Art Education and Young People’s Unsolicited Creative Practices on Social Media
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Abstract
This visual essay presents examples of high school students’ unsolicited videos and photography uploaded on Instagram together with their creative products in art-learning settings. I include images and descriptions of both settings, and I juxtapose them to illustrate how the out-of-school creative activities may inform and intersect with art learning. The art-based format of the study (visual essay) uncovers interpretation of the research that would be invisible otherwise. For instance, it is acknowledged that specific skills and artistic-thinking habits toward image or video interpretation and creation are developed in both settings (social media and the art classroom). Yet, although students very much enjoy producing videos and photography in order to share them on Instagram, they resist accepting them as material for art learning. Thus, I draw implications for the specific conditions that privilege the inclusion of students’ unsolicited videos and photography in art learning.

Keywords: youth, unsolicited creative practices, video, photography, art education, social media
Το εικονογραφημένο άρθρο παρουσιάζει παραδείγματα παραγωγής βίντεο και φωτογραφίας των μαθητών του δευτεροβάθμιου σχολείου που προέρχονται από μέσα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης (Instagram) καθώς επίσης και από τα καλλιτεχνικά μαθήματα. Παρουσιάζο και αντιπαραβάλλω εικόνες και περιγραφές και από τα δύο πλαίσια με σκοπό να σκιαγραφήσω τον τρόπο που οι αυτόκλητες δημιουργικές πρακτικές των νέων μπορούν να διαμορφώσουν και να αλληλεπιδράσουν με την διδασκαλία της τέχνης. Η καλλιτεχνική βάσης αναπαράσταση των ερευνητικών δεδομένων (το εικονογραφημένο άρθρο) αποκαλύπτει όνεις της έρευνας που διαφορετικά θα βρίσκονταν στην αφάνεια. Για παράδειγμα, μπορούμε να αναγνωρίσουμε ότι συγκεκριμένες ικανότητες και καλλιτεχνική σκέψη σχετικά με την θέαση και την παραγωγή του βίντεο και της φωτογραφίας αναπτύσσονται και στα δύο πλαίσια μάθησης (Μέσα κοινωνικής δικτύωσης και καλλιτεχνική τάξη). Παρόλα αυτά αν και οι μαθητές απολαμβάνουν ιδιαίτερα την καλλιτεχνική παραγωγή με μέσο το βίντεο και την φωτογραφία με σκοπό να τα μοιράστουν στο Instagram, αντιστέκονται να αποδεχτούν ότι οι ίδιες ή παρόμοιες πρακτικές μπορούν να αποτελέσουν υλικό της καλλιτεχνικής τάξης. Έτσι διαμορφώνουν κάποια συμπεράσματα για τις συγκεκριμένες συνθήκες που ευνοούν την συμπεριλήψη των αυτόκλητων δημιουργικών πρακτικών των νέων στην καλλιτεχνική μάθηση.
Over the last five years, I have examined the potential of students’ creative online activities, particularly video production (Katagiri, et al., 2015, 2016; Letsiou, 2019a, 2019b). Particularly, I sought to include online videos in the K-12 art classroom in two high school mode, public high school and public art high school. In this visual essay, I present the students’ unsolicited video and photography practices together with art activities that were part of the instruction of three different art classes in Art High School of Thessaloniki. I include the specific students’ online creative practices that inform the art content of the classes. The first project, with an 8th grade art class, took place during the autumn of 2017 and was a project-based unit that focused on the Declaration of Human Rights Day. The second example derives from a photography class of 10th grade students. The third example is video production from an 11th grade new media class. All the classes took place between 2017 and 2019.

This is an art-based study. The results that are drawn in this visual essay are based on the format of representation that inspires a new interpretation of the topic. According to the art-based method of the study, the mode of representation may uncover aspects of the study that would otherwise be hidden (Leavy, 2011). The art-based format of representation of the study uncovers the specific skills and artistic-thinking habits that students develop in the particular creative practices that take place in their online platforms and in the art classroom.
@asproulis14_offical is the Instagram account of a junior high school student, a boy of 12 years old (Letsiou, 2019a). It is an account of an imaginary virtual character depicted using a stuffed bear. In Greek, the name “ασπρούλης” (asproulis) means a white little bear. Asproulis is the main character who acts in several stories created from digital photographs and videos. The cast of characters are the stuffed toys from the boy’s huge collection (Fig. 1, 2). The mise-en-scéne is the child’s living room with the furniture properly placed for the purposes of each play. The stories are typical TV broadcasts of soccer games with advertisements and players’ interviews. There is also a soccer team named Stuffed Animals. The Stuffed Animals often play against a well-known soccer team, such as Arsenal (Fig. 1). The videos created with the stuffed animals fit into the genre of stop-motion videos. @asproulis14_offical is, therefore, an actualization of an innovative indoor play that is transformed into a thriller because it can interact with a vast number of spectators through the means of social media. Having the stories uploaded on Instagram gives them the power of a virtual existence with which followers can interact while following the development of the stories. The decision to use stuffed animals as actors evokes a sense of humor and parody.
The unsolicited video production becomes part of a school event

The @asproulis14_offical videos were screened in the 8th grade art class (Letsiou, 2019). The class then discussed the videos and exchanged their impressions about it. A tiny photographic studio was then installed in the art classroom. Each student brought their own teddy bear or another stuffed animal to the classroom so that the object could be captured on the camera of the student who had filmed Asproulis. The video that the students created describes each of the articles of the Declaration of Humans Rights (Fig. 3).

Students designed an art intervention that included a screening of the video with the teddy bears, a temporary monument, a corkboard and a photograph. The photograph depicted the inside of a burnt building of a refugee camp in Thessaloniki taken by a child. While the video was on display, the corkboard was filled with messages about peace (Fig. 4).
This practice realizes creativity as a social activity. Creativity as a social activity, according to Freedman (2010), emerges in both the art classroom and in a community of interests. Inside the art classroom, it consists of the conditions in which students are allowed to collaborate with and learn from each other. In parallel, the informal learning that occurs in communities of interest, such as graffiti or the youth’s creative production on social media, is considered a social activity since it develops through collaboration. The group interaction, in this case, is crucial for members to come up with new ideas and tools to create and communicate.

The photography practice I will describe becomes part of the investigation of an alternative selfie in the 10th grade photography class. One of my art class students invented an astounding creative activity using Instagram. She and her peers created a digital collage while chatting on Instagram (Fig. 5, 6). This digital collage was developed by combining screenshots. This is part of the way that she communicates with friends on Instagram. Consequently, these particular young people collectively develop a creative way to communicate by using a peculiar and original style of digital collage (Letsiou, 2019b).

Figure 5

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Figure 6
High school photography class

The 10th grade students investigated identity issues using knolling photography (Fig. 7, 8). Knolling is the organization of items around a similar theme. Usually the objects are arranged at 90-degree angles to organize a logical order and create a particular visual impression. In his *Personal* series, Jason Travis uses a knolling technique to photograph portraits of peoples’ faces along with the personal items they carry in their bags (Lauren Fritts L., 2019).

The students of the photography class of the Art High School of Thessaloniki investigated knolling as a means of recording youth’s identities and peers’ interests inspired by the work of Jason Travis. Knolling photography and portraits as an instructional material require students to perform. How to plan the teaching process proved crucial in this unit because the students have options to work in collaboration or alone. Moreover, performative actions (e.g. posing for a portrait) make some students to feel uncomfortable.
Art classroom activities

Students investigated meaning-making in photography. Several objects and their juxtaposition created new possible meanings. Their investigation included compositional elements such as balance and value, texture as well as the interrelation of signs, and concepts like opposition (e.g. shiny-dull, valuable-worthless). Also, common symbols were investigated and new ones created (Fig. 9, 10).
The 11th grade students of new media class investigate the emotions that derive from repetition of shots or lost shots in a video production (Fig. 11, 12). The mise-en-scène is the backyard of the school in which two students walk. The video production assimilates a contemporary art aesthetic.
Another assignment in the 11th grade new media class was the creation of a short video on the topic of “the use of smartphones in contemporary life.” This video was a parody of an advertisement for smartphones (Fig. 13, 14). Students used techniques and strategies that they had seen in real advertisements on TV.
The 11th grade class investigated the creation of a short video. The topic “the use of smartphones in contemporary life” was realized as a love story. How technology interrupts and prevents people from real communication and interaction became the inspiration for a funny story in which the role of a princess and prince are transformed into parodic characters. The title of the film is “Το ξύλο” (To xilo) a Greek phrase that means “a piece of wood.” The title is a sarcastic reference to the object that was used as a prince’s spear in the movie (Fig. 15, 16). The decision to use this title instead of a commonplace one indicates the ambiguity of meaning that often characterizes art production.
Closing thoughts

The students’ unsolicited video and photography practices I have presented indicates the potential of these practices as creative activities that can help students develop specific skills and knowledge gained using social media (Duncum, 2013, 2015). However, when these modes of expression are inserted in art class, students resist engaging in activities. Although they enjoy spontaneously participating in creative online communities, they resist accepting them as material for art learning.

The intersection of these practices with art classroom activities serves specific pedagogical objectives, such as acceptance of diversity and investigation of identity. Moreover, it is noticeable that significant artistic-thinking habits, such as parody in narrative, sarcasm, ambiguous meaning, and social interaction, are developed in both out-of-school creative activities and art classes. In order to legitimate the out-of-school creative activities as material for art learning, some explicit connection should be established between the artistic-thinking habits that are developed in youth’s participation in online creation and the contemporary art world.
References


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