Instead of people saying like, who you hang out with or what your favorite color is, you wear it in your clothes because they express your feelings and what your style is.

(Dee,[1] personal communication, March 2, 2007)

As an art educator in an urban high school in Baltimore, I am challenged to find teaching strategies that engage my students in the critical examination of visual culture. I seek to expand curriculum by presenting a larger scope of imagery in an effort to capture my students' attention and provide opportunities to practice thinking, interpreting, and speaking about their world. When I first started teaching, I felt far removed from the lives and interests of my urban students. I grew up in middle class suburban communities. As I reflected on this issue, it became apparent that before I could design a more relevant program for my students, I needed to carefully investigate students' ways of creating aesthetic[2] meaning in their everyday lives. In my newly designed curriculum, I focused on an examination of students' responses to visual culture in the classroom.

The Aesthetics of S·T·Y·L·E
in an Urban High School Art Class

BY LAUREN SELIG

Looking back, I realize the relevancy of drawing upon students' everyday experiences. For example, although students are required to wear black and khaki uniforms to the Baltimore City high school where I teach, they always manage to impose their personal style on uniforms. Brightly colored vests, earrings, scarves, big bags, chunky bracelets, bandanas, shoes, and hoodies express individual identity over mandatory black polo shirts. While my students often seemed indifferent to the aesthetic qualities of many fine art images, I noticed their rich aesthetic lives were represented in the careful personal choices made every morning when they dressed. My students made decisions based on their own aesthetic preferences for certain colors, shapes, sizes, textures, and proportions and were obviously considering these elements and principles of design in their personal appearance and belongings.

Many art educators have written about aesthetics and visual culture, but few have explored connections between them.[3] Jeffers' (1997) study of teachers' and students' aesthetic preferences of fine art images measured aesthetic preferences of teachers and students according to their ratings of 23 randomly selected artworks. Although the study was focused on fine arts, rather than a wide range of visual culture images, it centered on students' aesthetic reactions to different artworks. I investigated my students' aesthetic preferences and responses to visual culture objects and experiences outside the realm of traditional art. While fine art is an integral part of visual culture, it seemed that my students were more often exposed to—and more interested in—popular culture and its objects and practices. Much of the literature (Duncum, 2002; Efland, 2005; Freedman, 2003; Tavin, 2003) argues the importance of incorporating visual culture into a curriculum and describes how this may be achieved (Hafeli, 2002; Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight,
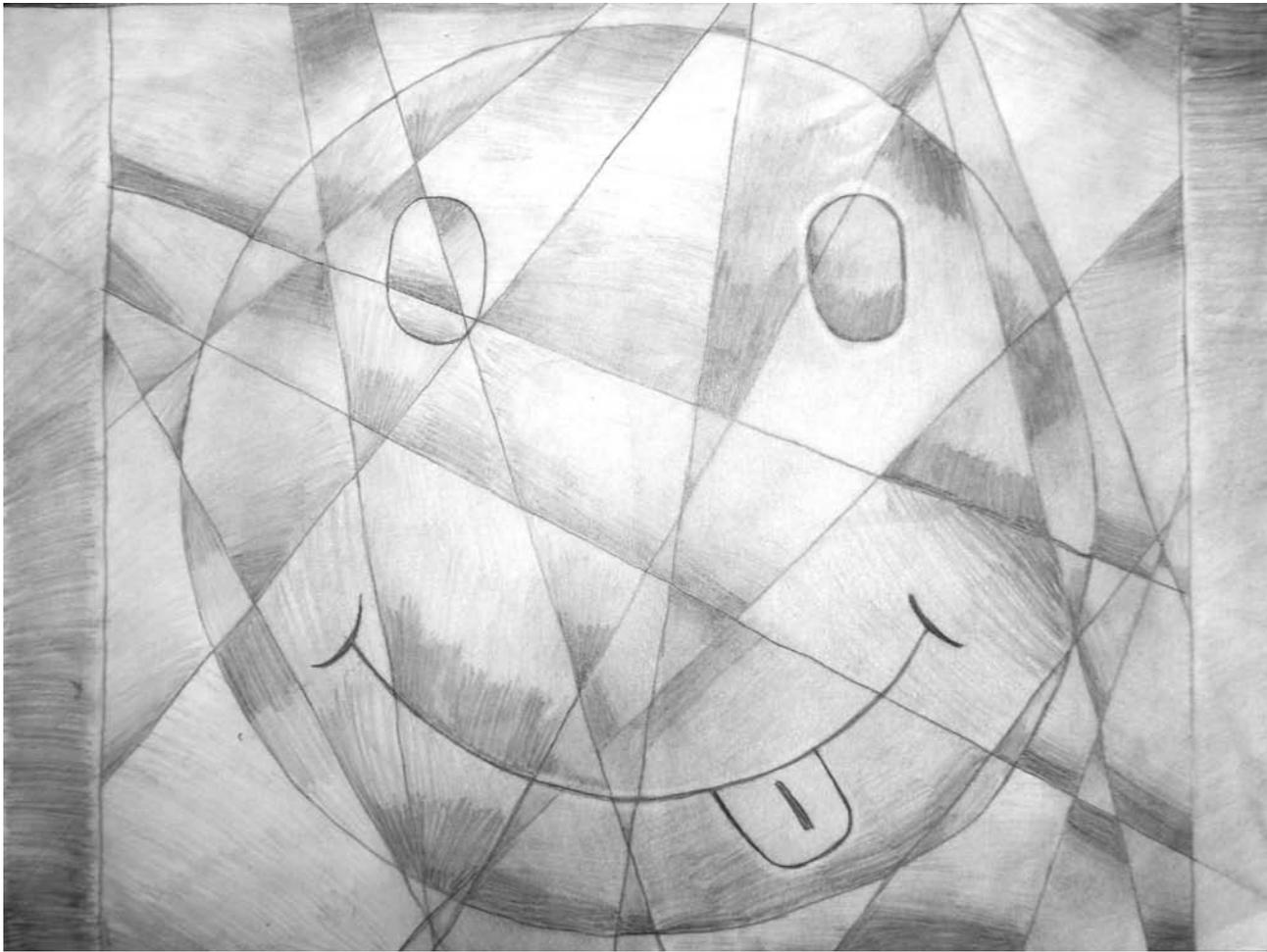
Figure 1. Student's choice of aesthetically pleasing visual culture.

2003; Szekely, 2006; Toku, 2001). However, both traditional and contemporary art education programs have focused almost exclusively on the study of aesthetics through fine arts, at the expense of visual culture found in urban students' lives. Numerous forms of visual culture have not been addressed as valid content in traditional high school curricula until recently, resulting in missed opportunities for engagement in meaningful learning.

To understand better the aesthetic responses of urban adolescents, I conducted a qualitative case study with the high school students in my Fundamentals of Art class. This introductory, semester-long course was comprised of 25 students, some of whom had not taken art since 3rd grade. While introducing them to typical art images and skills, I also examined their aesthetic responses to everyday objects and experiences from visual culture. For the purpose of this study, aesthetic response was defined as an individual's heightened emotional reaction to visual artifacts (including fine art), images, and experiences.

Interviews, field notes, student work, questionnaires, and prompted written responses were recorded and analyzed in order to answer my research question "In what ways do students manifest aesthetic responses to artworks, objects,

events, or experiences that occur in their everyday lives?" The study looked carefully at (1) the kinds of words students used in their responses, (2) what they responded to, and (3) the meaning of these responses. I also gathered my data from artwork and writing produced during an 8-week unit that included three lessons focusing on aesthetic preferences and visual culture. We began our unit by looking at artifacts students brought from home. After a group discussion about what "aesthetic" meant, which many students defined as "good" or "cool looking," each student recorded and justified his or her aesthetic responses to an object.

I introduced many of the same lessons I had taught before, but added a visual culture component and allowed students freedom to choose images they wanted. We made lists of objects and images that could be considered visual culture, ranging from fine art to advertisements, such as Edvard Munch's *The Scream* and the gym shoes Air Jordans. Based on this discussion, students selected imagery for their assignments.

Students created cubist artworks, collages, and photographs composed of different media images from visual culture that were found aesthetically engaging. The first artwork they created was a cubist drawing, as seen in Figure 1. Previously,

this was a lesson I had always taught by setting up a still life. Now, they worked from an archive of personally selected objects. Their archives consisted of images of popular visual culture, mainly magazine images, candy wrappers, and bus tickets. They also created collages from these images and wrote short essays to explain their aesthetic choices.

In the final phase of the unit, students interviewed peers outside of their class. They asked their friends to gather, describe, and explain 20 objects, events or experiences they considered aesthetically engaging, that is, "cool." Each student was given a disposable camera to record the items discussed in the interviews. I noticed that when talking to me, as their art teacher, students referred to fine art more often and seemed less likely to give genuinely personal responses. I expected the peer interview process to help students to be less concerned about my presence, therefore, resulting in more authentic answers.

The following sections outline the different categories that emerged during the unit of study. My students responded aesthetically most often to items that related to their personal identity and style, the design of the items they use, and aspects of entertainment.

Personal Identity and Style

Students overwhelmingly responded to style, such as clothes, adornments, or objects of personal use that make them look or feel "good." Style includes items such as apparel, accessories, hair, tattoos, piercing, nails, vehicles, iPods,® and phones. The term *style*, rather than fashion, is used to encompass many different aspects of students' personal aesthetic choices, not limited to clothing. Qualities of style that draw attention include details such as color, size, and shape of an article of clothing or accessory, as well as the name brand, quality, materials, texture, uniqueness, and images.

The different ways students wear their hair, tattoos, piercings, fronts,[4] and nails help to create and distinguish the identity of different individuals within social groups. Whether they are permanent or not, these body alterations/enhancements mimic the process of using different accessories. An application of a tattoo was usually a well thought-out decision. Many of my students have multiple tattoos. Originally, I thought tattoos had arbitrary designs. However, I discovered the relevance and meaning of these marks. Students photographed and included tattoos in their collages. There were different reasons why students found, or did not find, tattoos appealing. They included color, boldness, and lettering. For many students tattoos were a permanent reminder of a loved one, for example. Others said tattoos represented them or their style. One 10th-grader student, Keith, confirmed, "It's like it's not just art … it's like style. It's like wearing clothes. Like new clothes … tattoos are like wearing a hat." He researched tattoos on the Internet and in books and chose an appealing image for his first tattoo of comedy and tragedy masks that suggested his relationship to the meaning of life. "It's like everyday life. It could mean laugh now,

cry later. It could mean live now, die later … like what goes around comes around. So it was meaningful … it wasn't just like anything. It was what I go by" (Keith interview, February 2, 2007).

Choosing a hair color was also more than a simple aesthetic decision. It might depend on a girl's mood or upcoming event. A hairstyle for instance, is both a way to show beauty and status (see in Figure 2). The designs done on a girl's nails, such as painted on French manicures, flowers, butterflies, or glued on gemstones, said something about her personality and the social groups with which she associates.

Design

Items that boasted advanced technology, such as high end watches and state of the art cell phones, were mentioned often. Students discussed their aesthetic reactions to cell phones, iPods, video games, and video game systems such as the Xbox 360. According to my students, certain phones are aesthetically pleasing and many are not. One student believed the colors and size of the phone made the difference:

The Sidekick 3 is a cool phone too 'cause it flips. It looks good 'cause it's big and it's nice, and not everyone can get it. It come[s] in red, yellow … green. It can come in any color you want it to come in. (Jamie, personal communication, 12/6/2006)

Students had strong aesthetic reactions to cars and other vehicles such as trucks motorcycles and dirt bikes. One student took a photograph of the Cadillac SUV and said, "I like that truck because it's my car. I like the tires and the rims… You can change the size of the rim for each one" (Raymond, personal communication, 1/18/2007). This student told me in an interview that he identified with this vehicle partially because his social group identifies this truck as stylish. Different features of the vehicle, especially upgrades such as rims, evoked passionate reactions from students.

Figure 2. Student photograph of Dee's multi-color hair.

Figure 3. Student photograph of "Dope Dealers."

Figure 4. Student collage of aesthetically pleasing items.

Entertainment

Students commented on MTV videos, cartoons, and comics. One student, Sharquita, said about a music video, "The video for *Lip Gloss* is cool because there are dancing spoons two-stepping on the desk" (personal communication, 1/18/2007). Cartoons, comics, and manga and anime characters from Japanese comics and animation were often included in students' artworks. Drawing these characters and attempting to duplicate the original artists' style was extremely engaging for some of my students.

Sports-related items, most often basketball or football, were discussed by many of my students and were incorporated frequently into their artworks. Items students responded to most often included shoes, apparel, trophies, and sports equipment. Students' response to sports apparel and accessories was as much about style as it was about the sport. According to my students, sports are as much about how you look as how you play. One student took photographs of many different popular styles of tennis shoes, including Nike "Dope Dealers," seen in

Figure 3. Logos of sports teams were incorporated into their collages. Michael Jordan's line of shoes, bags, and clothes was very popular, the Jordan sign was drawn often, and basketball shoes were regarded as a thing of beauty.

Many items are marketed to young people, and this does affect their decision making about what is cool, but the particular New Balance shoe they chose to wear or manga character they chose to draw is based on a more meaningful visual decision. Most of my students discriminated against certain objects that had trendy brands when the item's design and form were not successful. My students would only wear some of the t-shirts from popular clothing companies such as Hollister because, contrary to popular belief, it isn't all about the label. My students were not only drawn to certain objects or events because they were popular, but students also overwhelmingly responded to the aesthetic qualities of shape, color, size, and texture, as well. Bangle bracelets and head bandanas were popular, but the size and color matters. Jeans were popular too, but the wash and back-pocket stitching determine whether they are acceptable to wear.

I now share more images from visual culture, ask students to critically incorporate this into their art assignments, and invite questioning of the visual imagery that surrounds them daily.

Figure 5. Student collage of aesthetically pleasing items.

Personal Meaning

An intriguing dimension of this study illuminates how meanings of an object or event impacted students' aesthetic responses. One student took many photographs of small figurines in her home. She was attracted to their color, texture, and style; the figures originally belonged to her grandmother. She probably would not have cherished their beauty were it not for the emotional connection. The history of these objects drew her in, allowing for engagement and perhaps facilitating an examination of each figure's formal qualities. Similarly, a pregnant student who made a collage of baby-related items said that she was able to fully appreciate their qualities because she now had a reason to admire them. Most of the time students seemed to have a more pronounced reaction if personal meaning was involved. They were happier with an image if it represented them: their talents, interests or their personal identity. Students attached meaning to items that added to their fashion style, made them look cool, or attracted personal attention. One student's collage expressed his preference for expensive items, as seen in Figure 4. Some students spoke about the quality of an expensive item, such as a finely crafted gold watch, while others stated that the label or logo made the item beautiful. These students believed, regardless of quality, that certain logos and brands were beautiful because of the design and monetary value.

In Figure 5, Cody's collage displays different items that express his style, but he also added words such as "succeed" because he felt that what he wore was a sign to others about what kind of person he wants to be. Another student tried to describe how her style related to her character and personality. Dee stated,

> Your clothes express the people you hang out with, or the store you like to shop in. I like to wear Hollister, I like to hang out with both black and white people. I show that through what I wear. (personal communication, March 2, 2007)

One finding that emerged in the study was based on the students' positive feelings and how an object's visual qualities made them feel good about themselves. It is important to note that there was not always an apparent meaning behind students' responses to objects. Students often commented on the color, shape, or craftsmanship of an object. So while students had an aesthetic response to the formal visual qualities, they did not always disclose the reasons for their choices.

Figure 6. Student artwork of items from visual culture.

Incorporating the Aesthetics of Visual and Popular Culture into a High School Art Curriculum

In addition to interpreting art, my class analyzed logos, hair styles, and features of cars. Students were able to identify the elements of art and principles of design used by the artist or designer when creating these visual culture images. Identification of such elements and principles was as fluid and intelligent as the students' analysis and response to a traditional painting. When they talked about appealing car features they mentioned the importance of clean lines, unique form and shape, and a unified design. The aesthetic choices my students made were well thought-out. I believe teachers often think that students' responses to items from their visual culture are less thoughtful because of the informal language students use to describe their responses. As art educators, we do not always teach our students to look critically and speak about consumer culture objects in the formalized way we do for fine arts. If students were guided to closely examine the objects and images they find important, they would speak and think about these things in a more informed manner. Consequently, art educators would recognize the sensitivity of adolescents' aesthetic responses to visual and popular culture when we allow ourselves to listen.

This research has helped me to better understand what my students find aesthetically pleasing within their visual culture. Both my students and I have benefited from this effort to engage and introduce different artworks that students can more readily relate to and appreciate. This experience has helped me to become more aware of my students' interests and aesthetic preferences, and it has made my teaching more relevant. I now share more images from visual culture, ask students to critically incorporate this into their art assignments (as seen in Figure 6), and invite questioning of the visual imagery that surrounds them daily. To build drawing skills students now draw objects they are personally connected with instead of complaining about a pre-set up still life. We have discussions about the role advertising has on young people and we critically examine items from visual culture. Students are asked to show multiple views of these items and explain them during the critique.

It is rewarding to see my students have found another way to express their style and think critically about it at the same time.

It is important to incorporate current, mass culture imagery into instructional practices and investigations of aesthetics in the classroom. My students benefited from being able to explore more relevant imagery in instances of art appreciation and artmaking. I would not make the case to stop exposing our students to fine arts culture or to discontinue the use of historical art images; these things will always be extremely valuable for students. However, incorporating other popular visual culture images into a high school curriculum helped my students become more excited about the prospect of analyzing images and creating artwork, and allowed them to do this in a more thoughtful and critical manner. This can only make learning in the art room more relevant, powerful, and positive for all art students.

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ENDNOTES

[1] All participants' names are pseudonyms.

[2] *Aesthetics* can be defined as the "branch of philosophy dealing with such notions as the beautiful, the ugly, the sublime, the comic, etc. … with a view to establishing the meaning and validity of critical judgments concerning works of art, and the principles underlying or justifying such judgments" (Dictionary.com, 2007).

[3] *Visual Culture* was defined as visual imagery that includes the everyday objects, processes, and images of mass media and popular culture. This definition of visual culture is supported in the scholarship by Freedman (1997), Tavin (2001), Duncum (2002), and Efland (2005). The term *popular culture* is defined as society's contemporary customs that are well known and generally accepted in a particular cultural group. These customs inform meaning from information generated by the mass media, including broadcasting, cinema, video, Internet, advertising and other entertainment and marketing sources.

[4] Fronts/grills: gold or platinum covers for teeth that are easily detached.