

**Interconnectivity: How Place-Based Art
Education and in Visual Culture Art Education
Can Inform Each Other**

**Rachael Cohen
11/17/12**

Introduction

In 1961 June King McFee wrote, “art and artmaking [is] integral to the discourse that shapes and defines community” (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993, p. 25). Her definition sees artists as active participants who shape society. To study art is to study society, and to make art is to help create the conditions for change within a society.

Viewing art as active rather than passive makes art education a powerful discipline. In choosing their materials and how they frame their projects and curricula, art educators make decisions that prioritize certain ideas about art, society and culture. Whether they do so consciously or not, art educators engage in a deeply political practice that goes well beyond the transmission of technical or aesthetic skill. Scholarship within art education has always been concerned with how teachers mold their practice. For some, aesthetics and skills remain paramount. However, many contemporary art education scholars, myself included, increasingly see art education as a way to promote critical thinking and student empowerment. Critical thinking skills help students become active participants rather than passive consumers of their world. When students have an informed sense of how meaning is constructed around them, they are better able to make artwork that is both personally and publically meaningful.

Encouraging critical thinking and student empowerment are central goals of a politically engaged art education. From this perspective, how do we define the art that students study? How can we encourage meaningful and sustained engagement with these ideas and art forms? Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) and Place-Based Art Education (PBAE) are two recent theories that attempt to shed light on these questions. Both VCAE and PBAE see art as a conduit for understanding systems of power, and art

education as way for students to develop a social and political consciousness. Both VCAE and PBAE scholars seek to expand the scope of art curriculum. However, these two theories prioritize different societal issues that lead to different objects and methods of study.

In this paper I will investigate the implications of these differing priorities. I will suggest that while both VCAE and PBAE are vitally important theories, each have key shortcomings. Finally I will propose that scholars and teachers should integrate ideas from both VCAE and PBAE, to form an approach that is focused on visual culture, as well as ecologically and locally conscious.

VCAE and the Purpose of Art Education

VCAE is a relatively new paradigm in art education. However, it has generated substantial interest by scholars in recent years. VCAE evades easy definitions. Loosely described, VCAE proposes a teaching practice that examines popular culture, new media, and other alternative sources, in addition to the traditional fine arts (Freedman, 2003). VCAE's interest in investigating mass culture is primarily "rooted in a democratic ethos that attends to the practices of teaching and learning and focuses on lived experiences with the intention to disrupt, contest, and transform systems of oppression" (Tavin, 2003, p. 198).

VCAE theorists do not see the classroom as a neutral site. Instead they believe that art education is inherently connected to social justice (Darts, 2004). Art has the unique ability to help students recognize and disrupt systems of dominance hidden in visual media (Darts, 2004; Duncum, 2001, 2009; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2003; Taylor, 2003). All visual images carry complex social meaning. As Barret points out:

[i]mages ...present opinions as if they were truth, reinforce attitudes, and confirm ordinary beliefs and values. If the messages carried by visual culture are not interpreted, we will be unwittingly buying, wearing, promoting, and otherwise consuming opinions with which we may or may not agree. (Barret, 2003, p.12)

For VCAE theorists the purpose of art education is to help students develop critical thinking skills. By learning how meaning is constructed, students are empowered to better understand the media they consume. They also develop the agency to produce their own complex and layered imagery.

Why VCAE Now?

VCAE theorists strive to investigate unequal distribution of power within a world increasingly dominated by advertising, marketing, and immersive technology. The Internet, video games, TV, and social media provide a constant flow of imagery, ideas, and information. However, the increased speed and availability of information has not affected the unequal distribution of political and social power. As Duncum notes, “mass media is concentrated in only a few hands” (Duncum, 2001 p.102). This is especially troublesome because as he adds, “observing the new visibility of culture is not the same as understanding it” (Duncum, 2001 p. 103).

For visual culture theorists, visual media is the predominant form through which social roles are communicated. Media can reify constructions of power that disproportionately disenfranchise women, people of color, and youths. Unfortunately, the way these roles are constructed is not always apparent. Making the invisible power structures of society visible would be important in any decade. However, VCAE theorists believe it is even more critical today because of an increasingly digital landscape (Taylor, 2003).

VCAE: Object and Method of Study

VCAE strives to expand the art curriculum to include new media, popular culture, and traditionally under-represented artists. Within this paradigm, educators can make available “educative spaces where the layers of socio-cultural, political, aesthetic, historical, and pedagogic complexities surrounding these works can be examined and explored” (Darts 2004, p.319). Studying only the art included in traditional art curriculum will stifle the range of issues art teachers can address. The expansion of the object of study represents a belief that all cultural artifacts, whether from popular culture or the art historical cannon, are equally rich in meaning (Freedman, 2003).

It is not enough to merely expand the object of study. VCAE also emphasizes a discussion rich classroom. Lessons are meant to be inquiry-based and part of an overarching curriculum that is designed to revisit similar ideas, but from different angles. This kind of classroom atmosphere is difficult to produce. However, VCAE theorists believe that using popular culture and new media in the classroom will motivate students to consistently and deeply engage with projects. Popular culture and new media are accessible, exciting, and familiar. Students may feel less intimidated by these exemplars, and therefore more willing to dissect their meaning. They may also express more interest in learning how to make new media art, because it is so immediately relatable to their lives (Taylor & Carpenter, 2007).

VCAE Limitations

VCAE’s investment in popular culture and the digital landscape is vitally important. However VCAE scholarship tends to be more focused on mass culture than local culture. VCAE scholarship also tends to privilege social discourse, often ignoring

pressing ecological concerns that also effect society. A survey of the literature on VCAE curricular exemplars reveals a strong emphasis on consumable media such as advertisements, Internet memes, games, movies, and everyday objects (Barrett, 2003; Duncum 2006; Taylor, 2003). Although the term “visual culture” broadly understood includes the environment, little case study evidence supports it having a large role in VCAE curricula. VCAE practitioners also tend to shy away from a study of local or indigenous culture (Duncum, 2006). A focus on the environment and local culture is not extrinsic to VCAE theory, but it is sidelined in practice.

I am not the first to suggest that the objects of inquiry offered by VCAE may need redefinition. In *Beyond Visual Culture: Seven Statements of Support for Material Culture Studies in Art Education*, Bolin and Blandy (2003) assert that concentrating solely on the “visual” puts VCAE at risk of “being rendered obsolete because of our restricted and limited orientation to the world” (p. 247). They propose to expand the object of study to include *material culture*, “a descriptor of any and all human-constructed or human-mediated objects, forms, or expressions, manifested consciously or unconsciously through culturally acquired behaviors”(Bolin & Blandy, 2003, p. 249). They remind educators that sensory and auditory expressions hold just as much cultural relevance as visual ones. Their interest in multi-modal experience and expanded vision of “cultural objects” begins to lay the theoretical groundwork for the explicit inclusion of the physical environment in VCAE, but fall short of saying so directly.

The PBAE Perspective

VCAE’s lukewarm relationship with the physical environment and local culture is contrasted by PBAE’s overt focus on local and environmental issues. Place based

education emerged out of the environmental movement of the 1970's. PBE has implications for all subjects of study. However, it is also specifically discussed in relationship to art education. PBAE was most extensively discussed within art education circles from the late 1980's to the late 1990's, but there is currently a resurgence of interest (Graham, 2007; Inwood, 2008).

Drawing on the work of eco-theorists, bioregionalists, ecofeminists, and geographers, place based education views ecological, cultural, social justice, and aesthetic issues as inherently interconnected. It positions locality as the nexus of these diverse concerns (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Gruenewald, 2003; Graham, 2007; Hicks & King, 199; Inwood, 2008). A local perspective helps to sharpen a focus on social justice and community empowerment issues. As Graham puts it, PBAE “aims to strengthen children's connection to others, to their region, to the land, and to overcome the alienation and isolation that is often associated with modern society” (Graham, 2007, p.377). The purpose of art education is then, to help students learn to be better stewards of the earth, as well as, their local communities. Concentrating on the local is a way to strengthen art education, community, and ecological studies.

Why PBAE Now?

Where as VCAE theorists position the growth of technology and mass media imagery as the most pressing concern of the 21st century education, PBAE theorists look to environmental degradation and the loss of investment in local communities. PBAE theorists believe we that must encourage our students to think more deeply about environmental issues because, as Graham notes, “ modern civilization has created environmental conditions characterized by pollution, depletion of natural resources,

climate change, threatened biodiversity, and diminishing wilderness” (2007, p. 378). The motivation to preserve environmental integrity, simply for sake of nature, is often ignored (Gablick, 2002). We live in a complex world, in which the immediate concerns of the day-to-day can supersede the concerns of eco-justice. Cementing a respect for nature is essential to combat ecological degradation. As Sobel (1996) asks in his article *Beyond Ecophobia*, how can we ask our youth to save the planet if they have no connection or investment in it?

But there is more at stake than simply nature for nature’s sake. Global and civil wars have erupted over limited access to life-sustaining resources and changing weather patterns have caused natural disasters followed by social unrest. “Some argue that ecological deterioration will soon eclipse ideological conflict as the dominant national security concern” (Clover, 2000, p. 213). Clearly, our actions on the environment have ecological and social justice ramifications. Technologies that might be good for some, induce climate changes and production needs that harm others. The ecological choices we make affect other humans as well as the rest of the living planet.

PBAE theorists, “have nothing less in mind than ending nature versus culture dichotomies, that is, rejecting the belief that people and their creations represent the antithesis of their natural surroundings” (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993, p.24). They believe that fostering a direct connection between students and their immediate environment will help students to see the interconnectedness of all living things. PBAE theorists also see this focus on environment as an opportunity to enhance students’ critical engagement with other aspects of society. Understanding the implicit, yet obscured, power dynamic between humans and the environment is an

essential basis for investigating power structures inherent to various forms of visual representation. By investigating the ways that humans shape and affect nature, students may develop a more complex understanding of how meaning is constructed and disseminated in other forms of visual culture (Graham, 2007; Gruenwald, 2003).

PBAE theorists see a link between the lack of concern for the environment and the loss of a strong local culture (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993). Industry and technology have affected our physical environment, but have also created a more globally connected world. A global culture is not necessarily negative or positive, however it has ushered in a stronger, more easily disseminated mass culture. This is especially true in education. The primacy of local knowledge has faded due to our increasingly global, technological, economically focused, and standards-based educational model (Graham, 2007; Gruenwald, 2003; Inwood, 2008). PBAE theorists see the lack of locally rooted learning as a major contributor to cultural alienation, as well as environmental and global apathy (Gruenwald, 2003). Cultivating a sense of place not only “increases the relevance of ... curriculum and makes it directly applicable to students’ lives” (Inwood, 2008, p. 30), but also helps students to “develop strong bonds with their...community physically, politically, emotionally, and spiritually” (Inwood, 2008, p. 30). This ensures a basis for better stewardship of their local and global community throughout their lives (Sobel, 1996).

PBAE: Object and Method of Study

In order to strengthen student’s connection with their local community and the environment PBAE encourages an experiential approach to learning. PBAE helps to break down the walls between the human and natural world by encouraging youth, not

just to study the environment, but also to go outside and experience it. It is in service to this concept that many PBAE practitioners advocate the specific use of “natural materials such as wood, stones, sand, and water, and the teaching of handicrafts” (Clover, 2000, p. 216). As Inwood (2008) further describes, an art curriculum that draws on the environment provides:

an innovative approach to ecological and environmental education, one that balances the traditional roots of these disciplines (found in the cognitive, positivist approaches of science education) with the more creative, affective, and sensory approaches of art education. In this, art education offers a dynamic way to increase the power and relevancy of learning about the environment by providing an alternative means of furthering learners’ ecological literacy (30).

Experiential learning provides students with an intimate knowledge of nature that will forge a lasting interest in ecological concerns.

The focus of inquiry in PBAE is not just nature. PBAE curriculum cites the student’s neighborhood as a primary resource. The local environment is an important point of inquiry because place can be lens through which to investigate larger concepts of power and social discourse. Where as in VCAE, visual media is seen as the primary means of investigating social constructions, PBAE proposes that our physical environment can provide an equally rich point of inquiry. As PBAE theorist Gruenewald (2003) asserts:

We tend to take our social space for granted and do not often think of it as a cultural product. Becoming aware of social places as cultural products requires that ... [we] unpack their particular cultural meanings (p. 627).

She further provides that PBAE specifically, “is an approach grounded in the peculiarities of the local community and attentive to how power and culture work through places to enhance or limit human potential” (Gruenewald, 2003, p. 627). Therefore, PBAE’s

concentration on place necessitates an investigation of what place means socially. How do the spaces we cultivate reflect our values? Is space static, or is it a constantly constitutive process incorporating the past and present of human and non-human actors?

Why Place is Important

As Erikson & Smith (1978) point out, “the built environment is an art form. It is a space that man has been shaped to human dimensions ... its great impact lies in the combination of function and aesthetic content” (p. 4). Given that designers and architects have the power to shape space, it logically follows that the decisions they make reflect cultural values. By looking at the urban design of our cities we can begin to unravel these values. Streets may be wider and better maintained in areas of heavy commerce. The layout of public transit systems may exclude certain areas of the city while favoring others. These elements of urban design may not only indicate racial or socio-cultural biases, but also actively reproduce them by limiting certain residents’ access to the different parts of the city (Hicks & King, 1999).

The buildings that constitute the city are also carriers of cultural values and histories. The expense and use of building materials mark socio-economic divisions. While public housing is often unadorned and made from cheap materials, private estates tend to have expensive and decorative facades designed to communicate power and privilege (Hicks & King, 1999). In just these few examples it becomes clear that built structures reify systems of dominance and hierarchy, in ways that are critical to examine.

It is equally important to point out that architecture and city planning are not the only forms through which we cultivate space. Areas of predominantly flora and fauna are what we commonly refer to as the “natural environment.” However, these natural

spaces are also cultivated. Humans have acted upon natural spaces by deciding which spaces to preserve and which to develop. Therefore they too reflect cultural values and systems of dominance. Several eco-theorists even contend that “wilderness” is a social construct, because wilderness is only defined in relationship to human activity (Jokela, 2008). In fact, a study of the locations and development of the US national parks system would reveal which types of landscapes the US values, the environmental effects of industrialized capitalism, and at what point in history it became politically salient and theoretically necessary to “preserve” nature. Our relationship to such “natural” space can be wrought with even greater complexity.

While we typically assume that “preserving” nature reflects a pure motivation, Duncun and Duncun’s (2001) study of zoning laws in Bedford, NY reveals our relationship to landscaping to be more multifaceted. Once a farming community, Bedford is now an affluent community with many large homes dotting well manicured but wide-open swaths of land. Under the guise of maintaining an aesthetic connection to farming history, the town’s zoning laws make it prohibitively costly to break up lots or create multi-use housing. In effect, these laws keep less wealthy people out of town by prohibiting apartment-style or public housing. Hence, “class and power relations are reduced to aesthetic and life style choices. Landscapes become possessions for those with the wealth and power to control them” (Duncun & Duncun, 2001, p. 387). Thus, it becomes clear that our relationship to, what I will now call, the cultivated natural landscape, is laden with cultural narratives waiting to be unpacked.

In essence, those with power and wealth have a greater ability to control the physical structure of social life. They also come to expect and naturalize this control.

The renter of any apartment accepts that they cannot paint the walls even though they live in the space day to day, while the apartment owner assumes the primacy of their ability to choose the wall color despite their lack of lived connection to it. Our social and economic world is predicated on these power structures. Art has a unique ability, and thus the unique responsibility, to attempt to make these structures visible.

In general, a close look at how we cultivate space can help to unlock the complexities of such owner/ renter models and open a dialogue about how power is structured. When specifically linked to the local landscape these kinds of investigation can open up sites of resistance and empowerment. For example, Sobel (1996) suggests engaging students in personal as well as geographical map making as a way to urge students to see how they value certain elements of their community over others. This project includes a discussion about why they value certain aspects of their community over others. Students can begin to unpack how power works on a global scale, as well as how it plays out in their local communities. The knowledge of these systems of power and the ability to express that knowledge through art, provide students with a sense of agency. Knowledge and artistic possibility function like wealth, allowing students feel they can have control over their space and their life.

Another example of linking learning to the local environment is the *Mosaic Bollard Project* (Dawes, 2008). This project not only addresses meaning making in the local landscape, it also empowers students to see themselves as active participants in shaping value. In partnership with Willowbank Primary School, in Glasgow, artist Katrina Young lead a group of young artists to design and implement vibrant mosaics on crumbling and ignored concrete bollards on a street near their school. This project

engenders sense of ownership and connection to their local community. Students come to forge deeper commitment to their local community. This project also clearly demonstrates that an individual can change the shape of their landscape and affect the lives of everyone in their community. By developing a more intimate knowledge of how their actions affect their community, students can more directly understand themselves as meaning makers and agents of change. This project illuminates the radical possibilities of art (Dawes, 2008). Art can reshape both the community and the individual.

PBAE Limitations

The PBAE approach is a powerful way to link art, ecology, and social constructions of power. However, some scholars have argued that PBAE over emphasizes ecological issues and neglects new media (Graham, 2007). PBAE does favor the study of local artists, structures, and media. The influx of new media and its effect on mass culture should not be overlooked. Nor should we ignore the excitement and motivation that new media can stir in a classroom. Local issues are not the only avenues through which students feel personal connections. Icons and issues of mass culture can feel very personal. Students should develop a more informed sense of their local culture, but not at the expense of studying more global issues and art forms.

Integrated Conclusion

Neither VCAE nor PBAE represent a complete picture. However both theories provide students with a personally meaningful and motivational approach to art making and investigation. Both theories aim to examine the hidden and implicit power structures that pervade our daily lives and each direct us toward objects of inquiry rich with socio-cultural markers. For VCAE the object of inquiry rests most distinctly in visual media,

most often that which is mass-produced. Thus, VCAE misses out on the peculiarities of local culture. VCAE runs the risk of teaching students to understand structures of power in mass culture, while ignoring the way they function on the local level. Adding the local and ecological focus put forth by PBAE could strengthen VCAE practice, by further recognizing the interconnectedness of all things (including our environment) and cementing a personal connection to visual media. VCAE could also look to PBAE as an approach with powerful implications for student empowerment and agency. In PBAE projects like *The Mosaic Bollard Project* students come to understand their agency through lived experience.

PBAE too, can take from VCAE by strengthening the connection between students' local surroundings and popular culture. Thereby, helping students to better understand their identity and recognize their agency locally, as well as globally. I am not suggesting that one theory supersede the other or that the union of VCAE and PBAE represents a summative solution. However, I am suggesting integrating ideas from both could provide a new approach that is locally conscious and visual culture focused. Combining the strengths of both approaches could lead to greater student engagement and a powerful angle for art education.

References:

- Barrett, T. (2003). Interpreting visual culture. *Art Education*, 56(2), 6-12.
Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3194015>
- Blandy, D. & Bolin, P. E. (2003). Beyond visual culture: Seven statements of support for material culture studies in art education. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 246-263.
- Blandy, D. & Hoffman, E. (1993). Toward an art education of place. *Studies in Art Education*, 35(1), 22-33. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Clover, D. (2000). Educating for a change: Reconceptualizing formal and/ or non-formal environmental education. *Comparative Education Review*, 44(2), 213-219.
Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Darts, D. (2004). Visual culture jam: Art, pedagogy, and creative resistance. *Studies in Art Education*, 45(4), 313-327. Retrieved from
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/1321067>
- Dawes, M. (2008). *Beyond process: Art, empowerment and sustainability*. In G. Coutts & T. Jokela (Eds.), *Art, community and environment: Educational perspectives* (pp. 3-29). Bristol, UK: Intellect Books.
- Duncum, P. (Ed.). (2006). *Visual culture in the art class: Case studies*. Reston, VA: NAEA.
- Duncum, P. (2009). Visual culture in art education, circa 2009. *Visual Arts Research*, 35, 1(68), 64-75. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20715488>
- Duncum, J.S. & Duncum, N.G. (2001). The anesthetization of politics of landscape design. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 9(2), 387-409. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Erikson, A. & Smith, V. (1978). Art education and the built environment. *Art Education*, 31(5), 4-8. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Freedman, K. (2003). *Teaching visual culture: Curriculum, aesthetics, and the social life of art*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, and Reston, VA: National Art Education Association.
- Gablik, S. (1992). The ecological imperative. *Art Journal*, 51(2), 49-51. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Graham, M. A. (2007). Art, ecology, and art education: Locating art education in a critical place-based pedagogy. *Studies in Art Education*, 48(4), 375-391. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>

- Gruenewald, D. A. (2003). Foundations of place: A multidisciplinary framework for place-conscious education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 40(3), 619-654. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Hicks, L. E. & King, R.J.H. (1999). *Mapping a sense of place: A contextualized approach to designed environments*. In J. K. Guilfoil & A. R. Sandler (Eds.), *Built environment education in art education* (pp. 10-18). Reston, VA: NAEA.
- Inwood, H. J. (2008). At the crossroads: Situating place-based art education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 13(1), 29-41. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org>
- Jokela, T. (2008). *A wanderer in the landscape: Reflections on the relationship between Art and the northern environment*. In G. Coutts & T. Jokela (Eds.), *Art, community and environment: Educational perspectives* (pp. 3-29). Bristol, UK: Intellect Books.
- Sobel, D. (1996). *Beyond ecophobia*. Great Barrington, MA: Orion Society
- Tavin, K. (2003). Wrestling with angels, searching for ghosts: Toward a critical pedagogy of visual culture. *Studies in Art Education*, 44(3), 197-213. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/pss/1321009>