

## A Critical Eye: Using Visual Thinking Strategies | Notes for Teachers

### Background information

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) can mean different things to different people, as you will see if you try a quick google search using this term.

For the purpose of this resource, we are referring to the teaching method developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine in 1991.

Philip was the Education Director at New York's Museum of Modern Art from 1983-1993. He worked with colleagues at MOMA to develop a strategy for increasing the visual literacy of audiences. Working with teachers in the field for more than a decade, the strategy was tested and refined, and is now widely used by educators in a variety of settings and across a wide range of disciplines.

VTS is one method that the education team at LAI have implemented in order to encourage inclusive, creative and critical discussions around artworks. Recently, we have been working with our collection to support teaching at La Trobe – using collection objects as a starting point for discussions in Law, Physics, Mathematics and Linguistics. VTS has been a useful method for these object-based discussions as it is simple, inclusive and highly effective.

For more information on the founders of VTS See:

- Yenawine, P. (2013). Visual thinking strategies: Using art to deepen learning across school disciplines. Harvard Education Press. • Or visit the organisation website: <https://vtshome.org/>

For more recent discussion on the method see:

- Rautiainen, K.-H., & Jäppinen, A. (2017). Visual Literacy From the Perspective of the VTS Method. Journal of Literature and Art Studies, 7 (8), 1071-1082. [doi:10.17265/2159-5836/2017.08.016](https://doi.org/10.17265/2159-5836/2017.08.016)
- Chin, C. (2017). Comparing, contrasting and synergizing Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) and aesthetic education strategies in practice. International Journal of Education Through Art, 13(1), 61-75.
- VTS founder, Philip Yenawine's new website: [www.watershed-ed.org/](http://www.watershed-ed.org/)

Further Reading:

- Visual Thinking Strategies; Using Art to Deepen Learning Across School Disciplines, by Philip Yenawine.

### Using VTS Across the Curriculum:

VTS can be used in different ways depending on the subject area or skills you wish to focus on developing. For example, when LAI used VTS in a discussion with LTU Law students, we encouraged students to view and discuss images using the same VTS questions, but within a discussion around learning to read an image which may be used as evidence in a legal case -in particular, the discussion included the importance of being aware of our personal biases, and how our background, experiences, personal values and attributes, professional and other knowledge can influence the way we read a photograph or image.

An English or Civics & Citizenship teacher might be interested in using VTS to develop students' ability to accommodate multiple perspectives, engage in respectful discussion, articulate their ideas with confidence, and develop a rationale for their viewpoints.

The technique of asking students to look, then look again and back up their assumptions with what they see in the image can also be used in teaching students how to read data of any kind, so useful in subjects such as science, social studies or history.

### Choosing an image for a VTS discussion:

The choice of image is very important and can change the emphasis and direction of the discussion. Your image can be tailored to best fit the subject and purpose of the discussion and may be an artwork or an image from the media.

You might consider, for example:

- An image which is rich in details to draw out observation and communication skills and provide many details for discussion
- An ambiguous image that could be interpreted in different ways to demonstrate how different people see things differently
- An image that is controversial or emotive to discuss values
- An image that is misleading to provoke discussion around media manipulation or responsibilities in journalism and democracy
- Abstract artwork to draw out discussion around abstract qualities or art elements

### Facilitating the discussion:

For the discussion to work best **it is essential that all participants feel safe to contribute to the conversation.** To enable this, state that;

- All input is valued;
- There are no right or wrong answers;
- It is important to hear from everyone, and
- Listen and speak respectfully.

Give participants clear ground rules about how to participate in the discussion as follows;

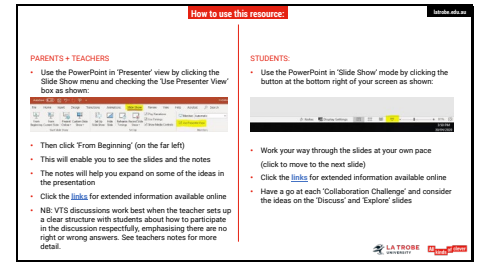
- One person speaking at a time;
- Put up your hand and wait to be called on by the teacher/facilitator before speaking;
- Keep your contribution short and focussed on one idea, to allow room for others to offer their views.

The teacher/facilitator should validate each person's contribution by restating their observation back to the group without any positive or negative comments or judgements to avoid anyone's comment appearing to be better or worse than another's'.

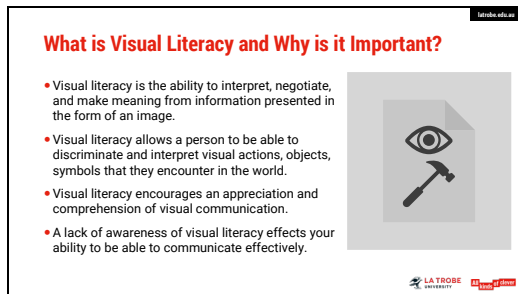
Keep asking "What more can you see?", perhaps prompt students to look from top to bottom of the image, and from left to right, to really examine every bit of the image completely. A good discussion should go for around 20 minutes.

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Slides 1-3



Slide 4



We know that 'literacy' is the ability to understand and interpret the meaning of written text. But it's not just being able to read and write.

The UNESCO definition of literacy is:

"...the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts. Literacy involves a continuum of learning in enabling

individuals to achieve their goals, to develop their knowledge and potential, and to participate fully in their community and wider society (UNESCO, 2004; 2017).

So clearly, literacy is a vital skill that empowers people to make sense of and manage their lives effectively. Indeed being literate helps us fit into society, follow instructions and act appropriately –or just as importantly – to question rules or information. In short, literacy helps us be effective, empowered citizens.

## What is visual literacy and why is it important?

We see hundreds, even thousands of images everyday on social and other media i.e. news on TV or online, articles, advertising, Instagram, icons, emojis, maps, Youtube, Facebook, magazines, books, film, video, animation, film, film clips, posters, logos, graphic novels, art in and out of galleries, signage and so on.

Visual literacy is the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image, and this kind of literacy is just as vital in empowering us.

Visual Literacy teaching toolkit from the Victorian Curriculum:

<https://www.education.vic.gov.au/school/teachers/teachingresources/discipline/english/literacy/readingviewing/Pages/litfocusvisual.aspx>

*As so much information is being delivered to us visually, it is vital that we develop the skills to be discerning, questioning, curious, and sceptical readers of these images. Why do you think this is important?*

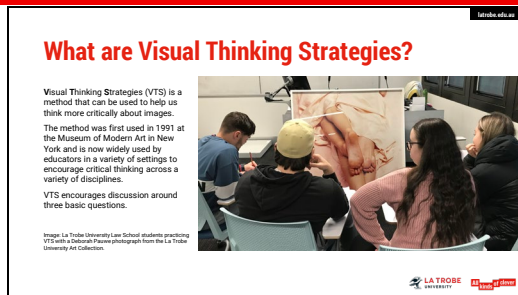
A lot of the images we see every day are designed to influence us in some way –to make us *feel* something, and therefore *do* something.

So visual literacy is also a vital skill that empowers people to make sense of and manage their lives, and be effective, empowered citizens.

*Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a teaching method that improves critical thinking skills and visual literacy through facilitated discussions of visual images.*

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### Slide 5



**What are Visual Thinking Strategies?**

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a method that can be used to help us think more critically about images. The method was first used in 1991 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York and is now widely used by educators in a variety of settings to encourage critical thinking across a variety of disciplines. VTS encourages discussion around three basic questions.

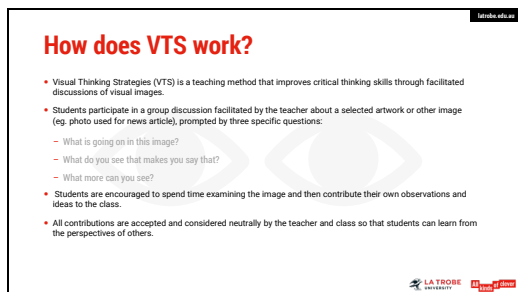
Image: LA Trobe University Law School students practicing VTS with a photograph of a person from the LA Trobe University Art Collection.

VTS was developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine in 1991.

Philip was the Education Director at New York's Museum of Modern Art from 1983-1993. It was within this setting that he worked with colleagues to develop a strategy for increasing the visual literacy of audiences. Working with teachers in the field for more than a decade, the strategy was tested and refined. It is now widely used by educators in a variety of settings and across a wide range of disciplines.

VTS is one method that the education team at LAI have implemented in order to encourage inclusive, creative and critical discussions around artworks. Recently, we have been working with our collection to support teaching at La Trobe – using collection objects as a starting point for discussions in Law, Physics, Mathematics and Linguistics. VTS has been a useful method for these object-based discussions as it is simple, inclusive and highly effective.

### Slide 6



**How does VTS work?**

- Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) is a teaching method that improves critical thinking skills through facilitated discussions of visual images.
- Students participate in a group discussion facilitated by the teacher about a selected artwork or other image (eg. photo used for news article), prompted by three specific questions:
  - What is going on in this image?
  - What do you see that makes you say that?
  - What more can you see?
- Students are encouraged to spend time examining the image and then contribute their own observations and ideas to the class.
- All contributions are accepted and considered neutrally by the teacher and class so that students can learn from the perspectives of others.

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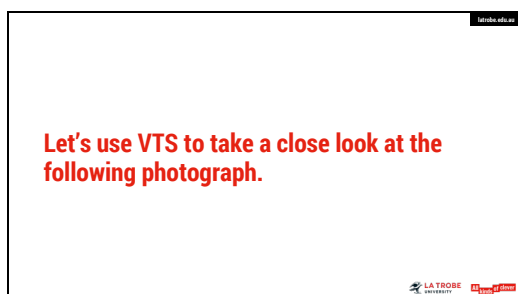
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- What do you see that makes you say that?
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Students are encouraged to spend time examining the image and then contribute their own observations and ideas to the class. All contributions are accepted and considered neutrally by the teacher and class so that students can learn from the perspectives of others.

VTS helps students develop:

- the ability to interpret, negotiate, and make meaning from information presented in the form of an image
- communication skills through encouraging all students to share their ideas, listen to others and respect different perspectives.

### Slide 7



**Let's use VTS to take a close look at the following photograph.**

We deliberately do not provide you with information about the photograph you are about to see until after the initial discussion.

Sometimes, labelling leads thinking (and the ensuing conversation) in a single direction. Information such as title, photographer, year and image provenance influence our reading of images and can inhibit creative and critical thinking.

Without these details we are free to create multiple alternate narratives for the image, and must rely on the evidence in the image, we are forced to examine the whole image and pay attention to details that we may have overlooked if the given written information did not explicitly or implicitly highlight it.

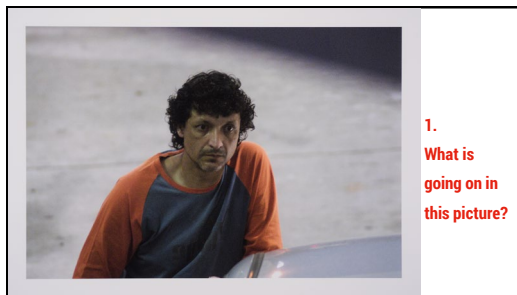
**Before creating a discussion with students, set up the ground rules to create a safe space for everyone to contribute.**

### To enable this, state that;

- All input is valued;
- There are no right or wrong answers;
- It is important to hear from everyone;
- Listen and speak respectfully - One person speaking at a time;
- Put up your hand and wait to be called on by the teacher/facilitator before speaking;
- Keep your contribution short and focussed on one idea to allow room for others to offer their views.

The teacher/facilitator should validate each person's contribution by restating their observation back to the group without any positive or negative comments or judgements to avoid anyone's comment appearing to be better or 'less than' than another's'.

Slide 8



### Question 1. What is going on in this picture?

\*\*\* Encourage students to jot down their ideas and/or share them verbally.

If necessary, here are some prompts however try to let students lead the thinking and discussion as much as possible.

Who is this? Who took the photograph?

What is the subject doing? What was the photographer doing?

What emotion does the image seem to convey?

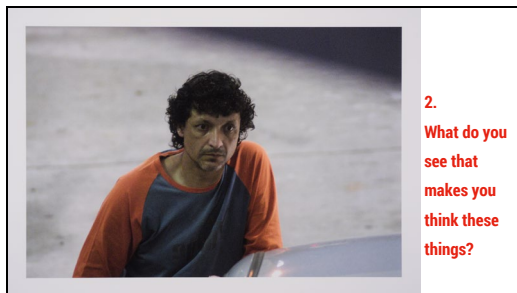
Where is the subject? Where is the photographer?

What is the relationship between the subject and the photographer?

When was the picture taken? What happened before/What happened afterwards?

Why are they here? Why was the picture taken?

Slide 9



### Question 2: What can you see that makes you say those things?

\*\*\* Here, help students develop critical thinking skills by encouraging them to give a rationale for each of their observations and assumptions.

For example, did you make your guesses/judgements based on:

- The subject's expression/gaze presentation, physical attributes?
- Other clues in the foreground and background?
- The quality, framing/composition, colour, tone of the photograph?

Slide 10

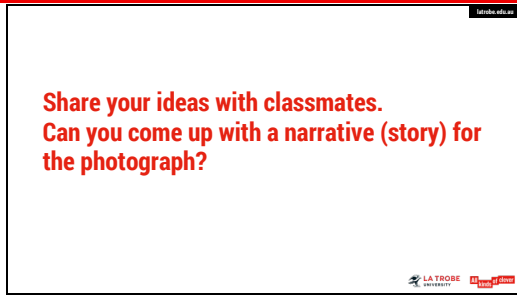


### Question 3: What more can you find?

\*\*\* Keep asking students this question until the conversation dries up completely. A good VTS discussion should take around 20 minutes.

Part of the value of the exercise comes from spending time with an image and allowing as many observations from as many students as possible which demonstrates the breadth of people's perceptions and possible interpretations of the same image.

Slide 11



Gather your ideas and come up with a narrative for the image. Can you write it as a story?

### \*\*\* Extension Activities

1. You may wish to leave your VTS discussion with students at this point, with the skills learnt from the discussion itself being the outcome.
2. You can decide whether or not to provide “The Facts” about the image in the next slide and ask them to compare their ideas with those of the artist.
3. Or continue with this extension activity that LAI originally developed for LTU law students to increase their awareness of the personal biases or influences they bring to reading images, (and other aspects of their lives).

This VTS exercise could be applied to many other areas of the curriculum including:

- **Personal and Social Capability:**
  - Levels 5 & 6: Explore and discuss behaviours that demonstrate sensitivity to individual, social and cultural differences
  - Levels 7 & 8: Explore their personal values and beliefs and analyse how these values and beliefs might be different or similar to those of others
  - Levels 9 & 10: Analyse how divergent values and beliefs contribute to different perspectives on social issues
- **Intercultural Capability:**
  - Levels 5 & 6: Explain how intercultural experiences can influence beliefs and behaviours, including developing a critical perspective on and respect for their own and other cultures AND
  - Identify barriers to and means of reaching understandings within and between culturally diverse groups
  - Levels 9 & 10: Analyse the ways in which intercultural relationships and experiences have contributed to the development of attitudes, beliefs and behaviours, and how they are manifested in various contexts AND
  - Identify and analyse the challenges and benefits of living and working in an interconnected and culturally diverse world
- **Civics & Citizenship**
  - Levels 5 & 6: Identify different points of view on a contemporary issue relating to democracy and citizenship AND Investigate how people with shared beliefs and values work together to achieve their goals and plan for action
  - Levels 7 & 8: Examine how national identity can shape a sense of belonging and examine different perspectives about Australia’s national identity, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples’ perspectives
  - Levels 9 & 10: Examine the influence of a range of media, including social media, in shaping identities and attitudes to diversity and how ideas about Australian identity may be influenced by global events



Slide 12



This image was created by Melbourne-based artist, Paul Batt as part of his Service Station Series (2006-08).

About the work in this series he says:

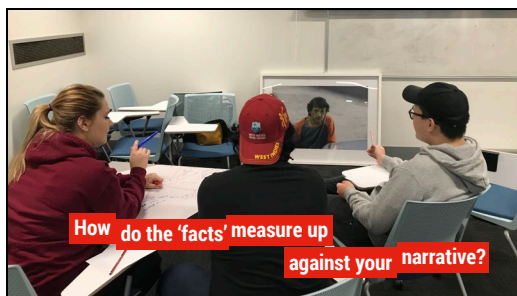
"This series is part of a project documenting self-reflective moments on the faces of individuals at the service station next to my apartment using a super

tele-photo lens. The transitory nature of a service station means that it is never the patron's intended destination, just a stop on the way to somewhere else. The customers are focused on their immanent departure and arrival at their final destination. In a sense, this transitory 'non-place' elicits a certain melancholy from their experience. Their thoughts are elsewhere. I tried to capture these moments, when their façade was absent, to create spontaneous portraits of people unknown to me."

Paul Batt is currently a PhD candidate in Fine Art (Photography) at Monash University, Melbourne, where he is also a Sessional Photography lecturer. He has exhibited work widely throughout Australia, received several awards and grants and has had work featured in a number of publications including Photofile. Batt is represented by Shifted, Melbourne.

*Artwork Details: Paul Batt (Australia, 1977) Untitled #1, 2006-2008. C type photograph. La Trobe University Art Collection, Purchased 2014. LTU2407/14*

Slide 13



What are the main differences between your ideas about the image and the 'facts'? Discuss this with your class.

What factors influence or *bias* how you read this image? What might make you see the same image differently to someone else?

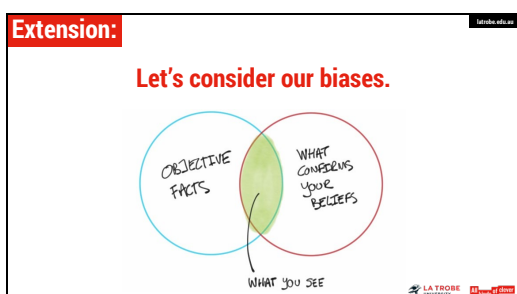
Each of us use our own bank of knowledge and experiences to interpret the world. Perhaps we've had an experience with someone who looks similar to the person in the photograph? Perhaps we've had an experience that has made us feel like we imagine the person in the photograph is feeling?

Can you identify how the ideas you have written down about the image relate to your own background, any previous experiences or knowledge that you bring to your interpretation of the image?

It might be a personal experience or information you've gathered from the media or another source.

Being aware of your own biases can help you move beyond your automatic interpretation of an image and open your thinking up to more interpretations and possibilities, and the viewpoint of others. It can also improve our critical thinking skills.

Slide 14



A bias is giving disproportionate weight in favour of or against an idea, person/people, belief, system or thing.

Biases can be innate or learned. They are not always intentional.

People may develop biases for or against an individual, a group, a belief or system because of their upbringing and other past experiences, or knowledge they have gained through education, their job or social, religious or cultural life. In science and engineering terms, a bias is a systematic error. Similarly, an undetected bias can become a 'systematic error' in any field - influencing and perhaps leading to inaccurate, poor or unfair decisions, conclusions or outcomes. Once we become aware of a bias, we can start to consciously minimise its negative effects or improve its positive effects.

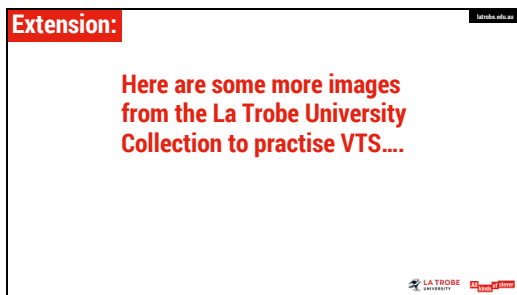
**Think about what biases you bring to your interpretation of this image. Your biases are not right or wrong *and* it's important to be aware of how they make you think.**

Your gender, age, cultural background, state of mind (happy/sad), past experiences, your values, socio-economic background, profession/job, education, the context in which you are viewing the image, and many more factors can all influence or *bias* your view of the image.

**What are some facts about you that might have influenced your way of seeing this image? Again, your views are not right or wrong.**

**Choose 3 'facts' about yourself and write down how they influenced your interpretations of the image. Share this with your class.**

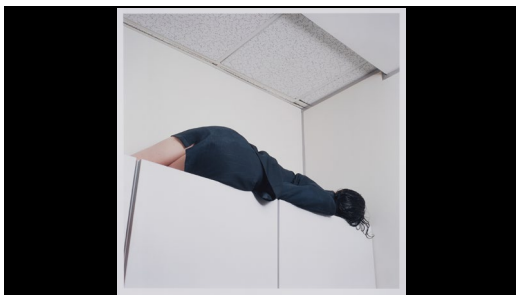
Slide 15



The images on Slides 16, 17 and 18 were used in a VTS session with third-year students at La Trobe University's Law School in their subject: *Criminal Law, Ethics and Accountability*. The lecture topic was 'Viewing and Evidencing Crime'. While these photographs are fine-art photographs from the La Trobe University Art Collection, they were deliberately selected for this particular VTS session for their ambiguity and potential to be read as both evidence

and as depictions of intimacy. **These photographs are recommended for mature student groups.**

Slide 16



- What is going on in this picture?
- What can you see that makes you think these things?
- What more can you see?

### The Facts:

Artwork details: Narinda Reeders, (Australia, 1976) *White Collar Undone No4*, 2006. Lambda print, ed. 1/10. La Trobe University Art Collection, Purchased 2006.

### Artist Statement for *White Collar Undone*, Narinda Reeders.

"I hate my job. Thank god. There is a vengeful pleasure in dreaming the demise of the things that oppress us. It opens up a whole field of imaginative riches. But what is the source of this perceived oppression?"

Why do we white collar workers love to hate our corporate jobs? The corporate workplace requires adherence to strict codes of behaviour which can be incredibly frustrating. But at the heart of our complaints is the wish to bite the hand that feeds us, to sever the dependence that threatens our freedom. But we keep up the 'daily grind' with hungry mouths open, because we believe, paradoxically, that this hand also holds our ticket to freedom: our brand-new iPod, the latest model SUV, an expensive art practice. We grudgingly give up generous portions of our lives and ourselves as a sacrifice to freedom, while imagining with pleasure how it all might crumble and disappear."



Slide 17



- What is going on in this picture?
- What can you see that makes you think these things?
- What more can you see?

**The Facts:**

Artwork details: Deborah Paauwe (United States of America, 1972) *Sleepover*, 2001. Colour ink on photographic paper. La Trobe University Art Collection, Purchased 2005. LTU1970/05

From Deborah Paauwe's website:

The coy petting act evident in many of Paauwe's works suggests a mutual privacy and underlines Paauwe's intent in capturing sensations of the dichotomy of concealment and exposure. The soft palette of skin tones and elaborate lacy vintage gowns against the black background adds an enhanced sense of theatricality. Conveying varying degrees of implied eroticism can be confused with innocence, a deliberate course of action.

In Paauwe's world of fiction and desire, ambiguity is a prevalent characteristic and issues of femininity, sexuality, power, fantasy and voyeurism pervade Paauwe's work. Through potent employment of costume, veiling, performance, Paauwe examines the complex relationship between the child, femininity and the camera. Her works which centralise on the limbs, hair and vestments rather than the face are highly suggestive of an artifice and poignant reality, the dichotomy of sexuality and innocence, life and death whilst depicting the natural but haunting transition from childhood to adulthood.

Slide 18



- What is going on in this picture?
- What can you see that makes you think these things?
- What more can you see?

**The Facts:**

Artwork details: Paul Knight (Australia, 1976), *Untitled*, 2011. C type photograph. La Trobe University Art Collection, Purchased 2013. LTU2380/13

About Paul Knight:

Paul Knight's recent work engages with notions of intimacy, eroticism and risk. Since graduating from the Victorian College of the Arts, Melbourne, in 2001, he has produced several significant bodies of photographic work as well as sculptures, performances and installations. For the summer of 2010, Knight was awarded the Australian Council for the Arts, Skills and Arts Development London Studio Residency. In 2009, he was awarded the William and Winifred Bowness Photography Prize, presented at Monash Gallery of Art, Melbourne. In 2007, Knight received a Samstag Fellowship to attend the Glasgow School Of Art, uk, where he graduated with a mfa in 2009. In 2008, he featured in new08 at Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne and, in 2007, his photography featured in the group exhibition Australian Photography Today at Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne. He has also been shortlisted for the Gold Coast Ulrich Schubert photographic art award, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Queensland. In 2004, Knight was a Studio Artist at Gertrude Contemporary. Paul Knight is represented by Neon Parc, Melbourne.

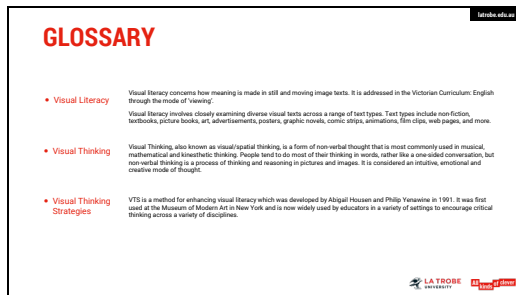
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Slide 19



- What have you learnt about interpreting artwork and other images?
- What biases have you discovered in yourself?
- How can this be useful to know about yourself?
- How have these biases effected the way you see the world?

Slide 20



Slide 21

