Assembling Visuality: Social Media, Everyday Imaging, and Critical Thinking in Digital Visual Culture

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Art education faces significant curricular challenges through the confluence of two contributing innovations that are transforming learning in the art classroom: networked digital technologies and shifts in curricular focus to a visual culture pedagogy. These shifts present forms of visual research in student’s learning that may involve crowdsourcing a community of users, analysis of the social practice of tagging, or assembling image collections that allow students to engage in understanding visuality. Visuality, as a central construct of critical thinking in visual culture, assembles social constructions of images that are often invisible to understand the performativity of visual culture in constructing our social worlds. Efforts to augment the curriculum of a university-level art education course to explore the opportunities social media provides to build students’ critical thinking skills in their relationships to images in a visual culture are reviewed. These investigations in visuality and social media provide an indication of the ways that the field of art education, through a visual culture pedagogy, may contribute to critical thinking in a participatory culture.

Innovations in network technologies have brought compelling resources to the art classroom to develop a visual culture pedagogy in a participatory culture. These powerful online resources can support art teachers in engaging students in an array of artistic expression and digital making, and forms of visual research that utilize social media. Forms of visual research may involve crowdsourcing a community of users, analysis of the social practice of taggings, or assembling image collections that allow students to engage in understanding visuality. Visuality, as a central construct of critical thinking in visual culture, assembles social constructions of
images that are often invisible to understand the performativity of visual culture in constructing our social worlds. Visual research assisted by digital networks provides a great opportunity for students to analyze the overwhelming image flow of visual culture to construct understandings of their social worlds that inform their roles as image-makers and critical thinkers.

Investigating visual culture was a part of the curriculum developed for an undergraduate class called Art Education 252 (AE252): The Computer in Visual Art while I was a graduate teaching associate at Ohio State University. The AE252 course develops investigations in visual culture and contemporary art while using a variety of computer media, from blogging to graphic design software. Within the 2010–2011 school year, my students and I used social media and tagging as research tools in the art-making process. Searching tags in social media platforms that focus on visual communities, in this case Flickr, provided associative webs of images that extended student research through the performance of visuality. Performance in this context refers to the associations that are made and unmade by a community of image-makers that involve the negotiation of interrelationships of images that emerge within the community. As an introduction to visuality, AE252 students investigate the semiotic nature of visual representation through a discussion of connotative and denotative messages (Barrett, 2003), and the concept of how artists use “big ideas” in their work (Walker, 2001, 2003). Prior to the 2010–2011 school year, computer use had focused on graphics software and investigating contemporary art through blogging, but the inclusion of social media was an attempt to investigate visuality as a process of visual research.

In this essay I review my experiences of exploring visuality through the social media website Flickr through the work of one student called Lola. In the first half of this essay, I present a theoretical argument for focusing on visuality in the art education curriculum by outlining the confluence of innovative digital technologies and visual culture studies in the field of art education, and the importance of visuality as a curricular emphasis. In the second half, I provide reflections on Lola’s project work to illustrate this argument. These reflections consider the opportunities of social media in online visual communities such as Flickr to engage students in critical thinking through visual research that attempts to assemble visualities by navigating and analyzing large reserves of online image collections. I argue in this essay that utilizing social media for visual research facilitates a unique visual construction of social interactions that can impact student’s critical thinking about visual culture. These visual constructions, as significant ways of knowing and participating in the world through assembling image collections, can inform students’ critical understandings that encapsulate image streams of the art world, of popular culture, and of social media. These critical understandings go beyond close reading of images in popular culture or art history canons to probe the com-
plex ways that “values, beliefs, and knowledge are interconnected with issues of agency, politics, and power” (Tavin, 2003, p. 209–210) in everyday image making. Relating Lola’s use of the image collections in Flickr to the understanding of binaries and inequality in society may inform visual culture pedagogy in developing student’s critical thinking while exploring social media and the granular view of visual culture that it provides.

Art Education in a Participatory Visual Culture

Early excitement for the Internet’s democratic potential has been replaced by a complicated marketplace of competing agendas of consumption, entertainment, social networking, and political action that continues to offer both opportunity and exclusion. Increased participation is coupled with a persistent digital divide, a gap in who has access to digital technologies and who does not, illustrating that “disparities in technology access and use are related to socioeconomic status, with income, educational level and race among the factors associated with technological attainment” (Mehra, Merkel, & Bishop, 2004, p. 782). Opportunities for participation have evolved through the advent of social media, mobile computing, and increased access to computing networks. These opportunities continue to be shrouded in inequitable distributions of access and expertise, functioning as a “new form of the hidden curriculum, shaping which youth will succeed and which will be left behind” (Jenkins, Purushotma, Clinton, Weigel, & Robison, 2006, p. 3). Educators have struggled to keep pace with these complex and fast-paced changes with difficulty adopting newer technologies in K–12 education that are curricular, resource-based, and a matter of civic engagement (Delacruz, 2009). In particular to art education, curricular lag stifles investigations around how these participatory frameworks have impacted visual culture.

Despite concerns over equity, there is a range of technological tools being explored for learning that centers on user-produced content on the Internet through blogs and wikis to support collaborative learning (Ellison & Wu, 2008; Larusson & Alterman, 2009). Social networking websites are being theorized for their potential contributions to learning communities (Castro, 2012; Muijs, West, & Ainscow, 2010). These explorations are placing strains on schools to stretch budgets to expand technological availability while managing the potential and problems of online social interaction as it mixes with offline classrooms. Additionally, these explorations in technology and pedagogy suggest that teachers need to be prepared to meet the new challenges of a school space that is rapidly transforming through amorphous boundaries.

Art teachers can play a significant role in meeting these challenges of online, participatory learning due to the increasingly visual aspects of these technologies.
There is a long history of art educators exploring the intersections of technology and art making to consider the educational impact of innovative visual technologies. Surveying this scholarship over the last three decades presents early adopters exploring laser discs (Anderson, 1985; Schwartz, 1991), creating graphics on computers (Madeja, 1993; Stokrocki, 1985), and using hypermedia in the art classroom (Keifer-Boyd, 1996, 1997; Taylor & Carpenter, 2002). With the publication of *Inter/Actions/Inter/Sections: Art Education in a Digital Visual Culture* (Sweeny, 2011), it is clear that the digital innovations that crowd the contemporary moment continue to require a pedagogical response from art education scholars and teachers.

While art education has had a lengthy history looking at technologies in the art classroom, only within the last two decades has the field undergone a re-conceptualization from disciplined-based art education to a field focusing on visual culture (Duncum, 2001, 2009; Freedman, 2004; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). Within visual culture art education there is more emphasis on semiotics (Smith-Shank, 1995, 2004), critical theory and cultural studies (Chalmers, 2002; Darts, 2004; Freedman, 1994; Garoian & Gaudelius, 2004; Tavin, 2003), popular culture (Duncum, 1987; Manifold, 2009; Tavin, 2002; Tavin & Anderson, 2003), and digital visual technologies (Eisenhauer, 2006; Sweeny, 2004, 2005; Taylor & Carpenter, 2002). The focus on visual culture within art education has paralleled and drawn from broader scholarship in visual studies that has positioned the visual as an important site of socio-cultural meaning to communication in the 21st century (Sturken & Cartwright, 2009). The curricular revitalization of art education through visual culture has occurred in a similar time frame as networked computing has transformed learning spaces. This onslaught of innovation, both curricular and technological, makes it difficult for teachers to understand what skills in critical thinking and digital literacy learners need in a participatory visual culture.

**Visuality as Visual Constructions of the Social Field**

A part of the difficulty in maneuvering through the changes in digital technologies and the reconceptualization of art education through visual culture is how to grapple with these two movements in conjunction. One starting place is through the concept of visuality, which is used to reference the construction of vision as a social, cultural, and political phenomenon (Mirzoeff, 2006; Mitchell, 2005). As Bryson (1988) states, “between the subject and the world is inserted the entire sum of discourses that make up visuality, that cultural construct, and make visuality different from vision, the notion of unmediated visual experience” (pp. 91–92). Therefore, visuality is more than just looking, but rather the mediation of various contributing factors that allow the image to serve as “filters through which we recognize and misrecognize other people” (Bryson, 1988, p. 351). In visual culture
studies, visuality is understood as the articulations of sociality through images that forces a disruption to what Bryson (1983) called the “natural attitude,” in that images are not surfaces of universal messages whereby a commonsense interpretation becomes apparent to all who look on. Instead, images serve as filters of how we see and are seen in the world, tinting our perceptions about our peers, building a bricolage of our understanding and assumptions about the other, and looking back at us to inform our self-concept.

A focus on visuality as the beginning to critical thinking in visual culture art education is an important starting point, because to disrupt the natural attitude of images forefronts the image as a semiotic terrain of meanings that are “an arena for political and ethical critique” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 171). W. J. T. Mitchell extends this “arena” of visual culture to not “rest content with a definition of its object as the ‘social construction of the visual field,’ but must insist on exploring the chiasmic reversal of this proposition, the visual construction of the social field” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 171). In his chiasm, Mitchell positions the visual as a mediator in social interactions that does not pre-suppose a social, but instead constitutes it. Like Bryson, Mitchell suggests “this approach would treat visual culture and visual images as go-betweens in social transactions, as a repertoire of screen images or templates that structure our encounters with other human beings” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 175). A good example of “visual images as go-betweens in social transactions” are collections of images that are archived in social media websites because these images can be labeled or tagged in a way that allows users to understand their content and are seen by a range of viewers determined by privacy settings. These images, on social media websites such as Facebook or Flickr, are posted by various users and coded with identification, but these identifications can be confirmed or deleted by other users. Networked image collections are fractal as they expand and contract with user submissions. This visual construction suggests a powerful semiotic constellation of imagery that is not limited to interpreting representations, but involves a performativity of visual meanings that impact our being and acting in the everyday world, whether they come from an art gallery, popular movie, or a friend’s camera phone. In this way, visual culture studies goes beyond disciplines of art history and media studies into investigations of “vernacular visuality or everyday seeing” and “looks at the strange things we do while looking, gazing, showing and showing off such as hiding, dissembling, and refusing to look” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 179). Our refusing to look, or be looked at, as we remove our name by untagging a photo that we do not like, becomes a part of our social behavior that is formed with vision and connectivity, and marks visuality as an inherently social practice. The visual construction within everyday seeing is a vital component to a pedagogy of visuality that provokes art education curriculum to critically engage with a torrent of imagery.4
Part of the aptitude of visuality as a pedagogical focus is the combination of critical thinking and everyday seeing that it inflects into the art curriculum. Visuality is a performative understanding of images and meaning, and a way of seeing visual culture not just as an effect of the world we live in, but rather a substance of the social world that we live through. As Pam Taylor (2006) observes in reference to the powers of hyperconnectivity and critical thinking, “students have greater opportunities to discover, interrogate, and analyze the links that exist between the object of their study and the broader social world that informs their object of study” (p. 2). This is the challenge of engaging contemporary visuality: Digital innovations have driven an image-rich world that draws from our everyday imaging, and so critical thinking must derive equally ubiquitous moments of criticality. It is not enough to deconstruct the latest action movie or develop an analysis of a contemporary artist’s work if these activities are devoid of engaging the performances of everyday imaging and playing in the photostreams of participatory culture. In what follows I will provide a series of reflections on Lola’s participation in assignments that were meant to integrate modes of critical thinking and everyday seeing as a performance of visuality through the social media website Flickr.

Reflecting on Assembling Visuality as Critical Thinking

As the first step in researching their projects in AE252, students focused on a big idea and then followed tags within Flickr to find visual representations of their big idea concepts as opposed to a general search of the Internet. Tags are inherently social technologies because they associate a wide array of media to searchable terms that make it serviceable to an audience. On Flickr, tags play an important role in making the images searchable to users and create connections between users’ images that use the same tag. This method offered two advantages: (1) It focused searching for images in a community of users invested in visual representation, as Flickr is a photographer’s community; and (2) Flickr offers the opportunity for students to follow chains of tags to inform their developing understanding of the visual representations of their big ideas. For example, when students search a certain term and find an image that has been tagged with that term, they can find other tags attributed to that image through what is commonly referred to as a tag cloud. They then can choose to follow this new tag and subsequent associations that might expand their thinking. Use of Flickr in visual research takes advantage of key aspects of social media: namely, interest-driven community, user-generated content, tagging as a social technology, and entering a collaborative environment of feedback. There was a diverse array of responses to this method of visual research, and in the following, I present reflections related to Lola’s investigation of this online community.
Tag Clouds and Crowdsourcing Image Clusters

Lola’s project began by choosing a big idea, brainstorming connotative associations, and then exploring tag clouds of those associations. Lola compiled a list of three synonyms for her big idea, which was focused on binaries, to begin searching through the tags of Flickr: the three terms were “difference,” “dichotomy,” and “separation.” Through her searching, she gathered together different images that were tagged in Flickr with that term into clusters of images. Once searching, she was attentive to other tags that made sense with her big idea and conducted a search using that tag to compose more clusters of images associated with the tags that she started with: the three additional terms were “stranger,” “two,” and “wall” (see Figure 1). The additional tags led to nuanced visual explorations of her big idea that helped to expand her thinking about the visual construction of the big idea. These associations made a direct impact on how she completed her midterm evidenced by images gathered through the search appearing in her final visual project. For example, the association of her term “separation” and the tag of “wall”
made an important visual contribution to her work in that the wall becomes a central visual signifier in Lola’s final project (see Figure 2).

The tag clouds were an example of assembling visuality: bringing together a constellation of associations from both Lola and connections made through *Flickr*. Lola’s assembling of an image collection from the larger reserves of *Flickr* through the tag clouds traces connections that are determined by images as social interactions. Performative meaning in big ideas was continually filtered through Lola’s negotiation of image and word association, *Flickr* users assigning meaning through tags, and her own curation of images. Lola assembled a visuality of binaries through specific user’s photostreams on *Flickr* as opposed to the wide-open anonymity of using a web search engine focused on images. These image searches within an online community of image-makers allowed Lola to see repetition in tagging regularity and find users within the *Flickr* community who appealed to Lola’s personal visual sensibilities. This visual construction of her big idea presented a range of visual strategies and connotative associations in language connected to images, as evidenced by the tags that users assigned to their images, but also a
generative play of ideas constructed through images that led to other interrelations of visual connotation in her research.

Lola’s assembling of a visuality of binaries became a social practice that involved both searching tag clouds using her own terms and then using the tag clouds to find other associative clusters of images and connotation. Lola’s visual research is co-constructed through the visual community of Flickr, and, as a methodology, gathers connotation in language that troubles a “natural attitude” (Bryson, 1983) of what images mean, and instead forefronts a performative visuality of *how images mean*. These modalities in searching, using tags, exploring visual communities, and working to understand the performative semiotics of the image all have rich potential for conducting visual research that encourages students’ critical thinking in a networked art classroom.

This form of visual research employs crowdsourcing of visual connotations that uses large resources in a community to gain insight in exploring big ideas. Crowdsourcing can be a way of inviting others into the process of decision making by leveraging Internet connectivity to solve problems (Brabham, 2008). Crowdsourcing leverages the merits of collective work, especially when an interest-driven community brings to bare its cognitive resources. Lola’s assembling of a visuality of binaries was itself a social act of bringing images and connotations from the Flickr community to synthesize within her own project. The act of synthesizing interrelationships of images is not unique to the context of social media, but its power in this capacity allows students to see the performance of visuality and the performance of the crowd through the accumulation of images. Assembling visuality using social media allows for the visual culture of crowds to provide a vast array of media input in visual construction that is perhaps a unique resource that distinguishes social media as a visual apparatus.

Additionally, in collecting Lola’s various image clusters into one visualization (see Figure 1), there begins to be a sense as to the social aspect of visuality through her project. Lola’s artist statement, submitted along with her final work, is instructive in demonstrating how she understood the performance of visuality as a visual construction of the social. Lola states:

*My big idea is “binaries,” which I further specified as dichotomy, then dichotomy in how people act, and finally, “random acts of kindness” versus “random acts of meanness.” . . . I have been looking around at various photo sites—Flickr, Google images, even photobucket and gathered ideas via these resources on different aspects of dichotomy; I tried to gather images for my brainstorm that people wouldn't typically think of when thinking of dichotomy. . . . visual images I have come across that strike me are of the homeless—a pivotal determiner of how a person operates. (Do they even acknowledge the homeless*
person as human, or walk on by? Do they call them a disgrace to society and scoff? Or do they take them to lunch?)

Lola’s gathering of images ultimately mediates on a social issue, in her case, thinking about a relationship to the homeless population, that both constructs that relationship, but also constitutes a relation to her own peer group. Her project work and artist statement reflect on her peer group’s sense of social responsibility to those less fortunate. This aspect of her visual research exemplifies the capacity of visuality to build critical thinking around the complex ways that images help to construct our social worlds. This is not to suggest that these aspects of the work could not be derived without network computing or social media, but it does suggest the powerful role that images play as filters through which we know the world. In this sense, visuality is an important social practice: a network constellation of image play that constructs a social world of which we are a part. Critical thinking in a visual culture pedagogy is a negotiation of images as social filters, but also an assembling of image relationships that allow for critical reflection on patterns and anomalies. As an opportunity for critical thinking in visual culture, social media provides an unparalleled assemblage of everyday seeing and must be engaged in a visual culture pedagogy to build a critical capacity in students’ reflections within this overwhelming image flow.

Although students were asked to utilize the class as a community of feedback through blogs maintained throughout the course, my emphasis on student visual research in Flickr had not developed enough of a feedback loop within the community. Ideally, students would re-enter the Flickr community with their own work, using tags and benefiting from the input of that specialized visual community. Without careful consideration of the full cycle of participation, the opportunities to gain from assembling visuality through the use of social media remain limited to a kind of visual lurking. Considering the unique opportunities that Flickr offers to connect within a visual community, it would be important in future iterations of this project to not overlook the opportunities to contribute back into the community through postings and membership.

Remixing Copyleft Visual Culture

A part of the project that Lola and her classmates were completing was to use digital image manipulation software, in our case Adobe Photoshop, to make a visual representation of their investigations. During this making process, students appropriated and remixed a range of different images that were gathered in their visual research. Appropriation serves two purposes in the context of AE252: (a) appropriation is an important mode of artistic expression that is emblematic of many contemporary art-making processes, and (b) appropriation is also featured as an
important part of 21st-century literate practices within a participatory culture that focuses on “the ability to meaningfully sample and remix media content” (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 4). Therefore, students appropriating images and remixing them into their own projects is an important practice in the class.

However, it became clear through image searching in Flickr that appropriation also gathers other important issues into the matter of remixing as an artistic practice of expression: namely the relationship between copyright and creative practices in a digital visual culture. Immediately upon entering the Flickr community in search of images, Lola and other students were confronted with negotiating the ownership of images and control through different copyright designations available to users through the Flickr interface. Certain images that seemed perfect for their projects were reserved under strict copyright restriction, and therefore were made unavailable for download to incorporate into their own work. The emergence of copyright and the image became a useful learning opportunity for students to understand the legalities that surround creative practices and choices involved with assigning copyright to images. Discussions of the need for copyright for artists who profit from their work were contrasted with the overly restrictive nature of copyright in allowing creative producers to assign a level of use appropriate to a more collaborative remixing process. I introduced the historical connections between free and open source software movements and the Creative Commons movement of copyleft. The ethos of free and open source from the industry of computer programming and software development, spearheaded by Richard Stallman (2010) and his Free Software Foundation, spread to creative industries to question the role of copyright within the realms of creative content and visual technologies (Lessig, 2004). This ethos of free software, and the more broadly termed free and open source movement, characterizes not only a vastly different market strategy for developers and software industry workers, but in a technological ecology, it suggests a very different aligning of resources and ultimately changes the ways we use images in making digital visual culture. As a result, the introduction of the Creative Commons licensing allows creative producers more control over their copyright restrictions, which may enable generative remixing that is vital to creative communities.

By engaging with the copyright and copyleft dynamics within their project work, students were able to take this dynamic back into their visual research process. Students used advanced searching in the Flickr community to restrict their image searches to results that only return content with a Creative Commons license that allows remixing. There was a level of hacking the system in that students would use screen capture techniques to circumvent the copyright restrictions within Flickr, and then work within Adobe Photoshop to transform the images and take a sense of ownership through remixing. What at first appeared to be a
restriction to project work through the enforcement of copyright, became a vital resource in understanding the conceptual impact of legal discourses within visuality, and provided insight into the practices of control and property that are a part of the visual field. In this sense, investigations of visuality go beyond the visual semiotics of representation, that is, how to interpret what the image means. Assembling visuality includes the dynamic gathering of social and cultural spaces of visual culture through practices of market forces or alignment with a more socially conscious and democratic ethos that is central to the free and open source movement.

**Conclusion**

Recent scholarship in digital media and learning has indicated a changing landscape for education and its use of technologies, and the field of art education has a history of engaging innovative technologies in learning and art making. As art education undergoes its own shift in emphasis to a visual culture pedagogy, there is a growing urgency to understand what investigations in visuality provide to critical understandings of social media and everyday imaging. In order to build students’ critical thinking skills in their relationship to everyday imaging, my efforts to adjust the curriculum of a university art education course were focused on investigations within a focused online community of image makers. As visual researchers, students like Lola were asked to explore tag clouds in *Flickr* to gather visual connotations both through their search terms and the crowdsourcing of image clusters. These investigations provided a networked visual construction of ideas that explored the many compositions of image collections and their interconnectedness, a gathering of not only images but the social and cultural discourses that inform understandings of them, and a means to leverage the contributions of a vast number of image makers. Lola’s investigations showcase critical thinking about images that goes beyond a commonsense approach, use of appropriation and remixing, and an assembling of a visuality for everyday imaging. These investigations in visuality and social media provide an indication of the ways that the field of art education, through a visual culture pedagogy, may contribute to critical thinking in a participatory culture.

**Notes**

1. Jenkins et al. (2006) state: “A participatory culture is a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices” (p. 3).

2. Tagging is a process of assigning metadata to information elements in the form of a keyword or term that make them more accessible through search or browsing.
3. Lola is a pseudonym. Lola has granted permission to be a part of this study and publish her work.

4. This torrent of imagery should not be relegated to still images only, as most of my examples from Lola’s case may falsely imply. As of January 2012, one hour of video is uploaded every second to YouTube’s participatory video broadcast website, making time-based media an important part of the flood (see http://www.onehourpersecond.com/).

5. Tag clouds are visual representations of metadata associated with an information element. In the case of Flickr, the metadata are keywords that are assigned by the user to each image. Flickr was an early adopter of tag clouds within its interface, although recent discussion has questioned the utility of tag clouds as a navigation interface. See Lohmann, Ziegler, & Tetzlaff (2009).

6. I am using the term “image cluster” to refer to the collection of images that students assembled in their visual research. For me, a cluster suggests a less ordered and non-hierarchical arrangement of images as opposed to a collection or album. In this sense, an image cluster is a more accurate description of the students’ work (see Figure 1 for a sample of Lola’s image clusters).

7. See Jenkins (2006) for case studies of crowdsourcing in fan culture.

References


