

Teaching visual culture (and then doubting it)

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Teaching visual culture is driven in large part by what could be best described as a will to see. This can be understood in part as a supposed natural desire to see; to see things in particular ways, and to know things through specific practices of looking. The will to see is inherently self-justifying and tied tightly to the presupposition that the more we see, the more knowledge we gain. But what happens when students don't see? In this article, the promise of visual culture studies is advanced and at the same time made problematic through doubt. Using concepts from psychoanalytic theory, an argument is made that teaching visual culture is stained by the unconscious, engaging the unknown, unfixated, anxious, uncertain, and absent subject.

Kulcsszavak: art and design education, psychoanalytic theory, visual culture

Art education celebrates doubt and at the same time determines a position of explaining doubt, through modalities of seeing that are almost always tethered to some sort of knowledge production. In other words, we might not know exactly what we see, but we expect that through art education practices we can understand what we see (verify and produce knowledge), and know that we are seeing it (that “we” are seeing what we see). This idea has been reified through recent movements in visual culture, which I argue are both important and somewhat problematic, as they often create a self-reproducing agency of the will to see.

In this essay, I first review recent movements in visual culture, as they pertain to art education. I begin by laying the groundwork for the necessity of visual culture as a field of study. I then provide a brief overview of a university course, taught in the U.S., that was undergirded by visual culture, and consequently (although not consciously) by the idea of the will to see. In the last section, I raise doubts about art education’s emphasis on knowing and seeing as a foundational component of classroom practices, in a global context. I suggest a different turn for art education, one that already exists through doubt itself, but nevertheless is quickly passed over or explained through the will to see.

Visual culture

For many people around the globe, life in contemporary times is mediated through the swirl of visual culture. Digital film, TV, internet, medical imaging devices, cell phone cameras, satellites, newspapers and magazines, and a host of other multi-media devices attempt to enhance our sight, represent ideas, and help human beings see and be seen. Attempting to understand this cultural condition, its material and symbolic manifestations, and the effect on individual and collective identities is the project of visual culture.

Although many scholars of visual culture often refuse to adopt a predetermined methodology, there are central questions around visibility that seem to be common across disciplines. Here, visibility refers to the socially constructed character of vision, and the politics and ideology of specific visualizing practices that may serve the needs of particular identities.¹ For instance, questions may revolve around how identities have been fashioned through the visual in the past and how they are being refashioned in the present (Mirzoeff, 1998). Oth-

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1. For a detailed critique of visibility see Mirzoeff (2011).

ers questions may deal with the politics of identity as constituted through social categories of seeing, spectatorship, gazing, and glancing. In addition, there may be questions of what it means to be looked at, seen, not seen, or made invisible (Elkins, 2003; Mirzoeff, 2011; Rogoff, 1998).

Art education and visual culture

For over a decade, art education theory and practices in various areas around the globe has informed by visual culture (Eca & Mason, 2006; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Lindstrom, 2007; Park, 2007; Tavin, 2003). At its best, this can be seen as an attempt to reconceptualize art education; an attempt to shift from traditional and limited modes of art making and thinking towards a profoundly critical, historical, political, and self-reflexive understanding of culture, coupled with meaningful and transformative student production (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010). In addition to shifts in curricula at primary and secondary school levels, the current reconceptualization of art education has propelled the development of interdisciplinary courses at the university level. Such courses attempt to help students make explicit their critical investigations of visual cultural practices and interpretations of daily visual experiences. One such course, *Engaging Visuality. The Power of Seeing and Being Seen*, I developed and taught in the U.S., for a number of years.

The course met for ten-weeks, twice a week, for approximately two- and-a-half hours. Lectures and student-directed and small-group discussions provided opportunities to apply theories of visual culture, including perspectives on representation, spectacle, spectatorship, surveillance, and voyeurism, to a variety of cultural forms. To illustrate the power of seeing and being seen, for example, I usually started out the course with a black and white photograph by the artist, Weegee (see Picture 1). The photograph shows a group of excited and puzzled children and youth, and adults on a street in New York City. At first glance, the image seems to reflect a positive atmosphere, but in fact the people in the photograph have just witnessed what Weegee describes as *The First Murder (after 1945)*. After spending some time interpreting the Weegee image, we discussed general questions regarding seeing and being seen.



Picture 1. Discussing *The First Murder* with students

During the rest of the course, students continued to explore notions of culture by seeing culture through a transdisciplinary lens, as an ongoing set of signifying systems that societies produce, reproduce, and contest. Students brought in and discussed their own examples of visual culture, and attempted to draw upon and apply key concepts of visual culture covered in class and through the text-book, *Practices of looking: An introduction to visual culture*, by Sturken and Cartwright (2009). Some of the examples students bring to class include personal family photographs, film clips, YouTube videos, advertisements, personal artwork, and images of body adornment. Students also presented a more formalized display around one or a small set of images for a mid-term and final project.

From reason to doubt

Within the scope of this essay, the brief sketch above necessarily passed over complex and difficult processes that all university courses encounter. The class was neither seamless nor smooth in its development and approach, or pedagogically unproblematic in its daily manifestations. The course had varying degrees of success, depending on a host of factors including individual and institutional expectations, social and cultural assumptions, and students' history and previous knowledge. Through reflecting on the impact of the course a few years after it ended, especially in the context of international art education, a critical positioning and theoretical self-reflexivity is necessary which problematizes the very idea of art education and visual culture — the fundamental principles and presuppositions of the course itself.

The course *Engaging Visuality*, and indeed much of art education as I have known it, is tied tightly to the pre-supposition that the more we see, the more knowledge we gain (I see = I know). This idea naturalizes the desire to know, and normalizes learning to look. In contemporary courses based on visual culture, like *Engaging Visuality*, the agent of art education that issues the order to *see* (the teacher, in many cases) and the agents of seeing (the students, in many cases), are set to work and bound inextricably together in this headlong pursuit of learning to look (regardless of the biological capacity of sight) a quintessential and virtuous process, and a coveted territory for our field (Nobus & Quinn, 2005).

This idea of the will to see seems to exist for its own sake, fueled by old traditions in art education, an almost unlimited amount of literature and classroom paraphernalia, and new curricula and classroom practices around the globe, but especially in the US., including focus on so-called visual literacy. Most art educators in the U.S. believe, for example, that it is beneficial for students to see further, deeper, closer, clearer, inside and outside, and so on. Regardless of where we are located within the international field, most of us know what art education has asked of us — to teach students to see; to see the world in different ways, to see art deeply, to see themselves as artists, and so on. Seeing itself, in more detail, with more attention and intention through art education, is almost always taken for granted as necessarily valuable and good, and a modality tethered to knowledge production that should always be taught. As I learned from developing and offering the course, *Engaging Visuality*, the will to see has remarkable market value.²

Art education, is then, by default, increasing the number of individuals that believe they are driven to see and should learn how to see, the variety of objects and images to be seen, and the need to validate how to see and what is seen. A result of all of this is the enlargement of the field of art education into an end itself. An urgent issue is the consequence of this self-reproducing agency of the will to see. How do theories and interpretation strategies of visual culture deal, for example, with the failure of visual culture? In other words, how can seemingly all-inclusive practices of looking, under the directive of the will to see, address the consequence of not seeing, especially for international art education (what happens to the global field, for example, when students *don't see*)?³

When visual culture runs up against itself

Despite our good intentions as art educators to have students seek and represent knowledge and consciously use language to describe what they see, the things we think they should see, and the signifiers that come out of their mouths (and through their bodies), always reveal that there is something else going on. This is one point where the radical Otherness emerges, beyond anything we can see. In psychoanalytic theory, this Otherness is distinguished in part as a moment of inversion, when, for example, seeing runs up against itself or blocks its own development (Nobus & Quinn, 2005).⁴ This is not, however, the opposite of seeing in the usual way we understand the idea. Instead, this Otherness signals the very impossibility of being fully aware of what we think we see and what we think we know about what we are supposedly seeing. If we take seriously these moments, in-

2. Market value, used here, includes the currency of visual literacy, visual knowledge and skills, and pedagogical capital (including university discourse) in the knowledge economy (including the so-called creative economy tied to art education), where we are all potential specialists.

3. What are the consequences, for example, when students don't see what the instructor desires them to see (in an image, object, or artwork)?

4. This moment may manifest when something is both visually familiar and yet visually unrecognizable, when vision continues but seeing fails, or when the visual signifier and referent are no longer working in tandem (Nobus & Quinn, 2005).

stead of quickly dismissing them or trying to explain them in a rational manner, we might step back from the hegemony of seeing that takes for granted the overwhelming idealization of the relationship between the visual subject (seeing) and visual objects (being seen), in whole or partially — including ourselves. We might embrace this point of disruption to recognize how our subjectivities are always constituted in and through the very ways we think and believe we see; a point that becomes pronounced when meaninglessness enters into *our picture* (not seeing what we think we should see, and so on), eluding the symbolic grasp. Žižek (2006) clarifies that seeing is not the direct assertion of my inclusion in objective reality (such an assertion presupposes that my position of enunciation is that of an external observer who can grasp the whole of reality); rather, it resides in the reflexive twist by means of which I myself am included in the picture constituted by me — it is this reflexive short circuit, this necessary redoubling of myself as standing both outside and inside my picture, that bears witness to my material existence (p. 17).

What if the world gazes back at us, as the unfathomable point where we are always in the picture, yet unable to put ourselves in the picture — for example, when the world looks at you and not you at it? These types of moments, which already occur, might work in the opposite direction of many art education practices, producing non-sense instead of meaning, and hermeneutic failure instead of validating interpretations: the non-relational character of unconscious activity.⁵

Attempting to open up the subjective refinements of the will to see is, in a sense, an unwelcome failure for art education — yet a necessary opening that troubles models of knowledge and the relationship between habits of seeing and the objects of seeing. When students claim, for example, “I don’t see,” art educators might resist the temptation to explain things in a rational way, to fill in the empty space of doubt with meaning. Instead, we might embrace doubt as a pedagogical encounter that puts our own subjectivity in doubt — around the unknown, unfixed, anxious, uncertain, and absent subject. Perhaps the future of art education begins with acceptance of the absolute disarray of subjectivity. Perhaps the future begins by declaring, “I am in so far as I doubt” (Žižek, 1993 p. 69).

5. This should not be understood as a novel pedagogical tactic for art classrooms, but something that already exists on the other side of modalities of seeing. Instead of recipes for practice, these moments offer opportunities for art educators.

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Notes

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