

Shark Girl: Examining Local Art as Visual Culture Curriculum

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Abstract

In today's increasingly globalizing world, images are vital to communication and expression. Visual culture consists of every image we interact with on a daily basis. Advertisements, media, the design of the car, bicycle, bus, or shoes we use to get to and from destinations, the memes we might laugh at on our twitter feeds, and the emojis we use in place of words in texted conversations, all constitute visual culture. Visual culture, therefore, encapsulates much of how we interact with and relate to our world, in an image-dependent society. I, along with many other educational and aesthetic theorists, believe that visual culture naturally belongs in art curriculum. As with any important concept we wish our students to engage with in a classroom, the challenge is finding ways to make it relatable, relevant, and interesting to our students' lives. Using ethnographic methodologies and arts-based research, I studied one facet of visual culture: public art in my own community, Buffalo, NY, focusing most particularly on *Shark Girl*: a statue/bench in the popular Canalside waterfront. I argue that public art is perfectly situated to provide a 'hook' for student engagement in the art room, as it is accessible, highly visible, and inherently relevant to students' lives. The implications of my findings include an approach to teaching visual culture in the art room, across grade levels and media, in which public art is an exemplar, and source for research, community engagement, and art-making.

Introduction

If you were to ask any Buffalonian “who is Shark Girl” they would be able to tell you. Many people who have visited Buffalo could also answer this question. The fact is, *Shark Girl* is an iconic piece of Buffalo’s visual culture. She is a work of public art who has taken on a prominent persona within our community. She has self-proclaimed fans, friends, and loves. What was intended to be a contemplative spot to sit and watch the water, has become a photo opportunity, a celebrity, and a pilgrimage site. There is something poignant, sweet, and worthy of sympathy about *Shark Girl*, but also something independent and undeniably new. When she moved here, Buffalo embraced her; and as a result, she wove herself into the fabric of Buffalo’s culture. I have gone to visit her, posed, taken photos. I have liked countless photos which friends post to social media doing the exact same thing. I have seen bumper stickers and t-shirts starring *Shark Girl*, news articles and more Instagram posts than I can count; and I have wondered what makes this fiberglass canal-side creature, in a city filled with public art, such a phenomenon. After conducting an ethnographic analysis of *Shark Girl*, I can articulate the effect she has on the people who interact with her: she surprises us, comforts us, and represents us. I believe *Shark Girl* is one strong example of the power of public art in creating visual culture. In our rapidly globalizing world, visual culture is an essential component of art curriculum; and I believe that public art is an ideal vehicle with which to bring visual culture into the art classroom in a meaningful and engaging way.

Research Statement and Background to the Problem

Visual culture plays a prominent role in today's increasingly globalized world, in which image-based communication is vital. I believe that educating students about visual culture provides necessary tools for engaging with the contemporary world. Linking learning to students' experiences provides an opportunity for richer and more meaningful connection, which leads me to believe that public art is a prime source material for teaching visual culture in the classroom. Students interact with public art in their communities every day, making them inherently tied to the visual culture of their world. Through this study, I sought to uncover the significance of the role public art plays in creating visual culture in a community; and since *Shark Girl* is an icon of public art in Buffalo, I chose to conduct an ethnographic study of her in search of answering the following questions: who is *Shark Girl* to her community, what is the role of public art within a community, and in what ways does this manifest visual culture?

Literature Review

Public Art

Public art plays a powerful role in the lives which make up a community, as it is accessible and immediate. Mary Staniszewski (1995) holds that art as we know it today, did not exist until fairly recently. While Duchamp's *Fountain* is art, the *Venus of Willendorf* was not. This is because, historically, art did not serve a disciplined aesthetic function; instead works of art were part of the everyday fabric of life. We look at prehistoric cave paintings and marvel at the artistry of them; but for early man, these were more likely part of a ritual, or worship practice

and not simply beautiful decoration (Staniszewski, 1995 pp. 1-118). Putting an art in a public space breaks down the barrier between the viewer and the work. It is not an aloof presence on a museum wall, but a part of your environment, something you live and interact with.

Visual Culture

Visual culture includes any and all images which surround us in our daily lives, as well as the images we produce. This encompasses everything from public architecture and statuary, advertisements and television, to Instagram posts. I believe that though not all of visual culture may constitute high art, it is directly related to art and the minds of artists. Therefore, visual culture is a temporal, emerging component of our lives, and it is worth study and integration into art classrooms.

On the internet, images act as agents of communication. One way this manifests is through image-based social media. Instagram, still a relatively new platform, has revealed a huge shift in the practice of photography, and the sharing of photographs today. As shown through McMaster's (2016) research, the internet moves quickly, and perhaps with the most speed when it comes to social media apps like Instagram. If Heffernan (2013) and her contemporaries are to be believed, then social media is a phenomenon with substantial influence in the lives of young people. This leads me to believe that the visual culture of social media is worthy of study in the classroom, but that may be the best way to equip students to interact with the visual culture which surrounds them healthily and productively.

Implications for Art Education

Visual culture surrounds students, and so therefore affects them in many ways. I, along with many educational theorists, believe that visual culture should be integrated into art

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curriculums. Heise (2004) aptly states that visual culture influences how students see and interpret the world, and shapes public taste. By recognizing these aspects of the world as a form of visual literacy, we may provide students with the tools necessary to partake in their cultural landscapes (Mueller, 1997). Some theorists fear that integration of Visual Culture Arts Education (VCAE), will shift the focus from making to analyzing, which they find problematic (Duncum, 2016). I feel that though VCAE depends on teaching visual analysis, it necessarily involves making as well. Furthermore, analysis of art is an important skill for cultivating creative thinkers regardless of its application to contemporary images.

Duncum (2010) disagrees with the assumption made in McMaster's (2016) research, that visual culture is rapidly homogenizing. The former believes that though there may be vast cultural sharing occurring, this manifests differently for different groups of people. I am unsure as to which claim has more validity, I feel there may be truth in both. Regardless, I believe both men would agree that educating young minds about these paradigm shifts would be beneficial. The emphasis on VCAE underlines the departure from Discipline Based Art Education. Because images exist as a part of cultural experience, they must not be reduced to purely disciplinary parameters. VCAE thinkers profess that art educators must teach about visual culture in terms of its capacities for power, self-identity, and historical ties (Ballengee-Morris, 2001). I find these to be applicable and versatile starting points in understanding the images which shape our culture today.

These three concepts: power, self-identity, and historical ties are very important in the classroom. If visual culture is an avenue to teaching these ideas, and instilling in students a value for their understanding of self and other, then it is worth pursuing in the art room. I am

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interested in exploring how the study of local visual culture, can make these concepts even more relevant, personal, and meaningful to art students.

Theoretical Framework

Since coming to Nazareth College, I have been increasingly interested in arts-based research. My home of Buffalo, NY, in the midst of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery public arts initiative, offers countless subject matter within the community to examine ethnographically. Culhane (2017) states that as ethnographers, we are “multisensory, embodied, imaginative beings” (p. 14-15). In examining my own interests to find a meaningful area of curiosity to study, I wanted to embody this description of the ethnographer. An arts-based research project seemed like an ideal way to combine the sensory with the cerebral, and integrate my imagination with my academic work. *Shark Girl* immediately came to my mind when I considered public art in Buffalo, and my fascination and questions grew as I considered an ethnographic analysis of this fiberglass celebrity.

Maxine Greene (1995) states that imagination is “a means through which we can assemble a coherent world...imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” (p. 3). In terms of my own study, this idea encapsulates the intersection of art and visual culture. Art releases the imagination certainly; and visual culture involves a meeting of art and communication. I believe this intersection is pivotal to community building, bringing in the importance of empathy and the relating of coherent worlds that Greene (1995) discusses. The ideas of these art theorists inform my interest in ethnographic research; and inspire my connection of arts-based research to my own pedagogy.

Methodologies/Methods

Methodology:

Renee Sandell proposes the ethnographic method of analysis: Form Theme Context™ (2018). This approach may be used on an artwork or other cultural object to better understand visual language in all its complexities. Form looks at how the work “is”, in terms of structural, technical construction, and presentation. Theme aims to discuss what the work is about, exploring the expressive content. Finally, Context involves the by whom, for whom, and why of the arts creation (Sandell, 2018). This methodology of analysis suits the study of visual culture well, as it unpacks the layers of meaning and intention in images and artworks. Employing this methodology allowed me to not only analyze *Shark Girl* for meaning through form, but ensured that I consider context and symbol, which fully involves all characteristics of visual culture.

Methods:

Elliot (Elliot & Culhane, 1997) lists the core methods of ethnographic research as participant observation, interviewing, and analysis. Ethnographic analysis was a cornerstone method of my data collection. Following the model of Renee Sandell (2018), I also conducted an analysis of *Shark Girl* as an object of visual culture. I immersed myself in the human interactions which involve public art, and specifically *Shark Girl*, in order to understand how people perceive, engage with, and react to the sculpture. This included taking field notes, conducting interviews with Buffalo citizens, an employee of Canalside, and employees of Buffalo’s Arts Commission.

Since I analyzed a visual work of art for this article, I collected predominantly visual data. *Shark Girl* exists as a public interactive work of art, and as such, I gathered not only

my own visual data, but that of others. This included social media posts, and photo evidence of *Shark Girl* in the many forms she appears (i.e. on clothing, bumper stickers, comics, etc.).

Data/Finding Results

Gathering Background on *Shark Girl*

To begin my study of *Shark Girl* I looked into her origin and background. *Shark Girl* was purchased from artist Casey Riordan Millard by the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, and she is what many Buffalonians consider a “compulsory destination for selfies...” (Inscoc, 2017). The Albright-Knox describes her as “absurd, hilarious, and bittersweet...” (Albright-Knox, 2018). Very early on in my research I came across an article detailing *Shark Girl's* first home, which was the Cincinnati waterfront. I discovered that Millard had a childhood fear of the water, and turned her anxieties into a figure of soothing, which was *Shark Girl*. She originally planned the sculpture to be a contemplative piece, which one could sit with facing the water, creating a space for quiet reflection. According to the artist, *Shark Girl* had been installed as intended by the waterfront for less than 6 hours before people physically picked her up and turned her around, using her as a photo opportunity with the water as the backdrop (Haight, 2016). Despite this very interesting development and change of purpose, she was not embraced in her original home. When she moved to Buffalo she was immediately embraced. Millard comments on her creation’s overwhelming success in her new home along the Erie Canal in Buffalo: “I can't believe it's happened. I'm just so happy for her that she's being taken care of. I guess because in my head, I think she's alive, so I'm so glad that she's got this life going on,” (Haight, 2016). With this contextual knowledge

about *Shark Girl* in mind, I felt ready to see her in person once again, this time with the lens of a researcher, rather than a hometown visitor as I had only seen her before.

Field Notes

Before my first day of observing *Shark Girl* in the field, I sat down with my phone and started scrolling back to the last time I could remember seeing her. I was searching for a picture. A few years ago, one of my close friends from high school who lives out in the suburbs, wanted a “Buffalo Day”. She reached out to me and our other close friend from the city, and asked if we could arrange a day where we visited all of the classic Buffalo stops since she was feeling bored with the mundanity of her suburban summer experience. I remembered myself and my other city-dwelling friend immediately deciding that Canalside had to be on the list, a summertime staple. I do not remember who said it first, but the next words that were spoken were “we can stop and see *Shark Girl* while we’re there!”. When I found the picture, a selfie I had taken of all four of us (I’m including *Shark Girl* as a member of the party), I studied our smiling faces, squinting into the sun, and my eyes fell on Monica’s hands which gently clasped the statues. Indeed, she had felt like a member of our party then. “Isn’t she great? What a sweetie” I remember saying. As I looked at the picture I felt the same way: we weren’t taking the picture “at” a public work of art, we were taking a picture *with* her.

I knew I wanted to observe how other people interacted with *Shark Girl*; and in anticipation of taking field notes, I decided to get some insights from my good friend and long-time employee of *Shark Girl*’s home, Canalside. I wanted to hear his perspective of how people interacted with this work of art. Below is an excerpt from our interview:

Talia: So Jack, what would you say is *Shark Girl's* impact on you as a Canalside employee?

Jack: Well...I think every single day that I've worked there, which at this point has been a lot [laughs], someone has come up to me and asked 'where is *Shark Girl*'. A surprising amount of people can't find her. Which I guess is 'cause she's sort of out of the way, she's over by the bridge which is kind of off of the main path.

Talia: What kind of interactions do you see between visitors and *Shark Girl*?

Jack: Um people just really seem to love her, I haven't encountered anyone who doesn't think she's really cool. People are usually there to take a picture with her.

Talia: What is it about her that you think is so loveable?

Jack: Hmm...I'm not sure I think she's just fun, and funny. Like she's a girl with a shark's head and you kinda just vibe with her, if that makes sense. She's also a pretty unique photo-opportunity, which people are into these days with social media and whatnot. (J. Kane, personal communication, July 1, 2018)

I was intrigued by Jack's description of *Shark Girl* as someone people "vibe" with; and I wanted to get a look at these interactions for myself, so I spent some time at Canalside. This was the peak of summer, in July, and so my field note taking time relied on how long I could endure the sun in a spot with very little shade. *Shark Girl* is located on one of the bridges of the canal, over a spot that in the winter time serves as an outdoor ice

skating rink and curling arena. The only shade falls from the angular, industrial arches of the bridge. In the summer months, the only object of interest on the bridge is one work of art, that also serves as the only bench there: *Shark Girl*.

I recalled the interesting descriptors assigned to this artwork by the Albright-Knox “absurd, hilarious, and bittersweet...” (Albright-Knox, 2018), and listened for the words I heard from people who came to take photos with her during my observation. I did hear a great deal of laughter, especially from young people, who came to see her. I heard small children giggling as soon as they saw her, and teenagers laughing with each other as they posed for their selfies. I overheard some middle-aged women exclaim “Oh isn’t she just darling?” as they patiently took individual shots of each other sitting on the bench beside the statue. Looking back at my own notes, I realized that I never once referred to *Shark Girl* as I just did, a statue; in my notes, I only referred to her by her name, or with feminine pronouns. Likewise, I never noticed a visitor refer to *Shark Girl* in anything other than human terms. Some examples of this from my field notes include:

“Wait, put your arm around, that’s cute”

“I’m going to hug her”

“What do you think she’s thinking about?”

“She likes me, I can tell”

“We found her!”

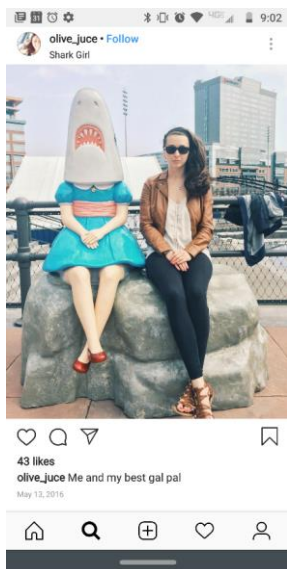
In reference to the last example, about half of the people who came to take pictures with her exclaimed something about finding her, or referred to her as something they had been seeking.

After my second day of taking field notes, I realized that I started to wonder about all the pictures I had seen taken, which were numerous indeed. I decided to go onto Instagram, and conduct a search of images with the tag “Shark Girl”. I was unprepared for the myriad images that came up. My search included photos with the hashtag “Shark Girl” and location” Shark Girl,” which corresponded with a geotag for Canalside. I saved dozens of pictures that were available to any Instagram user who searched, and could have kept going had I not been overwhelmed with the number of images I had studied already. I was looking primarily at two things: poses and captions. Not only did I start to notice patterns in the poses I saw of people (and also pets, and inanimate objects) alongside *Shark Girl*, I also noticed fascinating captions. People referred to this work of art with terms of endearment, friendship, and even love. Below is a list of the terms which people of all ages and gender presentations applied to *Shark Girl*:

Friendly/Platonic Terms	Terms of Endearment/Romantic	Idolizing/Empowering
Best gal pal Sista sista Homegirl Buddy New friend	Special lady Tinder date My girlfriend My girl Zoomorphic bae Secret crush Bae Little lady Sweetest gal Little sweetheart Love	Iconic Immortalized Princess Buffalo’s own Popular Awesome

Figure 1. Table listing terms assigned to *Shark Girl*, retrieved from Instagram search: “*Shark Girl*, Location”, 2018.

As for poses, people went for whimsical, humorous, sweet, classic, and interactive. People placed their hands on *Shark Girl's* hands, put hats on her head, and dogs in her lap. They kissed her cheek, hugged her, and wrote some extremely interesting captions which included the terms listed above. There were quite a few posts made by people visiting Buffalo, and *Shark Girl*, for the first time. They expressed surprise and disbelief by how they connected with this work of art. One woman stated "Shark Girl just gets me" (Instagram, 2018). Below are select photos from my study:



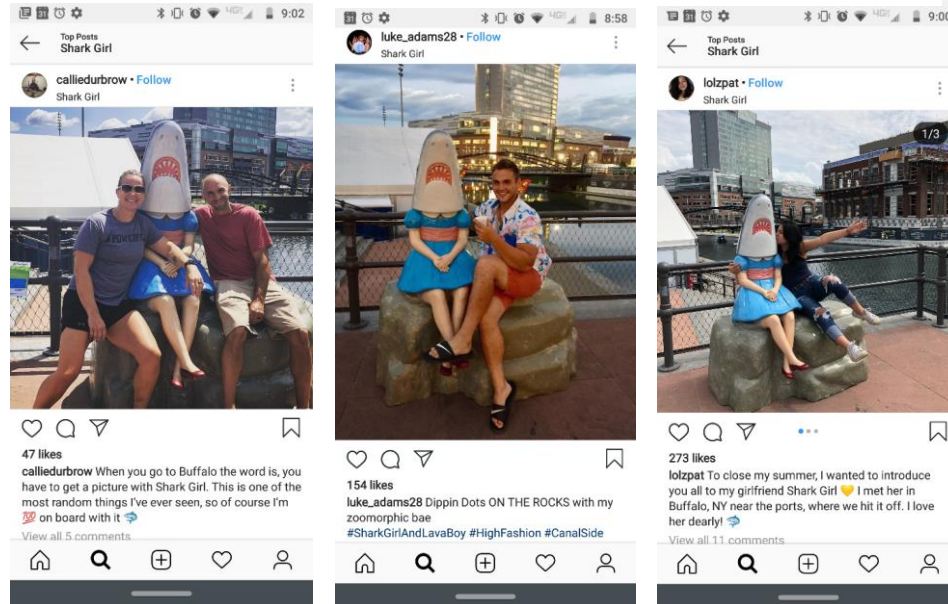


Figure 2. Series of Instagram posts retrieved from the search: "*Shark Girl, Location*", 2018.

During my time taking field notes, and gathering Instagram content featuring *Shark Girl*, I began to notice her in other places as well. I drove behind someone with a bumper sticker which said "Yeah, by my city has Shark Girl". I saw children wearing *Shark Girl* t-shirts at the grocery store. While teaching an art camp in a local high school, I noticed pictures of the art teacher with *Shark Girl* taped to cabinet doors. It was becoming increasingly clear that this work of public art a significant and prominent reference point for the citizens of her community: Buffalo, NY.

It had always been clear to me that *Shark Girl* has a significance for Buffalonians; but even visitors reacted strongly to meeting her for the first time. And I use the term "meeting" purposefully here. After observing people's interactions with *Shark Girl* and studying photos posted with her, I felt I had come across something remarkable. *Shark Girl*

is not simply a work of public art to beautify a community; she is a destination, a representative, and a friend to those who find her. She has a personality and reputation of her own, and she has a quality about her which allows people to feel an emotional, human connection.

Public Art in Buffalo

The more time I spent studying *Shark Girl*, the more I found myself paying attention to the public art in Buffalo in general. I wanted to take a step back and consider how public art ends up in communities. Who is responsible for this process? I got in touch with a friend of mine who works in Transit at Buffalo City Hall. She had recently applied for a grant from an organization called Transportation for America, that consults professionals, artists, arts administrators, and other community members, about “creative placemaking” (J. Fetzter, personal communication, August 2018). The goal of this workshop is to generate ideas on using arts and culture to address challenges within transportation and daily life for a community. Through her efforts, Buffalo has been awarded this grant. My friend, Julie Fetzter, hoped, that in being awarded this grant, arts and culture may be better incorporated into Buffalo’s transportation project; she states: “This included developing strategies to improve collaboration, rethinking public art policies and procedures, learning how to maximize investments, etc.,” (J. Fetzter, personal communication, August 2018). I asked Fetzter what her personal hope was for incorporating more public art into transit projects through her work, and she replied:

I find myself most interested in how public art can be used as a tool to promote

neighborhood livability and walkability. In my everyday experience, public art gives me insight into the identities and values of their neighborhoods. What I find most interesting is that because public art is freely accessible, it becomes not only a permanent part of the neighborhood landscape, but forces itself into the daily routines of people. When people walk past a mural every day on their way to work, I think they have a distinctly different relationship with that artwork compared to something they saw in a gallery setting. I believe that relationship has the power to influence residents to take ownership of their neighborhood and ultimately revitalize communities. (J. Fetzer, personal communication, August 2018)

My friend Julie's perspective fascinated me; and she suggested I get in touch with the head of the Buffalo Arts Commission, Emmerson Barr III. I wanted to hear more about what goes into the process of deciding on public works of art. For example, Shark Girl is a part of the Buffalo Public Arts Initiative. In order for a work acquired by our local art museum to be placed outside the museum within the community, there must be a relationship to city government. When I asked Barr what factors are in play when decided on a public art acquisition, he gave me the following list of questions asked before the decision is made:

Is the work of art temporary or permanent?

Is the work of art deemed worthy of public display?

Does the work of art meet the Commission's standards for art?

If it is a memorial; is the person, place or group worthy of the City of Buffalo memorializing them? (E. Barr, personal communication, August 2018)

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I asked Barr further what factors influence placement of public works of art, and he expanded upon the original list of questions:

Does the work of art fit into the surrounding neighborhood or community?

Is the installation of the work of art supported by the surrounding neighborhood or community?

Will the work of art be able to be conserved and maintained at the proposed location?

Are there any safety issues concerning proposed locations? (can it be installed safely, is there a chance of injuring people). (E. Barr, personal communication, August 2018)

With these ideas in mind, I began taking notes about the public art in my own immediate area, around my home, and on my daily commutes. Canalside, *Shark Girl's* home, is a venue, a destination for food and entertainment; but is not a spot most people come to daily unless they are employed there. This sets *Shark Girl* slightly apart. Of the murals I see within a ten-minute walk from my house in any direction, there are two memorials, two Buffalo themed murals, and three purely beautifying murals of their own theme. There are also painted scenes on electrical boxes on street lights. I have seen people take pictures at nearly all of the examples I have just listed. I have seen people take pictures of the murals themselves, and in front of the murals. I have seen people lay bouquets of flowers near the Gord Downie mural, to commemorate a talented and much-loved singer, who passed nearly two years ago. I have seen photos of people with the works of art, or the works of art alone on Instagram. I have also seen articles written about some of these works of art in the local newspaper. Beyond the scope of my neighborhood there are numerous murals, statues, sculptures, and functional artwork throughout the city of Buffalo. Buffalo is home to old beautiful bronze statuary, modern abstract and huge sculptures,

and contemporary paintings and sculptures alike of people and designs and objects. But I have never seen the fanfare for any of them that I have seen for *Shark Girl*. The Instagram language alone, is enough to astound me.

Since *Shark Girl* seemed to me to be such a social media presence, I decided to conduct my last bit of research on the imaged-based social media platform. In my Instagram story, for all my followers and any user who searched my name to see, I put up a question: what is your favorite work of public art within your community and why? I received numerous and interesting answers. The beloved works of public art ranged from small paintings on street signs, to memorial statuary. There appeared to me a common theme however: the artwork which seemed to resonate with people the most in their daily environment were things that surprised them, made them think, or made them curious. Many people told me the first time they saw their favorite work they had to Google search for information about it; they wanted to know background and context for the piece. Other's told me that it is something that first caught them off guard during their daily routine; it may have made them laugh or feel taken-aback; but they have come to love seeing this particular bit of beauty every day.

I looked back upon the Instagram images I had discovered of *Shark Girl*, the powerfully worded captions, my field notes, my own memories of her, and the contextual understanding I had gathered about her public art contemporaries in Buffalo. It immediately seemed clear to me that what I was looking at was visual culture. *Shark Girl* was essentially rejected by her first home, but embraced by her second. Public art, therefore, has the power to meet the need of a community. *Shark Girl* is a beautiful example of this at work. She clearly meets some need within the community of Buffalo, NY. In this way, public art embodies visual culture. It meets, or fails to meet, our needs as individuals and as communities. It communicates with us, and

serves as a tool for communication. It was now time for me to investigate what this means, for art, curriculum, and fans of *Shark Girl*.

Data Implications

Theory, my own research, and my own pedagogical philosophy tells me that visual culture is an essential part of contemporary art education. Visual culture is an essential component to communication in the contemporary world, and so naturally belongs in art curriculum. After having conducted my research of *Shark Girl*, I feel confident that public art not only forms visual culture within a community, but offers a perfect vehicle for introducing the concept of visual culture into the classroom. Students live with public art, it is familiar and inherently relevant to their lives outside of school. It appears on social media, it acts as the backdrops and props for their own photos, and it simply exists within their environment. Therefore, public art combines aspects of visual culture, fine art, and contemporary communication, making it an ideal exemplar for the art room.

As I gathered data throughout the course of my research, I found myself thinking constantly about how I could use what I was seeing in my teaching. I thought of several ways to connect public art to big ideas that I could use in my future classroom.

Project:	Unit Overview:	Media:
Design a Work of Public Art: research-based art making	<u>Big Idea:</u> Place, Home, or Community <u>Essential Question:</u> How can artwork meet a community’s needs?	<u>Digital Imaging/ Photography:</u> Students photograph a location they feel could hold a work of public art. Design their idea using traditional or digital

	<p><u>Exemplars:</u> <i>Shark Girl</i>, as well as any selection of public artworks in the students' communities.</p>	<p>tools, and insert it into the photographed space.</p> <p><u>Drawing/Painting:</u> Students practice realism/perspective/landscape renderings using reference photos of their proposed locations, and change the scene to hold their proposed work of public art.</p> <p><u>Studio Art:</u> Students photograph a location they feel could hold a work of public art. On transparency paper laid over the top of the image, students can compose and insert their proposed design using multi-media techniques.</p>
Designing Sculpture for Public Spaces: research-based art making	<p><u>Big Idea:</u> Place, Home, or Community</p> <p><u>Essential Question:</u> How can a work of art meet a community's needs?</p> <p><u>Exemplars:</u> <i>Shark Girl</i>, as well as any selection of public artworks in the students' communities.</p>	<p><u>Ceramics/Sculpture:</u> After discussing the different uses for public sculpture (i.e. memorial, beautification, political/social statement, photo-opportunity, etc.) students may pick one of these themes (or come up with one of their own) and design a work of art for their own community within that theme. They will build a model of this work of art using 3D materials.</p>

What excites me about the idea of using public art as a means for studying visual culture in the art room, is the potential for meaningful community engagement. My research exposed me to the process through which public art is accepted in a city, and the various needs and opportunities for new public works of art. Asking students to engage in considering a need within their community, which could be addressed through a work of art is meaningful; however, there is an opportunity to take things further, making ideas

reality. I have discovered that there are many spaces, opportunities, and need for new works of public art within my own community. A public art project could be taken outside the classroom and into the community if students and their teacher felt enough passion and ambition behind their ideas. This would not only be a fantastic learning opportunity, requiring collaboration, research, and planning, but would be a way to empower students in a profound way, allowing them to contribute something to their own community.

Conclusion

Ultimately, I believe that visual culture, as a prominent means of expression and communication in the contemporary world, is a necessary component of art education curriculum. After conducting an ethnographic analysis of public art within my own community, I argue that public works of art are ideally situated to make visual culture an exciting, relevant, and engaging idea to students. Public art provides worthy aesthetic, cultural, and historic exemplars, and gives students an opportunity to engage with their community while designing and creating their own works of art. I hope to take advantage of the public art within my own community, with which I have engaged deeply over the course of this study, in my future classroom. I believe that the study of visual culture in schools has the potential to not only span media in the art room, but span curricula as an interdisciplinary tool for engaging in the contemporary world.

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