AESTHETIC/ACTIVISM: THE LIMINAL AREA BETWEEN AESTHETIC FORMALISM AND SOCIO/POLITICAL ACTIVISM IN ART EDUCATION

by

MATTHEW CHRISTIAN BURNETT

BFA, Emily Carr Institute, 1999
B.Ed., University of British Columbia, 2001

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Abstract

This thesis inquires into how an elementary art education curriculum can embody the space in/between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism. I call this curricular approach aesthetic/activism. Visual texts will be the catalyst for research subjects to engage with aesthetic/activism through art-making, writing and dialogue. I am also interested in the learning and meaning-making that happens as a result of an aesthetic/activist curriculum.

This research is situated in an after-school elementary art program in a multicultural, urban area. Much research has been written about engaging secondary students with socially activist curriculum (see Alter-Murri, 2004; Brown, 2007; Chalmers, 2005; Darts, 2004; Desai, 2006; Gude, 2007; Lanier, 1969; McFee, 1974). There is little research concerned with how younger students would respond to such curriculum.

Two questions guided this research inquiry. The first question is: How can a curriculum be enacted that uses visual texts to inquire into the liminal area between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism? The second question is: What learning results from such a curriculum? The research methodology of a/r/tography was used to inquire into these questions, which requires art, research and teaching to be integral parts of academic inquiry.

The process of inquiring into the two research questions stated above led to new learning and knowledge that was co-created by the researcher and the research subjects. While most subjects conformed to the dominant discourse in the classroom as constructed by the teacher, a minority of subjects had the initiative to express their personal, subjective values when analysing and producing artworks. Most subjects demonstrated an appreciation for the therapeutic qualities of natural environments unaffected by the corrupting influence of human activity. A number of students did use art-making as a vehicle to engage with socio/political problems. Finally, some subjects demonstrated an understanding of aesthetic activism and
the inter-relationships between visual and textual data. These results are fully explained in the Findings and Discussion chapter.

This thesis is organized into five chapters. The introduction is the first chapter, which will explain the purpose, rationale and objectives of my research, as well as my research questions. The second chapter includes a literature review that will survey the history of aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism in art education research, as well as criticisms of each of these paradigms. An inquiry into art, art curriculum and art education theory that embodies both aesthetics and activism will provide a context for my research. The third chapter explains my research methodologies: what they are and how I will use them, as well as a description of the actual research process which involves teaching and art-making activities. The fourth chapter, the Findings and Discussion will analyse my research data. The last chapter is the conclusion of my research and my recommendations for further inquiry.
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Dedication

Dedicated to Susan

Bits and Pieces
Acknowledgments

Thank you to Ed Pien, Bob Mitchner and Carol Moesavitch for being the best studio art teachers I ever had.

Thank you to Dr. Graeme Chalmers for encouraging my interest in social issues in art education and recommending me for graduate school. Thank you to Dr. Kit Grauer for “too much fun and transformation”. Thank you to Dr. Rita Irwin for introducing me to a/r/tography. Thank you to Dr. Anna Kindler for reaffirming the importance of aesthetics, and thank you to Dr. Donal O’Donoghue for introducing a more intellectually rigorous art education to me.

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Chapter One: Introduction

The Question

I have been obsessed and fascinated with art for most of my life. As a child I spent hundreds of hours sitting alone in my room perfecting my drawing skills. During my childhood my experience of art was restricted to creating visually realistic pencil drawings. I felt a great deal of pride in my ability to create detailed, realistic drawings. After graduating from secondary school I attended post-secondary art school; as a result of this my artistic repertoire expanded to include painting, photography, ceramics and animation. I was particularly interested in creating large-scale expressionistic self-portrait oil paintings. I was inspired by the work of Francis Bacon, Attila Richard Lukacs and Odd Nerdrum. In 1999, I graduated from Emily Carr University with a Bachelors Degree in Fine Arts (Studio Arts). Today I am an art teacher, art-maker and art researcher. As a result of my participation in art education as a student I have had many art teachers. As a young art student I sought an inspirational art teacher that could teach me to create aesthetically powerful, politically potent art-work; however, only a few of my many art teachers created the socially transformational learning experience I was searching for. Now that I am an art teacher myself, I want to be that inspiring, socially transformational, exciting art teacher that I was searching for as an art student. As a result of my
experiences I have reflected deeply on the question: "What teaching and learning is essential for a socially transformative art education program?" This thesis is an attempt to answer questions that stem from this issue.

Based on my experiences in art education I believe that a transformational art curriculum must contain two elements. First, I believe that such as art education program must teach the "how" of art making because technical proficiency emancipates art students to express themselves more powerfully (Kindler, November, 2006, personal communication). Second, art education must also address the "why" of art making. Students need to learn that art is not just for decoration: "[s]tudents need to use art for socially reconstructive purposes" (Chalmers, 2005, p.105). I am interested in the interrelationships of technical proficiency in art-making and socially activist art-based experiences. This leads to my research question:

How can a curriculum be enacted within art education that uses visual texts to inquire into the liminal area between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism?

As a corollary to this question, I was also interested in:

What learning results from a curriculum that inquires into the liminal area between aesthetics and activism?

In order to answer these questions I taught an eight week long after school art class for upper-elementary students in an upper middle-class area of a multicultural, urban Canadian city. This served as my research site where I enacted an aesthetic/activist curriculum and measured the learning and meaning-making that occurred as a result of an aesthetic/activist curriculum. Much research
has been done to inquire into teaching a socially engaged art curriculum at the secondary level (see Alter-Muri, 2004; Brown, 2007; Chalmers, 2005; Darts, 2004; Desai, 2006; Gude, 2007; Lanier, 1969; McFee, 1974). However, there is little data to suggest how younger students would respond to such a curriculum. Another factor that made this study unique is its Canadian context. How do Canadian students within our unique “multicultural mosaic” respond to social and political issues presented in an aesthetic context? I constructed a specific curriculum to teach; however, I did not want to predict specific learning outcomes. I wanted to remain open, responding to any learning and meaning-making that resulted from this curricular approach.

This thesis explores the in/between space of aesthetic/activist visual text co-created by researcher and subject or teacher and student. The in/between space is the relational space in/between aesthetics and activism. It is a space that is constantly in-flux, changing and shifting as contexts, artworks and interpretations change and shift; as a result, the space in/between aesthetics and activism requires a situational, subjective, embodied and personal understanding. I am also interested in the spaces between teaching, learning, art-making and research. I will attend to all of these practices and the way these practices exist in contiguity and reverberate with each other. My paintings and writing, my student/subjects art-work and writing and the art and writing of artists and theorists that inform this research overlap and intertwine with each other to create a “rhizomatic relationality” (Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, Bickel, 2006, p. 70) that I hope will create deeper and enhanced meaning-making through the inter- and intra-relationships.

A/r/tography is a qualitative arts-based research methodology that I utilized to inquire into my research questions. This methodology is fully explained in detail in the methods chapter.

My teaching and research goal was to enable my research subjects to experience and understand how formalism and activism in art are intertwined. In order to do this I designed curriculum that seeks to cause an improvement in my students’
ability to manipulate art materials to create aesthetically powerful results. To facilitate this process I gave direct instruction on technique and allowed time for students to practice. I also facilitated an investigation with students into historical and contemporary examples of socially engaged artwork in an attempt to inspire their own artistic inquiry into socio/politically engaged art-making. Students also had the opportunity to take part in an art exhibition in order to expose their art to a wider audience, thereby increasing the socially activist potential of their art. The objective of these activities was to create an embodied awareness through experiential learning of how aesthetic art-making can be used to engage with socio/political activism.

It will be useful to define the concepts used in this thesis so readers understand the limits of this inquiry:

**Art**

Within this thesis I am restricting the concept of art to the visual arts, being types of art which are primarily visual in nature, such as drawing, collage, painting, photography, printmaking, computer-generated art, textile arts, installation art, sculpture and multi-media art that contains a combination of these media.

**Artist**

The term artist can be applied to a wide variety of identities. The definition of artist used in this thesis is “a person who creates visual art with a degree of serious intention”. It is not necessary to be a full-time professional artist to call oneself an artist since this occupation only exists in specific social, cultural and historical contexts. I believe being an artist is not a job that someone can apply for; it is a process someone chooses to engage in. I refer to myself and my subjects/students in this thesis as artists because we are engaged in an art-making process with a degree of serious intention.
Aesthetic Formalism

Aesthetic formalism is the idea that the value of an art-work is dependent on its form. This includes its visual aspects, how it is made and the medium used. Art education practice that utilizes the concept of aesthetic formalism sometimes focuses on the formal elements of design, such as line, colour, shape and volume. These elements can be used by an art student to create the principles of design, which are balance, repetition, texture, gradation, contrast, dominance and unity.

Activism

Activism is an intentional action to bring about social or political change. Activist art education uses student art production as a catalyst to critically inquire into social or political issues. This thesis specifically engages with activism through community building, transformational education and arts-based activism.

Aesthetic/Activism

Aesthetic/activism is the concept that the visual aspects of art can be used to enhance the activist significance of the art-work. Inquiring into the interrelationship between aesthetics and activism is the primary purpose of this research.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

I am interested in inquiring into the liminal area between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism within art education; therefore, it is imperative to inquire into the histories of these paradigms within the history of art education. Where did these theories come from? How did they develop and change? What place do they have in art education research and practice today? Answering these questions will provide a theoretical context for my research and create a "rhizomatic relationality" (Irwin et al., 2006, p. 71) between this thesis and the field of art education research and practice.

Some contemporary theorists have inquired into the area between formalism and activism. The work of two such contemporary art education theorists, David Darts and Olivia Gude, will be looked at as examples of theory that exist in relationality to my thesis. Jeff Wall, Eva Hesse and Leon Gulob are three artists whose work will be used as case studies to demonstrate how formalism and activism are used by artists.

The History of Aesthetic Formalism in Art Education Theory

Based on my experiences as an art student in secondary and post secondary art programs and later as a substitute teacher and art teacher, the main method for teaching aesthetics in some art education contexts is the use of the elements and principles of design. In order to decide if the elements and principles of design are a suitable tool for teaching aesthetic formalism, it is important to understand where the elements and principles of design come from and why art teachers use them.

Where did the elements and principles of design come from? They are as old as art itself. The elements of design can be seen in virtually all visual art. Lines,
shapes, texture and colours can be seen in the prehistoric cave art in Lascaux, France, in Ancient Greek Sculpture and in the contemporary visual arts.

The elements and principles of design as a tool for structuring art education theory originated in early 20th century art theory. Art movements such as cubism and post-impressionism challenged traditional aesthetic values; as a result, there was a search for a system that could be universally used to create and evaluate standards in art.

In 1913, art theorist Clive Bell wrote a book simply entitled “Art”. In it he introduced the idea that various parts of an image, such as line, shape and pattern can interact with such other parts to produce a sense of balance, harmony and rhythm. Bell’s focus on the aesthetic qualities of an image de-emphasized the importance of social, political and historical contexts of images.

Another art theorist, Roger Fry, described the pure aesthetic experience as separate from ethical, religious or conceptual experiences. He pointed to well respected artwork from the Renaissance as examples of pure aesthetics and excellent design. He described a composition as being “of value in proportion to the number of orderly connections which it displays” (Ross, 1929, p. 132). The post impressionists disgusted Fry. He felt a focus on experimentation and self expression led to “disorder, lawlessness and the degradation not only of art, but life” (Ross, p. 148).
Arthur Wesley Dow expanded on the ideas of Bell and Fry by introducing "the teaching of art through such elements as line and colour organized by specific principles of composition" (Elfand, 2004, p. 694). He was the Director of Fine Arts for Columbia University Teachers College from 1904 to 1922. Dow believed students could recognize value in art through a study of formal qualities. He created a series of curriculum guides to lead students through art projects that focused on the elements and principles of design as the primary method of art-making and art appreciation.

The idea of using the elements and principles of design to organize art education became popular with art teachers even while Dow was the Director of Fine Arts at Columbia University Teachers College because it reduced the visual arts to "a set of universal, teachable rules" (Elfand, 2004, p. 694). In addition, it "enabled students to discover beauty in all cultures and periods" (Elfand, p. 698).

Despite the fact that Dow introduced the elements and principles of design to art education more than eighty years ago some art education theorists such as David Darts and Olivia Gude believe they are still used extensively in contemporary art education practice: "[a]n aesthetic formalist approach to art education enacted through the elements and principles of design constitute a significant portion of art education practice today" (Darts, 2004, p. 27). "[T]oday's students regularly complete school art programs that are based on elements and principles" (Gude, 2007, p. 7).

The claim of Darts and Gude resonate with my own experience in art education practice. On the first day of my practicum as a student art teacher in 2001, I walked into the secondary art classroom where I would be practicing and refining my skills in art education and the first thing I saw was a huge poster hanging in the front of the classroom. Large colourful words at the top on this poster proclaimed "THE ELEMENTS AND PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN". Underneath this statement the poster listed the elements and principles: line, shape, colour, value, texture, balance, gradation repetition, contrast, harmony and dominance. This poster
visually dominated the classroom and the elements and principles dominated the curriculum of my sponsor teacher; for example, I watched my sponsor teacher present a lesson to the students in which they had to select two elements and two principles of design and paint a non-representational image onto a small canvas. My sponsor teacher began by showing some examples of the same project from the previous year’s class. After a brief question and answer period the students began to work. Some of the students seemed enthusiastic about this project, other students grudgingly began painting. The conversations in the classroom revolved around design ideas and how to manipulate the paint to achieve specific visual effects. As a novice teacher I found myself leaning heavily on the elements and principles of design when planning lessons. This practice was met with warm approval from my sponsor teacher.

Why are the elements and principles still used in some art education practices such as my sponsor teachers curriculum? One reason is that they are entrenched in curriculum prescribed by the British Columbia Ministry of Education:

The use of visual elements and their organization according to principles of art and design are the basic components of image-making. These visual elements include colour, form, line, shape, space, texture, value, and tone. The principles of art and design include pattern, repetition, rhythm, balance, contrast, emphasis, movement, unity, and harmony (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 3).

I believe another reason the elements and principles of design continue to be used extensively in art education practice is that they figure prominently in some commercially available curriculum guides used by art teachers. For example, Dr. Betty Edwards, professor at the Art Department at California State University, wrote “Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain” (1979 revised and reprinted in 1989 and 1999). In her book, Edwards instructs readers to complete a series of exercises that focus on line, shade, space, texture and proportion. The implicit message is that art education is about learning to draw realistically by improving the ability to manipulate the elements and principles of design. I found this book to
be widely available in the art classrooms where I taught. In fact, some art teachers I worked with used Edwards’ book as the primary teaching resource for their drawing and painting units.

Today “[i]t is difficult to find support in serious academic writing (as opposed to commercial textbooks) for using the elements and principles of design as a curriculum structure” (Gude, 2007, p. 7). While many contemporary theorists do recognize aesthetics and art-making as vital aspects of art education, they do not advocate using the elements and principles of design as curricular organizers, (Chalmers & Desai, 2007; Darts, 2004; Eisner, 2002; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Gude, 2007; Parsons, 2004). There are theorists that promote an art curriculum based on aesthetics in general. Anna Kindler (2004) has written extensively about the importance of developing aesthetic awareness in students. She writes: “[a]rt education can and should free some space for the enjoyment and savoring of art in its purely aesthetic layer, for the inspiration and uplifting feeling that are byproducts of sensory enrichment and delight” (p. 117). She argues that “technical mastery of art materials emancipates students to express themselves more powerfully through their artwork” (personal communication, November, 2006).

Similarly, one of the foremost theorists in art education, Elliot Eisner, believes art making skills are important aspects of art education: “[i]f a material is to be used as a medium, techniques for working with the material must be developed...skills must be at hand” (Eisner, 2002, p. 83). Like Kindler, he also believes in developing aesthetic awareness in students: “[t]he arts help students learn to pay attention to qualities and their expressive content. Attention to the particular aesthetic qualities of, say a rock...there is more beauty in a rock than any of us is likely to discover in a life-time” (Eisner, p. 88).

While Eisner and Kindler advocate for aesthetic awareness in art education due to the intrinsic value of aesthetics, American philosopher Monroe C. Beardsley argues that aesthetic literacy is a necessary component of cultural criticism:
Cultural criticism cannot avoid taking account of the judgments of aesthetic criticism. In order to do justice to each of a variety of cultural strands, cultural critics must be sensitive to the differences and divergences among them as identified and characterized by aesthetic criticism. Therefore, rather than eliminating or replacing aesthetic criticism, cultural criticism must embrace it (Beardsley, 2004, p. 173).

Beardsley’s statement reveals the interdependence of cultural and aesthetic criticism that is consistent with the aim of this thesis, which is to inquire into the liminal area between formalism (aesthetics) and activism (cultural criticism) as well as the philosophical stance of a/r/tography to inquire into “an in/between space that exists between and among categories” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 28). While the elements and principles of design receive little support in contemporary academic research (see Chalmers & Desai, 2007; Darts, 2004; Eisner, 2002; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004; Gude, 2007; Parsons, 2004), theorists such as Beardsley, Eisner and Kindler argue that aesthetic studies should remain an important element of art education because they are interrelated to cultural criticism, they help students develop sensitivity to expressive content and they create inspiration and delight. However other theorists argue that aesthetic formalism and the elements and principles of design are no longer relevant in art education. This view will be explored in the following section.

Critiques of Aesthetic Formalism

“An aesthetic formalist approach to art education enacted through the elements and principles of design constitutes a significant portion of art education practice today” (Darts, 2004, p. 35), despite the fact that “[i]t is difficult to find support in serious academic writing (as opposed to commercial textbooks) for using the elements and principles of design as a curriculum structure” (Gude, 2007, p. 7).

Is aesthetic formalism, as enacted through the elements and principles, still relevant to art education? Does it reflect current thinking about art and art education? Is it a suitable vocabulary to create and critique the range of post-modern art that students will encounter today, such as feminist art, post-colonial art, conceptual art, installations, outsider art, street art, appropriated art, computer
graphics and animation? Certainly some avant-garde art does not lend itself to an aesthetic analysis in the traditional sense. For example, a small group of political and artistic agitators based in Europe and called “The Situationist International” aimed to create alternative life experiences that interrupted and critiqued capitalist based society. One of their acts involved standing in front of the altar of the Notre Dame Cathedral in Paris, France dressed like monks during Christmas mass and declared “God is dead!”. A public outrage resulted. Art happening such as this can be critiqued politically and socially. However the elements and principles of design are ill-equipped to provide a meaningful critique of such art.

Many theorists have turned away from aesthetic formalism in general, and the elements and principles of design in particular, in favor of a more “issues-oriented” form of art education. For example, Desai and Chalmers are theorists that advocate the social importance of art. They explain that “[w]e need art for social critique, cultural survival, and community identity. Art involvement can become particularly meaningful in the lives of students when we find ways to connect art learning and production to important social issues” (2007, p. 8).

Many other theorists believe the elements and principles are not relevant for addressing the concerns of contemporary art; for example, Gude offers this critique of the elements and principles:

Art educators whose research involves contemporary art, critical theory, or youth empowerment do not consider modernist elements and principles to be uniquely foundational to quality art curriculum or to making or understanding art. Do we really want students to say that art is about “line, shape, colour, contrast and repetition?” (2007, p. 7).
Contemporary art often combines aesthetics and activism in creative ways.

Understanding the history of aesthetic formalism and the elements and principles of design within art education, how aesthetic formalism is enacted in current art education practice as well as how theorists have advocated and critiqued its use in art education creates a contextualized understanding of aesthetic formalism, which is important because this thesis is an attempt to construct a curriculum that exists in/between aesthetic formalism and activism. I believe it is important that art teachers do not neglect teaching aesthetic formalism because "[i]f a material is to be used as a medium, techniques for working with the material must be developed...skills must be at hand" (Eisner, 2002, p. 90). I believe creating visually engaging, aesthetically powerful art-work is central to a quality art education curriculum; therefore, aesthetic formalism needs to be a vital part of art education theory and practice; however, a curriculum that only addresses the formal aspects of art neglects the socially transformative potential of politically activist images. The next section will inquire into activist art education.
The History of Socio/Political Activism in Art Education Theory

The desire to utilize art education for socio/political activism mushroomed in the 1960's. At that time a massive youth movement in North America and Europe was changing the world. Young people were rebelling against conservative social norms and protesting socio/political injustices. There was a desire for participatory democracy. This often took the form of political activism; for example, the anti-war movement, environmental protests and the civil rights movement. Art seemed to be the ideal medium with which to pursue social and political change. For example, Robert Crumb was a cartoonist who helped initiate the underground "comix" movement which was closely associated with the 1960's counterculture. His subversive comix criticized and satirized mainstream culture. The idea that art education can and should be used for social re-construction arose as a result of these social, political and artistic revolutions. This following section explains how theorists have advocated for art education to be linked to activism.

Vincent Lanier, an early and outspoken advocate of activism in art education, felt that learning how to draw and paint realistically was useless when there were significant socio/political issues that demanded urgent attention. He believed art students should use photography and video cameras to inquire into the issues that were polarizing Western society in the 1960's, such as war, sex, drugs and poverty. Lanier proclaimed: "[a]lmost all that we presently do in teaching art in...schools is useless. Students need to examine the gut issues of the day- war, sex, race, drugs and poverty... these new ideas must engage the guts and the hopes of the youngsters" (1969, p. 7).

While Lanier focused on how art education can address the pressing socio/political issues in the U.S. in the 1960's, June King McFee believed that art education could be more compelling if it was related to world economics, politics and society. Her writing encouraged teachers to perceive art education in relation to global problems, and design art education programs that would change peoples' attitudes
and behaviors relating to world issues: "[w]e may no longer be able to indulge in the luxury of art for its own sake; we must be equally concerned with art for humanities sake. We need to be able to relate artistic decisions to economic and social decisions" (McFee, 1974, p. 16).

More recently, interest in post modernism, multiculturalism, critical theory and a desire to address ongoing atrocities have been the catalyst for politically engaged art education theory. In “Notes for a Dialogue on Art Education in Critical Times” (2007), Chalmers and Desai show how art education can be used to inquire into contemporary horrors, such as the Iraq War. What makes this study particularly useful is that Chalmers and Desai included an extensive list of contemporary artists’ whose work addresses socio/political issues, thereby making a direct link from theory to practice.

Many art education theorists have promoted the concept of politicizing the content of art education. S. L. Brown wrote “Using Visual Art as the Bridge to our Cultural Heritage: Roy Strassberg’s Holocaust Bone Structures Series” (2007). In his writing Brown discusses how a contemporary artist uses ceramics to create compelling sculptures that deal with the Holocaust, then gives instructions on how to use the sculptures as a catalyst for a student inquiry into cultural heritage. In “Teaching about War and Political Art in the New Millennium” (2004) Simone Alter-Muri declares “[t]he inclusion of political art in the curriculum demonstrates the power of art in society and inspires students to create art about meaningful issues.” David Darts inquires into how “engagement with social issues through the examination and production of art and visual culture impacts students understanding and awareness of these issues” (Darts, 2004, p. 6). A central idea in his dissertation is the idea of resistance theory suggesting that student art production can be used as a form of collective resistance against oppression. Thus art education can become emancipatory. The common thread linking the ideas of Brown, Alter-Muri and Darts is that in order for art education to be of social value, it needs to be socio/politically relevant by inquiring into socio/political problems.
agree with this; however, I would add that socially transformative art education should also enable students to make aesthetically compelling art-works.

In “Celebrating Pluralism Six Years Later: Visual Transcultures, Education and Critical Multiculturalism” Chalmers explains the difference between “celebrating multiculturalism” and the more aggressive, “critical multiculturalism” theories. A curriculum that celebrates multiculturalism inquires into the art and artifacts of a multitude of cultures as a way to come to a greater understanding of other cultures, thus challenging stereotypes (2002).

Chalmers is preceded in this by John Dewey:

Civilization is uncivil because human beings are divided into non-communicating sects, races, nations, classes and cliques. Art is a more universal mode of language than is the speech that exists in a multitude of mutually unintelligible forms. The differences between English, French and German speech create barriers to understanding that are submerged when art speaks (1934, p. 349).

Chalmers has subsequently constructed a more forceful curriculum he calls “critical multiculturalism” in which art education inquires into the art and artifacts of cultures that have been marginalized and therefore disadvantaged by the increasingly homogenized global village based primarily on American hegemony. The goal of critical multiculturalism is to create social justice through cultural and artistic inquiry.

The idea underlying both Chalmers and Dewey’s writing is that art education can reduce conflict and make the world more just because art facilitates an understanding among people that emphasizes our similarities; as a result art education can be truly socially transformational. While I am not arguing against socially relevant art education, I do not believe an effective curriculum needs to be exclusively concerned with overtly political art. Since all art is made within certain socio/political contexts, all art can be read as a socio/political statement. Conversely, all visual art has formal qualities that can be analyzed. An artwork can
exist in the liminal area between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism when it can be perceived as having both powerful formal and activist qualities. Inquiring into this is the goal of my research.

**Critiques of Socio/Political activism in Art Education**

Art education is not just about making decorative images; art education can and should be about social reconstruction and political activism. While there is little argument that art education should be socially relevant, there have been several criticisms leveled at overly-politicizing art education. Eisner points out that most art teachers entered the profession because of a love of art, not socio/political activism:

I believe most art teachers came into art education because of the satisfactions, indeed the joys they received from the visual arts. The arts are processes or objects they cherish and like to experience, and I believe most art teachers want to open the doors of such experiences to their students. The political analysis of images is not quite the same (Eisner, 2002, p. 30).

![Figure 6](image_url)

Ross Penhall's arm tattoo
He also points out that the creative process of art making is what is truly foundational, unique and significant in art education, and that focusing on activism will undermine what is really important to the field:

The concept of [socio/political art education] transforms the student from a productive young artist into an analytic spectator. In art courses the experience of bringing an image into being that is appraised by a sense of purpose held by a young creator requires students to think in very special ways, ways that are almost absent in most classrooms (Eisner, 2002, p. 31).

Eisner believes art teachers should focus on art and that social studies teachers are better suited to engage students in socio/political activism. Eisners' attempt to separate art from social issues expresses a philosophy that the intrinsic value of art, is divorced from any didactic, moral or utilitarian function. This is called "art for art's sake", and has been criticized as being elitist since it holds art above and separate from socio/political contexts, as well as being Eurocentric, given that many non-Western cultures create art that is integrated into every aspect of social and political life (Chalmers & Desai, 2007; Darts, 2004; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004).

Art Education theorists such as Eisner are not the only people who critique activist art. Contemporary artists often have strong opinions about the function of art in society. Odd Nerdrum is a Norwegian artist who embraces an "old-masters" aesthetic. He offers this critique on the post-modern disinterest in craft and obsession with "issues":

Modern artists have abandoned the grand humanistic themes of Western art in order to indulge in an all-pervasive irony. They have forsaken not only hard-won techniques of figurative realism but the very notion of quality standards...the avant-garde now dominate schools, museums, galleries and publications worldwide exacting adherence to their artistic doctrine with all the fierceness of high priests. They have completely divested art of any connection to the real emotions of everyday people, devoting their work to abstraction, victim group protest or mockery (as cited in Vine, 2003, p. 81).
While I agree with Nerdrum’s point that some “protest art...lacks quality [aesthetic formalist] standards”, he fails to articulate that his own art is a screaming socio/political protest against the contemporary art he criticizes. Nerdrum’s paintings are the ultimate form of activism because they are not only a protest against the art avant-garde, but they also do what some protest art does not: they offer an *inspiring aesthetic example and direction for future artistic inquiry.*

While Nerdrum’s paintings undoubtedly demonstrate an uncommon level of technical virtuosity, there is a contradiction in his art. He claims avant-garde art has “completely divested art of any connection to the real emotions of everyday people” (as cited in Vine, 2003, p. 81). This charge of elitisms is ironic considering Nerdrum has aesthetically aligned his art with the European, museum based, high art tradition of large scale figurative oil painting, which is viewed by some as elitist itself due to its tradition of exclusive membership reserved for wealthy, urban, highly-educated, male European bourgeoisie. For example, the idea of the *male gaze*, which refers to the artist/model polarity that exists in the Western art history that Nerdrum draws inspiration from has been criticized by feminist theorists:
The male gaze acts as a mechanism of oppression as it elevates males to the status of privileged spectators. Feminists respond that treating people as objects of aesthetic contemplation is dehumanizing and call for a revised aesthetic, attentive to and respectful of differences among gendered spectators (Garber, 1992, p. 213).

A counter-argument can be made that some avant-garde art can itself be viewed as elitist due to its use of materials traditionally considered non-artistic, its lack of recognizable craft and its theoretical nature, thereby making its meaning and importance inaccessible to laypeople. As an art student I studied Marcel Duchamp’s *ready-mades* as watershed moments of 20th Century Art History, yet when I suggested that Duchamps’ *Fountain* (1917) was “art” to friends and family I was met with disbelief and anger. While European high art has been associated with cultural elitism, art that is conceptually and aesthetically inaccessible to laypeople can be considered intellectually elitist.
Aesthetics: David Henry Thoreau said "Most men live lived of quiet desperation" My late 1990's paintings were a screaming protest against quiet desperation, mediocrity and the status quo. Mixing oil paint and tar I wanted to create smeared, sensuous dripping colours that expressed the anxiety of modern life. I believe an artist needs strong technical art making skills in order to create visually powerful art. Aesthetics is the language of art.

Activism: All art is about something. Within the context of animal testing and research my painting is a direct political statement against such practices. By putting a face on suffering the viewer is much more likely to emotionally connect with ideas presented in artworks. Visual texts like mine can open dialogic spaces for viewers in which the issues of animal testing and cruelty can be explored and discussed.
Art and Curriculum

In order to contextualize my research interests an analysis of contemporary artists and art educators whose work exists is the liminal area between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism is necessary. Jeff Wall, Eva Hesse and Leon Golub are three artists whose artistic interests have commonalities with my research. David Darts and Olivia Gude are art educator theorists who have enacted curriculum that inquires into the liminal area between formalism and activism.

Jeff Wall is a major international photo-based artist who is based in Vancouver. With a career that spans four decades, a comprehensive analysis of his work is beyond the scope of this thesis. I will focus on how one art work that Wall completed in 1978 entitled *Destroyed Room* inquires into the liminal area between formalism and activism.

While primarily known as a photo-based artist today, Wall did not start in photography: “since childhood, my background was painting and drawing” (as cited in Galassi, 2007, p. 203). In fact he calls himself “[a] painter of modern life” (2007, p. 192). Not so surprisingly, much of his work makes direct reference to paintings. *Destroyed Room* is aesthetically indebted to Eugene Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus*. 
Both Wall’s *Destroyed Room* and Delacroix’s *The Death of Sardanapalus* display a diagonal composition, dominated by the colour orange and by rich visual detail. They are both monumental in scale (Delacroix’s painting is 392 x 496 cm; Wall’s image is 159 x 234 cm.) When asked why he makes reference to modernist paintings in his large scale photo-based work, Wall talks of trying to map a new artistic course: “[my aim was to] recuperate the past—the great art of the museums—and at the same time to participate with a critical effect in the most up to date spectacle” (as cited in Galassi, 2007, p. 57).

While Wall’s choice of materials (a colour photograph displayed as a transparency on a light box) creates a very different aesthetic than an oil painting, Wall explains how he aesthetically connects the materials of modernist painting with his photo-based work:

> [I] had been thinking about the masters [I] saw in Spain, about Velazquez and Titian, Goya and Manet, and in particular how powerful those pictures were, how much of contemporary art lacked such authority, and how one could instill art today with a comparable sense of significance and relevance. Then [I] looked out the window of the bus and by chance saw a sight I had seen hundreds of times before— a back lit bus stop advertisement (as cited in Galassi, 2007, p. 20).
Wall realized that the backlit transparency was a "glaring symbol of the consumerist spectacle" (as cited in Galassi, 2007, p. 29) which he was interested in critiquing (see Galassi, 2007) as well as "an excellent means of creating and presenting large, richly detailed, seductive colour images" (2007, p. 29). The perfect medium for a man who aspired to be "[a] painter of modern life" (2007, p. 192).

*The Destroyed Room* can also be read in terms of its politically activist content; it is an updated re-reading of *The Death of Sardanapalus* which is the story of a King, who, upon military defeat has his concubines killed, his horses slaughtered and then commits suicide. Delacroix’s image can be seen more generally as erotic violence designed for the male gaze. Wall’s image of a violently destroyed woman’s bedroom alludes to domestic violence, rape and murder, specifically of women. In this way *Destroyed Room* is a feminist subversion of *The Death of Sardanapalus* because it represents the violence against women that is intended to titillate in Delacroix’s image as an ugly, brutal, contemporary reality. Wall also critiqued how advertising art uses sexualized images:

> The pleasure which has become ideologically attached to the image of erotic violence by making explicit allusions to its acceptable manifestations in fashion magazine illustrations, shop window displays, advertizing, art and cinema (as cited in Galassi, 2007, p. 25).

By using the same technologies of representation that are used in the commercial art he was critiquing, he not only critiques commercial art, but subverts its methods of representation as well.

These artistic relationships are important because in order to fully appreciate Wall’s inquiry into formalism and activism it is vital to understand his ideas. Without this historical context Wall’s work may be incomprehensible. Wall was interested in an aesthetic that was visually powerful as well as politically provocative, therefore his
artistic intentions explored the liminal area between formalism and activism. Once the formalist and activist content of *Destroyed Room* is understood a viewer can experience the image as existing in the liminal area between formalism and activism by mentally flipping from a formalist to an activist reading of the image, resulting in an experience that can be described as “an in/between space that exists between and among categories” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 28).

Another artist that deals with contemporary social issues with a unique aesthetic is American artist Leon Golub. In October, 1995, I viewed a major exhibition of his work as well as an artist talk by Golub himself at the Vancouver Art Gallery, in Vancouver Canada. I was deeply impressed with his aesthetically and politically powerful canvases.

Golub acknowledges his aesthetic influences in classical Western art history: “I used to go to Roman and Greek statues, and in many of my paintings I stole from Greek sculptures—that is to say I took an image and imitated it—I tried to give it a contemporary flare” (as cited in Enright, 1995, p. 4). He fused his artistic interest in classical aesthetics with contemporary media images because “[i]t seems to me that the world we live in has to be understood largely through photography and film” (p. 4). As a result of this fusion he discovered a relationality between Greek sculptures and media photography “I thought I found a kind of urban stress and violence and vulnerability in these sculptures which were equivalent to the kind of urban stresses that I was interested in my own time” (p. 7).

Golub explains this relationality by pointing out the Greek word “Agon”, from which we get the word agony originally meant sport: “There is a relationship between agony and sports—the body under stress” (as cited in Enright, 1995, p. 4).

Golubs' aesthetics are intertwined with the political content of his images. His work is about stress, violence and power. Golub, himself, states this, “I have always dealt with stress and violence. This comes from my own state of mind” (as cited in Enright, 1995, p. 5). *Interrogation 2* (1981) is a huge canvas that met me as I
walked into the gallery space at Golub’s exhibition. The figures in the painting are ten feet tall, making them impossible to ignore. The edge of the canvas cuts them off at the ankles, approximating the limits of visual perception in a real situation. This makes the image seem less theatrical, more real. The background is a flat, blood red. The painting is a scene of torture. Golub created anxiety by showing the moment before terrible events unfold: “[t]hese actions...are on the verge of happening” (as cited in Enright, 1995, p. 5). The torturers look directly at the viewer and smile, implying the viewer is one of the torturers. This is not a hypothetical scene, his imagery originates from actual media reports taken during the civil wars in Central America during the 1980’s. I have become desensitized to photos of actual acts of violence due to oversaturation of such images in the media; therefore Golub’s painting of violence was more shockingly real to me then a photo. His images of torture came from media images from Central American conflicts that were active at the time he created Interrogation 2. The image has a renewed sense of horror within the context of the recent shocking images in the media depicting human rights abuses in Iraq.

Golubs’ methods of image making are connected to his theme of violence. He paints thick layers of acrylic paint then scrapes them off with a meat cleaver. He repeats this process several times, giving the painted surface a tortured look. He paints on a canvas surface that looks as if it is the remains of a military tent. All of this adds to the feeling of acute brutality in his work. Golubs’ painting Interrogation 2 (1981) exists in the liminal area between aesthetics and activism because the aesthetics, such as size, surface quality of paint, painting ground and subject matter, all express a politically activist desire to shock us out of compliancy and force us to deal with an example of a horrific event that unfortunately “manifests itself everywhere in the world” (as cited in Enright, 1995, p. 5).

While Golubs’ work is a massive, aggressive, violent reaction to the atrocities of war, artist Eva Hesse had a completely different aesthetic response to brutal realities. Hesses’ artistic political activism and aesthetics can best be understood by relating her artwork to the political and personal context in which she worked.
Her life was excruciatingly tragic. She was born into a Jewish family in Germany in 1936. When the Nazi party came into power her parents fled with her to New York. Her uncle and grandparents were murdered in concentration camps. Her parents got divorced when she was still a child. When Eva was ten years old her mother had a mental breakdown and committed suicide. Eva married a fellow artist, but the marriage fell apart. In 1964 she moved back to Germany and lived in an abandoned factory. Danto describes her as "cop[ing] with emotional chaos by reinventing sculpture through aesthetic insubordination, playing with worthless material amid the industrial ruins of a defeated nation that, only two decades earlier, would have murdered her without a second thought" (2006, p. 33). When she was thirty-four years old she developed an inoperable tumour in her brain. She continued making art until her death a few months later.

Her art can be read as a potently subversive reaction to the brutality of the Nazi war machine and the emotionally devastating effects of suicide, fatal disease and divorce, as well as the male dominated, sterile, mathematical, reductive aesthetic of minimalism, which was the dominate art paradigm during her career.

While living in an abandoned textile factory in Germany, with the memory of World War 2 still painfully fresh, Hesse used industrial garbage to create a new sculptural aesthetic that embraced the organic, the handmade and the erotic with a sense of playful absurdity in a country that had tried to exterminate her people. While Hesse did not consider herself a feminist, she brought a feminine sensibility to a male dominated art world. Her work is pregnant with metaphor and metonym, making frequent reference to the body and skin. Made of organic materials her sculptures droop, sag, hang and fold, as well as decompose. She did not intend to make permanent museum art. Her work is activist because it is a reaffirmation of the power of art that expresses an embodied, emotive sensibility in the face of inhuman horror. Aesthetically she pioneered the use of traditionally non-traditional art materials to create a new aesthetic based on organic, tactile substances that challenged the dominance of the impersonal aesthetic of minimalism.
Jeff Wall, Leon Golub and Eva Hesse created aesthetically innovative art that engaged with social and political activism. I have included an analysis of their work because "[a]n element of postmodernist art education is that art education practice is conceptualized in response to the contemporary art world" (Clark, 1996, p. 137). Wall, Hesse and Golub's artwork is the background for this research project.

This research project uses an engagement with political contemporary art to facilitate student art-making that inquires into the space in/between formalism and activism. Other art education researchers have inquired into this area as well. The following section clarifies how the work of two such researchers parallels and diverges from my own research.

Art education theorist David Darts wrote a doctoral dissertation in 2004 at the University of British Columbia entitled Visual Culture Jam: Art, Pedagogy and Creative Resistance that has commonalities to my research interests in some important ways. Like me, he identifies a/r/tography as his primary research methodology: "[w]orking as an artist/ researcher/ teacher over the course of three months, I adopt a relational approach to the study, which is informed by a/r/tography (p. 3). Another commonality in our research is our shared interest in inquiring into the intersection of art education and activism. Darts' research question reveals this focus in his research:

How might engagement with social issues through the examination and production of art/visual culture impact students understanding and awareness about these issues? As a corollary to this question, I was also interested in how this engagement might influence students understanding and awareness of the social roles and cultural functions of art/visual culture (p. 6).

The third similarity between our inquiries is our chosen research sites. Both Darts and myself used a classroom where we taught as the primary research site, with our students as research subjects.
Darts is primarily interested in "engagement with social issues" (2004, p. 6). There is no analysis of aesthetics in his dissertation, despite the fact that a large portion of his study involves the creation of visual art, and is therefore engaged with aesthetics. Darts spends a considerable amount of time with his students/subjects facilitating an engagement with socially activist art and visual culture:

...at the beginning of the dissertation, the students and I, over the course of our three-month curriculum unit, examined, deconstructed, and interpreted numerous examples of popular visual culture, including print and television advertisements, newscasts, movie clips, and TV programs. We also viewed and discussed the work of socially engaged visual and performance artists, including culture jammers and art activists (p. 108).
After this engagement with social issues the students responded by creating a mixed media sculpture based on a social issue they were interested in:

As well, an integral component of this curriculum unit involved engaging the students in artistic production, by ... producing sculptural assemblages based around social issues. In creating the assemblages, I provided each student with discarded mannequin heads and invited them to convey a message through their sculptures based on a social issue or set of issues of personal significance. I encouraged the students to incorporate found objects and other cultural artifacts from their everyday lives into the sculptures as a means of actively participating in the (re) production of culture. In so doing, I was encouraging my students to understand “that they have a role in the making of their world and that they need not accept positions as passive spectators or consumers.” (Trend, 1992, p. 150) (Darts, 2004, p. 108).

While I have admittedly been influenced and inspired by Darts work, I feel that his proscriptive use of art materials for students limited the visual statement that
students could make. In other words, the available art making materials: mannequin heads set on plungers and found objects limited the ways in which students could make art to express their ideas. If art is truly about exploring and expressing ideas, then art students should be able to freely choose the materials and techniques best suited for expressing their ideas. Darts does acknowledge this weakness in respect to a “pedagogical recipe” that teachers may follow, but not in respect to the potentially detrimental effect it would have in students’ engagement with ideas:

I SUSPECT THERE is an inherent danger in reducing this study to a pedagogical recipe for visual culture education (take 20 mannequin heads, add two large bags of cultural artifacts, some glue, one box of magazines, and stir). There is no question that using mannequin heads and other cultural artifacts from the everyday lives of students (e.g. Barbie Dolls, toy soldiers, corporate logos, Disney products, etc.) to create assemblages was an effective method of expanding the students’ conceptions of art/visual culture. But I worry that this pedagogical/artistic approach could be rendered less meaningful if it is not also accompanied by thoughtful discussions about the connections between these materials, signs, and symbols, and our own social lives and cultural identities (2004, p. 116).

Darts dissertation provides an excellent example of how students can engage with social issues within the context of art education; however, I find the lack of articulation within his dissertation to the issue of aesthetics and the proscriptive use of materials for art making weakens his inquiry.

Olivia Gude is another art educator who has influenced and inspired my own work:

Olivia Gude is a Chicago artist and educator. She is a professor of Art Education in the School of Art & Design, College of Architecture & Arts at the University of Illinois in Chicago. She has worked in the field of community public art for 20 years and has created over 30 large-scale mural and mosaic projects, working with inter-generational groups, teens, elders, and children. She has created major works in Los Angeles; Madison, Wisconsin; DeKalb, Illinois as well as in the Chicago area (Gude, n.d.).
This section will look at her rejection of the elements and principles of design and her creation of the *principles of possibility* (Gude, 2004, p. 6) as a way to construct curriculum that exists in the liminal area between formalism and activism.

Consistent with my experience in art education, Gude believes the element and principles of design are commonly used to teach art today due to their presence in resources material used by teachers:

> The elements and principles are presented as the essence of artmaking. If not literally engraved in stone, the big seven (elements) + seven (principles) are reified in print, achieving theoretical unity, not through persuasive argument, but through seemingly endless repetition in formally oriented textbooks or, during the last decade, as government mandated standards (2004, p.7).

She has criticized the elements and principles of design as being out of date and unable to address issues in contemporary art:

> [Arthur Wesley] Dow advocated a new system of art education he believed would bring to the student "an increase of creative power" [the elements and principles of design] (1920/1997, p. 65). But 75 years have passed since he wrote those words. We owe it to our field and our students to study the art of our times and to begin, as Dow did, with probing questions and, far reaching goals. What do our students need to know to understand the art of many cultures, from the past and the 21st century? Today, what knowledge do students need to stimulate and increase their creative powers? (Gude, 2004, p. 8).

In response to what Gude saw as the inadequacy of modernist elements and principles of design, Gude created the *Principles of Possibility* to give art teachers a theoretical framework more relevant to contemporary art and society. The Principles of Possibility are:

- Appropriation
- Juxtaposition
- Recontextualization
The Principles of Possibility seem more appropriate to address the formal and activist content of contemporary critical art, like the Guerrilla Girls, than the "bland and formal 7 + 7 [element and principles of design]" (Gude, 2004, p. 7). In the above image the Guerrilla Girls appropriated French Neoclassical painter Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ painting Odalisque as an example of patriarchal art, then juxtaposed a guerrilla head onto it, subverting and recontextualizing the image into the contemporary feminist critique of the male gaze. The interaction of text and image re-enforce the feminist critique of the Western cannon of art history that favours art made by and for men, which is being sustained by the museum system. The image is representin’ the frustrations of contemporary female artists concerning their lack of presence in art history.
By critiquing the elements and principles, which are primarily concerned with formalism, and creating the principles of possibility, which are primarily concerned with how form and content inter-relate, Gude has provided a framework for art education that inquires into the liminal area between formalism and activism.

The work of Jeff Wall, Leon Golub, Eva Hesse, David Darts and Olivia Gude provide background and context for my inquiry into the liminal area between formalism and activism. Their work serves as reminders that aesthetically powerful, politically provocative art can be socially reconstructive. I use their examples as inspiration for my own efforts as an artist, teacher and researcher.

**Artistic Auto-ethnography**

"Every text one writes is autobiographical: anything else would be plagiarism" (Boal, 2001, p.xi).

Clandinin and Connelly point out that the researcher’s personal interests are revealed by the area of inquiry that the researcher chooses: “[o]ur research interests come out of our own narratives of experience and shape our narrative inquiry plotlines” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2003, p. 121). Therefore, research and autobiography are intertwined. By revealing the liminal area between my life and my research I hope to delve deeper into artography and reveal where my interest in the liminal area between formalism and activism originated.

My interests in art, art education, formalism and activism have developed as a result of my life experiences. I intend to reveal these connections by telling my story.

I have a younger brother who has always been athletic, confident and popular. As an adolescent he competed in sports at the national level, hung out with “the popular crowd”, dated numerous attractive girls and went to numerous parties. He
always seemed to get what he wanted. From the point of view of a teenage boy his life seemed perfect to me. In contrast, my experience of adolescence was lonely, depressing and boring. I was clumsy, bad at sports, shy (especially around girls), skinny and introverted. For me, high school was a lonely, miserable experience.

As a student, I did not excel academically, athletically or socially; however, my drawings impressed teachers and classmates. In elementary school I was known as the class artist. In high school, art was the only thing for which I received positive attention. I remember doing pencil, pen and ink drawings using a visual reference of my choice in high school art class. I do not remember receiving any technical instruction on how to draw, which was ironic since visual realism was highly valued at this level. I always suspected that my art teachers in public school were not practicing artists.

When high school graduation reared its ugly head I was forced to make a decision about which direction I wanted my life to go. I was not ready to work and my grades were not high enough to go to university. I feared graduating and leaving the miserable but familiar routine of a high school student. I felt unprepared to deal with real life; luckily, my mom registered me for a two year fine arts program at a local college.

Going to art school changed my life. I no longer saw art as only a school subject; it was a lifestyle. I met an inspiring group of friends. We saw ourselves as young revolutionary left-wing artists. Our art was going to change the world! We devoured Kerouac's "On the Road", listened to *Jane's Addiction* as we painted at 2:00 a.m. and sipped red wine, moshed to *Rage Against the Machine* at small, dirty downtown clubs and talked about politics, art, philosophy and music while we sat around a campfire on the beach. Throughout my life, art and exciting social change have been inseparable.

The art college instructor's critiques were usually directed at aesthetic formalist concerns in a vague way. I remember comments like "loosen your colours up, be
free!" and “this line works, this shape doesn’t”. Despite the lack of concrete technical instruction, I eventually became quite good at visual realism due to constant practice. Teachers and students seemed impressed by technical proficiency and visual imagination. I remember thinking “there must be a better way to teach art!”. 

After graduating from the two year art diploma program at the college, I applied to and was accepted into a four year degree granting art school. The art instructors introduced us to post-modern discourse the “po-mo disco”. Discussions concerning feminism, critical theory, post-colonial theory and post modernism were encouraged. Aesthetics, at least in the traditional sense, was viewed as passé. I quickly tired of reading long articles with titles like “Critiquing the Post-Structualist Feminist Gaze”. I longed to smear red oil paint onto a pure white canvas.

While the art college I attended emphasized aesthetic formal concerns in their art education program, the art school I attended instead stressed conceptual concerns in their curriculum. My goal is to construct a curriculum that embodies both the aesthetic and the conceptual in one curriculum.
Aesthetics: As an artist, I can't help be influenced by the aesthetics of other artists. Ross Penhall, Lisa Burke, Phillip Rafanel and Tiko Kerr have all inspired/influenced my aesthetic sensibilities.

![Figure 15](image)

Matthew Burnett
The Path, 2007

Activism: The path of progress stretches out before us, but the path is bisected by a ragged grey line. We must move forward in our lives, but we always have free will. We can always decide which side of the line we will walk. This line represents the dualities of life decisions.

David Darts reminds us that the elements and principles of design still have a grip on art education practice today:

Aesthetic formalism, which can be defined as the practice of reducing art objects into the basic elements and principles of design, has played a role in art education since the early 20th century. Although it serves to isolate form from context, this aesthetic model remains today as a staple curricular component of many art education programs (2004, p. 65).

Based on my experience in high school and the art department of a college the aesthetic formalism model of art education is widely used despite the fact that many art education scholars promote theory that suggests art education should be used as a method of inquiry into socially important issues, rather than focus on aesthetics.

This schism between contemporary art education theory and practice needs to be resolved. It requires art educators to be skilled in the material processes of aesthetic formalism, as well as the conceptual framework of art activism. This is asking a lot from art teachers. What is needed is curriculum that embodies both
technical skills and social activism within art education. This thesis provides one example of how aesthetics and activism can exist within an art curriculum.

Art Education for the 21st Century

"There is no single sacrosanct vision of the aims of art education" (Eisner, 2002, p. 25). Art education paradigms are constructed to meet a perceived societal need. What approach to art education is needed today? Unfortunately the aesthetic formalism-socio/political activism debate has polarized much of the field of art education:

Essentially 1 of 2 aesthetic theories tends to inform art educators thinking about teaching, learning and curriculum design and that consequently, art programs are often skewed in one theoretical direction or the other. The theories of formalism and contextualism invoke very different conceptions of art; for example, the former values art for art's sake, while the other embraces the functional value of art. A program skewed in a functional direction emphasizes individual creativity, skills development and compositional excellence. While a contextualist program focuses on collaborative experience and social issues (Jeffers, 2000, p. 4).

Art embodies both the aesthetic and the activist, but most art education programs are "skewed in one theoretical direction or another" (Jeffers, 2000, p. 4). The challenge for art educators is to construct curriculum that includes both formalist and activist inquiry. An approach to art education that relies on the elements and principles of design to construct curriculum can be classified as aesthetic formalism. This approach can lead to students developing technical art making skills; however, the artwork produced serves no social role other than being decorative. Focusing on aesthetic formalism also leaves school art programs on the curricular periphery, in favor of programs with socially relevant content, such as English, Social Studies and Science.
Alternatively, an art class that focuses exclusively on the socially activist role of art education can lead to art that does not visually engage the viewer in aesthetically powerful ways. This brings to mind an experience I had while attending post-secondary art school. A student displayed a blank canvas during a group critique. He justified this by proclaiming that his non-painting is a protest against the elitist grand-narrative of Euro-centric, patriarchal art history. The class then argued passionately for 45 minutes on the legitimacy of this statement. I present this in a humorous tone; however, my example is taken from an actual experience in art school.

I believe a socially transformative art education curriculum needs to attend to both:

Aesthetic Formalism  
(Developing technical skills and visual imagination)  

And  

Socio/Political Activism  
(The socially activist role art can play in society).

Kit Grauer’s concept of “Inbetweenia” is consistent with this idea. She explains that modernist education compartmentalizes and decontextualizes knowledge. School subjects taught using a modernist philosophy are presented as discreet bodies of knowledge, even areas of inquiry within a subject are not connected. For example painting and sculpture are sometimes taught as two separate classes. Post-modern education inquires into the area between traditional bodies of knowledge, for example, the intersection between social activism and visual art making (from lecture at the teacher institute “Exploding the Cannon”, July 9, 2007, Vancouver Art Gallery).

I am interested in the Inbetweenia of aesthetic formalism and art activism.
In his book “The View from the Studio Door” Ted Orland explains why both the social role of art and technical skills are so important while discussing the music of Bach:

There's pretty good evidence that Bach himself understood that to make work that mattered meant addressing art at every level—from the purely technical to the completely profound. He once composed a set of training pieces whose purpose, he said, was “to glorify God, to edify my neighbor, and to develop a cantabile style of playing with both hands” (2006, p. 103).

He goes on to say the following:

How deeply can art matter if the only fitting description of its meaning and purpose is “art for art’s sake”? Perhaps all of us—artists and otherwise—would benefit from Bach’s self-imposed discipline that each of us should work to glorify God, educate our neighbors, and continue to expand our technical abilities (p. 103).

Bach thought music should be technically proficient, while expressing profound ideas that are used for social activism. I suggest that contemporary art education should focus on the same things.

While there is much theorizing about possible directions for 21st Century art education, there is little in the way of documented curriculum that embraces these ideas. Olivia Gude explains this well:

There is much discussion in the field of art education about creating new styles of art education that are more relevant to contemporary art and culture; there are few models of what such post-modern art education would actually look like in schools. Teachers seeming reluctance to shift their teaching practices is often rooted in not being able to visualize what students would actually do or make in post-modern art curricula (2007, p. 7).
Aesthetics: Copying has been neglected as an outdated, overly academic activity in art education in favor of developing authentic personal imagery (API). I believe there is value in "master-copies". My technical painting abilities improved as a result of copying Mary Pratt's painting.

![Image](image1.jpg)

Activism: The first time I bit into an organically grown apple my taste buds exploded with pleasure. As an artist I wanted to create a visual representation of this experience. Organic fruit is healthy because no toxic chemicals are used. It is the way humans were meant to eat.

Eisner agrees with Gude that what actually happens in the classroom needs to be studied in order to create change:

> Among of the most important kinds of research needed in the field are studies of teaching and learning. By studies of teaching and learning I mean studies that try to carefully answer the question: What do teachers of the arts do when they teach and what are its consequences? (2002, p. 215).

Unfortunately much contemporary art education theory that focuses on using art as a vehicle for social transformation does not address what art students tend to spend the most amount of time actually doing in the classroom, which is the process of creating art, or the craft of artmaking, despite the fact that “without some attention to aesthetic and "craft" concerns, some supposedly socially conscious work falls absolutely flat” (Chalmers, personal communication, September, 2007).
Despite Chalmer's warning, there is little theorizing about aesthetics and craft in contemporary art education theory. I believe this is due to the following:

1. It is assumed that art teachers attended art school; therefore, at one time they were practicing artists, so they should be proficient in the technical processes of art making;

2. Many celebrated contemporary artists make art that is purposely non-aesthetic or anti-aesthetic. As Ted Orland explains: "Beauty has become a dirty word in the art world-and sincerity an embarrassing reminder of gentler times" (Orland, 2006, p. 46) Some contemporary artists choose to focus on creating art that opens dialogic spaces through human interactions with the artwork, for example relational aesthetics is a new way of conceptualizing art that does not rely on traditional notions of visual aesthetics.

3. There are many "how-to" art books available, so theorists may believe that there is no need to concern themselves with craft.

Aesthetics: While working on this painting I was completely immersed within the process of composition, layering of colours and creating a sense of light

Activism: This painting is a gentle reminder that "Getting and spending we lay waste out powers. Little we see in nature that is ours" (Wordsworth). It could also be a visual protest against air pollution.
Student art production should be central to any art education curriculum; therefore craft and aesthetics are central to art education theory and practice. The question “how can an art teacher combine mastery of technical art making processes with meaningful student art production” is central to my study.

Olivia Gude has made impressive efforts to bridge the gap between social activism and aesthetics. In her website, *Spiral Art Education*, she is “re-thinking the style and content of art curriculum in the 21st century”. Gude explains that art curriculum should:

1. deal with an issue of developmental importance to the student;
2. be based on a contemporary social theme;
3. include examples of past and contemporary artworks that explore these themes; and
4. teach a method for making art.

This certainly seems like a lot for one art project to embody, but Gude doesn’t just theorize. She offers a multitude of detailed lesson plans that utilize all four of these principles; thereby bridging the gap not only between aesthetics and activism, but between theory and practice as well. This thesis aims to expand on Gude’s philosophy of linking art, activism, theory and practice to develop a relevant, exciting post-modern approach to art education.

This literature review has summarized the history of aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism in art education, including where those paradigms originated, how they developed and how they are situated within the field of art education today. The work of artists and art education theorists who have inquired into the same issues as this thesis have been explored, and, finally, I have explained how my research interests have developed as a result of my own life experiences as an art student and art teacher. This information gives a contextual background to my research, methodologies and artistic interests.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Research Site and Subjects

My research site will be an after school art class that I will be teaching, which is a component of the Artists for Kids Program (AFK) which is a program in an urban, Canadian public school district. As the director of the AFK program, Bill McDonald has created a mandate for the program to be the “best art enrichment programming in Canada” (McDonald, personal communication, July 15, 2008). AFK has an art gallery that exhibits artwork by Canadian artists; this gallery is used as an art education resource by teachers. AFK fundraises by selling prints donated by artists. These funds are used to purchase artwork for the art gallery and fund after school art education programming and a two week summer art camp. The classroom I will be teaching in is adjacent to the AFK gallery, allowing me to use the artwork in it as the primary visual texts for this study.

I selected this site because it is in the school district that I currently teach in, so I am somewhat familiar with the student population. In addition, the AFK program has the advantage of having an art gallery in the teaching facility, giving students and teachers easy access to original works by Canadian artists such as Emily Carr, Jack Shadbolt, Graeme Gilmore, Toni Onley, Ross Penhall and Edward Burtynski. This is an advantage because students can experience the visual text that will form the basis of this study in an embodied, kinesthetic manner. Being able to physically interact with an artwork is potentially a more meaningful experience than simply viewing a reproduction of an artwork in a textbook. The after-school art program that is my research site is non-mandatory, increasing the chances the students will have a genuine interest in art and a willingness to engage with art in meaningful ways.
The art class I will be teaching is for grades four to seven. There will be eight one and a half hour classes. I will endeavor to enact a curriculum that attends to a space in/between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism through the analysis of visual texts in the AFK gallery that is next to my classroom, followed by the production of visual texts in the classroom in response to the dialogic spaces generated by the analysis of artwork in the AFK gallery.

The room I will be teaching in is a dedicated art classroom. It is well stocked with fine art supplies such as paint, brushes, paper, drawing supplies, clay, a kiln, easels, art books from the Western cannon of art history such as Picasso, Van Gogh and Monet, two sinks, printmaking supplies and still life objects such as cow skulls, driftwood and a stuffed seagull. There are no computers in the room. The supplies in the room seem set up for a curriculum based on a traditional fine arts studio model of art education. Walking around the room I find it easy to envision art classes held here based on cubism, still life painting and colour theory. There are few resources in the classroom I will be using that are intended to support a curriculum based on contemporary socio/political art such as computers, cameras and books on contemporary art.

My research subjects will be the students that attend the after school art class who agree to participate and whose parents sign a consent form agreeing to allow their children to participate in my study. It is reasonable to assume the students in the class will have an interest in art making since they are attending a non-mandatory after school art enrichment program. Since the tuition fee for the eight classes is $90 it is also reasonable to assume the children I will be teaching come from families with some disposable income. As of 2006, the city in which I will be teaching had a population of 48,165 people. 74% of residents identified themselves as not being a visible minority. (Statistics Canada, 2006) I would characterize the community as predominantly Caucasian and upper middle class since the median income was greater than the average in British Columbia.
Most theory that attends to art education as social reconstruction addresses the secondary art classroom (see Alter-Muri, 2004; Brown, 2007; Chalmers, 2005; Darts, 2004; Desai, 2006; Gude, 2007; Lanier, 1969; McFee, 1974). My research is aimed at upper level elementary students. With their limited life experience, what social issues would be appropriate to inquire into with this age group? How should the social issues be introduced and discussed? Are there certain issues that should be avoided? How will elementary students respond to socio/political issues? Can they articulate their ideas and feelings through the medium of art-making? My thesis will attempt to answer these questions.

Students are engaged when they inquire into issues that they have direct personal experience with; therefore, I need to design curriculum with this in mind. I will use two artists as central visual texts to initiate an inquiry into concepts of utopia and dystopia. I will present this to the students as an opportunity to design their own vision of a “perfect world” free of socio/political problems or as an exploration into socio/political issues that each student is personally concerned with.
Aesthetics: While painting this I was experimenting with form and colour in an intuitive manner. I particularly like how the red and blue colours play off each other, as well as the black background and the pale skin.

Activism: This painting could be read as a depiction of the modern worlds' capacity to cause disillusionment and disenchanted in the individual. The person feels completely socially ostracized. Surrounded by cold darkness, his face and body twist into unnatural shapes. This painting could bring greater awareness to the social issue of the dehumanizing effects of contemporary society.

Figure 18
Matthew Burnett
Alienation, 2000

Theorizing Social Reconstruction

"I'm looking for too much fun, and transformation!"

Kit Grauer (personal communication, September, 2007)

I want to show students how they can change the world with their art.

My research question is: How can a curriculum be enacted within art education that uses visual texts to inquire into the liminal area between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism?

As an art teacher, what kind of curriculum do I need to design in order to facilitate an inquiry into this question? Simply instructing students to make an anti-war
poster is unlikely to create meaningful aesthetic social reconstruction. I remember my high school art teacher giving us an assignment to draw an anti-drinking and driving poster for display in the art room. I had no personal experience with the potentially devastating effects of drinking and driving; therefore, it was an empty, meaningless assignment for me. I believe that in order for curriculum to be socially activist:

Students must have direct, personal experience with the issue they are inquiring into.

Inquiring into the research participants' notions of utopia and dystopia through the analysis and creation of visual texts allows the participants to reflect on their own values, beliefs and experiences in order to create an art work that expresses personally meaningful ideas and feelings.

I believe the other requirement to make socially activist art is:

Students must have the opportunity to show their work to an audience.

In his dissertation *Visual Culture Jam* (2004), David Darts experiences the power of "the show" while discussing student art making:

The collective artistic intervention which we designed early into the unit as an afternoon field trip became the central focus of the students work and a core component of the curriculum unit. If fact for many of the students, the art installation itself became the single most pivotal event during the three months I was at the school (p.86).

Student artwork needs to have an audience in order for it to have the opportunity to effect social change through dialogue that is generated as a result of the exhibition. This process may create student self-determination and social confidence by enabling students to realize that their art matters and that they can make a positive
difference in the world with their art. I will facilitate an exhibition of the students’ artwork at the completion of the eight-week course. It is my hope this student art exhibition will be the catalyst that initiates a process of social transformation for the research participants.

I also want the curriculum to attend to aesthetic formalism. Eisner explains why this is important: “[i]f a material is to be used as a medium, techniques for working with the material must be developed...skills must be at hand” (Eisner, 2002, p. 90). I acknowledge my own interest in the area of formal art making skills was a factor in deciding to include formalism as a curricular focus. I am a representational painter. I have spent thousands of hours painting, struggling to achieve a specific look to my paintings. I always wished an art teacher would have helped me to improve my formal art making skills. I want to be the teacher that I never had. By including both aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism within the same curriculum I hope to create a curriculum that allows students to analyze and critique issues that are important to them in aesthetically powerful ways.

The intent of my thesis is to inquire into the liminal area between formalism and activism within art education. This thesis and the research methodology of a/r/tography share the common philosophical approach of exploring “an in/between space that exists between and among...[to create] deeper and enhanced ways of meaning making” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 30). Being an artist and a teacher are important aspects of my life; a/r/tography provides room for my art and teaching to inform my research practice. Using a/r/tography as my research methodology has allowed me to see connections between art/research/teaching that enhance the meaning-making of this inquiry.
Methodological Notes: The Method to my Madness

Two thousand three hundred years ago Aristotle identified three kinds of activities, associated with three different types of knowledge: knowing (theoria), doing (praxis) and making (poesis). The end goal of theoria was truth. The end goal of praxis was production. The end goal of poesis was action. Taken together, these three ways of knowing represent a hybrid process that exists in/between traditional bodies of knowledge. Much more recently a movement within academic educational inquiry has developed a methodology that encompasses a pluralistic, hybrid approach to research and knowledge-production that includes theory, teaching and art-making: "[w]ithin the field of education, arts-based research is emerging as an inquiry tradition that reaches beyond disciplinary boundaries-creating innovative junctures among art, education and research" (Garman, Piantanida & McMahon, 2003, p. 182).

There are at least three indicators that arts-based research has become a legitimate area of scholarly inquiry. First, the growing number of researchers who are arguing for the inclusion of art-based research within the field of educational research (see Barone, 1995; Barone & Eisner, 1997; Diamond & Mullen, 1999; Donmoyer & Yennie-Donmoyer, 1995; Findley & Knowles, 1995; Norris, 2000; Willis, Smith, & Collins, 2000). Second a growing presence within academic journals with a focus specifically on arts-based research; for example, the April, 2003 edition of Qualitative Inquiry was devoted to exploring discussions within arts-based research. Third, graduate level courses specifically dedicated to arts-based research shows an acceptance of such scholarly inquiry within academia; for example, in 2007 I took a graduate course at the University of British Columbia entitled Contemporary Art Practice and Arts-Based Educational Research: In/forming Connections. It is from this tradition of arts-based research that a/r/tography emerged. In 2004, Rita Irwin and Alex de Cosson wrote a/r/tography: Rendering Self Through Arts-Based Living Inquiry. In it Irwin and de Cosson articulated a new form of arts-based research called a/r/tography.
Irwin connects a/r/tography to Aristotle's three ways of knowledge: "knowing (theoria), doing (praxis) and making (poesis) are three forms of thought that are important to a/r/tography...relationships between and among these ways of understanding experience are integral to the...foundation for a/r/tography" (Irwin et al., 2006, p. 73). A/r/tography is a qualitative arts-based research methodology that inquires into "an in-between space that exists between and among" (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 28) the categories of theory/research, teaching/learning and art/making, as well as art and writing which "unite the visual and textual by complimenting, refuting or enhancing one another (p. 31) as a way to "provide space for exploration, translation and understanding in deeper and enhanced ways of meaning making" (p. 30). By inquiring into this in/between space a/r/tography aims to move away from a modernist model of "dichotomous thinking" to a post-modern model of "dialogical thinking" (p. 30). The opening of dialogic spaces creates a relationality within a/r/tography that has been called "rhizomatic" (p. 71). A rhizomatic plant such as ginger grows roots and shoots in multiple directions, thereby making multiple connections and rejecting predictable linear progress. Therefore, the rhizome is a fitting metaphor for a/r/tography "where concepts emerge from social engagements and encounters" (Irwin et al., 2006, p. 72), which are nonlinear and unpredictable by nature. As a result of this, a commitment to a/r/tography is a commitment to "a way of being in the world [that] embraces ambiguity, improvisation and entertains uncertainty" (p.80). Thus, a/r/tography is an open methodology: open to change, open to criticism, open to new ideas and new discourses.

Figure 19
A/r/tography is living inquiry that is about self and community: "no researcher or artist or educator exists on their own [community], nor do they only exist within a
community [self] for in fact both occur” (Irwin et al., 2006, p.77). A/r/tography is about self-identity as an artist/researcher/teacher and how attending to those identities “alter...perceptions and actions [so that] transformative practice emerg[es]” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 34). In this way a/r/tography has commonalities to auto-ethnography.

A/r/tographers work in communities of practice to provide “an opportunity to inquire together as they create deeper understanding and meaning-making” (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005, p.905). Irwin et al. (2006) explain how a/r/tographers seek meaning in communities of practice: The intelligence of a community of practice is exponentially greater than the intelligence of any one member of that community because collaborative interactions create new ideas and concepts. This collective intelligence transforms individual perspectives, which in turn transforms the community of practice. As a result of this transformative practice “a/r/tographers... are continually evolved through ... engagement with one another” (p. 82).

A/r/tography puts an emphasis on practice, in fact Irwin et al. (2006) calls a/r/tography theory as practice. They describe a/r/tography as: “not merely a physical location of object, but a process, a movement and displacement of meaning” (p. 75). As such, a/r/tography is fluid, dynamic, within a/r/tographic research initial questions are formed, but the embodied, relational practice of a/r/tography is reflexive. New questions arise from the hermeneutic circle that occurs within communities of practice, resulting in new perspectives and new questions. A/r/tography is always in a state of becoming. It is never static, never finished because a/r/tography is an embodied, reflexive practice.

A/r/tography’s focus is on embodied process of living inquiry that is “attentive to the sensual, tactile and the unsaid” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 899) of the lives of artists/researchers/teachers. In this way it has commonalities to action research which is “a term used to describe professionals studying their own practice in order to improve it. Applied to teaching, it involves gathering and interpreting "data" to better understand an aspect of your teaching that interests or concerns you”
Springgay et al. identify six renderings of a/r/tography. These renderings describe how a/r/tography is enacted and represented; they are concepts rather than methods. As Springgay et al. (2005) explain: "[c]oncepts are flexible, dynamic and inter-subjective locations through which close analysis renders new understandings and meanings" (p. 898). The renderings are not meant to be static and separate, but are rather "visual, aesthetic, and textural performances that dance and play alongside each other" (p. 908). "Renderings offer possibilities of engagement. To render, to give, to present, to perform, to become - offers for action, the opportunity for living inquiry" (Darts, 2004, p. 82).

Contiguity

Contiguity emphasizes the dis/connections between the various roles embedded within a/r/tography. Contiguity opens spaces for the "interaction and the movement between art and graphy so that research becomes a lived endeavor" (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 901). Engagement in a/r/tography is to be attentive to the process of research and be open to revisions, rewriting and rethinking. A/r/tographers resist absolute truths and final conclusions. They are constantly in a state of not-knowing (Springgay et al., 2005). My own lived experience as an art teacher, graduate student and painter over the last four years resonates with contiguity. Painting, teaching and researching are never finished; they are processes to be engaged in, not products to finish. The relationality between art, teaching and research enlivens and enhances the three areas of inquiry in a way that must be lived to be fully understood. As Irwin & de Cosson put it "[t]hese in-between spaces are dynamic living spaces of inquiry" (2004, p. 9).
Living Inquiry

Irwin & de Cosson (2004) explain that a/r/tography is a “living practice of art, research and teaching: a living metissage; a life writing, life creating experience” (p. 28). Living inquiry postulates that research is not separate from life; rather it is part of life. As Springgay et al. (2005) explain: “[t]hrough attention to memory, identity, autobiography, reflection, meditation, story-telling, interpretation and/or representation, artists/researchers/teachers expose their living practices in evocative ways” (p. 902).

The visual and textual aspects of living inquiry can inspire socially transformative actions. Springgay et al. (2005) explain that image and text can be viewed as “interrogations with difference and contradiction that ask viewers/readers to reexamine assumptions, destabilizing forms of identification. Some encounters with a/r/tographical texts [can] inspire thoughtful action” (p. 903). While a/r/tography is a living inquiry that “engages emotional, intuitive, personal, spiritual and embodied ways of knowing” (p. 902), it does demand rigor and discipline. Art and writing come from long traditions of rigorous academic inquiry. These traditions are present in a/r/tographic inquiry that “creates its rigor through continuous reflexivity and analysis” (p. 903).

For myself, art, teaching and research are not simply my jobs, they are a large part of my personal identity. I draw upon my life, my history and my experience, knowledge and values to inform my engagement with a/r/tography. For example, I feel narrative storytelling can deepen engagement with concepts and meaning-making. I often tell my students stories from my own life as a way of illustrating a concept I want them to engage in.
Metaphor and Metonymy

Metaphor is image or text that reveals commonalities between two or more distinct subjects. Metonymy is image or text that reveals contiguity between two or more distinct subjects. Metaphor and metonymy do not seek to classify and contain meaning, instead they open up meaning to multiple interpretations. As Springgay, Irwin, and Kind (2005) explain: “[m]etonymical meaning is not intended to close spaces with singular interpretations but instead allows for the ambiguity of meaning to shift in space and time” (p. 904).

As a former art student I am intimately familiar with the powers of metaphor and metonymy. The ability to generate multiple meanings through powerful associations is what attracts me to art. The opening up of multiple reactions, dialogues and interpretations through metaphor and metonymy creates new meaning and knowledge that can be socially reconstructive. Sullivan argues this is consistent with the goals of research: “the utility of research is to be the capacity to create new knowledge that is individually and culturally transformative” (2004, p. 800). Therefore using metaphor and metonymy are effective strategies for engaging with research.

The slashes in a/r/tography and aesthetic/activism have meaning. They are “intended to divide and double a word-to make the word mean at least two things, but often more” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 904). The spaces between art, research and teaching suggest multiple intertextual and intratextual meanings. “The slash makes the terms active, relational, as they reverberate with, in and through each other” (p. 904). Aesthetics and activism in artwork inform and enhance one another. It can be hard to separate them. The slash between aesthetics and activism is an attempt to get away from binary concepts and call attention to the messy, entangled, liminal area between the two concepts that includes aesthetics and activism, but also something more, a third space. The space in-between aesthetics and activism, this is the area of inquiry that my thesis endeavors to explore.
Openings

A/r/tographic research creates conceptual openings by “deliberately seeking out the difficult, the unknown, the ambiguous and the unpredictable” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 905). By negotiating these difficult areas the a/r/tographer seeks the un/making and re/construction of meaning. Art-making, teaching and research can all be difficult, unknown and ambiguous. The concept of curriculum and currier demonstrate the ambiguous and unpredictable nature of teaching. Curriculum is the teachers’ lesson plan for what the teacher wants to happen in the classroom with students. Currier is what actually does happen in the classroom with students. By embracing the unpredictability of human interaction a teacher can be open to potentially transformative educational experiences.

Openings create space for analytic and reflexive discourse which is the source of academic rigour in a/r/tography. Openings allow researchers to “move within the research text, penetrate deeply, and to shift boundaries of perspective” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 905). They identify that openings in a/r/tographic practice allow for new dialogue and concepts to enrich the research practice as a way of collaborative meaning-making:

Such research is situated as a conversation for understanding, as an act of negotiated meaning, and as an ongoing exchange between Self and Other, and between texts and images. Therefore the intention of the imaging/writing is not to inform-as in to give information- but to open up to conversations and relationships (p. 906).

Reverberations

Reverberations call attention to the echoes and resonations that occur between teachers and students, artists and researchers which challenge our perspectives. David Darts explains how social and textual reverberations alter our point of view:
I remember sitting in Ted Aoki’s class a few years back and discussing the idea that each time we engage with a text (I am defining text very broadly), we are changed. Thus, when we later return to it or engage with another text (what does it mean to conceptualize research participants as texts?), we are inevitably viewing it (and ourselves) from a different perspective” (2004, p.85).

Excess

Excess serves as “a point of rupture between absolute knowledge and sheer loss. Vacillating between conservation and destruction, excess becomes a movement toward anything...” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 908). This notion of excess reminds me of a powerful experience I occasionally have while art-making: when I start a painting I often have a general idea in my mind of how I want the painting to turn out, usually informed or influenced by other paintings I have recently completed, as well as artwork by other artists I am currently studying. The process of thinking through the medium of oil paint (the act of painting) often causes my original ideas to change as I respond to the evolving canvas in front to me. By being open to “happy accidents” I am often surprised and pleased with the final result of the painting process, but occasionally the painting process will lead me down a road of frustration, in which I feel like I am fighting with the materials. The harder I try to make the painting work, the worse it becomes. This leads to a point of rupture, where I give up, out of frustration, and stop trying to make the painting look good. It is at this point of surrender when I stop trying to make conscious aesthetic and technical decisions that the most exhilarating and completely unpredictable results can occur. I find myself standing in front of a thrilling painting, yet I have no idea how I created it. This is my point of excess.

Even though these renderings are presented as separate entities they are not intended to exist independent from one another. They are “visual, aesthetic and textual performances that dance and play alongside each other, reverberating in excess and as openings...each rendering moves alongside and between the others” (Springgay et al., 2005, p. 909).
I am using the methodology of a/r/tography because it is well suited to my research questions and design. A/r/tography is about self (Irwin et al., 2006). This thesis is about challenging myself as a teacher to create socially transformative curriculum, as an artist to re-read my own art as an inquiry into aesthetic/activism and as a researcher to engage in a meaningful inquiry. A/r/tography is also about community (Irwin et al., 2006). As a teacher/researcher it is my goal to create a community of artistic practice in my classroom which is socially transformative. I try to achieve this by creating an atmosphere of mutual respect with a focus on artistic inquiry.

My data collection will be done within the context of teaching an after-school art class. I will write field notes, take photographs, audio-record conversations and write reflections as soon as each class is over. The processes of working as an artist/researcher/teacher with my students who will also engage in art/research/teaching will be used as a source of data collection. In order to evaluate the effectiveness of my curriculum in engaging students with the liminal area between aesthetic formalism and activism I will conduct open ended interviews during the course of my research as well as at the conclusion of my research. Questions will be designed to ascertain if students felt they increased their skills and appreciation for the formal qualities of their artwork and the artwork of others, as well as their ability to read and understand the socio/political content of artwork. In addition questions will be asked that determine if students understand how the formal qualities in artworks contribute to their activist content. I want to design the questions in such a way that they leave space for students to respond in individual and authentic ways. I will audiotape these interactions for later analysis. A presumption this thesis makes is that art-works can be read as visual texts. Through metaphor, metonym, contiguity, openings and excess artworks can express ideas, thoughts, feeling and values. The art-work the students create in response to an analysis of visual texts over the course of this study will be presented and analyzed as research data.
Aesthetics: I started this painting with the intention of creating an expressionistic figurative painting. The figure in the middle looked terrible, after hours of painting I gave up, so out of frustration, I glued a piece of white paper overtop the figure, and scribbled on it. Suddenly the painting worked. I smeared some paint onto the paper, letting it drip down the canvass. Sometimes when I give up on a painting it suddenly improves.

Figure 20
Matthew Burnett
The Rising, 1997

Activism: A flat white square (self), partially sticks into the underside of a transparent three dimensional cube (society). While slashing diagonal paint strokes swirl around it (nature). This image is a socially relevant metaphor of the human condition, which, is open to multiple interpretations.
Aesthetics: I paint representational; however, I do not use any visual references. I experiment extensively with mixing and layering colours, and I am often surprised and pleased with the results; but I feel not using any visual reference can lead to overly-simplified and uninteresting composition and form.

![Image of a painting](image1)

**Figure 21**
Matthew Burnett
Sunset, 2007

**CAN ART BE BOTH AESTHETIC AND ACTIVIST?**

![Image of a painting](image2)

**Figure 22**
Matthew Burnett
Red, 2007

Activism: The earth is scorched red and brown by man-made toxic chemicals. The rivers flow a putrid yellow sludge. My painting depicts the environmental nightmare we are headed for unless we stop thinking of the earth as our collective dumping ground.
The Theory and Practice of A/r/tography

I have worked as a secondary visual arts teacher since 2001. I am a teacher because the idea of facilitating experiences that allow my students to realize the incredible power of art is the most important work I can imagine doing. I want my students to create personally meaningful art and experience the deep satisfaction that can result from that process. I want them to be proud of the art they make and realize the social importance of art. I want them to see that art is potentially the most powerful form of human expression. Based on my experience, first as an art student then as an art teacher, I believe a curriculum that includes both aesthetics and activism will be effective in facilitating a personally meaningful art-making process.

Despite my passion for art education, in 2005 I was beginning to feel that my art teaching practice was stagnating. I was becoming bored. I felt a need to enliven and enrich my teaching. I wanted to feel excited about teaching art like I did when I first began teaching in 2001. Going to graduate school seemed like the best way to enhance and deepen my knowledge and involvement in art education. As a graduate student I studied art education research. I was looking for theory that would inform and enrich my art teaching practice. I believe I found that theory in a/r/tography. My interest in art-making, art teaching and art education research are not unrelated. They grew out of each other and they continue to influence and enhance each other. A/r/tography offers the opportunity to bring art practice into teaching and research, the ability to access creative resources for uncovering artistic ways of knowing, and an acknowledgement that art practice can be considered a form of research and the sharing of art as teaching (Bickel, 2007).

The reason I resonate with a/r/tography is because it utilizes what I do already: make art, teach art and write about art. I teach, make art and write about art almost every day. These are all forms of research. They are all manifestations of the same creative impulse, expressed through different mediums. Switching from one medium to another often helps me pass a cognitive block. When I try to write about
art education and the ideas do not flow, I simply switch to painting. This stimulates my creativity, and as I paint I think of ideas to articulate in writing. While I teach art, I often refer back to my art practice when dialoguing with students about their creative processes. Each activity enriches and enhances the other. When conceptualizing a/r/tography I realize that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

The practice of a/r/tography creates connections between self and others, art and teaching, teaching and research, the visual and the written. These connections create new dialogues and new meanings. They create a meaningful context for art making. By linking art making to pedagogical practice and academic research art making becomes part of a living practice that exists in a relational context to other parts of life. The methodology of a/r/tography forms the basis of my thesis. It is my goal to contribute knowledge to a concept that has enlivened and enriched my art-making, research and teaching practices.
Chapter Four: Findings and Discussion

Art Education in the Real World

Visual Texts

This section describes the process of teaching eight after-school art classes to elementary students using a curriculum that inquires into the liminal area in/between aesthetics and activism. The students’ art-work and conversations are represented and analysed as research data.

Class 1 of 8: October 15th 2008

Describing art as “visual text” implies that ideas are embedded in art that can be read by the viewer. My goal for this class is to show students how to read a visual text they create, in preparation for reading the visual text of Penhall and Burtynsky. Pictures and words are different forms of communication; therefore, the process of constructing information from them will be different. Images often suggest multiple interpretations though metaphor and metonym. Images often express connotative, rather than denotative meaning. I want to students to experience how visual text can open many interpretive pathways.

I demonstrated to the students how paying attention to shapes, shadows and forms can result in visually realistic drawings. With guided practice the students drew realistic eyes, mouths and noses. I discussed the idea of “inter/connectedness” with the students. Inter/connectedness recognizes that all world cultures and religions contain an idea that everything in the universe is one, and separation is an illusion. I suggested that attending to this idea would prevent all sorts of conflicts in the world, both at the national (wars) level and personal (arguments) level.
I gave each student a 1/12 section of a drawing of an old man's face set in chiaroscuro and instructed them to draw the image they saw onto a larger piece of paper. Some of the sections looked like abstract shapes of black and white while others were recognizable parts of an eye or nose. The students copied them using charcoal and erasers onto letter sized paper. I showed them the additive and subtractive method of drawing. This involves adding black marks with charcoal and then adding white marks with the eraser. This became quite messy as students played with the intensely rich blacks that charcoal can create. We then pinned the students' drawings to the wall to create a huge face, with beautifully dramatic light and shadow. I wanted the students to see this as an amazingly aesthetic drawing, and a metaphor for the concept of social inter/connectedness.

Figure 23
Collaboratively created face
Students of Matthew Burnett's afterschool art class
2008
I presented the following ideas:

- When we work together, we achieve something wonderful that none of us could have predicted or accomplished by ourselves (community building).

- Our differences (drawing styles and abilities) are our strength because they created an amazing drawing (celebrating diversity).

- Our art making connects all of us in a mutually beneficial way (collaborative art-making).

As I discussed these ideas I could see the students nodding in agreement, but I am not sure they were internalizing the concepts. They seemed well trained to be polite and agree with whatever their teacher says, rather than critically engaging with issues. This is the teacher’s dilemma: when there are 25 squirming bodies in your classroom it makes a teachers job easier if students obey orders without question, but the basis for education in a democracy is critical inquiry. How does a teacher retain orderly control necessary for safety while encouraging students to problematize normative practices? I am hoping the engagements with visual texts I facilitate will open dialogic spaces and allow students to come to a greater critical understanding of art and activism.

Art can tell stories, challenge stereotypes, reveal hidden truths, or make political statements. Art is not politically neutral, it is a visual language. Many researchers use politically engaged art as an entry point to socially reconstructive curricular experiences (Kumashiro, 2004; Knight, 2006; Aoki, 2005; Ulbricht, 2003; Gude, 2007; Giroux, 1992; Barnett, 2008; Freedman, 2003; Darts, 2004). Teaching students to view visual texts critically is important because “much contemporary culture has become visual. Global culture is rapidly shifting from text-based information to image saturation” (Freedman, 2003, p. 86). If visual texts are the predominate medium of communication in society, then using images as a vehicle
to facilitate student inquiry into socially relevant issues is essential to educational practices.

Students need to become visually literate in order to engage with art in meaningful ways. Students need to be taught how to read and critique visual text so they can experience both the aesthetics and the socio/political content of artworks. Do we really want to restrict the analysis of art to line, form, shape and repetition?

Class 2 of 8. October 22, 2008

I will use the work of two Canadian landscape artists as central visual texts to enact a curriculum that inquires into the liminal area between formalism and activism. I have chosen these visual texts because my own art practice is primarily concerned with landscape that is "aesthetic/activist", the art clearly embodies both formalist and activist concerns and the research subjects have easy access to the original artworks.

Ross Penhall is a North Vancouver landscape painter who creates soft, utopian landscapes that express the beauty of natural forms which have been manipulated by the hand of man. "Ross Penhall...is widely recognized for his carefully composed and vibrant imagery depicting man's intersection with the land. His stylized forms resonate with inviting spaces" (MacDonald, 2005). While Penhall's images show landscape that has been tamed by human activity, his images never show humans or any man-made objects, giving his pictures a quietness that can be soothing for city dwellers accustomed to jack hammers and police sirens.

As a painter I recognize the "joy of art-making" in his images. The sensual quality of colours, the thickly applied paint and the painterly technique, which allows the brushstrokes to remain visible all point to a profound enjoyment of the process of painting. Since most art students will not become critically acclaimed, financially successful artists it is this joy of art-making that must be nurtured in the classroom, so it can sustain student’s art making efforts. An art teacher’s attitude towards art
can either nourish or destroy the pleasure of art making in students. The most effective way I know of teaching students the joy of art-making is by allowing them to see the happiness I get from making art.

Ross Penhall lives and works in the same neighbourhood that my students do. Therefore, his art often depicts local scenes my students would have personally experienced themselves, thereby creating embodied meaning for the subjects. Penhall’s work is the ideal visual text to use as a catalyst for an inquiry into formalism because of his strong use of intense colours and simplified shapes to create well constructed compositions. His work is also ideal as a foil for the analysis of more critical and politically confrontational work.

Figure 24
Ross Penhall, 2006
While Penhall’s paintings offer a positive image of manicured landscapes, photographs by Canadian artist Edward Burtynsky’s offer an aesthetically seductive view of dystopia. The main theme of his work is “nature transformed by industry” (Burtynsky, 2004, p.3). While the viewer is drawn into the rich visual detail, highly saturated colours and carefully constructed compositions of his shattered landscapes that reference fine art conventions. The viewer may also be simultaneously repulsed by the real environmental nightmare depicted. While aesthetically beautiful, Burtynsky’s work raises questions about the sustainability of our consumer based society. As we enjoy the products of industry the earth is being transformed into a post-apocalyptic landscape. Viewed within this socio/political context, Burtynsky’s work serves as an effective starting point for a student inquiry into environmental issues. In further contrast to Penhall’s work, Burtynsky’s subjects are international, not local. For example some of his photos are of the Three-Gorges Dam project in China.
The study of these contrasting visual texts will be used as the mechanism for students to inquire into issues of pollution, global awareness, socio/political activism, the politics of image, artistically constructed truth, and formalism through dialogue, writing and image making.

I took the students to the gallery space where the Ross Penhall painting and Edward Burtynsky photograph are located. The students sat down in front of the Penhall, and I started asking questions to initiate the reading of the visual text:
What colours do you see?

Are the colours warm or cool?

Would you want this to be your backyard?

Have you ever seen a place that looks like this?

Does this place look friendly or dangerous?

How does this painting make you feel?

If this painting told a story, what would it say?

How has the artist simplified the shapes?

Does this show beauty?

The answers of my students ranged from noticing the warm colours and claiming to be able to hear the waves, to saying “I don’t like the painting because I hate hiking”, “It looks dangerous” and “My parents have a painting like that!”

I then turned the students’ attention to the Edward Burtynski image and continued to ask questions, this time inquiring into the political message as well as the aesthetics:
Why would someone take a photo of all these tires?

Why would someone want to look at this?

Is this beautiful or ugly, or both?

How does the artist feel about garbage?

What does this photo tell us about garbage?

How would you feel if you saw this in your community?

Is this art? Why?

Does this place look friendly or dangerous?

Where do you think this is?

One student acknowledged the aesthetically seductive quality in the image: "I love this photograph because there is an amazing amount of detail in this photo. It makes you want to look at it." I asked the student if she thought it was a beautiful image. She replied "Yes, but not in the usual way. It is garbage, so it's meant to
make you think about how people pollute so much.” I asked her why an artist would create a beautiful image of such an ugly scene. Her answer revealed an understanding of the inter/relationship between aesthetics and activism. She explained: “The artist made it beautiful so people would look at it, like at all the details in it. No one will look at something that isn’t interesting. Once people are looking at it they will think about all the garbage and pollution in the world.” Her statement shows that some upper elementary aged children are able to conceptualize the relationality between aesthetics and activism in visual texts.

We walked back to our classroom. I gave the students various images, some by Burtynski, showing how industry transforms/destroys the earth and some by the Canadian “Group of 7” artists showing the raw beauty of Canadian wilderness. I asked the students to classify the work as showing either “images that show how people destroy the earth” or “images that show how wonderful the world is”.

This started a dialogue about how we both hurt and help the earth. This is exactly what I wanted. One student commented that “schools are landscaped with trees and bushes, to make them more beautiful, but some people throw garbage on the ground, making it ugly”. Another student said “a banana peel is litter, because it looks bad, but it isn’t because it doesn’t hurt the earth. Cars are the real litter, because they do hurt the earth” One student noticed a contradiction in Burtynski’s work: “it shows garbage, so we are supposed to feel bad, but the garbage looks so detailed and beautiful, so I like it”. Another student expressed another contradiction “if this was in my front yard [pointing to the Burtynski tires image] I would think it’s horrible, but because it is a cool photograph, I like it”. I was glad the visual text I selected opened dialogic space for the students to express complex thoughts and concerns about environmental issues and aesthetics. Their comments foreshadow the next experience I want to facilitate with them: To turn garbage into art in order to inquire into the aesthetic, political and social intersections of art and activism.
Class 3 of 8: October 29, 2008

The next class I gave the students some cardboard, newspapers and magazines to create the ground for the image they will create. The students will express their ideas about the intersection of art and activism in response to the dialogue generated by Penhall’s and Burtynski’s images. The process of transforming garbage into art will be used to start conversations about the nature of aesthetics, political activism and multiple meanings in visual text. I explained to the students that they will be “creating an art-work that expresses either their ideas about how people can make the world better or their ideas about problems that make the world not nice to live in”. The students glued cardboard, newspaper and magazines together to create a rich multi-layered, textual ground for painting. I pointed out that many of the magazines they were including in their grounds had “found text”, and that they could intentionally include text that expressed their artistic and environmental concerns.

Before the students started their final painting they did some art exercises that I have found invaluable for building technical art making skills. The first activity involves cutting out a small piece of paper from a magazine that has a fragment of a photo on it. The student then tries to replicate the colours and composition of the photo fragment through painting. The fragments are abstract colours and shapes, so students can focus entirely on technique without being concerned with pictorial realism. Next, the students painted a sphere, cube or cylinder using highlights and
shadows to create the illusion of three-dimensional mass. While these activities do not engage the activist, or even creative aspects of art, they allow the student to build some confidence with art supplies and techniques.

I demonstrated how to mix colours to create light, shadow and details, how to use a paintbrush for wet on wet and wet on dry effects and how to compose an image using the rule of thirds. At the end of the class we talked about the artist as activist:

Q: We are painting on cardboard, magazines and newspapers, so we are changing garbage into art. Why is this important? Why don't we just paint on paper?

A: It's recycling. It's helping the environment. We are doing the opposite of polluting. I'm in the environmental club at school, we recycle, reuse and reduce.

Q: Good. Would you say that the art we are making here is doing that?

A: Yes.

Q: Any other ideas about why we are using garbage to make art?

A: If we painted on canvass or paper, we would be spending money and creating more garbage by using new materials.

Q: Do you think art is just about decoration or can art be about something else?

A: Art can be about expressing ideas, like in this project we are showing what we want or don't want the world to be.

Q: Do you think that as artists you can improve the world?

A: Most student nod the affirmative, one student says "no".
Q: (To the student who said no) Why do you think an artist can not improve the world?

A: Because this art will eventually become garbage, and we have to dump out our paint water.

“If writing is thinking expressed in words, then art is thinking expressed in pictures” (Grauer, 2005, p. 113).

Class 3 of 8: November 5, 2007

Art making is often an intuitive, aesthetic process that creates meaning through metaphor, metonym, contiguity, openings and connotative meaning. I wanted the students to inquire into the ideas embedded within the images they created through a discursive process, so I asked each student to write one paragraph to explain how their art-work expresses the ideas of utopia or dystopia in relation to their personal values. I hoped the students would “inquire into the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art-form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create additional and/or enhanced meanings” (Irwin, 2008). The processes of art making and writing creates a hermeneutic circle in which the student expresses ideas through the aesthetics of art, which informs what the student writes, which can transform the meaning of the artwork. Grauer explains this: “By using the unique aspects of knowing represented by visual as well as verbal thinking, children have the opportunity to experience deeper and richer forms of communicating their ideas and to appreciate these capacities in others” (Grauer; 2005, p. 112). Writing about their art encourages students to not only analyse their aesthetic choices, but to explore the ideas, values and meaning expressed through those choices.
Classes 4 to 8 of 8: November 12-December 10, 2008

The final five classes were studio classes. Students worked on their art-work and I assisted with aesthetic and technical decision making. These studio classes were about artistic process. This is what Irwin refers to as a “community of practice” a/r/tographers work in communities of practice to provide “an opportunity to inquire together as they create deeper understanding and meaning-making” (Irwin et al., 2006, p. 77). Art-making can be an intensely private activity; however, while art-making in a classroom filled with students who are also art-making dialogic spaces open up that allow students to collaboratively problem solve aesthetic and conceptual problems, which may lead to deeper levels of artistic inquiry. For example, I overheard students discussing how to mix paint colours together in order to achieve atmospheric perspective. I also noticed students sitting in close proximity to each other selected similar subject matter. Three boys sitting at the same table all painted mountainous landscape images. Their conversations revolved around how mountains are metaphors for utopia. The community of practice in my classroom seemed to inform each student’s artistic process, which in turn informed the community of practice.

Most conversations that I engaged in with students were concerned with aesthetic decision making that would be consistent with their personal expression of utopia or dystopia. This focus on the craft of art-making led me to consider theories of artistic development. Should I be teaching visual realism as the logical endpoint to art education? How do I teach artistic thinking? Is there a universal criterion for artistic skill? Answering these questions is important for two reasons. Firstly, my research is concerned with aesthetic formalism, and the artistic development of children primarily deals with how children aesthetically engage with art-making at various developmental stages. Secondly, one role imbedded in the methodology of a/r/tography is art teacher and as an art teacher I want to facilitate a process of artistic development in my students.
Anna Kindler (2004) has inquired into notions of children's artistic development. She critiques the idea that visual realism should be the endpoint to art education: "[t]he ability to achieve mastery in pictorial realism is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition for artistic success. Technical proficiency has proven redundant in some manifestations of art" (p. 233). A survey of contemporary as well as non-Western artworks demonstrates the "redundancy of pictorial realism" in some art-making practices; therefore pictorial realism cannot be used as the singular endpoint to art education. Kindler proposes a model of multiple endpoints to artistic development. Wolf and Perry (1988) suggest a system of artistic development based on a child acquiring multiple drawing systems that form a pictorial repertoire:

...development in drawing consists of a growth in pictorial repertoires as well as an evolution and improvement within each of the drawing systems...The ability to use the most recent, newly acquired system is less relevant then the ability to select from among the attained choices a system that best matches a specific pictorial task (p. 19).

I used this notion of developing pictorial repertoires to guide my interactions with my students. The "specific pictorial task" of creating a personal vision of utopia or dystopia determined the criteria for making aesthetic choices. Pictorial realism was not necessarily desirable. For example a student who was focusing on the notion of dystopia was painting the sinking of the Titanic. I assisted him in selecting colours, designing a composition and creating a brushstroke that would express violent movement and impending death. This aesthetic style could be called expressionism, which could be considered a drawing system within the pictorial repertoire of an art student.

The notion of artistic development can be applied to more than aesthetics. Artistic thinking can be considered a determinate in artistic development as well. Kindler explains:

If the meaning and the message in art can be regarded as equally or, at times, even more important than the form, then a question
referred to developmental pathways guiding growth in "artistic thinking" becomes central to the concept of "development in art" (2004, p. 244).

In relation to this study, the notion of development in artistic thinking applies to students conceptualizing utopia and dystopia within the context of their personal value system and expressing those ideas through the medium of visual art. I have endeavored to facilitate a growth in artistic thinking by opening dialogic spaces within the classroom that attend to the expression of ideas in artwork, specifically the ideas of utopia and dystopia. A few of the students made comments that suggested they had perceived art as being merely decorative before this inquiry; for example, in reference to a Penhall painting one student said "I like the way it looks, but it doesn't mean anything, it just looks cool". However, once I introduced the concept of art as visual text that expresses ideas that can be read, most of the students seemed capable of reading metaphorical meaning in artworks.

I do not believe there is there a universal criterion for artistic skill. Art is a vast and heterogeneous domain; therefore, any notion of artistic skill needs to be situated within a specific social/political/aesthetic context. Kindler's critique of single-endpoint models of artistic development and proposal for a model based on multiple drawing systems that form a pictorial repertoire seem consistent with my view of a diverse art-world.
I like peaceful things. Like a swan in the middle of the lake. It's like no one is bothering you, no homework, so you can feel good. I like to paint things that are related to nature. I don't like to put in a lot of detail. I like to keep things simple. Sometimes I like to draw things that aren't even real. I just make them up.

-Elizabeth (name changed for confidentiality)

My subject is war. My art shows a terrible world. My art shows what people feel like during war. If war doesn't stop it might end the entire world. The colours I used (grey, brown yellow) show the darkness of war. I don't know if my painting will make people realize how bad war is.

-Conner (name changed for confidentiality)
My painting is about a peaceful sunset. I put the tree and the cloud in it because it looks good. My painting shows my best world.

-Meagan (name changed for confidentiality)

My art shows the perfect world. It's a world where everything is natural, where everything is free in the wild. No cities, cars or pollution. A horse represents freely running in the wild. Horses are big and strong. They are natural, and that is important, not like cars that are also big and strong but they pollute. Horses make me feel calm and relaxed. They are just themselves. They can run faster than humans. I think the horse is a symbol of freedom. I think art can open people's minds and make them think about how we could change the world to make it better.

-Trish (name changed for confidentiality)
I painted a sunset, mountains, a waterfall. My art shows the best world I imagine. I didn't paint any houses or roads because I think the world should be more natural.

-Ryan (name changed for confidentiality)

I started with collage, then added plants and designs. It shows a garden, like the one in my house back in Mexico. Gardens are alive, but they are controlled by humans. Being in a garden makes me feel happy. It is a way people can be with nature. I like pictures more than words. Pictures describe things better. They are more real. Pictures have more information. They can be more emotional.

-Kim (name changed for confidentiality)
My art shows the perfect world where everything is free in the wild. No cities, cars or pollution. Most of my colours are bright. Everything is natural. We really should start recycling because we have too much garbage, like that photo of tires (Edward Burtynsky) you showed us. At school the teachers talk to us about the environment and recycling, but not about how art can change the world.

- Christian (name changed for confidentiality)

I like my painting because it looks beautiful. My art means a nice sweet world. It makes me happy

- Bosco (name changed for confidentiality)
Figure 39

My picture shows the Titanic sinking in a storm. This is the terrible thing that happened. Many people died. This shows my worst world.

-Simon (name changed for confidentiality)

Figure 40

My art shows abnormal tanks that fire toast. It shows how war feels, terrible.

-Aaron (name changed for confidentiality)
I like my painting because it looks beautiful. I like the nature. Mountains are better than cities because they are quiet.

-Peter (name changed for confidentiality)

My art says a perfect world. My picture is peaceful floating in the deep water.

-Susan (name changed for confidentiality)
During the eight week period when I taught the after-school art class I also worked on my own painting in my studio, removed from the educational context of the classroom. It was based on a painting I had seen in Germany. My oil painting is a large diptych, measuring three feet high by six feet long. I became intensely involved with the painting process, spending many hours on its production. When I was finished there were three to four layers of paint on the surface of the canvass. I was not actively thinking about the concept of utopia while in the painting process. However, when I looked at my painting within the context of my students’ paintings I was struck by the realization that I had created my version of utopia. Like many of my students expressed in their artist’s statements, I love being in wilderness areas, away from the noise and pollution of the city. Hiking, camping, mountain biking and rock climbing have a therapeutic effect on me. I feel that my painting communicates this. I do not think art needs to be confrontational to be activist. My
image is activist because it can remind me, and perhaps other people, of what is truly enjoyable and worthwhile in life and as a result attitudes and behaviours can be transformed. My aesthetic approach to activism reminds me of something Juan Carlos Castro said to me about how he would prefer to engage with ideas in artworks: “I’d rather be seduced then assaulted” (personal communication, April, 2007).

Exhibiting Students’ Artwork: The Big Show

About two weeks after the final art class, a student art exhibition was held to showcase all of the artwork made in the various after school classes that are held at the AFK facility. By increasing the audience of student artwork via a student art exhibition, the importance and influence of student art can also increase: “[w]hen art is presented outside of the classroom or school it can also act as a means of educating a wider audience and increasing the visibility and importance placed on student art” (Blatherwick, 2005, p.129).

At the art exhibition the students were excited to show their friends and family the art they had made and to enthusiastically explain how they made it and the meaning of their art. Student exhibitions create dialogic spaces allowing student art to “become a catalyst for reflection, discussion and interpretation” (Blatherwick, 2005, p. 129).

As I looked around the exhibition room where the parents and children were buzzing with energy as they responded and reflected on the student artwork, I realized: this is what it is all about. Children need to exhibit their art to a wide audience so they can feel pride and if child art is to be valued in society, it needs to be exhibited to a wide audience. Both Children and society benefit by such exhibitions.
Freedman & Stuhr (2004) explains how student art exhibitions can be a form of social activism: "from [the perspective of student art exhibitions], artistic production is valued in part, because it has the power to influence, and anyone, including students, can work to initiate social and personal change through the visual culture they produce" (p. 90).

I interviewed a small group of students during the opening reception to see if the public exhibition of their artwork altered their perception of the role of aesthetic/activism in society:

So now that your work is on display show do you feel?

*Great! This is cool!*  
*More people can see our art this way. I like it*

Do you think people understand the ideas in your artwork?

*They might not understand it if they just look at the painting, but they would definitely understand it if they read our artist statements.*

*I told my parents what my art is about so they didn’t even need to read my artist statement.*

*The artist statement is part of the art, so everyone should read it.*

Do you think your art may make people think about the ideas in your artwork, like the ways we can make the world a better place?

*Some people might look at our art, but not care about that stuff. I think it depends on if they are into that stuff anyway.*

*I see some people just quickly walking by the art. Maybe they don’t care.*
I don't know.

How can we change the world to make it the way it looks in your artwork?

People have to stop polluting and start recycling.

I think cities will always be dirty, crowded places. When I grow up I want to live in the country, where things are natural and free, like in my painting. It already exists, we just have to go there.

We recycle all our pop cans at school, so there is less garbage, but I think there will always be some garbage.

There is garbage is some places and not others, if you don't want garbage, don't look at it.

Do you think art shows like this can change the world?

I think making these paintings got us thinking about pollution and war, so it could make us change the way we do things. I guess that is changing the world.

I don't think so. People will look at our art, but it doesn't change anything.

It might make people think to pick up garbage and not litter.

Have you ever seen art that makes you think about things?

Before I just thought about art as decoration, to look good, but you got us to think about the ideas in art. I never thought about that before. Art can be about how we can make the world better. By painting and writing we think about it more, and that can change things.
The process of art-making, talking and writing caused the students to reflect on and externalize their beliefs about the intersection of aesthetics and activism. This created new awareness and new ideas. The students can now express their opinions about socio/political activism with some confidence; however, they seem reluctant to admit their art work could act as a catalyst for wider social transformation. Some of their comments seem to reveal an attitude that some aspects of the world are unchangeable: “I think cities will always be dirty, crowded places. I think there will always be some garbage”. Others are cautiously optimistic about meaningful activism starting with themselves: “I think making these paintings got us thinking about pollution and war, so it could make us change the way we do things. I guess that is changing the world”.

Overall I think the art exhibition allowed the students to experience how their artistically expressed concepts can generate large dialogic spaces where their ideas are treated as serious issues that deserve attention from a wide audience. I would like to extend this study to further engage students with aesthetic/activism. Creating a permanent mural or organizing a direct action activity like “Buy Nothing Day” or a shoreline clean-up afternoon could extend the concept of aesthetic/activism into other areas of inquiry; however, as is the nature of after school art classes, time runs out quickly and no further action is possible with this group of children.

Analysis of the Data

My goal was to construct a curriculum that inquires into the area in/between activism and aesthetics. I used Ross Penhall’s paintings and Edward Burtynsky’s photos as central visual texts because their work exists within the liminal area I wanted to explore. I facilitated an inquiry into Penhall and Burtynsky’s work with my students by asking them to respond to the artwork through drawing, writing and talking. We then discussed how to express utopia (Penhall) and dystopia
(Burynsky) through the production of visual texts. The students created painting/collages that conveyed their personal vision of utopia or dystopia using both written and visual text. The students also wrote artist statements to explain their artistic creations.

I taught the class that also served as my research site, took field notes and photographs, audio-taped conversations and wrote reflections after each class was over. I used the students’ art and artists statements as research data; in addition, I created my own artistic inquiry into the notion of utopia. I was cognisant during the research practice of using the methodology of a/r/tography. This included actively working as an artist, teacher and researcher, while being aware of how attending to those identities “alter...perceptions and actions [so that] transformative practice emerg[es]” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 34). I also tried to create a community of practice with my students by opening dialogic spaces that allowed students “an opportunity to inquire together as they create deeper understanding and meaning-making” (Irwin et al., 2006, p. 77) through the analysis and production of visual texts that investigate personally meaningful social issues.

After the course was over I looked at the art-work created, read and re-read the students artists statements, and listened to the audio-recordings of my conversations with the students. During the course of reviewing all the data six themes emerged. While I am hesitant to say they provide a comprehensive and complete analysis of what happened in this inquiry, they encapsulate what I learned during the research process from my subjective perspective as an artist/researcher/teacher inquiring into the concept of aesthetic/formalism within a class of students/community of practice. These six themes are set out below
First Theme: The student/subjects desire to conform to the dominant discourse in the classroom, as constructed by me within the role of their teacher.

Sometimes during this study, when the students and I were engaged in conversations that addressed utopia, dystopia, reading visual texts and aesthetic/activism, I had a feeling some students were trying to guess what I wanted them to say. Some students acted as if there was one correct answer to my questions and they wanted to answer with the “correct” answer. When we were in the AFK gallery I asked the students a series of questions that were designed to facilitate a critical reading of the visual texts. When I asked a student the question “[w]hy do you think Ross Penhall does not include people in his paintings?” The answer the student gave was phrased as a question, as if he was asking if his answer was the correct one: “[b]ecause he wants to show how peaceful nature is?”

This concern with finding the “correct answer” runs counter to the ways a/r/tographers make meaning and create knowledge. A/r/tographers can make meaning when individuals or communities engage with art, writing and teaching through the concepts of metaphor, metonym, openings, reverberations, excess, contiguity and living inquiry, which rely on personal and relational ways of knowing and meaning-making, that are subjective and situated within a specific embodied context. Knowledge is socially constructed within a community of practice. A/r/tographers do not seek an objective, universal truth that exists independent of context. The idea of an objectively correct answer is not congruent with the nature of a/r/tography.

Why do some students think there is only one correct response when asked for a personal interpretation of artwork? Some teaching and evaluation practices in educational contexts require students to select one correct answer from a list of incorrect answers. I have taught in schools within the same community in which this research into aesthetic/activism takes place. In some of these schools standardized high-stakes tests are used to evaluate student learning. Some of these tests rely heavily on multiple choice questions, which can lead students to
believe that they need to find the one “correct” answer. When I asked the students in this study if they were required to perform in high-stakes multiple choice tests ten out of twelve of them said yes.

I believe the existence of evaluation methods that require students to memorize and reproduce information that is regarded as objective truth creates an imperative for students to have the opportunity to experience alternative methods of meaning-making and knowledge construction that do not rely on memorization and reproduction of facts. A/r/tography offers an embodied, personal, relational and artistic method of knowledge construction that may represent a more personally meaningful method of learning than the memorization/evaluation method used in some schools that I have taught in.

Second Theme: Some students/subjects had the confidence to express their personal, subjective values when analysing and producing artworks.

While some students displayed a desire to conform to the dominant classroom discourse as presented by the teacher, other students expressed individual opinions that ran counter to the dominant discourse of the classroom, which was constructed by me as the teacher. For example, I presented Ross Penhall’s landscape paintings that include an image of rocky cliffs and the ocean as a vision of utopia. Most students agreed with this interpretation, but Kim disagreed: "I don't like the painting because I hate hiking; it looks dangerous". I always supported this kind of personal meaning-making by encouraging students to express their subjective interpretation as well as asking the students to explain their interpretation. Meaning in artwork is socially constructed by the people engaging with the art-work; therefore the meaning of an image is not an unchangeable, permanent construct, it is fluid, dynamic and subjective. My research suggests that upper elementary aged children are able to engage with meaning-making when analysing art-work by refuting or concurring with the dominant discourse that is presented in the classroom by the teacher.
Third Theme: Most students demonstrated an appreciation for the aesthetic and therapeutic qualities of natural environments unaffected by the corrupting influence of human activity.

“Nature unaffected by human activity” emerged as a dominate theme in all nine students who identified their images as utopia. Three of those nine images included animals. When asked to explain their choice of imagery the students used descriptors such as “peaceful”, “beautiful”, “free” and “natural”. This seems to represent a high value placed on the aesthetic of natural forms and low value placed on the aesthetic of human built forms as well as an appreciation for the nature of animals. When I asked students about their choice to include animals in their visions of utopia, some students expressed their appreciation for what they perceived as the “natural” qualities of animals as well as their symbolic meaning. One student stated the following:

A horse represents freely running in the wild. Horses are big and strong. They are natural, and that is important, not like cars that are also big and strong but they pollute. Horses make me feel calm and relaxed. They are just themselves. They can run faster than humans. I think a horse is a symbol of freedom.

While the students investigated the aesthetics of trees, mountains and oceans through painting and collages, they also alluded to the socially activist role of these images. One student linked nature unaffected by human activity to social transformation: “I think the world would be a better place if there weren’t any houses, roads or pollution. Everything can be natural and free. That’s what I want to show in my art”. Some students also felt that nature can have a calming effect on people, as opposed to city life, which can cause stress, as one female student put it: “I like peaceful things. Like a swan in the middle of the lake. It’s like no one is bothering you, no homework, so you can feel good”.
Why did most students paint images of the natural environment, including mountains, sunsets, rivers, trees and animals to express their vision of utopia? Wilson and Wilson (1985) argue that children's visual language is strictly socially acquired: "...all images created by children...can be traced back to pre-existing schemata that are socio-culturally shared" (p. 243). If the dominant images in the students' artwork are culturally acquired, where are they acquiring them from? Some students may have used the artwork in their homes as source images for their artwork. For example, when analysing a landscape painting by Ross Penhall, one student shared: "[m]y parents have a painting like that!" Another source may be the local natural environment. The community where this study is located is in very close proximity to several mountains, which are popular recreation areas for families. The ocean is also in close proximity to the community. Therefore it is possible the students are using the natural environment that surrounds their community as an imagery source. The images created by the students may have been influenced by the art-work I presented to them as representative of the concept of utopia. The painting I presented by Penhall depicts trees, the ocean and a mountainous landscape. Penhall lives in the same community that this study takes place in. His paintings depict landscape that is representative of the environment surrounding the community, so there could be an interesting overlapping of imagery sources for the students' art-work, since their natural environment and the visual text we analysed exists in contiguity to each other.

Much contemporary activist art education focuses on bringing attention to the atrocities of modern life: (Chalmers & Desai, 2007; Darts, 2004; Brown, 2007; Freedman & Stuhr, 2004). In contrast to this, nine out of twelve subjects engaged with art activism by creating images that offer a positive view of a more "natural" future as a method to inspire positive personal and societal change, rather than critique social and political problems. This positive engagement with activism was unexpected, but may indicate a new area of inquiry. Perhaps positive activism could be a new direction of art education research and practice. If aesthetic/activism is to be transformational, then students need to engage with an inspiring "future vision" to work towards, as opposed to critiquing socio/political problems
like war, violence, homelessness and crime which children may not be emotionally prepared to inquire into.

Fourth Theme: Some students did use art-making as a vehicle to engage with socio/political problems.

Three out of twelve students’ chose to critique social problems. Two focused on the horrors of war and one inquired into the man-made disaster of the sinking of the Titanic. All three students were boys who were sitting at the same table for the duration of the study. They seemed to really enjoy talking about war, guns and tanks; however, their comments reveal an understanding of the real devastation war can bring: “[m]y subject is war. My art shows a terrible world. My art shows what people feel like during war. If war doesn't stop it might end the entire world”. While these three students were confident expressing their intentions, when asked if their art could be a catalyst for social change there was a variety of opinions:

“I don’t know, maybe”.

“I think making these paintings got us thinking about pollution and war, so it could make us change the way we do things. I guess that is changing the world”.

“I don’t think so. People will look at our art, but it doesn’t change anything”.

While the students were reluctant to admit their art-work could be the catalyst of societal transformation, their art-work was the catalyst for personal transformation as evidenced by their choice to articulate their fears of war and violence through image production and textual information. Therefore this study allowed students to open dialogic and contemplative spaces that address real social issues.
Fifth Theme: The student/subjects demonstrated an understanding of aesthetic/activism in artworks

Does the students' work engage with aesthetic/activism? While the art-making process is inherently aesthetic, the students were also thinking through the medium of art, as evidenced in their artist statements. They seemed aware they were creating visual texts that expressed their ideas and feelings about what was wrong with the world and how we can improve it. Some of the comments from the students reveal that the experience of inquiring into ideas about societal change within a community of practice was an individually transformational experience: “I think making these paintings got us thinking about pollution and war, so it could make us change the way we do things. I guess that is changing the world”.

A curriculum that inquires into the concept of aesthetic/activism is about exploring the rhizomatic relationality in/between aesthetics and activism; it is about how aesthetics and activism are inter/related, en/tangled and inter/twined. A curriculum that explores aesthetics and activism as separate concepts will not achieve this. I believe the comments of one student reveal an understanding of the rhizomatic concept of aesthetic/activism:

Before I just thought about art as decoration, to look good, but you got us to think about the ideas in art. I never thought about that before. Art can be about how we can make the world better. By painting and writing we think about it more, and that can change things.

The comments of this student reveal an understanding of how concepts and values can be embedded within images and how those images can open dialogic and contemplative spaces that can be personally and socially transformative. This is the goal of enacting a curriculum that engages students with aesthetic/activism. I feel that some students comprehended and internalized the concept of aesthetic/activism fully, but not all the students were able or willing to engage with
the curriculum I presented. Some students were not able to articulate an understanding of aesthetic/activism. When I asked a student if he felt his art-work could cause people to think about the social problem depicted in his image, and as a result change their attitude or behaviour, he answered “I don’t know”. In retrospect I feel his “I don’t know” response may indicate he did not understand my question or the concept of aesthetic/activism. It is possible some students within the age range of nine to thirteen years old are not yet able to comprehend the concept of aesthetic/activism.

Sixth Theme: The student/subjects demonstrated an understanding of the interrelationships between visual and textual data.

Kit Grauer (2005) explains the importance of integrating visual and verbal modes of understanding to enhance educational experiences:

...using both visual and verbal modes of understanding and representing could actually enhance children’s expression. By using the unique aspects of knowing represented by visual as well as verbal thinking, children have the opportunity to experience deeper and richer forms of communicating their ideas... (p. 213).

A/r/tography values the intersection of art and writing not to illustrate or explain, but to enrich and enhance inquiry: “[A/r/tography] unites the visual and textual by complimenting, refuting or enhancing one another, [as a way to] provide space for exploration, translation and understanding in deeper and enhanced ways of meaning making” (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004, p. 31).

The students’ comments reveal an appreciation for how visual and textual data can inform and enrich one another. For example, one student explained how textual information can make visual information more accessible. I asked him if he thought people would understand the ideas expressed in his artwork. He responded: “[t]hey might not understand it [the students’ artworks] if they just look at the paintings, but
they would definitely understand it if they read our artist statements”. Another student discussed how an artist’s statement is not an explanation of the artwork, but is in fact an integral element of the artwork: “[t]he artist statement is part of the art, so everyone should read it”. The students were able to expand and articulate their ideas of utopia and dystopia by creating visual as well as textual representations of their learning. Writing about artwork creates both denotative and connotative expressions of cognitive processes that enrich and expand the learning experience of students.

During the eight-week after-school course students made meaning while engaging with aesthetic/activism in the following ways: By expressing personal and subjective interpretations of art-work, inquiring into the inter/relationships between visual and textual information, learning about the liminal area between aesthetics and activism and demonstrating an ability to create images that express their ideas and feelings concerning the concepts of utopia and dystopia. I found it interesting that most students decided to communicate ideas in their art-work of how they think the world can be improved. This seems to represent a hopeful, positive engagement with socially transformative art education. Perhaps focusing on creating a vision for a better future is an area that would engage elementary students in deeply meaningful ways. I would like to continue an inquiry into this area with another group of students at some point in the future.
Chapter Five: Conclusion and Recommendations

When it is all Done

The purpose of this study was to enact an elementary art curriculum that explores the spaces in/between aesthetic formalism and socio/political activism using the methodology of a/r/tography and to measure the learning that results. Most inquires into art education as activism use secondary students as research subjects (see Kumashiro, 2004; Knight, 2006; Aoki, 2005; Ulbricht, 2003; Gude, 2007; Giroux, 1992; Barnett, 2008; Freedman, 2003; Lanier, 1969; Chalmers, 2002; Darts, 2004). There are few academic inquires into how elementary students would respond to such a curriculum.

Engaging secondary students with socio/political issues may be easier than with elementary students because older students are more cognitively developed; as a result they are better able to understand issues like the politics of representation, connotative meanings and art as metaphor. At times I have wondered if my elementary school aged students were able to understand art on this level. The students did seem to understand that the formal qualities of art can express
socially-transformative ideas, that visual and textual data can enhance or refute one another, that art can offer an inspiring future vision as well as critique socio/political problems and that art is visual text that contains ideas. My guiding pedagogical principle was to ensure that I engaged my students with issues that they had direct, personal experience with and that they were able to show their work to a wide audience. At the same time, I endeavoured to teach students technical art making skills because “[w]ithout some attention to “the craft” of art-making, some supposedly socially conscious work falls absolutely flat” (Chalmers, personal communication, February, 2005).

This purpose of this thesis was to construct a curriculum that will engage my students with certain types of learning. In addition, it affords me a leaning opportunity as well. Art-making has occupied a large portion of my life. I feel confident in my technical art-making abilities and my understanding of the formal aspects of art; however, I wanted to expand and enrich my ability to engage with the activist facets of art as an art-maker, art teacher and art education researcher. I believe the process of researching and writing this thesis caused that learning to occur. Understanding and experiencing how art not only expresses ideas through its formal elements, but how those ideas can be socially-transformative has been a major learning objective for me. I have been teaching art in schools for eight years. During this time, I have constructed and enacted art curriculum based on a modernist/formalist understanding of art. The format of my course outlines looked like this:

**Studio Art 11/12**

**September:** Pencil drawing using a visual reference.

**October/November:** Acrylic painting copying a “Master” painter’s work, change a small aspect of it to personalize the image.

**December:** Clay ceramics: pinch pot, coil vase, slab container.
January: Linoleum prints of a personal metaphor.

February/March: Industrial design. In a small group build a functional chair using cardboard.

April: Research and write an art history essay.

May/June: Student choice of project.

While I enjoyed teaching this type of curriculum and my students seemed to enjoy my art courses, I now realize that my curriculum was based on a formalist studio model of art education that conceptualizes art curriculum as a series of unrelated projects whose primary learning objective is technical proficiency within a given medium. Researching and writing this thesis has allowed me to reconceptualise art curriculum. An art curriculum that inquires into social and political activism through the analysis and production of aesthetically compelling visual texts has the potential to be socially transformative. Young art students can become artists/activists when they use their art to articulate their vision for a better world.

While looking at the art-work the students and I made over the course of this study I realized that much of it is fairly "safe" looking landscape images. The images are not obviously provocative or even political in nature. For the most part the students and I did not create aesthetically confrontational artwork. While the art-work created may not initially seem to have any activist content, the process of analysing the political content of the art of Ross Penhall and Edward Burtynsky and using that analysis to discuss, write, create and exhibit art-work that inquires into the concepts of utopia and dystopia is a socially activist process because it can cause students to critique their life/world and articulate their ideas for an improved life/world.
The process of researching and writing this thesis has also caused me to re/read the art-work that I have made over the last eighteen years as existing within the space in/between aesthetics and activism. When I created the art-work that is presented in this thesis I was not consciously trying to create activist art-work; however, the art I created does express ideas, values and feelings and therefore is political, but this is not the same as activism. Almost any image that expresses values and ideas can be considered political. Activism is intentionally trying to create social or political change. A political image can become activist when it is positioned in a way that is intended to create socio/political change. Positioning my art-work within this thesis, which is intended to inspire pedagogical change in myself and others, transforms my art-work from being political to being potentially activist. I have also included an aesthetic and an activist reading of each individual work of art within this thesis to demonstrate how my thinking about my own artwork has been transformed as a result of my inquiry into aesthetic/activism.

Curriculum itself can be aesthetic/activist. The act of teaching a specific curriculum can be intended to cause cognitive discord in students and, as a result, create societal change. The curriculum I constructed and enacted during the course of this research project was intended to enable students to experience how visual texts can communicate socially-transformative concepts through their formal elements. Students were then able to engage in aesthetic/activism through discussions, writing and art-making, which they shared with an audience during the student exhibition. I posit this process has the potential to be activist because if can cause students to re/examine their values, which can result in thoughtful action.

What I would do Differently Next Time

The process of inquiry creates new ideas. The eight week after school course I used as my research site is finished, but my thinking is not. Next time I would like to do the following:
1. Use non-traditional art materials for student art analysis and production thereby challenging students and myself to expand the definition of art beyond conventional studio-art materials. For example, showing students the art of Scottish environmental sculptor Andy Goldsworthy as a way to facilitate an inquiry into environmentalist issues as expressed through art.

2. Use art-making as a way to engage with direct socio/political activism. Once the students have articulated their vision of utopia through art-making the class could brainstorm activities that could cause their utopian vision to be realized. For example tree-planting, garbage clean-up or a public mural can change the environment of students in real ways.

3. Be less prescriptive in assigning a concept to inquire into. I wonder, for example, instead of telling students to express their ideas about utopia and dystopia, what would happen if I showed students a wide variety of politically engaged art-work and then told them to research any personally relevant socio/political issue and express their research in a process of writing and art-making not separate or illustrative of each other, but woven through each other?

I have included my own art in this thesis because my art-making practice, my art teaching practice and my interest in art education research do not exist in isolation from one another. They are intertwined, entangled and knotted together. They are the knowing, doing and making of my art-based living inquiry.

As a teacher, I enjoyed getting to know the students, watching them become deeply engaged in the art making process, and seeing the pride on their faces when they finished an art project. As a researcher, I wondered if they could make the cognitive connections between images, words and activism. As an artist, I enjoyed working with students to create aesthetically powerful, politically potent multi-media art-works.
Most of the students created images of utopia that included mountains, lakes, trees and animals. While these subjects are not uncommon in many children’s drawings and paintings, re-framing these images as visions of utopia that could be used as a catalyst for discussions and actions meant to bring about real social and environmental change could be an important consideration when designing socially reconstructive elementary art curriculum. It suggests an optimistic form of social activism through the process of art-making. Once students have visually articulated their ideal world view in their art-work, the next logical step would be to create projects that allow students to transform their environment to so it matches their artistic utopian image. This could lead to activism because students would be intentionally creating social and environmental change.

Transferability

I realize the time constraints of this inquiry limit the potential of it. Eight 1.5 hour classes is not a lot of time. A classroom teacher may have different results if this curriculum was extended into a year-long program. My research subjects/students ranged in age from 10-13 years old. There can be huge variability of maturity and cognitive abilities within this age range. A classroom teacher may have a smaller range of student ages and therefore, be able to focus curriculum to more effectively engage students in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Despite these limitations my research subjects/students did not contain some variables that can make teaching art more challenging, so I was able to focus more on the art curriculum, as opposed to individual student needs. For example, I had no English-as-a-second-language-students, no special needs students and no students with serious behavioural problems. I had a small group of students who were all interested in art. While this made my experience in the classroom potentially less challenging and more enjoyable, I realize that classroom teachers may have to dedicate more time and energy to meeting a wide range of students
needs. As such, they may have less time and energy to focus on a challenging art curriculum.

Recommendations for Further Study

More research needs to be done that inquires into how elementary art education can engage students with activism. Chalmers (2005) states: "Art involvement can become particularly meaningful in the lives of elementary students when we find ways to connect art learning and production to important social issues" (p.105). In response to Chalmers' statement I would ask how can children connect art to important social issues? This thesis offers one possible answer to this question, but more research needs to be done in this area.

I believe the idea of positive activism needs to be further explored. Using art to create inspiring visions for the future is a great starting point for student socio/political activism. I would like to continue to investigate what types of curriculum can lead to social reconstruction. I think a teacher with an enthusiastic, caring attitude, serious involvement in the field of study and a focus on building positive, inspiring ways for students to engage with the world creates the potential for a transformative educational experience for students.

I also believe education theory needs to be more readily accessible to teachers working in the field. As David Darts points out in his dissertation (2004, p. 125):

"Responsible thought cannot remain confined within the walls of the academy but must take to the street"

(Taylor & Saarinen, 1994, Communicative, p. 10).
I have researched and written this thesis with the intention of unsettling and transforming my teaching practice as well as the teaching practice of others. How can I position this research so practicing teachers can access it easily? Websites, conference presentations and published curriculum guides may allow teachers to access this research more readily, increasing its influence on the field of art education.

**Final Thoughts**

While the process of researching and writing this thesis has been arduous, I believe new knowledge has been created. I have become intimately familiar with art education theory, I have gained the experiential knowledge that results from pursuing an academic inquiry over an extended period of time, I have been able to reflect deeply on the question “what learning is important in a socially transformational art education program?” and I have experimented with new curriculum and evaluated the results. I have been able to contribute something to a field of study that I care about passionately.

My goal was to enact a socially-transformative art education curriculum; however, reflecting on my teaching and research process has caused me to recognize a potential limitation within my curriculum design. My curriculum asked the students a question: How could you create an artwork that expresses your ideas concerning what utopia or dystopia looks like using collage, drawing, painting and writing in response to the visual texts presented? This focusing question that I based the curriculum on could be considered prescriptive due to the limitations set on the art mediums and concepts that the students were permitted to engage with. This could limit how students are able to engage with aesthetic/activism and lead to predictable, almost predetermined results which are socially-conformist, not socially-transformative. I recognize that some of the students’ art-work appears to be derivative of the Ross Penhall visual text that was presented as an example of utopia.
In my defense, the “proscriptive curricular question” I used that may limit students’ engagement with aesthetic/activism has some commonalities to Juan Carlos Castro’s notion of “constraints that enable: creating spaces for artistic inquiry” (2007, p. 76). Castro argues that limiting the scope of student artistic inquiry through enabling constraints can create focus and purpose to student artistic inquiry: “Well structured constraints [focusing questions] create a space that can orient and enable artistic inquiry [by] asking for a reordering and reconsideration of accepted understandings and inviting elaboration and extension” (p. 77). Castro used the question “What would your self-portrait look like if you couldn’t include yourself directly?” (p. 76) as an enabling constraint when he taught a photography class. He found this question “enabled artistic-inquiry so artist-students were able to enter into spaces of uncertainty and be able to reorganize previous understanding” (p. 77). The question I posed to my students: “How could you create an artwork that expresses your ideas concerning what utopia or dystopia looks like using collage, drawing and painting in response to the visual texts I presented?” could also act as an enabling restraint by orienting and enabling artistic inquiry.

Is my curricular approach limiting and proscriptive or is it a constraint that enables student artistic inquiry? Perhaps the limitations set on student art materials, area of inquiry, and the presentation of only two example of visual text that express utopia and dystopia create more restraint then is necessary to enable artistic inquiry. Some constraint can be enabling, while too much constraint may be limiting. I wonder if the restraints I used on student inquiry may have been limiting. How would the results of this research would be different if I removed some of the limitations I set on student inquiry? What would happen if a teacher placed no restraints on student inquiry?

My research subjects/students have been engaged with an art curriculum which I believe contains the best of what art education can offer. They have experienced the process of being exhibiting artists and have hopefully gained new technical art
making skills and a greater awareness of the socio/political activist potential of their art making.

My research question “How to construct a curriculum that exists in the liminal area between aesthetics and activism and what learning will result?” has led me on a journey that has created new questions: “Does aesthetic/activism have to critique a socio/political problem to be effective?” and “Can expressing a positive world vision in art lead to transformational activism?”. Writing this thesis has made me realize that research is a never ending process.
References


