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PUBLIC PEDAGOGY OF VISUAL CULTURE & GENDER

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Editorial

Unsettling Feminism(s)



There is no such thing as a random recollection. They are all somehow interconnected—for everything is narrative. And the one narrative we all grapple with is the life we call our own. (Kennedy, 2011, p. 26)

Over and over again, we are reminded that as we expose ourselves to the narratives of others, our own memories are evoked. Then, as our memories juxtapose with others' narratives, insights are triggered that interface with history, relationships, and with both small and large cultures. Shared narratives become public pedagogy, and this is the central theme of this issue of *Visual Culture & Gender*. These public narratives that come from the authors' poignant desire to investigate and share insights are text- and art-based, self- and culture-reflective. In these articles, readers are invited to consider multiple ways our social experiences are, most of the time, unreflexively taken for granted. Stepping outside of our comfort zones often encourages us to reflect on invisible habits of understanding.

In May, 2011, the editors stepped out of our comfortable academic cultures to participate in the “unconference” called *Unsettling Feminism(s): Disrupting the Center, Dismantling Oppression, Transforming Social Work*. This was our first unconference, and our first feminist-centered social work conference. Presenters were encouraged to avoid using traditional conference-related forms of communication. That is, we were not supposed to stand behind a podium and read a paper to the audience. Alas, even at this unconference, there were a few papers read, but most sessions invoked visual projections, theatrical performance, poetry, discussion, stand-up comedic monologue, first person narratives, and other types of significant audience engagement. One of our VCG Reviewers, Olivia Gude, brought art supplies into her engaging sessions, and had everyone drawing and discussing ideas.

As we arrived in Chicago, the first unconference event was a tour / history lesson brought to life through old visually coded census data and photographs of teachers and students at Jane Addams' Hull House. These visual data brought the stories to life as we learned how neighborhood

people were impacted by the work of Addams and her cohorts. We were moved by the stories of obstacles that faced these newly immigrated people over 100 years ago in Chicago. As we reflect on the lives of what would be our great and great-great grandparents, we also reflect on the immigration issues of today and how they are both different and very similar in how immigrants' lives and stories continue to be marginalized.

The artifacts in Hull House are very similar to those used by Carolyn Erler and Michelle Richmond in their visual essays. Carolyn Erler (*Oncogenesis of a Scar*) and Michelle Richmond (*My Lived Experience of Anishinaabe Mothering*) share memories of their own communities and reengage with experiences that shaped their lives and the lives of their extended families in meaningful ways.

The artifacts we saw at Hull House made us certain that our presentation would be useful for the attendees of this unconference. We wanted to engage the audience in a demonstration of how we make ideas visual—how we encourage visual thinking and imagining. Using a visualization strategy that Karen designed, participants were asked to close their eyes and to think of a way to invite the public into a different route or routine—to take a break from their typical everyday way of seeing visual culture and gender; and moving through space and time. We encouraged attendees to disrupt, challenge, or change public action and knowledge.

We showed visual examples of public pedagogy with the photographs we took enroute to the unconference from our dormitory, which included photos of advertisements for “American” products (i.e., nation-centric notions that “American” refers to the USA, which is suggested with the red, white, and blue visual) and a bar and grill advertisement of a woman offering herself for consumption along with the meat she served on a platter. These and other images set the stage for revealing the public pedagogy that the participants in our session would have also passed by even if not consciously noticed.

As an example of changing public attention by rearranging familiar objects in a familiar space, Karen referred to her recent experience at the *Elsewhere Collaborative*, an experimental museum sculpted from a former thrift store housing an immense collection of objects amassed by

one woman from 1939-1997.¹ Each semiotic endeavor of curatorship of the thrift store collection translates a visual display originating *elsewhere* and leaves a residue that creates new meanings within the present experience. After attending an event at *Elsewhere*, the group's awareness was piqued as they walked by the downtown storefronts seeing the curated collections in the display windows, each with specific cultural narratives.

Similarly, this is the power of the urban artwork of Dynamite Museum. Stanley Marsh 3, of Amarillo, Texas—known for *Cadillac Ranch*, a group of ten Cadillacs partially buried on his property in a 1974 collaboration with Ant Farm—has created an enterprise called the Dynamite Museum. Since 1992, this enterprise has distributed and placed free signs to over 4,000 Amarillo locations. Social commentary is enacted in placing the “BIG DEAL” sign across from The Junior League, Amarillo's premiere women's social organization; and the sign “WE'RE NOT FINISHED” displayed in front of a shotgun house in an economically depressed area of town, which is predominately an African-American community.²

At our unconference session, we performed a day in the life of a park bench in which our gender, race, socio-economic circumstances, and age appeared to change through our actions and dialogue. (See Figure 1.) This became interactive pedagogy when participants joined in by telling short stories that re-invented their relations to routine ways of knowing became interactive pedagogy. For example, one woman felt belittled by a billboard she passed each day and re-envisioned it in order to hold a new image in her mind as she drove by it. Another described a group of students in her school who used tape one night on the hallway floors to create arrows and lines that redirected hallway traffic to entangle difference for new encounters in the movements through the school. We have set up a [blog linked to VCG volume 6](#) for those who wish to post their

1. For more information see <http://re-title.typepad.com/opportunities/2009/12/2010-residencies---elsewhere-collaborative-greensboro-nc.html>.

2. This examples are from: Wilson McKay, S., & Keifer-Boyd, K. (2004). Steal this sign: A semiotic expedition into Dynamite Museum's public pedagogy. In D. Smith-Shank (Ed.), *Semiotics and art education: Sights, signs, and significance* (pp. 25–34). Reston, VA: NAEA.

images and stories to encourage commentary in a global forum, and to invite new assertions and insertions of the visuals and performative acts in different locations.

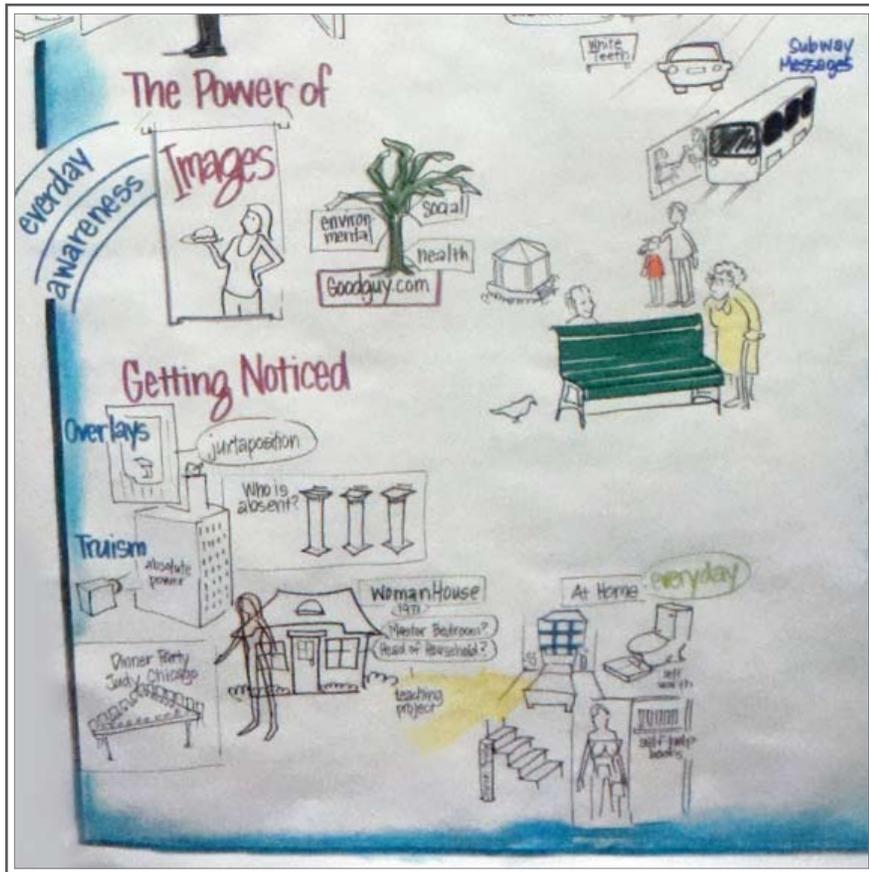


Figure 1. Graphic recording of our session at the *Unsettling Feminism(s) Unconference*, 24 May 2011

Very interesting to both of us were the two women hired by conference planners to attend sessions and make visual storyboards of the sessions. The storyboard of our session included words and images that indicated our interest in the power of images and could be considered an arts-based biography of our session. However, we found this visual reporting (see Figure 2) evidence on how *what we see* is framed by what we know in that the graphic reporter saw things we did not intend and

she missed other very significant ideas.

Visual Culture & Gender is one form of public pedagogy. We publish the work from those who explore and challenge patriarchy and others who disrupt, challenge, or solicit public action as well as those whose interventions in knowledge production allow us insights into issues of visual culture and gender that might ordinarily remain outside our experiences.

Joni Boyd Acuff (*Outliers in Research: The Narrative of an Ally*) and Kevin Almond (*Masquerade in Clubland*) share a glimpse into very different aspects of LGBTQ communities. Joni Boyd Acuff takes us into the world of an after-school program for LGBTQ teens, while Kevin Almond invites us into the glamorous world of LGBTQ clubs and shares his insights as an observer and participant. In each of these articles, the authors challenge readers to reconsider the routine ways that we understand others and ourselves.

Girls, girlhood, and the artifacts of girls are the subject of articles by Meghan Chandler, Shari Savage, and Olga Ivashkevich. Meghan Chandler, in her article, *Grrrls and Dolls: Appropriated Images of Girlhood in the Works of Hans Bellmer and Riot Grrrl Bands*, looks at Surrealist photographer Hans Bellmer and Riot Grrrls bands to reconsider the use of images of girls and dolls for political purposes. She



considers the ways in which images of girlhood and dolls were reappropriated and re-presented by Bellmer and Riot Girls, and launches an investigation into their motivations.

Shari Savage's article, *The Secret Diary of Dolores Haze: Lolita as Re(a)d* is arts-based research in which she juxtaposes the narrative and structure of Little Red Riding Hood with Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*. This article is a critical feminist response to the novel in the form of a fictive autoethnographic diary, and is used to loosen the myth of blame-worthiness attached to Dolores's story by giving her a voice.

Olga Ivashkevich considers girls who are much more empowered than Dolores Haze in her article *I'm Gonna Make You Look Weird: Pre-teen Girls' Subversive Gender Play*. The young female research participants often resist and transgress what society understands as normative/ iconic femininity. Through their discussions and drawings they undo gender limitations and taboos just as Savage attempted to do for Dolores Haze.³

The article and video by Barbara Bickel and Tannis Hugill *Re/Turning to Her: A Co-A/r/tographic Ritual Inquiry* also uses art as a catalyst. It is an a/r/tographic ritual-infused inquiry into the intersections of research, art, spirituality, and education as thresholds of collaborative learning.

Courtney Weida introduces readers to a spectrum of comic books and graphic novels that in her review, *Wonder(ing) Women: Investigating Gender Politics and Art Education within Graphica* considers problems of gender representation that persist in many superhero comics. She suggests feminist interventions of critical pedagogy using contemporary comic books and graphic novels that may serve as potential sites of critical feminist public pedagogy.

Feminist Virtual World Activism: 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence Campaign, Guerrilla Girls BroadBand, and subRosa, written by Jennifer Motter, is a review of forms of contemporary feminist activism that occur in physical and virtual space. She outlines the challenges of using these sites for activism and its potential for reaching and

engaging a vast and diverse audience while also advocating for women to become producers of technology.

VCG exposes culturally learned meanings and power relations that surround the creation, consumption, valuation, and dissemination of images of gender in relation to race, age, sexuality, and social class. Gendered visual culture surrounds us and influences our perceptions of reality. Culturally situated images have an integrated affective, sensory, and cognitive impact on our perceptions of self and the world. Whether we pay attention or not, we learn from the visual experiences of our everyday life. Education and images politically impact our knowledge of the world. *Visual Culture & Gender (VCG)* articles focus on visual conceptions of gender and expose the meanings of images that circulate in particular social contexts. They critique the multiple ways images impact beliefs about entitlement and social equity, and work toward increasing methods of "seeing," understanding, and being discriminate interpreters of visual culture.

First Five Years of VCG

VCG visual essays encourage multiple voices and challenge disenfranchisement based on intersections of the politics of gender, race, (dis)ability, and economic social status. In the "Visual Essays" section, our goal is for visual presentations of conceptual, practical, and inspirational stories, research, reports, and points of view enhanced by text as visual communication. *VCG* continues to be at the forefront of juried journals presenting new ways of considering research. Since volume 1, we have been presenting research in both text and in visual form by including video clips from the films of a German feminist filmmaker, Ula Stöckl, analyzed in Claudia Schippert's (2006) article and in each volume we have moved toward the goal to support scholars that study and analyze using visual processes to present in multimodal ways. As in earlier volumes, we find that autoethnography and arts-based research were the foci for many articles. We have also published many articles on (art) historic events and objects that relate to gender and visual culture. Our submissions, publications, and review board has become more international with each volume and we continue to desire publications in dual

3. We would like to direct your attention to an upcoming special issue of Visual Arts Research (Winter 2011, Vol. 37) focused on Girl Power! and edited by Deborah L. Smith-Shank.

languages—the author’s home language and English. While we have a couple, we invite more authors to consider this option and we encourage all sorts of interconnected narratives.

We want to thank our review team for their outstanding and continuing work with both novice and veteran authors. We thank our assistant, Ju-Chun Cheng and our institutions, Penn State and The Ohio State for supporting our work as co-editors for these journals. The journal journey for us has been, and continues to be a labor of heartfelt service, feminist praxis, and love—and we see our most important contribution to the discourse as the public pedagogy that is *Visual Culture & Gender*.

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About the Editors

Deborah L. Smith-Shank, Ph.D., is professor and interim chair of art education at the Ohio State University. Among her numerous publications is the edited book, *Semiotics and Visual Culture: Sights, Signs, and Significance* (2004). She served the National Art Education Association as president of the Women’s Caucus from 1998-2000, and president of LGBTIQ from 2001-2003, and the International Society for Education Through Art (InSEA) as executive secretary of the World Council from 2002-2005, World Councilor from 2005-2007, and she currently serves as elected Vice President. Smith-Shank has presented over 60 papers in national and international venues and has received national teaching awards and grants to conduct research on visual culture and gender in Ireland, Canada, Croatia, the Netherlands, and in the United States.

Karen Keifer-Boyd, Ph.D., is a professor of art education and women’s studies at The Pennsylvania State University. Her research is translated into several languages, recognized with Fulbright awards (2006 Finland & 2012 Austria), and focuses on feminist methodologies for teaching critical and creative inquiry with dynamic/interactive technologies. Currently, she is president of the National Art Education Association Women’s Caucus (2010-2012), and project evaluator (2010-2013) for “Communicating Research to Public Audiences on Gender Barriers” funded by a National Science Foundation grant.

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