If it's one day I would erase from history it would be August 29, 2005...this is the day that Hurricane Katrina hit. When we were first allowed to return to the house about two months after the storm we found what was once our home was setting[sic.] in the back yard of the neighbor's house. But, the most ironic thing of all was when I look through the wall-less house, I noticed that the tea-sets that my great great-grandmother once owned was still in place on top of the china cabinet. (Claire's V. A. (Visual Artifact) entry, 2-15-07)

Visual Artifact Journals as Creative and Critical Springboards for Meaning Making

BY LYNN SANDERS-BUSTLE

Claire's description of a photograph taken of what once was her home profoundly captures the importance of those everyday contents of our lives to which we are so deeply attached. Visual artifacts such as this photograph serve as valuable springboards for meaning making in visual artifact journals, which I use with my students.

It has been 5 years since I began my job as an art education professor at a Louisiana university where I teach an introductory "Art in Education" course. The majority of my students are studying to become classroom teachers, while a small percentage are art education majors. Many willingly inform me that they have had little or no formal art instruction since elementary or middle school. Some confess, "I can't draw a straight line!" However, I remain undaunted, determined to erase misguided notions and to replace them with a sense of artistic agency.

Figure 1. Claire's Visual Artifact Journal Entry.
Given this context, I created a visual artifact journal assignment that would encourage students to enter the world of art through the contents of their everyday lives. In this article I show how visual artifact journals are used with beginning students as creative and critical springboards for visual study and meaning making (see Figure 2). 1

Revisiting and Revising Art Journals

Typically, we consider sketchbooks as places designed solely for drawing. If you drew well, you participated with a certain level of confidence. If you did not, the experience was somewhat frustrating and for some, a place to which they never returned. At the same time, art educators understand the magic of the sketchbook as a space for ideas to take shape, imaginations to wander, and drawing skills to be practiced. Blecher and Jaffe (1998) suggest that sketchbooks can become liberatory tools for “widening the learning circle” to include often marginalized learners.

The use of sketchbooks, journals, and reflective writing in art education is nothing new. Yet, a contemporary shift from a modernist to a postmodern paradigm challenges educators to revisit and revise practices to include experiences that are not solely about formal content and the development of art skills but those which cross disciplinary boundaries, encourage conceptual development, and foster creative and critical inquiry, all within the context of an ever-changing contemporary world.

Many have embraced this challenge by rethinking what it means to practice, sketch, draw, or fill a page or a screen. Grauer and Nath (1998) suggested the use of visual journals that represent “visual thinking in a variety of forms: drawings, sketches, collages, photographs, graphics, and personally meaningful symbols” (p. 10). Anderson and Millbrandt (2005) recommend the use of research notebooks, which “incorporate visual exploration, contextual research, critiques and other visual and verbal forms of art criticism, aesthetic inquiry, and above all personal reflection…” (p. 237). Altered books can be employed as personal creative and critical explorations of social issues (Sanders-Bustle, 2007). Drucker (2004) reviewed artists’ books as important art forms, which support “the use of cross disciplinary media, the production of work through an accessible means, and the reaction against the established art world/market” (p. 7). Finally, technological innovations offer learners a world of possibilities to search for, capture, and manipulate visual and textual representations (Madeja, 1997).

The Visual Artifact Assignment

Visual artifact journals provide learners with a creative and critical space to explore and represent the contents of their daily lives. Visual artifacts are simply described as everyday artifacts that students find to be visually engaging. This definition is purposefully broad, which allows students to happen upon artifacts with few restrictions. Weekly, students select a visual artifact and mount or display the artifact (or a photo of the artifact) in an 11” x 14” sketchbook. After carefully studying the artifact, students write a two-part reflection that includes a contextual account and a detailed description of the artifact. The contextual account describes how and why the artifact was selected and why it is important to them. The detailed description includes newly learned art terminology and the use of descriptive language. For an overview of criteria for assessment, see Figure 3.

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Purposes of Visual Artifact Journals (In their words):
To find unexpected visual qualities in everyday objects.
To help us pay more attention to detail/ to see the beauty of nature around us.
To give importance to small things in life.
To document life.
To implement the art language and terms we have learned in class.
To keep a record for our personal use in the future.
To be able to express our thoughts about these things.
To make us think critically.
To help us know that anything can be art, not just paintings or drawings.
To use this as an example for future teaching ... As in what we find in the world that interests us but might not interest others (future students).

Figure 2. Purposes of Visual Artifact Journals: In their words.

Criteria for the Assessment of Visual Artifact Journals:
1. Completion: Correct number of artifacts
2. Thorough description of visual qualities: Use of art terminology and descriptive language
3. Contextual discussion of artifact
4. Variety of artifacts: Ex: found objects, both man-made, and natural, photos...

Figure 3. Criteria for the Assessment of Visual Artifact Journals.
Selection, Visual Study, and Written Reflection As Processes for Visual Artifact Engagement

Selection

The success of the visual artifact assignment lies partly in the student's power to select the artifact motivating further interest and inquiry. Visual artifacts include all naturally found or man-made objects. Students' choices have been vast, ranging from artifacts found in nature such as insects, plants, and rocks to manufactured items such as candy wrappers, jewelry, and ticket stubs. While links between visual artifacts and material culture theory can be made, material culture typically refers to those objects "created, used, and modified by humans" (Kader, 2003, p. 20). Applying a material culture perspective to the visual artifact assignment is helpful because it offers students an opportunity to enter into what Kader (2003) referred to as a critical dialogue about ownership and value with an object that is often taken for granted. However, since much of what students select are naturally found objects I continue to use the term visual artifact to include both material culture and naturally found objects. I wanted to be careful not to direct student selections at this early stage of exploration. Every semester I am surprised by something I have never seen before, such as Gail's spider artifact, which she shared with the class and her arachnophobic professor. Much to my horror she had carefully attached an actual 1/2 inch-wide banana spider to a page in her journal, writing (see Figure 4): You could see this beautiful creature and not stop and look. Though many are frightened by spiders, the banana spider common to most south Louisiana yards is harmless unless provoked. Called a web spider because of the large beautiful webs they weave in the shape of a circle, these spiders remain still on their webs all day until they are to eat any bugs in the web. (Gail's V. A. entry, 9-8-04)

While I would have never selected this artifact, Gail's genuine interest prompted further inquiry into the world of banana spiders. She filled the journal page with what she had learned, later sharing how she researched possibilities for encasing her specimen in the sketchbook.

Visual Study

Visual study of an artifact serves as a starting point for further exploration. Careful visual study is common among artists. In a traditional sense, art students are taught to study objects closely so that they can be carefully replicated, expanded upon, or mined for inspiration. However, in a broader sense, many view seeing as just one of many sense making devices essential to the development of one's understanding of the world (Toland, 2002; Eisner, 1994; Gardner, 1983; Perkins, 1994). While visual artifact journals prioritize the role that seeing plays in understanding, they also encourage the engagement of other senses through a careful study of art elements and principles. As one student explained, "It allowed me to look at things in a different way. There are things that I saw all the time, but when I actually took the time to really look at them, it was amazing how many questions I started asking myself regarding the different elements of art" (student questionnaire, 2004).
Written Reflection

Writing is an important meaning-making process in visual artifact study. Sullivan (2005) pointed out, “meaning is not found, it is made” (p. 126). Without meaning, Bridgette’s necklace of pink Mardi Gras beads becomes merely shiny beads held together with a string (see Figure 5). “So long as objects are mere “things” with no intrinsic or extrinsic value to us, they are meaningless space fillers” (Kader, 2003, p. 20). Bridgette explained, “I think that this [the beads] also signifies the cultural beliefs of our town. We are one of the few that celebrates Mardi Gras. So not only does this bead/necklace give great art details but it holds history also” (Bridgette’s V. A. entry, 3-3-04). By writing, Bridgette appropriates meaning to the object and communicates her ideas, making important links between art, history, and her world.

Writing also serves as a vehicle through which students apply newly learned art terminology. For example, many students name colors in very general terms such as “green” or “red” or notice only one visual element versus a wide range of visual elements at play in objects. By asking students to use art elements or principles as a guide for visual exploration, they not only broaden what they notice, they also broaden their vocabulary. Gail’s detailed description of the banana spider is a good example.

Silvery, hairy head. Sunset orange pattern blended with silvery white. Dark Brown. Separating lines on abdomen, FUZZY BODY! It is covered with fine, spiny hairs sensitive to ... and vibration. Each is tipped with three tiny “toes.” Coloration is ink black that fades to deep caramel organ at the body end. LONG LEGS. (Gail’s V. A. entry, 9-8-04)

One student explained, “By making us document visual artifacts, it makes us use the terms and ideas that we have learned in art. For example, what constitutes a good design? How are different lines used?” (Exit questionnaire, 2004). In addition, peer sharing opportunities and whole class discussions of artifacts provide opportunities for modeling what Althouse, Johnson, and Mitchell (2003) described as “art talk or the verbal aspects of art education” (p. 9).

Writing also provides opportunities for students to craft entries rich in descriptive language, poetic representations, and relevant narratives. For example, one student emerged as a storyteller—turning a description of a microwave popcorn label into a humorous story about how she dumped a bowl of popcorn on her brother’s head (see Figure 6).
I would argue that while critical
discernment might be one goal of visual
artifact study, critical engagement
does not happen in exclusion
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constructive actions of the artist, viewer,
and others.

**Making Interdisciplinary, Personal, and Critical
Connections**

Visual artifact journals provide spaces where interdisciplinary,
personal, and critical connections can be made. Increased interest in
interdisciplinary (Taylor, Carpenter, Ballengee-Morris, & Sessions,
2006) and integrated approaches to art curriculum (Althouse,
Johnson, & Mitchell, 2003; Efland, 2002; Parsons, 2004) asks art
educators to make authentic links to other disciplines. **Artifacts
journals become student-initiated scaffolds for natural curricular connections.** Like Gall's study of the banana spider, Abby's carefully mounted plant collection provides an excellent
eample of interdisciplinary connections made through visual artifact exploration (see Figure 7). Abby writes, "My grandmother
wanted to show me her ivy ... I asked her if I could have one for my
sketchbook and she was so excited, we picked a leaf off of every
single plant in her garden" (Abby's V. A. journal, 9-06). What began
as a visit with her grandmother turned into a collection of plant
samples titled and described much like a naturalist. As the semester
progressed, her artifacts aged gracefully into deeper shades of
purple, bronze-kissed ochres, and olive green. I couldn't help
thinking about how what started as an art assignment had naturally
grown into a science project about plants.

Dried flowers from past and present romantic relationships,
greeting cards, and photographs act as visual scaffolding for the
thoughtful mining of memories highlighting the importance of
relationships in a culture that is profoundly attached to family. In
Sheila's entry a simple hair bow serves as a springboard for
reflection about the evolution of motherhood.

I saw this little red bow lying on a table at my mom's house.
It brought back a flood of memories: good ones and bad
ones... Where have the years gone? I'm not having any
more kids. Gosh, that's sad. I feel old, no this can't be....
On the other hand, I am very thankful because my first
daughter died. It was so hard seeing beautiful bows and
lacy things. I'm glad that I have good memories now with
that. I have good memories with ribbons and bows and
lacy things. (Sheilds V. A. journal, Fall 2005)

Abby values the journal as a place in which her friend
"deserves" to be included. Her world intertwined with
mine as I read/viewed this entry. Suddenly, I was left
wondering about the true value of such an assignment.
The contextual response overshadowed the visual
description, which almost seemed less significant and
empty. Reading/viewing entries such as these provided

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Sheila's Visual Artifact Entry.
significant challenges for me because it is my practice to assess journals carefully, responding to strengths and weaknesses but responding as well to events in students' lives. Suddenly I am the one with a limited vocabulary.

Visual artifact exploration can serve as a starting point for the examination of popular culture. I must admit there were times when I privately grimaced at reflections related to beauty, romance, or marriage—my sometimes cynical self rising from my feminist core only to dissolve into a puddle of my own questioning. I knew that my responses scribbled in the margins of journals must challenge assertion. At times I felt comfortable posing a question. Other times I came face to face with my own biases about what constitutes art, trying to temper my responses to the visual sophistication of care bears on a greeting card or the significance of certain mainstream artists.

Magazine and newspaper photographs/articles offer the most revealing glimpse into student ideas related to contemporary issues. In this entry, Dana discriminates between her likenings of a photograph of war from that of the war itself.

I have found all of the photographs taken at war awesome. Do not mistake my liking the photos for being in favor of the war. I feel that the president is doing what he has to do. The photograph has a great deal of value. At the center the troops have sent missiles, which lights a line down the center. (Dana's V. A. entry, 4-04)

This discrimination is interesting because it represents tensions that exist between conceptual and visual understanding. In one instance the artifact is interpreted as awesome, yet at the same time the reflection represents war as not “favorable.” Other war related artifacts were revealing. I learned of one student’s loss of a fiancé and one young single mother’s affiliation as a soldier, with a 2-year-old, later to be deployed with a local brigade.

While students often selected images depicting women from magazines, few chose to reflect critically about their portrayal. However, Shelly’s response to a magazine photograph moves beyond the topic of beauty to touch on issues of ageism and social class (see Figure 8).

Our culture is saturated with images of beautiful people and an obsession with youth ... There are so many assumptions one could make about this woman ... She does not appear to be wealthy or live a pampered lifestyle. It would be an amazing place to live in a world that valued its elderly versus one that seems to forget about it. (Shelly’s V. A. entry, 2-16 03)

Shelly’s critical response to this entry demonstrates the role that assumptions play in the reading of images as well as the fact that assumptions are often layered with complexities. While critical response is not a requirement of the assignment, students’ selections of and response to popular culture artifacts suggests applications for critical study and visual culture pedagogy. Current debate surrounding visual culture theory highlights differing ideas related to the role visual culture should play in art education (Duncum, 2002; Illand 2005; Freedman, 2003; Irwin, 2005). While some
While a critical eye is much needed for the creation of better worlds, such an eye will not develop because we say so, but rather through the authentic investment of students in their worlds along a gradual trajectory that provides students with an opportunity to construct their way toward change.

Consequently, I would argue that while critical discernment might be one goal of visual artifact study, critical engagement does not happen in exclusion from creative engagement. In fact, they might work together through the constructive actions of the artist, viewer, and others. And ultimately, it is the hope that creative and critical examination, reflection, and just action become staples of what it means to develop as a learner at any level and disciplinary distinction.

Closing Thoughts

By self-selecting and writing about objects of importance, learners make personal connections between art and their lives. Learning about art includes not only an understanding of masterpieces or drawing skills; it also includes focused engagement with and the representation of multiple worldviews. By applying an artistic lens to daily lives, visual artifact exploration encourages learners to lay claim to what is artful, ultimately providing a more democratic space for daily lives, visual artifact exploration encourages learners to lay claim to what is artful, ultimately providing a more democratic space for students and teachers to share ideas, reveal lived experiences, and make their worldviews public.

As an instructor, I continue to look for new strategies for engagement with visual artifacts and remain enthralled with the meaning unearthed in the artifacts of my students' lives. The writing of this article has birthed new ideas related to future use such as having students return to prior artifacts, devising activities that purposefully lead to critical engagement with intermediate students, and continued infusions of past and present strategies. I encourage readers at all levels to experiment with ways that visual artifacts can be used as springboards for learning on many levels.

Lynn Sanders-Bustle is Associate Professor of Art Education at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette. E-mail: lsb@louisiana.edu

REFERENCES


END NOTES

1 To better understand students' perceptions of the visual artifact assignment, at the end of each semester, students are asked to write about what they felt was the purpose of the visual artifact assignment. I also asked them to articulate what they felt they had learned. This list represents repeated perceptions articulated by students.

2 Altered books are "any book, old or new that has been recycled by creative means into a work of art" (The International Society of Altered Book Artists).

3 Artists' books, while difficult to define, are any book or alteration of book created by an artist with the intent of being works of art (Duncum, 2003).

4 Students are asked to purchase 11 x 14" sketchbooks in attempts to move students out of a traditional notebook size.

5 Material culture is a term used to describe all artifacts, past and present, big and small, beautiful and ugly, valuable and useless, simple and complex, hand made and manufactured that are created, used and modified by humans (Kader, 2003, p. 20).

6 Students are encouraged to study actual artifacts as opposed to studying a picture of the artifact because I want them to engage other senses by picking it up and exploring all sides.

7 Visual culture "refers to the abundance of visual images and artifacts in our lives and the frequencies with which we interact with them. Essentially, visual culture is everything we encounter visually" (Carpenter, Burton, Manifold, & Wightman, 2003).
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