

1-1-2005

## **An investigation of the impact of visual culture on visual arts practice and visual arts education**

Robyn Roper  
*Edith Cowan University*

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# **An Investigation of the Impact of Visual Culture on Visual Arts Practice and Visual Arts Education.**

**Robyn Roper, Dip. Teach, B. Ed.**

The written component of a Creative Project submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the award of Master of Education (Visual Arts Education)

Faculty of Community Services, Education and Social Sciences  
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May 2005

## **ABSTRACT**

This research project is based on the premise that school students have a right to an education that assists them to “develop a sense of personal meaning and identity, and be encouraged to reflect critically on the ways in which that occurs.” (Curriculum Frameworks, 1998, Values, Statement 2.2 Personal meaning: 325). Not only should education offer students a sense of well being, it should make a difference to their lives and foster an appetite for life long learning. A key ingredient that makes for a rich, fulfilling and rewarding life, is an understanding of visual culture, that according to Freedman (2003:1), “inherently provides context for the visual arts and points to the connections between popular and fine arts forms”.

The Creative Arts Project is presented as an exhibition and exegesis. The exegesis includes in part (a) an interrogation of the Arts Outcomes, as described in the Curriculum Framework (1998), (b) a review of theoretical positions that can be adopted by visual arts educators in response to the impact of contemporary visual culture, and (c) recommendations for pedagogic practice.

The exhibition of art works explores the visuality of the social and urban/suburban life and how visual culture affects our lives. Collection of materials taken from the urban landscape utilised in conjunction with collage, textile traditions and bricolage is the basis of a body of works that explores the notions of attending, adjusting and communicating - actions that are integral to an engagement with contemporary visual culture. The hidden messages of consumer society vis a vis gender, race and socio-economic status are highlighted / exposed / in focus. Documentation and images of this work are included in the exegesis.

This research project investigates the questions: (a) in what ways can the investigation from my social and urban landscape, through art practice, develop a fuller understanding of embedded meanings and personal identity? and (b) is Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) an appropriate model for action in schools in Western Australia? Through explorations of the complexity of visual culture, and research into various theoretical positions of art educators, recommendations are made for the efficacy of K-10 visual arts education.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to especially acknowledge and thank my supervisors Dr Judith Dinham and Dr Tony Monk for their belief in me, encouragement and guidance throughout my studies. Many thanks also to Geoff Lummis for his thoughtful (and often witty) input into my exegesis and my artwork. For their support and assistance in putting together the exhibition, thanks go to Gill Treichel, Vicki O'Shea and Ross Di Blasio. A special gratitude must go to Alan, my wonderful husband and my two beautiful sons, Cameron and Fergus, who had to persevere and often ignore my rantings and ravings whilst I maintained the home, a job and 'the masters' (more like 'the monster'). Thanks also go to my mum, Lesley Douglas who always believed in me. And finally where would you be without your friends! A special note of acknowledgement to Jan Trainer and Lynn Vroombout who were the best sounding boards, art gallery goers and ideas people that I could have ever asked for, many thanks. We did it!

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

The intention of this exegesis is to provide an insight into the impact of visual culture, the centrality of visual images, a survey of practices suitable for young people for analysing today's images and whether visual culture arts education (VCAE) is a suitable model for Western Australian schools. Accordingly this introduction provides an overview of the Creative Arts Project. The following areas are covered; the relationship between visual culture and visual arts education, key terms and a description of the Creative Arts Project that includes a conceptual framework.

### **1.1 The relationship between visual culture and visual arts education**

This Creative Arts Project is based on the premise that the visual culture of today is in need of closer scrutiny and one of the ways to do that is through visual arts education. It is my view that with the bombardment of often highly charged visual images in everyday life, our job as visual arts educators must be to assist students to gain control, or at least understand the influence, of visual culture on their lives. Hobbs and Rush (1997:15) claim that images can enhance our life but "at their worst, [the messages are] stereotypical and mind numbing".

A major issue of importance is that without a broad knowledge and understanding of visual culture including images and the visual language used by artists, advertisers and product advisers, young people would be illiterate in a critical area of contemporary communication. They could therefore be set adrift in a sea of images, allowing the tide, winds and currents of products, promotions and propaganda to lull, pacify or excite their senses in a way that limits their capacity to critically engage with the medium.

In an article "Get the Message? You will. Anytime, anywhere, advertisers have you in their sights" by James Elder from the Australian Magazine, (September 9-10<sup>th</sup> 2000) Privacy Commissioner Chris Puplick states "We are bombarded by huge amounts of advertising". Elder reviews how due to our overload of advertising and product placement in movies and television, people nowadays tend to switch off. Advertisers therefore have to find new ways to influence audiences and according to Elder (2000) 'ambient advertising' that infiltrates our everyday

lives have been able to have that sort of impact. Elder (2000) notes that advertisers target our lifestyle in order to "impact everywhere". This pertinent article demonstrates the importance of visually literate young people.

In today's society we, as consumers, are overwhelmed by choice and controlled by how well advertised, promoted or displayed the products are. We consider our society to be a consumerist one and visual images are key ingredients in this process. A web site, [www.verdant.net/society.htm](http://www.verdant.net/society.htm), critical of today's consumerism is scathing in its definition: a pattern of behaviour that helps to *destroy* our environment, personal financial health, the common good of individuals and human institution. Can we as educators ignore the importance and enormity of the influence of visual culture and the role of images in consumerist society on our young people?

A visually illiterate student can be vulnerable to exploitation if not educated in how visual images can manipulate. Consumerism has become so much part of this society that it's like wallpaper: situated neatly and carefully in our lives but goes unnoticed. In an interview with Chan (2001), Susan Sontag states

In my view what's called Postmodernism that is, making everything equivalent is the perfect ideology for consumerist capitalism. It is an idea of accumulation, of preparing people for their shopping expedition, these are not critical ideas. (<http://www.iath.virginia.edu/pmc/text-only/issue>)

Through the use of critical understanding and art criticism explicitly taught, young people are better equipped to assess and selectively respond to the impact of visual bombardment. Further, through understanding how visual images, or more broadly visual culture communicates with an audience, young people are better able to understand themselves, their cultural heritage and their role in society. In turn they are better able to take a participatory role in social change. Chapman (1978:5) believes that from a very early age young people are educated through visual forms and that they will develop a "more precise image of the human spirit than they are likely to discover on their own," especially with a practical and thoughtful approach to visual culture. Hobbs and Rush (1997:15) point out that to learn "to interpret the visual imagery of art helps children to distinguish the positive from the negative images of their visual culture."

More recently some including Duncum (2000) and Freedman (2000) have argued that we have visual overload. At every turn of the head, visual images, in the form of consumer culture, are making an impact on our lives whether it be through television, advertising, internet usage, magazines, comics, video games, videos or clothing, to name a few. According to Patricia Anderson (Weekend Australian, Nov. 15-16, 2003) "The consumer culture has thus generated a lot of the kind of art we see today: a torrent of images, colour saturated, insistent and ambiguous, has overwhelmed us."

The increase in the number of magazines with images targeted at niche markets in the newsagency is mind-boggling, let alone the accessibility of images available through the internet. Advertising, often with hidden messages, is even reaching us on the back of toilet doors! Yet Bracey (2001:32) states emphatically that he is "not convinced that society at large is faced with an excess of information, visual or otherwise" and suggests that there is not enough evidence to mandate the teaching of skills to deal with the "surfeit of visual images".

This exegesis argues that in today's society, *as never before*, young people *do* have to deal with the bombardment of visual images associated with consumerism and popular culture that are major components of visual culture. Shank-Smith (2001:5) clearly believes it is important "to acknowledge the parameters, power, and persuasion of images, and engage in reflective critical discourse with visual culture and with our children."

Villeneuve (2003:1) states that "Young people today are bombarded with visual messages, and they need the skills to decode them." How *are* students coping with the quanta of visual messages? To what degree do the educational practices in schools today develop the skills to decode these messages and how are educators making visual arts education relevance for students? In order to transfer learning from the classroom Eisner (2001) suggests that it is important to connect students' learning to what they know in the outside world, provide opportunities to develop language skills, and help students "to improve the ways in which they [students] think" and make decisions. Bowden (2000:20) believes that in order to extend current practice, the encouragement of risk taking through an open-ended problem solving approach and the celebration of *students' own culture and interests* is the way to go.

In view of the relationship between visual culture and visual arts education, Mirzoeff (1998:7) thinks it is important to realize that visual culture directs “our attention away from the structured, formal viewing settings like the cinema and art gallery to the centrality of visual experience in every day life.” The experiences and cultural backgrounds of young people then become important issues in the teaching of the visual arts. Rogoff (1998:16) suggests that visual culture is “an opportunity to reconsider some of the present culture’s thorniest problems from yet another angle” and that even a “new and alternate language” be sought in order to make sense of our rapidly changing technological time.

In response to the emerging needs of ‘new times’, Duncum (1997) investigates appropriate educational challenges and sources of meaning for educators. He makes the point that new times theorists must go beyond postmodern approaches, to engage more fully with the “forces shaping our period.” These include issues about consumerism, conservation, gender, classism and globalisation to name a few.

#### My Pedagogical Shift

Although I had no prior knowledge of artists, my strongest memory of learning was of an art class (1968) where I created an assignment about Salvador Dali. I chose *Burning Giraffe* to show and write about. This image had a huge impact on me and has stayed with me all my life. I became a big fan of Salvador Dali and consequently ended up being an art teacher. So what was it that made such a difference? It was the *impact* of the image, the *visualness* of the painting, the semiotics *behind* the painting (unknown to me at the time), with its dreamlike and romantic qualities. It inspired me and gave me a sense of the other, expanding my thinking and a capacity to process, explore and extend boundaries of the commonplace. It literally opened my eyes to possibilities. The times (1968-1972) were different and consumerism didn’t have such an influence on my life, unlike young people of today, but it demonstrates the potential impact of imagery. In my case I believe this was a defining moment that led me to this project. Importantly it started with an image!

The need to keep negotiating contemporary visual culture is paramount. I’m not suggesting giving up using fine art images, but rather promoting the use of the

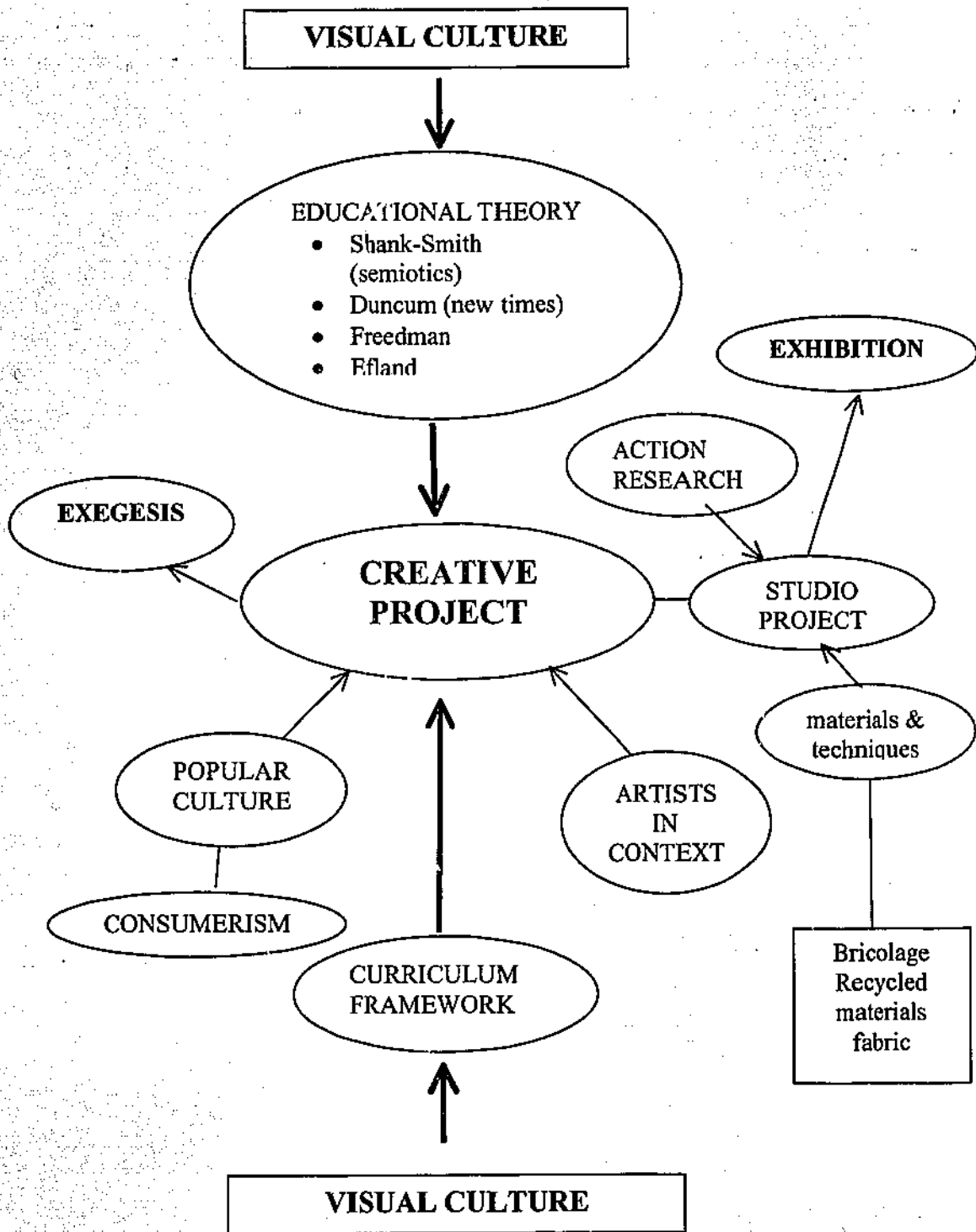
images of the everyday or popular culture. It is interesting to note that Freedman (2000) acknowledges how advertisers and makers of popular culture, (who are trying to persuade people/young people to buy and accept images of how they should be in this world), are often using fine art images. For example how many people would not recognise Van Gogh's irises or vase of sunflowers? Whether advertiser's images are from popular artists, are blatant and 'in-your-face,' or subtle, they are all designed to manipulate the viewer. Turning the attention of visual arts educators, to visual culture is one way of addressing the "context barren syndrome" that Smith-Shank (2000:234)) suggests has arisen in today's education.

### **1.2 Conceptual Framework of the research project**

The relationship between visual culture and the Creative Arts Project is set out in the Conceptual Framework that follows (Figure 1).

Visual culture that is embedded into our everyday environment, or subjective universe (also known as *Umwelt* as proposed by Jakob von Uexkull, Sharov (1999)), impacts in turn on society. For example visual arts educational theory and the Curriculum Framework, and this in turn informs this exegesis. This Creative Arts Project is an action research project. The outcomes being the exegesis and an exhibition informed by visual images from popular culture.

**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for the Creative Project**



### 1.3 Key terms

The following key terms are used throughout this document and in some instances terms have been defined elsewhere in context.

Visual culture: A complex and interconnected cultural environment that include economics, new technologies and the rapidly changing social conditions. Mirzoeff (1998:7) suggested that visual culture was a meeting point between the visual elements of the consumer and visual technology and wasn't just a part of our lives, it was our lives. Freedman (2003:28) believes visual culture is a site for social, political, economic and personal references that include combinations of historical and contemporary issues. For the purpose of this research project, visual culture is understood to be a meeting place of Duncum's (1997) 'new times'. It includes visual images and their decoding, communication and cultural connotations involving attitudes, beliefs and values.

Appropriation: Refers to borrowing an artwork or image, often from popular culture, and changing its context to use for another purpose or in a new, interesting way. Israel (2002:174). Appropriation is distinguished by the artist's intention.

Assemblage: The use of three-dimensional objects that have been found and combined to create an art object. Skull (1988:50)

Bricolage:(French) An assemblage improvised from materials from the urban landscape and recycled materials ready at hand, or the practice of transforming found materials by incorporating them into a new work.

Consumerism: An economic system based on expanding consumption of goods. (Chambers 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dictionary) In addition, it is the tendency of people to identify strongly with the products and services they consume, especially those with commercial brand names reinforcing social status. (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia) Consumerism can also be considered a pattern of behaviour that helps to destroy our environment, personal financial health, the common good of individuals and human institution. (Consumerism [www.verdant.net/society.htm](http://www.verdant.net/society.htm))

Installation: An artwork created for a particular site or gallery, creating an environment in itself. Israel (2002).



Modernism: Modernism can be characterised in several ways, but if it is to embrace the diversity of visual culture over the last 100 years or so and, any description should have three dimensions. First, the exploration of the art medium itself and how it can be used to create interesting formal effects. Secondly, the communication of emotion and the processes through which this can be achieved. Finally, the conveying of ideas as a primary purpose of art. (Hoffert, 1993) Artists abandoned traditional subject matter, aesthetic standards and embraced experimental techniques of art.

Postmodernism: This movement was a reaction to Modernism and encompasses a diverse range of ideas. The movement developed around the late sixties collecting momentum until the present time. It has its roots in Modernism but has no discernable style as such, due to the array of positions artists interpret from. For example race, culture, gender, economic situation, artists/consumers view of the social function of art and popular culture, to name a few, have all shaped postmodern art. The expansion of new technologies has also radically changed the face of art, especially mass production. Postmodernism is generally considered these days as a concept used to define our cultural condition. Gablik (1982:32) suggests, "Postmodern society is increasingly 'administered', transmitted and controlled by means of corporate management techniques, public relations, and professional marketing." Other aspects of postmodernism include pluralism, multiculturalism, emphasis on ideas, the importance of the viewer, and the notions of non-permanence. Artists often use appropriation, embrace new media technology, produce artworks that deal with multiple interpretations, offer a social commentary, or they can participate in the artwork themselves.

Popular Culture is the currency or iconography of a contemporary culture. It is constantly changing and is specific to place and time. (Wikipedia.(2004))

Semiotics: The study of signs and symbols in culture and their consequent meanings. According to Shank-Smith (1995:234), semiotics "is a broad approach to understanding the nature of meaning, cognition, culture, behaviour, and life itself." Cultural signs in artworks are examined questioned and confronted. Semiotics involves making connections, thinking and understanding, is experiential and can encourage students' collateral experiences. A sign according

to Shank-Smith (1995) can be verbal, visual, gestural, musical and often stands for something.

Visuality is about concerns with the visual environment that has “an indispensable relationship with verbal, auditory, emotional, physical, intellectual, spatial, and historical vectors” (Rogoff, 1998 in Fiske (2001:155)). It involves visual language, visual communication and visual literacy.

Visual literacy: Understanding visual images with particular regard to structure, meaning and cultural contexts of an artwork. The ability of a student to use art language, written or spoken, to critique visual artworks that includes images from popular culture.

## **2.0 VISUAL CULTURE**

The nature of visual culture is central to this research project and therefore a more detailed explanation of the concept is required at this point.

Culture, is about how we live our lives and consideration of culture is vital to understanding and defining who we are. It is personally, socially and politically intertwined with the historic and contemporary world in which we live. Culture and visual culture are a collateral configuration. The visual or everyday images are deeply entrenched in our daily lives. According to Fiske (1992:154), there are no boundaries between art and life, "popular art is part of the everyday". Yet it sometimes seems that society at large is hardly even noticing the subtleties and intricacies of visual culture and how it affects our everyday life.

I believe we are all born to be active in determining our future. From personal observations very young people don't sit around waiting for events, they are fully participating in their cultural multi-sensory world, curious creative and imaginative. Shank-Smith (2001) suggests that any two-year old is evidence of this. Contrary to this, Shank-Smith (2001) also believes that young people learn passivity through culture! How is it then that creativity, imagination and critical thinking, all essential aspects of the visual arts are not being acknowledged by the wider educational community as a huge facet of young people's lives Compliance learned through consumer culture and manifested in schools is making visual culture awareness essential.

According to Duncum (2001:103), visual culture represents "a recognition of a vastly changed cultural environment" which includes economics, new technologies and a change in social conditions. However in trying to define visual culture, Duncum (2001) came up against some fundamental issues. He thought that the problems associated with a definition were multiplied due to the lack of a framework. A Modernist framework is compared to a tree where roots or pathways can be easily followed showing a link from one thing to another. In a postmodern context, or as Duncum (1997) prefers, 'new times', the situation is quite different. Wilson (2000), quoted by Duncum (2001), suggests visual culture is like a rhizome, too complex and interconnected to follow one single pathway easily or for that matter construct a workable framework.

Visual culture in an educational context is a term used increasingly to mean the study of images from mass media or contemporary culture. This study, coined by Duncum as Visual Culture Arts Education (VCAE), focuses on all the sophisticated and complex coding of the nonverbal messages from society. It includes a dialogic, where cultures can merge, conflate and reconstruct meaning.

### **3.0 RESEARCH PLAN**

The Creative Arts Project seeks to engage with the nature of visual culture, its impact and its significance to visual arts education. This is done in two distinct, but related ways. Firstly, at a personal and artistic level where I explore these popular issues through the processes of art making to create a body of artwork. Secondly, through the exegesis where I reflect upon my own art practice and the relevant issues for visual arts education in WA.

#### **3.1 Research questions**

The Creative Arts Project addresses the following questions:

- How can I, investigate the images in my social and urban landscape?
- How can I extend my art practice to develop a fuller understanding of embedded social meanings and personal identity?
- What are the optimum practices of students for analysing today's images?
- What new VCAE approaches can I identify to help students negotiate their visual culture?

The aims of the project are:

- To make connections between the importance of the reading of visual images and understanding visual culture.
- To make connections between the Western Australian Curriculum Framework and the Arts learning area so that educators can help negotiate visual culture with students.
- To investigate the locus of the dialogic where students and educators can work collaboratively to enrich their lives.

In my artwork I have used images to expose some of the issues that face young people in these new times. I have gathered images in the form of postcards, newspapers, magazines and promotional material that have abounded in shops, cafes and theatres, and manipulated them to change the reading. How images are read and my critical understandings of images are interconnected and then

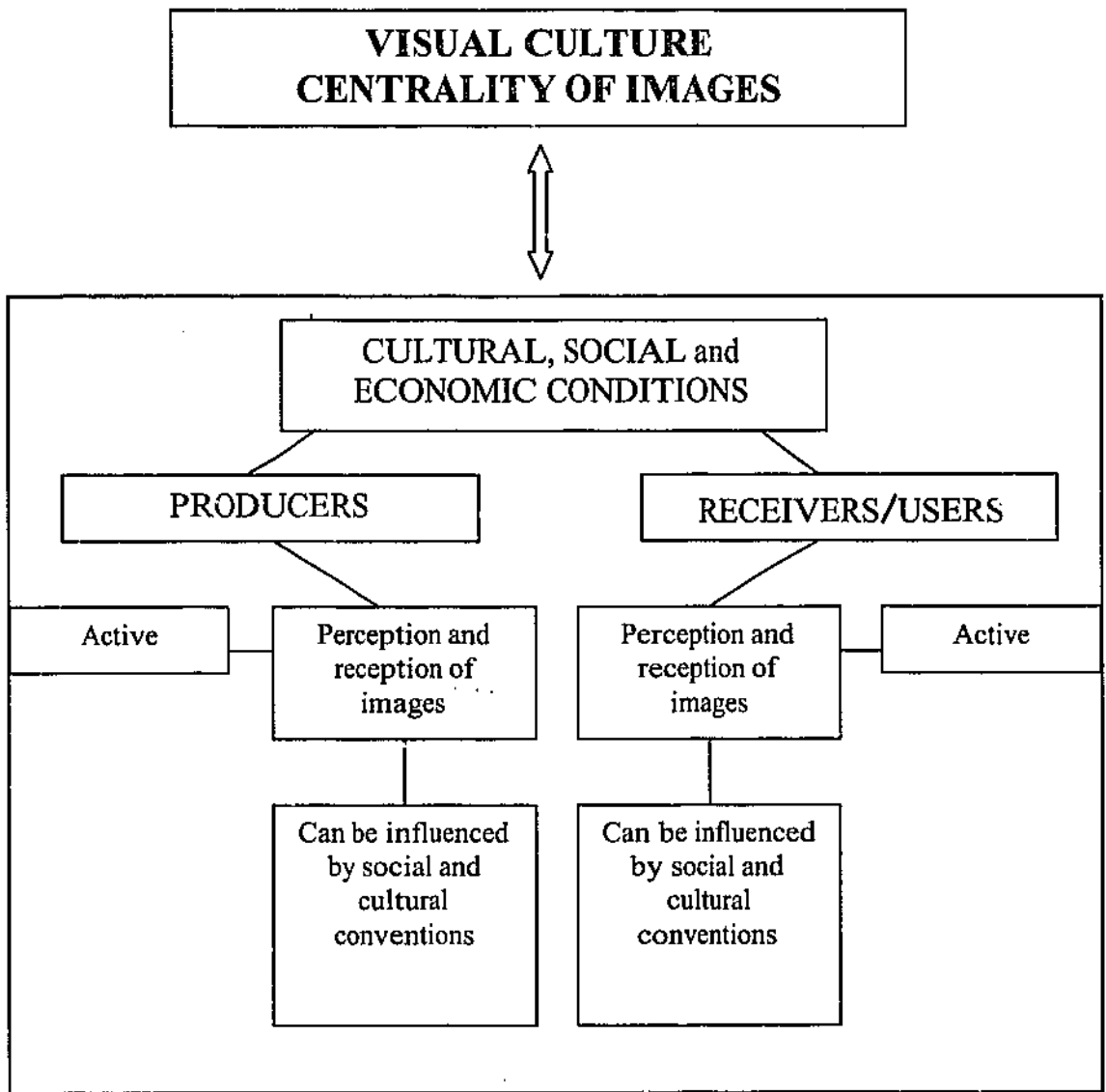
changed to form new meanings. The reading of the images is then up to the viewer and will depend on their cultural and social background. As the viewer changes so does the reading, the active semiotics of the artwork comes into play.

In Figure 2 the importance and connectedness of Visual Culture to our daily lives is mapped according to Fischman (2001:3). He posited that:

Understanding visuality calls for inquiring about perception and the reception of images as well as about the cultural, social and economical conditions surrounding the producers and users of visual culture.

Furthermore 'perception' and 'reception' are considered active and cannot only be influenced "by social and cultural conventions" but should be given serious thought where there could be an "absence of fixed meaning" in images (Fischman, 2001:4). The integration and interpretation of our experience and perception of our environment, along with the way we react to the environment and learning styles established in prior knowledge, all contribute to how we learn about the world.

Thus as an artist, I am unable to fix meanings, but display images that invite the viewer to re-evaluate, reconsider and review their position in regard to the artworks.



**Figure 2: Conceptual Framework of the Importance of Visual Culture**

### **3.2 Methods of investigation**

Action Research methods, used in this project, is where the researcher “is engaged in systematic reflection and action in relation to some aspect of the researcher’s practice and able to engage in rational critical interpretation of evidence” according to Grundy (1995). The research method is appropriate for my art practice. The method is based on the Action Research Spiral that concerns thinking, planning, doing, assessing and thinking in an ongoing reflection and improved understanding. The process typically begins with reconnaissance of the site, the first ‘moment’. According to Grundy (1995), the next ‘moment’ or main focus of action research is planning. I established a plan in a formal line of inquiry by collecting information on visual culture, journal articles, newspaper images and postcards to name a few.

Over the years my work as a secondary visual arts teacher has convinced me that contemporary visual culture has a big impact on the thoughts, preferences and actions of secondary students. There is abundant evidence that secondary students in particular, with a growing concern for primary students, are targeted by advertisers and further their responses to the visual bombardment is often uncritical. So much so that the American Academy of Pediatrics have set up a website to offer parents and educators insights into the impact of visual images and the media messages.

In October 2003 the West Australian published a ‘sexy picture’ of two young people, the fifteen-year-old girl shown in an erotic position with the male model on top of her. It was an advertisement for a clothing shop. I started to wonder what type of image this was portraying to young people. Were girls going to get a great boyfriend by being sexy in the shop’s clothing or what! This kept me thinking and with my background in visual arts and a large amount of documentation on the use of images and visual culture, I went about the next ‘moment’. This ‘moment’ involved assembling information about artists, reviewing curriculum documents and making art works. Following the development of the plan I made artworks, observed more images and visited art galleries, then acted again by continuing to make artworks.



The third 'moment' in the action research process is to reflect on my writing and artworks and to keep evidence of this. In the course of the Creative Arts Project I have had regular formal reviews of my artwork, exhibited selected works, gained feedback from visiting lecturers, critical colleagues and peers. Personal reflections, a collection of newspaper articles and gallery visits are recorded in visual diaries and journals.

The fourth 'moment' or stage repeats the process of discovery and reflection thus demonstrating the cyclic nature of the Action Research Spiral. I believe that Action Research is an appropriate tool for investigating concepts and issues in my visual arts education and thus enhancing my art practice.

#### **4.0 PERSONAL CONTEXT**

Throughout the journey (research process) it is important to recognise the researcher:

- as an artist,
- a person influenced by art,
- a person with a pedagogical history and
- an art teacher involved in reflective practice.

#### **4.1 Researcher as teacher**

Since beginning teaching in 1976 I have had diverse experiences with teaching visual arts with K-12 students. I have witnessed many curriculum changes and the development of different philosophical viewpoints. The current thinking by Western Australia Curriculum Council (1998) has been to join visual arts, dance, drama, media, and music, to become The Arts, as one of the eight Learning Areas. This could be a good idea if the subjects were integrated but as such are organised as separate units of study, meaning that the visual arts is only given one fortieth of the total curriculum time, a very small amount of a student's timetable! I strongly believe combining five separate subjects to be a mistake for students. Considering the importance of visual culture and the rate at which technology is advancing, I believe, in order to serve a democratic education, that the visual arts in the form of Visual Culture Art Education should be relegated to a place of importance.

As a young art teacher my main fascination was with the Pop artists, their use of every day objects and recycling of imagery found in advertising. One of the more exhilarating exhibitions at the W.A. Art Gallery in recent times was the *Warhol Look* and naturally I collected all the newspaper clippings, reviews and pictures I could lay my hands on. I had been an avid comic reader as a young person and once I'd left high school, I studied graphic design, but decided to switch to art teaching. At the time I was young and thought art teaching would be a good job because I loved making art. As time has passed, I have come to see the strong

connection to social action and reform, as a form of personal expression that occupies a special place in the art world.

Returning to study in 1995, I became more interested how visual images influenced students. Based on this interest I made an effort, to encourage students to look for meanings behind many of the visual images affecting them in their lives, asking them to think about how they may be influenced by these images.

As a visual arts teacher, I think that "visuality" (or visual language, visual communication and visual literacy) is important for all students to understand, in order to help them connect with themselves and their urban landscape environment. Rather than being bystanders in the numbing and dumbing down of society, visual art teachers have an obligation to raise young people's awareness of the global village in which we live through the visual arts. Not only are the visual arts a tool for social change, but for internal change, or in other words, giving people a voice that counts. There can be no doubt that creativity is a part of the fabric within all of us. It's a matter of reaching down and getting in touch with that part that needs expression. I want students to be empowered with more choices about the world that inundates them with persuasive visual images.

Even Madonna (2003) in her hit single admits "I'm just living out the American Dream and I've just realised nothing is what it seems". Mia Johnson (2000) clearly accounts for the current preoccupation with appearance:

everyone wants 'the look', products and consumer objects, cars, sofas, atmosphere, western society. Advertisers are aiming at people having an *aesthetic experience* to enhance their world. They are showing the uneducated others what is 'good' and beauty and order.

Susan Sontag (2001) has little kindness towards television, probably the most used babysitter of them all, "notably what's on television. It seems non-nourishing, conventional, bland, trivial." To nourish students is to give them an honest grounding in visuality. Meanings, metaphors, signs and signifiers all help students to understand who they are. Through developing skills of production, students can achieve, self-confidence and the motivation to develop new beginnings, new questions and new answers. My message is essentially one of hope.

#### **4.2 Researcher as artist**

In 1995, when I returned to study for my Bachelor of Education, I reactivated my relationship with art and semiotics. My artwork had been abandoned, because parenting had been my main focus up until this time. Since 1995 I have explored the profound world of semiotics, developed my understanding of philosophy and found a way to express my passionate interest in humanity.

In addition, behaviour aspects of my young life returned. Collecting, sorting and categorising became increasingly obvious as a way to develop artworks. I was alert to my surroundings and often rummaged around through many creative homemaker shops, searching for techniques that I could also employ. I used my new understanding of semiotics, combined with my passion for social justice, to expand and extend artworks. Thus started my journey. I also visited art galleries to develop my critical thinking about my art. I would observe and notice other artists and how they tackled solutions to their artworks. I would also listen and take notes when different artists would make presentations or read artist's statements. I would reflect this information and engage my creative thinking and social position to my artworks, recording ideas in my visual diaries.

#### **4.3 Artist's statement**

Okwui Enwezor, artistic director of German art exhibition Documenta 11, stated that "The artist is also a translator of ideas, art not just being about aesthetics, but about embracing ideology." (Weekend Australian April 13–14, 2002)

This statement draws attention to the potentially close relationship between the visual arts and ideas, especially those that coalesce to form a shared set of beliefs, values and attitudes.

As I was growing up (1960-1970's), the fibres of my 'being' were woven with 'being on guard' threads. Early on in life I had to monitor and observe, reading signs and other more obvious messages as to ascertain how safe it was at any given moment. Most of the time the air was cool with a shadow of violence hanging like a thundercloud inside the house. Observation of the adults in my life and what went on was a key to my survival, albeit a difficult (but useful) stance at the time, I had to read the signs.

Apart from that, I loved making things and doing: knitting, hand sewing, school projects, cutting and pasting, and collecting. The doing had immediacy, physicality and an involvement. The activities would give me time, a closing off to reality, to be by myself where I could drop my guard and be absorbed and taken away to a quieter place, (the small voice). I remember having a shell collection gathered in Rockingham when I went on holidays and producing a type of collage/poster where I did a lot of cutting and pasting. I had success with the beautiful shell collection and the poster. These techniques have been developed over the years to enhance my artmaking.

I used to keep a scrapbook of articles of interest, mainly creative art and gardening things, reviews of art shows and recipes from newspapers when I first went teaching. Then in one of my visual arts education units, I realised this would be an excellent way to explore visual images from the Iraq war. At first this was a difficult task and I came to a standstill due to the huge amount of images that could be gleaned from the newspapers. I decided it was better to make a start regardless of my confusion. I made the decision to believe that I would gather the necessary images and other information that I required, therefore allowing my collection to unfold, a file according to dates. I had already been collecting free postcards from coffee shops since 1998 and had been able to categorise them accordingly. But the newspaper images and articles including the war images had eluded me. I now have an eclectic collection of scrapbooks, files, large roller plastic containers and cardboard and shoe boxes filled with cards all used to inform my practice. I have developed these techniques and approaches of collecting and assembling from a base at an early age and can now see how my sense of satisfaction and achievement was established and flourished.

In a similar way to Rosalie Gascoigne's approach, I go into my landscape and look for things I can use to inform my work. Unlike Gascoigne, who wandered through and was moved by the natural environment, my landscape is the social and sub/urban. This landscape, made up of a pandemonium of television/ movies/ mass media/ home/ houses/ school/ people/ city/ restaurants/ hotels/ restrictions/ oppressions/do's/don'ts/must haves, pervades my everyday. I wander through op shops, art galleries, coffee shops, movie houses, sorting and collecting magazines, objects of interest, postcards, old books, old bags, fabric and memorabilia. At

times I scour the streets when rubbish pick-up is scheduled. Space has inevitably let me down and my house is heaving big sighs from within (a bit like my husband when I bring home the 'junk'!).

Postcards collected over the last five or six years have finally been engaged to convey visual messages/communication. I want the viewers to be drawn into the images and texts I've created 'to show us up', to make them reflect on themselves and their position in life. I think it's important to speak out about inequities, discrimination, inequalities and wrongs brought on by greed and fear. So in the seduction of the viewer (as in advertising), I want the viewer to get drawn in, but made to think and reflect rather than be "dumbed down" or manipulated by images. Through my artworks, I want to explore the notion of attending to find meaning. How can I lure people in to look closer? Take another look? And another, looking deeper into the place of questioning.

My motivation now is to find that voice for me, to raise issues of sexism, classism and the superficiality of consumer society that has had a role in making me who I am. I notice that I can pay good attention to others and can pick up visual clues in my world due to my earlier predicament and this in turn can be harnessed for my artwork. I suppose it's a paradox really in that, the skills learned as a young person to keep me invisible can now set me free to find my greater voice. When thinking about my art, I want to show a position of counsellor / teacher not client. This means that rather than being a victim of my background, social status or society, I want to acknowledge the deeply loving, intelligent and joyful part of us all. I have a humanistic approach to life where the key is in the present moment. Although many different oppressions and other people's patterns get passed on by contagion, confusion and misinformation, it all counts to make us who we are therefore I see a need to take charge of life and its offerings, to be proactive rather than reactive.

#### **4.4 Artistic Influences**

My creative use of the grid, assemblage, and bricolage techniques have been supported through research on artists who use these techniques. This has enabled

me to further my understanding of the techniques and therefore use them to my fullest competence to make social statements in my artwork.

Rosalie Gascoigne, with her assemblages; *Pale landscape*, 1977 (white swan feathers, newspapers), *Piece to walk around*, 1981 (saffron thistle sticks), *Inland sea*, 1986 (painted corrugated iron, wire), and *Sunflowers*, 1991 (sawn and split soft drink crates on plywood) provides great inspiration for me. There are similarities between our practices apart from the fact that Gascoigne had her first art exhibition much later in life than most artists. Gascoigne went into her environment and collected natural and synthetic/artificial objects that she constructed and reconstructed to produce aesthetically pleasing artworks. A great sense of rhythm, balance and careful construction characterise her artworks. Gascoigne also uses the grid that not only provides a frame for construction, but also becomes a unifying and integral part of her artwork. Like Gascoigne, I have used the grid and have also delved into my urban landscape gathering images, often in the form of postcards, bringing them back to the studio and constructing and converting them into artworks.

Miriam Stannage is another artist who creates works based on collected objects from her urban landscape (alongside photography, painting and printmaking). Stannage also uses the grid, reconstruction as a process, as well as the consumer society as a focus in her artworks. Her images invite the viewers to question their life values ideology. This is shown in *Australian Landscape Painting*, 1973 (postcards of landscape, appropriated and painted), *An Irish Song*, 1973/74 (where the plight of the Irish was written in a grid form on canvas) and *International Code of Signals*, 1973/74, (Mondrian-inspired composed of painted coded flags).

Another artist that has influenced me is James Rosenquist, who uses the grid format with fragmentation, juxtaposition and collage (cited in Yenawine, 91.23). Rosenquist, a proponent of Pop Art, developed work that accommodated the everyday or popular culture. The lively use of everyday objects, sections from comic books repeated and collages meant that Pop Art became one of my preferred art movements.

Other artists whose work interests me are Shona Wilson, Simryn Gill and Mee Ping Leung (cited in Israel 2002). These artists' works show assemblage and/or

installation. For example, Wilson's *Sea Pelt 1* and *Sea Pelt 11* have seaweed, washed up and collected bluebottles consecutively pieced together in a grid-like way to form a beautiful, rhythmic assemblage. Tariq Alvi, a British artist who spends time in both London and the Netherlands is also fascinated by different media material including advertisements, newspapers and magazines. Tariq in one moment is exact and deliberate and in another moment poetical and relaxed. He engages with ideas about art being therapeutic and personally enjoyable, he wants his viewer to make their own interpretations. In some examples, Tariq cuts up jewellery catalogues, sorting, assembling and displaying, whereas other artworks involve installation, assemblage, collage and/or combinations of these.

In summary, the above-mentioned artists all use components of assemblage, the grid and collecting. These components are utilised throughout my work to emphasise social and personal themes.



## **5.0 EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT**

### **5.1 The Arts Outcomes**

The Creative Arts Project relates to the Arts Learning Outcomes (Curriculum Framework, 1998:56-57) which are (a) Arts Responses where “students use their aesthetic understanding to respond to, reflect on and evaluate the arts” and (b) Arts in Society where “students understand the role of the arts in society”.

In accommodating Arts Responses, students respond to arts experiences using the processes of inquiry, reflecting upon the creative thinking processes associated with their arts experiences. In addition students evaluate arts works using critical reflection and cultural values to make informed judgements. Students are asked to explore cultural connections in view of style, form, genre, context and culture. They are expected to examine artworks through observation, categorisation and responses in order to develop connections. All this cannot be attained by osmosis but needs to be explicitly taught through the structured visual arts education/experiences. According to Mirzoerff (1999:46) “Art is born between individuals and communities and cultures in the process of dialogic interactions”. It is not only through analytical discussions about fine artworks that students gain a clearer understanding of who they are but such discussions provide a context where students can confer and share ideas and use collateral experience to gain greater insights into themselves. My proposition is that this practice of critical analysis needs to extend to images from popular culture and mass media, during visual arts educational activities.

According to the Arts in Society outcome, students need opportunities to value the arts, understand arts heritage, explore ideas about time and place as well as recognise the contribution of the arts to the Australian economy. As in Arts Responses, Arts in Society also requires discourse between educators and students. This discourse would include student research and understandings about cultural contexts that include contemporary and historical concerns. With a strong grounding in the above outcome areas, critical understanding and visual literacy should enable students to critically read their life world environment.

## **5.2 Role of Visual Arts Education**

Visual arts education has undergone comprehensive changes in the near past years needing to justify its existence in the world of academia in terms of Tertiary admissions to University. Yet it now has to share the middle school timetable as part of 'The Arts' with dance, drama, music and media. A move forward into Duncum's (1997:103) "new times" that embraces Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE) that supports a more comprehensive learning about the self and culture would be more beneficial than briefly skimming the surface of each area of 'The Arts'. New times can be comprehended, valued and acted upon as the need arises. According to Smith-Shank (2001:5) whether educators like it or not "Visual culture is invading art education classrooms at a rapid rate". Visual arts education must be able to provide places of experiencing and learning, and teaching about visual culture.

## **6.0 APPROACHES TO VISUAL IMAGES**

This section is an examination and review of approaches to visual images and a range of educators' views on the importance of teaching critical understanding about visual culture. Due to the demands placed on young people it is imperative that art educators address the issues involved in 'new times'. It is important to note that no one approach of study is going to cover the diversity of visual images that flourish nor address every difficulty involved in sorting through the intricacies of visual culture. The aim here is to provide an understanding of possible approaches that educators may be able to utilise in the classroom.

### **6.1 Efland's Pragmatic Social Reconstruction Model for Art Education**

Efland's Conceptions of Art Teaching with the focus on the Pragmatic-Social Reconstruction strand of the model provides the basis for a framework that I developed for the purposes of this project.

Efland developed his conceptions of art to model the identifiable and different approaches to visual arts education. My interests are aligned with the Pragmatic-Social Reconstruction conception of visual arts education. It reflects an approach that the visual arts and visual arts education can use to bring about social change. In this model of visual arts education Efland suggests that visual art is instrumental in raising awareness, posing problems to be solved and bringing about reconstruction of knowledge through which social change could occur. The underlying belief of social reconstruction according to Freedman (2000:314) is "[visual arts] education can make a difference in student understanding and action in the world and that, the difference can enrich and improve social life." Through transactions with experiences and the environment students learn to think and solve problems and make the necessary adjustments or reconstruct knowledge that could then continue into lifelong learning. Duncum's idea of a Visual Culture Arts Education (VCAE) is easily situated in this category.

In Figure 3 following, Efland's (1990) model of the Social Reconstruction approach to visual arts education is presented. It is one of the four models proposed by Efland in his representation of previous, present and future conceptions.

<b>EDUCATIONAL THEORIES</b>	<b>AESTHETIC THEORY</b>	<b>PRESCRIPTION FOR ART EDUCATION</b>
<b>NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE</b> Experiences as the instrumental value A means to an end	<b>NATURE OF ART</b> Instrumental value, social reform, ethics Building visual language to understand visual environment Learning to see, through language/ text of the art work	<b>CONTENT</b> Identifying cultural and social conditions in contemporary society Problem solving
<b>NATURE OF TEACHING</b> Setting of problem situations Students transact with environment- including urban and suburban Students transact with popular culture	<b>CREATIVE PROCESS</b> Reconstruction and understanding of experience Giving artistic form to thought Use of own culture/ culture of others to understand self	<b>TEACHING</b> Teacher notices situations within students understanding where problem solving can take place Teacher identifies possible resources
<b>NATURE OF LEARNING</b> Constructivist forms of learning where prior knowledge is acknowledged Reconstruction of knowledge through transactions with environment	<b>RESPONSES TO ART</b> Transactions with works of art to gain understanding of societal issues Language enhancement in own art works Free flowing	<b>STUDENT</b> Artistic solutions to problem solving Possibility of community involvement Students able to identify, understand and make judgements in the process of problem solving
<b>VALUE OF EDUCATION</b> Emerges through the transactions with experience and understanding A sense of life long learning, a journey	<b>VALUE OF ART</b> Social dialogue/ Aids in thinking about social issues Heightened awareness of self and others Ethical inquiry Useful tool for understanding self/society	<b>EVALUATION OF LEARNING</b> Students and teachers working together in acknowledgement of progress Instrumental value of aesthetic

**Figure 3: Theoretical model of Efland's Pragmatic-Social Reconstruction Conception of Art**

## **6.2 Semiotic Informed Approach**

Smith-Shank (1995) believed that an alternate pedagogy that is directed at understanding signs, codes and interactions would benefit students and teachers alike and support lifelong learning. Smith-Shank used the work of Peirce, the father of American semiotics and pragmatism as the foundations for her argument. According to Smith-Shank, semiotics “is a broad approach to understanding the nature of meaning, cognition, culture, behaviour and life itself” (1995:234). Semiotics was also seen as cooperative, experiential, expanding boundaries of education, involved understanding, thinking and making connections and acknowledges the human urge to make order. Smith-Shank believes that “semiotic emphasis on codes, signs and their interaction” (1995:234), was an essential factor in the study of visual images. Smith-Shank notes however, it was important that educators use signs that resonate with what the students already know in order to promote understanding for students. If educators follow this approach, they would assist students to make new connections from previous experiences, thus understand and learn in a more meaningful manner.

Willis (1989) notes that the study of the meaning of everyday images using semiotics would help students not only be more interested but more informed, rather than the using a more formal analysis as used in art criticism

Smith-Shank (1995) considers that it is also important for students to re-assess previous beliefs and habits by questioning the status quo. Smith-Shank (2001) suggests that people have a mental reference book that helped to make sense of the images encountered. These images built over time “become habits that are developed to the extent that they cling tenaciously to our belief systems.” (2001:4). Smith-Shank (2000) emphasises the ongoing process of inquiry and learning as thinking. These are important factors in learning, although Smith-Shank did acknowledge that much of the educational practices were not contextually based and as such, not useful as a semiotic frame of reference.

Smith-Shank (2001:1) believes that the nature of images, engagement with images and the context “both create and reflect culture.” Furthermore Smith-Shank suggests that visual culture was at the heart of visual arts education and

that visual signs contributed to what and how we learnt about ourselves. Semiotic systems use cultural signifiers as a base, but they also serve “as the catalyst for new ideas and understandings outside existing cultural codes” (2001:1). This implies that the visual arts continue to accumulate cultural information and become richer and more complex over time. The symbols used in tribal cultures communicated stories and ideas and even subtle messages that have been carried through time and across cultural codes. According to Cunningham and Shank (2003) “our existing conceptual system is.[also] a network of signs”. In the same conversation between Cunningham and Shank (2003), Cunningham suggests that semiotics is useful in its “emphasis on reflexivity” and if it only influences this area then it’s good for education as a whole. They believe that this can help society to live life more deliberately. This can assist young people to be proactive in their lives rather than learning to be passive bystanders.

Like Efland’s (1990) pragmatic-social reconstruction model of visual arts education, Smith-Shank, thinks it is vital to connect new experiences to previous experiences. Once the experiences are reviewed and sorted, new connections could be constructed. Smith-Shank (2000:236) believes that “How we think is directly related to how we learn. When learning is understood as thinking, it is a process and not a product”. Learning then is essentially an on-going process bringing previous experiences and understanding into being. The Curriculum Frameworks (1998) emphasises this on-going learning process for students in order to demonstrate an outcome, which in turn shows that learning has taken place. The semiotic informed approach can be positioned neatly into the current curriculum framework alongside student-centred learning that is emphasised in the Curriculum Framework document.

### **6.3 Critical Inquiry Versus Recitation as an Approach**

The approach of critical inquiry can be beneficial for learning visual arts criticism strategies and consequently be useful for students in understanding visual images, whether from fine art or popular culture sources. Geahigan (2000) points out, where a studied discourse or recitation is not useful, a critical inquiry could fill in the gaps. The very nature of recitation models of criticism of a formalistic

aesthetic approach does not assist students to move beyond the work of art to make connections or cultural contexts. Recitation limits and shapes students' responses, due to its linear procedural nature. This negates students' emotion, concerns of the intention of the artist, the context of the artwork and immediate relevancy of students' experience. Geahigan (2000) suggests that openness to experience and reflection on a work of art would foster future involvement. He notes that a form of disciplined inquiry that includes student research, personal responses, concept and skill acquisition, could take into account students emotions, interests, previous experiences, artists' intention and historical/cultural understandings. This approach does not rely on a single method of instruction. (Geahigan 2000).

Marsh (1994) offers a model for analysing unseen artworks using personal and critical responses. It involves description and formalism that connects comprehensive social issues. This model is useful for students studying TEE Visual Art in upper school, but not necessarily adequate when contemplating some contemporary artists, for example, Robert MacPherson's newspaper hats or white words on black board (covering all walls in one of the galleries of the Art Gallery of WA).

A modified model of Marsh's personal and critical response to an unseen artwork was given to first year primary teaching students from Edith Cowan University, completing the compulsory visual arts education unit (AED1100). (Interestingly, only one out of the ten students had visited the Art Gallery of WA). The framework creates difficulties because students had never come in contact with this sort of analysis. In addition this method is not useful in instilling confidence in analysing or understanding artworks. The gallery guides, were asked to show the students artworks that related to water and were keen to elicit responses from the students. The three artworks introduced by a guide were from a range of contemporary artists. The first was a photograph of a Sydney building-site with a light box situated behind the photograph. Students responded quite well, (due I believe to its realistic nature). The students made comments, suggestions, gave first impressions, spoke a little about the formal qualities and could generally think of something to say. The second artwork, a painting by an indigenous artist, consisted of two large canvases with watering holes represented by circles very

methodically painted from an aerial view. The colours of the paintings were bright and not generally associated with traditional indigenous art, but included white dots carefully radiating out from the watering holes. Half of the students hadn't seen a traditional indigenous artwork and were at best, stumped for words. Colour ("I like the colour.") was the biggest attraction in the painting. In addition students generally did not realise how land was so vital to indigenous Australians and had little understanding of the concept of aerial view versus Western style of painting, or why the artist painted this way. The third artwork was removed from realism and was the most conceptual of all the works studied. The work laid flat on perspex, was a woven mat of fishing line in different colours. Two or three of the students looked closely and picked up some of the more intricate dealings of the artist. Most students looked blank and unconvinced of the artistic merit of the work. Overall these first year students, of whom at least a third were mature age, had difficulty in 'reading' the artwork. Hardly their fault when little or no background was given about the artist or the intent or philosophy behind the artwork. Also students were unable to pick out the signifiers of meaning due to a lack of prior knowledge. As a result, students were not able to enjoy or connect to the artwork, or make connections to other understandings to any significant degree. Understandings form ideas about things, which in turn can assist students to think more clearly to inspire social change. A more meaningful visit would have occurred if students had been grounded in cultural and critical literacy with an understanding re the way they perceived artworks was influenced by the way they thought which in turn was influenced by ideas, beliefs and values. Although the visit was a huge learning curve and useful in some ways, students would have engaged more with the artworks had they been educated in the use of critical inquiry from an early age.

#### **6.4 A Creative Approach**

Artists acknowledge the fact that making and producing artworks requires creative thinking. Fielding (1998) believes that a creative thinking approach could also be utilised in visual arts criticism. This creative thinking approach, as opposed to a cognitive approach, is based on De Bono's 'six thinking hats' distinguished with colour. Fielding implies that students need a strategy that is



structured and implicitly taught to assist with the enjoyment and engagement with artworks (in particular contemporary visual images). Fielding (1998:3) notes that it is important to acknowledge how the viewer responds to an artwork thus “the interpretation stage can be a truly creative response using divergent thinking.” In his example, Fielding uses De Bono’s six thinking hats technique and how it can be applied to engaging with visual images.

### **6.5 Visual Culture Approach**

Paul Duncum, a researcher in visual arts (School of Early Childhood and Primary Education, University of Tasmania), advocates a paradigm shift from visual arts education to Visual Culture Art Education (VCAE). This approach according to Duncum is the most useful when viewing and understanding visual images. Since 1995, I have read many of his published articles and he has certainly had an impact on visual arts education throughout Australia and the international community.

Some visual arts educators including Smith (2003) questions Duncum’s approach of VCAE, asking “but need we accept abandonment of our core?” Duncum (2002) challenges the notion and clearly states that image making and the critical understanding he advocates in visual culture are intertwined, one feeding off the other in a symbiotic relationship. Image making does not lose its centrality, it just shifts to make room for critical understanding and all it stands for. Duncum is determined that VCAE is not just a reworking of the same package, but a new paradigm, one that deserves consideration and deliberation. The change to visual culture has come about due to what Duncum (2000) sees as a proliferation of visual imagery that includes a shift from fine arts to popular culture. Duncum (1997:75) believes it is vital to encourage the teaching of ways to handle the vast amount of visual images readily available and to “acknowledge the importance of new media and devise curricular in partnership with students use of it”.

Duncum (2002) suggests that many visual arts educators may put themselves on the defensive and outside of the curriculum. In contrast, visual arts educators who take on visual culture and deal directly with everyday images, locate themselves at “the core of the curriculum”. Duncum explains that examining images

(especially historically bound images), are all part of VCAE. He acknowledges Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE), where critique of visual arts and visual arts history became an important component of visual arts education. Yet he claims that the history of visual culture is not the same as the history of visual arts, "a visual culture curriculum is profoundly historical, though it reframes what history means".

Kerry Freedman (2000) notes that along with the expansion of visual culture comes an expansion of the visual arts that includes modern media images of film and TV, computer technology, magazine production, advertising and more! In Freedman's view, fine arts are not precluded, but are an ongoing integral part of the whole.

A well debated issue by educators concerning the hierarchy between high art and popular culture is questioned by Takashi Murakami. In an article in *Art Review* (November, 2003) by Katy Siegel states

Murakami believes that the idea of a hierarchy between high art and low or mass culture (popular culture) is a western one; for him, the only difference between making a painting and making a handbag is the ratio of personal control to compromise with the practical realities of committees and production schedules.

Murakami is a contemporary artist, who creates paintings, sculptures, prints and produces animated videos. He bases his art on ideas that range from older Japanese artistic forms, to well known contemporary Japanese artists, using manga cartoons. According to the article, Murakami has built up a huge business corporation using mass production that spans Japan, Brooklyn and Paris. The question asked at the end of the article is "why is Murakami's art so great?" to which Siegal (2003:53) answers, "Looking can make you want, and wanting can get you thinking." This is an example of an artist working within visual culture that transcends the debate of high art versus popular culture incorporating the importance of both. Studying visual culture helps to blur the divide between high art and popular culture, thus keeping the dialogue and the questioning of new times open.

Freedman (1998:13) acknowledges the use of "images from various cultures recycled in fine art, advertising, and other forms of visual culture". Often these images are used in the current social climate to persuade young people to accept

images that try to manipulate their understanding, persuading them about themselves on every level, conscious or unconscious, (even to the betterment of society for example anti-smoking advertisements). Finally, Duncum (2002) believes that VCAE involves empowerment, social issues, historical studies, aesthetics and ideology, cultural and critical understanding and importantly, focused image-making, which he sees more akin to the design, make and appraise model.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

Regardless of how young people learn whether historically, culturally, from a high art position or popular culture, it is important to consider that young people have connections to imagery that can't be controlled. Yet according to Baynes (2000), it is important to make arts education more relevant to young people. With the study of visual images incorporating the use of new technologies and its language, this could put visual arts education at the heart of modern curriculum according to Baynes (2000).

From the research of approaches about viewing and understanding, the ongoing issue is how to make visual arts education relevant and meaningful in today's society. It is obvious that young people do need a framework and educators need a foundation of thinking or philosophy to underpin their instruction. What is also important is that students have a strong sense of themselves and their world within which they live.

Mirzoeff (1999) gives a clue to the understanding of visual culture. The book is divided into five parts that include issues that need to be addressed in contemporary society: the genealogy of visual culture; visual culture and the everyday; Visuality; race and identity; and gender and sexuality. These are all-important fields of study. With this in mind an issues-based curriculum with the use of an eclectic approach to visual culture would help young people/students to come to terms with the significant elements of the global society.

From art skills, responding and reflecting about artworks to art criticism and critical understanding, it becomes obvious that deliberate intervention and building awareness of visual culture for visual arts educators is required. Whether

they be new graduates, keen and enthusiastic or hard-core 'chalkies', the above clearly indicates that a paradigm shift in thinking is needed by visual arts educators towards a more critical and aware approach, such as the use of VCAE, in order to address today's confluence of visual images, artworks, mass media and contemporary global society.

Not only do visual arts educators have to be aware of the difficulties facing young people, they have to be actively involved in the education of visual culture and not just simply be a consumer of the visuality of contemporary society feeding from mass communication. It is easy to get caught up in day-to-day living and forget the importance of being an active and vital facilitator in young people's lives. This can involve taking a new and open attitude which, in any new situation may be uncomfortable at first. Nevertheless it is essential that visual arts educators make a paradigm shift in thinking and beliefs about the role of visual arts education, address the importance of life-long learning and be willing to reflect and adjust to the 'new times'.

## **7.0 ROLE OF ART EDUCATORS**

In an article published on the internet and entitled, "What is Post Modernism?"

Beth Carmichael quotes Jean Baudrillard,

So there is something more than that which is peculiar to our modern media images: if they fascinate us so much is not because they are sites of the production of meaning and representation- this would not be new - it is on the contrary because they are sites of disappearance of meaning and representation, sites in which we are caught quite apart from any judgement of reality...

This statement raises an important issue. How are students going to know about the 'real' world if the barrage of images imitate what is not real only digitally enhanced, edited and manipulated? Freedman (2000:316) states, "it is the conceptual and physical *interactions* of various images, forms of imagery, and their *meanings* that are the essence of the visual arts." Freedman considers this as one of the foundations that underpin social perspectives that "are, at root, forms of democratic education." Smith-Shank (2001:1) believes that the nature of images, engagement with images and the context "both create and reflect culture".

Smith-Shank (2001:1) suggests that visual culture is at the heart of visual arts education and that visual signs are the means by which we learn about ourselves. Semiotic systems used both cultural signifiers as a base, but also "as the catalyst for new ideas and understandings outside existing cultural codes". This suggests that visual arts could continue to accumulate cultural information over a period of time. Symbols were used in primitive cultures to communicate stories and ideas. Subtle messages have been carried through time crossing cultural codes. Duncum (1997:70) made the point that through popular culture most people establish their identities; "mass media images saturate our lives." Imagery services social, political and economic struggles and is a battleground of meaning used as a weapon for influence and power. Duncum suggests that meaning is not just in the images themselves but in the way in which they're used, in what context or social fields and to whom they are appealing to. For example, a new magazine on the market had an advertisement aimed specifically at people who had used a play station. Although the image could not be read initially by many of the students who were asked to look at the image, what did finally 'clinch the deal' for the students, was the use of small symbols that corresponded to the keys on the hand

controller of the game. The image was difficult to be read even by the students. As for myself, I was completely inept and unable to make sense of the advertisement. The students had a context whereas I did not.

Smith-Shank (2001:2) considers that traditional schooling is based on acquisition of "truth" rather than the reciprocal nature of semiotic pedagogy. She notes that visual culture influenced all aspects of "perceptions, cognition, beliefs and habitual ways of being in and of the world." In order to have an impact on visual culture Smith-Shank thought it was important to have a "critical scepticism" where there was a participation "in the creation, maintenance, and disruptions to our own visual culture."

Needless to say the importance of the role of art educators and visual arts education is paramount and demands an active and vigilant recognition of visual culture. As Wilks and Emery (1998) note, without some sort of deliberate intervention to educators' practice, understanding about artworks would suffer. In their study of classroom teachers, Wilks and Emery (1998) found that there was teacher domination of discussion, use of closed questions, a lack of teacher encouragement with vocabulary and verbal interaction, and little student willingness to participate in offering answers. Once teachers were taught specific skills in inquiry, a significant increase in the percentage of student-initiated discussion and reduction of lower level responses was observed. Wilks and Emery (1998:62) believe that Thomas' "essential ingredients of a community of inquiry" may well assist art educators in attending to art criticism in the classroom. These ingredients included (a) building on students' interests, (b) valuing talking and listening, (c) giving and expecting reasons from students, (d) respecting self and others and (e) valuing students' own thinking. These would put art educators in good stead for "co-operative group work and the development of the individual." Art educators became "models in the inquiry learning process and facilitators of independent thinking which resulted from the inquiry process."

Boyd (1994:217) suggests that if the learning environment is conducive to obtaining higher order cognitive skills and self responsibility, students could be empowered to lead a more thoughtful, "less mindless conformity" type of life. Boyd thought that an important factor was the introduction of problem solving that helped empower students to learn how to think. Cox (2000:57), in her study

of primary school students, thinks it is important to understand that codes and meanings are not fixed and metacognition or 'thinking about thinking' is a key issue. It is important to "enable children to challenge their preconceptions in responding to and interpreting art." Cox (2000) also considers that it is important to develop a theoretical framework for the discussion of artwork that can be contextualised in the classroom. In her study of primary students, Cox (2000) chose a committed primary teacher who believed it was important that young people knew about the work of artists. The teacher was keen to develop useful strategies for art responses in the classroom that didn't trivialise responses and kept students open to future experiences. Without the commitment of visual art educators, opportunities for enrichment and the development of understanding for students are diminished.

In addition, it is important to have a strong grounding in the study of visual images demonstrated through experience with many undergraduate university students studying to become primary teachers who are strongly influenced by memories of school and art. These memories can range from having fun to complete disaster: from joy to embarrassment and shame. Once they start the compulsory art education unit the most oft heard saying is "but I can't draw". Smith-Shank (2001:4)(A) suggests that one of the problems lies in the fact that perhaps art education in tertiary institutions needs to be dealt with in a new way and that "reconceptualizing the role of art within the general elementary curriculum means breaking down barriers between art and other subjects." Smith-Shank believes that an interdisciplinary education with visual arts being central could do away with the 'handmaiden' nametag, a term used by Eisner (1972) and afforded to the visual arts as an outcome of the domination of traditional '3R' subjects

However I believe, as revealed in this exegesis, the visual arts is an essential subject that needs to become a fully established discipline, not just allocated to a small portion of The Arts (Curriculum Frameworks), (1998).

## **8.0 REFLECTIONS ON MY ART PRACTICE**

When reflecting on my own practice I need to go back to an early time of collecting. I had a shell collection. Somehow it was important for me to have this collection. I started to consider what it meant. I had been shopping recently and had noticed some intricate houses made out of fine bone china, numbered of course and very expensive. This then took me back to the intricate collections of the Rococo period, very much associated with the aristocracy. This turned my thoughts to the class system we live in today. Why is it so important to collect 'things'? Is this a form of status and symbolic of affluence and therefore somehow superior. I have a friend who believes she is bettering herself by having a better home. I don't think she has considered that the mind, the emotions or the understanding of other cultures, to name a few, are also areas of relevance to self-improvement.

I have been collecting 'things' ever since my childhood. In fact the size of my house belies the number of collections I have. Is this just me wishing for status? I too am caught up in the consumer society and instant gratification. This is reflected in my work. I love the instant, easy to sew, cut and paste methods I have developed. To me this reflects I'm a product of this society and that I have to be aware of capitalism, consumerism and instant rewards! My collections include take away containers and packaging to be used on another day or to make artwork. This collecting habit can be very space invading! I have collected postcards, plastic figurines, glass jugs, and natural objects of all kinds, art books, comics, stamps, xmas decorations and my children's art to name a few. For what reason!

My recent artworks and collecting has focussed on newspaper images of the Iraq war but I get quite low when working with these newspaper cuttings. My heart grows heavy and when the Madrid bombings happened I couldn't decide whether to collect the images or not. For some reason I couldn't collect the Bali bombings images, maybe because of the confronting nature and the closeness to home.

The Iraq war newspaper articles are examples of where my practice of collecting and images has intersected. The newspaper images form only a part of the images



that hit me daily in shops advertisements through the papers and letterboxes, magazines, TV, and other media.

To give some insight about how I go about working with my collected materials and for the purpose of this project I will attempt to explain three of my artworks. I have a penchant for working intuitively with the materials that I collect, continually reflecting and reviewing my position. I tend to get inspired by keeping an open mind and continually looking out for ideas in the wide world. My use of images from popular culture has helped me to inform my practice as an artist in contemporary society.

After a trip to Ningaloo reef I noticed that a huge resort was going to be built on an area that is used by the turtles. My collection of save Ningaloo postcards was exactly right to help me materialise *'Isn't it time you made a smarter investment'* artwork. This artwork evolved using an old sheet of my mum's to semiotically suggest a span of time with images of a resort imposed on the fabric. Another postcard from a bank about making a smarter investment became the pivotal point for the work. My sense of looking after our heritage is enmeshed in this work.

Another example of my artwork come about whilst scouring the op shop for fabric in the blanket area. Intuitively I purchased a blanket that I thought maybe suitable for another artwork at a later date. Previously I had made a beautiful piece out of an old blanket for an earlier visual arts unit. This artwork consisted of squares of chemically transferred images, original photographs, coloured and sown onto the blanket. This previous artwork served as inspiration. I pondered on this new artwork over a period of time whilst working on chemically transferred newspaper images of the Iraq war. Somehow I thought of the difficulties America was having with the situation in Iraq. I thought of doing an American flag with stars and stripes. I then came across a photograph of American soldiers' boots in a commemorative ceremony of the five hundred soldiers who had lost their lives since the beginning of the Iraq war. I then went about collecting all the images and articles about the Iraq war (since it was 'won') from the newspapers. I selected some images to photocopy that I then transferred to overheads. Using backward photocopies I transferred them chemically to chiffon. I used image filled chiffon to place over ripped strips of red fabric. These became the stripes from the 50 states for the flag. Images of the boots of soldiers who'd died became

the stars. The use of war text and images embedded in my work, created the semiotic backdrop to explore and critique the situation in Iraq and to produce '*The worst week*'.

A trip to a Fremantle gallery provided the inspiration for another of my artworks entitled '*Make an impression*'. This work utilises collected postcards and off cuts of laminating from another artwork. An artist had cut up images and placed them back together in an interesting way. This triggered my thinking and I started to reflect on the materials and the message I wanted to impart. My ideas eventually filtered through to produce the final product.

Recently I had an idea for an artwork that unfortunately won't get realised due to time restraints. There has been some discussion in the paper about the age and look of the models on the catwalk. According to Melissa Kent (West Australian, April 30<sup>th</sup> 2004) "There seems to be a universally accepted dictum in fashion that clothes look better on hacked-off adolescents who consider smiling to be sooo last season." Kent continues further into her article "if the epitome of beauty looks like a pre-pubescent Pokemon, does that mean it's all downhill, lookwise, after grade 7 for the rest of us?" The model Kent was talking about was sixteen. Another article in The Sunday Times April 25<sup>th</sup> 2004 shows an image of a girl called "catwalk kitten" who is thirteen! My idea was to make a video of say maybe a fashion parade, displaying all the glamour and glitz, with babies on the catwalk showing the world the latest in day, evening, and bridal gear! Perhaps a baby with a beach coat on and as she 'sashays' down the catwalk revealing a g-string bikini? What has to happen to awaken contemporary society?

The process of open mindedness, intuition, reflection and review underscore the themes of liberation, gaining insight into contemporary society, consumerism, popular culture and visual culture.

## **9.0 CONCLUSION**

The dynamic nature of the visual arts and 'new times' has contributed to the complexity of visual culture. Therefore the parameters of visual arts education need to be expanded to include visual culture, encompassing the vastness of visual imagery. Visual arts educators are obligated to facilitate understanding of the 'new times'. They need to be aware of the impact on young people of the proliferation of images and must themselves be warlike and vigilant in their approach to educating young people about visual culture. Students and teachers must be open to change, be able to participate in a dialogue of 'new times' and be purposeful in the ways of assisting young people to lifelong learning. A process that involves a broad unending web woven of possibilities where young people get 'connected' not 'disembodied' is essential. Visual culture is panoptic and young people have the ability to be active members of the community. However, without visual arts educators who are willing to be active also, young people would not have the foundations of critical inquiry, semiotic understandings or an open mind to be aware of the impact of visual imagery and the potential for social change.

In conclusion, the undertaking in this Creative Project of delving into visual culture and the effects on visual arts education, will assist in the illumination and clarification of how to tackle The Arts Learning Area Outcomes of (a) Arts Responses and (b) Arts in Society.

The research questions for this study were:

- How can I through investigations of the images from my social and urban landscape, extend my art practice to develop a fuller understanding of embedded meanings and personal identity?
- What are the optimum practices of students for analysing today's images?

I have addressed these questions through my art practice of direct experience in gathering and using images from popular culture. This direct experience has informed my work by making me reflect and critically analyse contemporary society. This process has allowed me to become proficient in making an assessment of curriculum models suitable for my students.

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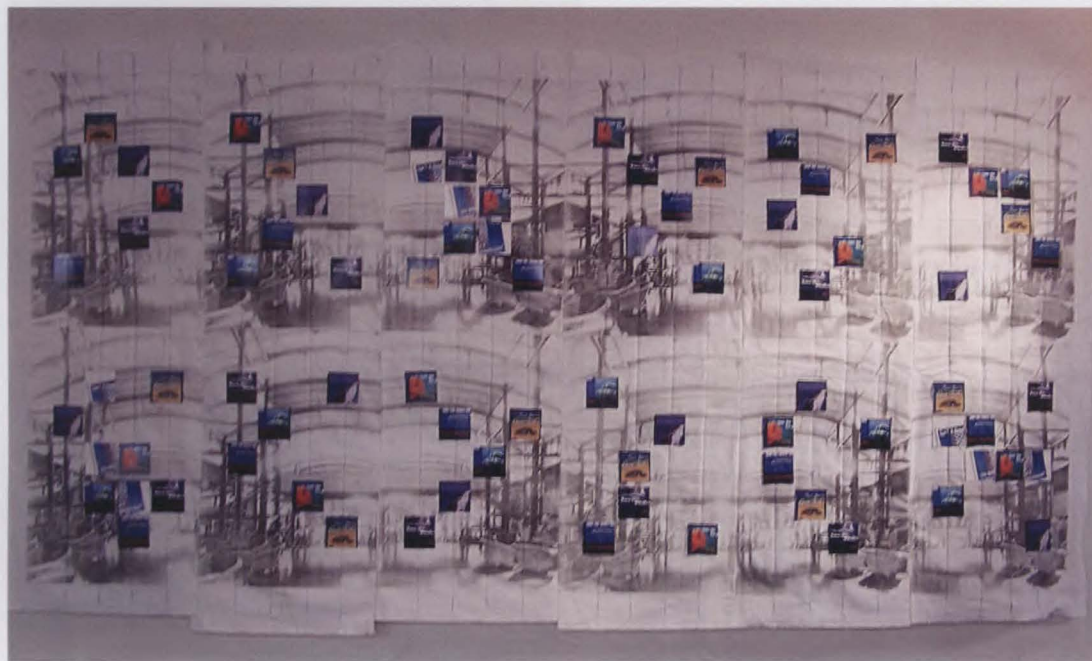
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## 11.0 APPENDICES

### 11.1 Images of artworks.



*Isn't it time you made a smarter investment?* 2002.  
mixed media: old sheet, postcards and stitching. 80cm x 120cm.



*tad cranky?* (close-up) 2002.  
mixed media: fabric off cuts, postcards and stitching. 90cm x 130cm



*Sorry, (close up) 2002.*



*Sorry 2002.*  
mixed media: old sheet, postcards and stitching. 110cm x 100cm.



*Snapshots, 2002.*

mixed media: postcards, slide sheets, gloves and file. 30cm x 20cm



*Snapshots (opened)*



*Snapshots: Aphrodisiac (close up)*





*Light reading.* 2004.  
Shimmer magazine cut and pasted. 47cm x 1500cm.



*Sweet dreams for couples. (close up) 2003*  
mixed media: pillow, photographs of magazines. 38cm x 120cm.



*The choice is yours. 2004*  
mixed media: plastic containers, origami. 35cm x 108cm x 108cm.





*Aah, heaven on earth..* (with the artist) 2004.  
mixed media: door, hooks and laminated home catalogue images. 196cm x 76cm.



*Breakfast for one. Janet Jackson placemat.* 2004.  
Mixed media: Janet Jackson placemat, breakfast goodies. 34cm x 70cm x 60cm.



*The worst week.* 2004.

mixed media: old blanket, red and blue fabric, stitching and chiffon with war images.

130cm x 150cm.



*Weapons of mass distraction. Prototype.* 2003.

T-shirt with stitching and war image. 40cm x 35cm.



*Weapons of mass distraction, series 1. 2003*  
10 T-shirts with stitching and war images. 40cm x 35cm.



*Weapons of mass distraction. Series 2. 2003.*  
3 T-shirts with stitching and war images. 40cm x 35cm.



**11.2 Images of exhibition, Mt Lawley ECU, 2004.**



*Descent into chaos* 2004. (installation)  
mixed media: Iraq war images on chiffon, newspapers.



*Descent into chaos*, foreground. *The worst week*, background

11.3 Invitation.

You are invited to the opening of an exhibition of  
artworks  
by

ROBYN ROPER

cutting through

To be opened by  
LINDA WAYMAN

Thursday 6th May 6 - 8pm

Edith Cowan University  
Art, Design & Technology Studios,  
Building 16,  
Mt Lawley Campus,  
Bradford St, Mt Lawley.  
(Best access off Central Ave into Stancliffe St and  
follow signs)

Exhibition open weekdays 9am—5pm  
6th—17 May



This exhibition is presented as partial fulfillment of the  
Master of Education (Visual Arts Education)

ECU Curatorial Services awarded the artist a Mastery  
Scholarship in 2002



#### **11.4 Opening address by Linda Wayman.**

Thank you for coming along tonight and thank you to Robyn for asking me to open her art exhibition, cutting through.

It is a great honour for me and incredibly gutsy on Robyn's part given that we have known each other for 35 years and she knows better than anyone in this room that I have a fatal attraction for stirring the pot combined with a terribly warped sense of humour.

Nevertheless it is an indication of Robyn's confidence and her own warped sense of humour that she asked me to talk briefly tonight as part of her triumph of talent and hard work.

The 19<sup>th</sup> century writer and poet, Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote that "it does not matter what lies behind us or what lies ahead of us. It is what lies INSIDE of us that is important."

This is true for all of us but in the case of an artist we get to see the tangible expression of the individual. The qualities I see in Robyn's art are no surprise to me. I see her sense of fun, her ability to cut through the bullshit yet tap into the popular, her ability to communicate. I see her confidence and courage. I see her honesty and her humour and above all I see Robyn's originality.

My first meaningful exchange with Robyn was in the dank, dark change room of PLC's swimming pool. It was 1968 and I was new. Robyn, a state champion, had just done her stuff in the pool and we were all impressed.

I can still see her... along languid figure undulating along below the surface of the 30 metre pool. Doing dolphin kick from one end to another. Underwater all the way. She seemed to just have to move a part of her body and she would slide forward through the water like pale shimmering silk.

So as I listened to Robyn chatting to her friends among the clouds of chlorine in the change room, she came to mention that her dad had won some swimming championship.

Oh you must take after him, I said rather inanely.

Silly girl she replied ... I'm adopted.

It wasn't a put down (or maybe I was as thick then as I am now). There was no bitterness or bitchiness. It was simply said, with an easy laugh containing more confidence than any 12 year old could possibly have.

It is this confidence and genuine friendliness that defined Robyn during our school years together. She wasn't up herself even though she was cool and popular and attractive and good at everything she did.

In fact, it's a wonder I didn't hate her, but I didn't think of any of that stuff. I was such a dreamer and a joker, and so totally clueless that I never really realised Robyn was cool or popular.

At the risk of endangering my current extremely sophisticated image I will give you a perfect example of Robyn's 'cool' juxtaposed with my own complete dagginess...

We both had blonde hair and Robyn started this trend of using 'magic silver white' in her hair- very artistic as you can imagine- gorgeous silvery highlights. Except if you forgot to dilute the purple concentrate with lots and lots of water... you see I thought you just put the dripper in your hair and then washed it. Except when I emerged from the shower I had huge purple patches in my hair ... which wouldn't come out. Not artistic.

Yes, my so called friends at school found it very amusing...

Anyway right from the start I could see what was important was that Robyn was fun and funny, we could always have a laugh together and she could play really good netball. So I wanted her to play for my team outside of school as well as our team in school.

So she did and we had a great team and made a great team for many years in fact. My own friendship with Robyn was not close in the sense that we shared our personal experiences – though I can tell you that she used Oil of Ulan on her skin during those teenage years which was a revelation to someone who had never even heard of moisturisers. However, what Robyn and I shared without either of us probably realising it were values.

These values included loyalty, a sense of fun, teamwork, honesty, respect for people, a shared curiosity and a dislike for bullshit.

It is with considerable astonishment that I can say that despite going to an all girls school not one of my friends at PLC had an inch of bitchiness in them and Robyn who with her popularity and her beauty, was best placed to be the ultimate bitch never even showed a hint. I was always safe with her.

So what has this to do with Robyn's art?

Because to me art in any form is about bringing what's important – that is, the inside – outside in the ultimate act of communication and expression...

Our actions should reflect our substance – they should represent what is INSIDE us. Robyn's life, her family, her choice of career and her art reflect her intelligence, her courage and integrity, her confidence, her humour, her generosity of spirit and her originality. Her values, as well as her innate talent are here in her art.

She has the honesty to be inspired by contemporary culture and she has the courage and confidence to use unusual mediums to communicate broadly in an original and witty way.

Robyn and her art are cutting through our perceptions and our prejudices.

When we were in year 12 someone mounted a Miss PLC contest... Clearly in 1972 the feminist movement had not yet breached the walls of PLC.

Anyway Robyn won of course and I remember Gillian Cornish – ballet dancer, strong calves, pimples – saying that Robyn had won because she had 'sunshine in her hair'. (It was that bloody Magic Silver White...)

Well at the risk of sounding schmaltzy as one of the pop songs on my radio station I would say that Robyn will always win because she has sunshine in her soul.

I will finish with another quote from Ralph Emerson:

Insist on yourself, never imitate."

I am very proud to be opening an art exhibition that offers us all a glimpse of Robyn – and the sunshine of her soul. Be enlightened.