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Kathryn Grushka
University of Newcastle,
Australia

Visual Art as a Communicative Cultural Narrative in Adolescent Student Artmaking

Abstract

Post-compulsory secondary Visual Art curriculum in NSW, Australia, informed by postmodern and popular culture perspectives is providing performative sites for the individual to make meaning, explore subjectivities, an ethico-aesthetic understanding and visual performative communicative capacities. This paper investigates the value of visual artmaking to the adolescent beyond the classroom. The findings of a longitudinal analysis of student learning outcomes informed by two case studies reveals how students use artmaking as social inquiry and a meaning-making tool. It demonstrates how visual education can contribute to the development of students’ capacities to be active cultural participants with the communicative capacity to interpret contemporary society and the critical and self-reflective skills to understand themselves, others and how society shapes identities towards becoming.

Key words: visuality, visual education, visual and performative communicative capacities, performative pedagogy
Introduction

Visual Art education has a significant role to play in supporting individual’s notions of self within the broader context of a globalised twenty-first century culture and society. Issues of identity are of central concern to the emergent adult. Youth seek to find a balance between their unique sense of self and how this is played out within the demands of one’s perceptual reality. This reality is informed by their families, friends, experience and the wider society, which is increasingly dislocated, visual, virtual and mobile (Szerszynski & Urry, 2006). Visual education is increasingly emerging as a focus of discussion in education as society increasingly communicates visually (Anstey & Bull, 2006; Kalantzis & Cope, 2001) and the skill of visuality presents as an authentic means of cultural communication (NRVE, 2006; Stafford, 1996). The skill to visually navigate and represent one’s identities through visual means will increasingly play a part in each individual understanding their unique ethical and aesthetic life.

This paper investigates the value of visual artmaking to the adolescent in a post-compulsory learning context. It is contextualised within the learning outcomes of the Stage 6 Visual Art Syllabus, New South Wales (NSW), Australia. It is a Visual Art curriculum, which has been informed by postmodern and popular culture perspectives and approaches knowledge as produced through multiple interpretive positioning. Visual artmaking in this learning context is presented as providing performative sites for the individual to make meaning and explore subjectivities. It is also presented as significant in developing an ethico-aesthetic understanding (Guattari, 1995) and the visual and performative communicative capacities of the individual with value beyond the classroom. It presents some of the findings of a longitudinal analysis of student learning outcomes from the annual state exhibition, ARTEXPRESS (1991-2005). These finding are informed by a case study of two students who provide insight into the way they have used artmaking as social inquiry and as personal narrative. It
demonstrates how Visual Art education can contribute to the development of students' capacities to be active cultural participants, developing the communicative skills to interpret contemporary society visually and the critical and self-reflective skills to understand themselves, others and how society shapes identities towards becoming.

**Issues of Subjectivity and Visuality in Contemporary Society**

Our subjectivity and being are essential aspects of how we contextualise the way meaning about self is positioned. The individual is active in constructing how they ‘see’ their world and others in it. The word self as singular and autonomous or self constituting, is being presented in current discourses as an inadequate way to represent the complexity of an individuals’ engagement with political, social and philosophical understandings (Baudrillard, 1983; Deleuze, 1990, 1994, 2004; Mansfield, 2000).

Being a ‘subject’ implies being an individual operating as part of a world consisting of complex social and cultural networks. Subjectivity is a term used to represent an “abstract and general principle” (Mansfield, 2000, p.2) which allows us to understand how our inner world of feelings and sensitivities affect one’s being. These feelings and sensitivities are connected to one’s social existence and natural world. The self is therefore seen as a changing stream of impressions and thoughts, in constant transformation.

Self has come to be presented as a phenomenon in a constant process of creative becoming. Neitzsche (1973) refers to this as a form of creativity, as a “will to power” (p.67). Habermas (1976), drawing on the field of critical theory and cognitive psychology presents identity as dependent, able to obtain ‘free access to the interpretive possibilities’ of a society’s cultural traditions (p. 93) through reflective performative actions. The self is therefore positioned as reciprocally constituted and located within cultural, society and history, thus open
to multiple interpretive possibilities. The individual is a critical, creative and expressive active player.

An essential aspect of subjectification is self-reflexivity. Habermas (1976, 1990) and Deleuze (1990) see self-reflexivity as similar to Neitzsche’s idea of the ‘eternal return’ (1990), where each returning, sees all previous subjectivities being dissolved and interpretively re-constructed. Deleuze presents us with the idea that the process of subjectification is establishing a way of existing or being and that there is a “tendency for human life to form images of itself” (Deleuze, 1990, p.95). Thus identity is presented as being constituted by its own image which has been formed outside itself by other social and cultural agencies (Abbinnett, 2003; Bauman, 2004).

Extending on this idea the individual will therefore require the capacity to explore subjectivities with a creative force that is able to critically and interpretively explore and form representations of one’s subjectivities. For Deleuze, this process is multiple, different and formed by a “disjunctive synthesis” (Deleuze, 2004. p.205) in a creative dynamic space and time, which is being accentuated by our mobilised society. The individual and groups may constitute themselves as subjects through the processes of subjectification, but what counts in such processes is the extent to which, as they take shape, they elude both established forms of knowledge and the dominant forms of power. In this sense subjectivity is now presented as open to one’s capacity to find ways through existing power and knowledge constructs and representations, to deconstruct and to invent possibilities or new ways of existing. More specifically such processes require a mechanism through which to process such knowledge in a form that is authentic within any given society and in ways that assimilate new forms of knowledge (Deleuze, 1990). As identification of self often resides in the visual clues of one’s lifeworld, finding one’s identity through visual representations may be an important place to explore identity (Jones, 2007).
Bourriaud (2002) hypothesizes that artistic production presents as a model of sociability where by artmaking is an activity that produces relationships with the world as signs, forms, actions and objects and has a role to play in informing identity as it emerges from our relationship with our aesthetic, ritualized and shaped life. Similarly arts education writers such as Dewey (1934), Abbs (1995) and Eisner (2002) also identified that an aesthetic, creative and expressive engagement with cultural forms provides opportunities for a prolonged and transformative encounter with self.

The importance of arts inquiry, as an expressive interpretive activity informing self, has been identified by many philosophers such as Habermas (1976), Heidegger (1956, 1962), Deleuze (1990) and Derrida (1998). In the context of multiple presenting identities this would see an individual working towards reconciling the complexities of one’s inter-subjectively complex life and appropriating creatively whatever conceptual, symbolic and representational forms best met their needs or their deep inner sense about who they are. An individual would therefore also need to develop the skills and understandings of how to access their inner nature to make personal expression from the forces which shape self. Arts inquiry has most recently been identified for its capacity to actualize such multiple understandings and offer generative meaning opportunities via its performative processes (Deleuze, 1990; Finely, 2005; Peters, 2005; Reilly, 2002; Sullivan, 2005).

**The Visual and Performative Communicative Capacities of Artmaking**

Identity is what we make of ourselves within society, and we create our own beliefs and values (Barker, 2000; Guattari, 1995; Habermas, 1976; Mansfield, 2000; Rhode & Platteel, 1999; Robinson, 1999). The subject therefore may take on a variety of positions, each operating differently, according to the spaces the individual inhabits. For Habermas (1976) “the basis for the assertion of one’s own identity is not really self identification, but inter-subjectively recognized self-
identification” (p.107). This anti-essentialist position provides us with an image of the ego accomplishing self-identification through performing interactions and communicating intentions. These actions require the individual to identify themselves as reciprocally constituted and formed through the assertion of one’s own identity. Self knowledge is a movement towards becoming or a coming into consciousness and this ability underpins an individual’s communicative competency in society. Artmaking is therefore presented as a process that allows the conscious self to engage with the other in self, to explore imaginings or projections and speculative understandings (Jones, 2007).

Postmodern artmaking gives attention to the way representations form a living mythology of consciousness. Art practice, as research, is both critical and reflective and shifts seeing to knowing (Sullivan, 2005). Inquiry in art practices draws on the imaginative and intellectual work that artists perform while inquiring into everyday life and constructing knowledge about self and society. Visual Art education also examines the problematic nature of representations and their role in cultural production (Duncum, 2002, 2003, Freedman, 2003). Postmodern contemporary visual art practices are presented as ‘aesthetic self-consciousness’ (Barker, 2000), going beyond mere representations to critical, creative and cultural transformations (Cunliffe, 2005; Eisner, 2001). Contemporary art practices redefine notions of artist and audience, challenge high culture, give attention to consumer culture and the new processes of the construction of social identity (Barker, 2000).

Current thinking about visual art practice could be seen as discourses informing experience, where equal emphasis is placed on making as a validation of thinking and conceptualizing and as records of process or as events in time (Mel, 2000) as it does on the production of art objects. Sullivan (2005), in his framework for visual arts knowing, finds that artists work with practical and theoretical/conceptual understandings and creative and interpretive practices. He
acknowledges the logo-centric position of the making as a form of autobiographical knowing or artist self as the research site. He identifies that a phenomenological way of knowing for an artist resides specifically in the creative, experimental, abstract and immaterial spheres of ‘knowing’ of the artist that operates between ideas, forms and situations. This knowing is presented as mediated through a materials knowing.

Bolt (2004) reinforces Sullivan’s perspective by presenting us with the idea that art provides a material practice which produces existence through embodied knowing. Imaging produces reality; ‘the act of imaging has power to materialise the facts of matter. Thought this way, imaging in art practices could be posited as a “productive materiality”’ (p. 168). In arriving at this position Bolt draws on the thinking of Heidegger (1962) who finds that the essence of art lies in its socially constituted meaning and the power of art is a sign that colours our experiences of being and, when performed, is a mode of revealing self that enables truth to be set in process (Bolt, 2004; Grierson, 2006).

Sullivan (2005), using a research orientation describes the artist as a participant in action, rather than participant observer in an attempt to emphasise that artistic knowing is a valid form of knowledge generation. Like the action research models developed from the work of Schon (1983) based on the ideas of ‘reflection-in-action’ and ‘reflection-on-action’ artists generate knowledge through iterative re-representations that include hermeneutic cycles of reflection from both subject and object orientations (Grushka, 2005). The distinction between action and observer is presented by Sullivan to emphasise that the knowledge generated through making is different and more creatively powerful than any created from a second referential framing. Interpreting the product of another’s experiential world (the artwork) from the position of audience (observer reflector), while providing hermeneutic understandings will always frame the knowing from the limited interpreting possibilities of another’s experiential world and actions.
An artist’s identity is constituted, therefore, through performative acts, the production of countless re-representations as bodies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.87) that respond to the cultural rituals, myths and beliefs which shape the individual. The subject enters into a relationship with objects (representations) in order to represent a moment where all forces form interconnections and towards the creation of a new assemblage. As art, therefore, goes beyond representation to re-representation it is presented as a material ontology (Bolt, 2004). It is a productive action, where becoming harnesses the imagination and discharges endless signs and images (Want, 1997) upon which the individual critically reflects and intuitively responds in expressing a dialogue with existence. The action enacts existence, and allows the individual to respond to their realities and reconcile emotions and experiences which Deleuze (2001) identifies as the capacity to find voice.

Contemporary artmaking with its critical and reflexive actions affords consideration of the representational strategy, or meaning making processes ones requires for the reconciliation of the body/lifeworld (Payne, 2005). Visual and communicative performative proficiency afford the individual a process through which to reflect on mutual visibilities and individual cultural acts or imaging as knowledge.

**Visual Art education as Communicative Cultural Action**

Education curriculum is recognised as an agent of social reproduction (Dewey, 1934; Bourdieu, 1977; Emery, 2002). Visual arts as inquiry praxis (Finley, 2005) researches current social and cultural phenomena. Its inquiry crosses personal experiences, time and cultures and presents inquiry findings through critical and expressive means.

Learning in Visual Art education centres on the critical qualitative experience with self, and is central to meaning making and communicative action. Eisner
(2001, 2002) has long argued that Visual Art education provides a platform for engaged transformative learning and the stabilisation of self.

More recently visual artmaking has been presented as a more performative and processual activity (Bolt, 2004; Deleuze and Guattari, 1987; Sullivan, 2005). From this position Visual Art education is presented as a method of social inquiry which requires imagination, perception and interpretation of the qualities of things as well as the mastery of skills of artistic representation (Finley, 2005, p. 683) informing personal agency. Engaging in the activity of copying and re-working representations of the world is a powerful way of ‘getting a hold’ on understanding one’s world. Performative and communicative aspects of Visual Art education have strong implications for educational practice generally (National Review of Visual Art Education, 2006).

The visual and performative communicative proficiency nurtured in contemporary Visual Art education reframe educational enterprise, as a change phenomenon where all meanings are negotiated between the artist-self and the audience, classroom peers, teachers and society. The artist or student artist is presented as the creator of ongoing narratives and performances (Warren, 2007, Elliott, 2007) as knowledge within a legitimate meaning making system. The performative nature of visual art inquiry in education allows students to invest and explore the possibilities of new images of self, while reflecting, projecting and communicating their intentions to an audience. It allows an individual more flexibility about how they position and interpret self, and teaches students that all aspects of existence cannot possibly be reconciled into one truth about self, or one resolved image. Artmaking in this context is presented as providing a technology of self which allows a student to use many and multiple imaging processes or acts of re-representation to affirm the becoming self.
The Visual Art classroom is presented as providing opportunities to allow students to encode and decode through dialogical means (Markello, 2005) the meaning of society's images and ideas. This occurs through both image analysis and image creation (Sandell, 2005, Darts, 2006) in a studio context which is a unique learning community. Visual education is presented as reflecting the capacity in the critical qualitative field to demonstrate active and regulated democratic practice with transformative and emancipatory consciousness (Cunliffe, 2005; Duncum, 2001; Eisner, 1991; Freedman, 2003; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000).

Visual Art education as personal and social inquiry is presented as a learning context that informs the importance of the artfulness of performative pedagogical that honours and values all life experience (Gradle, 2006) and its ritualistic behaviours. In performative approaches to pedagogy, the importance of the individual and their aesthetic responses are affirmed as they relate to the vernacular of an individual's everyday life (Dissanayake, 2000). In this context, youth investigate through fine art, popular cultural and social practices how the transfer of values and belief systems operate in their own reality. For youth this will be strongly linked to the way popular culture and new technologies, visual imaging and media represent realities and communicate messages as representation, and mediate information, style, desire and consumption (Duncum, 2002, 2003, 2004; Rogoff 1998).

**Visual Art curriculum in New South Wales (NSW), Australia**

Visual Art curriculum in NSW, Australia is increasingly being informed by postmodern orientations that more readily reflect contemporary art practice and connect to the lifeworlds of students. Postmodern visual orientations in
curriculum place the individual within a socio-cultural paradigm of learning which aims to build on each student as ‘cultural capital’ (Lankshear & Knobel, 2003). Learning is orientated to focus carefully on the perceptual experiences of students, their social interaction within communities of inquiry and their capacity as more critical philosophical inquirers (Wilks, 2003). Postmodern Visual Art education curriculum addresses issues of aesthetics, cultural pluralism and contemporary issues such as gender (Emery, 1996). It also addresses the tensions and sensibilities about meaning along the continuum from high and low art. It adopts a methodology which allows students to iteratively move, in their personal inquiry, towards points of stability through critical analysis and image manipulation.

Restructuring of Visual Art curriculum in NSW over recent years has attempted to shift away from the nurturing of hegemonic practices. These privileged Western aesthetic traditions of art are seen as antithetical to cultural preservation (Emery, 2002; Mason, 2004) in Australia. Concurrently, Visual Art curriculum writers have drawn on philosophy to develop a conceptual structure that provides authentic interpretive and reflective learning experiences that bridge the artworld and the lifeworlds of the students (McKeon, 1994). Pedagogical outcomes in the curriculum present knowing as the narrative of ‘knowing how’. When studying Visual Art, the subject content of school and life are central investigative themes as students move towards personal lifeworld autonomy in a productive and performative learning environment. The NSW Board of Studies Visual Art syllabus structures the learning to have flexibility “to cater for the need, interests and abilities of individual students” towards autonomy (NSW Stage 6 Visual Art Curriculum, 1999, p. 1).

McKeon (1994) describes the influences on the syllabus structure as being informed by the intersection of Habermasian (1976) theory of knowledge, informing human action and Danto’s (1964) artworld theory. Using Habermas’s (1976, 1990) communicative knowing theory, the writers of the syllabi have aligned and intersected the technical, practical and critical fields of interest with
analytical, hermeneutic and emancipatory or communicative ways of knowing. Students are encouraged to use their analytical skills to deconstruct meanings in artworks across time and cultures. Students then use this knowledge of artworks, artists, the world and audiences to develop practical and performative means to represent their ideas through the breath of representational forms available in contemporary arts practice.

The NSW Visual Arts 11-12 Syllabus, revised in 1996 embeds the critical and interdisciplinary discourses that frame multiple contemporary arts practice. This has been a conscious attempt through the syllabus structures, content and learning outcomes to provide a broad, flexible, contemporary and authentic learning environment which has relevance to the student participants in the twenty-first century. While meeting the broader aims of the NSW Board of Studies examination requirements the curriculum aims to “contribute to the critical and reflective armoury of the individual beyond school years” (McKeon, 1994) and to have lifetime relevance.

**Inquiry into the Value of Visual Art as Cultural Narrative Beyond the Classroom**

The inquiry aims to reveal the value and nature of the learning encountered in a post-compulsory Visual Art classroom in Australia, as it informs personal, social, cultural and ethical understandings. It sought to identify the kinds of visual spaces and visuality students explore when they are encouraged to work with contemporary artmaking practices within a curriculum that fostered communicative understandings. In particular, it focused on students, who studied Visual Art and were either selected, or were eligible to be selected for the final annual state-wide ARTEXPRESS exhibition. The ARTEXPRESS exhibition presents works drawn from the NSW Higher School Certificate (HSC) in Visual
Arts, an external examination carried out by the NSW Board of Studies in Australia.

This paper reports on an aspect of a larger research project informed by a qualitative longitudinal research study of the ARTEXPRESS exhibition learning outcomes and was informed by a case study that describes the narrative learning journeys of two past Visual Art school students. The longitudinal study draws on documented image and text data analysis from exhibitions spanning a fourteen-year period, 1991-2005. The study involved approximately three thousand student artist statements and their corresponding artworks and an in-depth inquiry into the artmaking experiences of Abby and Pete through "researcher-as-interpretive bricoleur" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p.189).

The research explored the legitimacy of artmaking as a significant communicative platform for young adults to understanding self and others in contemporary society. It sought to identify whether the students found artmaking a valid research and inquiry tool (Sullivan, 2005). Did the students in the study find artmaking a legitimate means of mediating performatively personal, social and ethical decisions in an increasingly visual age? It also asked whether the student’s immediate family or friends also valued the contribution Visual Art had to the construction of values and beliefs for the student beyond the classroom.

The study draws on a hermeneutic phenomenological approach (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Plager, 1994) combined with a critical hermeneutic understanding (Kinchelo & McLaren, 2005). Consideration is given to cultural critique and discursive forms that reveal power dynamics within social and cultural texts and how they inform the historical and cultural boundaries of an artwork. This approach to the research task aims to convey "a deeper essence, or nature of the phenomena" (Neilsen, 2000, p.9), and a deeper insight into the student artists’
intentions beyond the immediate interpretative analysis of their images or forms. It is also aimed towards a constructed approach that connects the multi-voiced texts (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) of the students (their artworks, their artist statements, interviews and diaries). This approach connects in more authentic ways, through an empathetic identification with the participants’ social life-world.

It acknowledges that the student artworks in this inquiry are bound by the limitations of an educational institution, an external examination process and a curriculum that presents the field of study and shapes the pedagogical environment. All the empirical evidence in the form of student artworks must acknowledge the teacher as co-constructor and the role of audience in shaping the final artworks which includes examiners and the wider community.

Identity as Communicative Cultural Narrative in Adolescent Student Artmaking

Self narrative or subject orientations were identified as the key defining characteristic of the student inquiry. Visibility informing subjectivity production, broadly categorised as Identity as Expressive Self Narrative and Identity as Expressive Cultural and Social Construct supported a wide range of inquiry positions within the self portrait or self narrative genre. The evidence identified that since the implementation of the postmodern oriented Visual Art curriculum subjectivity issues have been a significant preoccupation for students. It also demonstrated there had been a substantial shift away from abstract objective inquiry. Landscape and object studies, for example, were replaced with more discursive and expressive visual narrative forms. Self-reflective, interpretivist orientations were significantly represented. The self portrait in its many forms represented approximately 70% of all student works selected for the ARTEXPRESS exhibition across the study period. The self portrait, as performative narrative in contemporary art practices represented in this research,
includes traditional forms of self portraiture, but extends to forms such as bodies of work, or collections, animation, video and installation artworks which allow for possibilities of many representations of self. The increased focus on self portrait or the conscious decision by many students to place themselves within their narratives in very explicit ways, across all of the genres represented in the ARTEXPRESS exhibition is evidence that the students were using their artmaking to mediate their life experiences.

In constructing communicative cultural narratives the students in the study engaged with a wide variety of issues around their subjectivity. The appropriateness and legitimacy of this embodied material practice has been identified within this research as embracing: Identity as Expressive Self Narrative and Identity as Expressive Cultural and Social Construct. In the category of identity as a narrative of subjectivity, visualising self and visualising events were significant viewing positions. Other than exploring the expressive self, identity was significantly explored from a position of tangential visibility, seeing others and reflecting on self as inter-subjectively constructed. Identity as a cultural and social construct focused predominantly on the exploration of the cultural and discursive identity that was significantly influenced by media and popular culture. The discussion on the inquiry will be informed by the longitudinal study finding and insights will be informed from the in-depth case study students Abby and Pete, who both connect their identity to the culture of the beach and to events and memories of their childhood.

**Abby, 'the expressive me’**

Reflecting on her HSC artmaking, some five years ago Abby describes her work in the following way. ‘My artwork ended up being more of a journey sort of style...I guess portrait’ (Abby, 2006). Abby’s work fits within the category of Identity as Expressive Self Narrative. Her artmaking is a significant means for her
to ‘see’ self and actualise in her world. Reflecting on her preoccupation or obsession with self during adolescence, she talks of her overwhelming desire to explore self, her fascination with her physicality and her psychological and emotional self. Abby’s inquiry saw her locate her journey in the ocean baths swimming pool which was her personal retreat. Her painting series, ‘Swimming at the Baths’, illustrated below, links explicitly to her emotional self, the events in her life and her desire to express and communicate her unique identity.

For Abby, the [water] is an ‘amazing place. Like it’s there and it just never ends’. On choosing to do a self portrait, Abby reflects, it was ‘almost essential to me I think...I was delving into what I represent as a person during that time... it [was] a hard time with friends...I think focusing on something that was really serene and really cool and calming to me was like, almost a vessel’.

Through focusing on communicating an important event for her at the time she was able to link her work explicitly to her private space, to the events in her life and the moments that captured her inner self. Abby continues to express her desire to visually represent her life experiences, both privately and through her work as a graphic designer. Visual Art and culture are ‘essential... I think it’s who I am...it’s offered me so many opportunities to be artistic and [to be] creative’.
Visualising and Locating Self through the Events of Life, Places, Spaces, Moments and Events

While a sense of place and events linked Abby to her personal narrative other students chose to inquire into how their inter-subjective awareness of a significant person in a tangential relationship to them impacted on how they now see and act in the world. This group of students predominantly chose family members or peers. Often events, places and spaces connected them to concepts such as birth, death, illness, displacement, cultural difference, mental illness, alienation by peers and society. Life was communicated as a series of perceptual events defined by the observational sensitivities of the students and the ever increasing link between imaging technologies and the recording of events over time. The choices they made in selecting and representing places, spaces and events connected to a very deep sense of self. Often students drew on family photograph albums, current images of themselves and new technologies to communicate their ideas.

*My Mother's Story* (Park, 2001, p.26) a work from ARTEXPRESS (2001) looks carefully at how history and family events have shaped and continue to shape the students perceptions of life as they define self. *My Mother's Story* is a collection of images by Hannah Park, each containing a photo of her mother depicting the choices she has made as an immigrant and the consequences of these choices. In each frame the portrait of the mother takes a reflective stance.

Hannah Park (2001), *'My Mother's Story'* [Drawing], ARTEXPRESS, 2001, p. 26)

*My Mother's Story* displays significant aspects of her life:

“treasuring her Korean culture; reflecting on the past; aspirations for the future;
the displacement; the longing to return” (p.121). The student is also able to project the personal to the universal and talk of the “inevitability of change” (p.121) and through juxtaposition illustrate how choice and action have direct implications for her own becoming. The viewer can easily access how the making process has been able to capture the past, present and future embodied and provide a way for the student to reflect on life events.

**Visuality, Identity and Social and Culturally Constructed Expressive Self.**

A significant proportion of students chose to examine how the phenomena of identities are shaped by an individual’s unique inter-subjective experiences, and how these mesh with the cultural and social agencies and expectations that surround them. They chose to position their inquiry in the contemporary context of their visually mediated world. They frame themselves as actors and interrogate the zone where the tangent of the individual private world intersects with the greater mass of the collective identities of a society and its cultural practices.

Analysis of the themes represented in the ARTEXPRESS exhibition identified that student artworks highlight a preoccupation with reflecting on how society’s normalisation practices are enacted and how its performative influences impact on ones evolving ethical behaviour and constituted self.

‘The Boys’ (Eades, 2003, p.108) is exceptional in that it provides insights into the ‘rights of passage’ for the student and marks this defining moment. Through an investigation of a family’s social generational drinking behaviours the young adult works through the normalising behaviour that connects a family as he reflects and affirms an aspect of self. Connecting these relationships across three generations is achieved through the act of layering and constructing an accumulated image of many identities as one, with the past simultaneously part of the present. There is an affirming moment or sign in this work when the student elected to place a personal photograph into the frame. The photographic portrait makes a strong and purposeful autobiographical statement demonstrating how artmaking actively mediates ethical acts and subjectivities.

My Bathroom Sink: Pete’s work has been described by his teacher as an ‘autobiographical narrative’, ‘him and his surf culture’. It is a ceramic tile installation with bathroom sink. The images on the ceramic tiles surrounding the sink are hand painted by Pete and depict satirical cartoons commenting on popular beach culture. They are representations of a world that was definitely Pete’s world, surfing and surfing culture.

Pete’s artwork was inspired by popular Sydney Morning Herald cartoonist Leunig, by a local artist Michael Bell, whose work has been described by critics as ‘suburban obsession’ (John MacDonald, Sydney Morning Herald, Sept 30, 2006) and ‘an antic spirit... deliciously funny’ (Smee, The Australian, Sept 23, 2006). Pete also drew on the work of Mambo artists such as Reg Mombassa made internationally famous for their satirical characterisation of many aspects of Australian culture, including surf culture. He describes his art as ‘your average day at the beach and what you see’.
Pete (2005). ‘My Bathroom Sink’, ceramic installation, detail of ceramic tiles

The image of himself (seen in the detail photo above top right) came definitely first, ‘that came early that was the first one I did’. The narrative, as you read the tiles, tells the following story as described by Pete;

‘The surf one at the beginning that’s sort of the morning I get up and have a morning surf, and then I might spend the whole day at the beach ... it was kind of like your average day at the beach and what you see’ (Pete, interview, 2006).

While Pete’s artwork to some extent is ‘quite insular ... his work is about his life surfing’ (mother). His artmaking has been valued by his parents for nurturing creativity and imagination and through its capacity to help him represent his adolescent self. Developing his creativity and being able to communicate his ideas was seen as preparing him well for adult life.

Pete spent many hours exploring how other artists have projected surf culture in Australian society. His final work evolved from his own world, his love of the sea and its explicit link to family and childhood. To some extent it was seen by his mother as reflecting on the past and projecting towards the future. For Pete he was comfortable representing the flows and rhythms of the events of his life from a humorous perspective and his artwork communicates a strong aspect of his
adolescent and cultural identity as he reached the end of his years of schooling and youth.

**Media, popular culture and subjectivities:** The impact of cosmopolitanism or the phenomena of global media and urbanisation is ensconced in all our daily communications and behaviours. Students in this study are representative of the generation that inhabit this global cultural landscape and reflect concern for ethical dilemmas that arise from the commodification influences that shape their behaviours, beliefs and values.

Visual Art students who decide to inquire through the popular culture lens find fertile areas for investigation. As energetic activists in this fluid culture, they explore topics such as beauty, health, relationships, the environment, fashion, music and the forces of stereotyping, gender exploitation and desire. *'You are What you Wear'* (Genner, 2001, p.18) is an example of how students interrogate the devices used by marketing and media to promote specific gender constructs through fashion statements that facilitate consumerism and define the female adolescent. The student has photographed themselves in their own product *‘You are What You Wear’* T-shirts and has set about the process of merchandising her concept ... “using mass media techniques of the fashion industry to explore our desire to use accessories to define ourselves within our consumer-driven society” (p.18). The work is intensely personalised and internalised as the artist engages through creating, wearing, photographing and manipulating the very images and products of the consumer world which have helped define her... her final note ... “without you I am nothing” (p.18).
One of the main preoccupations of adolescent youth is the search for ways to define one's individuality and ask truth questions about self. This requires critical self-reflexivity which is an increasingly complex task as imagery and artifacts in popular culture and the consumer driven society exploit the need to conform to ones peers to meet the consumption imperative.

The student artwork below by Sayarath (2003, p.99), *Just Me; Just Life; Just Different; But Just Like Everybody Else* demonstrates the interplay between the two categorisations of self-narrative identified and elaborated above. It exemplifies how many students explore reciprocity through re-representational acts to produce the expressive critical self portrait. It demonstrates how the deeply personal, feeling self is informed by the desire to understand how others see them. It illustrates how youth focus on social stereotypes and the way words and images work to construct and support certain social and cultural constructs. It also demonstrates how artmaking powerfully communicates students’ deeply felt cultural understandings. In this instance the self narrative clearly deals with the complexities and struggles of understanding self as a gender and cultural construct and how the student engages with critical, ethical and cultural understandings through imaging.
Conclusion

Artmaking practices allow the phenomenological experience of visual and performative communicative acts or material enactment to give expression to existence. Much of the work that art does is to look at life beyond the everyday function of existence to be able to 'see' possibilities. This amounts to considering becoming, not as a preconceived end but as a testing of generalities, extending understandings and finding new meaning. An individual can use artmaking processes to experience becoming through the working and reworking relentlessly through a process of re-representing personal and culturally significant signs to find new ways to see and make meaning at a deeply unique and personal level.

The inquiry identified that students have engaged with a wide range of material performative strategies and found contemporary art practices a legitimate means of mediating personal, social and ethical decisions in an increasingly visual age. Through self narrative the students have been able to encounter many of the cultural and social values and beliefs of their communities. All the parents, teachers and students interviewed in this inquiry along with ARTEXPRESS
commentators reinforced the value of learning through the visual arts as it informs the reciprocal relationship between self and other.

The students who attained visual communicative proficiency were conscious of the power of the visualising performative act as a process where you can play in the virtual and explore the actual. Students in this inquiry explored the possibilities of self through understanding difference as drawn from the traces of humanity found in the experiences of living and the richness of imagery. Students explored their own solutions to inquiry issues from a personal and particular position and the reflexive habits of artmaking provided a prolonged openness that informed an understanding of mutual visibility and the ethical self. Artmaking as cultural communicative narrative, presented in this inquiry, saw students connect through an aesthetic and performative inquiry to their ethical self. Communicating and performing culture as an artistic act supported their awareness of how becoming is shaped by themselves and society.

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