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**Life as they know it: Teaching photography to teens for cross-cultural  
understanding and identity development within community art education**

Laurel Marie Hart

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Art Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts at  
Concordia University  
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## **ABSTRACT**

**Life as they know it: Teaching photography to teens for cross-cultural understanding and identity development within community art education.**

**Laurel Marie Hart, M.A.  
Concordia University, 2009**

This thesis provides an account of my action research project, teaching photography to teens within an upstart, Montreal-based, cross-cultural community art education program. Narrative is employed to illuminate emergent findings through my telling of key events.

Within this project, my role includes organizing the new media art component, while I also maintain a responsibility for mentoring and teaching the photography focus group—wherein my primary research focus lies. In the dual role of mentor and teacher, I collaborate with the participants to co-create a series of ever-adapting weekly sessions following a modified action-research model.

Together, the youth of Crossing Cultures and I discuss the meaning of culture. The youth are then encouraged to create artwork responding to these discussions or representing stories from cross-cultural interviews. The teens are free to choose whether to follow the suggested outline or to pursue their own ideas in this focused, but non-restrictive environment. The resulting images, dialogue, and actions raise questions about where teens' artistic interests lie, and what sort of culture first and second generation Canadian teens (and recent immigrants) identify with, and why. Photography provides the teens with a place to capture their experience, but are they willing to use it to investigate their family heritage and the cultures of others?

The analysis includes: "Culture. What does it mean, and to whom?" "Art education for identity formation," "Teaching meaningful photography," "Collaborative teaching and learning: a community-classroom mentorship model," and "Organization, partnerships, and relationships in crossing cultures and community art education."

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To my father, I wish you were here with me to celebrate this accomplishment. When you passed away, the words you had spoken of love and confidence set ablaze in my heart, melting so much self-doubt.

To Zac my personal editor, chef, support group, cheering squad, and my love. I was told twice, “You owe him!” as I’m sure you’ve read every word in this thesis (as well as those omitted), twice. I look forward to returning the favor, and pursuing our dreams together for a long time to come. We make a great team.

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## *Chapter 1*

### **Introduction**

For my Master's of Art Education I have produced an academic thesis that employs action research as described by McNiff and Whitehead (2006). The research question which I have sought to answer is: "To what extent can I contribute to cultural understanding, community cohesion and positive identity construction for an inter-cultural group of Canadian adolescents within a community based, cross-generational, cross-cultural program through teaching art photography?" This question and research project brings together two of my strongest passions. The first is being involved with and creating community organizations where people from different backgrounds are brought together in a creative, comfortable, and accepting environment, united towards a common goal of enriching life. My second passion intertwines photography and identity. For most of my life my camera has been a vital aspect of my own quest to understand the world, and my place in it. Trying to understand who I am, and aiding others in their quest to develop their own identities has long been a marked feature of my teaching style.

### **Background to the Question**

I grew up in the sprawling city of Surrey, B.C., located about an hour's drive south of Vancouver. We were on the "safe" suburban side, which happened at the time to be inhabited mostly by Caucasian individuals. By the time I was high school, I saw a large change in the ethnic demographic of my hometown: now fifteen percent of the students at my school were of Korean or Chinese descent. I remember kids talking about gangs forming and one boy who was targeted and nearly run over in the school parking lot by

students from a specific group. I remember the peace that was broken by confusion, and the continuous voicing of questions like “What’s the point of learning all this stuff? What does it have to do with my life?”

Years later, when I began substitute teaching for the Surrey School Board, I was stunned to see how the demographic of Surrey had changed immensely over the 6 years that I had been away studying at UBC in Vancouver. One Surrey school exemplified this fact. During my visit a teacher there explained to me that within approximately 3 years the school went from having a 97% Caucasian population to a 99% Indo-Canadian population. Even the layout of the land changed. Trailer parks disappeared and were replaced by condos; forests were torn out and replaced by mega-houses, (mansion-sized homes of average construction that occasionally housed several families.) Like the animals and the nature around me, I had to adjust. I learned to twist my tongue around syllables of names that before I had never imagined, (which was often greeted by friendly outbursts of student laughter). The students and I were all learning to adapt. I remember one day showing up to substitute a Punjabi class where the teacher had left a message in the phone system that said, “This is a great group of kids. You don’t have to know Punjabi—they have in class work, just *please* come!!” When I arrived, they looked at me, the only white person in the room, and after a few minutes one student finally walked up to me and said in a curious, quizzical tone, “You don’t know Punjabi...” To which I responded in jest, “Are you saying just because I’m white that I don’t know Punjabi??” That got her attention and focused the attention of a few other students who had been wondering the same thing. “You do??” she said, with a look of surprise. “No, not at all. But I wish I did!” I responded with a big smile and we all laughed, as they began

brainstorming how to teach me about their culture. It included the proper way to pronounce “chai”, and the best restaurants to go to in “Little India”. They introduced me to the ‘bangara’ music they were accustomed to studying with and debated amongst themselves the proper way to write “Miss. Hart” (how to replicate the “h” or “ha” sound) in Punjabi on the board.

As a high school substitute art teacher in the second largest city in B.C., I have visited many art and photography classrooms and have had the opportunity to get to know hundreds, even thousands of teenagers. One day, I found myself substitute teaching a grade nine social studies block during which a student asked me why it was important for him to know the dates and locations of all the battles fought by Napoleon. I thought about it, and realized that this was a very good question, particularly as I saw students struggling everyday with understanding themselves, their familial relationships, their society, and their place within it. I had to admit that not once had I ever seen a student (or adult, for that matter) agonizing over the exact date of the Third Coalition, and what precisely took place there.

The world is changing. My world has changed—and there are more important issues that need be addressed than memorizing details of white man’s history. When I arrived in Montreal to pursue graduate studies and learned of some of the inter-cultural struggles taking place here, I began to realize (through discussions with others) that I was uniquely situated to see life and cultural differences from an inclusive, diverse, multicultural mosaic perspective.

When I arrived at Concordia last year, I was fortunate to have work as a Teacher’s Assistant for an undergraduate photography class in Art Education. As I got to know the

instructor, Dave<sup>1</sup>, I learned about his involvement in a local social justice community art program, and his passion for the well-being and healing of adolescents. This year Dave reunited with another co-organizer of the social justice program, Susan,<sup>1</sup> to create a new project entitled Crossing Cultures<sup>1</sup>.

### **Introduction to Crossing Cultures**

Crossing Cultures brings together nine first-generation Canadian adolescents in an arts-based journalistic program. The youth are members of immigrant families of various cultures. The program seeks to increase cultural understanding and respect among the youth participants. Participants are either first generation Canadians whose parents have immigrated to Canada, second generation Canadians whose grandparents immigrated to Canada, or, recently immigrated youth who are new to Canada. Parents and grandparents are included in this project and provide an important intergenerational perspective. One goal is to involve participants of differing cultural backgrounds, in order to represent Montreal's diversity. Dave took charge of recruiting participants, using the various contacts he has established over his many years working within the community. In this project I work closely with five adolescents, teaching them photography as an art form and as an artful (soulful) way of approaching and responding to life. My focus is threefold: personal identity; familial and cultural identity; and societal/social identity.

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<sup>1</sup> All names of people and organizations have been replaced with pseudonyms for the sake of anonymity.

## The Key Players

### The Adults.

There are a large number of individuals involved in Crossing Cultures, each of whom have different roles. First off we have Susan and Dave, the co-founders of Crossing Cultures. The project was imagined by them and funded with the help of their previous non-profit organization. Dave also garnered support from the Gallery, which connected Crossing Cultures to two individuals: the Gallery's lead organizer of community programming, and Paul, the Gallery educator who was assigned to connect Crossing Cultures to the Gallery's collections, programs, and goals. To provide background information to the educators, Dave's brother, a University professor who is a specialist in Canadian immigration, took part. Dave sought out the assistance of a teacher and professional design consultant at the College, whose task was to create a web-platform for Crossing Cultures, which includes a blog and website. Dave recruited an undergraduate student in her third year of Concordia's Art Education program to assist with teaching and aid in translation and interviews.

Dave also requested my participation in the program to teach photography and contribute to the planning and implementation of the arts component of the project. He told me that his reason for hiring me was because through our previous work together, he developed an appreciation for the valuable skills which I brought as a professional art educator and experienced photography instructor. Dave asked me to recommend or find other art teachers who were specialized in new media arts such as video and animation. I introduced him to H  l  ne and Rachel, two practiced teachers who were in the process of completing their master's of Art Education degrees at Concordia University. H  l  ne, like

most art educators, is a “jack of all trades.” She spent the previous year exploring animation for the first time, and has past experience teaching video. Rachel works for a local school board, where her job has been to integrate technology into elementary school curricula, usually by teaching teachers how to use animation in their classes. She is also an experienced industrial designer and has worked for a number of years as a professional animator. Dave also sought out advice and support from a variety of different sources, including professors at Concordia University. Dave’s connection with a representative of Canon allowed us to purchase cameras at a lower cost.

### The Youth.

The youth of Crossing Cultures were student participants, but were also organizers through their actions, feedback, and choices. Each youth came to us as a representative of their family and culture(s), and linked us to their family members and their stories. Dave selected nine youth through his connections with local schools and community organizations. Each teen was either an immigrant, or descendant from immigrant parents (and in one case, grandparents). Five teens chose to participate in the photo-focus portion of Crossing Cultures, where my research was centered. Eliysha, age twelve, recently arrived in Canada from Philadelphia, originally emigrating from Haiti approximately twelve years ago. Daniel, sixteen, was born in Canada and his grandmother is Hungarian. Erica, also sixteen, has an Irish mother and a German father. Sophia’s parents are Portuguese, and she came to Canada as a young child; she is now thirteen. Tami, sixteen, was born in Canada and is a second generation Canadian. Her grandmother is Dutch from Indonesia, her grandfather is Italian and she also has Irish and Welsh heritage.

## Chapter 2

### **Literature Review**

Crossing Cultures stands out as being not only cross-cultural at its core, but also as having the distinctive approach of being inter-generational, recognizing the significant role that family, (particularly parents and grandparents), has on how we live, perceive the world, and develop an understanding of who we are. As there are many aspects to this project, the bodies of research that I am reviewing are multi-faceted. Key authors have been chosen based on their tremendous understanding of the field as well as their personal knowledge.

### **Teaching Art and Photography for Aesthetic/Artistic Purpose and “Heart.”**

In the introduction to her book, *I Wanna Take Me a Picture*, Wendy Ewald (2002) explains the rationale behind her work.

“This book describes an approach to teaching photography to children. It grew out of an attempt to address what I saw as the need to attend to our neglected physical and visual surroundings, and the need we all feel to articulate and communicate something relevant about our personal and communal lives.” (p. 8)

Throughout her writing, Ewald acknowledges children’s familiarity and comfort with reading and creating images to express ideas from a very young age, even before they are able to read.

In this book, Ewald describes one of her first experiences teaching photography on a Native reservation in Labrador. She reflects on how “the reservation was already in crisis, its young people caught between two cultures and two languages” (Ewald, 2002, p.

11). She recounts that “It was clear that some of the older children were very worried about the future of their people” (Ewald, 2002, p. 11). After handing out cameras to the children and teenagers in the community and joining them on an explorative photo-walk, Ewald recognized that where her own pictures were selective and cautious, the children’s photos provided an “uncompromising look at the problems they faced” (p. 11).

The process by which Ewald approaches teaching photography involves first “asking [the students] to write about the subject they were going to photograph, then asking them to make a list of images suggested by their writing – [as] a way to help them organize their picture-taking before they went out to shoot” (p. 12). Later in her career, she began bringing these techniques into school settings, where she notes that with the “rapidly changing demographics in American schools [...] photographs provided a much-needed opportunity for the students to bring their home lives into school” (p. 12). The photographs also provided a starting point for open discussions about students’ families, cultures, and communities. The positive impact of Ewald’s extensive explorations into teaching photography to children provides me with a foundational understanding of her process, and further insight into the planning and structuring of my own lessons, and how to approach my relationship with the students.

Hyde’s (2005) study of Ewald breaks her practice into three parts. First, Hyde identifies Ewald’s approach to teaching—Ewald acts as both an artist and teacher, and most importantly, approaches working with children from a collaborative framework, “sharing control over the process of visually representing children’s lives, their stories and their faces” (p. 172). Secondly, Hyde suggests that the work produced by Ewald “provides a rich source of material for those interested in visual culture” (Hyde, 2005, p.

172). Lastly, during her analysis of several of Ewald's latest projects, Hyde observes that not only do these images both "address and raise sociological questions," they "offer a compelling visual example of the confluence of gender, race, and social class" (p.172). This is a prime example of how an art educator teaching photography in the context of social action can have far-reaching implications that touch the lives of the students involved, and also create a meaningful dialogue with society at large.

In 1973 Roy H. Quan made several observations, of which (from my experience) many still hold true today. He stated that "there has been little educational discussion of still photography's function as a medium suited to social inquiry and its role in helping students better understand their surroundings and experiences" (Quan, 1973, p. 4). Since then, some research has been done on the subject, as is evidenced by Kit Grauer's (2002) study on "Teenagers and Their Bedrooms" in which Grauer investigates adolescent identities based upon photographic portraits of teenagers in their bedrooms.

Thomes M. Spoerner (1981) states "Photography is a model of perception [...]. The camera is to visual experience what the pencil is to writing, a tool that can be dealt with and directed, from research to expression to all kinds of questioning." (p. 36) These sentiments are repeated by many experienced photographers. In an interview with master photographer Jerry Uelsmann, Craig Roland (1994) quotes Uelsmann as he explains exactly why photography, when approached artistically, is so powerful and personal for the photographer. Through Uelsmann's words, one can begin to understand why the images resulting from such a meaningful, focused approach have the capacity to carry that same meaning and emotional intensity to the viewer.

The camera is a license to explore, and that concept to me is very important.

When you give a person a camera, it's giving them permission to stop and look [...] It really makes the world more accessible in a personal way [and] can help people to interact with the world at another level. You begin to notice things with a camera. In a sense you understand the thing that you are photographing in a non-verbal way. The camera allows for a sequence of continuing emotional commitments and intense visual concentration. Each click of the shutter becomes an emotional investment; and a part of the world becomes our visual possession. The more possibilities you discover visually, the more you understand artistically (quoted in Roland, 1994, p. 56).

When photography is approached from an artistic perspective, it has the ability to transcend subjects and create meaning and skills for dealing with whatever life brings our way. It becomes personal and contributes to one's wellbeing, enriching his/her experience of life in a "soul" way that both addresses and goes beyond the fundamentals of the everyday.

In the Leave Out Violence (LOVE) photojournalism project for teenagers who have witnessed, experienced, or been perpetrators of violence, this truth is realized. Teenagers involved in the project often gain new insight into their lives and their world around them through both approaching their life through "the eye" of the camera, and sharing those observations with others. In his doctoral thesis, LOVE co-founder Stan Chase (2008) notes that one reason for the success of LOVE is that "through their participation in the Photojournalism Project they [the "at-risk" youth] became more empowered as they were given a voice and an outlet to express their thoughts and feelings" (p. 187).

In Tali Goodfriend's (2006) Master's thesis *"To See From Your Perspective"*, she gives an account of her visit to the Givat Haviva Art Center in Israel where she interviewed six participants involved in teaching a photography project called "Through Others' Eyes." The goal of the Givat Haviva Educational Foundation Inc. is "Education for coexistence and social justice" (Givat Haviva). On their website, the organization describes the "Through Others' Eyes Photography Project" as follows:

As part of their photography program at Givat Haviva's Art Center, Jewish and Arab high school students are assigned to visit one another's homes and communities, and to photograph both the exterior and interior. The camera serves as the eye that helps them observe "the other" from a new angle. The teenagers' interactions have led to a deeper understanding of one another and to lasting friendships. The resulting 'Through Others' Eyes' photography exhibit is mounted throughout Israel and abroad." (Children and Youth – Givat Haviva Educational Foundation.)

Goodfriend's (2006) interviews with students involved in this project revealed that the main reason students joined "Through Others' Eyes" was because they wanted "to learn photography and make new friends" (p. 35). The teens also recognized the significant role that visiting one another's homes, and later engaging in professionally facilitated larger group discussions played in helping them discuss their feelings and voice their concerns about any conflict. Goodfriend concludes: "It is successful to use photography as an artistic medium for bringing people together in a shared experience, to strengthen their understanding of one another. [Photography makes this possible because] the person taking the photo is 'behind' the lens, at a distance and somewhat protected" (p. 40).

## **Adolescence and Identity Formation:**

### **the Importance of Self-determination and Empowerment**

Arnett (2001) identifies adolescence as being a crucial time for identity formation due to the cognitive developments that make it possible (for the first time) for teenagers to “consider themselves in the abstract, in the ‘third person’ in a way that younger children cannot” (p. 175). Arnett notes that the commitments made during this time form the foundation for adult life. Because of this, special attention should be paid by educators, policy makers, and society at large, to aiding adolescents in the difficult task of identity development. Arnett (2001) looks to Erik Erickson’s findings in psychohistory, which reveal that at its core, identity development can be broken into two parts. According to Erikson, the first part is the significance of “the person’s looking inward and assessing his or her individual abilities and inclinations”, which occurs alongside the second aspect of “then looking outward to possibilities available in the social and cultural environment” (p. 177). Arnett (2001) summarizes that “successful identity development lies in reconciling one’s abilities and desires with the possibilities and opportunities offered in the environment” (p. 177). For this reason, it is essential that at this crucial age, adolescents be provided with a positive environment where they can explore their identity. They need adults who will encourage them and provide positive options for their responses and actions which will likely become habit and character in the future.

Another key observation made by Arnett (2001) concerning adolescent identity formation is that different cultures approach identity in very different ways. Cultures either promote an independent, individualistic self (as is seen widely in North America), or a collective, interdependent self (p. 164). Arnett notes that aside from Erickson's

studies on identity development in the Sioux and Yurok Tribes of Native Americans, the majority of Erickson's research and theory on adolescent identity formation "takes place among White middle-class adolescents in the United States" within an individualistic cultural background (Arnett, 2001, p. 182). Arnett states that "certainly, more studies are needed on identity development among young people in non-Western cultures" (p. 182), and he recognizes the great need for research around identity development for ethnic minorities living in American (or Canadian) society.

Like other identity issues, issues of ethnic identity come to the forefront in adolescence because of the cognitive capacities that adolescents develop, [which includes their] growing capacity for self-reflection. [...] For adolescents who are members of ethnic minorities [there] is likely to be a sharpened awareness of what it means for them to be a member of their minority group. [...] Also, as a consequence of their growing capacity to think about what others think about them, adolescents become more acutely aware of the prejudices and stereotypes that others may hold about their ethnic group. (Arnett, 2001, p. 183).

Not only that, but they also have to learn to reconcile the values of their ethnic group with the values of the majority culture. Phinney, DeVich-Navarro et al. (1994) address four responses of adolescence in ethnic minorities to this cultural conflict, which include: assimilation (changing to become like the majority culture), marginality (feeling rejected by the majority and rejecting one's own culture), separation (remaining active in one's own ethnic group and distancing/ ignoring the majority), and biculturalism. Biculturalism means having a dual identity, "one based in the ethnic group of origin and one based in the majority culture" (p. 184). Hermans & Kempen (1998) recognize a fifth response,

which they call *hybrid identity*. In this, the individual combines values from their own culture with those of the global culture or the cultures of those surrounding them. This process of developing a hybrid identity and adapting to global culture can be very difficult for young people, sometimes resulting in a feeling of marginalization or identity confusion which can lead to problems such as “depression, suicide and substance use” (Hermans & Kempen, 1998, p. 185).

Ruoyi Wu (1994) researched written autobiographies by ESL students. He revealed different responses to cultural identities between those expressed by newly immigrated teenage students and those who had come to the United States in their early teens. The latter group of students told less of their journey, and instead focused on sharing their experience of losing “their original identities and (becoming) ‘marginal,’” (p. 7) which Wu describes as having a “double consciousness,” a concept gleaned from Susan Friedman (1988). Wu explains:

As a group, these students tried to say something less “sayable” because when relocated in a different culture as young children, they had lost their original identities and become “marginal,” their selves often re-categorized in terms which they could not immediately understand. (Wu, 1994, p. 7)

One of the students shared that rather than being himself, he felt caught up in being American. Within the class a support group and sense of community formed, while student’s articulation of their feelings led them to better understanding of “their purpose in life more clearly in their later revisions” (Wu, 1994, p. 11).

David Wakefield and Cynthia Hudley’s (2006) review of theoretical research surrounding ethnic and racial identity support this result, as they state: “a strong, positive

ethnic identity benefits adolescent mental health and academic success” (p. 147). The need for community is of special importance to immigrant youth as is noted by Tsai (2006); “Immigrant youth leave their relatives, friends, and other social ties behind in their home countries during their immigration processes.” (p. 285).

Owens, Mortimer and Finch (1996) conducted a study into self-determination as a source of self-esteem in adolescence. As many studies had already concluded “that when people conceive their behavior as internally motivated, as determined by their own volition, there are stronger consequences for the self,” (p. 1378). Owens et al. (1996) sought to determine specifically the effects of self-determination on adolescents in the realms of school, family, and work. They assert that “The same kinds of experiences that have been found to stimulate positive psychological outcomes in adulthood - personal discretion in decision making, a sense of self-determination, interesting and challenging tasks—also foster self-esteem in the adolescent years.” (p. 1396).

Miller (2007) details three central teaching approaches: transmission (where the teacher lectures the curriculum to the student); the transaction position (in which the curriculum is given to the student who then responds to it); and finally the transformation position, a collaborative learning and teaching approach, where students actively participate in defining the curriculum and the teacher shares his/her power and authority in the classroom with the collective. In the transformation approach, the teacher acts more as a learning guide than an ultimate authority. I feel that the transformation position described by Miller (2007) is best suited to empowering adolescence through promoting self-determination.

### **Multicultural Art Education Theory and Practice**

The theory of “Dialogical Inquiry” employed by Flavia Bastos (2006) comes from her own experience. Bastos came to the United States from Brazil in the 1990s to find herself surrounded by “multicultural and global education concerns” (p. 20). She writes: “I was often puzzled by many requests to characterize my culture, artistic experiences and traditions, I realized that requests to speak about Brazilian culture were in fact opportunities to reflect upon a heritage I largely took for granted.” (Bastos, p. 20). Bastos presents the act of “dialogue” as a twofold process involving both “learning about others and, at the same time, reflecting upon my own identity” (p. 20). The notion of *dialogical inquiry* is based upon a non-hierarchical, direct “everyday” conversational exchange between individuals of different cultures (Bastos, 2006).

[This process of] sympathetic listening and thoughtful talking takes place in the context of a social relationship, be that in a friendly exchange, a community outreach activity, or in a classroom. ... Dialogical inquiry is based on the relatively simple but powerful premise that talking to one another can foster cultural understanding. (Bastos, 2006, p. 21)

Bastos introduced the concept of *dialogical inquiry* in a University course for student teachers, and recognized that the point at which it began to affect cultural understanding was after “helping students map out their cultural boundaries and identify cultural intersections; spaces where different cultures come in contact with one another that are increasingly a part of contemporary experience.” (p. 23).

Ballengee-Morris and Sthur (2001) believe that “culture needs to be defined from a social anthropological perspective to facilitate the understanding of multicultural art.”

(p. 7). In "Multicultural Art and Visual Culture: Education in a Changing World" Ballengee-Morris and Sturh (2001) state that it is "Individuals' varied experiences within the history, heritage, tradition, and culture of the social groups of which they are a part of that produces diversity" (p. 7). Culture, they suggest, is not a "static, esoteric entity that is outside of an individual's lived experience," it is "made up of what we do [and] what we value" (p. 7). They suggest that while culture provides us with a blueprint with which to understand our lives, it also "confines our possibilities for understanding and action" (p. 7). This is why it is so important that young people learn about other cultures. When one learns more about identifying various aspects of one's own culture, he/she can better understand other cultures. Inversely, as one learns about other cultures, "the more complexly and richly one can understand the social and cultural groups to which they belong." (p. 7).

As Sturh and Ballengee-Morris (2001) seek to identify exactly how it is that multiculturalism and art intersect, they first recognize the need to identify what it is to teach art. Teaching art, they suggest, is teaching about life, from conception to death, and how to live and learn throughout the journey (p. 9). As art is so intimately connected to and concerned with the experience of living and expressing "cognitively, emotionally, physically, and sometimes spiritually" (p. 9), and as one's life takes place within one's own cultural context while interacting with the other cultures around them; art education has a mission and facility for addressing cross-cultural and multicultural understanding. Such an education is a way for teachers to revive from having become "bogged down in the teaching of school subjects or disciplines in a way that they are no longer connected to the students' lives." (p. 6). To become connected to the students' lives, we need to

meet them in their world, in their cultures. As teachers, we need to provide an example of inclusive, accepting, cross-cultural societal interactions in our multi-cultural society in order to contribute to a future peaceful society.

Kerry Freedman (2000) searches out the reasons why many art educators maintain social perspectives. She explains some general characteristics of these perspectives and validates her belief that teaching “social perspectives of art education are just good art education” (p. 314). Like Stuhr and Ballengee-Morris (2001), Freedman (2000) begins with a foundational belief that the Arts are about life: “They enable us to create, force us to think, provide us with new possibilities and allow us to revisit old ideas” (p. 315). Freedman (2000) notes that “the central theme to post modern debates has been that a shift in the cultural sphere—above all, the emergence of an all-encompassing visual culture—has fundamentally transformed the nature of political discourse, social interaction and cultural identity” (p. 315). Although I agree with the observation that mass media is highly pervasive in North America, I would disagree with the assumption that it is a single, all-encompassing entity. Although it may speak constantly to us through logos, the television, and bus advertisements, different cultural institutions and choices for visual representations in the home allow for a number of unique, multi-faceted, inter-relating visual cultures. How different individuals approach these various visual representations also differs drastically with the diversity of cultural, individual, and local approaches.

## **Sociology and Art Education**

Archer-Cunningham (2007) paints a portrait of a community organization that successfully fuses Art Education with Cultural education. Ifetayo Cultural Arts, a community program that teaches traditional African dance, is located in Brooklyn and “practices a three-tiered model of community development that places art and culture at its strategic center” (Archer-Cunningham, p. 25). The three tiers are: sharing art and cultural knowledge communally, exposing participants to cultures, histories and art forms (primarily African-centered) and “Promoting a sense of collectively among individuals, which is accomplished through the collective experience of artistic and cultural education.” (Archer-Cunningham, p. 25). The collectivity advocated by Ifetayo Cultural Arts is embodied by their mandate to include parents in the activities of the center which begins to break down “the barriers of finding the time, confidence, and [youths’] desire to participate,” while it has also “revealed an opportunity for adults who are in need of continued forums to share their knowledge and learn from those who may live in close proximity,” thereby reviving a sense of community (Archer-Cunningham, p. 30).

Within Ifetayo, youth are encouraged to speak freely, (although Ifetayo has a full-disclosure policy throughout) with adult and family communication playing a key role (Archer-Cunningham, 2007). Ifetayo’s philosophy centers on the concept of *Mbongi* “a Kongoles word that means ‘learning place’ exemplifies the organization’s philosophies and actions regarding mutually constitutive learning” (Archer-Cunningham, p. 31).

*Mbongi* is a succinct articulation of the idea that within every community there must be a dynamic, mutually constitutive, and ethically responsible relation between the individual and the group. Each member—with his or her unique attributes, opinions,

habits, actions, and duties—contributes to the life of the group and must be committed to ensuring that each and all adhere to its core principles. Reciprocally, the group must support proper development of each individual and hold him or her accountable to the ethical standards that it espouses. (Archer-Cunningham, 2007, p. 31).

Where Ifetayo has succeeded in combining Cultural Education, Social Justice and Art Education, many other programs fall prey to having one focus merely serve another. In some cases, art simply acts as a mouthpiece for social justice, or vice versa. Eisner raises this concern in his response to a series of papers published in *Studies in Art Education* on “the social reconstruction of art education” (Freedman, 1994, p. 131) stating:

Since the social and cultural agenda is so fundamental in the following papers, one wonders whether in the end art education will become little more than a handmaiden to the social studies. If this should occur, what would authorize art teachers (who many not possess the historical or cultural or political competencies) to use works of art as instrumentalities not only to illuminate cultural issues, but to advocate a particular set of political values? (Eisner, 1994, p. 190).

Steinspring (2001) replies to Eisner’s charge with gusto by suggesting that to truly teach multiculturalism within art education “would allow much less time for studio activities in art classes while placing enormous demands on teachers to study history, anthropology, sociology, economics, and political science,” which he suggests is the realm of teachers of social studies (p. 13). Steinspring concludes with an argument for “effective design and good craftsmanship,” as well as allowing students “to be creative in their art

expression, even if their creative ideas are new only to them” (p. 17). He states “I would hope students might be led to discover their own personal styles and unique ways of addressing the criteria in a teacher’s assignment” and that “Art teachers in public schools must continue to honor diversity by respecting the opinions of all the students.” (Steinspring, p. 17). Steinspring quotes Kindler (2000) who urges that students “be led to experience art at a sensory level, perhaps less cognitively involved but perceptually very powerful and engaging” (p. 41).

One common example is often found in school based programs, where art is shown to students as a way to teach them about other cultural groups, and students are then asked to mimic this art, as is in the “totem pole project”. Desai (2000) explores this tendency that “paradoxically, multiculturalism has shaped our understanding of art from cultures other than our own in stereotypic ways. It has reduced non-Western cultures to some constructed ideas of their essential characteristics that supposedly can be represented authentically” (p. 126). It is a rare and gifted program that successfully integrates both multiculturalism and art education simultaneously to their full faculty in a symbiotic, mutually beneficial way.

Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) also has implications for multicultural art education. Charles Dorn (2005) responds to the new movement towards VCAE, explaining that it provides a social reconstruction model. A potential downfall that I see as common to both VCAE and many forms of multicultural art education is the tendency to remove personal freedom and empowerment from teenagers and impose a heavy structure of expectations and preconceived cognitive strategies. VCAE often uses “prompts” (guiding questions constructed so as to direct the student to a predetermined

conclusion) and Dorn asks if the works produced “truly reveal something about a society (or) whether the meaning of an image needs to be validated by the teacher” (p. 49). Is it possible that in an effort to aid students in a cultural art exploration, teachers might interject expectations and biases which have little to do with the student’s personal cultural experience? Dorn explains his reasoning for why art should focus on the individual, rather than external systems or cognitive strategies:

Art is not, in my view, a product of intellect, but is rather a process more concerned with creative activity requiring an education in imagination, consciousness, thought and feeling. ... What students create are objects of meaning which come from understanding first and foremost that the works of art made by them express meaning and reflect artistic quality. ... *Meaning* is this sense that requires works of art to have content that can be cognitively or effectively experienced and that the artistic quality in works refers to specific aesthetic values. (Dorn, 2005, p. 50)

Dorn (2005) reasserts his point in his statement that “The practice of art is in itself fulfilling, in part, because it satisfies certain expressive needs and cultural functions through the making of objects that objectify meaning” (p. 50).

Graeme Chalmers and Dipti Desai (2007), on the other hand, profess confidence in the ability to include Social Justice within Art Education. They agree with many theorists that art provides images, and images provide “different ways of considering, imagining and representing our lived situation.” (Chalmers and Desai, p. 7). Art “deals with real human issues,” providing a way to make sense of and explore the world around us; while encouraging us to ask questions in unique ways” (Chalmers and Desai, p. 7).

Chalmers and Desai (2007) link to Dorn's argument when they state that "in their studio practice, students need to not only think about the kinds of meaning they are shaping through their artwork but also why they choose to create certain images." (p. 9). They connect to the concept of *dialogue*, mentioned earlier by Bastos: "Integral to socially engaged art practices is the facilitation of dialogue among diverse communities" (Chalmers and Desai, p. 9), and to the concept of collaborative process put into practice by Ifetayo Cultural Arts, "a dialogic aesthetics (is) defined in terms of openness, of listening, and a willingness to accept dependence and inter-subjective vulnerability," (Chalmers and Desai, p. 9). Overall, Chalmers and Desai provide many great goals and insights for social justice in art education, and provide references to artists working in similar ways; however, they still do not mention how to make these goals tangible and meaningful to adolescents.

Despite the lack of literature on how to integrate multicultural goals and cross-cultural collaborations successfully within Art Education (in non-University settings), I believe that it is possible, although difficult, to combine the two. Caution must be paid to respecting each individual's unique cultural identity, and efforts must be made to assist individuals (particularly youth) to explore their own culture, recognize new cultural experiences, translate these experiences into feelings, and become conscious of their thoughts in order to make personally meaningful art. In addition to this, technical art skills must be developed and youth must be introduced to a variety of artworks and art making concepts so that they might devise how to communicate their feelings symbolically and meaningfully.

Graeme Chalmers (1981) states, “Art, directly and indirectly, bolsters the morale of groups to create unity and social solidarity.” (p. 7). Although in my research I do not delve into the study of cultural anthropology or ethnology, I find Chalmers’ insights to be most significant in the study of multicultural art education. In the following passage Chalmers deconstructs the framework of the North American school system in an effort to ascertain how it functions to either support or suppress cultural rights of passage. Although his observations were made a number of years ago, I feel his insights remain significant today, as most schools still maintain the same structure they did thirty years ago.

What fascinates me is that our public schools, designed for adolescents ... educate and "socialize" their students by depriving them of everything the rites bestow. They manipulate them through the repression of energies; they isolate them and close off most parts of the community; they categorically refuse to make use of the individual's private experience. The direction of all these tendencies is toward a cultural "schizophrenia" in which the student is forced to choose between his own relation to reality or the one demanded by the institution. (Chalmers, 1981, p. 8)

Chalmers (1981) then continues on to highlight the importance of cultural anthropology being applied in the teaching of art education, so that individuals in bustling, multicultural, North American society can truly understand one another as people and creators of art. Chalmers notes, “In the multi-cultural urban centers of the world, children and teenagers are caught in cultural conflict—not just because they are members of a particular ethnic group or class, but also because they are members of an adolescent

subculture.” (p. 23). To further support his view on the need for culturally aware teachers, Chalmers references the guidelines for teacher preparation written by the National Art Education Association in 1973, which clearly state that the art teacher should be taught Anthropology “so that he may better understand the student in relation to his origin, environment, and cultural development.” (p. 24). That the NAEA once recommended that art educators also be knowledgeable in Anthropology is noteworthy, and not too far off from arguments persisting today, (Eisner, 1994. Steinspring, 2001).

### **Literature Review Concluding Remarks**

Art takes place in a realm slightly beyond the everyday. It takes place in the realm of the heart and soul, and because of this, it provides a unique bridge into areas that might otherwise seem impossible to venture. Art comforts, it explains, and it grows its creator as its creator forms the artwork. Art is personal. When art is created, it is as if a new child is formed, a new way of knowing and experiencing is created, a new level of understanding is reached. When art is created collaboratively, it is interpersonal. Many multi-cultural or inter-cultural action research programs begin with bringing people of different cultures together and teaching them about non-majority cultures. As educators, we know for a fact that much deeper, long-lasting learning occurs when the answers are discovered experientially. An educator teaching others about a culture they may not truly know themselves can only do so much, and is restrained by stereotypes, assumptions, words and definitions. The very word “culture” does not allow for true understanding of the complexity of people, their actions, unique individual (or familial) habits, and differences.

Christine Ballengee-Morris (2001) puts it this way:

We have seriously contemplated what it is we teach through art and have come to the conclusion that it is about life, from conception to death, and about how to live and learn about these complicated, ambiguous, and multi-dimensional processes. Through art we can come to understand cognitively, emotionally, physically, and sometimes spiritually, the phenomena of life and death” (p. 8).

Dave stated that the reason he asked myself and several other art educators to participate in this project is because of his recognition of the skill and expertise that art educators provide.

## Chapter 3

### Method

The method that I use for this project is Action Research according to McNiff and Whitehead (2006). I have selected Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead because of their collaboratively developed, down to earth, experience-based approach to action research. McNiff and Whitehead communicate a real, “lived in” understanding of action research. This understanding is exemplified by Whitehead’s ideas about “experiencing oneself as a living contradiction, and about the nature of living educational theories; and McNiff’s ideas about the generative transformational nature of the evolutionary processes of human inquiry” (McNiff, 2009, ¶ 3). I have followed a modified version of their cyclical / spiral example using the key terms of "Plan – Act – Observe – Reflect – Modify Plan.

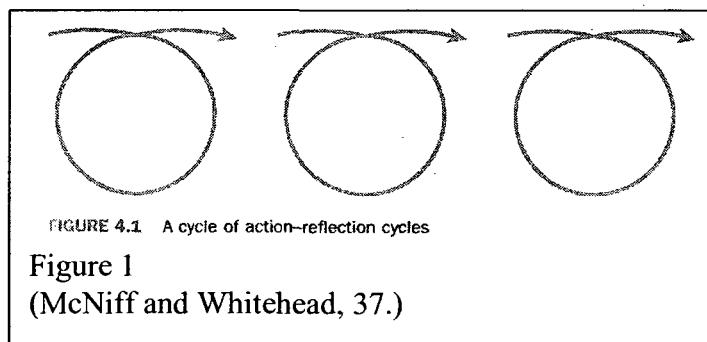


Figure 1 and 2.  
Action Research diagrams from McNiff and  
Whitehead (2006.)

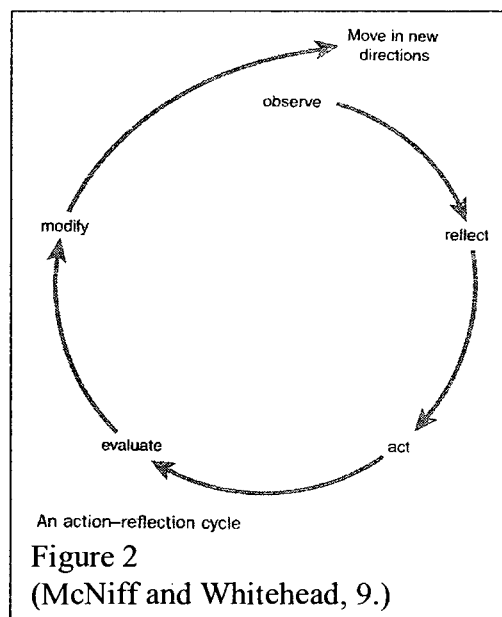


Figure 1 and 2 are visual examples of the Action Research cycle approach from All You Need To Know About Action Research by McNiff and Whitehead (2006). Figure 2 shows the cyclical approach of a single rotation, and figure 1 shows the continuation and

revision that occurs throughout action research. Based on these diagrams and descriptions, I have created my own action research cycle (Figure 3), which I feel better fits my specific project and teaching process. Within this model I have included the concepts conveyed by both Figure 1 and Figure 2. My diagram shows the action research cycle as a whole, and exchanges the term “plan” for McNiff and Whitehead’s first term of observe, replaces “observe” with evaluate, and places “reflect” after observation, at which point the cycle begins again with “modify plan,” as the new first step. This is because from my teaching experience, modifying and planning a new lesson is done in a single action.

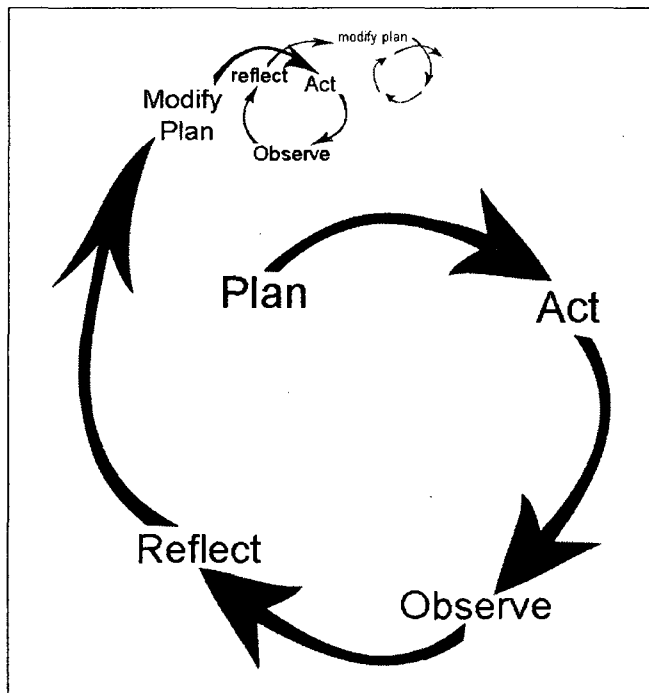


Figure 3

Adapted Action Research cycle  
based on drawings and description by  
McNiff and Whitehead.

## *Chapter 4*

### **Procedures**

I am conducting my research with five participants under the umbrella project of Crossing Cultures. There are nine participants in Crossing Cultures and three to four core instructors who work closely with participants in a medium of their choice. Therefore, involvement in this project provides me with engaged, experienced colleagues who impart their advice and provide multiple perspectives with their respective approaches. Although the research I present focuses primarily on my work with five of the participants, I also have had the opportunity to document the overarching project of Crossing Cultures as it relates strongly to the outcomes and events of my research. For example, my research and experience is largely related to teaching within the environment of an upstart community art education program, and is greatly influenced by the choices and actions of others participating within the project.

I approach the teaching and instruction in this project as a collaborator with the youth participants, and as their mentor. Together we create a series of lessons both teaching them photography (technical and artistic) and providing them with direction in their inter-generational, cross-cultural exploration. In my teaching with Crossing Cultures, I employ a transformative approach, which Miller (2007) states employs “strategies such as creative problem solving, cooperative learning, and the arts,” it also practices inclusiveness, and, Miller explains, “as long as the form of learning does not discriminate against or diminish the individual in any way, it can be included” (p. 12).

For this action research project, I began by presenting the participants and program organizers with a series of lesson headings and overarching themes to serve as a

basic guideline for developing weekly sessions/lessons. Together with the students (and in accordance with program allowances) we looked over these sessions/lessons, discuss them, and alter them as we see fit. The session structure that we began with can be broken down into three main subjects, each expanding and growing upon the last. My initial plan was for our investigation to start with a look at personal identity, followed by an exploration of family identity (inter-generational), which would lead to an inter-generational and cross-cultural exchange. However, based upon the response of the students and the instructors involved in the over-arching project, this plan has been followed to some degree and modified as well. During the first two stages of the project, participants have the opportunity to learn basic photography skills including photography as fine art (an aesthetic approach to photography), operating a digital camera, and photo editing. Participants are also taught how to make meaningful images and how to search for meaning using art. In the third aspect of the program, the youth investigate “culture” and participate in inter-cultural and intergenerational interviews. In this third aspect, participants meet one or more generations of their partner’s family and conduct interviews under the guidance of Susan, the program co-founder. Following their interviews, the youth are encouraged and guided in developing stories of those they are interviewing, as well as their own response and reaction to the story—how it fits into their life. Throughout the project the youth are given ultimate agency in their choices of what they want to photograph and work on.

My preparation begins with the development of a 10 week teaching proposal. This teaching plan is altered and revised based on student input, environmental factors (including institutions, other contributors and teachers, etc.), peer feedback, and my

reflections, following the action research “spiral” method. Lesson plans are developed each week based on the new topics being introduced as well as revisions and adjustments applied from previous observations.

### ***Example of My Action Research Cycle:***

As pictured on page 17, my action research cycle has four steps. Here is a mock example of one action research cycle and the continuation of the research spiral as it carries into the second cycle.

#### ***Cycle 1***

The first step of the process is Plan. I begin with creating the overall unit plan as well as a first individual lesson plan addressing the focus topic, in this case, “photographing the self”. This step is followed by Act, at which point the participants and I review the lesson plan, and follow it—by going out to take photos and write journal entries explaining the photos, or modifying the plan if they so wish. The third step in the cycle is Observe. The participants return the following week with the photos and notes that they have taken. We then conduct a focus group where we discuss the photos and the process as a group. I ask key questions about the experience which relate to the objectives of the lesson to aid the teens in digging deeper and developing thoughtful responses.

Participants are encouraged to think of meaningful questions to ask one another. I again ask the participants what they found successful about the process, and what they would change to make it more effective next time. During the session I record quick field notes, which I later expand upon following the completion of the lesson. In the fourth step,

Reflect, I look back to my field notes, my lesson plan, the student's work and responses, and my own feelings, and I write a personal response to the outcomes of this lesson. Key questions I might answer include: How do I feel about this lesson and the discussion?

How did the students respond, what did they say? Did they learn what I wanted them to, or thought they would? What do the students and I think about their photos? What could be improved or changed for next time? I always make certain to collect digital copies of students' photos and collect any notes on the photos written by the students. I then spend some time looking at the photos, notes from students, and the notes from myself.

Occasionally I meet with a colleague when I feel a need for an outside perspective or to bounce my thoughts off of someone. I then write a reflection, (or in some cases, the reflection is evidenced in the journal and notes), addressing themes, problems and successes which influence what will be changed (or expanded upon) next time.

## *Cycle 2*

The beginning of each cycle following the first will start with Modify Plan. This could include minor adjustments to the next lesson plan based upon the lessons learned from the previous session, or go so far as re-adjusting the entire approach of the unit, if deemed necessary. For this second lesson, the new plan I create addresses a different topic from the first. In this continued example cycle, the new topic is "family identity through photography." Again, depending on the outcome of the first cycle, this might be changed. I write the lesson and make changes to my approach following the observations from the prior lesson. Once I have completed my planning, I then Act—which includes both teaching the lesson, and in some cases refers to interactions with other elements of

the program such as the program organizers or actions taken outside teaching, such as contacting the youth via phone or email. As you can see, the cycle continues on until a goal is reached or the unit comes to its completion.

## **Data**

This thesis project has produced an abundance of data in a variety of forms. The data consists of: lesson plans, field notes (notes taken during observation), journal entries (reflections taken after observations), emails (between program organizers and myself, and myself and the youth), digital photo files of the participant's process work with any accompanying notes or journal entries, and finally, photos documenting the participant's completed photos and writings.

## *Chapter 5*

### **Narrative Description of Working with Crossing Cultures**

#### **Action Research: A Spiraling, Evolving, Multifaceted Progression.**

Jean McNiff (2003) suggests that in all action research, the researcher will succeed in improving the situation they seek to impact. In my research, I have learned that when conducting investigations within complex settings (such as cultural programs), the first steps toward improvement include: identifying the variables of the project, determining what requires change, and exploring how to make those changes. All this can be learned through a study of one's teaching. Davis (2007) explains the course of action research:

A hallmark of the process is that it may change shape over time, even unexpectedly, as participants focus and refocus their understandings about what is happening and what is important. Action researchers know, more or less, where the research is coming from, and where it is going to, but do not know precisely where it is going to end up or what the new situation will be like. (p. 9)

Davis extols action research for this very reason, stating "while some researchers may view action research as an imprecise form of inquiry, it can be argued that these qualities are precisely what are needed in order to more fully understand the realities of working with people in complex situations such as busy schools." (p. 9). Kemmis' (2001) description of action research reflects the sentiments of Davis. He describes it as being in reality a very open and responsive process, which skips between the cyclical steps as it constantly moves forwards with the researcher aware of the "sense of development and evolution in their practices" (Kemmis, p. 595). This portrayal of action research most

closely illustrates my own experience. I imagine that an accurate visualization of the evolving process of action research would look more like a complex spiraling braid of many strands that leave, combine, and return to the core braid at different times.

This experience has provided me with a landslide of information, and has given me many different stories to tell and options for where to focus my research. McNiff (2003) suggests dealing with new information gained throughout the research by continuously changing the research question to more closely address the one aspect of the researcher's own teaching that the researcher wishes to focus on. I feel that if I were to narrow my question yet again and focus on only one element of the experience, I would create a skewed and limited retelling of this living research story and all the variables which played a major part in my new understanding.

When I began working with Crossing Cultures, it was a brand new project, meaning that it required constant revisions to my approach and refocusing on new holes that developed in areas where the project was not yet established. Because of this, I've chosen to do my best to accurately and thoroughly describe my experience of what has happened, rather than rush to hasty conclusions. This description is a two-fold story. One story is of myself, an art educator learning to improve my own teaching and struggling with conceptual goals such as collaborative teaching and empowered learning. The other story is of a group of teens and their choices given the setting of a cross-cultural Saturday afternoon photography group, and a teaching relationship that allowed them choice and freedom of thought.

### **Telling My Story of Teaching Photography in Crossing Cultures.**

In this section, I paint a picture of my experience as a teacher and researcher within Crossing Cultures. Jean McNiff (2003) explains that in action research, the goal is not to create something predictable, but to “understand rather than predict, to liberate rather than control” (p. 133). She further clarifies this view of research as the sharing of experience, stating, “new forms of scholarship believe that knowledge is always being created, and exists in people and the stories they tell” (McNiff, 2003, p. 132). Action research encourages creativity and invention of new methods, while the sharing of it requires honesty and responsibility (McNiff, 2003). In this account, I seek to honestly describe key events that occurred throughout my research, knowing full well that no matter how hard I try, the story will still be selective to my experience and to what I feel is most important to share.

I approach this project firstly as a person—myself. Within this project I play the multiple roles of researcher, teacher, grad student, collaborator, colleague, mentor, friend, and many others. No relationship is static, no role absolute. In my attempt to teach and find answers, I have gathered up as many observations and artworks as I have been able to. I have recorded field notes documenting my actions, which include: the lessons I have taught, journal entries responding to lessons and events which have occurred, email correspondences, and notes taken from meetings with colleagues where we have discussed events as they occur and plans for the future. Due to the involvement of many people in the project, most of these actions can better be described as collaborative actions, initiated by myself, but also dependent on the decisions and input of many others. Throughout my research, I have continuously searched the data for connections,

as I sought to make sense of it all, and have found solutions to issues and events that I felt were counter productive to the goals of the project, or conflicted with my beliefs as an artist and art teacher. This process of “sense making” was multi-faceted and occurred within: discussions with friends and colleagues, journal writings and re-readings, organizing data, and time spent staring deeply into the youths’ images. Sometimes a sudden realization would dawn as one of the youth revealed a word or secret during in-class conversation.

McNiff (2003) explains succinctly that “people do research on themselves, not on others; they do research with others in order to understand and improve their own social practices. People offer stories of their own improved understanding as outcomes” (p. 133). It is my hope that in reading my story, others will be inspired and encouraged by a personal teaching account they can relate to, that will aid their understanding of the complex dimensions present in cross-cultural programming, community art education, and collaborative learning. Although I cannot make generalizations based on my experience, the stories told here will provide insight into programs with similar features, and this account will be of special importance to those studying or working with one or many of the conditions present in Crossing Cultures. The main features which characterize and comprise this research project include: the bringing together of different cultures and generations, specifically drawing teenagers together with older generations (parents and grandparents), the dual focus of promoting social justice and new-media art education, and bringing grassroots community programming into collaboration with a major public museum in Montreal.

### **Structuring the Description.**

In order to make the revisionary steps of the action research process more apparent, I have broken down each lesson into the categories of Plan, Act/Observe, and Reflect. A summary of events which occurred before the lesson (whether they be related to planning, reflection or otherwise) has been included together at the beginning of each week, preceding details of lesson planning and execution. In order to better situate the research and make sense of the abundance of information, I have organized my description chronologically.

Although I originally sought to focus primarily upon my own intensive photography teaching program within Crossing Cultures, I felt that it was important to also include my interactions with the program as a whole. I have several reasons for this decision. The first is that within the program I found myself playing a key organizational role, and was faced with certain unexpected outside factors (usually linked with the actions and decisions of others). I strongly believe that these factors have had a significant impact on the overall project, my goals within it, and on the youth involved.

Throughout the thesis I have used pseudonyms for all the individuals and institutions involved within the project in order to provide them with anonymity.

### **A Summary of Events Directly Before the Start of the Photo-Focus.**



*Photograph of Working on Plaster Trees, taken by Eliysha*

The program officially began in October with lessons taking place every Saturday at either the College or the Gallery. Lessons at the College were led by a variety of educators who introduced different multi-media art forms including: video, animation, digital photomontage, and digital photography. Interspersed between these lessons were visits to the Gallery, where Paul, the Gallery educator would often guide the youth around Gallery exhibitions, then lead them in art activities (which tended have a Eurocentric focus) of his choosing. A short winter break was taken at the end of December, and in January we returned and began cross-cultural interviews, where each week, two youth came with a family member and interviewed the family member of their partner. Weekly Saturday lessons continued. Paul began a new project creating family trees, Susan led two lessons on interviewing, and on weeks when nothing was planned, I would create a filler lesson with a new-media focus. All along, Hélène and I planned for the new media focus program, were the youth would participate in an in-depth investigation into video or photography, so as to become competent in their chosen media and comfortable with creating meaningful artwork. Originally, we had expected to begin with this program in October. As Crossing Cultures was planned to continue another

year, it was believed that in the second year, the youth would apply their photography and video art skills in creating final artwork for an exhibition at the gallery. The theme for their artwork would be: communicating stories from the interviews, and the teens' personal reflections on their cross-cultural experiences.

Five months into the program, H       and I were finally scheduled to begin the new media focus groups, and my photo program. I believe that one reason for why I was finally able to begin the photo focus in March was a result of my speaking up to Susan and Dave regarding mine (and H      's) concern that the project was losing momentum quickly, and that the artistic facet in particular was becoming sidetracked by unrelated sessions at the Gallery with Paul. The second reason why I believe it was allowed to begin is because of my advocating often for an opportunity to begin running the photography component of the program, and providing an overview of my plans. This photo focus was to contain my core research in the program. The process of petitioning for a start date began with occasional reminders, which later developed into requests that I be told when it might be possible to begin. The issue finally came to a head when another educator approached me at the end of our class session at the Gallery, imploring me to provide her with details about my plans. My response was mixed up, as I tried to explain that yes, I had created several plans, however they were in constant flux due to outside input and influence, and when it came down to it, I didn't know what was going on and I only hoped to put a plan into action soon. Therefore, I did not know for certain what would be happening over the next few weeks and months; I only knew what I was proposing, and what I hoped to see happen.

The goals of Susan, the co-founder of the project and the goals of H       and

myself were linked, but different. I wanted the youth to feel empowered both as art-creators and as individuals. I desired an environment where the youth could freely make their own decisions, get to know one another's cultures, and express their authentic thoughts and feelings during the project. Susan's main goal was to create an exhibition about the immigration and transitional stories of Canadians from various cultural backgrounds, as well as to facilitate multi-cultural understanding both for the youth, and for the public who would be attending the exhibit.

During one of our impromptu meetings, Susan and Dave together expressed to me their feeling that expecting the youth to become artists who could develop their personal art projects and express their individual thoughts was a lofty goal. Somewhat contradictorily, they felt all the youth needed to create art was a camera. Susan described to us what she envisioned for the youths' final artworks: a digital story telling station for each youth, which had quotes from the interviews played along with photos created by the youth that related to or represented the transition stories being told. I argued for allowing the youth to create their own art pieces where they expressed their own feelings and thoughts about the interviews and their individual experiences adapting to Canadian culture. Susan acknowledged that she respected my process, and agreed to allow me to run my program, and to conduct a focus group for my research. Dave asked me to provide him with a proposal of the dates that I needed to run the photography focus sessions. They reminded me that several key factors had to be considered, one of which was keeping close ties with the Gallery. I agreed to hold a session at the Gallery every third week, and proposed a five-week new media program where I would teach the photography group in conjunction with Hélène teaching the video group. Five sessions

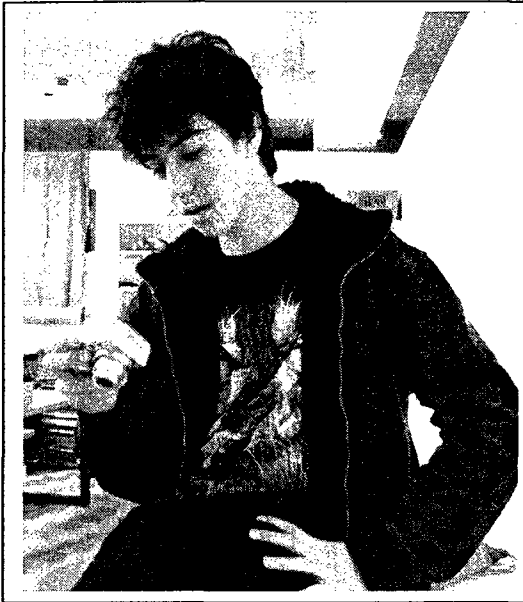
was several fewer sessions than I had originally hoped for, however I felt a strong pressure to be as quick and focused with the program as possible if I was to run it at all. I submitted my proposed plan, which ran throughout March, and it was agreed upon. Dave pointed out that it might go a little into April as well, which I was grateful for. By this point, I was the unstated lead organizer of the fine-arts component of the program.

The only art educator who operated nearly independently was Paul, who, despite our attempts at collaborative programming, consistently did his own thing. Along with the collaborative input of others, I acted as the main coordinator/organizer for new media art lessons (taking place at the College), and in the weeks leading up to my photo-focus research program. Whenever a session needed to be taught, I would be there to teach it. I am unsure whether this was assumed on the part of the organizers, since I remained very present and active throughout the project, or if it just happened that way. I realized around February that if I wanted to see something done, or felt that something had to be changed or addressed, I had to step forward, prepare myself, voice my thoughts and feelings, and finally, be willing to unashamedly take action to do what I felt was needed.

Over the period of time in which the photo and video focus took place, planning between myself, Dave, and Susan progressed smoothly and consisted mostly of me sending an email out to Dave, who would then forward it out to the youth. Planning for the weekly sessions was primarily between Hélène and myself, and occurred at coffee outings, via emails and phone calls throughout the week. In these communications we would troubleshoot, discuss events that had occurred, and trade ideas and lesson plans. The first official photo lesson occurred on February 21 at the end of one of Paul's classes. The first undivided lesson in the digital lab at the College began March 7.

## Beginning of the Photo Focus Group

### Thirteenth Week. Week 1 of Photo Intensive.



*Daniel investigating one of the new cameras. (Photo by me.)*



*Example self-portrait image taken by me; shown to youth on camera.*

## PLAN

This week took place at the Gallery with Paul as the main instructor. My lesson plan, which was to take place in the last forty-five minutes of the class, was simple, and focused primarily on handing out the cameras to the youth and instructing them in the basic functioning of their cameras. This included battery and digital card loading, how to turn the camera on, shooting without a flash, and an overview of the different settings.

## ACT / OBSERVE

This week we met at the Gallery for the second week of Paul's family tree project. At the start of the session, two of the youth left with Susan to conduct cross-cultural interviews

with grandparents. Later, I was going to distribute the digital cameras (brought by Dave). I asked Paul if it was okay for me to hand out and introduce the cameras in the last hour of class; he said that would be fine. I told him I would remind him later. Paul handed out supplies to the youth, however he provided the briefest of instruction, and the youth expressed frustration as they struggled with the project.

After an hour, Dave took out the cameras to show me; there were eight cameras and seven SD cards. Daniel immediately noticed the cameras and walked over to watch as I set up one camera. Daniel asked to look at it, and so I give it to him to test out. He played with the camera, snapping a few pictures (some of me) and said, "It takes good pictures." Daniel and I discussed what a 7.1 Mega Pixel camera means versus a 3 Mega Pixel camera, which progressed into an excited conversation about the costs of digital cameras, and how the prices have changed. This was one of the most lively discussions I've had with Daniel, who had previously seemed largely disinterested or sarcastic during activities. When I first met Daniel, he would slouch into the room wearing baggy jeans and a bulky coat with the hood always up, overshadowing his face. In order to meet my eyes, he would have to peer up at me from beneath it. He would shift uncomfortably under my direct address and would respond to my every question or comment with either a sarcastic/joking, perplexed or disinterested remark. Today, discussing cameras, both of us seemed to be very "into" the conversation. Instead of me approaching him, Daniel had come to me with questions, and was eager to learn more. After ten minutes or so, I asked him for the camera back so that he would resume working on Paul's project, and I told him I would be giving the cameras out in the last 20 minutes of the session. Daniel handed the camera back very slowly, and hesitantly stood up and slowly walked back to

the project table where he drudgishly attempted to assemble his tree. Susan and Dave then suggested that someone should take pictures of the families being interviewed that day, and asked Daniel if he would do it. Dave called Daniel the “documentary photographer” for the project, then provided him with Susan’s camera and showed him where to go. I returned to working on the trees with the youth.

In the last 40 minutes of the lesson I announced that soon I would be handing out cameras. All the youth cleaned up rapidly and hurried over when asked. As H  l  ne was not present to instruct the video group, I gave the same photography instruction and assignment to both groups. I began handing out the new cameras, still in the packaging, to all the youth and showed them how to insert the batteries, the wrist strap, and the memory card. Once everyone had figured out how, I showed them where the on/off button was and I explained the basic settings. Next, I demonstrated how to pre-adjust for focus by depressing the shutter button half way down before taking a picture. This way, the camera is ready to catch the decisive moment. I showed them how to turn the flash off, and encouraged everyone to use found light instead of a flash, whenever possible. Flashes went off at random; I turned to see a camera in my face and another flash going off a few steps away.

The youth were very excited about their cameras, and were preoccupied with testing them out after these initial instructions. I called for their attention, and all eyes (except Eliysha's) were back on me, as I made one last effort to demonstrate how to use the manual setting to add and subtract light, and (upon Dave's request) how to *not* format the card. I could see them watching, but they didn't look like they were paying attention, and some of their eyes were wandering back to playing with the different settings on their

cameras. Sophia, who is never afraid to speak her thoughts aloud, asked if they would get to keep their cameras, with a hopeful, mischievous smile. I told her that was up to Dave, but that I didn't think they would be keeping them. Dave then hesitated slightly, and stepped in to announce that all the participants would be allowed to keep their cameras after the project's completion. Several of the youth reacted excitedly, while a few looked only mildly pleased by the announcement, which came as a surprise to me. I decided that I'd done enough for now, as we had run out of time, and everyone was too busy playing with their new cameras to follow further instructions on how to use them. I thought to myself that the teens could probably figure out other camera features, as they need them, through experimentation.

Before they left, I launched into one last instruction, and asked the youth to take pictures of the world around them over the next two weeks (since the next week would take place at the Gallery, where they would continue working on trees). This way, we could all upload and work on the pictures for the first photography lesson at the College. I also asked everyone to create and take two self-portraits that they *like* and are willing to share. One self-portrait should be a picture they take themselves, another could be a picture someone else takes of them. I knew from the photography introduction class last session that some of the youth (both the girls and the guys) weren't comfortable with being photographed, and so I encouraged everyone to be creative in their approach. A self-portrait, I explained, didn't have to be a literal photo of them. It could be anything that represented who they are—like a meaningful object, their bedroom, their reflection, or even a shadow. It could be whatever feels like a self-portrait. Some of the youth looked a bit confused, so I quickly grabbed my purse, pulled out my camera and brought

up a recent self-portrait I had taken of my reflection in a window, with the city of Montreal below. I had taken this picture a few days prior, and was very happy with it, as it created an optical illusion of trees and buildings blending into each other and had a sheer image of me with my camera in the center. I passed my camera around and all the youth looked. “Neat.” “Cool.” “How did you do that?” I explained to them, and saw many nods of greater understanding about my request for a self-portrait. They were now shifting on their feet, glancing at the clock (it was five past four), and picking up their stuff. I reminded them quickly to take lots of pictures, and keep their cameras with them! Everyone took off, and with waves and thanks for the cameras, were out the door.

## **REFLECT**

*By the end of the session, most of the youth (and adults) still had not completed the plaster portion of the tree, despite my waiting an extra half hour to hand out the cameras. I realized that I should have provided more time for going over the directions of how to use the camera, and perhaps (ideally) had an entire session with their cameras where I could give them a “check list” of techniques to try, or a photo scavenger hunt requiring different settings to be used to achieve the techniques on the list. I was a little surprised that most of the youth seemed to know nothing about operating a digital camera, and that some were even having trouble turning their camera on. The cameras use AA batteries, which I immediately thought would be a problem, as the batteries would be used up very quickly. As the last bit of instruction was rushed, (and they were distracted), I wrote out and emailed the youth their “assignment” of taking pictures of anything they want. After class, Susan immediately asked me if I should have them taking pictures of cultural*

*objects instead. I explained to her that my plan with this project was to let the youth explore their life and the culture they live in freely, so that I could see what skill level they were at, and so that there would be images to critique and analyze in the future. With this assignment, I also hoped to get the youth started using their cameras (and excited about their cameras); I was also interested in seeing what subject matter the youth were interested in photographing. In a way, I thought it would help me to get to know everyone, and as they shared their images, they would also get to know each other. I felt that this also was a “friendly” introduction to the camera. I explained this to Susan and she accepted my reasoning.*

Fourteenth Week. (No Photo-Intensive.)

Since H  l  ne was out of town, her and I communicated primarily via email this week. She asked me how Saturday's lesson went, and what I was thinking about for the upcoming new media focus – and if I could send her any photography plans so that she could synchronize her video lessons to mine. She also apologized for her sudden disappearance to Toronto, and asked me to let her know if it had caused me stress. I replied, confessing, "Yeah, that is the case, a bit." I told her that I did a basic introduction this past Saturday, but that the video group would need further instruction. The Saturday after next, I told her, we would have the youth all to ourselves at the College. I added that I looked forward to her return, as I wanted to confirm plans with her to prepare for the photo and video focus. "The idea is," I wrote, "they'll have been at home gathering footage and imagery for the previous two weeks (this week and next), that can be worked on and discussed in March."

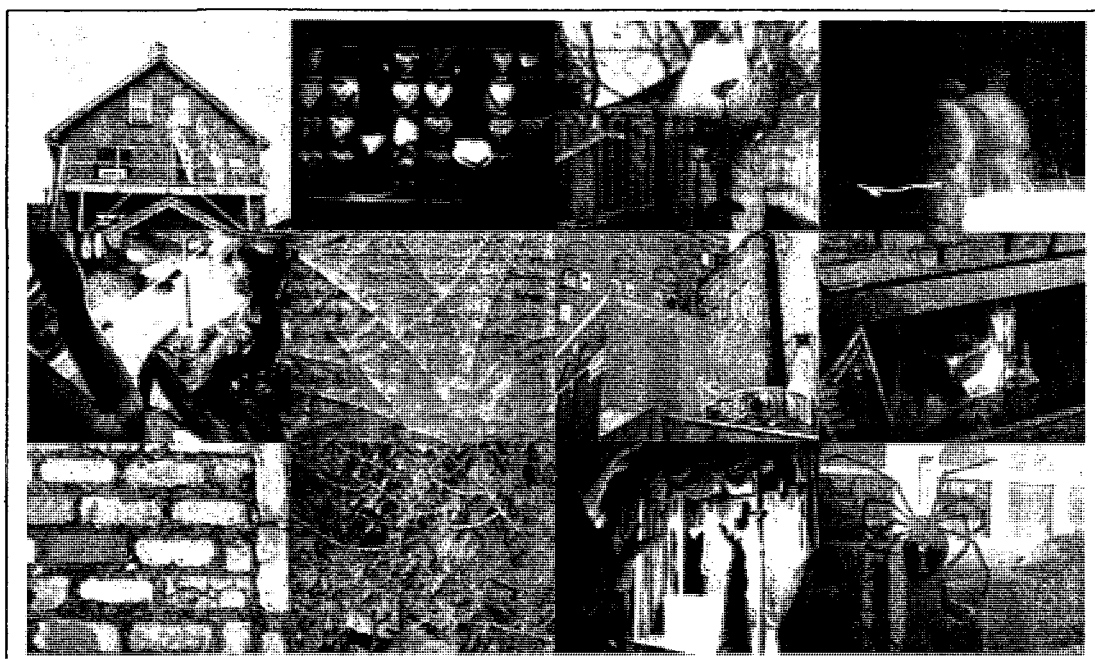
Hélène's next email came with an apology for "any undeserved stress," and she explained that she was going to stay in Toronto the coming Saturday for a family affair. If Paul was still teaching the tree project, she felt that this would be the best time for her to be away. She added that she would email the video group with instructions on what they were to do this week, so that they would know that she was not going to disappear, and asked if I was comfortable with this. My response was, "I'm not sure yet." I told her I was about to catch a bus for a quick out of town trip, where I wouldn't have email access, and would be back for Saturday's session.

At this point, I was still feeling rather overcome with school demands and stress

from the negotiations regarding the beginning of the photo/video project, and I was feeling a lot of responsibility to be present at all meetings and the weekly sessions to ensure that everything was organized and running smoothly. As H  l  ne was away, I felt more obliged to attend, as we had always tried to ensure that one of us was present at Saturday sessions.

Dave send out an email mid-week reminding everyone that we would be meeting again at the Gallery to work on the trees, and that all the various consent forms needed to be signed. He also included a reminder to the youth that by now they should have started taking pictures, as their photos “will play a major role in the exhibit.” On Friday night, I had a plumbing emergency at my home, which added to my stress and workload. This was just the excuse I needed to feel justified in calling in my absence and taking a day off. On Saturday, neither H       nor I attended the session working on trees at the Gallery. My recent observation that the youth seemed distant from the teachers who didn’t show up regularly weighed on my mind.

**Fifteenth Week. Week 2 of Photo Intensive.**



*A compilation of my own images taken while out of town and on break.*

My mini-visit out of town, together with the two-week gap between my attendance at Crossing Cultures sessions, allowed me a little distance to process the events up to now, and to enjoy a desperately needed break. The clearer thinking that followed (as well as my cheerier and friendlier disposition) could be seen in the email that I sent H  l  ne. In it, I suggested that we meet up during the week to review and further our planning. I also told her that the cabin I was staying at lacked Internet access, which I felt “was sort of shockingly comforting. It made an immediate environment of homely relaxed-ness.”

Over the last few months, I had been enmeshed in constant emails between H  l  ne, myself, Dave, and other Crossing Cultures collaborators, in addition to emails from projects that I was involved in throughout the week. It was beginning to feel as though I could not have rest anywhere, not even in my own home. Every project seemed

to be active at all hours of the day, and always require a swift response, and the organization of yet another plan and email to be sent out several days in advance of each Saturday session.

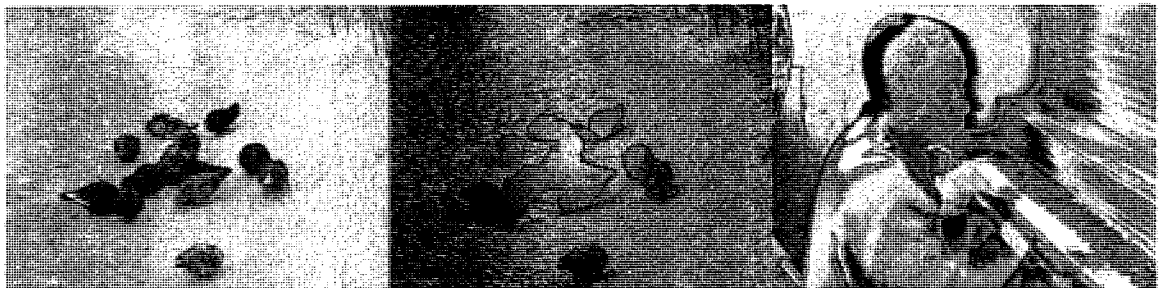
Hélène's response confirmed that being away from the Internet was "a perfect antidote for hectic schedules." She stated that she would spend the next few days creating a solid plan, and would be back in Montreal on Tuesday. We planned to meet on Wednesday, but between our schedules we didn't manage to meet until Friday afternoon. This was for the best, as I still had planning to do as well. I also emailed Dave with a request regarding five missing USB cords for the cameras, as well as for two more cameras which he was still waiting to receive from his distributor. I told him that I wanted to be sure that we had cameras for all the kids.

During the week, I experienced synchronicity, as events in my daily life paralleled my experience in Crossing Cultures, and revealed my hidden feelings. I decided that those who are not actively involved in the daily actions of others who were seeking to do good, should in fact have faith in those people. I was reminded that I didn't know all the background behind what was going on with the youth, or with Susan, Dave or Paul. Therefore, I should do my best during this collaboration to constantly recognize that they have good plans, intentions and goals. I also needed to clearly communicate my thoughts and needs, and have faith in others, just as I want them to have faith in me. This "A-ha!" moment also brought to light for me how frustrating it has been to be the one consistently and actively teaching within a difficult setting, while others who were not present doubted my efforts, or simply did not recognize the extent of my contribution, and the multifaceted circumstances present.

March 7<sup>th</sup> - Introducing Photo Editing, Beginning to Advanced.



*Three of Daniel's photos from the "8 best" he selected for printing. The final image was edited in class.<sup>2</sup>*



*Photos from Eliysha's "10 best," two of them have been edited in class.<sup>3</sup>*



*Selection of images from Sophia's "10 best." The first image was edited in class.*



*Images chosen by Tami for her "best 10." The fourth image was edited in class.*

<sup>2</sup> Note. This image is reproduce in Hart, L. (in press.) "To be, know, and see: Investigating identity, cross-cultural interactions and photography in community art education," 2009, Canadian Art Teacher.

## **PLAN**

An email was sent out to the youth mid-week reminding them to take 20 pictures of the world around them, documenting their life, and one self portrait.

The lesson plan for this week was to begin with me reminding the youth of my research component in the project, and asking their permission to tape record and take notes of the discussion. Next, we would split into the two groups and the photo group would meet in a circle, where we would do re-introductions, since some of the youth still didn't know the others' names. Following that, there would be an open discussion about their experience taking pictures. I would provide question prompts: "What did you like? What did you find difficult? And did you experiment?" After we discussed "Why did you choose to take the pictures that you took?" I planned to share a quote presented by Wendy Ewald (2000), where student Palesa Moholoe describes her motivation for taking pictures—to help her remember good things from the past. Following our discussion time, the group would then move into the computer lab, where they would be asked to choose (and save) their 10 favorite pictures. Next, I planned to show them how to edit a photograph in Photoshop. Students would then have time to edit 5-10 of their chosen images, to be printed out for review next class. At the end of the class, I would share my proposal for next week's assignment, and together we decide what to do. I would then encourage the youth to keep a written journal to accompany the photos they take.

## **OBSERVE / ACT**

I did an audio recording of this first lesson, to ensure that I had a detailed and accurate account of it, since I was quite excited and a little nervous, as is usually the case when I

begin teaching a new project.

Today's session began with the photo and video groups meeting together at the College. This was (in essence) the very first photo focus class. When the clock struck 1pm, I looked around and realized that of the photo group, only Sophia was present, whereas nearly all of the video group had arrived on time. We were meeting in the basement of the College, where the photo department's computer labs and studios were located. The weather outside was icy and cold, and despite my excitement, even I found it difficult to get out of bed and brave the frozen air and slow-running Saturday transit. Daniel showed up about twenty minutes into the lesson, and so for the first half of the lesson, (together with the video group), we casually discussed which of their photos told a story and which images they liked the best. I was feeling rather disheartened at the turn out, and quietly went about individually helping anyone who needed help. Despite feeling discouraged, I tried to positively focus on the youth who were there. There was a lot of friendly banter, small talk, and lots of laughter from everyone.

We split into the two focus groups about twenty-five minutes into the lesson. So far, our photo group consisted of Sophia, Daniel and myself. (Tami and Eliysha arrived later, while Erica never arrived.) Daniel, Sophia and I shared favorite photos and their meanings, and searched to understand what each of their emerging photographic preferences were. We also did some technical troubleshooting with their cameras, and thought about what made some photos "artistic" and others simply snapshots. Sophia noticed that when her sister had pushed her, she had accidentally blurred an image and very much liked the resulting effect. To her, this was artistic. Daniel, camera in hand, flipped through the images to what he called his craziest photo – a picture of himself

reflected in a “dirty mud puddle” in washed out tones of pastels and grays. It was one of his favorite photos, and also, one that he criticized as being “crazy” and “a dirty old mud puddle!” Most of Daniel’s photos were of objects including signs, places, and things that he saw walking along the street on his way home. He mentioned that he liked to take pictures of people, but only at events, because otherwise he found it too awkward. I suggested he try asking a close friend or family member if they would agree to a photo shoot, since if he had their agreement beforehand, he might feel more comfortable photographing them. He agreed that might work.

Sophia shared that what she liked best about photography was how it aided her memory, and brought up an example involving her aunt who had passed away the year before. Up until this point, Sophia had often been teased by some of the older youth, as some of the things she said tended to sound like grandiose made-up stories. Daniel was one of the main youth who teased her. In my introduction to this discussion, I talked about the importance of respecting one another and giving each other the benefit of the doubt, even if we don’t understand what it is someone is trying to say. This way, I explained, we all would have freedom to express ourselves in our small group. Daniel did not interrupt Sophia as she told her story, but he looked skeptical.

Given time to clarify, it became apparent that Sophia was not lying about her aunt’s death on “February or May; yesterday...tomorrow,” but that she was struggling to explain that her aunt had passed away a year ago, and she didn’t remember the date, although she knew that the anniversary of her aunt’s passing was “tomorrow.” She then explained how she had wished she was able to show a picture of her younger brother to her aunt before she passed away. This experience seemed to change the way we were to

listen to Sophia in the future. When we first began our lesson, Hélène could not get Daniel to answer any questions about his photography seriously. In this small, group-sharing atmosphere, Daniel was willing to speak his thoughts, and dig deeper when I asked new questions based on what he had said. By the end of the discussion, Daniel seemed to think of his photos much more seriously and in a different way than when we first began. The photos Daniel took about “his world around him” were of the street and the path that he walked daily. Other photos were taken in the metro, of architectural details, street musicians, and a teacher from his school holding a student in a headlock. The photos taken by Sophia were predominantly of her family and of objects in her room, many of which had cultural and religious connections.

Tami and Eliysha arrived half an hour into the lesson, and missed the introduction and discussion. Tami passed by me with a quick embarrassed sounding “sorry”, and swiftly sat down next to Daniel. Daniel asked her, “What happened?” Tami whispered back, “I slept in,” and proceeded to catch up to what the others were doing, flicking her computer on. Eliysha, on the other hand, was still debating whether to join the photo or video group, and was walking all around the computer lab. I told her that Sophia was in the photo group, and with Sophia’s pleading, “Please please please please!” she decided to stay. Then, she got up, said she changed her mind, and left to join the video group. A minute later she returned and said she wanted to join the photo group, and that was her final decision. The girls arrived just as we began the introductory lesson of how to edit photographs in Photoshop. Each of the youth sat at his or her own computer, and I sat at the central computer that was connected to a data projector which displayed everything happening on my computer screen on the white wall at the front of the class. I

demonstrated editing techniques such as curves and color adjusting while the youth followed along, making edits to their own photos. Each teen chose which of their photos they wanted to edit, and in the end, most edited approximately three out of their ten images, making extreme, colorful adjustments. While they edited, I darted from computer to computer, assisting youth individually in achieving the effects they wanted. Originally, the goal had been to edit five to ten images, which I think might have been possible if the youth had all arrived on time. Daniel edited his self-portrait puddle-reflection extensively. Sophia edited several of her photos, and Tami edited images of her grandma's old black and white photos, which she had photographed herself. Eliysha also made extreme edits, and seemed more frustrated with the process than others did. I asked each of the youth to make a file with their ten favorite pictures. These were saved one by one to my memory key, to be printed for the next week.

At the closing of the lesson, I requested permission from the late arrivals to turn on my audio recorder once again, which they agreed to without hesitation. I suggested that we collaboratively choose the next approach to take, and explained that this meant they would get to choose what they wanted to do, and what they thought was a good idea. I told them that I had prepared a variety of photography approaches/projects that they could choose to experiment with over the next week. For example, I proposed they create a series of pictures on a theme of their choice. Daniel's photos made a good example of a series demonstrating his daily path or the walk he took home. It would make sense, I added, if their series was about their family or their culture, and concluded that if they weren't interested in following a theme, they could continue to take pictures following their instinct. Tami stated that she'd prefer to follow her instinct, "but yeah,"

(which I took as meaning she would consider investigating the suggested themes, and saw the value they might hold). During this discussion, (in the last twenty minutes of session), the video group had come into our area chatting loudly and trying to get attention from members of the photo group. I told the photo group that I would send the list of themes in an email, as they might help everyone with getting used to shooting pictures for a purpose, since they're actually going to be telling stories with the pictures they take. Tami said "K" enthusiastically. Throughout our discussion, Tami appeared continually engaged and eager. I told the group that today we ran out of time for me to explain my proposal for next week's class, and asked again that they try to be on time next week so that we have time to cover everything. I said in a serious and concerned tone: "It's good not to have some people waiting for other people [...] I know sometimes things come up though." I told them that next week we might talk more about what it is we want to do, and that in the mean time, they could read through the list in their email and choose what to do with it. Tami answered, "Okay, sounds good." I smiled and told Tami that I liked her responsiveness a lot, and she laughed.

## **REFLECT**

*I was disappointed that in this first class of the photo focus, the students showed up so late, and missed the introduction. This really threw off my plans for the class, and made it so that everyone was not in the same place conceptually and technically from the beginning. (Erica, for example, didn't show up today at all.) I felt both let down by the youth, and frustrated with myself as a teacher, as I felt responsible for somehow not appealing to them enough.*

*As soon as the youth left, Hélène and I glanced at each other, and I said with a sigh “coffee?” She agreed fully. This was to become our weekly ritual where we shared about our lives, reflected on our feelings and on the program, compared our thoughts, and created a revised approach for the next week’s lesson. We both revealed to each other our sense that things didn’t quite feel right, that something, a spark of energy and excitement, was missing during the session. We felt that the youth weren’t quite “with” us. I mentioned that the youth not showing up on time really threw off my plan. Together we recognized their tardiness exemplified a bigger problem—a lack of commitment and care for the class, and for each other. Together, we came to recognize that the youth were not yet bonded to the group, and that we needed to work on developing more of a community, so as to foster mutual accountability, encouragement and enjoyment throughout the project. This also linked to the overall theme of the project—for the youth to learn about each other and break down the wall of difference and lack of understanding that may separate people from different cultures.*

*I suggested that we needed something exciting to catch the teens’ attention and break the pattern (and overall stagnant feeling) that had developed in the program so far. Hélène agreed that we needed something “big.” I wanted something that would stretch their comfort zone just enough for them to adapt and try something new, but not so far that they would feel uneasy. We ended up calling this our kick-start. Next session, we would shake things up a bit, get out of the basement to “surprise them,” and try to set a new pace for our portion of the project. Of course, we also wanted to teach them a new skill. This next week’s focus would be on telling stories and getting the teens to think more about the meaning of their photos by integrating text. We also began planning for*

*the week following next, and agreed to begin a weekly critiquing process, where the youth from both the photo and video groups would come together to share their creations. We wrote guiding principles, including respect, openness, acceptance, and encouragement, so that the youth would have a “safe place” to share. I made a note to myself to be more encouraging in the next lesson, as I felt this week’s lesson was too serious and focused on the negative aspect of the youth not arriving on time.*

Sixteenth Week. Week Three of Photo Intensive.



*Group Project "Images with Text" by Tami, Erica, and Sophia.*

**Revised PLAN**

Hélène and I developed a revised plan for this week which addressed three goals: getting the youth to arrive on time, developing a sense of community and friendship among the teens, and changing the pace of the program to make it more exciting. The plan involved organizing a field trip, and after very short introductions, we would leave right away, so as to encourage everyone to arrive on time. (The youth would be warned of this in advance.) We wanted to have a destination goal to motivate the teens to have an excited

pace, and give us something interesting, warm, and worthwhile at the end of the trip. We also intended to create a project that required the youth to work together in the conceptualization and creation of a final collaborative artwork.

Hélène and I each prepared a short (5-10 minute) inspirational introduction for what we wanted the youth to focus on. The theme of these lessons was integrating text into images, and telling a story (in our respective media). The artists represented in my presentation included Cindy Sherman, Barbara Kruger, and once again, Wendy Ewald's collaborative works with children. I also wanted the youth to interact with the environment they were photographing, and had sharpie markers and white papers if they wanted to make signs or statements to place in the environment. The youth were to create stories or plan their group approach ahead of time. We would walk around downtown and visit a nearby art gallery. When we arrived back at the College, the youth would then compile their stories and text together in Photoshop. We reminded the youth that the following week we would begin critiques, and their work would be displayed for all to see. We hoped that this might encourage them to create good quality work.

### **ACT / OBSERVE**

Hélène began the lesson with a creative, guided discussion about metaphor. She caught the youths' attention by throwing a paper airplane over their heads and discussing what sort of metaphor it represented. I showed a PowerPoint presentation with examples of art that integrates text into imagery, as well as single photographic images that tell a story. I then discussed the concepts, images and artists represented, taking care to ask questions regarding the youths' prior knowledge and their response to the images shown. The

images by Wendy Ewald depicted kids utilizing the simple theme of “alphabet” to tell about themselves. In one image, the letter “h” was written with “hola” on a waving hand. Following Ewald’s examples, I suggested the youth could draw on photos after printing them. Alternatively, they could add text within the image by writing something and taking a picture of it, or they can add the text afterwards, for example, in Photoshop.

Everyone arrived on time today, although two of the photo group, (Eliysa and Daniel), were absent for legitimate reasons. Dave mentioned to me that Daniel’s mom contacted him to say Daniel was worried that he might miss something or get behind. This made me feel a little bit better, knowing that at least he wanted to be there and recognized the value of the lessons. Unfortunately, he would still be missing out on today’s adventure and instruction.

I asked everyone if they wanted to travel as one big group, or in their two focus groups. The youth decided to go into their focus groups – which also separated them into boys (video) and girls (photo). The girls present in the photo group today were Tami, Sophia and Erica. Before we left on our trip, I sat in a small circle with the girls and encouraged them to plan ahead together to think of ideas, and decide on what sort of story they wanted, or how they would integrate their text. They all sat silently looking at me, and so I continued on to suggest that they could just go outside and see what happens. Tami and Erica became suddenly animated and agreed enthusiastically with this active, spontaneous plan. I wanted to decide some of the details ahead of time, but as it was a collaborative venture, I conceded. I was torn between thinking that I should push the teens to experiment with the concepts (and provide fewer options), and thinking that perhaps it is best that I follow the youth’s instincts and what they feel comfortable with

and excited about doing, as much as possible. Outside, I asked the girls again if they had any ideas for themes or an approach. Erica responded with a suggestion that they each take pictures that represent themselves; Tami and Sophia agreed. Tami suggested they could put them together later with text in Photoshop, and it was settled. On the outing, the group was rather quiet and walked for five minutes without taking pictures. They would slow and almost stop when I would encourage them to take pictures. When I was helping Sophia with something, Erica and Tami took off down an alley. When they were by themselves, they quickly started posing. I was surprised to see this, as Tami doesn't usually like having her picture taken, and Erica can be very shy about being photographed. The girls seemed to trust each other with the camera. Maybe this was following from their previous work together in the studio during the photography introduction last winter, as I recall Tami responded well to Erica taking her photo, but complained and hid from Daniel taking her photo.

Allowing the girls to choose their own path seemingly had the result of empowering them to decide to take portraits of themselves. Freedom of choice led to their daring. I also observed that practicing wait time (waiting a minute or two for the youth to process information about their surroundings) was very important. As we walked, few pictures were taken. When we stopped for a few minutes the girls had a chance to look closely at their surroundings, and spot the hidden things, like the alley. Both groups met together at the art gallery. Exploring the gallery with the youth was a nice experience. The youth asked questions about the art, how art shows are arranged, and about the show they would be putting on at the end of Crossing Cultures. As we left the gallery, I asked the teens if they were interested in visiting the nearby studio that I

worked in, to which they agreed. While we were there, I set out a bunch of my printed photos, and photo-installation art projects for them to look at. Several of the youth rushed over to investigate my largest print. One youth asked about my concept behind assembling the different images and how I printed it. I gladly answered questions, while Sophia peered at a sculptural art piece of mine entitled “memory door,” an old glass paned door with transparent digitally manipulated photographs mounted on the glass. I was surprised to discover how interested the youth were in my art. They swarmed around the pieces, with questions about editing techniques, camera types and more.

We walked quickly back to the College and sat down to forty-five minutes of assembling the photos. I was delighted to see how quickly the girls settled down to create a collaborative, unified series, while maintaining their freedom of individual expression. They each chose a different font to work with, but decided to choose four to five images and wrote one-word or short sentence elaborations. The girls thought carefully about what text to include on their image. Erica asked if she could write a single word, to which I responded yes, she was free to do whatever she liked. The words she chose were powerful and clear. Sophia thought up creative phrases expressing the thoughts going through her mind as she snapped the pictures. Tami’s phrases were poetic, and she was especially happy with a self-portrait called “caught in the wind”, and an image of a magazine surrounded by debris she titled “beauty exposed.” As Erica was away the week before last, I asked her to choose 10 favorite photos (so far) to be printed for next week.

## REFLECT

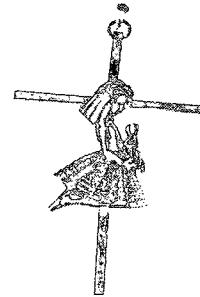
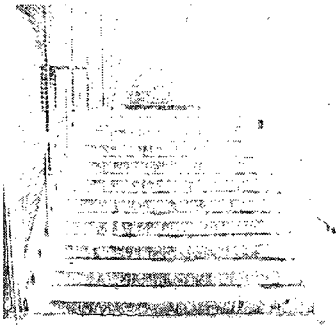
*Almost all of the youth showed up on time today. Dave's mention of Daniel's concern about missing a lesson made me feel better about lightly reprimanding the youth for arriving late last Saturday, and lecturing them about the importance of not missing lessons. Our trip out today worked well, and set a much more active and fast pace for the groups. Many of the youth hadn't taken pictures over the previous week, and were happy to have an opportunity to do so.*

*Adding words to describe the photos proved to be very thought provoking for the youth. A picture may say a thousand words, but sometimes, less is more and brevity is key. Deciding on what text to include helped each of the teens to clarify their vision, and to think about why they took the picture and what it meant to them. I also learned a lesson about trusting the instinct of the youth, and finding the right moment to encourage them to vocalize their thoughts to each other. It takes a lot of effort for me to put my plan on hold and allow the youth to make the final decision in what they are doing. I'm still not quite sure how to do this effectively, but I guess practice makes perfect. I felt really good about granting them this freedom, while I took on the role of mentor, offering suggestions that they might take or ignore, as they needed. The final projects created by the girls were nothing like I originally envisioned, but the girls had put a lot of thought into completing them, seemed attached to their final images, and treated the end products as their own. I felt it to be of utmost importance that the artworks truly belong to the youth and that the teens feel happy and free in creating.*

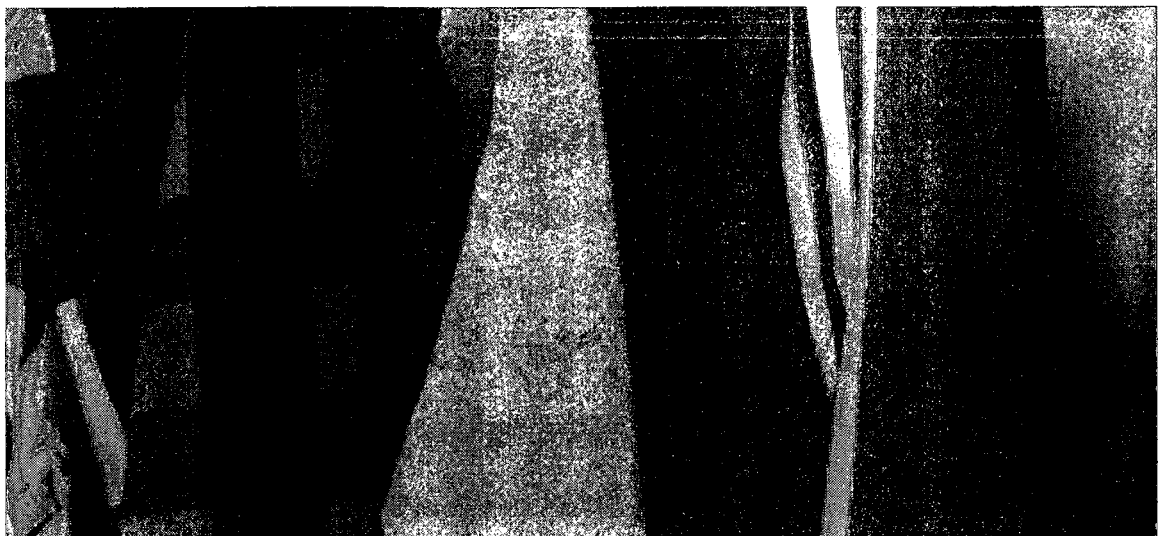
*In my March 14<sup>th</sup> journal, I recorded a few key observations from today and from the last few days. I observed that the youth were at times categorized by the program and*

*by the educators as being representative of their culture, rather than their individual selves. I noted how this Saturday, the girls had created an artwork both as individuals and as a collective, and chose to abandon almost all the guidelines I had provided them. In the journal, I also made a note of my resurfacing anxious feelings regarding a discussion with Susan that took place the week prior. After class, Susan questioned me as to what the purpose of the lesson was. I recalled feeling pressured for the finished final project on what was (to me), our first day of class.*

Seventeenth Week. Week Four of Photo Intensive.



*Daniel's edited image of "stairs," Sophia's edit of an image taken previously.*



*One of Erica's newly uploaded and edited photos.*

## PLAN

The main focus for this week was to build upon the community environment from last week and to establish characteristics of artistic discussion and development. Through critique, I hoped to both encourage the youth, and provide them with a platform for analyzing their work and learning from each others' ideas. The youth were each to lay out their photos in a configuration of their choosing, and would then discuss each other's work using the word prompts written on the board. I hoped to focus the discussion on

composition, and to show a PowerPoint from the girls' photo series created last week. After this, I would then upload the past weeks' photos onto their computers and would have one hour for arranging and editing a series of pictures to print for the following week. At the end of the class, we would discuss as a group their assignment for the next week. I would propose a photographic exploration of their own family and culture, and would encourage them to create a set of questions to ask two or three of their family members, and then, to ask themselves, "how can an image tell this story?"

### **ACT / OBSERVE**

Half an hour before the lesson, I rushed to the College to pick up an invoice that Dave had left for me, and then rushed to pick up the photos that he had developed at a local drugstore. I arrived back at the College with just enough time for Hélène and I to decide on some key words for the youth to use during the critique. I added that everyone should give one encouraging statement and one suggestion. Hélène had also created two lists of excellent descriptive words, and we decided to use her lists, projected on the screen above, instead of mine.

This week Erica and Eliysha were on time, Daniel was twenty minutes late, and Tami and Sophia arrived early. On the downside, no one came with any new pictures. Just after one o'clock, I audibly complained that Daniel was running late again, and Daniel's friend who was in the video group burst out laughing. I was surprised, and asked him twice why he was laughing. He finally said in a quieter voice that it was funny that I was concerned about Daniel being 10 minutes late, when the rest of the week Daniel would often skip school all together, and on some occasions would show up for

the last half hour of his art class, when art was the last block of the day. I now realized that by Daniel's standards, he was consistently on time.

At 1:10pm, I placed all the photos out on the table, and asked the youth to arrange their photos. For some reason, Tami's photos were not present, and Eliysha was missing a picture or two. Eliysha's missing photos were the ones she was most proud of. Also, the photos developed at the drugstore looked quite different than they did on the computer. The colors were overly dull and washed out.

First, we asked everyone to comment on a photo from any student's arrangement. However, this was a bit disorganized and no one wanted to go first. I made a quick adjustment, and suggested that we focus on one person at a time, and each look at their photos and pick up one that they feel most drawn too. I asked if someone would go first. Eliysha volunteered, and all the other youth selected a photo from her arrangement that they liked best. Each teen then took a moment to study their chosen image, and one at a time, looked up to the projected screen and used the guiding words to comment on one aspect of the photo that they liked. This proceeded slowly, the youth hesitating and pausing as they read over the list of words, looking for one that fit their own thoughts and that they felt comfortable speaking. I sensed that the critique was progressing along well enough, but a natural discussion and comfort level was never really found. Each of the youth received and gave a few good comments. Despite the fact that several of the youth were absent, the process took about half an hour, which I felt was too long. The youth were allowed to take their photos home so that they could spend some time with the images, contemplate them, and possibly develop an attachment to them.

Next, I led a discussion with the youth following a PowerPoint presentation about

“pictures that show emotion.” I asked the youth to carefully describe an emotion portrayed within each photo, and explain how the image made it feel that way. At first, the emotions portrayed were obvious and the reasons easy decipher, but they became progressively more complex. For example, one “easy” picture depicted a bunch of flowers the youth described as happy, because they were bright warm colors: red, yellow and orange. Another photo of a smiling girl in a busy orange room brought about more creative responses. “She’s happy, no, she’s happy-crazy. She’s wild and excited about something new.” This was fun, and the youth were very responsive and creative. Everyone was then given the remaining two hours to work extensively on editing and saving their photos. This was important as editing takes a lot of time, patience and practice. Sophia edited a few pictures whereas Daniel set about editing his second photo to date. He started by editing the image naturalistically, and then progressed to making the same extreme adjustments that he did to his photo last week. Before committing to the extreme edits, he asked me if that was okay to do that. I asked Daniel what he thought, and explained the advantages and disadvantages I saw with both choices. Lastly, I said that it was his art, so he should decide.

None of the youth made use of the suggested photographic themes and approaches I had provided them with two weeks ago, and most of them didn’t bring any new pictures at all. Sophia said her batteries died, Daniel forgot his camera, and Erica said she just didn’t take any. (Later she uploaded some images that she had taken during the week of around her home.) Mid-week, Dave suggested that the email I sent last week was too long. Also, I remembered that I hadn’t really gone over the different themes and their meanings. Before the lesson I had revised the list of suggestions, and recommended

to the youth again that they consider using some of the themes/guidelines to expand and improve their photography. This time, I had the ideas displayed on the screen via the overhead projector so that the youth could read through the list and ask questions as I explained each approach. In the conversation that followed, they each seemed to find one of the suggestions that interested them. One of the most popular photographic approaches was following the 10 golden rules of lomography, which presented a series of ideas like: “try the shot from the hip,” “don’t think,” and “take your camera everywhere you go” (source: <http://www.lomography.com/about/the-ten-golden-rules>.) This approach was accompanied by a fast-paced YouTube video illuminating the rules of lomography.

## **REFLECT**

*When I arrived home, I tried to figure out some reasons why I thought the youth hadn’t taken any new pictures. I came up with these theories:*

*1.) The teens only have 6 days to work between sessions. With school deadlines, involvement in other extracurricular programs and more, it’s asking them to produce too fast, or maybe they just don’t have time for non-school “homework.” 2.) Their not having pictures is a fluke – some of the youth said they forgot their cameras at home, others said they ran out of batteries. 3.) They are separating the “Saturday” activities from the rest of the week’s activities. Since we took photos on an outing last Saturday, the youth didn’t feel a need to take photos this week. 4.) They’re not feeling personally attached to photography. Can I help get them to feel attached to the medium, and if so, how? They didn’t want to follow a “guide,” just free shoot. 5.) Perhaps I haven’t been*

*clear enough in class and they didn't follow the emails, or there were too many options presented for what to do, so they did nothing. The switching between themes of personal and cultural might be creating problems. 6.) Some of the youth are not committed to the overall program and its goal.*

*One of my ideas for encouraging the youth to continue taking photos was printing the youths' edited images large so they could see the result of their editing work and what their image looks like when printed professionally. I also recognized that so far, the youth hadn't seen a physical product from editing their images, as the first 4x6 prints were unedited and from their free-shoot. I felt that the printed image needed to be something for them, something they were allowed to keep. Furthermore, I no longer had the time to continue following up on my list of suggested photographic approaches, as time was running out. In my journal I wrote "Maybe everything is just too fast and too overwhelming," and I think this applied to me as well as the youth.*

*I felt that the critique went alright, but was very stiff. I decided to create printouts with questions for the youth to follow next week. This way, they wouldn't need to look away from the class at the board for guidance. Also, I thought that having larger, more accurate photos to discuss would aid everyone in studying, being inspired by, and responding to each others' images.*

Eighteenth Week. Week 5 of Photo Intensive.



*Tami's printed photo series*

**The Week Preceding the Lesson.**

This week was packed with reflections, and struggles and action that took place before the lesson. I spent some time in e-mail communication with Dave, asking once again if I could print some larger, higher quality prints at my University's facility, as originally, Dave had told me I would be reimbursed for my printing costs. The first response I received from Dave was that we didn't need such a large print. I decided that the youth needed to see their work printed beyond a few small, poor quality drugstore prints. Emails passed back and forth between Dave and I, while I sat in the lab debating what to do. If didn't print the images then, I would not have any time to print before Saturday's critique. As I looked through the youths' images, I was moved. I decided to just go for it and figure out the details later on, recognizing that this might mean paying for the prints myself.

The next email response I received from Dave stated that he wasn't worried about

the cost, but the content of the images. I was startled to learn that he doubted my discernment in choosing which images to print, especially given his statements at the outset of the program recognizing my value as a professional. At the same time, it reaffirmed my feeling that I had to prove my value as an art educator. There was no time left to wait for Dave to come around, I needed to do what I felt was necessary: provide the youth with prints of their images. I explained this briefly to Dave in another email, saying that I felt the youth needed to see what their hard work looks like in print. I chose about 5 of each of the youths' images from the last few weeks and printed them off at about 8x10" a print, and kept them in a strip.

As I looked over the youths' images in the lab, I realized that I had not yet sat down outside of the classroom to contemplate what everyone was creating. As I looked over the images, my mind was flooded with thoughts about each youth, about their photos, about my teaching. Studying their images allowed my mind to think in an intuitive and visual way. I experienced a period of deepening awareness and insight regarding each of the youth, their lives, their aesthetic styles, and what I could do to better assist each of them and meet their needs. I wrote down these thoughts as I compiled the youths' images for printing. I also recorded thoughts about my own teaching which were provoked by contemplating the youths' images. The following is an excerpt from my journal.

*I find that it's easy for me to get wrapped up in the creation and dissemination of lesson plans. It's easy to get tied up in the philosophies, and whether or not I am "communicating" to the participants, or if my lessons are working. My desire to help*

*them to really know, see, and feel, brings me back to the images they've created. I've decided it's high time they saw their images printed, and looking good! Maybe I'm wrong, maybe digital is good enough. I will ask them. I've feel as though I have had 5-6 sessions with my group, but in reality, I've taught them much in the build up to this point, and they've had many weeks to collect their own pictures. Still, I find myself moving from one project one week, to a new project the next. I am still trying to collect images, trying to give them more to work with for their final project, and I am doing my best to teach as much as I can in the short time, including editing, composition, and how to create photos with feeling and meaning.*

*As I worked with the images, I saw portraits of the youth emerge. The portraits are intensely personal, revealing secrets and struggles. Some are portraits of an artistic journey, trying to find individual taste through playing and fighting and finding answers with the technologies present. For some, their pictures are of cultures and families. Others captured pictures of themselves and the streets they walked on every day.*

*Seeing their images grouped together makes me feel that I better know and understand each of their developing aesthetics and personalities. I realize that I have to do all I can to encourage and nurture their growth as individuals and artists. I don't want to throw them off, I don't want them to get frustrated with the technology or the changing projects given to them. I want to help them grow, and teach them new abilities. I want the youth to feel proud. I want them to see that what they're doing isn't just an exercise. That, as Daniel mentioned jokingly, they're not "guinea pigs." (I responded, "You're not guinea pigs, but you are getting free lessons.")*

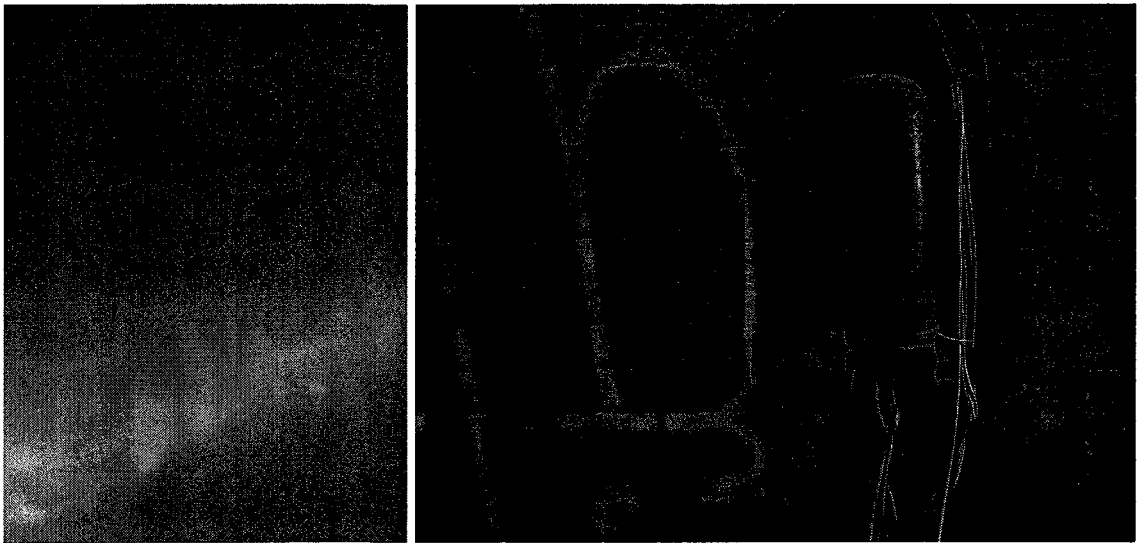
*When I introduce the finished series' to the youth on Saturday, I will ask that they*

*forgive me if they don't like the images I chose, or if they would have arranged them differently. I'll point out that next time they will have an opportunity to choose their own arrangement and make their own series.*

*Individualized Reflections on Each Youth Prompted by Their Images.*

*The images brought up memories of helping the youth as they edited and talked about the images. In some instances, looking at the images brought me into deep reflection about the individual, as was the case with Erica.*

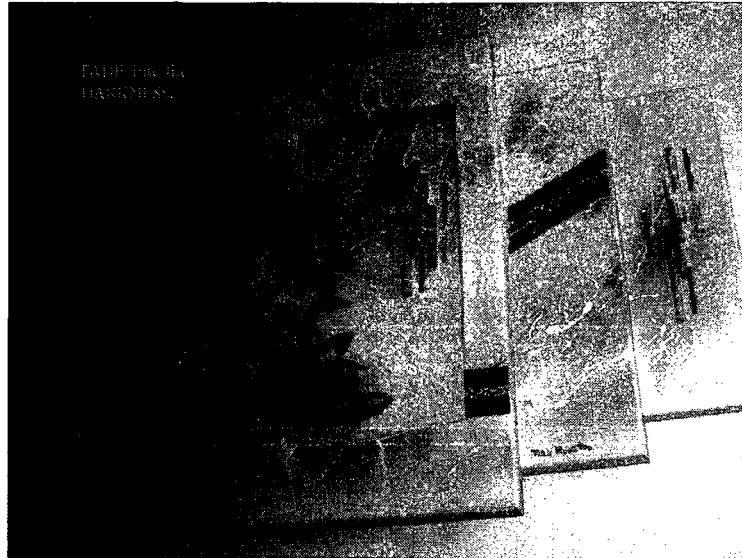
***Erica***



*Erica's images were very dark, and she was often very shy in class. The images she chose as her "best" were the less personal ones. Some days, she would do very little in class. She would speak little and came across as closed off and negative. In my notes, I recorded my recollection that Susan thought perhaps there was something more going on for Erica in her personal life. I recorded that I should find ways to talk more with her, and find her communication style. I should ask how she feels and what she needs, as well as if I forgot anything. I felt a need to give her special attention and show her that I care*

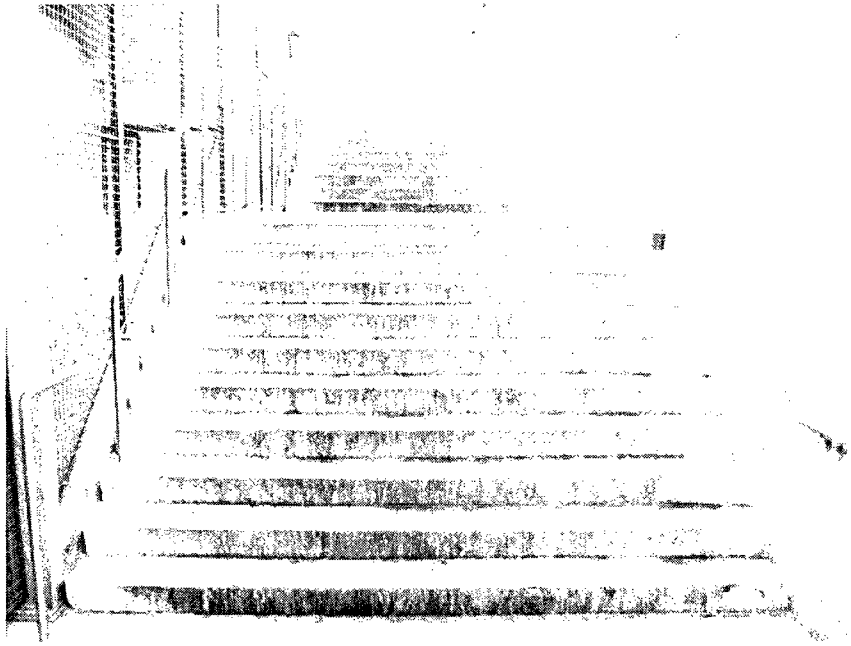
*and that I am there to help her.*

### ***Eliysha***



*Eliysha was having a hard time with photo editing. This past Saturday was the first session I noticed that she decided to try editing her photos without playing with the filters and creating extreme changes. In our sessions, Eliysha tends to tell non-stop jokes, but she can also be very serious and demanding of what she produces. She expects a high quality product from her work. It occurred to me that perhaps Eliysha is nervous about failing, and feels worried she'll do it wrong, or can't achieve what she wants to in Photoshop. I made a note to myself asking; "How do I encourage Eliysha more?" My advice to share with Eliysha was "Don't worry to much about perfect editing—that will come with practice, and I can help you learn. Focus on taking your pictures, you take amazing pictures and really capture people's personalities!"*

## *Daniel*



*Daniel has a tendency to delete all but a few images, but he is really invested in the class and process. He missed the week before last (due to a family event), and this week he forgot his camera. I wonder if he took pictures last week or not. I wonder if he is afraid of taking bad pictures, as he is so selective about the images he keeps. Last week I talked to him about artistic perfectionism, telling him that it's good for him to know what he likes but that he should experiment and not be too hard on himself. I challenged him to not delete any of the pictures he took for a week, just so he could really look at them. Daniel only wants to have good photos. He tries very hard at editing, but so far has been playing more with very difficult (very under or overexposed) photos. As with Eliysha, Daniel ends up reverting to some crazy colorful images, because they look good. Afterwards, he returns to proper editing to try and make them look good in a normal way. He is developing his eye and figuring out his personal taste/aesthetic sense. So far, his work tends to have either washed out colors or crazy/brilliant colors.*

### *Tami*



*Tami and Erica get along really well when taking photos. I think they understand each other. I think Tami appreciates how Erica is sensitive to her discomfort with pictures of herself. I'm reminded of when I was a teenager, and many of the most sensitive people were my friends. At some point, I would find out that they had faced personal hardships in their lives such as abuse, a distant parent, or relationship problems. Everyone had something to deal with. Everyone had secrets that they needed to keep to themselves, and tell a select few people who are safe, who would understand them, who will not judge them and who will be there to help when needed.*

*Overall, it's very important that we talk about why young people choose to take and edit certain images. I need to make sure to let them know before hand that we're going to show their pictures, and have their permission, so that they maintain ownership over their images and their thoughts. Looking at their images helps me to get a better idea of each of their individual styles, and what direction they seem to be heading in. I realize that I need to focus more on the personal relationships and less on the lessons. I*

*should let the youth know what I'm thinking and feeling, and give positive feedback to them about their work, recognizing their breakthroughs more. I need to look for and appreciate their good pictures, rather than take them for granted. Each session, there needs to be more praise, and more encouragement! How can I get the youth to praise each other, especially in a computer lab? I am always so busy getting started at the beginning of each lesson. There is a rush setting up, and some of the lesson plans are tricky. What about having a getting-comfortable time? Maybe now that we've addressed some of the problems, I need to worry less about people showing up. At the Gallery, there is a more comfortable space (it is big and bright), and is more conducive to group communication than the windowless basement of the College. Next week, how can I promote a comfortable talking environment? I can start with printed images.*

#### Mid-week brainstorm

I asked myself questions about the central goals of my work in Crossing Cultures. For example: how much is the project about learning each other's stories, and how much is it about each youth investigating their own identity and learning their own story? Tami's goal was to try to reclaim the story of her Dutch grandmother who had recently passed away. (Originally, Tami was hoping she might interview her grandmother before her passing, but sadly, that was not possible.)

Like Tami, Daniel also seems to have grown distanced from his own cultural family story, or has chosen to distance himself. Unlike Tami, he seemed less interested in telling or exploring his cultural history. I realized that if they're to create artworks on either their own cultures or on each others' cultures, someone needs to guide them through an

authentic, personal cultural exploration to help them to get in touch with their feelings more. In a way, I don't feel that it is my responsibility, as I was hired to teach the arts component, and I don't feel ready or even qualified to guide cultural exploration. On the other hand, if I am to direct them in creating culturally focused artworks and feel this personal exploration was needed; I may have to do it myself. I decided at this point to return to studying literature regarding teens, culture, and multiculturalism, some of which has been included in the literature review.

In order to improve my teaching I asked myself, "How can I improve my communication with teenagers, and develop real relationships?" and "How can we have open discussions where everyone feels free to say what they want?" I also researched how I could keep lessons interactive, personal, and independent, while still fostering collaboration and partnership. My Internet research on these topics included looking up articles, teacher videos, and other projects involving with teenagers. This sort of casual information gathering helped me to formulate my own ideas better and broaden my own thoughts surrounding the questions.

## **PLAN**

This week we would be meeting at the Gallery. I didn't know until I received the weekly group email a day before the lesson that yes, Hélène and I would have an opportunity to conduct the critique lesson and that the rest of the session would be devoted to finishing the trees the youth were working on. Several students would miss the beginning of the lesson, as they would be conducting interviews. The email stated that the next week (Easter) was cancelled, and the two weeks following would take place

at the gallery, led by Paul.

The critique was to last about forty-five minutes, and we would be viewing each of the youth's large, glossy, high-quality printed photo series. I would begin by explaining the benefits of a critique, and the reasoning behind providing one another with feedback. I was to present them with several questions designed to assist in contemplating, describing, and responding to each others' work, such as: "How do you see (artist's name) in the piece?" and "What story does the image/series tell?"

Following the critique, Paul would have everyone working on their trees for about an hour. Then in the last hour, I would gather the youth together to create mind-maps detailing characteristics of three people in their family, including one family member who has been interviewed. The youth were then asked if over the next week they would consider taking either literal (documentary), metaphoric, emotional/personal or abstract photos representing these characteristics of one of these family members, to be used in their final installation piece. In the last 30 minutes, I planned to gather the photo group together to discuss what is working for them, what is not working for them, and what they would like to see more of. Together we would determine and finalize an upcoming tentative structure including goals and a time line for the next few weeks.

## **ACT/OBSERVE**

Erica, Sophia, and Daniel were some of the first to arrive. Erica was smiling when she came in today. She gave a friendly hello, and I gave her a big smile as well. I think we could both sense the 'good air' between us, and were both glad about the sun and the new environment. Eliysha was absent once again, and Tami also did not come, and provided

no explanation. We began the critique with Dave, Susan, myself, Hélène, and Paul present, as well as the five students (three photo, two video).

This critique went much better than the last one. First of all, all of the adults were present, including both Susan and Dave. I opened up the session by talking about what a critique is and why it is important. This seemed a little dry, but went pretty fast, and everyone seemed to be listening closely and thinking about it. The result of this explanation was clear when we began the critique, as both the youth and adults were committed to the process. I suggested the youth begin their responses with “I like...” This slowly started them talking.

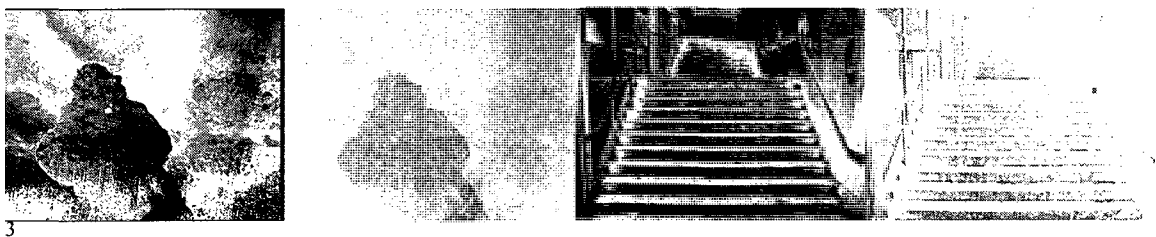


*Erica's Series.*

We began with Erica's photographs. At the beginning of Erica's critique I made a special note to tell her that I respected her editing decision, and printed her images without alteration. Last week, I had encouraged her to lighten the images a bit more and – consider experimenting with further edits. This had felt tense and was a slightly difficult/contested issue last week, as she chose to keep them very dark, and turned down all my recommendations and offers of instruction. I had decided beforehand to make a point of noting how her decision was being respected in order to give her ownership over her own images, as well as to allow her to see what her editing choice looked like in

print. Susan added to the discussion of Erica's work by commenting on what she liked best about it; the dark colors she used and her self-portrait. As usual, everyone listened very attentively to Susan. Sophia said she liked the picture of the clouds that were lit up along the edge. Someone asked what her third picture was of, as it was very dark. Erica responded to their comments, and a soft smile appeared on her face as she received the praise, encouragement, questions and reflections on her work. I felt immediately that this critique session, and my choice to represent her photos exactly how she had created them, improved our friendship and collaboration.

Susan has a very steadfast way about her that the participants respond well to. I feel they respect what she says greatly, and take the words she speaks into themselves. It is clear to me that she cares for each of them and believes in them, as well as has high hopes for what they can accomplish. I realized quickly that the "I like..." guide I was a bit too simple (although it might have been good to get them started.) I then switched to making comments, about what I saw in the youth's images (which had been stirred in me as I studied them earlier). I encouraged comments and asked the questions from my critique guide, sometimes openly, sometimes directly to a participant.



*Daniel's Series.*

Occasionally the adults would say something that would really impact the

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<sup>3</sup> *Note.* This image is reproduce in Hart, L. (in press.) "To be, know, and see: Investigating identity, cross-cultural interactions and photography in community art education," 2009, Canadian Art Teacher.

participant. I remember more than once seeing Daniel slowly look up, very focused, very interested in what someone was saying to him about his work. A key question that seemed to aid Daniel's opening up was "how can you see Daniel in his work?" I talked about the image of his reflection in the puddle, and Susan did as well. I said how his images had a mysterious quality, and held secrets from the viewer. Midway through the critique he began to articulate. He made a thoughtful and positively worded comment to Sophia (who he used to tease with Jamal) about liking her last two pictures the best – because they were more mysterious. I think this made him realize his style, that he likes mystery and surreal imagery. I suggested to Sophia that I liked how clear and straightforward her images were, as well as her use of bright colors.



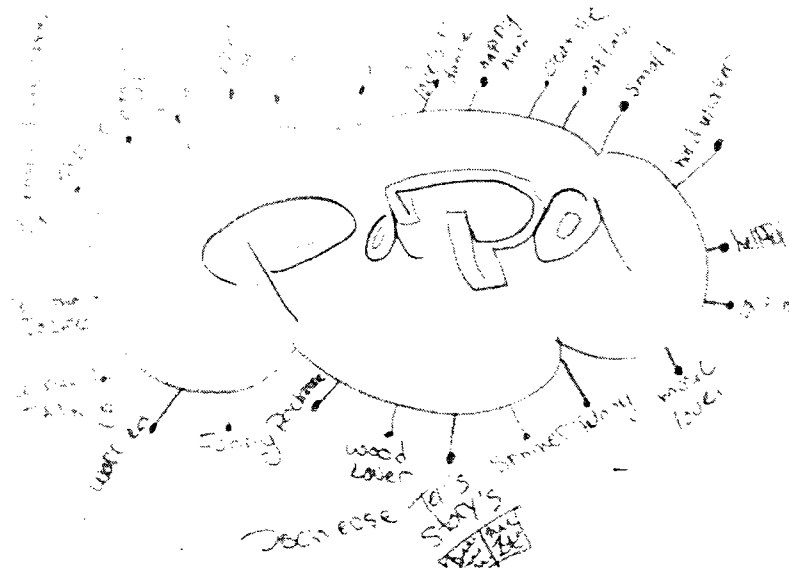
### *Sophia's Series*

Sophia seems to have stopped trying to get attention quite so much, and has cut back on making statements that seem untrue, or over the top. Daniel and his friend stopped teasing her, and have begun to respond to her work on a level of respect equal to their own. I even noticed that one of the adults doubted her originality and asked if the words she put on her photos were her own, due to their poetic nature. I affirmed that they most definitely were Sophia's words, and added that I loved how well she described her way of seeing in the images. I try to encourage Sophia as much as I can. She works very hard and always has a very positive attitude about the work she is doing.

After the critiques, I asked all the participants if they liked hearing about their

work. Everyone enthusiastically assured me that they did, and gave different reasons why they enjoyed the critique, including that looking at everyone's work was fun and gave them helpful new ideas. I asked the teens if it made a difference for them having their photos printed large. Daniel was the first to answer; he said that it was really different and good. Sophia said that it looked less bright than on the computer screen, that it looked better—and that she was glad. Everyone was in agreement that it was very important to see their images in print, and also to talk about the printed images.

After the critique, the youth were beckoned by Paul to work on their trees. I sat with Susan to discuss the photos, my planning so far, and to arrange our upcoming schedule. Susan responded positively to my lesson today, especially about the prints. I reiterated to her (and also to Dave) that I felt that the participants needed to see a product for all of the “virtual” digital work they had done.



*Sophia's mind-map depicting a family member's character traits.*

In the last half hour of the session I asked the youth to gather quickly around a table and had them sketch out mind-maps about the characteristics of their family members. There

was very good energy in the air as we looked at the mind maps. The youths were smiling, laughing and freely bantering back and forth, sharing family stories. We (myself included) told each other about our lives and about the people we cared for. Daniel told us about his grandma who smoked all the time and would go on very long walks. He called her a health irony. Sophia burst into non-stop laughter at one point, which was joined by others.

Today was a relaxed day, with more talking, and less of a rush to accomplish a task. Everyone (including H       and myself) created mind maps of three family members, with approximately 10 characteristics for each. I asked if the teens felt comfortable, and if they were willing to take photos representing character traits of one or two of their family members, preferably one who had been interviewed. They all nodded and agreed to give it a try. I asked the youth to focus this week on taking pictures that represented these characteristics either literally (portraits) or metaphorically. We discussed again how one could show a characteristic like “delicate and old” in a photo. Daniel suggested taking a picture of his grandma’s hands. I encouraged the idea and suggested perhaps also finding a possession of his grandma’s that had similar qualities. Everyone agreed that for the following week, they would bring these photos to session. I took pictures of their mind maps and gave them back to the youth, for them to use as a guideline.

A small but meaningful highlight for me occurred at the end of the session. Daniel was leaving and waving goodbye. I said “Goodbye.” Just as he turned the corner I called to him “Wait!” Daniel replied, “Yeah?” as he reappeared. (A few weeks before, he may have paused, and continued to walk away.) I told him “Don’t forget to take pictures, and

bring your camera next time!!” I remembered him forgetting the week prior. “I’ve got it,” he said with a grin, “see?” “I didn’t see...” I said, then noticed him pointing at the red camera case he had attached to his belt like a holster, ready to take a picture any time, anywhere! “That’s great!!” I responded, surprised. Hélène and I both beamed at him, impressed. Daniel grinned widely, clearly loving our positive reaction and waved goodbye as he swiftly disappeared out the door.

## REFLECT

*This critique wasn’t nearly as awkward or forced as the last one. The youth seemed much more eager to answer questions and engage with each other’s artworks. I think they began to recognize how the process aids their own “seeing,” and how they help one another. The hours I had spent looking at the youths’ photos and arranging them to be printed, combined with my determination to print them despite not being financially or personally supported, guided me to making a deeper commitment to my work with the youth. I recognized each of the participants as hard-working, truly budding artists, with their own style and developing techniques. Studying their photos led me to contemplate the struggles and everyday lives of each teen. I decided to only teach in a way that aided them personally.*

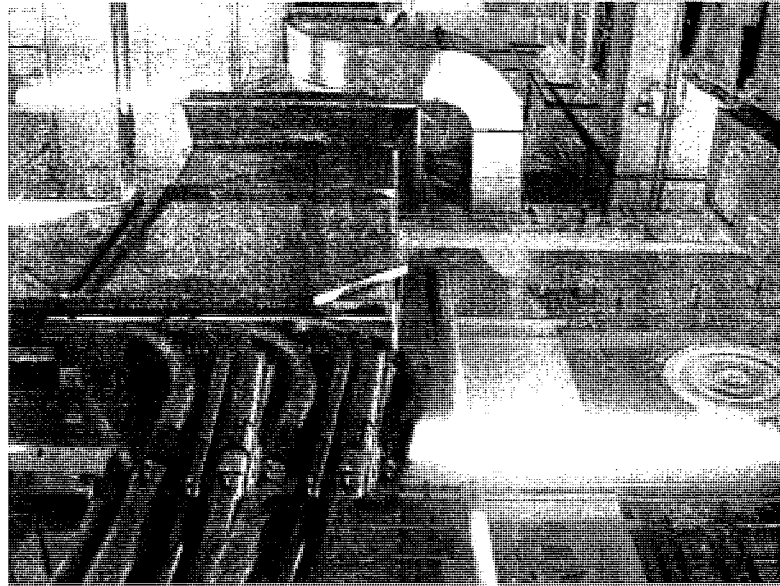
*After this Saturday’s lesson, Hélène and I skipped our usual “plan and debrief” coffee date, as we both felt that we were on the right track and were one week ahead in our planning. Following today’s lesson, I had a feeling of success and accomplishment! I felt very affirmed and respected by the organizers of Crossing Cultures in my goals and the process I’d taken so far, and could see that the youth felt encouraged and supported*

*for who they were individually.*

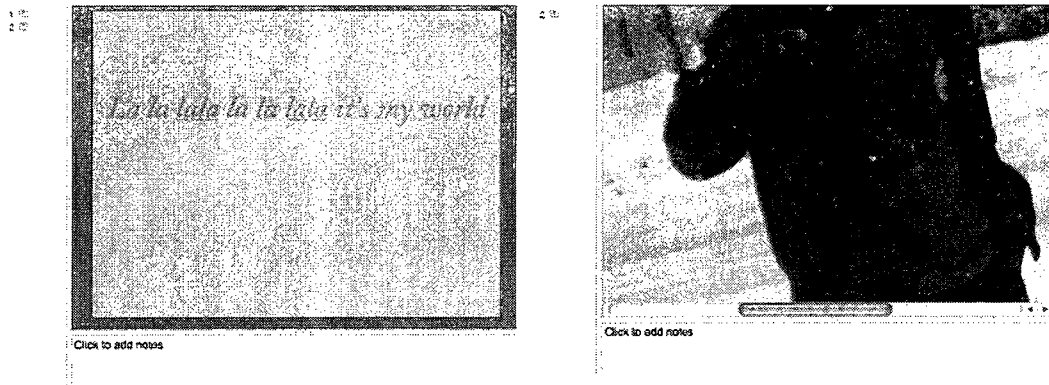
*My relationship with Daniel and his response to the work has come a long way from the beginning, when he would make distancing statements jokingly like “stay back” or “you’re weird”, and would oftentimes choose simply not to participate in an activity. Over time, he began to join in halfway into the activity. Now, he is one of the first to get into Photoshop and begin editing, one of the first to upload his images and is quick to ask a question if he has one. I think the reason for this is that he’s becoming more sure of what he’s saying, and that I have been demonstrating that I respect him, want to hear what he has to say and am excited about his perspective.*

*Today I learned the great importance of the youth seeing their work in print, and the importance of physicality—that digital needs to be turned into something tangible. This made me wonder about the difficulty of teaching digital photography compared to teaching traditional darkroom photography, which has a very different atmosphere. Up until now, I have primarily taught darkroom photography only, or darkroom and digital photography in conjunction. I recognize that there are aspects present in darkroom photography (such as students receiving physical prints) that I took for granted, and noted that I will need to adapt my teaching in a digital-only setting.*

Nineteenth week. Week six of photo intensive.



*Daniel's highly manipulated photo of "pipes."*



*Screen Shot of pages 1 and 2 of Eliysha's PowerPoint.*

## **PLAN**

Early in the week I had Dave send out an email to the youth outlining Saturday's plan, and reminding them to bring their cameras with pictures from: 1. their chosen photographic focus (from the session two Saturdays ago and the list of focus ideas) and 2. the latest assignment of depicting characteristics and personality traits of family members. In the email I wrote, "These pictures can be literal, like a photo of your dad

cooking a tasty dinner, or they can be metaphorical, like an image of books that your mom reads, or a blanket to represent comfort.” I informed them that we would be creating slide shows of their photos in PowerPoint, and together we would look at and discuss their images. In the email, I reminded them that we only had 1-2 more sessions after the upcoming Saturday to access the labs and complete artworks for the preliminary art show that would be taking place at the end of May. I ended the email with a note that I looked forward to seeing them and the pictures they had been taking on Saturday. Informing them of my plans via email was one way I attempted to be clear and direct with the youth about my expectations.

### **ACT / OBSERVE**

Youth present today included: Erica, Sophia, Daniel and Eliysha. Tami was absent once again. Erica came with her grandmother, who was being interviewed today. Susan came to tell me that the interview was to be conducted by Eliysha. I expressed my concern that Eliysha was getting rather behind, as she hadn’t been here for two weeks and had missed most of one class due to interviewing on a previous week. I explained that if possible, I felt it would be best if she didn’t miss more. Susan reiterated that this interview was very important and rather sensitive, so it was very important that Eliysha, whom she felt was especially perceptive, be right on time and conduct this interview. Eliysha was then ushered out of the room to be briefed on the interview.

I chatted with Daniel at the beginning of the session and admitted to him that I was feeling a little all over the place due to not having had much sleep the night before because I had been working until 6 am for the last five nights. He looked a bit surprised,

and confessed that he was super tired as well because he had pulled two all-nighters this week, one the night before last. He told me that the other morning he was so annoyed, when, just as he had finally fallen asleep (and planned to have one hour to sleep), his mom came in to tell him that she had to leave early. Daniel's friend from the video group added in that he hadn't gotten any sleep the night before as well. I sympathized, and asked why they were both getting so little sleep. Daniel smiled and avoided my question, while his friend replied, "Studying for a math test." "Really?" I asked. "No." he said with a smirk and a laugh, just as Daniel chimed in "yeah, studying, that's it..."

We started the critique with Erica and her grandmother present, as well as Sophia, Daniel, Jamal, and Eliysha, who had temporarily returned. I handed out critique question sheets for them to use as a guide. As I suspected, no one really read them. There was extreme tiredness all around. We quickly tried to look at Eliysha's work, as I knew soon she'd be gone again. As expected, Susan came in to get her just as we started. We watched a video from the other group, and Erica's grandma came up with positive feedback, describing how she felt the opening sequence was very poetic. As was with Susan, everyone listened attentively to her words. I wished she were able to stay longer, but she and Erica then left for the interview. Tami and Eliysha's photos were next on the schedule, but as neither girl was present, we moved on.

Following the critique, Daniel told me that he forgot his camera again. I surely looked exasperated, but held back my frustration and asked him why. He explained to me that he lives with his mom and his dad, and doesn't want to bring his camera to school (in case it might be stolen), so he leaves the camera at his mom's house, goes to school, and then goes home to his dad's house on Friday night. Daniel jumped from his

seat, ensuring me that he would quickly take some pictures to work on, and asked to borrow someone else's camera. Sophia was first to offer her camera to him, pulling it out from the heart-print bag she kept it in. We quickly realized that her camera had no batteries. Afterwards, Sophia confessed that she was hoping he would put fresh batteries in it and give it back. Sadly, we didn't have any batteries. I lectured Sophia again about her having to get her own batteries (since she had no batteries the previous week as well), and pointed out that it will have been four weeks since she's brought in any new pictures! How can she do projects with no pictures? She agreed and promised to take pictures next week and swore that she would bring her camera in. The youth and I were now in a much more casual relationship and I no longer felt bad about reminding or lecturing a little bit. Daniel borrowed a camera from someone else, and ran out for the first 30 minutes to take pictures around the College.

While Daniel was out taking pictures, I showed and discussed a short PowerPoint on photographic series. For each of the slides I showed, I asked the youth what the series was about. The youth were very vocal in their answers, and tended to provide much deeper and more thoughtful answers about "feeling" and the complexity of the images. than what I had expected. For example, one series showed grandparents and children. The images were soft, black and white photos. I asked them "what is the series of?" Some of the answers they gave were: sadness, mystery, time passing and losing childhood. The answer I was expecting was simply "portraits", or portraits of grandmothers and their grandchildren. Despite being distracted a bit from my original point, I was encouraged to know that the youth were paying attention to previous lessons, and that they were becoming more comfortable about engaging in a deeper aesthetic and

emotive exploration of the images. Next, I asked if they wanted me to demonstrate how to make a “series” in PowerPoint. Sophia was the only one present who didn’t already know how to assemble a PowerPoint, and so I told Sophia that I would teach her individually while the others worked on editing their images or creating their PowerPoint series at their leisure.

I asked the group if they wanted me to quickly show them the Unusual Photography PowerPoint I had made. They encouraged me to. The presentation showed interesting techniques that one can achieve in photography, and had many examples of mixed-media approaches to photography, photography installations, and more. It also included an example of digital story telling which involved a series of photos assembled in PowerPoint with a narration overtop. Eliysha, Erica and Susan returned at the end of this presentation. Susan thoroughly enjoyed seeing the last few slides, and excitedly proceeded to review them all with Erica. The other youth began uploading their photos. Susan told me that she found the images inspirational. She was especially interested in the digital story telling portion, and watched several of the videos provided.

When Daniel got back I told him to upload his photos, to which he replied “already on it,” and sure enough, he already had the cable in hand and was at his computer in a flash. Erica had brought pictures this week, but none were on the subject of a family member, or at least didn’t appear to be. Her images were of sunsets and water, calming nature scenes, colors, arrangements and shapes. They were very aesthetically minded. No people were in any of her new photos. Only one youth, from the video group, had actually followed the direction from the previous week. When Erica finished watching the PowerPoint, she got straight to work uploading her pictures, but ran

into a snag. Eventually she called me over for help. This was one of the few times she asked for help.

Eliysha, it turned out, also did not know how to create a PowerPoint, so I tried to show her and Sophia together. They were both acting rather silly and were not following the instruction I gave them. When they tried to make their own PowerPoints, they struggled greatly, which was highlighted by the moment Eliysha forgot to save hers and closed it by accident, losing her work from the last half hour. Sophia brought in some Easter bread her grandma made to share with everyone.

In my disappointment, I mentioned aloud my wish that Tami had come, as I wanted to show her the images of hers that I had printed. I said to the guys that I was surprised Tami was missing session again. Daniel said he wasn't, and mentioned something about receiving a call from her father the night before. I was surprised once again, and learned that things were complex in Tami's life right now.

Daniel took more upside down pictures of institutions, pipes, and inverted things. He pointed out how one picture with the lights flipped made it look like there was a swimming pool. He immediately went to edit a photo of the pipes, and showed how when he changed some things in curves, it looked like "terminator" style. This time he said to me "I'm going to make it all crazy." He seemed to be waiting for my approval, so I told him to do whatever inspired him, and he did! Once again, none of the youth used the email I sent them as a guide for their picture taking.

## **REFLECT**

*Today's class made me especially aware of the external matters (matters outside*

*the classroom) present in teenagers lives which effect how they act within the project and during weekly lessons. Daniel and his friend were both very tired, and had a weekend they'd rather not tell me about. One session, Daniel showed up with a frightful black eye. Tami is having some family struggles, which she has never let on about during class, and each of the other youth have their own external circumstances as well as hobbies and cultural programs. I realized that the teenagers share some of what goes on in their life with us (the adults), but hold many of their personal life details in secrecy. I admit, I sometimes felt glad not to know their secrets.*

*Some questions I asked myself was: How do I respond to revelations? Even if I am open to the youth creatively, am I open to them as individuals? What about the adult/teenager relationship, or teacher/teenager relationship? Does the fact that I'm doing research affect what they share? Do I really want them to be completely honest with me, or would that mean I might have to contact their parents, or worse? When I teach adults, I am able to talk with them about their lives and share about mine. How can I teach art to aid in identity formation for teens if they aren't able to share their lives and their world? Where do I, as an adult and mentor, draw the line? As an artist, what am I comfortable with them showing and sharing? Where do I draw the line?*

*A second area I reflected on was the issue of teaching/learning collaboratively with the participants. I wondered if it's possible to overcome the student/teacher role, or if the youth need to be at a certain level of development (or age) first. Despite my attempts to come to an agreement on a collaborative assignment with the youth, they still don't show up prepared for sessions, or with photos related to the assignment. Is this due to the freedom I allow, and that if they feel they don't have to, they simply won't? Are*

*they rebelling against the assignment? When the youth don't bring new work forward, I'm further tempted to dictate to them a firm assignment that they must do. I can't help but wonder if they would come at all on Saturdays if I did this. I wondered if I needed to do more thinking/writing with the youth to help them to become more engaged in the conceptual framework, and be more inspired to take pictures. I'm hoping that the next session with Susan should help with that, as they will review their interviews and select their stories.*

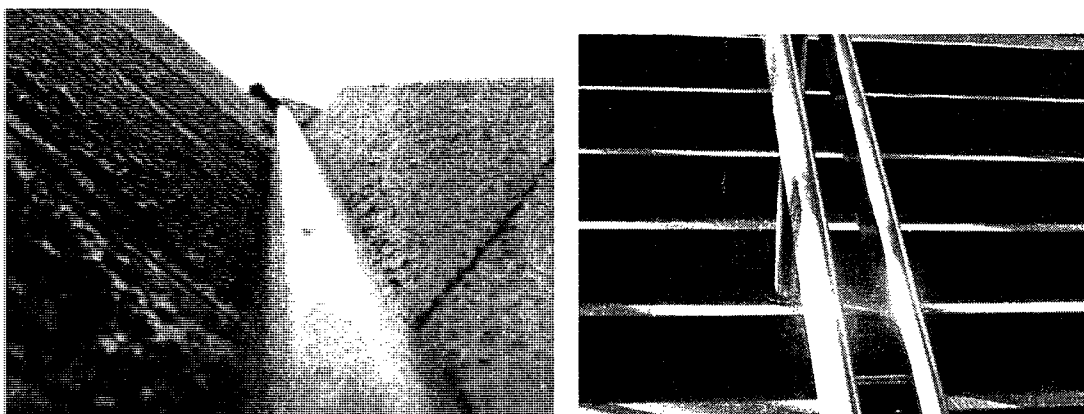
*Eliysa and Sophia never got very far in the PowerPoint projects. I realized that I was trying to do too much too fast in this class, once again, and the youth didn't have enough time to focus on creating a series. Originally I was debating how much I would show them in class, now in hindsight I think they may have been overwhelmed by the second input of information on the various ways to display and integrate photography into artworks. I imagine that if each week we immediately followed up their previous assignment and asked everyone to show, for example, the pictures representing their family members, that they might be more prepared. I don't think that this approach would allow for a lot of freedom and comfort (some youth might not come if they hadn't done the assignment), and the teaching approach would be more authoritative and less collaborative.*

*I guess I have been feeling frustrated with trying to pack so much information into a few weekly occurring lessons. We now only have about one or two more sessions left with access to the labs to create finished artworks for a preliminary mini-art show to take place near the end of May. That's quite a short time to go from learning how to turn on a camera, to creating technically accomplished, self-motivated art projects addressing*

*culture and the stories of others. Originally, H       and I hoped to do this mini-show and first stage of the media focus on the subject of investigating self and creating a self portrait; however I am constantly being reminded that everything has to tie into the interviews, and that the youth should be creating those pieces now, despite the fact that some of the youth still haven't interviewed.*

*My idea today was to assist the youth in deciding what sort of final project they wanted to create. I discussed with them what they were most interested in. Everyone seemed deep in thought, and Daniel told me he needed time to think it over, and would tell me next week. Sophia had already decided that she was interested in creating a comic strip. I don't know if I need to slow the lessons down, or if I need the youth to be more committed to this portion of the project, which includes taking photos during the week, remembering their cameras, and having enthusiasm for creating final products. Dave suggested that through his years teaching photography to teens, some of them are intrinsically interested, and others simply aren't that into it. With Daniel, I can see the changes that can occur in a youth who is intensely interested due to their own prior personal ambition to learn photography. With Eliysha, I can see how not being terribly interested in photography can cause one to miss the details along the way, and end up missing out on the whole later. As for me, I wish I had more time with them, and I wonder what it would be like if they were receiving school credit for the program. I've been teaching adults at the University recently who, for the most part, are very self-motivated and devoted to what they are doing. (They are also paying for their instruction.) The difference between the two is huge.*

Twentieth week. Week seven of photo intensive.



*Photos uploaded by Daniel this week.*



*Sophia's newly edited photos.*

## **PLAN**

The plan for today was to upload and edit the teens' photos, and finish the final conceptualization of their first art project for our mini-show. I recognized the struggle that the youth (as well as myself and Hélène) were having in taking culture from a theoretical place into a personal art project. I came up with a questionnaire to help the youth identify their individual culture. This questionnaire was to be handed out at the beginning of class to be filled out by the youth (either in writing or mentally) and discussed as a group before returning to editing. While they edit, I plan to discuss with

them individually about their final projects.

### **OBSERVE / ACT**

When I arrived I saw Sophia waiting by the front door of the College, so together we went downstairs. Sophia and I chatted for about 15 minutes before the lesson, as she was very happy to share stories about her week.

There was a small group today. The email I sent out two weeks ago said we would be editing pictures all day. Last Saturday was Easter holiday, so there was no session. Eliysha did not attend again, as she had “a piano thing.” Erica was away. Tami, who had been away the last few weeks, showed up today. Earlier in the week I had sent an email to Tami (via Dave) imploring her to come, so that she could see her prints, and I could see her!

Daniel arrived at 3pm, and said he couldn’t think. The look on his face confirmed he was telling the truth. He told me he hadn’t slept the whole night before because he didn’t have a bed to sleep on. I looked shocked and concerned, picturing him sleeping in the street, but before I could even open my mouth, he waved it away saying, “It’s not like that.” My thoughts switched to picturing him hanging out a friends’ party. My total class today started with two youth, and ended with three: Sophia, Tami, and a sleepy, zombie version of Daniel. Miraculously, Daniel did remember to bring his camera today, and he started uploading his pictures onto the computer (albeit very slowly.) Sophia continued practicing editing her photos, and told me that she had taken a bunch of photos, but her father had uploaded them to the home computer and had deleted them off her camera. She explained that she didn’t know how to get them back on the camera. She told me that

her dad had posted them on Facebook, however she was unable to locate them. I reiterated that she needed to bring the photos on Saturdays, as that's why we're there. She promised that she would try to get the pictures off her dad's computer. She also told me that her dad was very interested in what she was learning to do with Photoshop, and wanted to get the program at home so she could work on the images there, and could teach him how to as well. After Daniel uploaded his pictures he didn't do much else, he just repeated that he couldn't think.

At the end of the class I sat down with those present from the photo group to discuss their plans for an end of session art piece. I asked if they had any ideas they wanted to focus on. "Did you want to focus on your own story? Would you tell the story of someone you interviewed, or tell the story of one of your own family members?" Daniel said he had an idea, and then that he "can't think" (again), but ensured me he was still trying to figure it out. He said would tell me for sure next week.

## **REFLECT**

*The low turnout really affected me today, despite the fact that I knew we were on a pretty good roll, that we had a good community feeling in the class, and that it was the week after a holiday. Still, I was feeling a bit unwell myself, and perhaps that influenced my overall impression of things.*

*I realized that I needed to provide more time and direct guidance if the youth were to complete a larger art project. In my notes I recorded that "we've been working predominantly on the 'how' (technical skills), now we will work on the 'why.' What do the youth want to say about culture, or about life? How will they choose to respond to*

*their interviews? I thought about the youth in detail, and tried to pinpoint what might be in their way. For Eliysha, is everything too technical? Is she not very interested in photography (as Dave mentioned), or does she feel defeated by the technology?*

*For Erica, might the subject matter of family be hindering her? Is she disinterested in the project, or the medium of photography? Originally Erica had stated her interests as primarily being drawing and painting.*

*Am I giving the youth too much "freedom," or not enough? Is the program too fast or too demanding? Am I not demanding enough specific work from them, or do they not want to take pictures related to the theme of Crossing Cultures? In my mind, I micro-analyzed every detail, down to the possibility that the email I sent seemed too commanding and was not friendly enough. I even questioned my teaching ability.*

*After today's session, Hélène and I headed straight out for a coffee. This week's coffee meeting was a reversal of the one that took place a few weeks back. Today, Hélène was in a good mood, she had all of the photo group show up, while I was agonizing over my teaching. I remembered how Hélène had doubted herself when the youth didn't show up, and I advised her not to take it too personally. It seemed random due to the small size of the groups. I told her that she could only do her best to be present, to help them create. It was not her responsibility that they show up and participate in the program, it was theirs, and she couldn't make them want to be there or make them do the project. I was glad to remember this, as this time, I had to apply that same advice to myself. It was easy for me to blame my own teaching and then to change elements within my control, but I needed to remember that sometimes circumstances have nothing to do with me. This was an especially important realization, as it is much easier*

*to be an effective teacher when I feel positive, capable, and optimistic. I then recalled Sophia's commitment to the project and thought of the impact that her father's interest had on her participation. I also remembered how one youth from the video group was engaged by and followed the last lesson on family members' character traits.*

*By the end of all my reflections and questions, I decided that the absence of three youth was most likely a coincidence, but that I should work on encouraging more conceptual content in their images. I also realized that we were not going to be able to complete the final culture-related art piece with only one session remaining and few images.*

Twenty-first week. No photo intensive, lesson collaboration.

This session was led by Susan, as I was on a brief trip home to visit my family in Vancouver. I had told the youth that this week they would be working with Susan to find content from the interviews for their final artworks.

What was supposed to happen:

Last Saturday, Susan and I agreed that she would listen to the clips from the interviews, and provide the youth with transcripts and help them to each choose a story to tell. By the end of the class, the youth would have selected one or more quotes from their interviews to use in the formation of their final end of session art piece. Then it would be possible to assemble the quotes and photos together the following, final week of class.

What did happen:

The following Saturday the youth told me that they had all gathered together to listen to and discuss some of the interviews, but did not select any quotes. CDs of interviews were handed out to the youth, and they were asked to listen through them and choose what part they were most interested in at home. Susan had told them that this week Hélène and I would be going over the interview CDs with them and would help them select portions to work on. Transcriptions of the interviews were not provided. The youth then recounted how after their discussion with Susan and Dave (where they received the CDs), the group went back to work on the tree project with Paul.

Twenty-second week. Week eight of photo intensive.



*Sophia's photomontage depicting the Fatima, as recounted in her mothers' interview.*

#### Original plan

Two weeks ago, I spoke with Dave and Susan regarding my need for an additional week at the lab with the youth due to the low turnout, and so that the youth who were busy interviewing during previous lessons could catch up. Dave agreed to this, and so I prepared this week's lesson with the assurance that there would still be one more lesson. My plan was to aid the youth in finalizing decisions for their end of session art pieces, and to begin work on creating them. I had prepared a guided discussion to help the youth figure out how to represent the quotes/stories they had chosen from their interview. I then planned to individually ask them to decide on technical considerations, such as how they wanted to display their images and what supplies they needed. Finally, the teens would then work on editing their photos and sound clips from their interviews (if

needed). For our final session next week, we would have time to complete the project.

### What actuality happened

Today was our last official Saturday session in the photo-focus portion of the program. I was surprised to learn that the youth had not discussed or decided upon which stories they were each going to tell, or which quotes they were going to illustrate, and so deciding this was added into the beginning of the lesson. It soon became obvious that there would be no time to work on actualizing their interview story idea today. Neither the youth nor I knew that this would be our final official photo focus class until after our session.

### **PLAN**

The lesson was to begin with everyone gathering together as a group to discuss a series of questions leading to decisions for form and content of their final interview related art piece for the end of session. First, the youth would each be asked what sorts of pictures they had been taking (family? metaphorical/feeling related, design, or landscapes?) Next, I would ask questions designed to help them elaborate on what meaning they wanted to convey about their chosen interview story, such as “What was your experience of learning about your family’s past and cultural history?” and “What part of your grandparent’s interview stood out to you the most?” I would then explained three conceptual avenues they might consider in their project: metaphor, juxtaposition and (self-)portrait. I would then suggest that they decide on either a singular large image, a series of 3-6 images, a photo montage, or a projected story telling installation, combining projected sound and photos. The lesson was to conclude in the computer room where the

youth would begin combining quotes with photos they had already collected, or alternatively, the youth could combine audio quotes digitally with a slide show of images.

## **OBSERVE / ACT**

We met today at the College. It's the end of term here, so the computer labs and central areas are full of College students. As usual, Sophia was the first to arrive, and was happy to see me. We pulled a desk out into the hall where it was quiet and brought a few chairs. She and I sat on the desk and chatted a bit. She told me about her trip to visit her extended family in Calgary, and I told her about my visit home. Soon others began to show up on time. Eliysha and Tami were absent once again. We started our conversation in a rather casual sort of way, and progressed to more in-depth questions. The first question I asked was "What have you been taking pictures of?" The second question/topic became "What affected you most about your interview?" Everyone was able to remember one aspect of their family members' story, so we went around the group telling these inspiring bits of story. Given the option, the youth all chose to address aspects of their own family story rather than the story of the family they had interviewed. Here are some of their responses to the questions.

*"What do you take pictures of?"*

Daniel was most interested in night shots and the city skyline. He described his desire as "to take good pictures." So far, he has focused on taking pictures representing design, rather than people. Erica likes taking pictures outdoors, and said that she hadn't been taking many pictures. Sophia shared that inside, she takes pictures of her family, while

outside, she takes pictures of family and objects around her church.

*“What story affected you the most?”*

Erica’s impacting moment was when her grandmother shared a story of sipping tea in a bomb shelter in England. Daniel was also affected by the stories about bombs that his grandmother recounted, and remembered her saying that she used to sleep through the bombs. Sophia recalled the story of the Fatima, a Portuguese legend where an apparition of Mary appeared in a cloud above a tree to three little kids. She already knew of this story from children’s class at her church, which added to her enjoyment of the story.

*Envisioning an artwork based on the story*

My last question about how the youth would be creating their final artwork was preceded by my acknowledgment that I should have been helping them more to conceptualize and create their final projects. Previously, some of the youth pointed out that there were some difficulties to overcome in planning how to represent these meaningful stories. Daniel mentioned that he thought he had figured out something (over the last week), but that he’d tell me about his idea after I shared my suggestions. I talked with the youth about possibly choosing one of three approaches (metaphor, juxtaposition or (self-) portraiture) to represent the part of the interview they were most effected by. I proposed ideas to each of them about how they could depict the story (or aspects of it) metaphorically. Most of the time, they looked deep in thought, would nod and say “maybe.” Some talked about which approach they might like, others explained the difficulties they foresaw.

I encouraged the youth to help each other to figure out how to depict their chosen stories. Daniel gave a lovely suggestion to Erica that Erica really liked and decided she would try. Erica chose a memory from her grandmother, who had recalled how during the war when they were in their basements in England with bombs falling all around, they would always make sure they had tea. Erica asked “where am I supposed to find a bomb shelter in Montreal?” I suggested that Erica try creating a metaphor, or employ a symbol representing the story, for example, by taking a close-up picture of a full teacup, perhaps in a dark place. Erica tilted her head in thought, and responded “maybe...” Daniel then expanded on my idea, suggesting that she could create ripples in the surface of the tea. Erica looked deep in thought, then turned to Daniel and confessed that she really liked that suggestion, and would think about it more. This discussion had a very natural feel, and although I had a lot to say, I didn’t feel that I dominated it at all. The youth took the opportunity to express their thoughts and dig in to their ideas conceptually; they responded well to this structured assistance. I told them that I would come around to them individually in the lab to make sure they had a plan to execute before next week’s session. They all agreed that they would come up with something that they would finalize next week. This one on one discussion time was very valuable, as each youth did some troubleshooting about their ideas and considered how to go about implementing them.

While others edited their photos, Erica listened to her interview while surfing the net for interesting finds. She chose to transcribe by hand the portion of the interview that she talked about in our discussion, and decided finally to create an art piece about it. Her written transcription of her grandmother’s interview says:

“In England I remember running from the bombs, during the war years. (Did you have 2 go underground?) Always underground. Well that was in England, and the memories there is that everybody was crammed in underneath the ground and the one thing about the English is that they always want to make their tea. And so they always made their tea. Everything was there.”

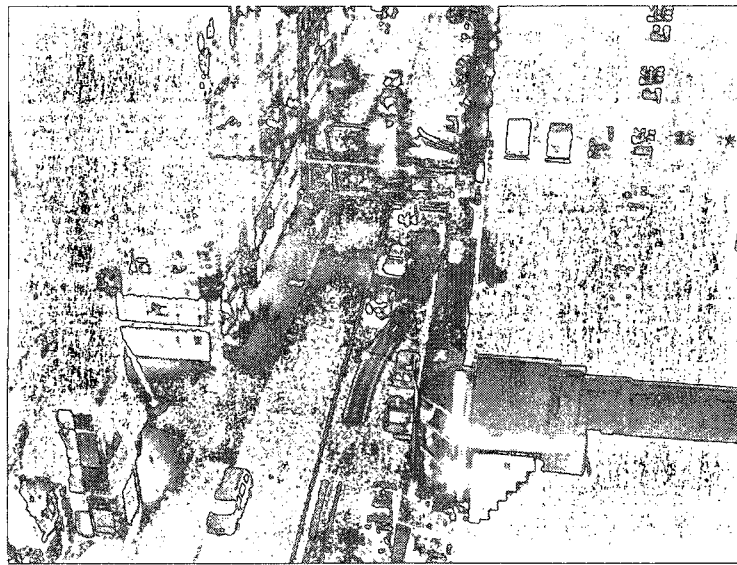
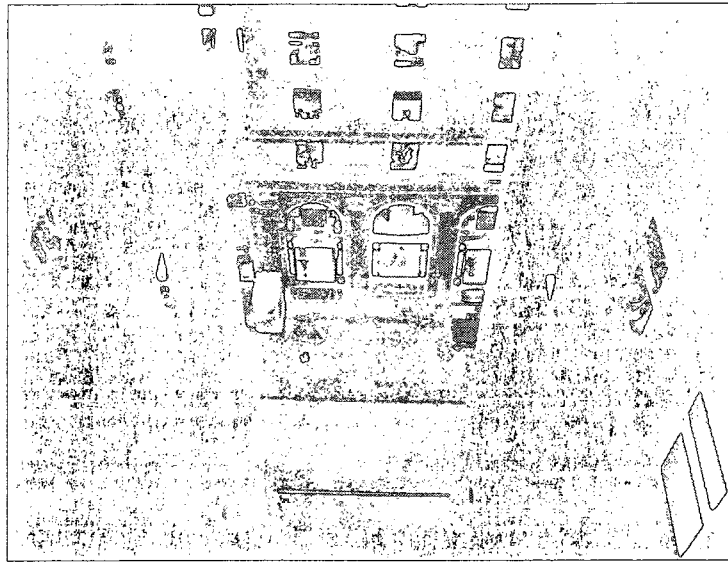
## REFLECT

*This class felt very good, and seemed to go very well for the youth. I had thought before that perhaps I wasn't including enough conceptual content alongside the technical content, and today seemed to confirm this suspicion for me. Once again, the week prior I was away and had time to take a little break and think about everything afresh. The time to think, time to breath and live less intensively seems very important to my creative thought process, and seems to correlate closely with how original and impacting my ideas are.*

*In the beginning of the photo/video intensive program, Hélène and I decided to work with the final goal of creating a self-portrait so that the youth could have a more personal first experience of creating a larger artwork. Our plan was that the following year, with this experience in hand, the youth would begin projects based on their interviews. That plan changed due to frequent requests, reminders, and simply being told at one point that from then on, all our media arts projects should connect directly to the themes of the exhibit. I think teaching the youth the technical skills of photography, helping them to develop their artistic eye and personal aesthetic, and then jumping straight to the interviews was too big of a jump for me, and for the youth as well.*

*Changing focus set back my teaching, and confused our goal. I also realized after today's session that Daniel had seemed excited about his own creative final project idea, which was going to involve installation, and that it seemed to have gotten squelched by this new, tighter guided approach. I don't like that. I still don't know what his idea was, but I know that he had one. I wish I knew, and that I had more freedom with the subject matter. Maybe it all depends on the youth themselves, on whether they are excited and interested enough in creating their own idea, but maybe a free and collaborative project creation would have been possible given the time, and especially the support.*

Twenty-third week. No photo intensive.



*Two of Daniel's "city at night" photographs.*



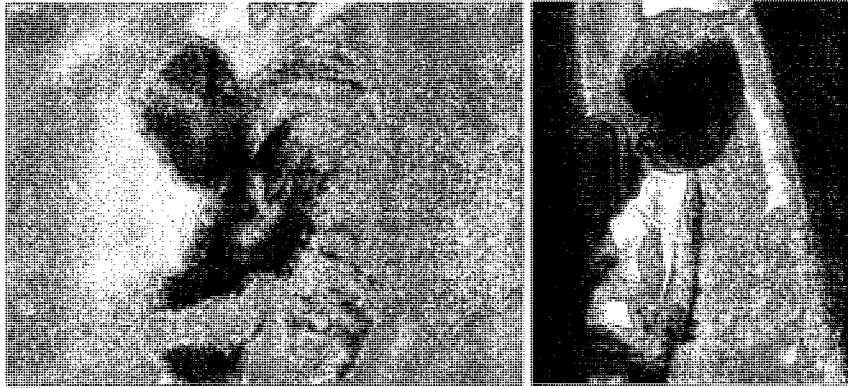
*Eliysha's plaster tree in its final stage.*

*Photograph by Sophia.*

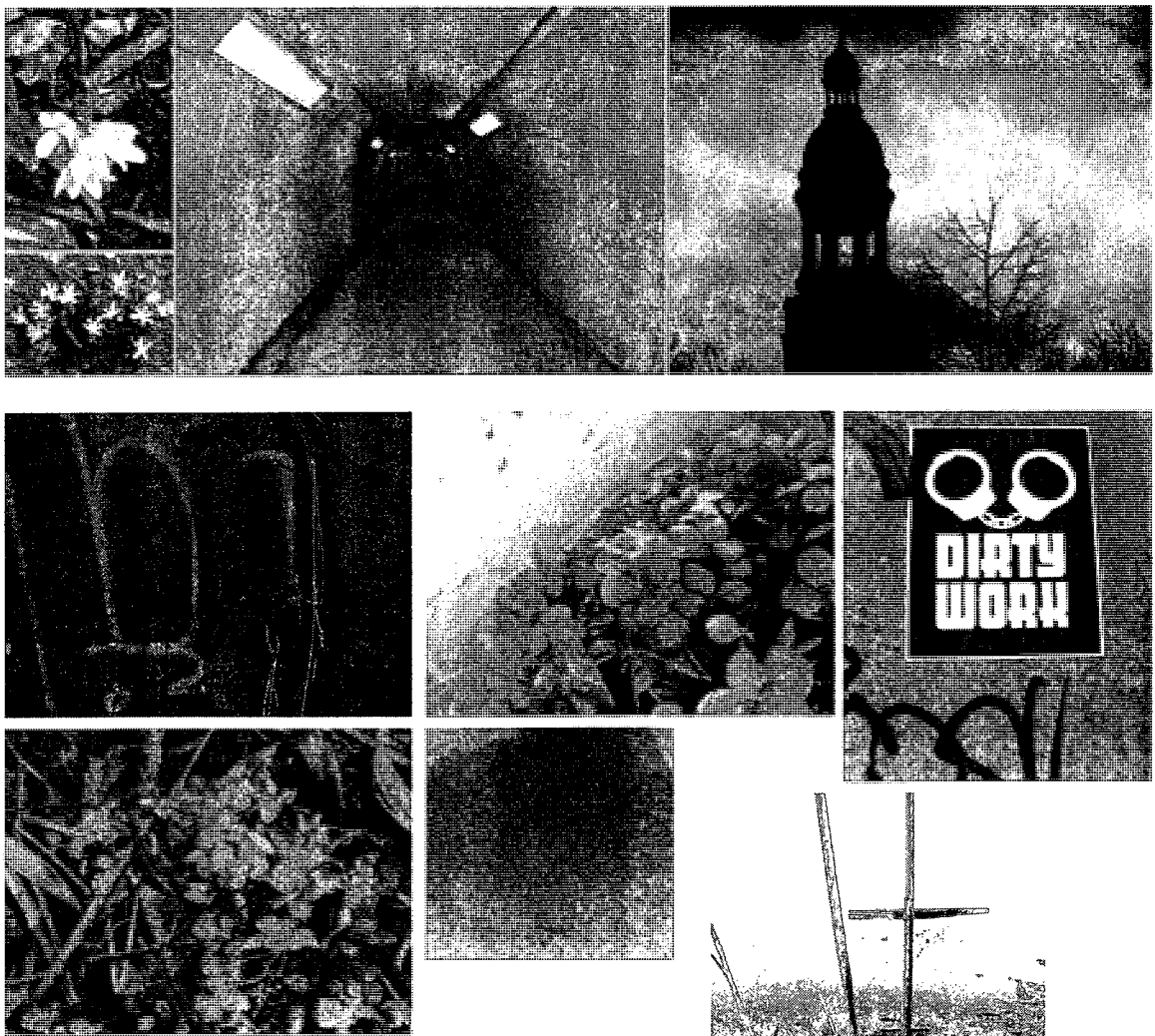
## **OBSERVATION**

Hélène and I were informed this week that we were not going to have one more week after all, as session would take place at the Gallery in order to finalize the tree project. Dave, myself and Susan arrived on time at the Gallery today. We looked around at each other and commented that it might only be us present today. Eventually some youth arrived. Most (including Daniel) arrived in the last hour of the session. I had been worried, as last Saturday, when we learned at the very end of class that there would be no further photo session, I had made plans to meet with the youth on Wednesday at the College so I could collect their photos for printing. Dave called Hélène and I to cancel, (because the College was too busy), but he had not contacted any of the teens. On Wednesday night I realized this and was worried that they might have shown up and felt forgotten. When Daniel arrived, I went straight over to ask him if he had gone on Wednesday, and sure enough, he had. I apologized profusely, and he responded by teasing me about ditching him. It was a perfect opportunity, since I felt awful. Daniel then allayed my fears and smiled, saying that it wasn't a big deal. He told me that it actually turned out well, because he had gone on a much longed after evening photo hunt where he had a great time experimenting with taking night pictures. Daniel then sat next to me and excitedly flipped through about seventy-five pictures of sky-scrapers and downtown Montreal at night, explaining his vantage point for each of them, and pointing out his favorites.

Twenty-fourth week. Week nine of photo intensive.



*"Learning to see" and "Works hard for the money", two of Eliysa's final images.*



*Tami (top 4) and Erica's (bottom) chosen final images arranged by them for printing.*

## **PLAN**

This Saturday's session was canceled due to a long weekend, however during the week I held two extra sessions with the goal of collecting photos from the youth to print for their final show. These two sessions took place on Monday and Wednesday.

## **ACT/OBSERVE**

Eliysha was the only one from the photo group to show up on Monday. I worked one on one with Eliysha for a few hours. We looked through the photos she had taken so far, she chose which ones to print, and I helped her make the edits she wanted. This worked very well. Eliysha didn't seem as frustrated as she had before in the group sessions, and she stayed very focused on (and interested in) her images. Eliysha seemed to enjoy the personalized assistance, as she liked to do things fast, and have answers fast. The entire time, she stayed her jovial joking self. Afterwards, I led her through some of the guiding questions she had missed the prior week. The part of the interview that she remembered most was her mother telling about an uncle who left a gang, was baptized, and soon afterwards was killed with a brick. Eliysha told me this made her glad that she now lived in a safe place. I asked if she would write her feelings in a paragraph, and she said that she would rather write a song instead, and so she did. As she sang each line, I encouraged her to keep going and wrote down the lyrics as she made them up through song. I gave her suggestions when she seemed stuck, told her not to worry when she was unhappy with something being "cheesy," but mostly, I simply encouraged her that her happy and grateful lyrics were meaningful and moving. I felt a shiver as her honest and sweet voice touched my heart.

### *Eliysha's Song*

I am happy, so happy.  
She veh du bop  
What a joy it is  
To feel so happy  
When life isn't such a pain

When I think of how  
Life was gloomy  
Staring back at the mirror  
I would do it all again

Here I am in this place  
And no one shall shake  
The way that I feel  
Right here in this place  
Cause this is home to me.

Working with Eliysha was a great surprise, but I still needed to gather images for the final show from the rest of the group, which meant another mid-week session.

Last Saturday, Dave had given me the youths' phone numbers, so with the youths' permission (provided the previous Saturday), I called each of them during the week to tell them that I was doing a second session on Wednesday. I reminded them that it was their last chance if they wanted to get some of their images printed. I reached each of the youth easily via phone, and everyone agreed that they would come in on Wednesday. Tami and Erica arrived on time, but Sophia and Daniel didn't show up. The College was busy, so we had to go into a different computer room than our normal one. I taped a note to the door explaining that we were down the hall.

I requested once more that Tami and Erica choose images related to their family stories and the cultural concepts we had been talking about, however I told them that ultimately they would be choosing and assembling their photos. Tami (who had missed most of the last few weeks) was editing some of her grandmother's old pictures, which

she had re-photographed at the start of the photo-focus. Erica had still not taken the picture related to her grandmother's story, and chose instead to print artistic photos of the river at sunset and things that she enjoyed. Tami asked me if she had to print her photos of her grandmother's old photos. Once again, I said that she was free to choose whatever she wanted, but that it would be good if she chose some which were on the project's theme. Tami looked relieved, and asked "so I don't have to print these pictures?" I told her again that it was her choice what to print. She then quickly opened up a different set of photos that included flowers, a church, and a metro hallway, and made some minor edits before assembling them into her final print document.

Erica finished choosing and ordering her photos quickly, none of which appeared related to the interview or her cultural origins. When she finished, she saved her images and left, with a friendly farewell. Tami spent a few hours solidly editing, and was in very good spirits. On Saturday, Daniel showed up, ready to chastise me for not being there again, but responded with astonishment that we had been at the College. "What, seriously?" he said with disbelief, which was followed by frustration at himself that he hadn't read the note on the door or tried to find us. He got over it quickly, as he usually does, and I reassured him that he would still have an opportunity to gather some of his images the coming Saturday, as he would probably get to choose between working at the College or Gallery. At the end of the day, Stan asked the youth what they wanted to do the following Saturday. Some expressed a desire to edit photos, while others, (Erica and Sophia) said they would be happy to work on something at the Gallery, so it was settled.

Twenty-fifth week. Week 10 of photo intensive.



*Daniel's final compilation image.*

## **PLAN**

This session Dave and I agreed to have groups working in the two different locations. My plan was that the Gallery would have one group of youth, who had thought of a project integrating their photos with traditional art. They could utilize the space, materials and guidance of Paul. The other group would go to the College where they could work more on editing their photos, and Daniel could choose his photos for printing.

## **ACT/OBSERVE**

Dave informed Paul at the beginning of the lesson that we would be splitting into two groups, and that anyone who wanted to stay and work on a project at the Gallery with Paul could do so, while those who needed to collect their photos for printing could come with us to the College. Erica stayed with Paul, and Sophia hesitantly decided to stay too.

Daniel wanted to choose pictures to print for the end of session, as did his friend from the video group. Dave told Paul that we were leaving, but, Paul asked that we all stay so he could introduce his new project. Dave agreed. This took about 15 minutes as he explained his plan to have the youth paint larger than life portraits of family members. Paul asked that everyone come and get the poster board they would be working on and begin the project. Daniel and his friend shifted on their feet, and were slinking towards the back of the room. I got up after the demonstration appeared finished, and gestured to Dave that we leave. Daniel asked me later if he had to do the project. I told him he wouldn't, as our program was coming to an end for the summer, shortly. He looked relieved. Dave finally announced that we were going, but when Paul stopped to ask him a few more questions, Dave told us to go ahead.

#### Twenty-sixth week.

The following Saturday everyone met at the Gallery once again to work with Paul. Hélène was present, but I was not. Hélène told me later that Daniel was visibly upset by the low turnout (only two students), and was expressing his doubts if we would be having a final show at all, in addition to asking lots of logistical questions about it.

### **The week preceding the final show.**

Dave and I met mid-week to discuss the date of our final show. Dave asked me if it was okay if we changed the final show date once more, to June 13<sup>th</sup>. I told him H       was out of town then, and so that wouldn't work. I suggested he contact H       to check. I pointed out that we keep moving the date back, (we have about 3 times already), and that the youth are growing tired. I added that if we want to have the youth rejoin us next year, we needed to end on a good note celebrating the teens' accomplishments, and soon. Dave hesitated, and then agreed, saying, "I know." He told me that he would tell Susan the show needed to be on the sixth, and informed me that the reason he was trying to change the show date again was because she couldn't come on the sixth. He emailed me a few days later to tell me that he had spoken to Susan, and the final show would have to be the thirteenth. This meant that despite all our organization and investment, H       would not be able to attend the final show, or help me arrange it. Later that day, Dave sent out an email to the group proclaiming the date of our last session to be the thirteenth.

Immediately after, I received an extremely disappointed response from H      . Her sentiments echoed mine, as I very much wanted her to be present at the final show.

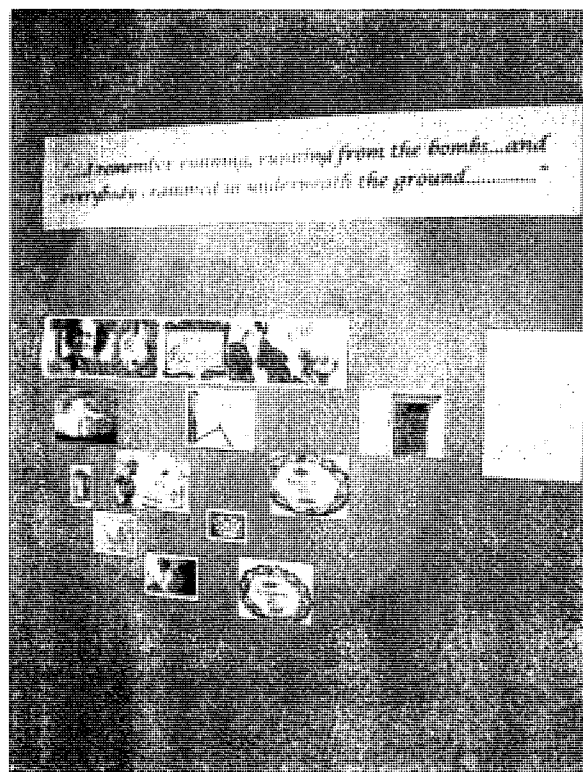
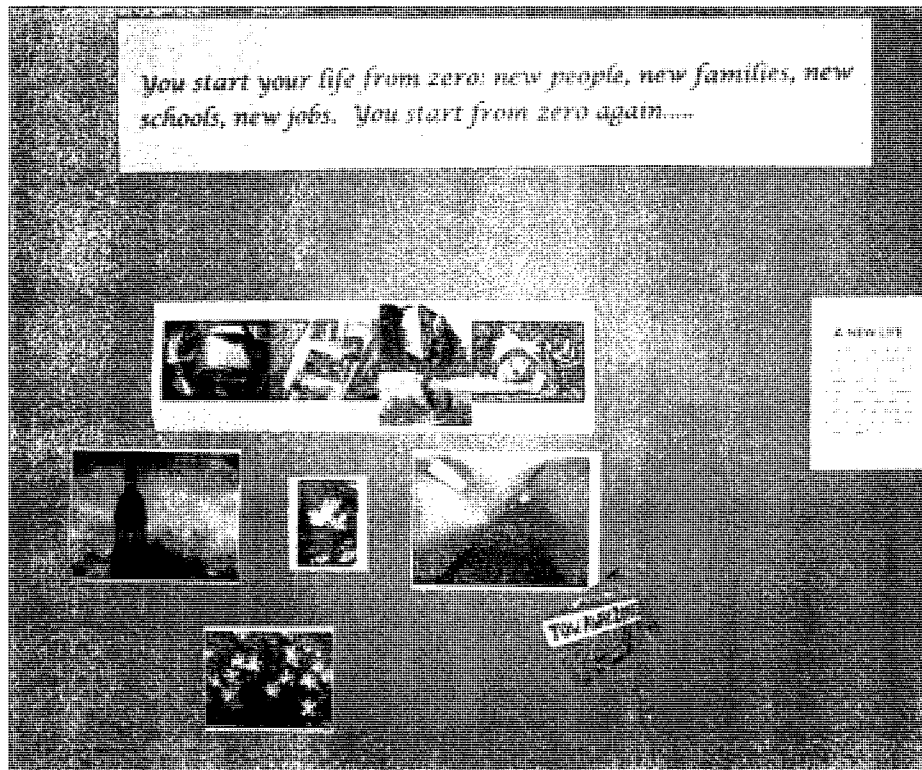
H       and I met the next day for coffee to discuss how this change affected each of us, which included our feelings about it, the implications we saw for the youth, and mainly, how we might be able to recover and create a final show despite this major set back. There were many long pauses as we both tried our best to brainstorm creative solutions; there were few options remaining. We came up with a few ideas and we each made a personal list of our key concerns that we decided to present to Dave when we next saw him. Overall, we both agreed that we felt strongly that this show needed to be

arranged in such a way as to respect, showcase and celebrate the youths' artistic creations. I was worried about who would display the work of the video group, and about curating and hanging a show without help, as I felt responsible to the youth. Despite our brainstorming, and our decision to voice our feelings and recommendations to Dave, Hélène and I both felt dismayed that ultimately we were left with no recourse. We could no longer foresee arranging a show of the quality that the kids deserved, and that we had told the youth every week was the goal they were working towards. I told Hélène that I could not imagine this sort of thing happening within a school setting, and that previously in my teaching I had never come to a situation like this that I couldn't fix.

#### **OBSERVE/ACT**

The next Saturday, Hélène and I both approached Dave individually to explain our concerns. I expressed my concern about having to arrange the entire show without her assistance. Dave told me that he and Susan would help me arrange/curate and hang the more than eighty photos and that it would only take an hour or two. He also agreed to locate a space for the show for next Saturday, and would contact the Gallery to see if we could exhibit there and possibly install the show on Friday. When I explained my feeling disappointed at not having Hélène present to organize the final show with me, Dave explained that he had no choice on the date change, since Susan was partially funding the project. This information helped me to make sense of everything, particularly why our collaborative organization was overruled. I felt slightly better about the prospect of a final show, but could foresee the event being personally exhausting.

Twenty-eighth week. Final Show.



*Photos documenting the final show installed at the Gallery.*

Our final session took place at the Gallery on June thirteenth. The plan was to have an exhibition displaying the artwork created by the youth throughout the session, and a celebratory pizza party. Although artwork was exhibited, and pizza was provided, this show was something very different from what I (and some of the youth) had hoped.

*Ending with a Fizzle, not a bang.*

Dave emailed me on June ninth to tell me he was “still waiting to hear back” about whether or not we could set up the show at the gallery on Friday, and to tell me that in addition to the photos I had printed out for the show, he had forty 8x10 prints developed. This was a surprise to me, since neither myself, nor the youth chose the prints. Since the start of the program I had been saving all images from the youths’ cameras to an external hard drive which was in Dave’s possession. I emailed Dave to ask which images he had sent to print, and mentioned that I knew that some images the youth didn’t want to share for various reasons. I asked if he had managed to export the videos from H  l  ne’s group onto DVD, as he had volunteered to do that since H  l  ne was away. Dave replied (via email) that he hadn’t yet exported the videos, and asked if I could do it. The forty new prints, he said, were a variety. I explained that I did not have the videos in my possession. He added that the Gallery would allow us to install the show in a lunchroom, but had many stipulations for us to follow. He suggested we meet at 10am to arrange the show on Saturday.

Saturday morning began with a series of phone calls between Dave and me attempting to find a way to put the videos onto DVD. At 10 am I was ready to install the exhibition, but Dave and Susan weren't there, and I didn't have access to the space. In

the time in between, I ran around looking for a computer to play the videos on, but to no avail.

Around noon Susan and Dave showed up together. I greeted Susan warmly with a hug and asked how she was doing, since I hadn't seen her for awhile. She said she was fine, and returned the welcome. Susan had brought printed banners she had made containing quotes that she had selected from the interviews. I said that of course we could include them. She stated how they are of key importance because the focus of this project is the stories, and the youth needed to see them and read them. I agreed, and told her that I wanted to make sure that we would have the photos the youth had created on display when they arrived. She reminded me that the youth had done the interviews.

While I walked about madly trying to organize and arrange the photos, Susan asked if putting the quotes up along the middle of the wall would work, and I said that I wanted to first figure out how to arrange the youths' photos in the space. She suggested running the banner quotes along the wall higher up, and I agreed that would be fine. I started organizing the youths' photos along the tables in the room according to whose photos they were. This took me about an hour. Meanwhile, Susan and Dave had gotten a ladder and had finishing hanging the banners as I begun to hang a few photos.

Paul then entered the room bringing a TV and DVD cart, and inquired as to why we were hanging the students' work in the lunchroom. Dave explained that the Gallery coordinator only gave us permission to hang the work in the lunchroom, which was complete with folding cafeteria tables covered in sticky juice residue, and had posters of artwork mounted on board bolted onto the walls. Paul told us this room wouldn't do, and quickly arranged that we hang the work in the large education room—a gallery space that

had spotlights installed all around. I began taking down the few large photos I had hung. Susan and Dave set about taking the banners down and moving them over. Dave worked with Susan to hang the banners with the ladder along the wall of the new space. I began to bring in the youths photos and order them along the floor, so as to organize the space. When I finished arranging the photos, Susan asked me to move the photos in one section, so that the ladder could be set up to straighten one of the banners. She said that, for the youth, we needed to set a good example of the quality we were expecting.

One o'clock neared and my worry grew. Still, none of the youths' photos had been hung. I decided that I would at least try to put up the large photo "series" in order to designate the space for each of the youth. Susan then came up to me to say that she wanted to hang some smaller quotes, as she saw a natural flow where there were spaces on the wall between the five quote banners. I knew that we had more youth than there were banners, and asked Susan if she could wait to hang these smaller quotes until some of the youths' photos had been hung, so that everything would look balanced.

Tami and Sophia (who arrived around one) spent a lot of time standing around, uncertain of what to do, and wondering if anyone else would show up. Eliysha and Erica arrived closer to three. None of the youths' parents came; I learned later that they hadn't been invited. Daniel didn't come. That was a big blow for me, as he'd been looking forward to the show, and doubting that we'd pull it off. He had often asked detailed questions like how long the show would be up, if it would be a real party, or, (he said with a smirk) would we be having "oven-cooked frozen pizza instead of real pizza".

Once I demonstrated how to use the photo mounting tabs, the youth took to the task of hanging the photos with gusto. They held their images very carefully, taking

pains not to crease them, while choosing where to place them. They judged the space to make sure their placement of the images was balanced, and made sure they were level. The youth did an excellent job overall of hanging their photos, as well as the photos of their peers who were late or, in the case of Daniel, didn't show. In the end, all the photos were hung, and all of the youth seemed happy with how they were displayed, except for one youth from the video group who expressed concern over the quote placed above his images. The quote was from one interview where one of the youths' fathers' describe his former home of Haiti as paradise, but sometimes "you wish god would kill you." He came up to me and asked "uh... why is that up there?" "What?" I responded, then turned to read the banner he was pointing at. I jumped a little when I realized what had happened, and quickly explained that it was a quote from an interview that had been placed randomly along the top before the pictures were put up. He asked if the show would be staying up, and I told him (to his relief) that it would be taken down today. Still, the end result of the show looked pretty good. Dave commented that it was too bad we couldn't leave it up.

This final result wasn't because of me, as I had conceded to Dave and Susan's request at around 2:30pm to stop hanging the photos of the youth who hadn't arrived, since we'd have to take them down at 4pm, anyways. The end result was due to the youth showing up and taking great care in hanging their own work, and the few (Tami especially) who worked extra hard to hang photos for others. This was an unexpected and marvelous lesson both for me and for the youth in composition, and curation.

I wish I could say what the youth were thinking through all this, but I can't. What I do know is that today, there wasn't laughing like there usually was, there wasn't

celebration over the success of their photos and how good they looked, and there wasn't discussion about what everyone liked about the youths' images. When most of the youth arrived, Susan talked to them about the importance of each of their family's cultural and immigrant stories. By three-thirty, everyone had arrived. Susan congratulated them on their work, and reminded them that in the Fall, all projects would have to be directly related to the theme of family and immigration, and added, "not that what you've done so far isn't important." She told them that for the exhibit next year, they would need to create artworks about these stories and the interviews. If a great exhibition was created, it would then have the possibility of touring to other art galleries such as the AGO (Art Gallery of Ontario). She told the youth about a colleague of hers from the AGO who was in town and expressed interest in coming to see the youths' work so far, but Susan told us she had responded that we weren't anywhere near having work to show.

At 4pm, we took the show down again, and let the youth take some of their prints home. They were very excited about this, as Dave let them each choose a few prints, and several of the youth chose their two largest and most accomplished prints. These prints were the ones I had printed at the University printing facilities.

## *Chapter 6*

### **Analysis**

#### **Make No Promises, Tell No Lies.**

Much academic writing proclaims the researcher has discovered a new approach, that they have found the key principles surrounding an issue, or have created a guide.

Teachers know that with every small success there remain many more unanswered questions, tiny “failures”, unexpected outcomes and the vast unknown. Attempting to obtain a full and conclusive understanding of all the circumstances at play in the classroom can be difficult, as can simply labeling the parts of the project (Davis, 2007). McNiff (2003) explains that action research is well suited to educational research, as it is a living, breathing research method that follows daily life, and therefore, continues to develop new, additional questions (McNiff, 2003).

In my description of the project I recorded a thorough, although refined account, containing stories of relationships, feelings, setbacks, solutions, decisions made, and actions taken by the various players involved. With each small success, I share my excitement. I maintain that the best understanding of the program will be an individual one, which can be found by reading through the description of the events.

In this analysis I will share the themes that emerged both during my research, and afterwards, following a thorough review of all records I had kept. Other aspects of my analysis included the sifting through and re-telling of the events, and a detailed color-coding of portions of the description. In my color coding of the text, I searched for repeated themes and words as I read, such as communication, time, planning, unprompted youth action, video, photography, and many more. Once I felt I had exhausted all of

these emergent themes, I returned to my key overarching themes of culture, identity, teaching meaningful photography, and organization.

Recognizing emergent themes that surfaced throughout my teaching and participation in Crossing Cultures has been a key aspect of my revisionary action research process. When I experienced resistance or tension either in my planning and organizing stages, or when working with the youth, this feeling would signal an area in need of further inquiry. When left unaddressed, similar struggles would re-occur until the cause for tension was identified and solutions implemented. I learned to fully acknowledge my own emotional awareness as a measure for pinpointing significant new insights. I will provide a forewarning that although many of these findings may be common to other organizations, what I share are observations made from my experience in Crossing Cultures—a specific program, with a unique group of individuals, located within Montreal, Quebec.

The question central to my research with Crossing Cultures is: “To what extent can I contribute to cultural understanding, community cohesion and positive identity construction for an inter-cultural group of Canadian adolescents within a community based, cross-generational, cross-cultural program, through teaching art photography?” Throughout my research I have created and implemented a variety of lessons, and have organized the new media aspects of Crossing Cultures with this question in mind. Because of this, the emergent themes that arose throughout my records and reflections addressed this question. In the following analysis, I present each of my emergent themes as a heading, and provide a brief explanation of how it connects to the question, or is enmeshed with other themes.

Despite the difficulties with categorizing findings, I found that breaking down the data into key topics and issues helped me to better grasp the whole picture in a concrete and manageable fashion, which allowed me to then closely examine it. I have found action research's greatest asset to be that it guides me, in the role of teacher, to gather, review, organize, and analyze data, thereby providing insights into my own teaching and a deeper understanding of the many circumstances present. Examining these observations helps me to realize how I can impact them, or, reveals ways to work around them. The ability of action research to guide a teacher in active conscious reflection allows for a deeper, active engagement with their own teaching as it relates to multiple surrounding factors.

### **Culture. What Does It Mean, and To Whom?**

The word culture is very loaded, and more than once within the program I've wished that there were alternatives (or that I'd never have to hear the word again.) Often when it is raised in lessons with the youth, it is questioned and defined (Knight, 2006, Bastos, 2006, Jacob, 1995). Other times within the program (Crossing Cultures), and also in my thesis, it is assumed to mean: the behaviors and actions of a group of people originating from a specific location. (In order to clarify this definition from others, I will refer to it in italics as *culture*.) This has been a stumbling block, as throughout my teaching and discussions with the youth, both the youth and I have recognized that we are each connected to a wide variety of *cultures*. Furthermore, the youth and I have discovered the diversity of types of cultures that they participate in, which might include Canadian culture, school cultures, and youth cultural groups (or subcultures). When in class we acknowledge this

multiplicity of cultures present, it has a tendency to derail the program's goal of telling the stories of different *cultural groups*. When we discuss the youth's culture, the topic of conversation transitions into their own identities and personal lives. In this space, they are engaged and share authentically, however whenever I have tried to transition back into an exploration of their familial *cultural* stories and representing the interviews, the youth have resisted. As I mentioned earlier, this point of resistance reveals an important area in need of further investigation.

Within Crossing Cultures and in my research, the authentic sharing of cultures/*cultures* is acknowledged as a key goal, as it leads to further understanding of one another. However, creating artwork that tells the stories from the interviews and expresses the youths' observations about different cultures and different families' immigration stories, is also a key goal of Crossing Cultures. After many months of trying to reconcile these two goals, I am still left asking, can it be done?

Ultimately, culture cannot truly be defined as having any singular meaning. Acknowledging one aspect of a person's cultural identity and ignoring others creates dissonance. I realized that the two goals I was trying to teach—the youths' individual identities and cultures, and telling the cultural stories of their families—were in some cases very divergent. When I began my research, I was not so aware of these differences, despite my previous research into identity formation of multi-cultural youth. I was reminded of Arnett's (2001) claim that youth need to learn to reconcile the values of their ethnic group with the values of the majority culture. The theory made it a possibility in my mind, but my experience made it real, and revealed the complexities inherent.

I found it difficult to guide the youth through consideration of their own cultures,

while concurrently encouraging them to then freely take their art into themes of personal significance. (Ultimately, regardless of input, the youth did choose to explore their personal interests, often to the detriment of the project's cross-cultural focus.)

Attempting to combine this personal cultural investigation with the goal of telling the immigrant stories of others (whether their own family members' or another's) resulted in the youths' resistance to telling the immigrant stories. A solution might be to focus on only one goal. However, I would be interested to see if clearly separating the two goals and teaching them consecutively rather than concurrently (as H       and I had initially hoped to do) would resolve the youths' resistance and ease struggles, allowing for the most meaningful discoveries in, and positive impact on, the lives of the youth.

Throughout my study I have recognized the significance of defining culture in a way that adapts itself to the life of the individual. Each individual belongs to numerous cultural groups, each to various degrees, as is exemplified by Hermans & Kempen's (1998) concept of *hybrid identity*. The combination of these cultures creates a composite culture that is both unique to the individual and shared by others who also live within similar cultural combinations. A theoretical example of various cultures, which might join together to create a new culture, are: school, suburban, technology, teen, English, hockey, etc. With all these aspects making up our culture and our identity, it comes as no surprise that youth, who are in the stage of struggling to define their identity, might not want to narrow their cultural self-definition to the singular *culture* of an ethnic, religious or national nature.

I am reminded of the three montages created by Jamal (from the photo group), in our introductory session contemplating culture. After a discussion about the many

aspects comprising culture, the teens were asked to include images that depict their own individual culture. Jamal made two images, which were both very carefully assembled. The first was a comic of a variety of characters from horror movies in which he inserted a train station into the background. The second image was of a woman's legs with a tiny red devil wrapped around it and Jesus in the foreground shaking a finger. When I went over to look at what he was working on I asked how it represented his culture. His response was akin to "uhh... oh yeah. Give me five minutes!" True to his word, within five minutes he created a hastily assembled photomontage depicting three camels, symbols from the flag of his family's country of origin, and three men in traditional dress playing instruments. It looked to be rather stereotypical. When I asked if he was finished, and pointed out the messy edges on the characters, he said he was. I said "Okay, so you don't mind if we put this on the blog with your name on it?" "What, you're not going to really, are you??" was his response, to which I said, "That was the idea." Jamal asked that I please not. Daniel then jokingly suggested he add a sausage to his flying cat image to represent his Eastern European *cultural* heritage. Conversely, Sophia and Eliysha, who were both a few years younger and whose families were newer immigrants, integrated flags, colors, and symbols of their *cultural* heritage into their personal montage seamlessly, without difficulty or dispute. These girls laughed and chatted, pointing out each new element as they constructed their creations.

It is worth noting that the younger participants, around ages 12 and 13, were much more engaged with assignments asking them to depict or investigate their *cultural* origins and family immigration stories, and were more inclined to articulate their feelings surrounding their discoveries. The two younger participants in my group were also closer

to their *cultures*, as Eliysha had immigrated to Canada just a few months before, and Sophia's parents had immigrated to Canada when she was a child, and had kept close ties with the Portuguese community in Montreal. This willingness to participate in activities requested of them, and to investigate their cultures is exemplified by Eliysha's creation of a song expressing her gratitude to be in Canada with her family. She wrote this when I asked her to respond to her family interview, where she recalled a story of violence in her country of origin. The separation of identities from cultural origins experienced by some, but not by others parallels Wu's (1994) findings that the youth who were recent immigrants could speak of their culture and their struggle within a new culture, whereas the youth who had immigrated a number of years before expressed a *double consciousness*, defining themselves according to dual identities: that of their country of origin, and of being marginal within American, or in this case, Canadian society.

### **Art Education for Identity Formation.**

Identity is a complicated thing for everyone. Children search to understand at a basic level who they are to their family, society and one another. Teenagers madly quest to discover and shape their own identity. Throughout life, many adults continue to investigate their identities, only to feel they have come to a realization, and to then have their identity shift once more as their job shifts, their familial roles shift and circumstances change. Even when we are not searching ourselves, we are often searching to understand how we relate to those around us, and so even then we are in flux. Because of this, it is especially significant when teenagers find a tool and system with which to actively take up the process of identity investigation (Arnett 2001).

I believe that in Crossing Cultures it is this need for teenagers to investigate their lives, their world and themselves, whilst being provided with a stable and supportive environment of peers, adults, techniques and tools, that kept them coming back. The two techniques by which the youth investigated their cultures were: interviews with their family members, and being provided with a camera and an environment where they could look at, share, edit and filter through their photographs. Each of the youth had different levels of success with the two exploration methods, depending upon their own interests and orientations. The themes of culture and photography are both closely tied with the theme of identity. I call these overlapping themes the border zone, and analyze them within these rich areas of interconnectedness.

*Border Zone – Identity & Culture.*

To some of the youth, the theme of cultural heritage was closely related to how they identified themselves. Sophia's family is Portuguese. She attends a Portuguese church and has many religious and cultural relics around herself. She is aware of her cultural heritage, and it is celebrated throughout her family, as evidenced by Sophia's grandmother bringing in special Portuguese bread for us all to enjoy just following our Easter session. In the interviews, when one of the other youth asked Sophia's mother and grandmother about a specific Portuguese holiday, they responded enthusiastically and commended her on her knowledge of Portuguese culture.

Not all of the youth came from a similarly culturally active background. For some, I could not tell whether their parents promote their cultural heritage within their homes, or if the youth him/herself has chosen to distance him/herself from their cultural

heritage. This latter possibility is supported by Phinney, Devich-Navarro et al. (1994), who provide four models of identities adopted by adolescents in ethnic minorities, which includes separation from their cultural origins or assimilation into another culture.

Daniel, for example, had a very difficult time thinking of even basic signifiers of his *cultural* heritage. In this lesson, I had asked the youth to brainstorm words relating to representing their *culture(s)* from their family heritage, and words representing their personal culture. Daniel could only think of “sausages” for his family heritage. In week eighteen, I recorded my reflection where I questioned: “*How much is the project about learning each other’s stories, and how much is it about each youth investigating their own identity and learning their own story?*” I also noted Tami’s interest in reclaiming the story of her Dutch grandmother, who had recently passed away. Like Tami, Daniel also seems to have grown distanced from his own cultural family story, or had chosen to distance himself. Unlike Tami, he seemed less interested in telling or exploring his cultural history. I realized that if we were to create artworks on either the youths’ own cultures or on each other’s cultures, someone needed to guide the teens through an authentic, personal cultural exploration. I remember the moment I came to this realization, and recognized that I would have to be their cultural guide. As a second generation Canadian myself, I could relate to some of the youths’ feelings of *cultural* disconnection, as I felt very distanced from my own *cultural* heritage. As an art educator, I have extensive knowledge of the arts, and how to teach them. I couldn’t help but wonder if I was qualified to take on the role of cultural guide (Steinspring, 2001). As with other subjects or media I am not familiar with, but find myself in the position to teach, I turned to literature to find words for my questions and concerns about teaching

culture. Because I needed to finish the photography focus and complete final projects with the youth, I was only able to begin this cultural investigation.

*Border Zone – Identity & Photography.*

It has been my long-held belief that an artistic engagement with the medium of photography provides a setting within which one can (and will) explore their individual identity. Ewald (2002) shares this vision and expands it from the personal to include the communal. She provides examples of instances where the camera allows the youth to explore the connections between their experiences and the various cultures present in their home life, school life, and community life. In Ewald's explorations, it appears that most of the youth often live within similar settings and originate from a like culture, where she goes to meet with them. This may have been a factor that made it easier for the youth in her program to investigate themselves, their environment, and the struggles they faced. During our critiques, the youth shared their photos and discussed their composition, meaning, and content. Similar to Ewald's experience, this became an entrance into discussions about the youths' lives, experiences, and cultures. A further benefit was seen during our largest critique, where the founders of Crossing Cultures were also present. During this critique, the youth not only shared with one another about their lives, their interests and their cultures; they were also affirmed by the adults both for their photographs, and for the content, which represented their lives.

Some of the teens linked learning how to master technical photography and editing techniques to their identity, as they desire to identify themselves as an artist, photographer, journalist or even family photography expert. For others, photography was

a task to be taken lightly, and did not fall in line with their personal desires and goals. Despite the initial disinterest of some of the youth (Sophia, for example) in mastering how to edit photos in Photoshop, the results of successfully learning the techniques, and having her images printed out and admired by both peers and adults was significant and spurred her artistic pursuit onwards.

Even during focused critique sessions, the content of an image was often times overlooked by others if the image itself wasn't visually compelling. In Erica's first series, she chose to leave all her images very dark. The photos she took were compelling compositionally and intriguing as metaphors, but due to their lack of contrast and their being slightly underexposed, the darker images were not treated to the same introspection and meaningful response as their more visually compelling and skillfully edited counterparts.

### **Teaching Meaningful Photography.**

#### *Looking to the photos.*

I began with the intention of aiding the youth in a meaningful exploration of photography. I learned that what was meaningful was different for each youth. For Daniel, it was the aesthetic and exploratory art of photography, as was demonstrated by his architectural and design oriented photos. He elaborated on this interest during group discussions. Erica also explored aesthetics, as well as images representing her own life and feelings. In the photos she uploaded, I would see self-portraits taken in her room, dark places that she walked through, and introspective hidden details of beautiful spaces that were her hideaways. Erica didn't follow any assignments given to her, although in

the final day of our photo-focus, through discussion with the other youth, she came up with an idea based on her grandma's story that she expressed interest in completing. Following this, she listened through the interview and recorded by hand her grandmother's words to accompany the image. However, this project was never realized.

Sophia's photos were of her *culture*. They showed the objects in her room and around her church, which were mostly Portuguese and religious in nature. These were the photos she took the first week when she was asked simply to take pictures of anything, of her world around her. Her photos were also of her family: candid shots of her father dancing, her sister, and her baby brother. Sophia's family encouraged her photography, and embraced her newfound role as family photographer and Photoshop expert. Showing her photos to us gave Sophia a firm starting point for sharing her stories and what was important to her. Listening to critique that both questioned her style, identified and described it, led Sophia to further understand her own aesthetic values and experiment with new ideas she liked. For some, the assignments I provided gave a helpful starting point. For others, it was thrown away, and the youth continued their own exploration of the world around them. I can definitively say that when given the assignment of exploring their own culture, family, or the cultures of others, it required continuous effort and encouragement from myself and others within Crossing Cultures for the youth to create anything in that theme.

I think that this avoidance of the theme of culture is due to its intrinsic complexity and the difficulties associated with telling and respecting the stories of others. The youth understood the complexity of culture inherently, rather than conceptually. When contemplating how to share his culture, Daniel immediately turned to his grandmother's

story and asked how he could tell it, when her life experience was nowhere near his. "Where am I supposed to find a van covered in bullet holes?" he asked. He also voiced his concerns for respecting his grandmother's story, stating that he didn't think he could represent it properly. He said that he didn't even know what living through that situation was like, in order to depict it metaphorically. Sophia, on the other hand didn't struggle with the *culture* theme at all. The reason for this I believe was because she was so closely connected with it. The story she recalled from her family interview was a religious one, of the Fatima, which she said she also knew about before. She was very interested in creating a photomontage to represent this, and did so without delay.

The youth who struggled to create photography which responded to, retold, or otherwise involved their *cultures* were also the youth whose families immigrated from traumatic settings, such as war or violence. Erica, Daniel and Eliysa fell into this category. Tami was interested in her grandmother's story, but could no longer retrieve it (she is second generation Canadian, with her parents born in Canada.) Sophia's family was the only one that emigrated from Portugal due to reasons unrelated to violence. They moved due to economic concerns, and wanting an education with better career prospects for their children.

#### *Technology - Digital vs. Darkroom*

Digital photography is now widespread, and it can be easy to forget how different it is from film photography. Darkroom photography has a certain sort of magic to it that happens the first time you put a photographic paper into the developer and see an image appear. It captures interest, and has an enchanting quality. I haven't yet seen a student who wasn't won over to photography after developing their first image in the darkroom.

Working in the darkroom can also be communal. Even in an environment where there is little communication, the artists move around one another and watch with curiosity as another's image floats, revealed, in the fix. It develops an appreciation for colleagues, as both experienced photographers and beginners relate to one another through the artistic sensation of knowing, feeling and seeing all that an image speaks. This experience has often prompted me to step forward with congratulations or a helpful technical tip.

In film photography, the photographer is compelled to carefully choose their photos, as there are a finite number of frames, and it is costly to develop. Digital photography, on the other hand, produces an image dump. It's rare that an image will remain mysterious and in need of further investigation. With digital editing, one sees instant results on the screen; however, it is often a long time before one holds the photograph, properly printed in their hands. It still remains difficult (and costly) to have a digital image produced at the quality of a silver gelatin print. Many photos never see the light of day (so to speak), and disappear in electronic data debris or worse, in an unforeseen computer crash.

During my photo-focus sessions within Crossing Cultures, I would stand by as the youth sat in front of their computers, searching for the right Photoshop tool to do the right job. Daniel spent over an hour on each photo, and because of this, he had little finished work to show for it. Others were not so patient, and would do hasty editing jobs and then appear to abandon their images out of frustration and a lack of mastery of the digital tools. When Eliysha became frustrated with editing, she would often begin to joke around loudly and tease those around her. At the start of the photo-focus, she and Sophia seemed the most interested in just hanging out and having fun. Erica, who is a few years older,

would find solace in Facebook rather than exploring Photoshop's editing abilities further. More than once, Erica expressed her desire to paint or work with film photography and developing images in the darkroom. However, the amount of assistance the youth need in the computer lab meant I did not have the time to teach her darkroom photography. Tami was happy to work at editing her photos, but would only show up to session when someone contacted her to ask for her presence. Everyone would arrive on time with a renewed interest in choosing and compiling their images when it was announced that they were to be printed.

Each of the youth had images that they wanted to see on paper and hold in their hands. Acquiring these images meant that I had to collect their digital files in one location and go to a facility to have them printed. The most convenient place (a nearby drug store) printed very low quality images, and didn't print others altogether. It was very difficult for me to obtain financial support to print images at the University's new media facility where I could spend several hours printing images at a fraction of the cost of a reliable commercial printing facility. Having access to such a facility is rare, and having quality images printed is a necessity. When I asked the youth if it was important for them to see the photos physically, (or if viewing them digitally was just as meaningful), they all strongly agreed that having their images printed was essential, and very different from seeing them on the computer screen.

### **Collaborative Teaching and Learning: A Community-Classroom Mentorship Model.**

When I first set out to teach in Crossing Cultures, it was with the intention of collaborating with the youth in the creation of lessons. In this, I was following the

approach of Wendy Ewald, and what seemed like a natural need to share power in a program where my goal was to teach the youth meaningful photography and aid them in exploring their cultural identities (Ewald, 2002, Owens et al., 1996). Teaching in a transformative (Miller, 2007), collaborative manner was not an easy transition from my experience teaching in high school and university environments. I began by intentionally writing into my lesson plans discussion times for deciding on future lesson plans, and questions, where the youth could choose the outcome. Still, I transitioned between a transformative approach and transaction approach, transaction being when I provided a curriculum that the youths responded to, rather than one that they created themselves (Miller, 2007). I feel that the youth also had to adapt to this new method, as they were very used to sitting and listening to lessons, and then doing what they were told. Some of the youth thrived in this new environment, such as Daniel, who was known to chronically skip school, whereas others (Eliysha, Tami) seemed more comfortable doing what was asked of them. I learned throughout this process that if I wanted to collaborate with the youth, I needed to learn how to communicate with them better. I wanted to communicate in a way that fostered authentic relationships based on care, so that they would feel open with their thoughts and ideas, and would feel listened to. I called this goal: "Learning the Art of Communicating with Teenagers."

Questions I asked myself included "How can I improve my communication with teenagers about their lives, and develop real relationships?" and "How can we have open discussions where everyone feels free to say what they want?" These questions arose mid-way through the photo focus program, and led me to more enthusiastically embrace a collaborative approach, as I realized that if I wanted openness and a redistribution of

power, I had to fully accept their choices. Here I will say a few things about my experience implementing a philosophy of empowerment, self-determination and adolescent ownership in Crossing Cultures.

My central observation regarding collaborative teaching/learning is that redistributing power to the youth gives them the ability to self-determine their actions, thereby strengthening self-expression and improving relationships with instructors and one another. This parallels the experience (and mandate) of Ifetayo Cultural Arts (Archer-Cunningham, 2007). I experienced many positive outcomes in applying a collaborative teaching/learning approach, and faced struggles as well. I begin with the benefits I encountered.

The youth chose what to create; they owned their creations and owned their decisions. The youth created unique images, each in their own individual style. This led me to believe that the youth developed their artistic selves, and that what they learned during our sessions crossed over into their outside lives. Thirdly, I recognized that following this method, relationships between the youth and adults improved. The youth shared more, and appeared to feel happier and more comfortable in class. I myself felt more comfortable teaching them collaboratively. Fourth, for some youth, this approach is accompanied by an improvement in behavior (such as Sophia, and Daniel). I could not determine if this was simply an improvement of behavior in our program, or if it is indicative of an overall change (such as improvement in their self identity) that took place in their lives. With Daniel, I feel it is the latter, which makes me very happy.

As a teacher, I feel good about my relationship with the youth. The youth respected when I asked them to listen, because I respected their thoughts and words. This

approach was good for classroom management. I was able to be honest with the youth (for example, they would say they didn't get much sleep, and I would say that I was up late working), and my appeals to them were less often based on my authority than on my being a mentor who gave my time to them, was committed to and cared for them, and provided them with knowledge and means. Furthermore, collaborative teaching and learning provided the youth with the ability to adapt the program to their own needs and interests. This approach supports my belief that the creation of art needs to be an uninhibited, free action. It cannot, and should not, be forced. It needs to come from a central, creative soul-place, and the youth need to be allowed to express what comes from that place, rather than create an artwork that they are told to make.

Although I felt that my experience in collaborative teaching was wonderful and, in a number of ways, successful, I also recognized a number of difficulties and frustrations I faced following this approach. Firstly, the self-determination ascribed to the youth allowed them to choose not to do what is asked of them, which led to a disruption to the program and teaching goals. It also meant that on down days (tired days, etc.), there would likely be little engagement and production. This was especially difficult given that lessons occurred only once a week. Some of the youth didn't respond as well as others to the self-guidance, or chose regularly not to do anything at all. Thirdly, the more relaxed atmosphere seemed to result in slower production of work. I speculate that a relaxed, power-sharing atmosphere with positive relationships might be the very reason why the youth showed up and stayed committed to the photo focus portion of the program.

One major frustration I experienced was that when given the option to follow an

assignment designed to broaden their investigation into photography, all youth choose repeatedly not to follow this guidance. In fact, most of the youth would choose not to venture into the unknown or push themselves to try new things whenever they were given the option, no matter how much encouragement, how many prompts or inspirational examples they received. The only time they made an effort to follow a suggested assignment was when it was repeatedly requested, as with art piece based on the interviews. Even then, the final product was never fully realized. I could say this was due to a lack of time, however the reality is that several new lessons were added to our original schedule in order to make up for occasional low turnout or the youth neglecting to bring in content related to their cultures and interviews. Finally, a neutral conclusion following the positive and negative analysis: in collaborative teaching, the youth are not forced. They need to come to their own conclusions about whether or not they want to be involved, and whether or not they will follow guidance.

### **Organization, Partnerships and Relationships in Crossing Cultures and Community Art Education.**

Working within a start-up, social-justice community organization was a new experience for me, in which I learned much. Before I begin, I want to note the huge amount of energies contributed on behalf of the program founders to get Crossing Cultures up and running. Tasks which they performed included: finding funding to begin the program, creating and affirming the mandate, garnering support and advice from a variety of professionals in related fields, establishing partnerships, locating facilities, finding staff, and soliciting youth who might be interested in and impacted by the program. When all

this had been arranged and the program had been slated to begin, then came the task of organizing the day-to-day schedule and collaborating with (and negotiating between) instructors. Despite all the careful measures taken (and possibilities considered), some details can only be known through experience.

I began teaching in Crossing Cultures with a preliminary proposal for the photo focus program, a basic understanding of what the program was about, and of what difficulties I might face. In hindsight, I had little knowledge of the setbacks I would experience, many of which are common to non-profit programs and action-research projects alike. I feel fortunate to have been involved in a program that encouraged collaboration and input from all parties, and sought to respect the special skills each of us brought into the program. Because of the organizational role I took on in collaborating between several of the art educators and helping to decide on weekly classes, I learned more about the inner workings of Crossing Cultures, and also accepted responsibility for the outcomes. Because of this responsibility, I have made a special effort to uncover the different factors operating within the program, so that I can make informed recommendations which aim to improve future results, and also, so that I could know what I would do differently if I were to be involved with a similar program in the future. The recommendations I make are through the eyes of an art educator, and relate primarily to improving my goals and involvement with the project.

In my analysis of the data I found five themes related to the planning, organization, and partnerships within Crossing Cultures that impacted my teaching. They are: the relationships between players (functional and emotional), the institutions involved, the goals of different individuals (and their institutions), and the start-up of an

organization, including logistical considerations, such as supplies, resources and wages. In each of these areas I learned first how they operated within a non-profit social-justice and community art education program, and then how I could best operate within the circumstances.

### *Roles and Relationships*

Within Crossing Cultures there were a variety of different roles and relationships. Relationships occurred between people and between institutions. The program founders (mentioned above) had a variety of roles, and ultimately decided who would be doing what, and when. In Crossing Cultures, the founders were also teachers, who taught the interviewing component of the program. Next, there were the youth. The youth came from diverse backgrounds and home situations. All were teens (or very nearly), between the ages of 12 and 16, and all had agreed to come every Saturday from 1pm to 4pm for the duration of the project. The educators in the project included myself, H  l  ne, Paul and Rachel. My relationship to the other educators made them either competing educators, collaborating educators, or educator friends. People who impacted my research included professional friends/colleagues who provided feedback and support, and people from the University, most notably my advisor, who served as a checkpoint with whom I would share the state of my research and the project, and would be given either a recommendation to adapt or a confirmation to continue my approach. The institutions consisted of the Gallery, the University and the College. The College, for the most part, was a facilitator, allowing us to use their space and only occasionally limiting it due to their own students' need to access the space during peak times. The University communicated with the program founders, and myself. The Gallery turned out to have

one of the most program-impacting agendas. In addition to promoting the mandate of Crossing Cultures, the Gallery had the conflicting goal of promoting their collection, which consisted primarily of traditional European paintings. The Gallery also required us to work with the Gallery educator, whose job was to incorporate Gallery content into Crossing Cultures.

The program founders had previous positive experience with the Gallery, exhibiting work from a prior social justice art program they were involved with. Maintaining our connection with the Gallery was important, as they had access to resources for the creation of art, as well as the venue and means for putting on a high quality art exhibition which would then welcome the community (and school programs) to share in the discoveries of the program. Through this experience, I learned that it was much easier for the individuals within Crossing Cultures to adapt and collaborate with one another than it was for the institution to adapt its goals. I discovered the power imbalance that can occur between a large, established European-derived institution and a small, grassroots, cross-cultural community art education program. I experienced first-hand how this relationship became imposing and detrimental to the overall program goals, and I saw the resulting detachment of the youth to the program. Many such lessons took place within the first half of the program, and have not been recorded in the narrative. The presence within Crossing Cultures of two distinct art programs that ran side by side—that of the Gallery, and that of the other educators in Crossing Cultures—further evidenced this division.

This leads me to wonder how smaller organizations can successfully collaborate with larger ones, and if it is possible at all. Perhaps it is necessary that both organizations

acknowledge this power imbalance and create safeguards to bolster the smaller program, such as regular meetings to check on the smaller program's main goals. I recall that mid-way through the first half of Crossing Cultures, a meeting was arranged with the Gallery educator and organizer, where myself and H  l  ne voiced our concern regarding only European paintings and European-derived content being introduced to the youth as real art verified by historians and artists through the ages. Together we provided recommendations, such as that they show art from a variety of different cultures. The recommendations were considered, and the lessons became somewhat less Euro-centric, although (except for one), they continued to lack multi-cultural content.

In addition to institutional relationships, personal relationships between all members of Crossing Cultures were also of key significance to program organization and my experience teaching. For example, my relationship with H  l  ne was a notably advantageous one. H  l  ne and I conversed regularly and openly, which built up our relationship as art educator-friends. Our communications were imbued with respect for one another, as we listened and shared our thoughts, feelings and questions. Through this partnership I learned the vast benefit of collaborating closely with a teacher-friend, and witnessed how together we could pinpoint problems, create, and apply solutions much more quickly and successfully than either of us could have done on our own. In a similar way, greater understanding, agreement, planning, and appreciation for one another occurred whenever all organizers and educators involved in Crossing Cultures met together for focused communication. Due to the range of schedules and availabilities, arranging these large meetings was difficult and infrequent, but I felt, very worthwhile.

During these meeting, I was reminded of the importance of openly sharing my

planning and organizational struggles. Sharing my thoughts and planning frustrations with everyone was greeted with assistance and positive responses that led to my feeling respected and supported in my role as an art educator. When we asked one another questions and created solutions, all relationships improved. Vocalizing my process and plans to everyone is something I have learned that I need to work on doing more regularly. Throughout my participation in Crossing Cultures, I recognized my ability to take up an leadership role in organizing the media arts component of the project. I have learned that this curriculum development is a strength of mine, and an area that I need to explore further.

Through this experience, I recognized that teaching within a collaborative organization is very different from teaching in high schools and academic institutions. In a high school, the teacher is autonomous and instructs a subject area however he or she wishes. In Crossing Cultures, almost all decisions are communal, which has the benefit of diversifying one's knowledge and partnership with others, but has the drawback of demanding a much greater time investment, often requiring plans to be repeatedly adapted, modified, and occasionally, compromised. Non-profit community organizations often require the investment of extensive hours and energies from those involved in planning and organization. The rewards are found in relationships formed with the youth and others, in seeing youths' lives positively impacted, and in being involved in a program that centers around caring for others and an attitude of hope, that together we can make positive change in the community.

*My involvement in the start-up of Crossing Cultures.*

Starting up an organization is a difficult task, requiring a lot of time, patience, co-operation and understanding that there will be many areas requiring troubleshooting and adaptation as new information is discovered experientially. As an art educator, I found it difficult to recognize my role, and eventually understood that I had to step forward and establish the specifics of my role myself. Within Crossing Cultures, those who were heavily involved in the program were the same people who showed up, spoke up, participated in collaborative planning, and took action. By doing these things, I maintained a place for myself in Crossing Cultures; however, I expended a huge amount of energy doing so. In the future, I will make an effort to focus my energy more efficiently. One way to do this might be to clarify my role with other educators and program coordinators earlier on, and to attempt to organize and agree upon a plan of action from the outset of the program.

By establishing my goals and plans at the beginning of the program, I may be less likely to find myself fluctuating between objectives, and may be more strongly supported by other members of the teaching and organizational team. An example of alternating between goals and project foci occurred in the new media program. The photo-focus sessions began with the intention of creating a small project on identity, which then became cultural identity, which, following Susan's request, ultimately turned into telling stories from the interviews. I attempted to blend these foci together, but in the end, I felt that (due to a number of factors), none of the categories were ever fully addressed.

I've also learned that the more goals simultaneously existing within a program (including various personal goals from all parties involved) the longer, more multi-

faceted and complex it will be. In the same way, I entered into Crossing Cultures with the aim of addressing a variety of inter-related goals simultaneously: identity, community cohesion and cultural understanding, with teens from of different ages. Through teaching, I learned just how vast these topics are, and in some cases, how divergent. I now recognize the benefit of closely investigating one, or maximum two goals at a time.

Despite my suggestions, I still acknowledge that regardless of how clearly I might seek to determine my role within a program, projects like Crossing Cultures are fluid and changing. All factors are never fully known until they emerge through firsthand experience. Furthermore, as it was the first year of the program, I recognize that the uncertainty, revision, and extensive planning I experienced was likely inevitable. As is with most new working environments, the learning curve was steep.

## *Chapter 7*

### **Conclusions**

I will be so bold as to announce my project to be in many ways a success. It was a success because of the positive relationships formed, and also because the youth learned about each other's cultures and lives. Furthermore, I believe that I made a positive impact in the lives of some of the youth. Another reason my action research was a success is that I discovered a great deal about my teaching and philosophies regarding culture, and about teaching and organizing within a collaborative community project. I also learned how a collaborative teaching/learning framework helps me to teach photography that is meaningful to the youth, and I discovered the complexities inherent in any cultural exploration with teens. As the group of youth I worked with was small, I can only suggest these findings (based upon my observations) may have the possibility of being representative of greater truths; I cannot present them as definitive facts.

The singular (albeit large) question that I started with brought about many more questions and possibilities. I believe the same rule applies to research that applies to life: if you begin with a question which leads you to better understanding and provides you with more questions, you are in fact on the path to true knowledge, as any good truth is always riddled with more questions. A truth which doesn't cause one to ask further questions may not be a truth at all. There is always more to learn. Arthur Bloch once said, "Every clarification breeds new questions," while Decouvertes stated "It is not the answer that enlightens, but the question."

### **Questions and Possibilities:**

#### *Questions and Possibilities Surrounding Investigations into Cultural Heritage.*

Of all the topics, teaching culture left me with the most questions, and some ideas for new possible approaches. Part of the reason for this might be my lack of specialized education in the area of culture. I think the main reason for my new abundance of questions surrounding culture, is due to an expanded understanding that I gained through teaching the youth of Crossing Cultures. As I taught them and collaborated with them I began to see a trust developing between us, and my care for the youth grew. Because of this care, any concerns I had about the potential negative implications that addressing and defining the youths' personal cultures might have on their identities was heightened. I was especially grateful for the weeklong break between sessions which allowed me time to move forward slowly on the topic and seek counsel from other educators.

Another safeguard to the youth existed in the collaborative teaching and learning environment, where the youth practiced their freedom to ignore lessons or suggestions they were not interested in or felt uncomfortable with. If the opportunity were to arise, in future ventures I would like to try working closely in a similarly collaborative learning environment with a specialist in culture and marginalized groups. An example of some questions I have surrounding this topic include, "Is it a prerequisite to understand one's own culture before exploring someone else's?" and "What benefits to youths' identities and to the community are gained from re-introducing first-generation Canadian youth who have assimilated into majority culture to their *cultural* origins?"

In my experience teaching the youth of Crossing Cultures, I observed that the

participants who were in their mid-teens were more engaged with photography when exploring their individual identity than when exploring culture or the stories and lives of others. I also noticed that Eliysha and Sophia, who were just entering their teens, had greater interest in engaging in cultural inquiries. Furthermore, I recognized that whenever we explored the concept of culture, there was a tendency for the youth to fall into stereotyping their own cultural groups. I learned that in my teaching (and in the program), a special effort must be made to avoid identifying an individual as being representative of one ethnic culture or one country's culture.

#### *Questions and Possibilities Surrounding Collaborative Teaching/Learning.*

Throughout my experience in collaborative teaching/learning, I noticed how difficult it was for me to relinquish my role as teacher, and allow the youth complete agency in their projects. Even during the times when I felt successful in providing the youth with freedom and choice, I would later wonder if I should have been more firm. For example, should I have begun this collaborative approach with a verbal commitment from the youth, whereby they agree to follow the process through and continue participation and production, even if they chose a different route than the one I suggested? In my moments of greatest doubt, I admitted to myself that I still remained unsure if this teaching approach would really work with teenagers, especially in a community setting. I do know that despite the frustrations negotiating a partnership with the youth, it felt really good. Teaching in this approach felt natural, the way that interacting with a good friend or family member feels. I learned that in my teaching, I prefer to approach the youth as equals, with each of us possessing different skills, knowledge and ideas. I enjoy having

my teaching beliefs reflected in my teaching style and lessons. This experience has led me to clarify my teaching vision. I now recognize that since I want to aid youth in positive identity formation and self-expression, I must seek to create an equal-power environment characterized by free choice and self-determination. It is my present goal to develop my abilities as an educator by learning how best to facilitate this environment. I know I still have more to learn. The central question I have about collaborative teaching/learning is: How do I hold onto the positive aspects of collaboration without losing production (both quality and quantity)? I imagine that if I were to run a collaborative teaching/learning photography program free from pre-defined goals, one of two scenarios would occur. Either the youth would choose to implement and experiment with some of my technical and conceptual suggestions, or I would learn how to adapt my teaching completely around supporting their ideas, and how not to give “lessons” in the traditional sense. I also wonder what would happen if youth were to walk into the class for the first time and, without any guidance or suggestions, were told, “Create a project, we’re here to help.” For beginners, I imagine this might be an intimidating situation, and have the possibility of debilitating their investigation. For youth who had some experience in the media already and possessed basic technical skills, I imagine it would be liberating.

*Questions and Possibilities Surrounding Organization, Relationships  
and Community Art Education.*

Working with Crossing Cultures was an enlightening venture into being part of a significant, start-up, collaborative community project. Although I have worked in a

number of teaching settings before, few of them were as truly collaborative in their approach as Crossing Cultures has been. Because of this, I found myself taking on a new organizational role within Crossing Cultures. This allowed me to develop new understanding about how I operate best as an educator and as an organizer in a collaborative community program.

I learned that I am most successful when collaborating with small, intimate groups, where a balance of power and mutual respect exists between all players. I have learned firsthand that such an environment is difficult to maintain, especially when different people are participating to varying extents. I grew to recognize that I have conflicting feelings regarding the distribution of responsibility within an organization. I desire to have one individual in control of organizing each aspect of the program (such as an director overseeing all the art educators), and conversely, I believe that by reducing power imbalance and creating an environment of equality amongst all staff and program organizers, individuals become more capable of authentic collaboration, and more likely to realize greater potential both individually and collectively.

Through my experience, I learned that when one individual from any part of the organization acts independently of the group, problems arise such as miscommunication, scheduling conflicts, misdirection of goals and ultimately, frustrations and setbacks. Another discovery I had was how much I enjoyed working within a collaborative teacher-friendship, and how incredibly effective this method was. I learned the necessity of clearly expressing my plans, thoughts, and needs as an art educator and program organizer to others involved—especially to those unfamiliar with the field.

Grassroots community programs with a vision for social change are unique from

other educational programs. As a new initiate, I found it to be a complex setting that required time to learn how to navigate. Through this experience, I learned to appreciate the commitment, openness, and roles of everyone involved, and I hope to apply this to my involvement with future organizations. My resulting question regarding planning in a community art education program is: How flexible and adaptable are community organizations in comparison to other organizations?

*Questions and possibilities surrounding teaching meaningful photography.*

I came to Crossing Cultures with a tacit belief that each of the youth would be interested in photography, and would either enter into the program with this prior interest, or that through my lessons they would become interested in the medium. Later in the photo focus, following a low turnout, Dave came to me and said that in his experience, some youth just aren't interested in photography. As I thought about this statement I became more aware of my bias towards the medium, I asked myself who of the youth were intrinsically interested in the medium and the process, and who was there because it was a condition of the program? Was it my responsibility to motivate those uninterested in the art form, and is that even possible? The youth began to provide answers as some of them started to express a greater interest not just in photography itself, but also in being part of the group and working through our process of imagining art and considering the conceptual. It was because of one youths' interest in drawing and painting, combined with my own excitement for installation, that I taught a lesson on "unusual photography," which included a great number of mixed-media techniques using photography. A revelation occurred at one point: that I wouldn't expect any individual to be especially

interested in painting, or print making, and so why should it be different with the medium of photography? My approach to meaningful photography is based on two parts: investigating one's own life with the camera (which is similar to Photovoice projects), and learning to master technical photography and editing techniques so that one might artfully engage with photography and create aesthetically appealing images. For me, this means that the images don't have to tell a story, but they have to be somehow meaningful to the individual creating them.

I learned that as a teacher I can introduce the youth to photography, and I can encourage them to explore the medium and learn the editing techniques. I can even develop interest where little existed before, and expose some for the first time to their photographic abilities, but the passion for photography as an art form comes from a certain special connection that some people have with it. I could foresee using the camera to teach identity with less of a focus on editing and creating aesthetically moving images; however as a photographer, (and one who is smitten by the medium), I prefer to teach photography "with heart" to those who have an interest in the medium and the aesthetics of photography.

When I showed the images created by the Crossing Cultures youth at a symposium, I was encouraged by the response from my discussant. She said that she could clearly see the progress made by each of the youth in the images I showed. I realized that I have a tendency to take a good image for granted, especially at the beginner level. I resolved to be more careful in the future to point out and celebrate successful images as they are being created. I rest assured knowing that this was done in the critiques. I also recognize a great benefit to the approach of briefly introducing the

youth to a variety of media, and then providing them with the choice of many artistic avenues to embrace and create within.

The question/future possibility I took from this experience is: how would an artistic collaboration between a youth and an artist look different from a teaching collaboration? I also remain curious to know if an individual must first be introduced to the basic technical aspects of photography (and be provided theoretical and art historical background) in order to create a conceptually complex or meaningful photographic work. In the future, I hope to investigate these questions and introduce the possibility of photo-based, new media installation art into my teaching and research, as I realized that this possibility excites me the most.

## *Chapter 8*

### **Final Closing Summary**

The setting of community art education has been both a trying and rewarding one for me as an instructor and collaborating organizer. The collaboration it opened up with my colleague and teacher-friend, Hélène was meaningful and incredibly valuable. In contrast, navigating organizational decisions with the many people involved was more often than not stressful, time consuming and in some cases disadvantageous to the goals and success of the program (such as working with Paul, a requirement of our collaboration with the Gallery.) In the photography-focus program of Crossing Cultures, the youth were greatly encouraged to create imagery based on their own (or another's) cultural history, but were ultimately allowed to come to their own final decisions. In the end, the teens chose to investigate their own personal surroundings, and resisted all direction regarding subject matter.

Using photography as tool for exploring the teens' unique identities and cultures was in my feeling a success. Although there were times when not everyone was engaged, they did each take pictures of what their world looked like to them, and shared these pictures and stories with each other. Through looking at these images, discussions, and questions, the youth got to know each other in a very real way. Some had an overt cultural heritage or cultural group that they identified with, and shared about their traditions, their religion and more. Others belonged more to a teen culture, and shared images of exploration, late night street shots and their walk home from school. I believe this created a community within our class, and true cultural understanding between the youth that was free from stereotyping and was instead based in real relationships.

At the beginning of Crossing Cultures misunderstandings existed between the youth which seemed to be based in different ways of being, or, in their different cultures. As they displayed and discussed their photos with one another, and spent week after week working together and listening to each other, the teens developed understanding and appreciation for each other's unique traits. Within the photo group, a small community formed where the youth freely expressed themselves and were happy. This is evidenced by the abundance of laughter and the teens returning in the final weeks of the photo focus session on time, and ready and willing to share with one another. Finally, I learned that applying a power sharing philosophy in educational settings has the end result of creating authentic community where teachers can impact the lives of the youth through a positive mutually respectful relationship.

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*Appendix A*  
**Parent/Minor Consent Form**

CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

This is to state that I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Laurel Hart that will contribute to her M.A. thesis in the Department of Art Education of Concordia University. I understand that Ms. Hart is working under the supervision of Dr. Lorrie Blair, Art Education, Concordia University. Ms. Hart can be reached at 514-409-4278 or [laurelhart@gmail.com](mailto:laurelhart@gmail.com).  
Dr. Blair can be reached at [lblair@alcor.concordia.ca](mailto:lblair@alcor.concordia.ca)

**A. Purpose**

I have been informed that the purpose of this research study is for Laurel Hart to examine her teaching as it applies to [Crossing Cultures] with the goal of recording "To what extent can Ms. Hart contribute to cultural understanding, community cohesion and positive identity construction for first generation Canadian adolescents of immigrant parents using a community based, cross-generational, cross-cultural photojournalism program?" In order to answer this question, I understand that Ms. Hart will be documenting group discussions, recording my response to lessons and my experience, as well as copies of the images I produce with the goal of improving her own teaching.

**B. Procedures:** Research Location: [The Gallery and the College.] (Omitted for anonymity.) As a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in project [Crossing Cultures] as usually, occasionally recording journal entries describing your response to the lesson. Furthermore, at the completion of your focused study with me on photography and/or digital photo manipulation, I will ask you to complete one or two thirty minute interviews which will be recorded, asking about your experience in the project. During these audio taped interviews, images and texts produced during your participation in [Crossing Cultures] will be used as a source of data. The data from these activities regarding your personal experience will be collected, analyzed, and interpreted to determine to what extent Ms. Hart's teaching has contributed to positive-identity

formation, your development as an artist and how future programs can be changed and improved upon.

**C. Conditions of Participation**

I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at anytime without negative consequences. I understand that it is MY CHOICE and that of my parent or guardian whether my participation remain (please circle one):

CONFIDENTIAL

(Where the researcher will know but will not disclose my identity) or

DISCLOSED

(Where the researcher will know and will reveal the real" identity of participants in results / published material).

I understand that the data from this study may be published.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT.

I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print) \_\_\_\_\_

SIGNATURE

\_\_\_\_\_  
SIGNATURE OF PARENT OR GAURDIAN IF UNDER LEGAL AGE OF CONSENT

Date \_\_\_\_\_

If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at 514-848-2424x7481 or by email at Adela.Reid@concordia.ca