

ROOTS, REASONS, AND STRUCTURE: FRAMING VISUAL CULTURE ART EDUCATION¹

Tom Anderson
Florida State University

Abstract

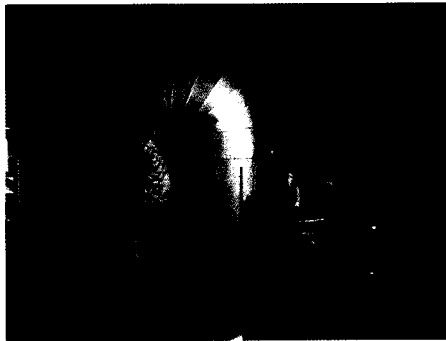
This paper is an examination of visual culture in its historical context and in relation to art education, including an exploration of visual culture art education's conceptual roots in psychology, the social sciences, and art education, and concluding with an articulation of foundational premises and a structure for teaching and learning in VCAE.

¹ This paper is condensed version of Chapter 3, of *Art for Life*, an art education textbook by Tom Anderson and Melody Milbrandt, to be published in 2004 by McGraw-Hill, New York, New York.

"We have become the organic self within a cocoon of artifact." (Susan Josephson)

Visual Culture

Rather than in nature, we now live most of our lives in the constructed environment. We seldom see the moon, experience the rain without protection, or meet other animals in their natural habitats. We live in a constructed, climate-controlled world, kept consistently and artificially pleasant, in artificial light that greatly extends our days. Our very sense of space is mediated by our constructed milieu: eight feet high at home, ten or more at work, and almost always squared off except in the case of the car: a cocoon that protects us in the outside world when we move from place to place. We overwhelmingly construct our waking, sleeping, breathing, growing, living, and dying world. Cut off from nature, our own constructions become our world.



Juice Stand: Seaside, Florida. Our human constructions become almost the only world we know.

Constant and ubiquitous in this constructed world are the electronic ephemeralizations and vicarious experience brought to us especially on television and on the Internet. Ninety-eight percent of North American households have a TV. That TV is on an average seven and half hours a day. And when it's not on, people are at their computers. The statistics are similar in many other countries around the world. Increasingly, television and the Internet tell us what's real beyond our immediate environment. These electronically generated environments are becoming undifferentiated from our own personal experiences in memory and in the construction of our sensibilities. Americans, in fact, may know more about Ellen DeGeneres or Vanna White than the neighbor next door. They may be more familiar with Ayers

Rock from watching The Discovery Channel, than with the other side of their own town. Likewise, Australians or Taiwanese may know as much about Ben Affleck as they know about their own family.

In this visually constyruacted world, language and its linear/logical thought aare giving way to entertaining visual images having web-like, divergent thought connections. Besides affecting our sense of relationship with people and place, the electronic media also affect our sense of time and history. Snippets, cutaways, sound bites, and instant replays that keep us from boredom are more appealing and entertaining than real time but also and lessen our ability and propensity for sustained in-depth engagement.

The news, for example, comes to us pre-packaged in a predictably controlled format, a news “show” consisting of theater bits presented by perfectly quaffed talking heads in 30 second segments broken up into sound and image bites. The apparent order and control presented over the chaos of the content (murder, political upheaval, budget approvals, scandals, sports, and the weather) are superficial and predetermined by commercial pressures that dictate format. Elections are won on looks fostered on TV, not on the substance of ideas. As McLuhan (1964) predicted long ago, we are now at the point where the medium is truly the message.

That medium is visual. Even the music videos on MTV rely on slick and suggestive visuals to make frequently questionable musical talent more appealing. And there are “visual learning” sections in bookstores. Rows and rows of books line the computer sections with titles like Visual Basics for Dummies, chock-full of instruction and advice on techniques for visual communication for selling yourself through Web pages, for advertising, and for business presentations.

Visual Culture Education

This increasingly visual world, constructed by human beings, is the focus of visual culture studies. It is important for success in contemporary culture that people be able to read the constructed environment and interpret and use the visual signs within it. In the art for life curriculum, then, in addition to teaching the traditional high and fine arts, it is important to include the broader category of visual culture.

Visual culture consists of visual artifacts and performances of all kinds, as well as new and emerging technologies, inside and outside the art museum, and the beliefs, values and attitudes imbued in those artifacts and performances by the people that make, present, and use them. It is a socially grounded approach that recognizes context of making and viewing as being as important as the artifacts and performances themselves. Since the social and ritual meanings of visual forms depend on people's embeddedness in culture for their understanding, visual culture studies primarily take the consumer's rather than the producer's (artist's, architect's designer's, cinematographer's) point of view. The primary point is to understand artworks and other visual artifacts, performances, and environments for what they do, say, and mean in their authentic contexts rather than to create, attain, or understand the heightened aesthetic experience that centers fine-arts based art education. Many have likened this type of educational pursuit to visual anthropology. In much the same way anthropologists set out to understand societies (their own and others) through understanding their art forms, visual culture critics seek to understand contemporary culture through examining our own visual artifacts.



Performer in a Caribbean Festival in Tallahassee, Florida. In much the same way anthropologists set out to understand societies (their own and others) through understanding their art forms, visual culture critics seek to understand contemporary culture through examining our own visual artifacts.

Visual culture studies are usually interdisciplinary in nature. In colleges and universities this interdisciplinary program usually resides in cultural studies, art history, graphic design, or communications programs. It is also a wide-ranging field politically and may encompass traditional art historical inquiry and traditional graphic design at one end of the spectrum, and popular culture, television and cinema, digital technology, and visual communication through mass media at the other. Cognitively, visual culture studies

ranges from traditional concerns with how and what we perceive to postmodern critique.

It is the scholars interested in the contemporary, popular media and culture who usually employ postmodern critique. Frequently, these critics have a reconstructionist goal. That is, they critique images and performances to understand the social foundations and ramifications of visual culture and to suggest solutions to the problems they find. Their strategy is to examine images, performances, and aspects of the constructed environment to reveal their intent, meanings, and implications; to determine their philosophical premises; to uncover who has what stake in a given expression and why; and finally to understand what the impact of all of this is on individuals and society. Their concerns frequently are with gender, social categories, and their construction (how we see ourselves and others as men, women, gays, lesbians people of color, people with mental and physical challenges, and so on), who has power and who doesn't and how that's portrayed. Because so much of the visual stimulus we are exposed to on a daily basis comes from commercial interests, an important aspect of visual culture studies is the examination of advertising including its philosophy, goals, purposes, and strategies.

The examination of imagery from the perspective of visual culture studies, then, is not for the sake of aesthetic appreciation, but for the sake of understanding and being able to take intelligent action in the world. In short, we study visual culture for meaning.

Visual Culture Art Education

This examination of visual culture for meaning centers visual culture art education (VCAE). The primary strategy used by visual culture art educators for ascertaining meaning is critique. Critique normally takes the receiver's perspective but can also be accomplished through making visual images and creating visual performances. The point of critique is not to understand aesthetic response for its own sake, but to incorporate our aesthetic response as part of an emotional/intellectual understanding of the visual environment around us, and to intelligently construct visual meaning of our own. In what follows I explore some of the roots of this quest for meaning and then present my current understanding of VCAE.

Some Roots of Visual Culture Art Education

Two kinds of understandings have contributed to our current cognitive conception of aesthetically framed visual artifacts and performances, setting the foundational understandings for VCAE. Those understandings are personal (rooted primarily in the disciplines of biology and cognitive psychology) and social (rooted in the social sciences, such as sociology and anthropology). In the personal realm we attend to the act of seeing itself: namely, how we see and therefore what we see. Second, in the social realm, we attend to meanings attached to seeing: namely, the socially embedded nature of visual culture rising from questions about what visual artifacts and performances do and mean in society.

Psychological Roots: How and What We See

Addressing the personal realm first, from a cognitive psychological perspective, art education in general and VCAE in particular is indebted to a number of researchers who have considered how and what we see. Among them, Jean Piaget (1976), Rudolf Arnheim (1986, 1989), and Howard Gardner (1994, 2000) have examined the roots of seeing from a biosocial perspective, making the case that visualizing is a cognitive activity, a form of intelligence, a form of thinking. This position has wide support in art education (Efland, 2002; Eisner, 1994; Parsons, 1998).

From a cognitive perspective, sensory input is much more than mere reception; seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and tasting are the roots of thinking. According to Arnheim (1989), the sensory system that is the primary source of our cognitive life requires ordering, invention, imagination, pattern-making, and so on for sensory input to make sense. The human eye, our window on the world, has more than 200 million receptors. As evidenced by the chaotic, indecipherable, and overwhelming visions of formerly blind people who can suddenly see, making sense of the huge amnount of information delivered by these recptors requires an ordering process: an eye-brain connection.

Beginning with this premise, many art educators have examined how and what we see. June McFee (1961), for example, explored how our concepts (word structures) inform our percepts (visual structures) and vice versa. She

also articulated how word structures (concepts) alter what we see. For example, we may see a table as round even although visually it isn't, because of the (verbal) conceptual "constancy" provided by the word, round. In the same vein, the conceptual idea of ascribing natural or realistic qualities of a rendering can be argued to be a totally false idea, since what we see is so strongly influenced by what we know. Is Japanese Sumi-e or English landscape painting, for example, more natural? It depends on who is seeing it.

Making meaning in and of visual compositions and structures, according to Arnheim, is a crucial and foundational tool not only for understanding images but for making sense of the larger environment. The initial purpose of this sense making is, of course, survival. Is that a mean dog or friendly dog approaching? Is that truck on collision course with me or not? From this functionalist position, when we are dealing with art and aesthetic visual images, in addition to purely aesthetic concerns, we want to know the meaning of the work and its practical effects on us and on the world we inhabit.

This is the psychological root of contextualist aesthetics, and it is this ideal of contextualism that most informs visual culture art education. At root it, for contextualists and by extension visual culture art educators, is seeing and recognizing form in both its physical and its expressive (connotative) aspects for the purposes of understanding and acting on life, beyond the form itself; they want to know how the visual artifact can inform them about the beyond art, about the world. From Arnheim and others they have drawn upon the notion that seeing is an act of intelligence, that patterns have meanings beyond themselves that impact or potentially impact the world.

Culture's Role in the Construction of Seeing

Arnheim and others established the fact that seeing is thinking. Piaget established the fact that there ways of seeing that are qualitatively different than each other, which he described as being intrinsic to stages of seeing-as-thinking related to our human development. Trying to understand the qualities and patterns of human development in seeing-as-thinking has become a mainstay of art education research. Through the efforts of cognitive researchers in and out of art education, developmental theory has evolved considerably since Piaget, and we now understand that children do not develop in contextless universal stages as he claimed. Rather, they develop

and in different ways and at different times because of the influence of that specific and particular contexts. The environment children grow up in heavily influences development. That environment consists most profoundly of human culture, which frames everything from attitudes to the shape of schoolrooms.

Intersubjectivity and Human Development

Kindler's (1998, 1999) research, for example, has shown that when children begin to draw they attach non-visual meanings to the act as well as visual ones. They also engage gesture, imitative noises, and language in a holistic meaning-making quest. This implies that even at the earliest stages children are engaged in the act of making meaning through their work and establishes mark making as communication: from a visual culture perspective, something to be read and understood. It becomes an aspect of dialogue that changes both parties in the conversation: the maker and the receiver.

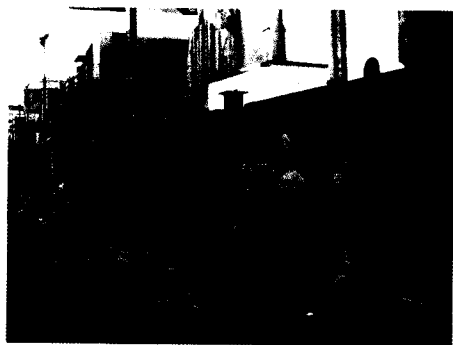
This frames human development as intersubjective rather than individual and universal. That is, human understanding is achieved over time, through the senses, in a social context. Rather than Piaget's buzzing and booming world of interesting but meaningless colors and forms, Bruner (1986, 1996) says the world of the infant is already one of directed and sustained meaning making. The child wants to make sense of things, even before s/he can speak. And it is in attempts to communicate with others, through cultural activity such as art making, that meaning making is formed and refined.

Development takes place through this process of making meaning. Attempts to communicate through the use of visual symbols are what bring a child's mind to focus and frame the ways of seeing and thinking the child constructs: what s/he ends up calling reality. In their development, a child relies on the knowledge of those already in the culture to give them the feedback they need to understand themselves and the world around them. According to Bruner, through intersubjective interaction, a child gradually comes not only to find his or her own feet and to build an inner sense of self-identity, but to understand others, what they are up to, what can be done in the world, and how it operates.

The Objectification of Subjectivity

Another important piece for understanding visual communication was contributed by Suzanne Langer (1980). Langer described art as the practice of creating perceptible symbolic forms expressive of human feeling in a way unreachable by discursive (verbal) language. Artistic symbols, she argued, are "presentational" rather than logical and "discursive", presenting the subjective, affective, feelingful nature of life. Franz Marc's *Blue Horses* or a Cindy Sherman film still, for example, have the ability to objectify subjective realities, feelings, and affects, by giving them concrete form, making them conceivable and understandable emotionally as well as intellectually. The forms and composition carry the content of the work in a subjective, expressive way that makes them a source of insight, belief, reason, and even spiritual inspiration, so we gain insight into those aspects of our own and others lives.

Langer made the case that the dynamic pattern of human feeling best finds its expression in the arts and that the arts we live with actually do much to not only to reflect, but actually to form our emotive experience. This is a very important understanding for visual culture art education.



Street Art, Barcelona, Spain. Suzanne Langer made the argument that artistic symbol are present the subjective, affective, feelingful nature of life. Visual culture art education takes as a primary task the "reading" of these images.

Biocultural Development as the Foundation of Symbolic Communication in Art

Extending ideas formulated by Langer and by Nelson Goodman, Gardner (1994) argued that visual communication (including art) is actually a language that relies on intersubjective understandings between makers and receivers of the symbols used and their relationships to each other and to their referents in the world. In making this case, Gardner begins by describing pre-verbal infants as having a world whose communication and perception center on what he calls modes and vectors. Modes and vectors are

body-centered, active ways of understanding. A mode is an affective state of being, a stance toward the world, rising from and understood from our body sense, our sense of ourselves as living, breathing, eating, coughing, defecating, feeling organisms. Modes such as being open, closed, feeling restricted, cut off, passive, retentive, or shut down all rise from our sense of our own bodies. A vector is, essentially, how the mode is carried. It gives form to and modifies the mode. Vectors give boundedness, directionality, spatial configuration, speed, density, force, and so on to the mode. Pursued lips, slouching, bouncing, and a furrowed brow are examples of vectors.

Infants' modal-vectoral activity is often analogous or mimicry oriented. They copy. This is significant for human and particularly artistic development because it is the essence of engaging in the quality of something: for example sadness, depth, or blueness. Although mode and vector functioning begins as pre-symbolic activity, it leads to symbolic activity, particularly the kind of symbolic activity that centers expressive visual communication. Sensitivity to general qualitative properties is essential to artistic expression.

As a child develops s/he will continue to feel and respond feelingfully both to direct experience and as an integral part of symbolic expression. The transition to symbolic activity happens as a result of the child assimilating in his or her own body, through imitation, the physical behaviors of another, in the process gradually coming to understand him or herself as a subject, independent and separate of the other and of the world of objects and events beyond him or her. As the child's sense of self grows through imitation, his or her sense of the other grows through a sense of consciousness of the other as similar to him or her self. Eventually this leads the child to understand aspects of the other in the abstract; the voice, the face, the shoes come to stand for mama and daddy or sister. This new skill/understanding then can be projected on stuffed animals, a favorite blanket, and so on. The feelings of relationship gained through modal-vectoral imitation then develop into the first symbolic steps in communicative empathy.

This beginning of symbolic behavior and understanding, based on body consciousness, is a fundamental prerequisite of artistic understanding. In expressive visual communication, it is affectively imbued symbols that carry the message, and we learn the essential affective quality of that at a body

level. We carry that through to the symbolic level when we separate ourselves from others and from the world and recognize that a symbol—a picture of a dog—is not the dog itself. In this, the essential aesthetic element is empathy for the affective qualities embedded in the symbol. It is not just a dog; it's a friendly dog, a nice dog, a dog we may want to pet. How do we know this? It's embedded modal-vectorally in the picture.

It is precisely this (culturally attained) ability to manipulate affectively imbued symbols that is the heart and soul of artistic performance and which we must understand to interpret the expressive qualities of visual culture.

This understanding of the early and profound influence of culture on human development also supports the idea that creating and understanding visual artifacts and performances can be taught and learned. After we reach the symbolic stage (at ages three to seven depending on the source), growth in expressive visual communication is cultural. It requires exposure to pictures, training in perception and making, education in affective response to images, and guidance as to how these activities connect with the culture's code. Gardner's (2000) research shows that tutelage in these areas enhances children's discriminatory powers, enhancing the way they make images and their ability to pay attention to sensory and qualitative aspects of art. From a visual culture art education perspective the obvious implication is that children need to be taught to make discriminations about what they are seeing in the media and in popular culture as well as in the fine arts. Such discriminations don't come naturally; they must be taught.

Important to understanding that what we see can and should be taught, Berger (1972) established the idea that what we see is determined by what we believe, and even more profoundly, that vision is reciprocal. That is if we see we can also be seen. So seeing is reflexive. It makes us who we are. And the images we make are an extension of this reflexivity. Every image, every photograph, every painting, every advertisement, embodies a way of seeing. There is no such a thing as a neutral image. Every image embodies the point of view and values of its maker. Further, every image-maker is culturally embedded. Every artist and designer lives in and is influenced by some culture(s). So whether or not s/he wants it to, the maker's values, mores, and cultural sensibilities will be reflected in the image s/he makes. Art and design

are cultural artifacts and performance; they are visual culture, and they reflect the society of their making.

Some Other Perceptions of Art-as-Culture

Two social scientists who have contributed greatly to the socially based focus in art education are Richard Anderson and Ellen Dissanayake. Anderson (1990), in his book *Calliope's Sisters*, examined ten cultures' aesthetic sensibilities and rationales and uses for art and found that though the impulse to make art is universal, the forms it takes are locally specific and culturally framed. Anderson's definition of art as "culturally significant meaning encoded in an affecting sensuous medium" (p. 238) makes it immediately clear that a meaningful system of symbolic communication is defined, structured, and understood in the group context. Symbolic meanings as Saussure (1966) first alerted us, are not natural or given but assigned through social agreement.

Dissanayake (1988, 1995) approaches visual culture from an etiological perspective (the study of first causes). Her simple and profound driving question is, why is art found everywhere, in all cultures? Her answer is that it is more than just nice; it is necessary. It is a human survival strategy. In simple terms, the case she makes is that we are a successful species because we cooperate in groups. That requires that we share mores and values and ways of doing things. We bond with each other, and form and reinforce these values through ritual behavior (ceremonies, festivals, initiations, religious services and the like), and that is where art comes in. Through aesthetic means (masks, dances, posters, stained glass windows, advertisements) art causes us to pay attention to values, mores, and ways of being promoted through the rituals we engage in. Dissanayake recently stated that the social purpose of art is the creation of mutuality, the passage from feeling into shared meaning.

The Bridge from Contextualist Roots to Visual Culture Art Education

Following from the biocultural foundations discussed above, the primary focus of contextualist art educators has been to mine artworks and visual artifacts for meaning, rather than to experience and understand aesthetic response for its own sake. Some of the art educators who have engaged art contextually have been content to merely describe it. Others have taken it a

step further into the realm of social reconstructionism. That is, they have used their critiques of how visual culture reflects social realities as a platform to suggest what's wrong in society and how that can and should be changed. One of the first and most influential of the contemporary reconstructionists was June King McFee (1961; McFee & Degge, 1977). Many of McFee's students, including Kristin Congdon, Doug Blandy, and Graham Chalmers are still influential today in carrying on that tradition, engaging particularly in pluralistic and multicultural approaches to art education, arts administration, and art therapy.

Another art educator who engaged the anthropological method was Edmund Burke Feldman (1970). In his book, *Becoming Human through Art*, Feldman explored the anthropological, social, cultural, and historical dimensions of art in some depth as a foundation for teaching and learning in art. Another art educator to be mentioned is Laura Chapman (1978), who has produced an enormous body of work both for preservice art educators and for K-12 art students, which always has a strong component addressed to understanding the role of art in contemporary society. Many other current art educators also are exploring socially constituted approaches to visual communication including Brent Wilson, Patricia Stuhr, Don Krug, and Terry Barrett, among others. Influenced strongly by this contextualist and socially reconstructionist movement a number of art educators are now focused particularly on visual culture. Notable among them are Doug Boughton, Kerry Freedman, and Paul Duncum.

Contemporary Visual Culture Art Education

The point of visual culture art education (VCAE) is to read and grasp the meanings of expressive visual artifacts and performances, for personal and social success in the arena of life. As Duncum (2001a, 2001b, 2002) points out, the social categories that separate art from other things in society have collapsed, leaving art not as a special, privileged domain but as a way of communicating that is as common as talking or writing and just as much a part of the basic fabric of everyday life. Visual culture includes all visual artifacts and performances from traditional high art to theme parks and shopping malls and also the popular arts. In the VCAE literature there is a special

emphasis on media and consumer culture.



The author and Julia Roberts. The ephemera of the media sometimes are more real to us than our three dimensional reality, so visual culture art education tries to understand the social, economic, and political embeddedness of artifacts and performances reflecting and constituting social mores, values, ways of being and doing, as well as the values and beliefs about that which is symbolized.

The focus of VCAE is on the artifact within the context of the culture that it is made and used. The object or performance is thought of as representing the society from which it emanates. So visual culture deals in the social, economic, and political embeddedness of artifacts and performances. In this understanding, artworks both reflect and constitute social mores, values, ways of being and doing: the social and political order. Of particular interest, according to Duncum, is second-order symbolization, which beyond reflecting mere information reflects values and beliefs about that which is symbolized: a semiotic search for the meaning of signs. Examples of this would be reflecting on what the clerestory constructed for the roller coaster in the Mall of America represents or signifies, or trying to determine what values are embedded in latest ad for the Gap.

VCAE's Point of View

VCAE sees aesthetic experience as informing one's response to visual culture, helping us to understand its not always positive seductiveness and immediacy. But the heart of inquiry is not to attain heightened aesthetic response; rather it is to achieve meaning through the examination of all forms of visual culture. The point of understanding is to achieve a perspective that helps us live more successfully, and ideally in a more democratic way. VCAE takes the stance that meanings lie not only in the qualities of the visual object itself, nor purely in the observer's response, but also in the relationship of the object and viewer in their authentic social context. In visual culture terms, this is called textuality (Duncum, 2001a). Textuality is the combination of the abili-

ty of the symbolized performance or object to convey meaning and the capacity of the observer to receive and understand it in a mutual context. So the (social) conditions in which meanings occur are of as much concern as the conditions of the object and receiver.

Many modernists argued that a visual image should be able to speak for itself, that if it had to be explained it was a failure. Contrary to that view, most contemporary artists and scholars hold the view that visual and verbal communication are increasingly interdependent, that how we label a visual image verbally makes all the difference in the world. Meanings are culturally embedded and determined. The Neo-Nazi's swastika is a very different, for example, than the Hindu's swastika in meaning and social significance, even though the two may look very much alike. A key understanding of VCAE is that while forms themselves may be universal, the meanings that inhere in them are culturally determined and locally specific.

Underlying this understanding is another one, even more basic, that we see what we know and we know what we see. Perhaps you've heard the admonition to be careful what you seek, because that's what you'll find. This homily illustrates the idea that rather than seeing being natural and neutral, our concepts and percepts, as Berger suggested, join with our purposes for looking to determine, literally, what we see. If we are looking for seashells at the beach we'll probably miss seeing the clouds. And at the conceptual level if we're looking for literal meaning, for example in Serrano's *Piss Christ* or in a Dell computer ad, we'll probably miss the connotative meanings.

The point is that seeing is cultural and much of what we see is in fact implied, beneath the surface, invisible to those who don't have the cultural code. Visual culture inquiry tries to get to the heart of this. In this way, VCAE continues the contextualist tradition in art education, examining the contexts of visual artifacts and performances' production, reception, and functions, as well as the technical and compositional aspects of the work.

Critique for Critical Understanding

To unearth the meanings from visual artifacts and performances, the post-modern strategy of critique is the primary teaching and learning tool for visual culture art education. Critique may take both verbal and visual form. The point of critique is to make the hidden and invisible in the work visible, that is,

to understand how aesthetically framed images and performances convey meanings as well as to understand the meanings conveyed. Making and visually critiquing artifacts and performances go hand in hand in this.

This critical understanding for the purpose of empowerment is visual culture art education's primary goal. Empowerment means students explore their own meanings rather than passively taking on meanings delivered by a book or the teacher. The starting point for this is students' own cultural experience. So visual and verbal critique should come from examination of critical questions relevant to the students' own lives, in and beyond school.

Because VCAE examines images in their social, political, and historical contexts, it is also inherently cross-cultural. VCAE examines how different cultures create identity through visual culture and how they respond to the increasingly universal corporate imagery. In this way it frames aesthetics as a social issue. It broadens the notion of what is to be examined aesthetically beyond high art to the likes of T-shirts, corporate logos, media campaigns, shopping malls and theme parks, and television.

A frequent end goal of these critiques of visual culture is social reconstruction. That is, the critiques examine the given, socially centered concept that holds the position of social power; deconstructs the assumptions, values, and mores that lie at the heart of these privileged constructions in a quest to find their contradictions, disjunctions, and dysfunctions; and thereby moves them out of their positions of power, centralizing instead values, mores and institutions that were previously peripheralized.

An example of socially reconstructionist critique was engaged by artists Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Coco Fusco (Fusco, 1995) in their installation/performance piece *Two Undiscovered Amerindians*. They dressed themselves in feathers, grass skirt and breechcloth, chest plates, beaded necklaces, and dark glasses, and put themselves in a golden cage, presenting themselves as Amerindians from an island in the Gulf of Mexico that had somehow been overlooked by Europeans for 500 years. In the cage, they performed traditional tasks such as sawing voodoo dolls in half, lifting weights while watching TV, and working on a laptop computer. A donation box was put out front by the description of their habitat, indicating Fusco would dance to rap music for a small fee and Gomez-Pena would tell authen-

tic Amerindian stories (which he did in a nonsensical language). “Zoo guards” were on hand to speak to the visitors on behalf of the primitives since the performers couldn’t understand them, and to take Fusco and Gomez-Pena to the bathroom on leashes. In addition, a peek at authentic Guatinaui male genitals could be had for five dollars.

In this reverse ethnography piece the performers observed the observers observing them. Their performance was intended to be about fetishizing so-called primitive peoples and decontextualizing and destroying indigenous culture through removing its authenticity by means of objectification of the ethnographic gaze and the attendant dominating influence of Euro American culture. It was intended to sensitize people to the distancing and objectification that allows people to commit genocide against others, to enslave them and seize their lands in the name of the king, or Jesus, or national security.

A Strategic Overview of the Pedagogy of VCAE

In a National Art Education Association Advisory from Spring, 2002, author Doug Boughton outlines a pedagogical position for VCAE agreed to at a conference on that topic. The pedagogy he outlined is as follows:

1. Focus of curriculum content that is conceptually based, interdisciplinary, and socially relevant through creating and responding to images, artifacts and performances.
2. Encourage students to take responsibility for their learning under the guidance of a teacher who initiates experiences with a full range of visual culture.
3. Expand awareness and use of newer visual media and alternative sites of teaching and learning.
4. Engage the perspectives of artists who create a variety of forms of visual culture to broaden students’ imaginations and inform critiques.
5. Encourage learners to reflect on the relationship of visual culture to the construction of identity, the richness of global cultures, and the integrity of natural and human-made environments.

6. Assess student work using long-term reflective methods and criteria developed and refined by ongoing debate among stakeholders (including students, teachers, and community members) to determine the nature of knowledge acquisition and application.

Content for VCAE

The content of VCAE is the broad range of visual culture we are all exposed to every day. Since the traditional fine arts play only a small role in our lives today, the primary focus is on the popular arts and culture that drive contemporary society. Carried increasingly by newer media, we are surrounded by popular art, design art (including the built environment), and advertising art, which exert ever more influence over our values and decisions. The majority of created imagery is made for commercial purposes and broadcast on commercial mass media. So it is increasingly in the mass media and the popular arts that we need to look for the causes of our values and decisions.

The culturally constructed environment projects and construes meanings, intentional and unintentional, sincere and manipulative, that constantly communicate something to somebody. Living successfully in this environment requires that we understand what is being communicated. We record our lives and our media interests with digital or video cameras and replay them over and over for ourselves and others until the images become embedded in the collective psyche: the planes hitting the World Trade Towers, the box-cars full of people in *Schindler's List*, Homer Simpson's selfish and blundering ineptitude. Which of these are "real"? How can we tell? What does "real" mean? These are the concerns of VCAE.



Gulliver's Playground, Valencia, Spain. The culturally constructed environment projects and construes meanings, intentional and unintentional, sincere and manipulative, that constantly communicate something to somebody. Living successfully in this environment requires that we understand what is being communicated.

Conclusion

Paolo Freire (1973) said that perhaps the greatest tragedy of contemporary society is people's domination by the myths and manipulations by modern ideological and commercial advertising. If calculated manipulations of culturally constructed symbols by ideological and pecuniary forces go unchecked it will result in the loosening of the associative structure of society. Symbols' disassociation from shared traditional meanings would be cultural schizophrenia. Likewise Sontag's (1980) critical analysis of fascist art as having a predisposition to control a populace through emotionally manipulative means and through a self-conscious repudiation of the intellect with the end goal of affecting behavior sounds alarmingly like the major characteristics of advertising art.

In this context, it is vital that students are given tools and the depth of sensibility to make informed decisions about their choices in life and their choices in society. If the role of art education is to help students develop the critical ability to go beyond accepting the prescriptions and recipes of established institutional powers, then an understanding of visual culture is crucial. Within the venerable tradition of contextualism, built on the biosocial foundation that visual communication is a cognitive, symbolic act, the ability for students to critically engage the major themes of the times through VCAEA may be crucial for not only the students as individuals, but for the society as a whole.

References

- Anderson, R. (1990). *Calliope's sisters: A comparative study of philosophies of art*. Upper saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Arnheim, R. (1986). *New essays on the psychology of art*. Berkeley, CA: University of California.
- Arnheim, R. (1989). *Thoughts on Education*. Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for Education in the Arts.
- Berger, J. (1972). *Ways of seeing*. London: Penguin.
- Boughton, D. (2002). *Art education and visual culture*. NAEA Advisory, Spring, 2002, Available at naea@dgs.dsys.com.
- Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Bruner, J. (1996). *The culture of education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Chapman, L. (1978). *Approaches to art in education*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
- Dissanayake, E. (1988). *What is art for?* Seattle, WA: University of Washington.
- Dissanayake, E. (1995). *Homo aestheticus: Where art comes from and why*. Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press.
- Duncum, P. & Bracey, T. (2001). *On knowing*. Christchurch, NZ: University of Canterbury Press.
- Duncum, P. (2001). Visual culture: Developments, definitions, and directions for art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 42(2), 101-112.
- Duncum, P. (2002). Clarifying visual culture art education. *Art Education*, 55(3), 6-11.
- Efland, A. (2002). *Art and cognition*. Reston, VA: National Art education Association.
- Eisner, E. (1994). *Cognition and curriculum reconsidered* (2nd Ed.). New

- York: Teachers College.
- Feldman, E. (1970). *Becoming human through art*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Freire, P. (1973). *Education for critical consciousness*. New York: Seabury.
- Fusco, C. (1995). *English is broken here*. New York: The New Press.
- Gardner, H. (1994). *The arts and human development*. New York: Harper/Collins.
- Gardner, H. (2000). *The disciplined mind*. New York: Penguin.
- Josephson, S. (1996). *From idolatry to advertising: Visual art and contemporary culture*. Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharpe.
- Kindler, A. (1998). Culture and development of pictorial repertoires. *Studies in Art Education*, 39(2), 147-167.
- Kindler, A. (1999). From endpoints to repertoires: A challenge to art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 40(4), 330-349.
- Langer, S. (1980). *Philosophy in a new key: A study in the symbolism of reason, rite, and art*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- McFee, J. (1961). *Preparation for art*. San Francisco: Wadsworth.
- McFee, J. & Degge, R. (1977). *Art, culture, and environment*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Parsons, M. (1998). Integrated curriculum and our paradigm of cognition in the arts. *Studies in art education*, 39(2), 103-116.
- Piaget, J. (1976). *The child and reality*. New York: Penguin.
- Saussure, F. (1966). *A course in general linguistics* (Trans. W. Baskin). New York: McGraw Hill.
- Sontag, S. (1980). *Under the sign of Saturn*. New York: Farrar, Strauss, Giroux.

Other Resources

Adbusters: <http://www.adbusters.org/home/>

Bowers, C. (1974). *Cultural literacy for freedom*. Eugene, OR: Elan.

Evans, J & Hall, S. (1999). *Visual culture: The reader*. London: Sage. The most comprehensive and scholarly source of visual culture on this list.

The journal of multicultural and cross-cultural research in art education, 18.

(2000). Volume 18 is a theme issue devoted to visual culture art education, with articles by Kevin Tavin, Brent Wilson, Paul Duncum, and Kerry Freedman. An excellent resource.

Mirzoeff, N. (1999). *An introduction to visual culture*. London: Routledge. A good overview, particularly strong in analyzing photographic images as culture.