstructing the imagery can help students to make up their own minds on what they'd like to believe about the product.
5. Require students to keep a journal that can include artwork, ideas, images from magazines and personal thoughts, in order to help them document and process their ideas.

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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Patricia received her Bachelors of Liberal Studies from the University of Tampa in 2007. Since that time she has held positions in arts administration for the Gulf Coast Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts of St. Petersburg, Florida. She has also volunteered as a studio ambassador for the Arts in Medicine program at Moffitt Cancer Center in Tampa, Florida.

In addition to working on her own artwork she has participated as a studio assistant in the Studio-f program at the University of Tampa. In this program she had the opportunity to assist such notable artists as Sam Gilliam, Miriam Schapiro, and Audrey Flack.

Patricia's artwork is in private collections in the United States, Australia and India. You can view her artwork on her website at

<http://web.mac.com/psriramart/iWeb/P%20Sriram%20Art/Home.html>