

Shoot From the Hip: Exploring Visual Culture Through a Personal Lens

Lea Kabiljo

A Thesis

in

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of

Art Education

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ABSTRACT

Shoot From the Hip: Understanding Visual Culture Through a Personal Lens

Lea Kabiljo

This arts based research aims to facilitate the understanding of visual culture for secondary school students. This research uses a snapshot approach to photography, known as Lomography, as a means to collect primary data. As artist, I engaged in a creative act through editing of images taken at different times and at various locations. This resulted in the creation of visual narratives that reflected my personal experience. Through my artistic process I became aware of the intention of creative process, questioned the issue of power between the artist, the image and the viewer, and examined the significance of the invisible - three important concerns present in critical study of visual culture. Relating these concerns to a subjective experience enhanced my ability to recognize and reflect on their presence in global visual culture.

Consequently, I involved my students in the same artistic process, and witnessed how this process enabled the students to engage in critical inquiry and respond to the visual culture that shapes their everyday existence. This thesis demonstrates that in order to successfully engage students in critical inquiry of visual culture, teachers must first help them to become aware of how they, as individuals, relate to, participate in and create visual messages that shape their culture.

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Introduction

This is visual culture.

It is not just a part of your everyday life,

it is your everyday life.

(Mirzoeff, 1999, p3)

This is the story of my everyday life. This is my visual culture.

A couple of years ago, during a visit to Vienna, I received a gift - a small, semi-automatic 35mm camera with a name LOMO printed on it. It was explained to me that with Lomo, photographs are not to be taken in the same way as with a regular camera. Lomography, as it was called, was all about the element of surprise, of capturing snapshots of everyday life through a distorted lens. I was told that I didn't need to use the viewfinder on the camera, but instead just snap the shutter from all different angles. It all sounded little crazy, but I was eager to give it a try. On my first stroll around the city with the Lomo in my hands I realized that it was much harder than I thought. Three years of commercial photography training were still fresh and strong in my mind, and it was impossible for me just to let go and not plan the shot in advance. I shot a roll of film in the same way I usually would, and brought it to the lab not expecting anything different from usual results. To my surprise, the photographs looked very different from what I thought I captured on film. Some parts were blurry, others dark. Overall, in my mind they were all garbage. Disappointed, I threw the Lomo in the bottom of my drawer and went back to shooting sharp, digital, know-what-you-will-get photographs.

During the years that followed Lomo continuously made its way back into my life – it was gaining popularity, people were talking about it, many stores started to sell their cameras. Every once in a while I would stumble across some multi lens, funky new Lomo that looked like a toy that was inviting me to play. I also stopped working as commercial photographer and was starting to re-discover the pleasure of snapshot photography. One day I decided to wipe the dust off the Lomo and give it another try. This time, I had fun. I was able to let go and play, without predicting shots in advance. When I saw the photographs I was thrilled. What I had previously qualified as ruined, out-of-focus and off-color-balance trash, I now was able to recognize as unexpected element of surprise that only enhanced the photograph – it's mood, the story it told. I realized that it was not the camera that was taking the pictures that was important; Lomography was all about the attitude with which the pictures are taken. Not worrying about the outcome, recognizing extraordinary possibility in ordinary situations, allowing yourself to play – these were the fundamentals of Lomo philosophy. Finally, I broke the barrier. I was a Lomographer.

Around the same time I was faced with a challenge of starting my career as an art teacher. When I first started teaching art in high school my expectations were high and I was bursting with enthusiasm. In days that followed I quickly realized that the reality of teaching was very different from what I hoped it would be. Instead of presenting all the great art projects to my students as I imagined, I first had to learn the art of survival in the classroom. At the end of my first year of teaching, after many trial and error situations and learning from my mistakes, I gained more confidence and things were finally starting to look better. However, I was exhausted. My enthusiasm was weak at this point and all

the great ideas I had about art education when I walked out of university had faded. Not wanting to become the bitter teacher waiting for the burn-out to happen, I decided to go back to school to regain my motivation and rekindle my passion for teaching art.

It was in one of my graduate classes that I came across an article by Efland (2005) discussing visual culture and its place within art education. The article awoke my curiosity and made me want to find out more about the topic. Before I knew it, I was submerged in the world of visual culture study and numerous debates about its definition, purpose and place within art education. Enthusiastic with the realization that what was described by scholars (Duncum 2002, Freedman 2003) as successful approach to visual culture study corresponded closely to my personal teaching philosophy, I decided to attempt putting theory into practice. I presented a project and had it approved by school administration to implement a course in visual culture study for grade nine students.

Building a curriculum for the course proved to be much more complex than I expected. As the end of school year approached I realized that the mistake I made at the beginning was that I tried to fit everything in. The first year proved to be an enriching learning experience in that I experienced with almost every aspect of visual culture. From cinema, through internet to advertising, the end result was a complete lack of focus. Some notions I brought into the class, while very interesting to me, proved to be not very pertinent to the reality of my students.

However, a simple exercise in snapshot photography that introduced the notion of Lomography generated interest and lively discussion amongst students. One camera was circulated around the classroom, each student had 30 seconds to get the camera, take one

picture and pass the camera to the next person. With Lomographic philosophy and examples of images fresh in their memory, students chose to capture some rather unusual places (such as back of cupboard or under the tables) shooting from all kinds of different angles. When we put all the images together we found ourselves in front of a story, a rarely told classroom testimony - chewed gum under the tables, broken chalk, dusty corners and scratched walls. Only few photographs were shot from the eye level. The students were enthusiastic about the outcome, acknowledging that this was nothing like the pictures they were used to taking and that they did not think that such things could produce interesting results when photographed, even less tell a story.

For the first time, I realized, the students were starting to grasp what visual culture was all about. Complex notions that I was hopelessly trying to introduce in class through examples of advertisements or films were now coming from students themselves. Without knowing it, the students were discussing the importance of the creative process, visual narratives and the power of representation - all important concerns present in critical study of visual culture. Was it because the experience of Lomography was a personal one, with their photographs and within their environment that the students were able to relate to the greater notion of visual culture?

This is when I first asked myself a question:

How could I use Lomography in my classroom in order to make the understanding of visual culture relevant to my students and their experience?

Review of literature

SNAPSHOTS IN THEORY

Snapshot 1 – Wide angle: What is Visual Culture Study?

A cliché that nevertheless stands true today is that our culture is visual. In addition to orally and textually, the meanings in today's world circulate visually and our everyday lives are lived through visual imagery (Duncum, 2002b, Rogoff, 2002).

Visual culture study, also called visual studies, is a result of merging between art history and cultural studies. It is described as a study of representations where close attention is paid to the image and theories developed in the humanities and the social sciences in order to address complex ways in which meanings are produced and circulated in specific social contexts (Mitchell, 2005, Dikovitskaya 2005).

Visual culture focuses on the visual as a place where meanings are created, as opposed to the idea of written word that prevailed in nineteenth century culture. The modern tendency to picture or visualize experience in addition to the gap between the wealth of visual experience in postmodern culture and the ability to analyze what we observe, marks the opportunity and the need for visual culture as a field of study (Mirzoeff, 1999).

However, despite a growing number of graduate programs in the field, some researchers still ask whether visual studies is a new discipline, or is it an interdisciplinary, hybrid enterprise formed as result of a convergence of other disciplines

(Walker, 1999, Mitchell, 2005). According to Dikovitskaya (2005), this raises the major issue with visual studies today – its attempt to expand boundaries by bringing together heterogeneous and diverse subjects often results in a lack of focus or agenda.

Snapshot 2 – zoom in: Visual culture and art education

While scholars are still debating the place and the future of visual culture studies in academic circles, another heated debate is taking place amongst educators regarding the introduction of visual culture studies in art education. (Duncum, 2002a, Tavin, 2003, Freedman, 2003, Silvers, 2004, Efland 2005, Bauerlein, 2004)

According to visual culture advocates (Duncum 2002a, Heise, 2004, Tavin, 2003), whereas in traditional art education the focus is placed on artistic expression, the main objectives of visual culture art education are critical understanding and empowerment. In their art practice, students maintain the freedom to explore, but the focus of artistic inquiry is placed on questions related to the nature and function of visual culture in society and the impact it has on their lives. Visual culture art education deals with the popular culture of student experience and draws upon both the history of imagery and cross-cultural comparisons to gain a critical perspective (Duncum, 2002a).

While mainstream art education assumes that art is inherently valuable, visual culture looks at visual representations as sites of ideological struggle that can be as deplorable as they can be praiseworthy. Duncum (2002a) stresses the fact that the main

goal of visual culture is empowerment in relation to the pressures and processes of contemporary image makers, and not the cherishing of artistic traditions and experimentation. In Duncum's (2002a) words, "the basic orientation is to understand, not to celebrate" (p8).

Freedman (2003) supports Duncum's view, arguing that in our present visual culture environment high-level interpretive skills are becoming increasingly important for students and these consist of understanding underlying assumptions, forming possible associations and performing critical reflection.

While there is a strong movement in art education toward visual culture, not everyone agrees about its merits. According to Silvers (2004), in visual culture education objects of study are presented as personally and socially malign, and inherently dangerous, in contrast to traditional art objects presumed to be intrinsically personally and socially enriching. She believes that in the images of visual culture the meaning is straightforward and no special knowledge or interpretive effort is needed in order to understand the message conveyed; in contrast to artistic imagery, where the meaning is elaborate, enigmatic and multilayered. Elkins (2003) supports this point of view in his claim that visual studies is too easy and predictable.

Efland (2005) warns us against the belief present in visual culture that there is no pre-established hierarchy that accords privileged standing to the fine arts and that visual culture study presents an unfortunate possibility of teaching students "to interpret cultures through a critical reading of images from the mass media, without ever referring to works from the genre of the fine arts"(p37). Fine arts, according to Efland (2005),

while not better than the arts conveyed by the mass media and popular culture, are different in purpose; they permit a unique enrichment of existence and a diversification beyond the scope of the popular.

Freedman and Stuhr (2004) describe visual culture as the totality of humanly designed images and artifacts that shape our existence. However, the shift to visual culture in art education does not only refer to expanding the range of visual forms included in the curriculum but also addressing the issues such as the functions of creative production, the meanings of visual narratives, the power of representation and the importance of interdisciplinary connections (Freedman and Stuhr, 2004).

This leads us to the conclusion that in visual culture art education, ethical and political judgements are expected to be made (Silvers, 2004). However, the fundamental concepts of ethical and political thought are complex to grasp and apply, and, according to Silvers (2004), students do not benefit from oversimplification of these issues nor by being encouraged to decide without balanced reflection or to emote rather than to judge.

However, according to Hermann (2005), who is a high school teacher herself, the problem does not present itself in the subjects that are being taught as part of visual culture art education, but in the way these subjects are being taught.

Unfortunately, these attempts to develop curricula consistent with Visual Culture Art Education and postmodern theory, when implemented, remain unrelated and irrelevant for students because the students are not involved in an investigation of meaning, contemplation of ideas, and criticism. Students are told how they should react to the images and what form their visual response should take.
(p42)

Eisenhauer (2006) points out an ironic constitution occurring within the context of visual culture art education – while the teacher plays the role of an informed individual, the students are understood to have had much more exposure to the popular media that is brought into the classroom as object of study, however, it is presumed that they lack the sophistication, knowledge and experience to critically engage in these texts. If we are to accept the proposition that in our culture today we are bombarded by media images, Eisenhauer (2006) claims we must adopt an approach in our classrooms that does not portray educators as rescuers of victimized students.

A language of bombardment constructs subjects, and particularly student subjects, as essentialized and homogenized victims and education as a colonial discourse in which one group is better able to define another's experience. However a language beyond bombardment positions the subject neither as a victim nor as a universal "self", but rather as a discursively constituted multiplicity. (p160)

Snapshot 3 – macro: Visual culture and I

As a teacher, my goal is not to get the students to share my opinions or interpretations. Rather, my goal is to help my students enhance their own ability to engage in the critical inquiry of visual culture. Like Hermann (2005) suggests, I believe that as educators we should encourage our students to understand that art making is not simply a creative use and transformation of materials, but also that it addresses issues of critical inquiry and transformation, deconstruction and reconfiguration of ideas.

In my first attempt to bring visual culture into classroom, unfortunately I did exactly the opposite. I exposed the students to a number of examples of images from media, advertisements, videos; showed them how images manipulate and influence their way of thinking; and told them that they must be more aware of the messages embedded within these images regarding questions such as consumerism, sexism or body image. Art making activities such as collage and spoof ads amused the students, but did not go any further than being labeled as “fun”. I was not creating a dialogue with my students, instead, I became *that* teacher - the one that stands in front of the class, lecturing on and on about what is the right way to think about something.

It was not working.

What did I need to do as a teacher to make the understanding of visual culture relevant to my students and their experience?

I turned my attention to the journals and articles I had collected about visual culture, this time looking more closely for “how to” sections, hoping to find the missing ingredient.

I found three.

The unseen. In order to understand visual culture we must look beyond the simple analysis of the image, of what we see. We need to take into account everything that is left out, not shown, invisible (Mitchell, 2005). This applies not only to the context in which the image was produced and the intentions of its maker but also the context in which the image is viewed, and the meaning that the viewer will construct based on personal experience (Freedman, 2003).

The creative process. In visual culture art education art making should be as important as the appraisal of the images (Duncum, 2002b). It is through their own artistic production that students are enabled to create connections between artistic motivations, intentions, process and the product (Freedman, 2003). In the case of visual culture however, creativity is not valued only as the expression of personal feelings interlaced with uniqueness and originality, but also its integration of critical thinking that communicates cultural values and social meanings (Keifer-Boyd, 2003).

The power. Visual culture can be an instrument of domination, however it should not be labeled as “the exclusive vehicle of political tyranny” (Mitchell, 2005, p350). As educators, it is important that we recognize the transformative power of art and its profound connection to education and social change (Darts, 2006), however we must also be able to move beyond the *us* against *them* (*them* most often referring to any type of media) stance, and realize that as individuals we are all entitled to actively participate in the creating of the visual culture (Eisenhauer, 2006).

Finally, I understood that before attempting to successfully engage my students in a critical enquiry of visual culture, I had to understand it myself.

Not as a teacher, or an informed adult that would then transfer the information to the students, but as an individual, an artist, living within visual culture, building it, being a part of it.

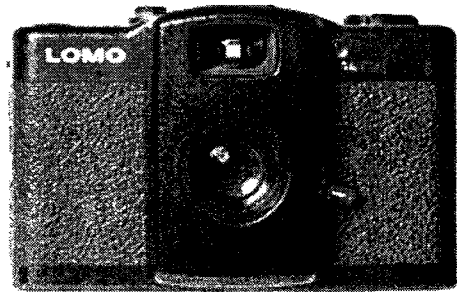
With a role of teacher put aside and a Lomo camera in my hands, I set off on a journey of inquiry into unknown. A journey I hoped would lead me to discovery and understanding. A journey that would help me become aware of my visual culture.

Methodology

DON'T THINK, JUST SHOOT

*With Lomography, art is put in the hands of all,
and extraordinary expression flows from ordinary circumstances.*
(Lomography, 2007)

The method used for my research is Lomography. Lomography is an increasingly popular trend in photography which was initiated in Vienna in the early 1990's. It is named after a LOMO LC-A, a small semi automatic camera that was produced in Soviet Union in the 80s. However, Lomography is not about the camera that is used to take the pictures, but about the attitude with which the pictures are taken. Lomographers take great amounts of pictures in all kinds of situations and positions, preferably without using the viewfinder. The outcome is supposed to be unpredictable and the element of chance gains extreme importance (Alberts & Novak, 1999).



LOMO LC-A

At first glance it may seem that Lomographers simply take snapshots, however, Lomography differs from the practice of conventional snapshot photography in several ways. First, as Albers and Novak (1999) point out, while snapshot photography does not pay attention to proportions and arrangements, Lomographers purposefully neglect standards of composition and follow their own program. Second, Lomographers put aside the determining aspect of snapshot photography, the memorable event. Instead of

trying to single out important moments that will be remembered later, Lomography strives towards the radical fusion of photography and everyday life (Alberts & Novak, 1999).

Finally, unlike snapshot photography, Lomography places emphases on the importance of the unconscious, following a strategy reminiscent of Surrealist Automatisme.

The authenticity of images is not, as in snapshot photography, vouched for by the pictures being labeled and arranged in an album, or by the represented object itself, but by the unconscious way in which the release is pressed over and over again. The lack of selection should insure that the items and situations are captured on the film unadulterated and genuine. One could say that the camera is ideally supposed to take the pictures on its own ... On the one hand, the camera is freed from the intentions of the user, while on the other, the Lomographer's gaze itself is no longer dependent on the technical apparatus. (Alberts & Novak, 1999, p103)

The Lomographic philosophy can be best understood through the 10 golden rules, a playful “how-to” guideline on becoming a Lomographer. Following are the 10 rules as presented on the Lomographic Society International official web site:

1. Take your camera everywhere you go.

In bed, in Gorki park, in a propeller-driven airplane or in the launderette: you grab your camera and everything around you starts to vibrate with life, be prepared, keep your camera at hand and ready for action everywhere and all the time.

2. Use it any time – day and night

Every single second has its own unique, light, grey, colorful, wooly, profound, flat mood. Your life is not going to wait for your camera. Its rules and the fooling around involved. Either – click – you have captured the situation as it is, or you haven't.

3. Lomography is not an interference in your life, but part of it

Lomography doesn't interrupt the direction your life is going. It's just a significant and integral part of it. Just like talking, walking, sleeping, eating, thinking, drinking, laughing and loving, Lomography is a powerful sign that you are alive.

4. Try the shot from the hip

It is as simple as it is unusual. You don't have to look through the viewfinder to take a good picture. No, on the contrary! Give yourself more freedom in your choice of perspectives. Hand up in the air, out in the front or behind your back, no limits – just your experience mixed with some luck.

5. Approach the objects of your lomographic desire as close as possible

Get close –click- from wrist looking deep into the eyes, full frontal, close up and precisely whatever it is that interests you. Laughing as you go, feeling good, so that everyone can see that Lomography is the most obvious and natural thing in the world.

6. Don't think

Put your head in the ice cold bathtub, hold your breath, count to 100 and let your troubles dissolve. Then jerk your head out again, and with it firmly on your shoulders, grab your camera and hit the streets, start snapping away, live it, and have fun.

7. Be fast

A mere tenth of a second makes the difference between Lomography or not Lomography. Just don't waste any time with settings, adjustments, thinking about it, faffing around and procrastinating. First impressions have a quality of their own, trust yourself.

8. You don't have to know beforehand what you captured on film

Give the random in Lomography a chance. Enjoy your new way of living with random occurrence. You're not here for Lomography. Lomography is here for you! Lomography only works if the only thing you concentrate on is celebrating your life.

9. Afterwards either

Wow, that looks great, what's that, where was I there? Your brain is running on top speed, your memory is spinning, your history is tumbling. No, you don't have to know exactly what's on the film even afterwards, just read between the lomographs.

10. Don't worry about any rules

*Forget the Ten Golden Rules – discover your very own Lomography, immerse yourself in what's going on, do it and do what you want but do it now.
("Ten Golden Rules", 2007)*

Data

SHOOT FROM THE HIP

With Lomo camera as my tool and the 10 golden rules as my guide I set off on what would be best described as “Lomomania”. From trip to grocery, to trip to Europe, I had the camera with me everywhere and was documenting as many moments of my life as it was possible. The blink of the eye became the release of the shutter. I was not thinking about the outcome, I was simply recording through camera lens what was happening in front of my eyes. Shot after shot, roll after roll, I soon had hundreds of moments frozen in time, captured on film. I was surrounded by my life on 4x6 format.

LOMOMANIA

=

473 photographs.

March 2007 - October 2008.

Grocery store, Ile-Ste-Helene, parking lot, Vienna zoo, my car, farm, Ann's house, Las Vegas, turkish restaurant, birthday party, school, bus, Mt-Royal, concert at Metropolis, Grand Canyon, Ste-Martine, cafeteria, beach, downtown, New York

etc....



Lomomania



Lomomania continued

Ctrlab 3634 boulevard St-Laurent

œuvres photographiques réalisées par Lea Kabiljo
en collaboration avec les élèves de l'école Ste-Martine

04.06 - 07.06 2009 12 - 17h

vernissage
5 Juin 19-22h

Invitation - SEQUENCES



Cirllab - opening night



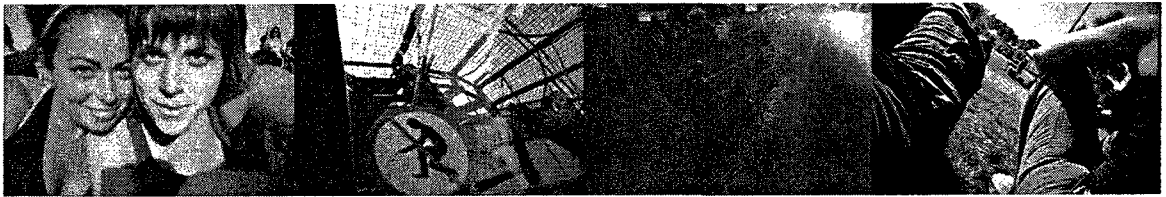
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Away



*SEQUENCE:
Evolution*



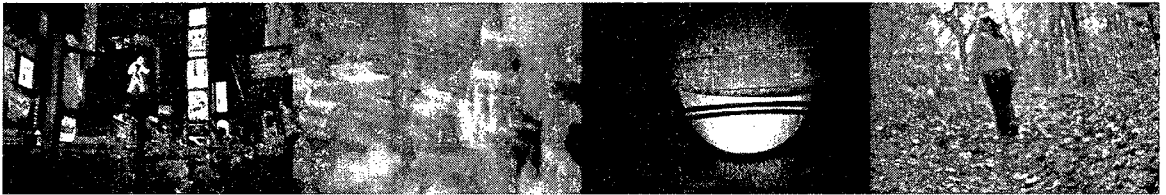
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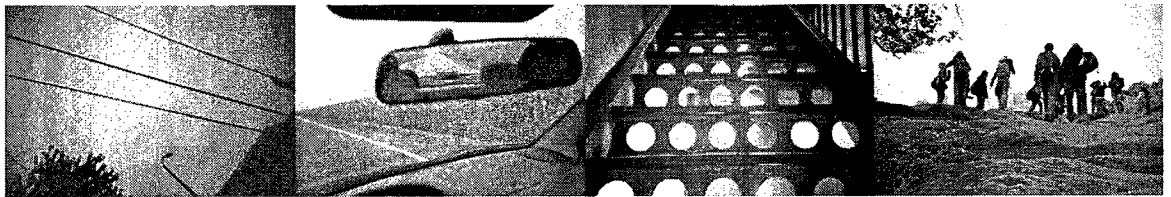
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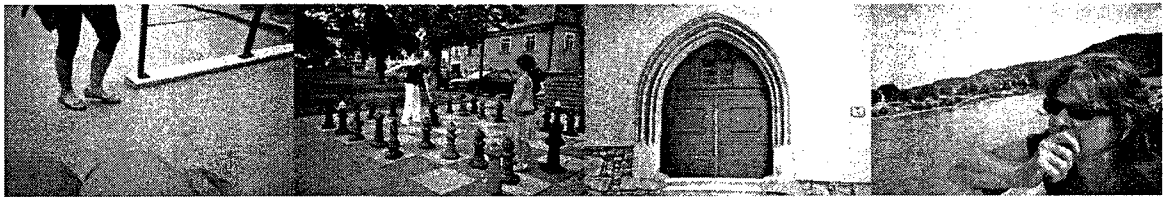
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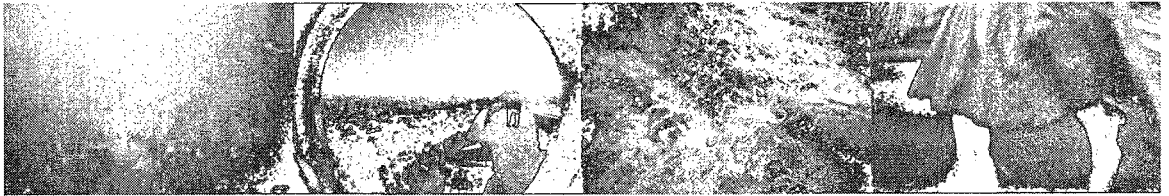
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Pursuit



SEQUENCE:
Escape



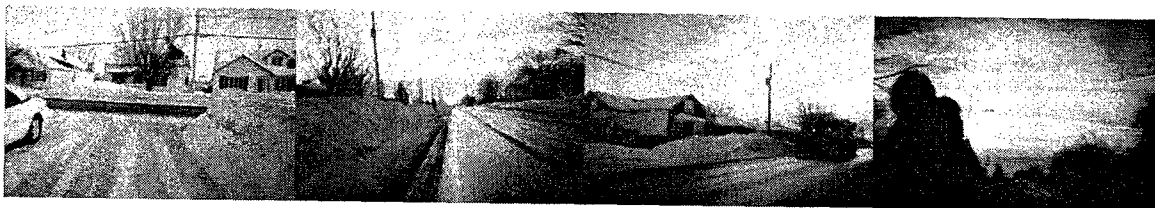
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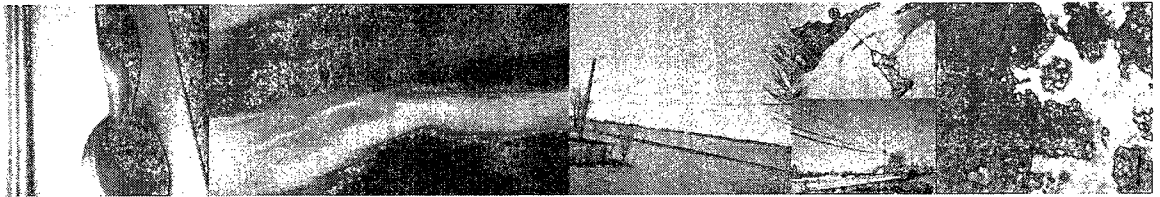
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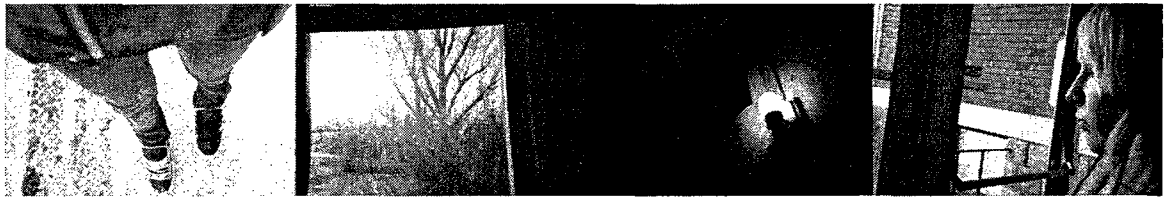
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Blue



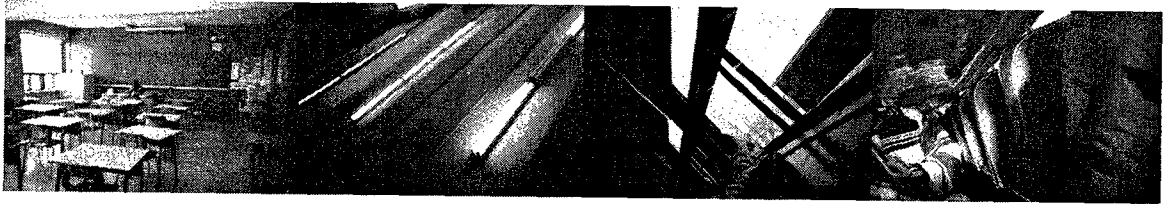
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Alexandre O.



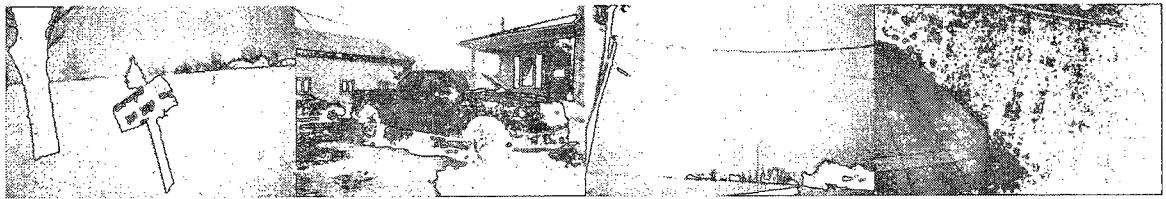
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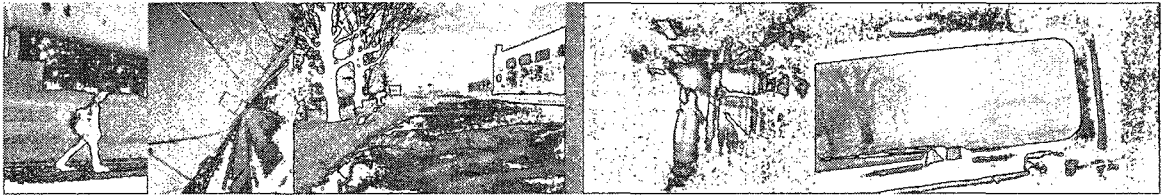
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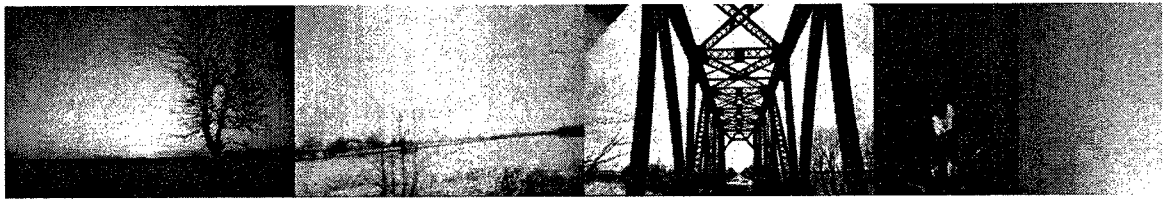
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Mélissa L.



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Pierre-Olivier G.



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Myriam R.

Procedure

SEQUENCES

*Visual culture does not just mean a broader range of stuff.
It also means a particular way of understanding that stuff.
(Amburgy, 2003, p48).*

I took out the orange shoe box that was overflowing with photographs. I started to lay out photos in random order on my kitchen table. It filled up quickly. I moved on to the coffee table... chairs... kitchen counter... Soon, I was surrounded with moments from my life frozen in time.

Now what?

As a photographer, I was trained to capture that one “magic” moment. Creativity happened in one thirtieth of the second. The technique, the composition, the mood... it all had to come together within a click of the shutter.

I had a very different situation laid out across my apartment. The photographs that surrounded me were certainly not the result of a creative process; while visually interesting, they were still only unintentional, impulsive recordings of places in time. My eyes were scanning back and forth over hundreds of images. Some caught my attention because of their formal properties - interesting composition, pattern, color.... others intrigued me because I had no idea what was it that I was looking at.

The task in front of me seemed simple enough: get creative - something I've done many times before, using a variety of media to express certain thought or emotion. This time, however, the feeling was different - instead of giving in to the impulsion or

overwhelming emotion that was bursting out of me, I was trying to consciously engage in the act. I had a clear intention, which was to somehow make sense of the visual mess that was in front of me and make it relevant to my experience.

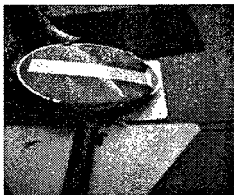
As I was circling around (and starting to ask myself if this was even possible, could we really engage in a creative act only by intention of doing so?) my eyes stopped on a picture...



A friend, eating an apple. Funny, her name is Eve, and she's eating an apple, just like Eve... the old story of creation... And wasn't there another picture somewhere, of a monkey, from that day in the



zoo.... The new explanation of creation.... Right, there it is.... Even



though we only see half the monkey... Oh, and there's that broken road sign, red and white - interdiction, was it? Where is it? And this one... Look at this one!... What is it? A bicycle rack?... Make's me think of DNA pattern though... And there's a

church in the background!... Oh, here's that road sign!... And this one here... the guy taking a picture... documenting... looking back at



history... looking at Eve and the monkey...

And there it was... out of nowhere, my mind triggered a thought, made connections, created a story. Five images, taken at different places, in different times, came together through my intention and I created a visual narrative relevant to my experience.



Evolution

I went on through the process over and over again - an image would catch my intention, trigger a thought, a question or a memory, and then the others would follow, building upon each other, completing the story. Like Freedman (2003) and Keifer-Boyd (2003) suggested, the creative process I engaged in allowed me to create connections and find a balance between personal artistic motivation and my intention to communicate stories that question cultural values and social meanings.

As I was creating the stories I understood the importance of that which was not seen on the images that Mitchell (2005) and Freedman (2003) both referred to. In this case, the invisible was the binding thread, the skeleton that was holding everything together. The invisible was the story itself. Images became a tool used to illustrate an idea, materialize it in order to be able to communicate. The invisible, I realized, would also play an important role for the viewers. Their reading of my story might be very different from mine. Based on their experience, background or even mood, each would come up with a story of their own.

This made me question the issue of power that Eisenhower (2006) warns us against. As the artist, I had to choose whether or not I wanted to guide and influence the viewer with my own idea. I could have given very explicit titles, or even explained in words what each story represented for me. In doing so, however, I realized that once

again I would be forcing my own understanding upon the viewer. Instead, I decided to title the works in a way that may suggest my intentions, but final interpretation would remain subjective for each person.

The end result was a series of ten visual narratives, SEQUENCES.

These were all personal stories. They were not political messages, works of resistance or cries for social change. SEQUENCES might have been a very insignificant part of the global visual culture, but they were my visual culture. And because they were based on my personal experience, I was able, naturally and without any forced effort, to understand the implications of major issues present within visual culture study: the intention of creative process, the importance of the invisible, and the balance of power between the artist, the image and the viewer. By engaging myself in the process as the artist I was able to finally understand my own philosophy as the teacher.

I realized that I believe that as teachers, we have the responsibility to help students develop meaningful approaches for interpretation, critique and production of visual culture by overcoming the familiarity of the experience of seeing and turning it into the problem for analysis. (Hermann, 2005, Tavin, 2003, Mitchell, 2005).

However, like Hermann (2005) and Eisenhauer (2006), I understood that the main problem with visual culture art education is not what is being taught but the way in which the subject is approached. If we look back at Duncum's (2002a) statement that the basic orientation of visual culture art education is to understand, as educators we must avoid forcing our own understanding on our students. As Silvers (2004) and Hermann (2005)

pointed out, students do not benefit from oversimplification of issues, even less from being told what to think.

I was ready to put my teacher hat back on and head back into the classroom.

Implications for art education

THE SCHOOL PORTRAIT

Initially, as part of my graduate studies, I opted to do a studio project for my thesis research. I was going to approach the problem of facilitating the understanding of visual culture through an art project and then speculate its implications in the classroom. Once the project was done, images printed and waiting to go up on the wall, I remembered the initial reason why I engaged in the project in the first place. It was not because I was an academic researcher interested in theory or an artist trying to find new outlets of creativity - before all, I was a teacher. I was a teacher faced with problem of not knowing how to approach the topic of visual culture that would engage my students. Even though the teaching project was not a requirement for the thesis, I decided to put theory into practice with my students.

There were couple of complications I had to resolve at first. For one, the end of school year was fast approaching, therefore I could only present a more compact version of the project. Due to the lack of time, I realized that budget would be an issue as well. I knew that at the time towards the end of year there was no way that school administration could find money to fund a project that involved 30 cameras. Instead, after discussing the possibilities with the school principal, we decided to present a project as extracurricular activity for a limited number of students.

I approached ten students, with the idea of making as heterogenous group as possible. Some students were already taking art as optional course, others were in sports;

some were high achievers, others were barely squeezing through the school system. Their personalities were also very different - one never stopped talking, another would never say a word, one made everyone laugh, and the other was sarcastic. They were all in grade 9 and knew each other (there were only 60 students in all of grade 9), but were not close friends with each other.

During our first meeting I explained to the students only the basics: the project involved taking lots of photographs and turning them into something meaningful, we would meet once a week after school for five weeks, their participation was voluntary, but they did need to sign the release form. By our next meeting one girl told me she decided not to participate, but I still had nine others with me on board. The school principal agreed to purchase nine inexpensive 35mm cameras and cover the costs of film and development. We were ready to go!

I started by introducing the notion of Lomography to the students. We looked at the website and discussed the 10 golden rules. I asked how they interpreted them? Very quickly, it became clear that because the students did not have any previous training in photography they would have absolutely no problem adopting the philosophy of Lomography. For the same reason though, they did have to spend some time learning how to load a film in 35mm camera and understanding that film is sensitive to light and that they must never open the camera while it's still loaded - they were a digital generation after all!

Next couple of weeks we spent meeting and looking at their developed prints. There were some initial disappointments, such as realizing for some that the film was not

loaded properly and ended blank, or that there were many pictures of red because they opened the camera before rewinding the film. But for the most part, they were eager to see their and everybody else's photos. None of the students ever showed any concern over the fact that the image was "underexposed and grainy", or that there was "too much sky in the composition". The initial reactions consisted of many "that is so cool!" and "wow, that is so beautiful" statements. But as they looked at the images, comments were sounding more as "oh, that looks like...." or "hey, that makes me think of..." and "you're right, I didn't think of it like that". They were making connections based on their own experience and realizing by themselves that interpretation was different for everyone.

After they each had two or three rolls of film developed (one student ended up with only one roll, as twice he did not load properly), we were ready to move on to the next step. I invited the students to lay out all the photographs and together we spent some time looking at them. Could they find a way to pick and chose four or five of their images in order to tell a story? They seemed a bit confused at first - what exactly were they supposed to do? What kind of story? Story about what? Weren't they supposed to take pictures and NOT think about what they were photographing? I did not give them any further explanations, just repeated that they should keep on looking at the images and think of the story. One student got it fairly quickly, in no time he had his four images picked out. But as soon as he did that he decided he was not happy with his story. He just thought of a better one and went back to his pile of images. That was the ice breaker- as soon as they saw their peer do it, the other students seemed to feel more confident. They

started picking out their images, placing them, putting them back, replacing them. Some would put their pile down and walk around to see what the others were coming up with. One student asked another if he could borrow one of her images as it was a perfect fit for his story. A girl was getting frustrated with her images, swearing and cursing that nothing seemed to work when another student walked up to her and pointed out an image he found interesting - they started to build her story together.

As for me, I felt that I became invisible. I walked around, observed them and took notes, but I could have as well been drinking coffee in the staff room. They did not need me there. They were not asking for my opinion or seeking my approval. It was certainly one of the most fulfilling moments of my teaching career.

In the end each student created one visual narrative. I overheard some of the stories while they were creating them, but did not ask them to explain them to me. The important thing was that the narratives were meaningful to them, I enjoyed being the viewer and interpreting them in my own way. Students seemed to understand this and appreciate it as now the power shifted between us - I was not the expert any more, they finally recognized themselves as the experts of their own creation.

Two weeks later, nineteen SEQUENCES , ten of mine and nine made by students, were hanging on the walls of a gallery in Montreal.

As I walked through the gallery on the opening night, surrounded by my students and their parents, school principal and colleagues, professors, family and friends, I felt that all the pieces of the puzzle that visual culture presented to me were finally falling into place.

I saw visual culture as a complex field of study, stimulating and challenging one. As a teacher, I do believe that we have the responsibility to bring our students to perceive and use art as a tool in order to examine and question the issues that arise regarding our society, values and culture. However, we also have the responsibility to listen to and observe our students needs and capabilities and adjust our teaching accordingly. Visual culture is a very broad field of study that can easily become overwhelming and confusing even in academic circles, even more so with adolescents. Therefore, it is essential that as educators we find means to introduce visual culture to our students as something that is a part of their life and that they are part of, making it relevant and meaningful to their experience.

As I was writing final pages of this paper I came across recently published article by Paul Duncum (2008), one of the pioneers of visual culture art education. In this article he stresses the importance of adopting a more playful approach to teaching, developing a dialogue between teacher and students, and allowing students to come to their own understanding of visual culture without forcing our own views upon them. As I read the article, with my research already done and all the ideas in their place, I smiled as I realized that I was not agreeing with Duncum - he was agreeing with me!

The project I described in this paper is only the first step, but based on my own experience and that of my students, it is also an important foundation for further understanding of complex issues present within the visual culture study.

After all, what does anybody care and know more about than... ourselves?

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