

Visual culture and art making in tertiary art schools: A ‘snapshot’ from Hong Kong and New Zealand

Abstract

This paper reports on research that investigated the influences of contemporary visual culture on the art making processes and artworks of a sample of visual arts students at tertiary institutions in Hong Kong and New Zealand. The Hong Kong-born researcher, domiciled in New Zealand, was a participant-researcher. The research was motivated by a paradigm shift that has occurred in visual arts education from its traditional ‘fine arts’ associations to ‘visual culture art education’ (VCAE). Understanding was sought of the impact of visual surroundings on the participants and whether visual culture informed the teaching programs at their art institutions. The research was informed by an interpretive arts-based paradigm underpinned by a/r/tography, a theoretical and methodological approach which links art, research and teaching. The findings, presented as both ‘voice’ and the ‘visual’, showed less emphasis on teaching and learning about visual culture compared with traditional fine arts. This suggests that skills in visual literacy could be extended for tertiary art students living in an image-saturated era and globalised world, and professional practice could be expanded to include the broadened domain of images found in visual culture and daily visual experiences.

Key words

Visual arts, visual culture, visual culture art education, a/r/tography

Introduction

This paper examines the influences of contemporary visual culture on the art making processes and artworks of eight tertiary visual arts students, four in Hong Kong and four in New Zealand, with two at each of four tertiary institutions. The researcher participated as an

artist/teacher/researcher. The study was motivated by a paradigm shift that has occurred in visual arts education, from its traditional 'fine arts' associations to 'visual culture art education' (VCAE), in which there is a new emphasis on the ways meaning is made through the visual and the expanding domain of study within visual arts (Dikovitskaya, 2005; Duncum, 2003, 2009; Freedman, 2003; Tavin & Hausman, 2004). As well as seeking understanding of whether visual culture, including visual surroundings, impacted on these students, the research investigated whether it informed their teaching programs.

This small-scale study was positioned within a qualitative interpretive arts-based paradigm underpinned by a/r/tography, a theoretical and methodological 'living inquiry' approach which links art, research and teaching and privileges both image and text (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004; Wilson, 2004). The findings, presented as participants' and researcher 'voices' and the 'visual', served to illustrate that there was little emphasis placed on teaching and learning about visual culture. Given that tertiary art students live in an image-saturated era (Leavy, 2009), this points to extending skills in visual literacy, and for development of professional practice towards the broadened domain of images found in visual culture and in the daily visual experiences of students living in a fast-moving globalized world.

Background to the research

Locating the researcher

Wing-Tai (Bobby) Hung moved with his family from Hong Kong to New Zealand in 1988 when he was three years old. He adopted the name 'Bobby' which is how he and his art are known. Although Hung's family regularly returns to Hong Kong his schooling and tertiary education were in New Zealand.

At secondary school, where images and art making from Western fine arts traditions were emphasized, Hung was not encouraged to explore ideas about his identity, cultural

milieu or personal interests. Nonetheless, he developed an interest in graphic design, graffiti, street art and illustration and subsequently attended a tertiary art school. There, he developed as a painter and was taught a range of theoretical ideas related to art history and contemporary art practices, albeit within a European modernist paradigm.

During subsequent study for a Postgraduate Diploma in Education Hung's perceptions and misconceptions about visual arts education were challenged. His lecturer, Jill Smith, an experienced tertiary teacher educator and researcher in visual arts education introduced him to socio-cultural perspectives, diverse pedagogies and a wide range of theories informing how visual arts education was shaped in the past, what influences it today, and the direction it has taken towards visual culture art education. He was also inspired by the notion that visual arts education research can be conceptualized, conducted and reported in innovative ways. Smith became his supervisor for the research reported in this paper.

Shared perspectives between researcher and supervisor

A key idea Hung gained from Smith (2011, p. 14) during postgraduate studies was that “teachers are cultural workers.” This phrase resonated with him, particularly for understanding cultural diversity and the contexts in which artefacts of differing ethnic and cultural peoples are created, used and viewed. This theoretical position underpins his current teaching in a tertiary art and design institution and, with the inclusion of ‘visual culture’, is being used to develop further pedagogical knowledge and understanding of the influences in his own art making and that of others. It also led him and Smith to speculate on how, or whether, visual culture art education (VCAE) was understood in tertiary art institutions in his country of birth and in New Zealand.

The notion of cultural context, together with Smith's introduction to innovative arts-based research practices, inspired and shaped a topic which would potentially be pertinent in both countries. Although Lau (2013, p. 67) reports that art-based enquiry is “not a major

concern in Hong Kong, China or Taiwan,” Smith’s interest in a/r/tography, the theoretical framework that influenced the re-presentation of her doctoral (text-presented) research (Smith, 2007) in an (image/text) exhibition (Smith, 2009), encouraged Hung to explore non-traditional approaches that validate the visual arts as a researching tool.

Previously, Hung considered his art making and teaching to be separate, but having gained knowledge of a/r/tography he could see how each can inform the other. Irwin and de Cosson (2004, p. 27) suggest that when the roles of artist/researcher/teacher are integrated together “knowing (theory), doing (praxis) and making (poesis) will inform our understanding of ideas and practices.” Smith (2009, p. 265) articulates her approach to A/R/T as “art practice, research and teaching which interconnect in an ever-continuing cycle.” As a participant in the research, this integration gave Hung a voice throughout the study via the a/r/tographical concept of ‘living inquiry’, rather than just gathering and reporting the findings. Photographic and video documentation throughout the research process enabled the study and portrayal of the social life of the participants, and revealed what text cannot.

Purpose of the research

In the twenty-first century students live in an image-saturated era, thus an investigation of the participants and their visual landscapes in Hong Kong and New Zealand offered a ‘snapshot’ for understanding the impact of cultural milieu on their art making processes and artworks. A further aim was to review the institutions’ teaching programs to determine whether students were supported towards understanding visual culture. It was hoped that the research would offer self-reflection for Hung, his research participants, and the art education community.

The research question

The overarching question was, “How are understandings of contemporary visual culture reflected in students’ art making at differing tertiary art institutions located in their cultural milieu of New Zealand and Hong Kong?” To assist in answering this question participants

were asked to define the terms ‘cultural milieu’ and ‘visual culture’; what types of visual culture, if any, influenced their art making; whether globalization and digital media were influences; and what part visual culture played in the teaching programs at their institutions. Hung also wanted to ascertain how, or whether, the influence of visual culture was similar or different for tertiary art students living in Hong Kong and New Zealand.

How the research was framed

A review of the literature

Underpinning this research was a body of literature on ways in which ‘visual culture’ and ‘visual culture art education’ (VCAE) are defined and debated. Duncum (2001, p. 103), a leading exponent of VCAE, claims that “everyday life is visual culture” and includes cultural experience, embodied visual memories, and visual lived experiences. Particularly pertinent was the contention that VCAE has moved away from the exclusive study of traditional arts and art history towards the study of everyday images, objects, sites and artifacts that are not limited to the context of educational institutions (Congdon, Hicks, Bolin & Blandy, 2008; Efland, 2005; Mitchell, 2011); the claim by Illeris and Arvedsen (2011) that study of visual phenomena and events offers ways in which to challenge personal and other’s preconceptions of how images are viewed that inform our understanding of the world; and Tavin’s (2009) concern to challenge and change the viewing habits of our daily visual experiences.

This century has witnessed further changes and challenges to visual arts education with the influence of globalization (Dikovitskaya, 2005; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009; Sweeny, 2004), the shift to visual modes of communication, and accelerating developments in technologies (Rusted, 2007; Wilson, 2008). The reality is that students of all ages now live in an image-saturated era, surrounded by a range of visual forms that have the power to influence and construct individual’s beliefs, values, ideas and identity (Eisenhauer, 2006;

Grushka, 2007; Richardson, 2006; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). Most theorists agree that ‘visuality’, the examination of relationships between individuals, images and society, has a strong focus on the creation of knowledge through the act of looking (Mitchell, 2011; Richardson, 2006). Duncum (2006) refers to visuality as a way of understanding how we view and use images in society, the conditions in which we look, and how others look at us. Others stress the importance of developing analytical skills, critically examining everyday images (Bigelow & Petersen, 2002; Darts, 2006), and connecting everyday visual forms encountered outside the classroom with students in the classroom (Bolin, 1996; Walker, 2006). It is suggested that visual arts educators need to develop pedagogies that teach students critical ways of looking and making new meaning of their cultural milieu and the visual landscape that surrounds them (Sturken & Wright, 2009). Grushka (2007) argues that within students’ cultural milieu forms such as music, films, advertisements and video are all ‘habitus’ for youth in constructing who they are. Pertinent to this research, Freedman (2003) and Heise (2004) suggest that students can often create stories inspired by their habitus - personal experiences of their culture, identity, environment, surroundings and understanding of their social world.

The research settings and participants

For this small-scale qualitative study two tertiary art institutions in Hong Kong (HK 1 and HK 2) and two in New Zealand (NZ 1 and NZ 2) were purposively selected by Smith for differences between and within them, thus offering some comparison. The head of each institution was approached and gave ethical consent for Hung to conduct the research at their setting. The eight art students were recruited through a flyer circulated at their institutions, inviting them to voluntarily participate in the research. Each selected a pseudonym to protect their identity. Six students were studying in their final undergraduate year, while at NZ 2 the volunteers were in the postgraduate program. Information on each participant’s ethnicity and

cultural background was unknown to Hung until they had consented to participate. An unforeseen outcome was that the recruitment flyer, which described the research and included an image of Hung with one of his artworks, attracted six participants of Asian ethnicity, four in Hong Kong and two in New Zealand.

The educational contexts

Prior to the fieldwork, Hung reviewed the art programs of the four tertiary art institutions on their websites. This created the educational context and provided a snapshot of each. From the mission statements for overall programs, papers offered, and expectations for students, it was evident that each institution had a unique approach, as well as aspects in common such as the study of Western art. The programs at HK 1 and HK 2 gave emphasis to Chinese culture, and NZ 1 offered a course on Maori culture. While each institution focused on conceptual, theoretical, practical, historical, and contemporary contexts within the visual arts, no references to ‘visual culture’ and ‘cultural milieu’ were located. The aim was to ascertain connections between what programs purported to do and how their aims were manifested through the art making and artworks of participants. Each program’s overview informed the questions asked during interviews and observations, and offered understanding for Hung of how he could view the participants’ artworks according to their context.

How the research was enacted

Methodology and methods: Crossing the boundaries through a/r/tography

Hung used traditional qualitative research and arts-based methodologies, the latter providing opportunity to use innovative ways of conducting, interpreting, and (re)presenting research through creative and artistic forms that satisfy the rigors of the academy. Data was collected in both countries, during which time Hung interviewed, observed, and talked informally with

participants in their studio environments, and ventured with them into their surroundings/cultural milieu. The methods were trialed by Hung prior to the fieldwork to ensure their trustworthiness. Each was inter-connected and included visual documentation, thus making a link to the methodology of a/r/tography by integrating the visual and textual through a qualitative paradigm (Creswell, 2003). Advocates of arts-based research claim that the power of images assists researchers by revealing the hidden and unknown, and supports the ability to complement text, reveal what text cannot, and reach a broader audience beyond the research community (Leavy, 2009; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009; Weber, 2008). Hung's visual methods featured photographic and video recordings for which consent was granted by participants. Care was taken to ensure that they and their institutions were not identified and participants were given opportunity to edit their interview transcripts and raw video footage before they reached the public (Sindling, Gray & Nisker, 2008).

Data analysis

Wolcott's (1994) 'D-A-I' method of data analysis was used as the framework. This began with 'description' of what the participants said, followed by 'analysis' to determine similarities and differences between them and their institutions. 'Interpretation' of how the data was understood to create meaning was then used to draw final conclusions. Analysis began as soon as data collection commenced (Silverman, 2001), thus enabling interpretation of data during the research rather than at the end (Creswell, 2003). Key comments were used verbatim to express participants' 'voices'.

Photographic and video documentation enabled cross-checking between what the participants did and said to ensure authenticity and validity. Hung's goal was "...not be to 'decode' or 'translate' visual data into verbal data per se, but rather to build a bridge between the visual and the verbal" (Collier & Collier, 1996, p. 169). He theorized and identified patterns that emerged, integrating both text and image. This provided opportunity to express his and the participants' voices in the final conclusions (Rose, 2007). Artful (re)presentation

of data was created through nine digital 4-6 minute videos featuring each individual contextualized in their cultural milieu, art making processes, tertiary institution, and influences of visual culture reflected in their artworks. From the videos Hung gained an even richer sense of understanding (Irwin, Spinggay & Kind, 2008; Punch, 2009).

What the research revealed

What were the participants' understandings of their 'cultural milieu'?

The data showed that participants, including Hung, connected with their studio and institutional environments. Most, however, did not critically engage with their broader cultural milieu – their environment, neighbourhood or social surroundings in Hong Kong or New Zealand. All four participants in Hong Kong were Chinese, Hong Kong-born, females in their early twenties. Cleo (HK 1) and Felice (HK 2) were not aware of the term 'cultural milieu'. Although Emily (HK 1) said "I have no idea", she was engaged with a project about an aspect of her neighbourhood through observing a neighbour in order to examine the norm of the family structure in Chinese society. Angela (HK 2) aptly described this term as the characteristics or style of an environment, place or society.

The four New Zealand participants defined their understandings of 'cultural milieu' as the characteristics of an individual's landscape, environment and surroundings. Laura (NZ 1) described this as a "cooking pot of different cultures," with reference to a place that has many different cultures of people. Ah Yee (NZ 2) explained cultural milieu as a "cultural template or a set of conditioning" which suggested that local people are embedded with a set of beliefs, understanding, general knowledge and customs of a place in which these are normal to those people and may only be strange to outsiders. Her explanation aligned with Howell's (2003) interpretation of 'culture', as a set of systems, customs and beliefs that are relative to the actions and thoughts of the people that use or give meaning to them.

The Hong Kong participants noted the significant presence of man-made visual culture in their environment, describing their city as very small, filled with shopping malls and housing, heavily populated, fast paced, and with an absence of nature in the visual landscape. Similarly, New Zealand participants believed their city was dominated by billboards, shops and architecture, though they noted the abundance of physical spaces, parks, trees, and nature. While there was certainly less visual saturation of media in New Zealand, compared with Hong Kong, there was little data to suggest that participants were critically engaging with what they saw in their environments and social surroundings. Marie (NZ 1) believed her environment did not influence her at all and Laura (NZ 1), who was unsure, explained that it might have subconsciously affected her art making.

Hung concluded that participants' surroundings were used merely as a point of reference for subject matter. Emily's exploration into the family structure in Chinese society was the only instance which used her visual experience to inform a social issue. This sense of critical thinking is connected to Sturken and Cartwright's claim (2009) that daily visual experience can be used to challenge an individual's own, as well as others' preconceptions. Other participants professed to have little interest, feeling or need for critical analysis towards their visual surroundings. This confirmed how deeply embedded visual images, media, sites, and artefacts are in our environments; that viewing habits are not challenged and the visual information that saturates our daily lives, experiences and understanding of the social world, is passively accepted. This finding aligned with Duncum's (2002) claim that our daily visual experiences and encounters are so familiar they are left undisputed.

How did the participants define 'visual culture'?

Each art student articulated varying nuances of the term 'visual culture'. These included the visual images, objects, and places that people see in their environment and surroundings. Emily's (HK 1) interpretation of visual culture was anything that was visually man made,

designed or fabricated, for example CD shops and food packaging, television, and architecture. This understanding aligned with Kuru's (2010) and Smith's (2003) lists of visual culture examples that include clothing, buildings and photographs. Both Felice (HK 2) and Cleo (HK 1) explained visual culture as a particular style that is designed or created to appeal to certain people. They cited advertising posters made specifically to attract locals or a type of fashion that is worn by the youth population. Angela (HK 2) described it as the "visual attraction" of a place, district or community.

New Zealand participants, Laura and Marie (NZ 1), considered visual culture to be all the images that one is surrounded by in the environment. Steve (NZ 2) referred to this term as the people or a culture of people who live in or use the visual information around them, while Ah Yee (NZ 2) suggested that visual culture is a set of recognizable images or features of images that relate, represent, or identify certain people, places or origins. She considered New Zealand to be a place that had a range of Māori-influenced images. The participants acknowledged the relationship between an individual and a visual image, site or artefact. This relationship between the viewer and the environment is the fundamental framework that underpins the intention behind VCAE (Illeris & Arvedsen, 2011).

There was no significant difference between the definitions of visual culture found in both countries. Six art students, four in New Zealand and two in Hong Kong, named types of visual culture that were prevalent in their city, most commonly billboards, advertisements, architecture and posters. Unlike the unfamiliarity of the Hong Kong students with the term 'cultural milieu', interpretations of visual culture by all participants aligned with the extensive array of arguments and justifications made by key advocates of VCAE (Duncum, 2013; Tavin, 2009). This finding surprised Hung, given that understandings about visual culture did not feature in any of the tertiary art programs. Nonetheless, there was some confusion about the extent of what is defined as visual culture, and how broad this list can be.

Were globalization and digital media an influence on participants' art making?

Data was sought on whether the increasing shift to visual modes of communication and accelerating developments in technologies (Rusted, 2007; Wilson, 2008) informed participants' art making processes and artworks. An unexpected finding was that very few used digital media as a primary mode for art making, despite the use of digital technology in their social lives. It did, however, play a small part in their processes. Cleo created paintings that merged her photographs from Europe with her imaginary Chinese-styled landscapes. Emily used photographs of her next door neighbour and transferred these on to cement to represent her neighbor's captivity in her home, an anonymous concrete high-rise apartment. New Zealand participants, Steve and Ah Yee, used Photoshop as a tool to inform their art works. Ah Yee created digital inkjet-printed artworks that layered Chinese characters on top of each other by editing those images on this computer program. Her rationale was to explore the idea of instantaneous mass reproduction, ultimately painting over the digital prints with Chinese and Japanese inks to develop more intricate layering. Steve used Photoshop differently. He began with photography to document his daily experiences, visual landscape and mundane objects, then created digital collages on Photoshop. His aim was to explore visual elements, such as scale and composition, to create rough mock-ups before painting these images on canvas. This idea of creating his own realities by manipulating images from his environment related to Freedman's (2003) and Sweeny's (2004) claims that when an image is taken or used out of context then the boundaries of reality are blurred and forged representations of reality can be created.

An alternative form of digital media that participants in both countries engaged with was an 'app' on the iPhone called 'Instagram'. Felice and Angela (HK 2), and Marie (NZ 1), used this as a photo-sharing application where users contribute images and short videos to the wider digital community. Images that are posted operate as a daily visual diary that document

and present ways in which people are actively living, participating, and viewing by showing their understanding of the world, themselves, and their artwork (Wilson, 2008). As well as people following them on Instagram, participants can follow others who may include friends, artists, celebrities, and fan pages.

This interaction with digital media technologies, and the temporality of the internet, reflected the “community of self-controlled shared experiences” in which individuals move from being consumers to “prosumers” (Duncum, 2013, p. 15). Individuals create their own content-driven media that continues to filter into the saturated and globalized visual world. There was little evidence of such interaction in the tertiary art institutions in Hong Kong and New Zealand, despite Duncum’s (2013) argument that visual arts educators need to engage and support these types of digital sites of visual culture to enhance the students’ critical understanding of knowledge, rather than their pre-packaged ideas and views. From the data it was evident that while six participants used digital media within a participatory community, and as a tool for art making processes, it was not used as a platform for art production that responds to the critical engagement of visual culture.

Did visual culture influence the participants’ art making?

The data showed that visual culture did play a significant role for six participants’ art making while three were not influenced at all. However, four participants believed visual culture did not influence them in any way, two were unsure, and the other three considered that it did affect their art making. Three of the four who believed that visual culture did not influence them had given contradictory responses during their interviews by listing influences in their art making that fell under the visual culture category as defined by the literature. At the same time, when they were asked if visual culture had influenced them, they replied “no”. Hung concluded that if the participants had a clearer understanding of how visual culture is defined they would suggest that they had been influenced by it. Without their understanding of the

parameters of visual culture, he ascertained that these six participants were influenced by a range of images, sites, and artefacts found in visual culture as well as other forms of knowledge and information traditionally found in fine arts institutions. The type of visual culture that influenced the six participants' art making was different from the list of visual culture that was described in their surroundings of Hong Kong and New Zealand.

Emily (HK 1) was influenced by everyday life, events, people and CD shops. She used a broad range of processes including painting, photography, collage, video and transfers, combining traditional media and everyday materials such as cheese, cement and leaves. She explored her understanding of personal emotion, family structure in Chinese society, and the natural order of life.

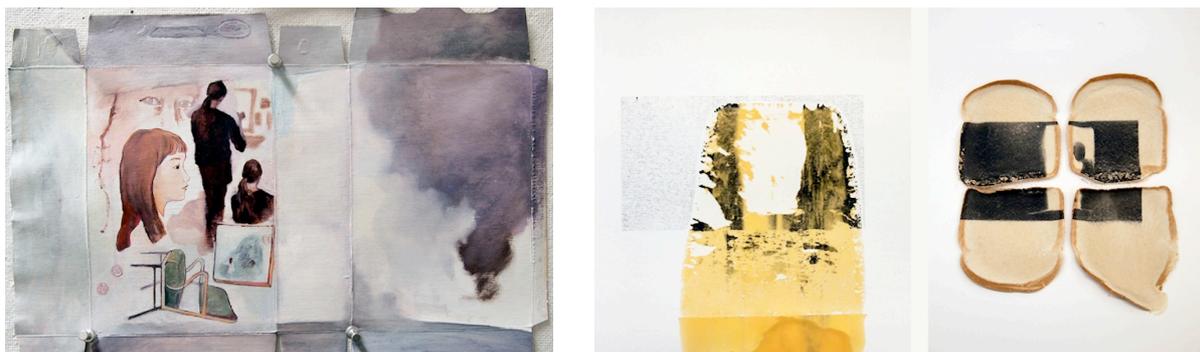


Figure 1: Emily (HK 1) – ‘The study of change’

Emily's painting on packaging and printmaking on cement and on bread

Cleo (HK 1) spoke of the influence of poems, songs, and literature which she used to help her create illustrations, prints and paintings that related to time and space, memories, the meaning of life and her experiences while staying in Europe.



Figure 2: Cleo (HK 1) – ‘My utopia’

A painting showing Cleo’s interest in traditional Chinese art and painting over a photograph

Angela (HK 2) listed influences on her art making as being English and Chinese literature, books, music, paintings and magazines. She used these to inspire paintings, drawings and performance that dealt with ideas related to emotion, body movement, relationships between herself and others, and the visualisation of her personal thoughts.



Figure 3: Angela (HK 2) – ‘Searching within myself’

Angela in her studio and a detail of one of her drawings

Felice (HK 2) was influenced by the internet, galleries, museums and a range of artist models. She created work primarily through jewellery in various metals, ceramics and photography. Her ideas explored daily life and experiences, and most recently the theme of loneliness and being homesick, the latter arising from participating in an exchange program in the United Kingdom for a semester.



Figure 4: Felice (HK 2) – ‘Homesick for Hong Kong’

Felice creating ceramic plates and forks for her jewellery

Laura (NZ 1) was born in England and moved to New Zealand when she was fifteen years old. Now in her early twenties, her interest is in text books and essays which were reflected in her exploration through line, shape, and disruption of the textual language. Her recent works were created primarily through stitching cotton onto braille paper and, in some cases, mixed media with acrylic paint.

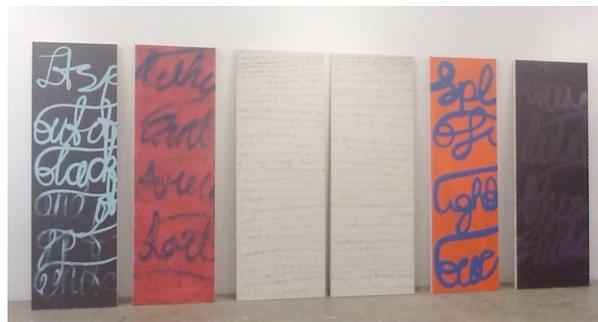


Figure 5: Laura (NZ 1) – ‘Reading the illegible’

Laura stitching into braille paper and her hand painted text on doors

Marie (NZ 1), a Chinese female born and raised in Malaysia, moved to New Zealand to study. Now in her early twenties, Marie explained that she drew influence from textiles, patterns, colours, memories, experiences from travels, and from artist models. Marie hand

printed on sheets of coloured photo-proofing paper to create abstract patterns, colour and line, making her final work as installations.



Figure 6: Marie (NZ 1) – ‘Layers and overlaps’

Marie creating layers with diverse media and her cut-outs of transparent film

Steve (NZ 2), a New Zealand Pakeha/Maori in his early forties, was interested in film, photography, design, commercial art, sign writing and artist models. He used his daily visual experiences as a process to create oil paintings to document his memories, nostalgia, family, people he had met, and things he had seen.



Figure 7: Steve (NZ 2) – ‘Recording the mundane’

Steve’s painting of his son and of a screenshot from a film

Ah Yee (NZ 2), a female in her fifties, was born and raised in Hong Kong. She completed her Bachelor of Fine Arts at the same institution in New Zealand where she is currently studying for her Masters. Ah Yee, who was drawn to Chinese and Western artist models that were

primarily painters, was interested in their philosophies and processes. This informed her creation of large ‘zen like’ ink paintings that explored “bodily gesture, ghosts, depletion of life and recording of time”.



Figure 6: Ah Yee (NZ 2) – ‘Traces of the ghost image’

Ah Yee painting in her studio and one of her digital paintings

Hung, himself a Chinese, Hong Kong-born male, in his late twenties is interested in graffiti, film, artist models, tattoos, and illustration. From these influences he creates abstract illustrative and typographical graffiti pieces with aerosol and acrylic paint, both outdoors on a large scale, and indoors on canvas.



Figure 9: Bobby – ‘The city as my canvas’

Each participant was influenced by visual culture in different ways but there were similarities between their approaches to certain themes, ideas and processes. Cleo, Angela, Ah Yee, Steve and Hung continued to paint while other participants worked with different media,

albeit within the traditions of the fine arts. The influences of both visual culture and the traditional model of teaching found in visual arts education were evident. All four New Zealand participants and Felice (HK 2) used ‘artist models’ as a point of reference. This was not unexpected for New Zealand participants since the concept of studying established practices of artists is central to the secondary school art curriculum for senior students. The data showed that the use of artist models informed participants’ decisions about selection of media and ideas.

Hung’s assumption, before the research began, was that participants in Hong Kong would be more influenced by visual culture and their visual environment than those in New Zealand. The data showed, however, that there was an equal range of influences of different types of visual culture on their art making. While participants in both countries were not particularly interested in their visual surroundings, the saturation of visual culture in their environments pointed to a lack of awareness of how to make meaning, or interpret the visual overload. Mitchell (2002) and Efland (2005) state that distinctions between ‘high art’ and ‘low art’ should no longer take precedence or be differentiated. This suggests the need to broaden the domain of study beyond the traditional institutional parameters to help students engage with everyday images, sites and artefacts that foster habits of critical thinking.

How did the teaching programs support students' understanding of visual culture?

All four institutions placed importance on accommodating the development of their students’ art making needs. At HK 1, the program emphasized learning about the art of China, although students were able to study both Eastern and Western art. Emily and Cleo did not experience any teaching about visual culture. At HK 2, there was a similar emphasis on Eastern and Western art, with opportunities for cross-disciplinary study and hybrid practices without needing to major in one pathway. While Felice and Angela suggested that there was a possibility that their institution taught visual culture, there was no data which supported

learning or teaching about the types of visual culture they engaged with. Rather, there was focus on the development of students' thinking and ideas along with the support of a range of different general education courses. Angela studied Mandarin, computer science and philosophy and Felice studied languages in English, Chinese and Putongwha.

NZ 1 was the only institution that made mention of 'visual arts culture'. Laura suggested that while 'visual culture,' per se, was not taught within their program she had opportunity in a theory course to learn about art images from different visual arts cultures. During discussions with her lecturer, she was encouraged to "look so we can see things differently" in relation to images, objects and places on the street, though this did not take place in an actual course devoted to the conditions of looking (Duncum, 2006; Tavin, 2009). Marie's response was that her lecturers suggested that students should visit galleries and exhibitions. At NZ 2, the only postgraduate program in this research, Ah Yee and Steve engaged in critiques with groups of peers and one-on-one critiques with their supervisors, but visual culture, as explored in this research, did not feature in these discussions.

From the data, Hung concluded that the art programs at each institution did not specifically support learning and teaching about visual culture. Prescriptions aligned with the education of historical and contemporary fine arts images. Each institution remained located within a visual arts paradigm focused primarily on art production, art criticism, art history and contemporary art within a mode of learning and teaching that resembled discipline-based art education (Smith, 2003). Efland's (2005) and Marriner's (2006) views that VCAE, which can support students in the creation of knowledge that parallels the traditions of fine arts with contemporary visual culture, was absent. This suggested that institutions could well move beyond the parameters of fine arts to help students engage with different visual forms found outside the traditional learning environment in order to encourage them to be critical observers. By doing so, tertiary students can challenge their discourses, assumptions and

beliefs, or they will continue to passively accept the information that surrounds them (Anderson & Milbrandt, 2005).

Conclusions and recommendations

Although six of the nine participants from Hong Kong and New Zealand were influenced by visual culture they were not engaged with it as a point of departure for critical, social, historical, cultural or political change, but rather as visual reference for personal themes and ideas in their art making. The influences of traditional fine arts teaching programs in both countries, within a modernist paradigm, outweighed a direction towards postmodern conceptions. What these findings present for visual arts educators in the tertiary (and secondary school) sectors is that continuation of narrow prescriptions of Western fine arts practice and theories may not serve to adequately help students become critically engaged with the contemporary world in which they live. Nor will this help students become critical citizens in society and challenge beliefs, perceptions and understandings that are generated in the present image-saturated era. As the literature suggests, art institutions may need to take the first step towards promoting the teaching and learning of visual cultural forms that are not normally categorized within Western art (Illeris & Arvedsen, 2011).

Hung believes that this research can offer art educators and institutions a clearer perspective of how visual arts educators and institutions could be placed at the forefront of change towards a visual culture art education paradigm by:

- | responding to, and understanding, the range of different types of visual culture that students engage with on a daily basis;
- | using visual culture that students engage with as a springboard for developing a deeper understanding of critical, social, historical, cultural, and political issues, perspectives and viewpoints;

- | reassessing the delivery of teaching to move beyond textbooks and narrow prescriptions so that students do not passively accept information, but learn how to develop critical habits of thinking for themselves;
- | teaching students how to respond to visual culture with art production that is relevant to the types of visual forms that they engage with, so that that students are not limited or bound to the traditions of the fine arts;
- | teaching students skills in visual literacy so they can critically engage in the many different ways of ‘looking’ at and deciphering visual images, sites, and artifacts that are found in their daily visual experiences and cultural milieu;
- | responding to new online communities of sites where knowledge and information is shared, created, engaged with and learned about in different ways that extend beyond the classroom environment;
- | implementing professional development programs for the teaching of visual culture art education to support visual culture art educators.

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