

The Landscape, the Built Environment, and the Work of Art: Three Meaningful Territories for Art Education and Material Culture Studies ■ RICHARD LACHAPPELLE

I have been wondering for some time about the similarities and differences in viewing experiences afforded by different kinds of objects and situations. Why, for example, do I often feel as moved by landscapes as I do by works of art? I suspect that, in some ways, these encounters share similar hermeneutic features, yet I also feel that they are different somehow.

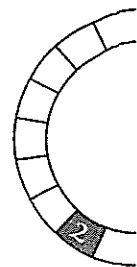
My ongoing work as a museum education researcher has focused on the viewer as interpreter of the work of art. It is from this perspective that I am proposing to extend my research beyond the walls of the art museum to include other places and objects as the potential loci of meaningful aesthetic experiences. In this chapter, I present and discuss three different territories (i.e., actual places but also spheres of action or thought) where potentially significant experiences can and often do unfold. These three territories are: (1) the landscape, (2) the built environment, and (3) the work of art.

MATERIAL CULTURE AS AN INVESTIGATIVE FRAMEWORK

Material Culture and Art Education

Before beginning this investigation of material culture studies in art education research, it is useful to remind ourselves why material culture studies, as a framework for understanding cultural objects, is of such interest for art education. Bolin and Blandy (2003) define material culture as “a descriptor of any and all human-constructed or human-mediated objects, forms, or expressions, manifested consciously or unconsciously through culturally acquired behaviors” (p. 249). They intend this definition to be inclusive so as to pertain to all kinds of artifacts, both simple and complex. However, in addition, “material culture refers not only to the objects that we view and engage, but it also encompasses the immense array of cultural expressions that transcend objects themselves, and applies as a descriptor of all human-generated expressions and activities of a culture” (p. 250). Finally, Schlereth (1990) provides a useful definition of material culture studies as a research method: “an investigation that uses artifacts (along with relevant documentary, statistical, and oral data) to explore cultural questions” (p. 27).

Bolin and Blandy (2003) present the following arguments in support of a material culture focus in art education. First, material culture studies is both multidisciplinary and cross-disciplinary in nature. As such, it contributes to the “dissolution of many of the discipline-based barriers that have divided the academic world for years” (p. 251). Second, material culture studies is intentionally inclusive of all forms of cultural expression as it occurs in our everyday lives. As such, all “human mediated objects or expressions are [deemed] worthy of study” (p. 253). Third, material culture studies focuses not only on the role of the visual in cultural expression but also on the role of all the senses (i.e., smell, hearing, taste, touch, and sight) involved in cultural expression. Finally, as an approach to understanding culture, material culture studies is congruent with the complex, multi-sensory nature of our contemporary world.



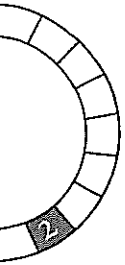
The Sociosemiotics of Material Culture

To assist in my investigation of specific examples of material culture, I call upon several sources from the literature in material culture studies. However, in particular, two key theories have informed my method of analysis. Carl Knappett (2005) has proposed a research methodology in which signs are studied within networks of meanings. Knappett calls this approach the “sociosemiotics of material culture.” In brief, the method consists, first, in identifying the affordances and constraints of artifacts. The term affordances was first proposed by the psychologist James Gibson to describe the entire corpus of potential functions of an object, including the novel and unexpected purposes to which it may lend itself (as cited in Knappett, 2005, p. 45). For example, a chair may be used for sitting but it may also be used as an improvised bookcase. The term constraints originates with Donald Norman who used it to describe the ways in which certain physical, logical, cultural, and semantic features of an object serve to limit or constrain the range of possible functions (i.e., affordances) of that object (as cited in Knappett, 2005, p. 52). For example, the specific shapes of puzzle pieces restrict the ways in which a two-dimensional puzzle can be assembled and, thus, the ways in which its image can be re-created.

The second step in Knappett’s methodology is mainly based upon Peircian semiotics. It consists of evaluating the extended networks of objects based on semiotic relationships such as iconicity (i.e., relationships based on similarity), indexicality (i.e., relationships based on actual connections among objects usually referred to as “contiguity”), and symbolism (relationships based upon convention or upon a “parts to whole” connection called “factorality”). As an example of iconicity, a car that is put on display in an auto show becomes an icon in that it represents all cars in a specific category (e.g. the gas-electric hybrid car). An example of indexicality is a sign for a fishmonger that consists of the image of a lobster. The image points to the function of the shop to which it is associated. Finally, a word can function as a symbol for a particular idea. Thus, the word “cat” refers to the feline not because of any similarity between the look or the sound of the word and the animal, but because of an accepted convention within the English language (Knappett, 2005). Finally, a basic tenet in the theoretical underpinning of Knappett’s approach is that, instead of the traditional dualistic Cartesian separation of subjects and objects, there exists instead a symmetry between humans and non-humans (i.e., objects) and that both can be agents or artifacts. Knappett argues that, because of this symmetry, humans actually think through material culture (pp. 11-34).

Material Culture as Communication

The second method that I employ in this chapter focuses on communication. Schiffer (1999), like Knappett, rejects the Cartesian dualism of subject and object. A key tenet in his approach is that in the process of communication, interactors—whether persons, artifacts, or externs (i.e., non-human interactors)—can play any role, and sometimes more than one role (sender, emitter, receiver). An extern is “a type of interactor which arises independently of people, such as sunlight and clouds, wild plants and animals, rocks and minerals, and landforms” (p. 122). In Schiffer’s model, a sender “imparts information to a second interactor [the emitter] by modifying one or more its properties” (p. 125) such as, for example, its form, location, or associations. The emitter can be an object or an artifact (i.e., passive emitters) or a person (i.e., an active emitter) (pp. 79-80). “From emitter performances, in one or more interactor roles, the receiver obtains information through inference” (p. 122). The receiver “registers the performances of emitters in the reference activity and, on the basis of this evidence, constructs inferences (and forecasts) and responds. In order to play a receiver role, an interactor must have a sensory apparatus and be capable of responding” (p. 124). Furthermore, Schiffer has identified 19 different basic communication processes (BCPs) involving one, two, or three interactors in the roles of sender, emitter, and receiver. A BCP always includes a sender,



an emitter and a receiver. The BCPS described by Schiffer are useful in understanding how communication takes place in different situations.

Schiffer's model differs in a very significant way from more conventional theories of communication. Conventional models position the sender in a privileged role. These paradigms "tend to focus on the sender's actions and intent... and on how the sender can get the message across to the receiver." In contrast, Schiffer's "archaeologically informed theory" adopts an "uncompromising receiver orientation" [emphasis added] where intention on the part of the sender is not a requirement for communication¹ (pp. 62-63). For Schiffer, "what matters most is that a receiver has acquired consequential information from emissions. That is why, I submit, any theory purporting to encompass the entire range of communication phenomena must, like archaeological inference, be receiver-oriented" (p. 64).

As a research methodology, Schiffer's approach consists in using inference relying on appropriately related knowledge to extract information from objects and artifacts. "The hard evidence for fashioning inferences consists of the present-day performances of artifacts and other interactors, for these are the remnants of past behavioral systems" (p. 52). Inferences must be based on evidence that points to the "formal, spatial, quantitative and relational properties of interactors" (p. 53). As we will see later, Schiffer's model holds promise for explaining the communication process inherent in many cultural activities including artistic ones. As such, this should be an area of investigation within material culture studies of particular interest to art education.

THREE EXAMPLAR TERRITORIES OF MATERIAL CULTURE

In order to provide an illustration of material culture studies as an investigative approach, I have chosen three specific examples to serve as focal points. To sustain a discussion on the landscape as a material culture territory, I will present the example of the Tablelands located [in Gros Morne National Park] in Newfoundland, Canada. To foster a discussion on the built-environment as a cultural territory, I have chosen an example of 20th-century military architecture, the six World War II defense bunkers, called *flak towers* (or *flakturms*), which still stand in several neighborhoods in Vienna, Austria. To investigate the work of art as a third territory of material culture, I will present and discuss Anishinabe artist Rebecca Belmore's installation and performance at the Art Gallery of Ontario titled *Wild* (2001). I have chosen these examples for simple reasons: I am familiar with all three having personally encountered them at least once. Also, all three sites have specific features that make them particularly useful as illustrations for some of the points I wish to make in this chapter.

The Tablelands: A Landscape but also a Site of Material Culture

The Tablelands are located in Gros Morne National Park, near Rocky Harbour, in Newfoundland, Canada. They form a large plateau in the southern tip of the Long Range Mountains. The park was designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 1987 since the mineralogical characteristics and geology of the Tablelands are exceptional and rare.

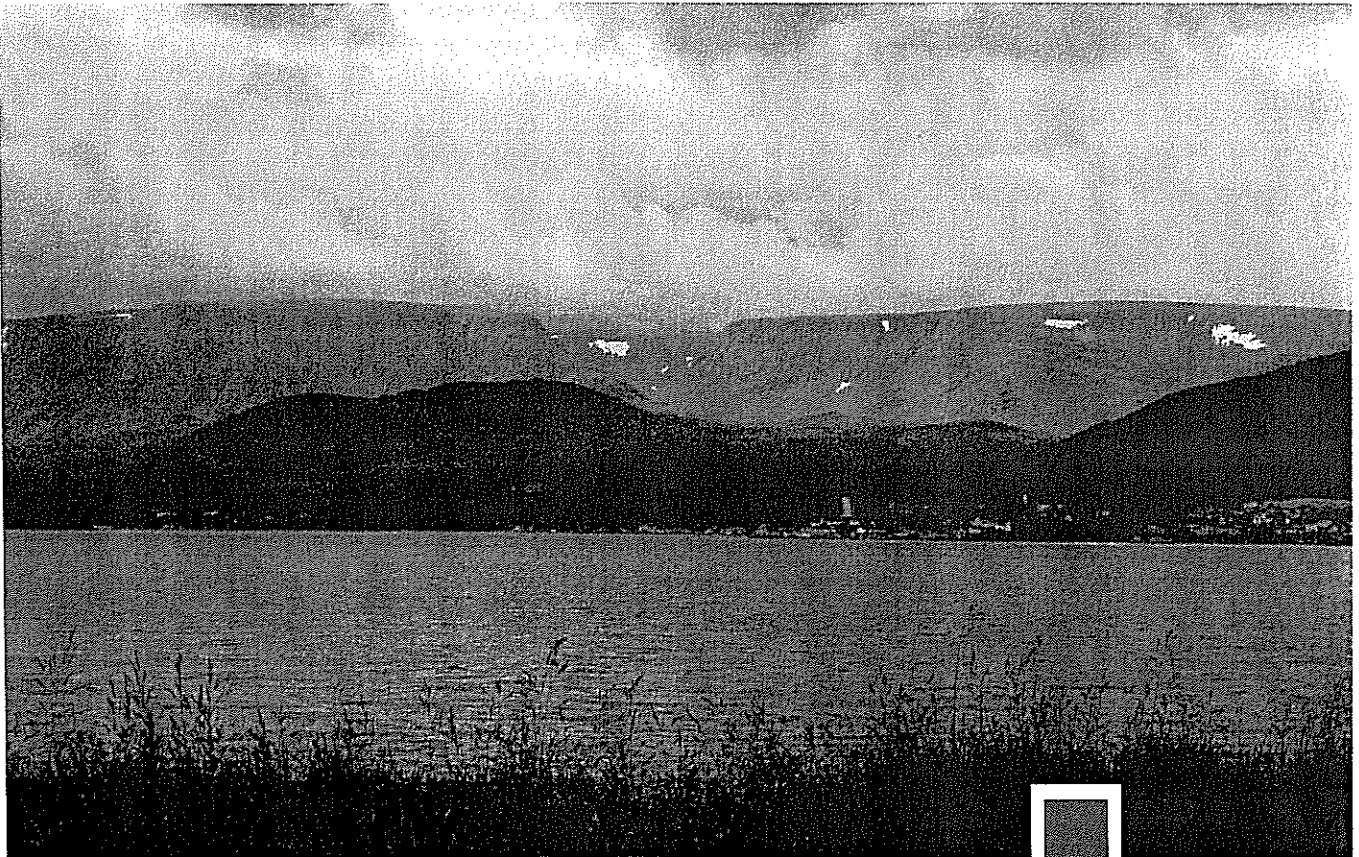
This mass of rock was shifted from the mantle beneath Iapetus Ocean to its present position during a continental collision some 450 million years ago. At the earth's surface this mantle rock is unstable, and weathers quickly. Its decomposition produces very unusual soils on which few plants are able to live. Flat topped and almost barren, this heap of ochre-colored rock is the single most important geological site in the park. Its scenery is so unlike anything else in the Atlantic Provinces that it almost defies description. Displaced cross sections of oceanic crust and upper mantle are not very common on the earth's surface. Where these ophiolites occur they are often strongly altered. However, the peridotite of the Tablelands is still relatively unchanged and unvegetated. The rock probably still looks fresh because it was buried beneath other sediments that protected it, and was not completely exposed to weathering until peneplanation (i.e., erosion) and later glaciation exhumed it (Burzynski, 1999, p. 15).

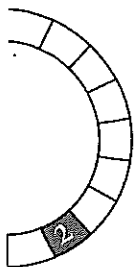
Natural processes almost always leave some sort of physical trace on the surface of the planet. The key features of Gros Morne National Park, including the Tablelands, were formed as a result of the process of Plate Tectonics (i.e., continental drift), erosion, and glaciation (Burzynski, 1999). Evidence of these natural processes is to be found in the various geological features of the Park and this evidence can be understood to constitute a sort of unintentional “written” record of an event inscribed into the park’s geology by nature.

The Landscape as Communication

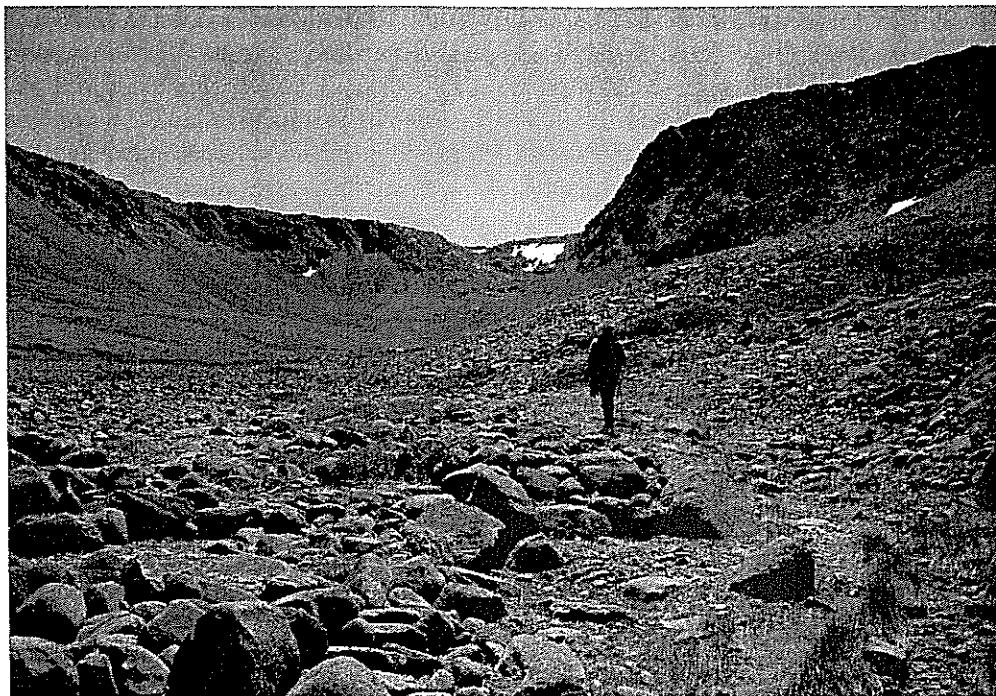
In terms of Schiffer’s communication model, the Tablelands’ geological features are externs. The Tableland externs play several interactor roles in the basic communication process (BCP) by which earth scientists were able to unravel the mystery of the origins of this unique landscape. In the communication process in question, the Tableland externs play two of the three BCP roles: the sender is the extern, the emitter is also the extern, and the receiver is a person (i.e., initially the scientists studying the Tablelands). According to Schiffer, this communication pattern “requires that a person infer, from an extern’s emissions, something about the latter’s own performance in a inscription event” (p. 99). As regards the Tablelands, that inscription event is the continental collision that occurred 450 million years ago. The extern’s (i.e., the peridotite or mantle rock) performance as a sender in that event was to physically leave the earth’s mantle, where it usually resides. By ending up and remaining on the earth’s surface, the mantle rock plays the role of an emitter modified (through displacement) by the natural events to which it bears witness. Fortunately for us, scientists (the receivers) were able to infer, based on the extern peridotite’s emissions, how tectonic plate theory accounts for the present location of the mantle rock. It was in the 1960s that geologist Bob Stevens, along with Hank Williams and other scientists from Memorial University (Newfoundland), were able to determine the origins of the Tablelands. In order to do so, they searched for evidence

VIEW OF THE TABLELANDS (GROS MORNE NATIONAL PARK, NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA) AS SEEN FROM ACROSS BONNE BAY. The Tablelands are formed of yellowish peridotite and are devoid of vegetation. For these reasons, they appear lighter in this photograph than the closer forested hills that form the shores of Bonne Bay. *Photograph by Richard Lachapelle, 2009.*





A HIKER MAKES HIS WAY INTO THE TABLELANDS IN GROS MORNE NATIONAL PARK, NEWFOUNDLAND, CANADA. *Photograph by Richard Lachapelle, 2009.*

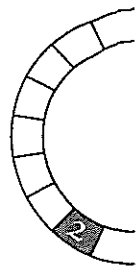


of the route² taken by parts of the Iapetus Ocean floor and the earth's mantle as it moved up and finally came to rest on the planet's surface. In doing so, these scientist provided crucial evidence to support a new scientific hypothesis at the time, that of Tectonic Plate Theory (Burzynski, 1999).

The Landscape as a Semiotic Network

Turning now to Knappett's model (2005), the peridotite rock that forms the Tablelands is a physical indicator of the area's indexical relation with the earth's mantle. Much like smoke on the horizon might signal a distant forest fire, the presence of peridotite in the Tablelands is a sign of the existence of the earth's mantle some 35 km below the earth's continental crust (Burzynski, 1999; Knappett, 2005). However, unlike the meaning of smoke, the meaning of peridotite is not easily understood. Sonesson (1989) proposed, therefore, that some indices are *abductive* and, thus, that they require "prior knowledge about a relation" before their meaning as a sign can be interpreted (p. 53). Clearly, this must be the case with the indices present in the Tablelands: Without some prior knowledge of the earth's structure and of geology in general, it is probably very difficult to even recognize the presence of these signs in the Tableland rock.

Furthermore, not everyone is as well prepared as earth scientists to "read" the geological history of the Tablelands. On their own, most visitors to Gros Morne National Park would simply be at a loss to make sense of its geological history, and most would certainly not recognize the historical significance of the Tablelands. For this reason, natural history sites enter material culture largely due to the research efforts of scientists and the scientific findings that they eventually share with us. In reality, an entire network of shared meaning begins with the scientists' research publications and then continues thanks to the efforts of agents like park naturalists and educators. Information about the geology of the Tablelands is disseminated in many ways; the avenues for doing so can vary but likely include such means as guided walks through the Tablelands, Parks Canada signage at the Tablelands trailhead, park publications, and, increasingly, the Internet. By participating in this shared communication network, all



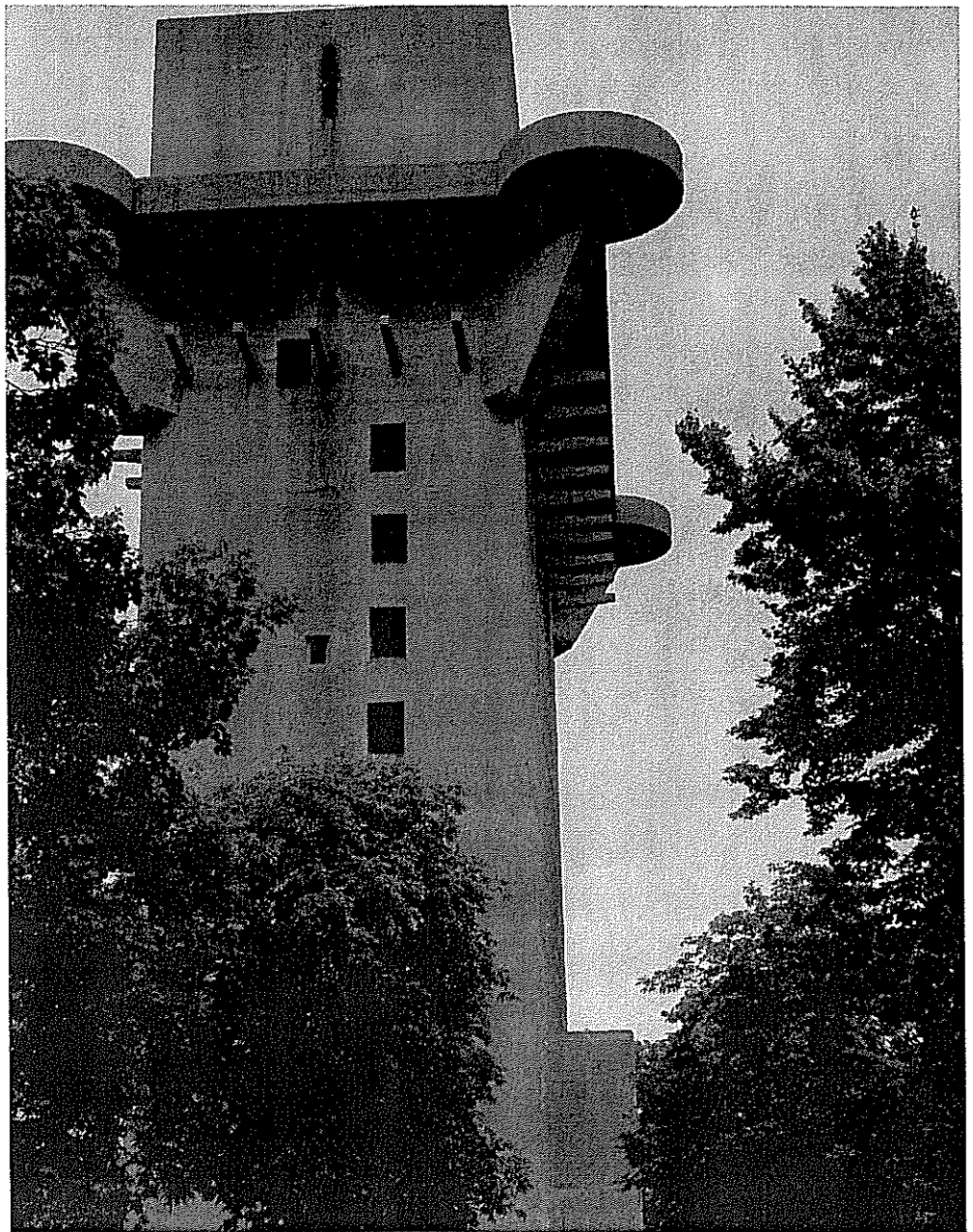
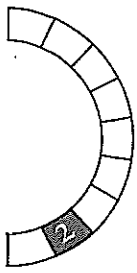
of us can make use of scientific information to develop fuller understanding and appreciation of the importance of natural history sites such as the Tablelands.

The landscape's affordances. From the point of view of visitors to Gros Morne National Park, the Tablelands present at least the following affordances. First, the Tablelands are a place for physical activity, as visitors must hike into the Tablelands in order to see and fully experience this unique area. Second, it provides social and recreational opportunities as most visitors to the area visit with family and friends. Third, like many other exceptional landscapes, the Tablelands afford visitors with the opportunity of aesthetic appreciation. A visit to the Tablelands—hikers can walk quite some distance into a cirque within the Tablelands area—is often an unsettling experience, one that has alternately been described as a “journey to the centre of the earth,” or as “stepping out onto another planet,” since imagined landscapes (the Earth’s core, the planet Mars or the Moon) often come to mind (Environment Canada Parks Service, 1990; Stephenson, 1991).

Aesthetics³ and the landscape. According to Carlson (2002), “we must have knowledge of the different environments of nature and of the systems and elements within those environments” in order to aesthetically apprehend nature (p. 164). Carlson explains that “this knowledge gives us the appropriate foci of aesthetic significance and the appropriate boundaries of the setting so that our experience becomes one of aesthetic appreciation.” He refers also to a point of view articulated by Sparshott, “to consider something environmentally is primarily to consider it in regard to the relation of ‘self to setting,’ rather than ‘subject to object’ or ‘traveler to scene.’ An environment is the setting in which we exist as a ‘sentient part’; it is our surroundings” (as cited by Carlson, 2002, p. 161). It is obvious, then, that visitors experience landscapes like the Tablelands in ways which can be understood to be aesthetic.

The Flak Towers: A Built-Environment Still Rife with Meaning

Our discussion of the different territories of material culture studies continues with an example of a built-environment taken from 20th-century military architecture: the six WW II defense towers, called *flakturms* or *flak towers*, which still exist and intrude on the cityscape of several neighborhoods in Vienna, Austria. As the son of a Canadian soldier and veteran who served in Europe (Great Britain, France, Germany, and Italy) for most of the Second World War (1940-1945), I was simply astounded when I first came upon the flak towers in Vienna. These towers represented my first encounter with concrete evidence of the military activities and aspirations of the British Commonwealth of Nations’ former enemy, the Third Reich. “Built by German forces in 1942 as defense towers and anti-aircraft batteries, these enormous concrete monoliths could house thousands of troops. So thick are their walls that any explosives powerful enough to destroy them would have a similar effect on the surrounding residential areas”⁴ (Brook, 2008, p. 164). The Vienna flakturms are significant as material culture for several reasons. Ironically, they are now unwanted, yet remain as enduring and indestructible artifacts of human architectural heritage that stand dissonantly in contrast with their immediate surroundings. Constructed in a hurry (in less than 6 months) and located mainly in public parks and gardens, where space was available to house them, the flakturms soar above surrounding historic and residential buildings. They are an enduring, visual blight that stand in marked opposition to the elegant baroque former palaces and apartment buildings, and the historic gardens that surround them. The flakturms, however, bear witness to one of the most salient and unfortunate historic events of the 20th century: World War II. They serve as a constant reminder of a recent historical past marred by dictatorship, fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, homophobia, and military expansionism. They remind us of the folly of armed conflict and of tragic and traumatic events that we would rather forget. If anything, the flakturms are rife with meaning and deeply disturbing.



VIEW OF THE AUGARTEN
L-TOWER AND ITS
PRESENT-DAY SECURITY
PERIMETER, AUGARTEN
PARK, VIENNA, AUSTRIA.

*Photograph by Richard Lachapelle,
2008.*

Built-Environment as a Semiotic Network

Affordances and constraints. The appearance of the Vienna flak towers is resolutely militaristic and, therefore, people often described them as somewhat terrifying. Indeed, they are massive, bare, concrete, and clearly industrial in nature. Their sheer materiality is overpowering and inescapable. They also appear to be out of context, as if somehow dropped into their present locations as a result of some massive blunder. One would only expect to encounter such structures in an industrial setting, certainly not in a residential area. Only war can account for the construction of such structures in an urban, residential context such as this. For all these reasons, the original affordance of the flak towers as military defensive structures still appears quite evident.

Less obvious are some of the other original affordances of the towers: they also served as air raid shelters for 15,000 civilians; each tower included large storage areas for art and cultural objects; the gun towers had hospitals with up to 800 beds; each also housed some form of armament industry (i.e., production of ammunition, engines, aircraft parts, etc.); and, finally, the flakturms also included prisons and military offices (Foedrowitz, 1998).

In terms of constraints, once again, the original design of the flak towers was largely determined by their military functions and this, in turn, has served to severely restrict and impede any alternate potential uses of the towers. Built with an extremely durable and hardened variation of reinforced concrete, the flak towers have foundations and walls 2 meters

thick and roofs 3.5 meters in thickness. Therefore, they cannot be demolished without risking serious damage to nearby buildings. The original architectural designs drawn by civil engineer and city planner Friedrich Tamms included, for obvious reasons, few entrances and windows. These design constraints still make it very difficult, even today, to reassign the towers to new peacetime uses. The Stiftskaserne tower is still maintained as an atomic-bomb shelter. The Esterhazy Park tower is now used in part to house an aquarium. Since 1994, one of the Arenberg Park towers is used as a contemporary art storage facility; this use is consistent with one of the original functions of the flak tower. However, the MAK Museum of Applied and Contemporary Art, the present-day custodian of the Arenberg tower, has plans to convert it into a facility for in-situ contemporary art installations (MAK Depot of Contemporary Art, 2008; MAK Contemporary Art Tower, www.mak.at, 2009).

Signs of symbolism and iconicity. After the end of the war, Friedrich Tamms, the architect who designed the Vienna flakturms, was quoted as having referred to the Vienna flak towers as “shooting cathedrals.” In designing the structures, Tamms had carefully selected the locations of the three pairs of towers: first for military reasons (i.e., to ensure the best possible protection for the historic inner city) but also for their symbolic value in terms of the layout of the city. The Stiftskaserne flak tower was carefully located to sit on the same axis as Vienna’s historic imperial Hofburg Complex. In turn, the Augarten towers were located in Vienna’s oldest Baroque garden (Foedrowitz, 1998). The intention in selecting these locations may well have been to suggest some kind of symbolic continuity or affinity between the long-lived Hapsburg reign (1300-1900) and the Third Reich.

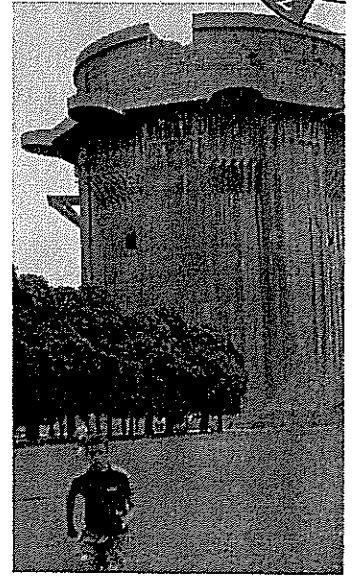
Although the Vienna flak towers were called into service by the summer of 1944, in reality the construction of none of the towers was ever actually finished. For this reason, the flakturms were never intended to have the final appearance that they do now. The architects of these structures knew very well that it would be impossible to remove them once the war was over. “The Flak towers were supposed to be finished in the style of the medieval Hohenstaufen castles in Germany and Italy, with raw tiles and French marble lying ready in quarries near Lyon, Paris and Orleans. Its transport never took place on account of the Allied landing in Normandy” (Foedrowitz, 1998, p. 38).

Again, the design of the final appearance of the Viennese flak towers seemed intended to bring to mind iconic architectural structures from the past; these iconic references may have been intended to suggest that the Third Reich was firmly rooted in a longstanding history and that longevity was indeed its destiny. Czech architecture critic and theorist Jan Tabor, who now lives in Vienna, has compared the flakturms, in terms of their monumentality, to the Egyptian pyramids. He has also assessed their symbolic purpose in the following manner:

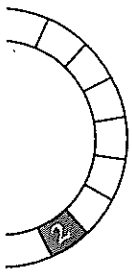
Without wanting to deny the military purposefulness of these buildings completely, they were conceived from the beginning and above all as ‘mood architecture’... They are monuments of and for all times. As a result, they are without utilitarian value in the usual sense. They are as useless as plastic art. But they were carriers of an idea, an elementary feeling for power, stability, and will to live. (as cited in Foedrowitz, 1998, p. 38)

Notwithstanding the symbolic meanings of the flak towers that Professor Tabor brings to light in his comments, it is likely that the construction and operation of the towers, along with an increased local presence of the military, would have functioned also as an effective sign of dissuasion intended to counter any dissent or opposition to the war among the local Viennese population.

As an example of material culture, the flak towers provide an opportunity to discuss the importance of historical context for understanding some cultural objects. However, through this example, I also want to address how the meaning of an artifact can be mediated by personal experience. When, in the present day, the person who encounters (or re-encounters) a flakturm is, in turn, a Jewish prisoner and laborer having forcibly participated in its construction, an elderly Vienna resident having lived through the rise and fall of the Third Reich, a



PLAYING IN THE SHADOW OF THE AUGARTEN G-TOWER, AUGARTEN PARK, VIENNA, AUSTRIA. Photograph by Richard Lachapelle, 2008.

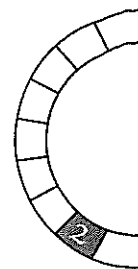


Russian army veteran having participated in the defeat and occupation of Vienna after the end of the war, the son of a war veteran confronting an important part of his father's past, or a child who still plays everyday in the park in the shadow of one of these monoliths, the flakturms necessarily mean something different for each one of these viewers. Yet, all of these individual significations are "correct"; none of them can be rejected as somehow insignificant. In fact, when brought to light, these meanings interweave to form a widely distributed network of signification. As the generation that lived through World War II grows older and passes on, the network of meanings of the flak towers will likely become less salient and less poignant as the connection with lived experience fades and, eventually, is finally broken. Our task, then, in interpreting and understanding the flak towers will become one of remembering. "The intriguing method of remembering—both individually and collectively—is what we seek to understand and to nurture in history education [using objects and artifacts], whether we do it in communities, schools, or museums" (Schlereth, 1990, p. 310). In the next and final example of a locus for material culture studies, we will examine an art installation presented in the context of an historical site located within a museum.

Rebecca Belmore's *Wild* (2001)⁵: A Work of Art and a Work of Material Culture

To investigate the work of art as a territory for material culture studies, I will present and discuss Rebecca Belmore's *Wild* (2001). *Wild* is a site-specific work that intrudes upon and significantly alters our understanding and appreciation of an architectural space: the master bedroom in The Grange. The Grange is an early 19th-century residential mansion, on the site of the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) (Toronto, Canada). It has been restored and opened to the public as an AGO exhibit. Starting from the actual furniture in the master bedroom display, artist Rebecca Belmore changed, in subtle ways, the bedding that decorates a rather dominant, four-poster bed. She attached beaver pelts to the canopy in a sort of "heraldic flourish," and also topped the mattress with a "blood-red" taffeta bedcover into which long, parallel rows of straight black hair are sewn into each seam of the quilted counterpane. Belmore's "adjustments so skillfully folded into the existing Victorian décor and conventions of museum display that it was unclear where her intervention began or where it ended. Many visitors came and went unaware that something was amiss. This lack of recognition speaks as much to the skillful blending of signifiers as it does to the inherited authority of historical displays" (Ritter, 2008, p. 56). However, Belmore, an Anishinabe woman, also occupied this bed at various times over a period of five days. Each time, she lay naked under the bedcover, simply resting. Most often, visitors overlooked Belmore as they passed through the exhibit. "By taking possession of the most intimate room of the house, the master bedroom, she made visible a forgotten (or, systematically erased) history: that of the Aboriginal people who originally occupied the land. *Wild* is on the one hand a comment on this contested history and, on the other, an indulgence of a fantasy of social (and political) transgression—the desire to occupy the master's house" (pp. 56-57).

Affordances, constraints, and sign-values. This installation and performance by Rebecca Belmore provides for an interesting discussion of the affordances, constraints, and sign-values of the objects featured in this installation and performance. When the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) re-opened the Grange residence in 1973 as a museum exhibit, the Grange building and furniture migrated from one object register to another, that is, from a functional to a significative register. While, initially, the furniture was obviously used by the Boulton and Smith families (the inhabitants of The Grange) as utilitarian objects (i.e., chairs were used for sitting and beds for sleeping), the museum now resorts to physical and other constraints (i.e., rails, ropes and signs) to prevent visitors from using the furniture in these very same ways. The Grange and its furniture has changed in status to become that of icons representing a certain way of life at a specific period in the history of the City of Toronto (Gray, 2001).

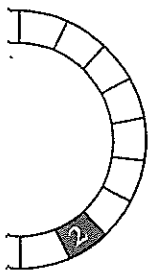


In terms of affordances, what sense can we make of Rebecca Belmore's performance? Have her actions uncovered new affordances? Have they produced new sign-values? Or, instead, by reclining in the poster bed of the master bedroom, has Belmore caused the master bedroom and its objects to return to their initial register as functional objects? Not quite. I would argue instead that the artist's actions have resulted in yet another re-assignment of the room and its furniture: this time, to an entirely new register, that of the work of art. What, then, are the affordances of this and other works of art? Works of art do have some practical uses: For example, a painting can be used to decorate a room or, in some cases, to hide imperfections on a wall. Admittedly, the functional affordances of a work of art, while not entirely inexistent, are relatively limited and, therefore, we must conclude that the principal affordances of a work of art are not pragmatic but significative. Each potential interpretation of the work of art is, therefore, to be understood as one of its significative affordances.

Belmore's installation and performance in *Wild* (2001) are rich in sign-values. For example, the significance of Belmore's use of beaver belts relies upon the iconic appearance of heraldic flourishes while, at the same time, through the use of indexicality, points to the tumultuous history of the fur trade in French and British colonies in North America. In terms of symbolism, the bed suggests many possible meanings, key among them the meaning of sexual intimacy and perhaps, sexual exploitation. The quilted bedcover indexes notions of warmth and comfort but also points to the popular tradition of quilt making as a record of familial history. Therefore, we might ask exactly whose family history is represented here? In addition, the blood-red taffeta and the black hair of the bedcover seem to symbolize some sort of trauma suggesting, perhaps, that the comfort of some comes at the cost of others. Belmore's passivity, as she lay resting in the bed during the performance component of this work, symbolically suggests both submission (since she seems to offer no resistance) and defiance (since she appears so comfortable and self-assured). We feel that, somehow, she should seem awkward in such a setting and, yet, she doesn't. In the context of this work, Belmore, herself, has become an icon—she stands in for all native peoples exploited over the centuries in the name of colonialism. In a sense, *Wild* briefly encapsulates a searing point of view of the history of relations between European settlers and North American native peoples.

I wish to rest my weary body in the master's bed. The bed has an autonomous quality that I find extremely attractive. The bed is a fortress. The four posts clearly marking its territory: Its canopy offering protection from the powers that live in the sky. It has become my shelter... To lie in this historic bed covered in a mass of hair is evocative of a time when the newcomers to this land viewed us as wild. The decorative fur detail of the canopy refers to the taking and taming of this 'wilderness.' My black hair is a celebration of survival. (Belmore, 2001, p. 83)

The artwork as a communication network. Returning once again to Schiffer's model of basic communication patterns, the exchange⁶ that occurred between Belmore and visitors to the AGO during the exhibition of her work would have involved a person in the sender role (the artist), a work of art in the emitter role (*Wild*, 2001), and a person in the receiver role (an AGO visitor). This is Schiffer's Basic Communication Pattern (BCP) no. 2. This pattern best explains what happens in terms of communication when a viewer encounters a work of art. Interestingly, this same BCP pattern also describes the communication that occurs when someone encounters one of the Vienna flak towers (the second example presented in this chapter). In the latter case, the Third Reich's architect is the sender, the flak tower is the emitter, and the viewer is the receiver. However, returning now to the very first case in point—the Tablelands—the communication pattern that we identified there was different: of the three instances examined, it is the only one where an extern plays one or more inter-actor roles within the communication process. In this regard, it is unique and distinctive. However, does the apparent equivalence in communication patterns between the other two



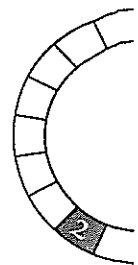
examples—the flak towers and Belmore’s *Wild*—signal that, when it comes to artifacts and works of art, there are no real features that distinguish these encounters one from the other?

Well, I may have identified two differences. For the time being, these are tentative findings that will require additional research in order to support or refute them. Nonetheless, for the sake of discussion, I will briefly present them here. The first difference concerns the affordances of the two types of emitters. While both an artifact and a work of art can be the locus of aesthetic interpretations, the primary affordances of an artifact are pragmatic; their aesthetic affordances are often secondary in importance. The Vienna flak towers are a good example of this: they were called into service as soon as they became functional even though the exterior cladding of the towers, essential as performative indices symbolically linking the towers to the medieval Hohenstaufen structures, was never completed. The flak towers were used first and foremost as defensive bunkers and their communicative potential was never fully realized; in fact, this potential was actually sacrificed for practical reasons. In contrast, the primary affordances of the work of art are aesthetic: the work of art exists principally as an intricate network of potential aesthetic interpretations. In almost every case, any pragmatic affordances of the work of art (i.e., as decoration) are secondary in importance to its aesthetic affordances.

The second difference concerns the motivations of both the sender and the receiver in the process of communication. In the case of an artifact, receivers may disregard any symbolic or aesthetic features of an emitter to respond mainly, if not sometimes exclusively, to the pragmatic affordances of the object. For example, we often use chairs without ever taking notice of their particular design features. That is, the functional aspects of an artifact often overwhelm any aesthetic features.

After reviewing arguments by Danto, Gell, and Genette, Knappett summarizes that “the viewer confronted with an artwork seeks to understand the nature of the agency behind its creation” (2005, p. 127). That is, in the case of a work of art, the artist’s (i.e., the sender’s) motivation⁷ is to transmit, via a work of art (i.e., the emitter), a message that has aesthetic form and significance. In turn, the viewer (i.e., the receiver) must intentionally reciprocate with similar motives by interpreting the emitter using the same register of aesthetic significance. That is, both sender and receiver must be correctly aligned in terms of the aesthetic significance of the object in question. I call this alignment, this meeting of minds between sender and receiver, *mutual aesthetic motivation*. That is, in the case of an art encounter, the viewer as the receiver must adopt the appropriate attitudinal disposition in order to respond aesthetically to the work of art.

Admittedly, viewers may not always respond to a work of art in this way. However, this problem is not unique to works of art. In understanding or appreciating any object, appropriately related knowledge—Schiffer (1999) refers to this knowledge as *correlons*—is required before the receiver can make inferences about the object in question. “I submit that skillful performance requires a receiver to employ a different set of correlons, and thus generate different responses, for each place, activity, interactor and interaction. Thus, every combination of categories call forth a corresponding—perhaps unique—set of correlons and thereby yields more or less tailored responses” (p. 77). Therefore, in the absence of the appropriate relational knowledge, it is sometimes difficult to recognize what type of a response may be appropriate in any given situation. For such reasons, receivers may respond inappropriately in certain situations. Finally, such occurrences underscore the role of education in assuring that receivers acquire the appropriate skills for inferring meaning from historical landscapes, artifacts, and works of art.



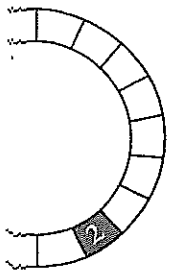
CONCLUSION

As an exemplar of a territory for the appreciation of material culture, the Tablelands have provided the basis for a discussion of human-mediated cultural experience. This discussion addressed nature as a site of aesthetic experience, the landscape as the vehicle for ideas and representations about the geological history of the planet, the role of communication and scientific inference in understanding natural environments, and the ways in which information of a scientific nature can enhance visual and cultural experiences. As a second example of material culture, the Vienna flak towers provide an opportunity to discuss the importance of historical context for understanding some cultural objects. However, through this example, I have also addressed how the meaning of an artifact is also mediated by personal experience. Finally, Rebecca Belmore's *Wild* provides a fertile ground for several different yet complimentary interpretations with meanings that enrich and build upon one another. My discussion of this work attempted to emphasize this point. It also addressed the communicative dimension of the work of art as a territory where dialogue(s) between artist and viewer, museum and visitor takes place.

In conclusion, this chapter serves to illustrate how material culture studies might be useful to the field of art education. Material culture studies make it possible to position art practices within the broader context of human cultural experience considered as a whole. Rather than continuing to define the arts as somehow distinctive and, therefore, separate and isolated from other cultural practices, material culture studies can potentially bring the arts into the arena of everyday life. Material culture studies reveal how works of art are similar in many ways to other objects of material culture. However, as a research method, material culture studies also have the potential to identify how specific examples and specific categories of human-mediated material culture, such as landscapes, artifacts, and art, might be understood as unique in some key ways while, nonetheless, firmly interwoven into an extended network of cultural meanings. As long as art educators don't lose sight of visual art as a key focus within art education teaching or research, then much is to be gained by teaching and promoting an understanding of the ways in which art is an integral part of human culture and how, in turn, that culture is largely defined by a material practice in which objects are significant conveyors of meaning.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Schiffer provides the following example of unintended communication by a sender. By walking through a neighborhood at mealtime, strollers (receivers) can infer from the smell of the cooking food (emitters) that escapes through kitchen windows what each family may be eating for supper. Those cooking the food (i.e., the senders) never intended to share this information but communication occurs regardless (1999).
- 2 Stevens traced the upward journey of the tablelands by locating chromite particles in the sandstones at Lobster Cove Head (Burzynski, 1999).
- 3 In using the terms *aesthetic* and *aesthetic experience*, I am not referring to any philosophical ideas of beauty. Rather, I am referring to certain behaviors on the part of the viewer that can lead to a heightened state of consciousness. Beardsley (1982) proposes that aesthetic experience has the following features: (1) the viewer intentionally focuses their attention on an object or a specific experience; (2) everyday concerns are set aside and give way to a feeling of freedom; (3) the viewer experiences a certain detached affect which result is a loss of self-awareness; (4) the viewer engages in a process of active discovery that he or she finds pleasurable; and (5) the viewer experiences a feeling of wholeness and connectedness. Based on this definition, aesthetic experience is certainly a feature of art appreciation, but it can also be found in many everyday activities including encounters with nature. Aesthetic experiences, then, take place when a person willingly adopts certain attitudinal dispositions that predispose her or him to these heightened states of awareness.
- 4 Flak towers were built in Berlin (6 towers) and Hamburg (4 towers) as well as Vienna (6 towers). After the war, the Allies attempted, with limited success, to destroy them. In Berlin, the towers were "made invisible through small partial explosions, removals, and covering with earth." The results were "bunker hills" which are still evident today. The northern part of the Humboldtthain gun tower in Berlin still remains as a memorial officially dedicated on October 28, 1990. The rest of the tower was destroyed forming another bunker hill. In Hamburg, the two control towers have been destroyed but the two gun towers remain. In Vienna, the urban locations of the towers prevent their removal and all six towers still exist (Foedrowitz, 1998, p. 3, p. 23).
- 5 Readers may view images of Rebecca Belmore's *Wild* (2001) at the following website address: www.rebeccabelmore.com/exhibit/Wild.html
- 6 To the best of my knowledge, during the performances that accompanied the installation, Rebecca Belmore did not engage museum visitors in any discussions about her work. The performance was a silent one. The exchange that we are referring to here is the aesthetic dialogue that occurs between a viewer and the work or art. In most cases, this dialogue takes place in the absence of the artist. However, in her role as the creator of the work of art, the artist nonetheless plays the interactor role of sender.
- 7 To be clear, I am not referring here to the modernist concept of *artist's intention*. In many sender-oriented models of communication, this notion is often used as a standard for judging the correctness of viewer interpretations by comparing them to an artist's statement about his or her work. From a receiver-oriented perspective (i.e., Schiffer, 1999), the receiver's performance in responding to an object is the privileged focus of communication studies. "In the present theory, however, the sender role cannot be privileged because it depends, ultimately, on the receiver's ability to infer the interactor responsible for a particular inscription event. Without a designated receiver, there can be no sender because the sender is a product of the receiver's inference" (Schiffer, 1999, p. 80).