

## Art, Ecology and Art Education: Locating Art Education in a Critical Place-based Pedagogy

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In contemporary life and education, the local is marginalized in favor of large-scale economies of consumption that are indifferent to ecological concerns. The consequences of neglecting local human and natural communities include a degraded habitat, loss of wilderness, alienation, rootlessness, and lack of connection to communities. Critical place-based pedagogy provides a robust framework for the theory and practice of art education that is concerned with ecological issues. This article locates art education within a critical pedagogy of place as a prelude to describing contemporary art and art education that is engaged with ecological issues.

*“In Wildness is the preservation of the World. Every tree sends its fibres forth in search of the Wild. The cities import it at any price. Men plough and sail for it. From the forest and wildness come the tonics and barks that brace mankind.”*

—Thoreau

Three difficult conditions, with their attendant consequences, define the context of art and education that would be responsive to ecological concerns. First, human progress emphasizing the domination of nature has devastated many parts of the earth (Berry, 1990; Bowers, 1993, 2001). Modern civilization has created environmental conditions characterized by pollution, depletion of natural resources, climate change, threatened biodiversity, and diminishing wilderness. Second, mainstream American education reform is deeply committed to a standards and testing culture that tends to ignore the peculiarities of places in order to standardize the experiences of students. Local human and natural communities are not usually important parts of the school curriculum (Gruenewald, 2003). Consequently, education that ignores issues of ecology and community becomes complicit in their erosion. Third, although many contemporary artists make ecological issues an important part of their work, contemporary art and visual culture are often not a significant part of the art curriculum (Wilson, 2003). The issues of gender, power, privilege, politics and social change that are associated with the study of visual culture are sometimes problematic in the traditional art education classroom (Freedman, 2003). Art education that neglects contemporary art and visual culture deprives students of the prospect of becoming conversant in emerging forms of artistic discourse, deprives them of

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information about the issues of social and ecological justice, and hinders them as artists in fostering social and ecological justice.

The intersection of mainstream educational purposes and taken-for-granted practices among art educators leaves vital matters of ecology largely unexamined. Such omission neglects the potential of art to educate and encourage active engagement with ecological concerns. Contemporary artists raise provocative questions about nature, community, and culture that reflect the complex character of our relationship with the natural world. The work of these artists often has connections to the peculiarities of specific places and is attentive to the web of relationships that constitute local culture and ecology. Their work makes ecological relationships comprehensible in a way that can be a catalyst for awareness and consequently change.

Critical place-based pedagogy creates a rigorous theoretical framework that combines the ecological focus of place-based education with the social focus of critical theory (Gruenewald, 2003). This article considers the ingredients of a critical place-based pedagogy for art education as a prelude to describing art education that is responsive to the ecology of local places and culture. That these approaches may also find resistance among students who have not garnered interest in local content or in the politics of social transformation is an important issue that will also be examined. Locating art education within a critical place-based pedagogy disturbs standardized curriculum models and re-envision educational purposes by valuing the peculiarities of the local and questioning taken for granted assumptions about progress and our relationships with nature. Teaching becomes responsive to ecology and local culture and artmaking becomes socially aware, reflective, and transformational.<sup>1</sup>

### Education and Ecological Crisis

Thoreau's question "Why should we be in such a desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises?" (1854/2004, p. 303) seems pressingly relevant today. The world is in an ecological crisis that is difficult to ignore. Evidence of man's influence on the climate as reflected in global warming is becoming increasingly alarming. Pollution, environmental degradation, and pressures on biodiversity are threatening the quality of life throughout the world. Yet, there is very little serious environmental education in American schools (Bowers, 1993, 2001).

In spite of their importance, environmental issues remain on the margins of the educational landscape. American education neglects the local and the ecological in favor of the logic of standardization and high stakes testing designed to get children ready for competition in a global economy (Bowers, 2001). There is a widespread commitment to prepare students for success in an economy that is often individualistic, unsustainable, and inequitable. Education that emphasizes "high stakes

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<sup>1</sup>There is a certain irony in writing about the virtues of the local and ecological art education from the perspective of an air-conditioned office in a university. Maybe I should be writing this in pencil, but then, where did that pencil come from? Paul Zencey (1996) observes that "As citizens of the *cosmo polis*, the mythical "world city," professors are expected to owe no allegiance to geographical territory; we're supposed to belong to the boundless world of books and ideas and eternal truths, not the infinitely particular world of watersheds, growing seasons, and ecological niches" (p. 15).

testing” and aspires to “world class standards” often ignores social and ecological practices that are oppressive and environmentally destructive (Gruenewald 2003; 2004). Attitudes and practices that promote the domination of the earth and abuse of the natural world are taken for granted and rarely challenged. For most students, events of ecological degradation are matters of distant geography if they are considered at all (Bowers, 1993, 2001; Furman & Gruenewald, 2004).

Standards-based reforms can draw educators away from the needs and interests of the local and diminish support for areas that are not tested, such as the arts. When standards are set far from schools, the curriculum becomes decontextualized by design (Jennings, Swidler, & Koliba, 2005). Connections to local communities and a sense of caring for place are lost, and alternative cultural attitudes toward nature that are more ecologically responsive are marginalized (Bowers, 2001). Place-based education is a response to standardized pedagogy that neglects local human and ecological communities. It draws on progressive traditions of multi-disciplinary, authentic learning that seek to extend learning beyond the walls of the school. Place-based education aims to strengthen children’s connection to others, to their region, to the land, and to overcome the alienation and isolation that is often associated with modern society (Gibbs & Howley, 2000; Gruenewald, 2002; Smith, 2002).

### **The Response of Place-based Education**

“We cannot immunize the continents and oceans against our contempt for small places and small streams. Small destructions add up and finally they are understood collectively as large destructions” (Berry, 2005, p. 7). Place-based education in the eco-humanist tradition exemplified by Wendell Berry (1987, 2005) seeks to replace uniform standardization with curriculum that is focused on the unique strengths, histories, and characteristics of the local. Its fundamental emphasis is on the web of relationships among human and natural communities. Place-based education looks toward local cultural and natural communities for content and context, and has sustainability of place as a goal (Jennings et al., 2005; Theobald & Curtiss, 2002). By connecting learning to real-world experiences, students can construct meaningful connections among cultural, political, and social issues. Place-based education is intended to develop expertise across many disciplines and prepare students to become actively involved in regenerating human and natural communities (Gibbs & Howley, 2000; Gruenewald, 2003; Morris, 2000; Smith, 2002; Smith & Williams, 1999).

Though often silenced, there is a well established tradition in art education that emphasizes the value of artmaking as means to increase students’ awareness and appreciation of the various communities to

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which they belong (Barret, 2004; Blandy, 1994; Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Clark & Zimmerman, 2000; London, 1994; McFee & Degge, 1977; McCollister, 2000; Morris, 2000; Neperud & King, 1995; Taylor, 2002; Walker, 2001). Artists, art critics and art educators have broadened the definitions of community beyond an anthropocentric orientation so that ecological interdependence within the larger environment is also considered (Gablik, 1991, 1998; Holmes, 2006; Jagodzinski, 1987), creating a bioregional perspective and an art education of place (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993). The value of an art education about place and the merits of studying local culture and artists who are outside the elite mainstream are well documented in the literature (Blandy & Hoffman, 1993; Congdon, 2005; Lai & Ball, 2002; Neperud & King, 1995). Critical place-based pedagogy adds a significant dimension to this tradition by delineating relationships between place-based education and critical theory (Ball & Lai, 2006).

### **A Critical Pedagogy of Place**

Problematically, place-based education has traditionally emphasized ecological and rural contexts and neglected the ways in which socio-cultural differences, inequality, and politics contribute to environmental degradation (Gruenewald, 2003). Equally problematic, the emancipatory, transformative agenda of critical theory has neglected ecological matters and the local, indigenous, traditions that are essential for preserving natural systems (Bowers, 1993, 2001). A remedy for this apparent disjunction is a critical pedagogy of place that considers the relationships among social, cultural, ecological, and political issues. Critical place-based pedagogy challenges taken-for-granted assumptions regarding our relationships with nature, notions of progress, and the purposes of education. It creates a space to examine cultural constructions about place, nature and wilderness. Such constructions are examined and alternative, transformative practices that are attentive to issues of local community and ecology are sought. A critical pedagogy of place emphasizes the effects of social inequality and imbalances of power on environmental degradation and resource depletion and addresses the traditional neglect of socio-cultural and political issues (Ball & Lai, 2006; Bullard, 1993; Gruenewald, 2003; McLaren, 2003).

Critical place-based pedagogy is significant because of its blending of the local and ecological with cultural awareness and social critique. A critical ecological perspective illuminates important relationships between cultural systems and ecological systems and affirms that social justice and eco-justice are closely related (Bullard, 1993). For example, attitudes of domination that oppress people also threaten many other life forms on the earth (Bowers, 2001; Gaard, 1993; Warren, 2000). Eco-justice extends ethical considerations to the non-human world and

explores relationships among ecological, social, cultural, and political issues. Eco-justice re-conceives life styles and revitalizes old and local knowledge replacing the destructive metaphors of modernism with new and old ecological metaphors (Bowers, 2001). A critical pedagogy of place acknowledges that environmental issues are inextricably intertwined with social and political issues and that places have important cultural dimensions.

### **Locating Art Education in A Critical Place-based Pedagogy**

A critical place-based pedagogy creates possibilities for art teaching and learning that are responsive to the ecology of local communities. Artmaking becomes part of a socially responsive process of reflection, critical thinking, and transformation. Blending place-based education with critical pedagogy generates an approach characterized by blurred boundaries between artmaking, social critique, scientific inquiry, and activism. It is an approach grounded in the peculiarities of the local community and attentive to how power and culture work through places to enhance or limit human potential (Gruenewald, 2003). Art education informed by a critical place-based pedagogy emphasizes the activist, restorative possibilities of artmaking and affirms the need for students to become involved in learning outside the school.

The ecologically activist possibilities of artmaking are reflected in the work of many eco-artists (Grande, 2004; Kwon, 2002; Spaid, 2002). Their work may include maps, photographs, drawings, performances, images, and interactive displays designed to change the way we think about artmaking and nature (Solnit, 2001). For example, Brandon Ballengée transforms field specimens of amphibians deformed by pollution into high resolution images that are displayed as both art and scientific research. His work blurs the boundaries between environmental art and ecological research as he collaborates with scientists and engages in ecological research and environmental restoration. The work of eco-artists demonstrates practices that are attentive to local environmental issues in ways that are restorative, service oriented, and interdisciplinary. Their work is critical in the ways that it re-envision the purposes of artmaking and the role of the artist (Gablik, 1991; Taylor, 2002). Involving students in these kinds of art study and practice connects art education to important issues within the local context of students' lives and encourages them to consider the convergence of politics, power, and culture in the places they inhabit.

Many aspects of our relationship to the natural world, including patterns of consumption are subtle and easy to miss. Eco-visualization is an interdisciplinary, collaborative practice that connects science, technology, and visual art in order to make ecological relationships visible. It draws on research and practice in the areas of media art, information

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visualization, computer technology, and sustainable design. Eco-artist Tiffany Holmes creates eco-visualization projects designed to make slow and barely perceptible ecological relationships visible in a way that incorporates imagery and scientific research. For example, her site-specific installations that communicate water quality issues use an array of visual data and interactive digital components that blend real-time data and audience input into a visually compelling statement about resources, pollution, and consumption (Holmes, 2006). Eco-artists see artmaking as a social practice that can promote community reconstruction, help define communal self, and develop ecological responsibility (Anderson, 2000; Blandy, Congdon, & Krug, 1998; Erzen, 2005, Taylor, 2002). Their work disrupts taken-for-granted assumptions of our relationships with the natural world and suggests that artmaking might involve interdisciplinary connections and active involvement in environmental restoration.

### **In Practice**

The practice of critical place-based pedagogy as described in the literature (Gruenewald, 2004; Erzen, 2005; Taylor, 2002; Woodhouse & Knapp, 2000) suggests themes or entry points with many connections to art education. These entry points include natural history, cultural journalism, and transformative education. Natural history education emphasizes getting students outside to experience and bond with the natural world. Cultural journalism aims to connect students to the cultural life of their community through local histories, stories, traditions, and the artifacts and performances of local cultural production (Wigginton, 1985, 1991). A critical pedagogy about place also has activist, transformative purposes focused on social change, community involvement, service, and environmental responsibility. In practice, the methodologies of natural history study, cultural journalism, and transformative education work together to create learning experiences that illuminate the complex relationships among communities, nature, and culture.

### **Natural History and Teaching about Places**

“Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?” (Thoreau 1854/2004, p. 48.) For younger children, experiencing and becoming aware of the beauty of the natural world is an essential step toward ecological responsibility. A natural history education melded into art education develops caring relationships for places close to home, allowing children to bond with nature. Children need to experience the natural world before they are asked to save it (Sobel, 1996). Natural history journals and mapmaking are valuable ways for students to explore nature that also have connections to the practices of art education (Leslie, 1999; Sobel, 1998; Woolery, 2004).

Art has a long tradition of connecting drawing to the exploration of the natural world. The history of landscape painting is part of this tradition as is natural history illustration (Marshall, 2004; Neperud, 1997). The value of observational drawing in developing a foundation for a repertoire of drawing strategies has also been documented (Graham, 2003). Drawing is a potent way for students to explore the natural world and expand their familiarity with local ecology (Anderson, 2000; Erzen, 2005; Woolery, 2004). Drawing can be viewed as research and discovery practice that connects artmaking to scientific inquiry and allows students to use the processes of art to understand and appreciate the world (Marshall, 2004).

Natural history education and scientific observation and inquiry, however, often neglect cultural analysis. The remedy lies in the concept of a critical pedagogy that considers power, privilege, and culture (Gruenewald, 2004). The idea is to make connections between the particularities of places and important issues beyond the local, and to reflect on natural places as they are situated and influenced by cultural, historical, political, or ecological contexts (Lai & Ball, 2002). For art teachers, mapmaking is a particularly generative learning activity that develops visual thinking and ecological literacy (Sobel, 1998). Making maps can also create connections to the cultural dimensions of landscape and geography. The reality of most classrooms is that students are from many different communities and cultures. Their idea of place is often shaped by experiences of dislocation and estrangement. Figuring out a sense of belonging or community can be a complicated undertaking for children who are strangers because of their history, language, or customs. Making a map can be a significant exploration of personal history and culture as well as a way to define local geography.

In an elementary classroom in Washington, students created maps describing their journey to the community where they live. This project began with ordinary road maps that allowed students to trace their physical journeys. The art teacher discussed Jacob Lawrence's *The Migration Series* (1941) as an example of visual representation of journeys. The class considered artist Kathy Pendergast's *Emotional Atlas of World* (1999), including a work called *Lost* (1999) that identifies only those places in the United States with names that include the word "lost." The class considered questions such as, Why are places named "lost?" How do places become lost? and Who gets to name places? As part of their exploration of place, students were asked to describe the borders in their lives. Their answers included borders decreed by history or geography. They also included metaphorical borders such as "my religion," "my neighborhood," "the space between my mom and dad." The discussion of borders led very naturally into the way pictures are framed or bordered and other ways that borders can be visually represented. This example

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demonstrates how an artful exploration of local geography informed by a critical pedagogy of place can evoke a space of possibility that respects the concerns of students while seeking to give their experience a context in the culture and politics of places.

Throughout the process of creating these self-portraits about places and journeys, the recurring question “Where are you from?” was answered in many different ways. Their images described journeys and re-envisioned geography and culture. Their artmaking was an interdisciplinary endeavor that included the exploration of color, the work of artists, the use of symbols, and conversations that ranged from physical geography to cultural boundaries to personal experiences. This is artmaking that is place-based in its insistence on connecting learning to the students’ local reality. It is critical in its connection of place to culture and in its exemplification of how places are defined and given value both socially and ecologically.

### **Cultural Journalism**

Cultural journalism, so effectively interrelated to critical place-based pedagogy, makes connections among students, teachers, and the cultures within the community. Cultural journalism accepts the artifacts of local visual culture and the objects of everyday life as candidates for study (Lai & Ball, 2002). Cultural journalism could include learning ecologically sustainable patterns from indigenous local cultures (Bowers, 1993; Garoian, 1998) or exhibitions focused on the unique artistry or other interests of the local community (Congdon, 2005). This discipline includes the kinds of cultural exploration that are associated with local history projects like the *Foxfire* program that documents the lifestyle and culture of people in southern Appalachia (Wigginton, 1985, 1991). For art educators, cultural journalism offers a methodology that includes visual culture and artmaking. It intermeshes effectively with the curriculum and pedagogy of place-based studies as it seeks to value local artistic traditions and sustain and renew traditions and intergenerational relationships (McCollister, 2000; Morris, 2000; Walker, 2001). As an example, high school students in a diverse suburban community created a photographic documentation of the stories of local immigrants through studio portrait photography and interviews. The teachers introduced students to important issues of multiculturalism, social justice, and documentation through films such as *Born into Brothels* (2004) and *El Norte* (1994). The students learned the technical aspects of studio photography and as well as various approaches to conducting an interview. The project took the students into places in the school and in the community where they had never gone before. The students’ personal journeys were given a public audience when the photographs were exhibited in the town library, accompanied by excerpts from the interviews. Their carefully crafted work honored the experiences of



people whose contributions and voices are sometimes silent. Equally important were the changed attitudes of the students that reflected greater appreciation for the differences, culture, and struggles of others that shared their community (Graham, Murphy, & Jaworski, 2007).

In another example, on the north shore of Long Island, a group of high school art teachers experimented with the possibilities of a critical place-based art education designed to increase environmental awareness, connection to community, and social activism. The subject of study was the metaphorical, cultural, and ecological richness of the place where they lived. These teachers and their students considered questions about the meaning of *sacred* in a world of commerce, fashion, and advertising. They noticed that the history of art is filled with images of sacred places and that artists often attach themselves to places, carving out sacred spaces, and attending to the details of their specific location. The students responded by noticing and making images about the places which they considered special, including graffiti on the walls of the city, the aesthetic possibilities of Main Street, the shore of Manhasset Bay, and the artistic possibilities of their own yards. The students walked through the fields of the local nature preserve with a biologist who explained the role of indigenous and invasive species of plants and animals. They explored the same fields in pairs to observe and draw the landscape. Later, they visited museums where 19th-century paintings by Thomas Moran and Frederick Church evoke yet another view of nature in Long Island. They learned that some of the paintings they sketched in the museum were used to establish national parks and promote the idea of wilderness as a special place. Paradoxically, these images of wilderness paradise were also used to commercially develop these places, reflecting conflicts between nature and development that still exist and raising questions about power, privilege, culture, and nature (McCarron-Cates, 2006). Nineteenth-century representations of nature were contrasted with their 20th- and 21st-century counterparts. For example, students examined the relationships among man, woman and nature in movie versions of *King Kong* (1933, 2005) and then compared both with *Gorillas in the Mist* (1998). Andy Goldsworthy's approach to working with nature was examined in *Rivers and Tides* (2001). How nature and indigenous people were represented in paintings and movies was explored in *Dances with Wolves* (1990) and *Smokesignals* (1998). This led to questions about who gets to represent nature and culture in the popular media. Contrasting themes of domination and reverence emerged from their discussion. One student remarked, "The most profound theme in these movies was man's attempt to control nature and its inevitable outcome. The outcome is negative for nature and positive for humans until we all die horribly." Another student observed that "King Kong's brutal capture and exploitation showed that man's relationship to nature has been desensitized by

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money and materialism.” Another wondered “What impact does man really have on nature?” After his solitary sketching assignment, another noted “I felt safest and most peaceful when I saw the Osprey nest. In my sketch there is a tall nest for the Osprey that lives there, made by people. I felt a lingering sense of hope and peaceful coexistence when I was there.” The class also discussed the peculiar cultural dispositions of nature photography, as exemplified in Sierra Club calendars (Solnit, 2001). The intentions of these photographs were compared with the more obvious purposes of the images of nature in advertising. These forays into visual culture revealed how romanticized nature can result in a tendency to dismiss local ecological responsibilities and ignore ordinary natural beauty (Cronon, 1996). In this example, traditional landscape painting was complicated and enriched by an approach that encouraged students to consider local ecology in the context of dominant culture’s representations of nature. The aims were for students to become more appreciative of the natural world close to home, to become more critically aware of the forces that influence the places they inhabit, and to create artwork that constructed personal meaning from the confluence of these experiences.

### **Transformative Education and Visual Culture**

Visual culture art education aims to develop students’ ability to critically evaluate the images and artifacts of art and visual culture by considering issues of power, persuasion, privilege, and politics. As we understand from a prodigious body of literature, images, including images of the landscape, are not politically neutral (Berger, 1985; Darts, 2004; Garoian, 1998; Solnit, 2001; Tavin, 2003). Within the study of visual culture art education, artmaking is seen as a way to make statements that influence social consciousness and advocate for change (Darts, 2004; Freedman, 2003). The study of art is linked to ongoing social struggles and popular culture as seen as a site for ideological struggle and resistance (Darts, 2004). The activist, transformative emphasis of visual culture art education overlaps with the interest in social and eco-justice that characterizes a critical pedagogy of place. A work of art encourages us to view the world from new perspectives: “The arts offer opportunities for perceiving alternative ways of transcending and being in the world ... and subvert our thoughtlessness and complacencies, our certainties” (Greene, 1991, p. 118). A critical study of visual culture creates opportunities for students to consider their own cultural assumptions from other perspectives and consider issues of justice, power, representation and privilege. Art can remove an individual from the “main text” of cultural beliefs and taken-for-granted attitudes. The significance of this, in the context of a critical pedagogy of place, is that many environmental problems can be linked to taken-for-granted images and metaphors of competition, progress, consumption, and domination over nature

(Bowers, 2001; Berry, 1988). Landscape, place, wilderness, and nature have political dimensions as well as aesthetic qualities (Cronan, 1996; Garoian, 1998; Nash, 2001; Solnit, 2001).

In the example of the New York students, they also studied the work of artists who take an environmentally activist role. Agnes Denes' *Wheatfield—A Confrontation* (1982) that critiques industrial exploitation was compared to Andy Goldworthy's attempts to make art in harmony with nature. They considered how planting trees might be a work of art, as Denes suggested in her work *Tree Mountain* (1996). There are, in fact, many artists whose work is designed to raise public awareness of environmental threats through photography and painting. Eugene Smith's photographic essays document the crippling effects of mercury poisoning in Japan (Matilsky, 1992) and Alexis Rockman describes the cleavage between the human and natural worlds in paintings that depict the effects of global warming and genetic engineering (McKibben, 2006). Their work illuminates vital ecological issues and suggest possibilities for student artmaking that actively seek to redress environmental problems.

In this example, students moved back and forth between experiences with the natural world, artmaking, and critical reflection about the assumptions and ideas reflected in art and visual culture. Over the course of the semester, some began to take a more activist approach to their work. For example, Amelia's first painting depicted the familiar stairway leading to her back yard, and was called "Lot of 40 x 100 x up Safe" that she associated with her childhood. As her interest in local environmental issues grew, she created a series of drawings about places around the school, including drawings of the school as seen from the forest's point of view. Her graphic reports of glass, refuse, and graffiti on trees documented the school's impact on nature and the carelessness of students toward the forest. Her second painting depicted trees above the sidewalk, flying away. Amelia's attention to the natural habitat of the school led her to think about a garden of indigenous plants in the dusty courtyard between school wings. She sketched the courtyard during her science class and turned her idea into a grant proposal that eventually funded her dream garden. The possibilities for a garden within the school boundaries had not been considered until Amelia imagined a garden in the desert of adult and adolescent indifference.

These many examples illustrate the possibilities and complexities of an art education about place. Traditional approaches to drawing and painting as a way to appreciate the natural world were complemented by a critical study of images about nature and the assumptions such images reveal. The cultural traditions surrounding nature create confounding questions about our relationship to the environment and what kind of art can be made about the places we inhabit. The works of contemporary

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eco-artists suggest possibilities for art that questions what exists and dreams of what might exist. Making art about places can involve students in many layers of thinking and action as place-based ideas converge with critical theory.

### Obstacles

Although a critical pedagogy of place creates a conceptual background for art education that is ecologically responsible, there are significant obstacles in putting theory into practice. Curriculum focused on issues of local community and ecology does not necessarily guarantee effective learning, or even increased student interest, in spite of the claims of place-based education theorists. Many students resist critical pedagogy's critiques of power and privilege and the politics of social transformation. The conditions that tend to marginalize places, degrade the environment, and create inequities in power, privilege, and opportunity may also encourage student indifference to the study of the local and make them resistant to critical pedagogies (Ball & Lai, 2006; Theobald & Curtiss, 2002). Students can be reluctant to become involved with local content, local ecology, or activism in spite of their teacher's enthusiasm. Contemporary culture that surrounds students is persuasive, pervasive, and not particularly sympathetic to environmental or local concerns. Anyone who has worked with adolescents knows that sometimes they are perfectly happy to re-create the ubiquitous icons of romanticized nature with little regard for social critique. One approach to confronting these obstacles is a curriculum that is responsive to the interests and experiences of the students and emerges from possibilities inherent in local natural and human communities. Students are expected to become creators of knowledge and there is a negotiation of content, where the teacher plays the part of an informed guide and facilitator (Smith, 2002). Teachers pay attention to students' questions, interests and to the artifacts of local cultural production so that curriculum emerges from the unique characteristics of the place where they live (Ball & Lai, 2006; Wilson, 2003).

What emerged in practice in the examples provided here was a wide range of engagement with issues of local community, ecology, social critique, and activism. This range is consistent with a curriculum that allows students to determine how they will become involved with the subject. In the example described above, some students did not venture past the familiar territory of their back yard, using traditional approaches to artmaking. Other students explored larger issues in their thinking and their work, and some, such as Amelia chose to make artwork with a transformative dimension. From an art pedagogical perspective, the important thing was that students were engaged with ecological issues in the context of their own experiences and location. They were given

opportunities to critically consider the aesthetics, assumptions, and politics that surround art and visual culture and were encouraged to make artwork that might make a difference.

### Conclusion

Like place-based education and critical theory, art education exists mostly in the margins of educational aims that emphasize a rationalistic approach to education that culminates in curriculum standardization and high stakes testing (Eisner, 2005). Perhaps it is in this margin of educational discourse that art makes its most distinctive contribution. Art asks us to resist habits of conventional thinking and to consider what we live for. Art education seeks divergent responses to important personal, environmental, and social problems that require creative, imaginative solutions. Art education framed by a critical pedagogy of place creates opportunities for students to engage in thinking and artmaking that consider vital questions about nature, place, culture and ecology.

Locating art education in a critical place-based pedagogy creates a confluence of ideas and resources that enrich the art education experience and connect it to vital issues in educational reform. In contemporary life and education, the local is often marginalized in favor of large-scale economies of consumption that ignore ecological concerns. A curriculum that seeks to establish restorative ecological practices and community based content goes against many taken-for-granted assumptions about progress and educational policy and practice encouraging uniform standardization. Yet the difficult challenges of culture, ecology and community are becoming increasingly important in the future of our students' lives and demand an approach that extends the purposes of education to include issues of social and eco-justice. Many art educators will recognize in the examples and methodologies provided here elements of their own teaching. Innovative practices in art education can illuminate emerging discourse about educational reform, place-based education and critical pedagogy.

Contemporary art that addresses ecological issues can educate students in unique ways about community, environment, and culture. Artists who are engaged in ecologically responsive practices exemplify an environmental aesthetic characterized by awareness of ecological relationships, stewardship, restoration and active involvement with issues of social and eco-justice (Blandy, et al., 1998; Holmes, 2006; Spaid, 2002; Weintraub, 1996). Artists who are making an activist, restorative response to environmental devastation suggest many possibilities for an art education that is able to engage students with vital contemporary issues and connect their learning to natural and human communities. Art education can move from the important, but limited, notion of art being solely about personal expression toward a vision of teaching

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that engages students in a reflective social process with the larger community.

Critical place-based pedagogies aim to build meaningful, empathic connections to natural and human communities. They encourage students to value the unique dimensions of their own lives, background and culture, while at the same time taking a step outside the “main text” of popular visual culture to critically consider the assumptions and metaphors behind the ubiquitous images in the media that surround them. Critical place-based pedagogy can cultivate a sense of wonder toward the places we inhabit, an awareness of the cultural and ideological forces that threaten them, and the motivation to take action. Art education that is framed by a critical pedagogy of place is responsive to ecology, community and culture while challenging the boundaries and purposes of art in ways that engage students in reflective and transformative learning.

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