

# TRENDS

JOURNAL OF THE TEXAS ART EDUCATION ASSOCIATION





# CHALLENGE

## WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH THIS?

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### Mel Basham, TAEA President

Have you ever walked into your classroom or art studio and realized there were no supplies and no budget? What will my students do? How can they complete any studio processes or produce a meaningful product? These are not new questions for most art educators. Yet the problem must be solved! Suggestion: Have your students work as contemporary artists by using contemporary materials – found objects, cardboard, house paint, wood scraps, wire – the list is endless and so are the supplies. To ensure critical and creative thinking, open a discussion by asking your students to collaborate on a list of current social and environmental issues. Then ask them to make a proposal regarding processes they might use to highlight and propose a solution to one of those issues. The next step is to research causes so students become aware of the complexities that affect their issue. As students research they are contemplating and responding to their world by making decisions about materials and processes. Through experimentation with found materials, students are not only inventing solutions to contemporary problems but are also expanding the possibilities of non-traditional processes. Surprise – you can make meaningful art without any supplies or budget! Do not be afraid to step outside your art supply comfort zone: go dumpster diving and garage sale shopping; pick up sea shells and drift wood; salvage sewing supplies, fabric leftovers, and cardboard scraps. The students will be surprised and the results will be exciting. Once you introduce non-traditional materials, or direct students to bring in their own, the learning process expands beyond traditional studio processes. Engaging students in their own learning is a valuable tool, and allowing them to make choices creates life-long learners. Without traditional materials to fall back on, your students will become critical and creative thinkers, discovering and designing new processes and products for their contemporary world. See what happens. Enjoy the surprise. Let serendipity loose in the studio. Surprise – success – oh yes!



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**“Surprise-you can  
make meaningful art”**

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Fattahi, Solomon's Prison (detail). concrete, glue, acrylic, fabric dye, and gesso on canvas, 4' by 6', April 2019. Author image.

# REVIEWERS

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Fattahi, *The Cost of the Chandelier* (detail): clay, glue, powdered Styrofoam, enamel, acrylic and fabric dye on canvas, 38" by 48", September 2018. Author image.





## TAEA LEADERSHIP

Standing from left to right: Ricia Kerber (Commercial Exhibits Director), Christine Grafe (Vice-President Elect Youth Art Month), Betsy Murphy (Secretary), Jami Bevans (President Elect), Mel Basham (President), Sara Chapman (Executive Director), Suzanne Greene (Past President), Gretchen Bell (Vice-President Youth Art Month), Chris Cooper (Vice-President Membership), Pam Arnold (Vice-President Elect Membership), Paul Kretchmer (Treasurer)

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## ON THE COVER: Julia DeLeon, *Manos de Amor y Trabajo*, Digital Photograph, 2019

*Julia DeLeon is an artist and educator at Rockwall High School, Rockwall TX. She graduated from the University of North Texas with a BFA in Studio Art. Currently she is working towards her Master of Art Education at Texas Tech University.*

*Also by Julia DeLeon,*

*Untitled, Digital Photograph, 2019. Author Image. (page 25)*

*Oja, Digital Photograph, 2019. Author Image. (page 41)*

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*Carol Flueckiger, Earth Day Event, Lubbock, TX, cyanotype on fabric, 96x82 inches, 2019. Author Image. (page 59).*

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**BACK COVER: Sahar Fattahi, *The Fragmentation of the Chandelier, done by a Middle Finger*, fabric dye on canvas, 38" by 48", September 2018. Author image. (detail, cropped)**

*Journal design by Andrés Peralta*





# AUTHORS

## ALDOUBY

*Ayelet Danielle Aldouby is a public art and social practice curator. She serves as a curatorial consultant at Residency Unlimited and was the lead curator for IDEAS xLab, cultivating artists as agents of change. Aldouby has curated "Re:Construction" public art projects, commissioned by Alliance for Downtown NYC. She is pursuing her doctorate in art education at Teachers College, Columbia University.*

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## CABRAL

*Marta Cabral works with people of all ages to explore artistic and playful engagement with materials, processes, and ideas in diverse settings worldwide. Marta is an Assistant Professor at the City University of New York at the College of Staten Island, and has taught young children for over 20 years.*

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## DICINDIO

*Carissa DiCindio is Assistant Professor in Art and Visual Culture Education, at the University of Arizona. Prior to this position, she was the Curator of Education at the Georgia Museum of Art. She has been in the field of museum education for over 15 years. Her research focuses on peer learning in museums and working with university museum audiences.*

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Fattahi, *The Fragmentation of the Chandelier, done by a Middle Finger (detail)*. fabric dye on canvas, 38" by 48", September 2018. Author image.



## DODINGTON

*Jessie Dodington is a recent MFA graduate from Texas Tech University. Her work has been exhibited in group and solo shows across the United States and internationally. Dodington has taught drawing and painting as a resource faculty member at Eastern New Mexico University and as a graduate instructor at Texas Tech University.*

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## FATTAHI

*Sahar Fattahi, MFA candidate at Texas Tech University, has concentrated on suppressing systems and gender inequality for more than a decade. Her work has been featured in the Russo Gallery and Cannon Gallery at WOU in Oregon, as well as the Satellite Gallery and the Landmark Arts Gallery in Texas. Her current practice is in painting and sculpture.*

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## FINCHAM

*Emmanuelle Fincham is a toddler teacher, teacher educator, and researcher at the Rita Gold Early Childhood Center at Teachers College, Columbia University. In her teaching and research, she is interested in the possibilities that arise when locating and disrupting the expected and “best” practices in early childhood.*

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## FLUECKIGER

*Carol Flueckiger, Associate Professor, School of Art at Texas Tech University, creates mixed media artwork about feminist history, environment, and renewable energy. Her signature technique uses cyanotype, a light sensitive chemical that she blends with drawing and painting. Her artwork is represented by Charles Adams Gallery in Lubbock, TX.*

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## KOEGEL

*Born in New York City in 1980, Charles Koegel has a Master’s degree in Fine Art from Pratt Institute and a Master’s in Art Education from Teachers College. His artwork has received review in publications such as Artforum Magazine and been awarded with a Pollock-Krasner Foundation grant. He currently lives and works in Brooklyn.*

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## PERALTA

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*Chris Radtke is a Louisville artist and former art educator in Michigan public schools. Radtke is a founding member of Zephyr Gallery, a collaborative artist-owned space exhibiting regional art, and served as chair of the Metro Commission on Public Art which developed Louisville’s first master plan for public art in 2010. Radtke is a partner with IDEAS xLab.*

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## RUFO

*David Rufo, a Clinical Assistant Professor at Fordham University, has published on the topics of creativity, STEAM education, action research, child-centered education, and self-initiated creativity. Additionally, David Rufo has twenty years experience as an elementary classroom teacher. David is also a visual artist. His writings may be found at <https://fordham.academia.edu/DavidRufo> and his artwork at [davidjohnrufo.com](http://davidjohnrufo.com).*

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## VALDEZ

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## WURTZEL

*Kate Wurtzel is a doctoral student at the University of North Texas and is interested in the new materialisms and their application to real-world situations. She has worked as a museum educator and elementary art teacher for several years. She has also worked as a teaching fellow for UNT and supervised student teachers. Currently, she is back in the elementary art classroom in Denton, Texas.*

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# EXPANDED MATERIALITY

SURPRISE AND SERENDIPITY  
IN LEARNING



EDITORS:  
SEAN JUSTICE  
RINA LITTLE

*Image Above: detail from Fleuckiger "Earth Day"*

Carol Fleuckiger, *Bicycle Collection* (detail), 2018.  
*Author Image.*

*Trends 2019* explores materiality and how it matters to learning in various settings, from museums and classrooms to community centers and individual art studios. The motivation to explore materiality is sparked by conversations about the role of tools and materials in the emergence of innovation, a topic that has risen to prominence from intellectual movements such as new materialisms and enactivism, and from new craft-centered practices popularized by the maker movement.

Deep encounters with materiality have grounded our lives in art and artmaking. As a teenager, I (Sean) remember losing myself while creating a tree sculpture for a performance of *Waiting for Godot*. From earlier, I remember hours passing in the space of a heartbeat as I drew and built model sailing ships and airplanes. Later, just out of art school and beginning my career as an artist, I remember seeking and sometimes finding magical wormholes where time and consciousness seemed to collapse into a stream of imaginative productivity while working in a darkroom or behind a video editing deck.

As I child, I (Rina) would spend countless hours creating clothes, boots, and hair accessories for my paper dolls for I was dissatisfied with the ones that came with them. Later, I remember being overwhelmed by the material world as I meandered along the rubble of artifacts I found along a shoreline and gathered them to create shadow boxes. Natural and manufactured materials combined to construct imagined lives where the weathered items began to simmer again.

Over the years, it has occurred to us that these creative flow experiences are often entwined with and inseparable from materiality. Getting our hands on the tools and materials of a particular practice sometimes



invites a fully immersive experience of mindfulness, like opening a portal to a different dimension, or like fabricating the substrate of a new kind of consciousness. Frankly, words fail to describe the experience, as you might realize if you have ever suddenly awakened, as if from a dream, with a sense of wonder or surprise about the new work that has found its way to your easel, printing press, potter's wheel, performance space, computer monitor, or community environment.

### **Where does art come from? How does it get here?**

The notion of being guided by materials resonates with artists across disciplines. The poet Wesley McNair said that the poem tells you when it's done. The painter Elizabeth Murray said, "I just take my cues from putting the color down and seeing how it works" (as cited in Hafeli, 2015, p. 5). And the woodcarver David Esterly (2013, p. 84) foregrounds the role of materiality when he writes: "In the usual way of thinking, you have ideas, and then you learn technical skill so you can express them. In reality it is often the reverse: skill gives you ideas." In these and countless other statements, interviews, memoirs, and casual conversations we hear artists and innovators talking about how the experience of the creative process often feels—the melody was in the air; the characters lived their lives and I just listened to them; it just happened; I was not fully in control.

### **What if we took them at their word? How might schooling change if the goal was to give up control and embrace serendipity?**

In *The Art of Teaching Art to Children*, Nancy Beal (Beal & Miller, 2001) wrote that materials are as much the teacher as she is. And in *Exploring Studio Materials: Teaching Creative Art Making to Children*, Mary Hafeli argues that children often "invent ways of working expressively with materials to make artworks," (2015, p. 3-4) just as artists do. In these statements and in the articles that follow, we hear artists and art teachers at the threshold of surprise and the loss of control, where innovation is closer to serendipity than to purposeful design, where coming face to face with the agency of the things is invited and expected in practice, and where the materiality of environments shapes it users and producers. That is, in our vibrant material world, artistic production often emerges from the liveliness of things. How do these dynamics inform or expand art learning? How do teachers design surprise into lesson plans and facilitate it in artmaking?

In this issue of *Trends*, authors recount their experiences with surprise and serendipity as artists, educators, and people participating in and making the world. By attending to how tools and materials anchor practice, these authors query the way that producers and receivers of art respond to the material world. In these pages we hope you will find inspiration that fuels your multiple material practices as teacher, learner, artist, and world-maker.

Thank you to everyone who made *Trends* 2019 possible.

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## **JUSTICE**

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# A THING I MADE

## How Children Transform Everyday Materials into Creative Artifacts for Learning

by David Rufo

While teaching a fourth-grade math class, I noticed that one of my students had garnished the end of her pencil with a handful of rubber bands. These were cut so they resembled strands of linguine. A few of the rubber bands were kept intact, wrapped around the mass of the pencil and attached at the ferrule right below the eraser (Figure 1). This simple creative act produced an effective visual and psychological dissonance. On the front half one could see a familiar Dixon Ticonderoga number 2 pencil, whereas

the back half appeared as a limpid, washed up sea anemone. The sculptural work by contemporary artist Susan Collis produces similar dissonances. Collis also uses ordinary objects such as screws, ladders, scrap wood, and brooms, and then covertly imbues them with material value by inlaying gemstones, silver, or gold to create precious objects from the mundane (French, 2017).

Collis' work reminds me of what children produce as they engage in self-initiated creative actions. As with the



**FIGURE 1.**

*Pencil festooned in rubber bands.  
Author Image.*



**FIGURE 2.**

*Mixed media abstraction made from detritus found around the classroom.  
Author Image.*

example of the pencil anemone, children will use whatever they can scrounge together to create images and objects, often small, and usually overlooked by adults. These subterranean objects, as I think of them, are surreptitiously fabricated out of small objects such as “erasers, paperclips, tacks, and other detritus found around the classroom” (Rufo, 2011, p. 20) (Figure 2). However, the preciousness in the children’s work lies in its personal significance to the child rather than from the subtle addition of gemstones or other costly materials.

During my tenure as a general elementary classroom teacher, I have witnessed how these acts of self-initiated creativity also benefit the children’s academic learning by encouraging scientific exploration (Rufo, 2014), student collaboration, serendipitous innovation (Rufo, 2013) and therapeutic conditioning (Rufo, 2017) (Figure 3). When I ask students how they refer to their artifacts, they commonly respond: “It’s a thing I made.”

I began to be interested in the self-initiated creativity of children upon becoming a teacher in 1995. I was



perplexed by the dichotomy I witnessed between the significance these creative artifacts held for the children and the contempt with which classroom teachers viewed them. Not being part of the prescribed curricula, the children's self-initiated creations were either ignored or in danger of engendering chastisement. For this reason, the children were willing to share their creations with their peers, but would then secrete them away in backpacks, bury them deep in pockets, or stow them in the corners of cubbies away from the gaze of the adults who did not sanction them.

In contrast, the research literature on creativity demonstrates that creative engagement is often intertwined with knowledge acquisition and recognizes that the artistic process "constitutes one of the oldest forms of knowledge and knowing" (Brydon-Miller, 2009, p. 125). Many believe that creativity should be taught "as a critical competency" (Perera, 2012, p. 2) and "be built into educational curriculums" (Berland, 2012, p. 12). However, my own teaching experiences compel me to wonder if creative competencies must be explicitly taught or if similar benefits could be gained by simply allowing students the agency to openly enact their self-initiated creative practices through material explorations. As Beghetto and Kaufmann (2009) posit, "supporting academic learning and creativity are not separate paths, but rather overlapping goals that can and should be simultaneously pursued" (p. 318). This idea of overlapping academic and creative objectives led me to consider if engaging in creative acts in tandem with academic objectives could enhance the learning process. As an educator who is also a visual artist, I have found that my learning is deepened when it takes place alongside engagement with creative materials. For example, I more readily absorb information from a lecture, TED Talk, or podcast if I work on a painting at the same time. I decided to allow my

**"creative learning often appears messy because like play, it involves open-ended processes"**



**FIGURE 3.**

*Prosthetic robotic hand design. Author Image.*



**FIGURE 4.**

*Stop motion animation figure with wire armature. Author Image.*

students the agency to create during their academic learning.

The students responded by bringing their self-initiated creations out into the open. Soon the walls, windows, tables, and chairs became surfaces on which students drew, painted, and posted their pictures. Creative actions and artifacts once hidden became visible. A few years later, for my dissertation research, I investigated the self-initiated creative processes and artifacts of my fourth and fifth grade students over the course of one school year and found pedagogical benefits to allowing students significant creative agency.

Over the years, I documented hundreds of self-initiated creative artifacts produced by my students. The selected images you see here were made between January and April of 2011, only a few months after my students were first invited to openly create and display their artifacts. The sudden proliferation of self-initiated creativity reveals the intensity and accelerated frequency with which students will engage in an assortment of creative actions when allowed artistic agency in the elementary

classroom. In addition to the rubber band pencil described earlier, the images show self-initiated creativity being used to design a robotic prosthetic hand, produce a stop-motion animation sequence, explore mixed-media abstraction with found materials, express the frenetic energy of a Valentine's Day celebration, paint a portrait of the teacher on a rock following the study of ancient pictographs, publicly advocate for additional creative agency during the school day, and exhibit ownership of the classroom space by hanging a mixed-media, found object sculpture from the ceiling (Figures 3-7). Each creative artifact was self-initiated, meaning that a teacher did not direct its creation. Nor were any of these artifacts produced as part of a required assignment. Rather, each was created by a student in tandem with their academic learning, which I believe was beneficial to the children's cognitive and emotional pedagogical experiences.

However, the way children go about the creative process and the resulting optics of their self-initiated creative actions is quite different from the visual aesthetic

educators are accustomed to seeing in elementary school classrooms (Figure 8). Despite the meaningful learning that took place in my classroom, it remained vulnerable to criticism by those who subscribed to traditional pedagogies. It is a commonly held notion that children need clear expectations, routine, and structure in order to learn (Postal, 2011; Staley, 2017). Nevertheless, creative learning often appears messy because like play, it involves open-ended processes with divergent pathways (Fillis & McAuley, 2000; Jones, 2018; Piirto, 2014).

The notion of creative learning as exploration reminds me of an experience I had as a young child. While visiting my cousins' home I recall being fascinated with the disarray of their bedrooms. In my home, I was required to put my toys away by stacking them neatly on a closet shelf and in their original boxes. Whereas in my cousins' home, cleaning up meant hurriedly tossing everything into a large toy box with the lid resting ajar upon the heap as we raced to the next adventure. To me, the jumble of my cousin's toy box was a delightful archeological site

FIGURE 5.

*White board with Valentine's Day celebratory markings and messages. Author Image.*



FIGURE 6.

*Portrait of the teacher painted on a rock mimicking ancient pictographs. Author Image.*



FIGURE 7.

*Student notes to teachers advocating for creative agency. Author Image.*



FIGURE 8.

*Found object sculpture affixed to ceiling tiles. Author Image.*





containing layers of hidden amusements that required us to search, dig, and explore. It offered a mode of play beyond the simple act of taking a game off a shelf and following its instructions. Rather, play required rummaging through a mix of action figures, marbles, cards, dolls, Lincoln Logs, and Tinker Toys. Attempting to locate a particular toy usually meant getting sidetracked by an unexpected discovery as “the dig” revealed new diversions. Following the cord from the handset of a Playskool telephone in an effort to locate the base, revealed a host of intriguing objects and gizmos along the way, making me forget about the phone altogether.

At my cousin’s house, play no longer consisted of simply choosing a mass-produced object with which to entertain oneself; rather, it was a creative excursion where making connections between disparate objects became commonplace. In this world of playful creation, a Barbie doll transformed into a colossus wreaking havoc on terror-stricken commuters driving home in their Matchbox cars on a braided-rug highway. It is not surprising then to read how play “functions as the cradle of creativity” (Mainemelis & Ronson, 2006, p. 121).

Creative play is generally associated with early childhood education. In fact, the statement “child-centered, authentic, play-based learning” (New York State Department of Education, 2017, p. 14) only appears in the Prekindergarten portion of the New York State learning standards. However, artist and educator George Szekely (2015) who has devoted his career to investigating children’s play in art making, considers play as a “form of art” (p. 3) and play-based learning as beneficial for students of all ages. Because play “facilitates a number of different processes important in creativity” (Russ, 1999, p. 58), opportunities for play through self-initiated creative actions should be included in all grade levels and across all subject areas. In order to do this, educators who value creative learning,

especially art educators, need to help their colleagues see the value of creative approaches to teaching and learning, particularly those that diverge from conventional expectations.

The research literature suggests that creativity is integral to the human experience (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997; Gnezda, 2011). It stands to reason then, that play-based, self-initiated creativity should be integral to the educational experiences of all children.

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The background of the entire page is an abstract painting. It features a dense composition of bold, expressive brushstrokes in a wide range of colors including deep blues, bright yellows, fiery reds, and dark purples. The strokes are layered and textured, creating a sense of movement and depth. The overall effect is a vibrant, almost chaotic, visual field that suggests a landscape or a complex emotional state.

# TRAVERSE BODY IN LANDSCAPE

Painting a Phenomenological  
Experience of Landscape

JESSIE DODINGTON

*Moon Shadow On The Contours Of The Canyon,*  
acrylic on canvas, 60 x 48" 2019  
Author Image.





## FIGURE

1. *Trail of Sweat or Rain*, acrylic on canvas, 82 x 156", 2017. Author Image.

2. *The Sky Weighed Heavy on Me*, acrylic on canvas, 82 x 156", 2018. Author Image.

3. *Overgrown Grasses Hide the Rocks*, acrylic on canvas, 82 x 77", 2018. Author Image (cropped).

4. *Working on Overgrown Grasses Hide the Rocks*. Author Image.

5. *Installation of Isotropy*, acrylic on canvas, 83 x 540", 2019. Author Image.

6. *Aube (dawn)*, acrylic on canvas, 30 x 40, 2016. Author Image.

**“I wish to paint embodied movement through a place, rather than a still image of a place.”**

A phenomenological approach to landscape involves experiences with an environment that acts on the sensory perception of the human body—to the point where embodiment occurs. Such an approach also necessitates movement within a space. Movement through a space deepens our understanding of that space and can lead to a richer experience than simply viewing a landscape can provide. As one looks out from within an environment, the notion that humans are disconnected from the landscape and are looking at or upon it begins to falter. Maurice Merleau-Ponty is one of the foremost philosophers who writes on the living body. He explains that “rather than a mind and a body, man is a mind with a body, a being who can only get to the truth of things because its body is, as it were, embedded in those things” (Merleau-Ponty, 1948/2004, p. 56). He asserts that our perception and understanding of the things around us are determined by our own bodily movements through space.

I wish to paint embodied movement through a place, rather than a still image of a place. This distinction makes the difference between painting as an experience of a place or space versus painting as an image of a place or space. Because my goal is to paint a moving viewpoint, I use running, more specifically trail running, as a primary form of research to make large scale acrylic paintings. Running provides a way to insert my body into landscapes, and simultaneously diminishes the thoughts that threaten to dominate sensation and affect. Exertion of this kind can focus attention, as in meditation, by funneling the consciousness into the present moment. The spiritual leader of the meditation community Shambhala, Sakyong Mipham, is also a marathon runner and teaches running as meditation, saying that it creates “panoramic awareness” (Mipham, 2012, p. 104) (Figures 1 & 2).

Running is the method by which I access different modes of perception; it is the way I perform space. Much in the way that walking has been productive in creative research methodologies, my

method of research via movement of the body through space is especially apt for a visual artist. This is because seeing depends on the merging of vision with other senses, which in turn relates to movement. Tim Ingold (as cited in Springgay, 2017) states that “‘walkers hear through their feet,’ emphasizing the proprioception of movement” (p.6). Thus, it could be said that I see or think in landscapes through my feet in the practice of running. I then paint the embodied memory of this richness of action and sensitivity to landscape that originates from my research.

The link that connects how I research with the way I actually create in the studio is presence, or mindfulness. I seek a similar state of mindfulness in my painting practice and in my running. This is about working from a state of awareness—being able to take in many things at once like composition, color, feeling, and energy and synthesize these in paint. Why paint? There is a decadence to paint, and a richness of the pigment and tactility. The way it moves and is susceptible to manipulation from gesture draws me again and again to this medium. Also, color acts on the body. Color has agency, an energy, or a PULSE. I want to keep that alive. I want the viewer to see every color I lay down, consciously or not. Painting with innumerable, thin layers allows me to access a state between control and release. In this way, a brush stroke, like a voyage, is an act of curiosity, of exploration, and of discovery (Figure 4).

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1994) emphasizes that “space calls for action” (p. 12). This is true of my experience in landscape. I have a fierce impulse to move my body, explore, self-situate, and through this activity, understand. I then transpose this experience of landscape into the spatial experience of painting. The way I paint is sympathetic or responsive to the landscape experience, rather than synonymous. The physicality of constructing my paintings reiterates the action of the research-run, while the act of painting is in itself a way of thinking. In the large canvases I hang on the studio wall, space indeed “calls for

action” and I stand, reach, hunch, sit, jump, bend and roam over their surfaces with brush in hand (Figures 5 & 6).

Artist Hans Hoffman (as cited in Ursprung, 2013) notes that “movement is the expression of life. All movements are of a spatial nature. The continuation of movement through space is rhythm. Thereby, rhythm is the expression of life in space” (p. 25). I have embraced this idea in my painting process. I utilize abstraction as a way to drop into the repetition of mark-making. This language of repetitious mark-making creates the rhythm, which expresses life in space. As is the landscape, in painting there will always be terra incognita. It is this mystery, magic, and the unknown, pregnant with potential, that excites me and propels me forward in my investigations.

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# TRASH TO TREASURE

*by Candace Yvette Printz*

## **A Reflection on the Land**

Driving in El Paso, I turned on to the Montana highway, east bound. On the left side of Montana, there is the vast Chihuahuan desert. The mountains, slightly purple in the distance, contrasted beautifully against the tans of the sand and the green splotches of desert plants. Occasionally there was a rabbit or roadrunner scurrying across the highway, narrowly missing the tires of cars containing people driving to work. On the right side of Montana, there was evidence of human encroachment on the desert and its many little inhabitants.

The first thing I saw was the multitude of fast food restaurants lining the strip, enticing commuters to stop in. I pulled in quickly to order a breakfast taquito before making my way to El Dorado High School. As I sat in line at the drive-through, I stared off into the desert. I was reminded of all the work that lay ahead for my students and I wondered how we would accomplish it together. I watched as the morning breeze blew plastic bags across the highway, only to get caught in a creosote bush. My eyes traveled from this to the line of litter along the shoulder of the highway. There were Styrofoam cups, straws, paper plates, and a plethora of unidentifiable plastics strewn across the landscape. I felt disappointed, bewildered, and a bit panicked. My art students and I





**FIGURE 1**

*Volunteer picking up trash at cleanup.  
Author Image.*

had a lot of work to do to clean this area of debris, but it would be a journey worth having (Figure 1).

### **The Journey Begins**

About eight years ago, my high school students and I came up with a community service project idea related to art making. The art club kids and I were meeting after school one Monday to discuss the pollution issues we had noticed around our school, which lies on the outskirts of El Paso, Texas. They suggested that we

collect all the trash in the area and turn it into a sculpture that would make people pause and consider consumption, waste, and littering. We wanted to shock people into the realization that the garbage in our own backyard was hurting the land, animals, and people. We knew that we had some responsibility for stewardship, but no attempt at creating that sculpture was ever made. Nevertheless, the seed of an idea had been planted.

In 2016, I thought back to that conversation when I saw a brochure

advertising a national contest called the *Get Going Day* with Chelsea Clinton. The call asked teachers to submit a community service idea involving students in the betterment of their community and in response to the challenge made by Chelsea Clinton in her book *It's Your World* (2017). In the book, Clinton discussed the power of young people and how they, no matter their age, can change the world. I ran home to create a proposal for the contest.

I proposed that we adopt a section



of the highway and clean it up. After we collected the trash, we would wash, sort, and inventory everything. I wanted us to organize and keep all the items so we could repurpose them for creative endeavors. The ultimate goal was to get people thinking about these materials in a different way. Instead of seeing these items as garbage to be ignored, I wanted students to become entangled with them—to react to their materiality and see them as inseparable from life and living. In order to make sure that people had the education to create artwork or other creative items from these materials, I also proposed we host free workshops to teach people different ways to recycle and repurpose the materials in order to promote the arts and environmentalism. Furthermore, after the cleanup and workshop phases, I thought we could host our own regional art competition for all ages, asking contestants to use recycled materials in the submitted works. A reception and awards would also be part of the showcase.

Local non-profits including the Make-a-Wish Foundation, the Humane Society of El Paso, and the Chihuahuan Desert Education Coalition would act as our partners in both the cleanup and

**“I wanted students to become entangled... materiality as inseparable from life and living.”**





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workshops. In turn, we would donate money to their organizations by allowing artists in the regional art competition the opportunity to sell their artwork and donate the proceeds to one of the three organizations. I decided to include non-profits because I realized that all of us, in our own ways, were trying to make our city a better place. Even though we had different missions and motivations, we were all about creating a better world to live in. I believed that we could be stronger when united in our efforts. Eight months later, my proposal had won the national contest. I was completely floored. A whirlwind of emotions came over me. Finally, it sunk in that we now had to take this idea and make the planning phase a reality in two weeks, since Chelsea Clinton herself would visit us then. The project proposed for the contest lasted from 2016-2017 but I and the school continue with this important work every year.

While we prepared for Clinton's visit, I began to realize also how much team work was really needed to make it all happen. We required a website, social media accounts, and a PowerPoint presentation for the audience of students, teachers, non-profits, artists, and potential sponsors; we also needed to complete the forms to adopt the highway



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## FIGURE 2.

*Chelsea Clinton with students at presentation. Author Image.*

## FIGURE 3.

*El Dorado High School students cleaning up trash from the desert. Author Image.*

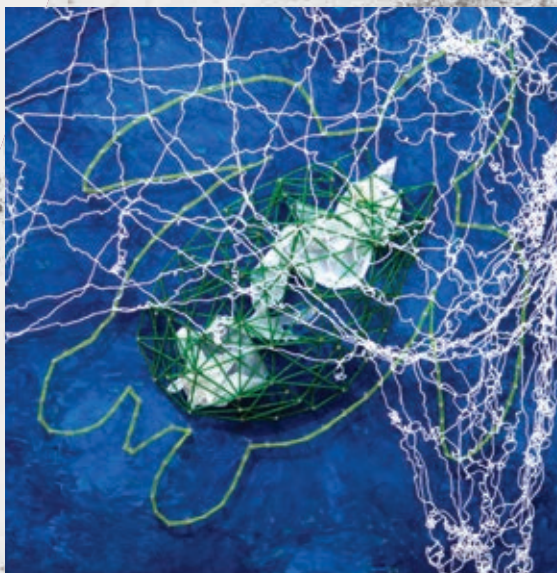
## FIGURE 4.

*It's Your World class, 2017. Author Image.*



## FIGURE 5.

*It's Your World class giving a recycled art workshop to the Girl Scouts. Author Image.*



## FIGURE 6.

*Andrea Vasquez's artwork, Open Your Eyes- Darkness is Coming. Author Image.*

off of Mon ana, print brochures, create an RSVP list, a press release, and get the gym ready for a rally with the rest of the school. I tried to do everything by myself at first, but quickly realized that if we wanted this done right, it would require me to let go and allow others to be a part of it. That was the lesson that I had learned during the two weeks before Clinton's arrival and have kept with me every year we have done the project. By allowing students, teachers, community members, and parents to help me, we all were a part of something together.

All our efforts paid off when Clinton arrived. We greeted her outside the school and she met the teachers and chatted with everyone freely. She willingly took pictures with people before being swept away to our presentation in the theater. Students gave the presentation, discussed their ideas, and invited the audience to join the project. Afterwards, Clinton spoke at length about how amazed she was with the creativity and passion they exuded. She wanted to know what would be done for the showcase and expressed interest in seeing the results first-hand. I told her that she should come back at the end of the year and see the exhibition. She agreed (Figure 2).

### **Our Involvement in the Project: Cleanups, Workshops, and Creations**

Once the cleanups were scheduled, we purchased our gloves, sunscreen, bug spray, first aid kits, safety vests, and bags and hit the road. We met at a gas station off Montana and went over the safety rules. I was disgusted after realizing how much trash was picked up on our first trips. We found thousands of expected and unexpected items and hauled off hundreds of bags of trash from a small area. We collected over three thousand beer bottles, fireworks, tires, roofing materials, carpeting, plastic bags, cigarette butts, nails, Styrofoam, fast food containers, straws, receipts, and toys. We found money, high school diplomas, a glass eye, a ring of keys, photos from the 1980s, letters, mounds of clothes, dishwashers, couches, mattresses, televisions, and washing machines. It really put things into perspective for my students and the other volunteers who pitched in. We sometimes wondered if the littering was done by individuals or companies. We also noted that learning through first-hand experiences was so much more powerful than just reading about the environment. Students told me that it would be so much worse if we were not there. They would talk about how if we did not collect the debris, local wildlife would be harmed, and if we did not share the opportunity to involve community members, they would be worse off or not knowing what was going on in their city. Our actions led to knowledge and compassion (Figure 3).

As we collected the trash, we stored it in a portable storage unit at the school. We began to pull from this storage trailer when we wanted to make projects

using alternative materials and to run our workshops. We also shared these materials with local artists, teachers, and other students in the community. As we moved forward, I began teaching a class called It's Your World. The course was both an art class, focused on using recycled materials, and a way to manage the project (Figure 4). I recruited students to join and we began to study the Great Pacific Garbage Patch, the dangers of micro-plastics, and the rise of fast-fashion. When we learned that plastics never truly break down we began to change our purchasing habits, recycling even more material to use in our artwork. We also discovered that when one-use plastics break down into microplastics, animals mistake them for food, which is harmful because the plastics cannot be digested. In class we discussed Boyan Slat, the teenage founder of the non-profit Ocean Cleanup Project, and his efforts to clean up 50% of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch in the next 5 years. Students were inspired to learn how Slat funds and supports his organization, especially realizing this person was so close to their own age. Lastly, the shocking findings in the documentary

film *Before the Flood* (2016), starring Leonardo DiCaprio, pushed my students and me to aim higher. For example, we were particularly moved by DiCaprio's address to the United Nations in 2014 when he stated:

This is not about just telling people to change their light bulbs or to buy a hybrid car. This disaster has grown beyond the choices that individuals make. This is now about our industries, and governments around the world taking decisive, large-scale action. (Stevens, F., DiCaprio, L., Packer, J., Ratner, B., Davidoski, T., & Killoran, J. D., 2016)

In addition, the students in It's Your World helped me run the art workshops that would include the use of recycled materials. They organized throughout the city, encouraging people of all ages to think about discarded materials in different ways and to create meaningful works of art. The workshops were mostly led by the students, with some teachers and local artists participating, and were so successful that we ended up adding workshops to keep up with the demand. We presented jewelry projects to the Girl Scouts at the Environmental Services

Department. We did a pop-up workshop at the El Paso Museum of Art and showed adults and children how to make magnets and pins out of discarded magazines and glass jewels. We were invited to show community members how to create planters out of burnt out lightbulbs and plastic soda bottles at the El Paso Water Utilities headquarters. We showed art teachers at every grade level how to make fine art from various found objects at the University of Texas at El Paso (Figure 5). We also expanded our own knowledge by working with Helen Dorion and Laura Aragon, two artists from the community, who taught us how to manipulate plastic into jewelry pieces. Other visiting artists also came to my class and spoke about different cultures and how they use readily available materials to create body adornment. These artists opened the students' eyes to what items are being discarded in our current culture and how we can repurpose them. Our visitors also referenced indigenous cultures and showed students how they have influenced contemporary works. Students built confidence as they ran these workshops and learned about using non-traditional materials. Furthermore,

**FIGURE 7.**

*Recycled art by Iliana Sapien, Addiction Author Image.*



**FIGURE 8.**

*Models showcasing the wearable recycled art by Iliana Sapien from the first Metamorphosis: Trash to Treasure exhibition. Author Image.*



**FIGURE 9.**

*Exhibition reception from the first Metamorphosis: Trash to Treasure. Author Image.*





this reprogramming of how we view “trash” encouraged us to be more creative and change our perspectives. Students developed empathy for the land as they became more aware of the condition their world was in and the role they played in it. Plus, they were challenged to be innovative in their artmaking.

Besides acting as workshop staff, the students also helped me imagine a larger vision for our future as stewards. We organized “Board Meeting Mondays” where we sat in a circle and discussed our weekly objectives. Class became a place where students could learn how to create artwork out of alternative materials, use their writing skills to extend their voice, apply leadership skills, become more informed about city and county policies, and delve into how their votes could change policies and laws. Every person had a role in making the system work better. This year, which is the third year I have had this class, I asked my students to write a mission and vision statement for our project.

### A Closer Look at Some Artworks

Andrea, one of the seniors, cut a sheet of plywood down to a 3' x 4' rectangle and hammered nails into it. She then wrapped yarn along the edges of the nails to create an outline of a turtle. Once the basic shape had been formed, she added discarded netting that swallowed the turtle and entangled it. Her title was *Open Your Eyes—Darkness Approaches*, referencing the dangers of the plastics that pollute our waterways and harm sea creatures, including the turtle depicted in her work. I was pleased to see she was not only thinking about important topics, but also that she was considering what materials best conveyed ideas and called attention to environmental matters (Figure 6).

Iliana, one of the juniors, took a different approach, addressing the irreparable damage that trash has on humans. She gathered cigarette butts from our desert cleanups and put them in a picture frame. The glass was smudged and stained with the tar and ash from the cigarettes. The smell was sickening. The background image included lungs drawn

by the student, and several magazine clippings advertising smoking. She said that the work contrasted cigarette advertisements and their promises with the reality of being boxed in by addiction, health risks, and dependency. Again, materials stimulated her to think about how art allows us to contemplate situations, themes, and feelings (Figure 7).

### Metamorphosis: Trash to Treasure Exhibition

The exhibition Metamorphosis: Trash to Treasure was the culmination of our project. The exhibition was open to the public, included all ages, and entries were not restricted by size. Our objective was to draw attention to the world through the use of recycled or repurposed materials. We had live music, descriptions about each piece on labels, and information boards all throughout the exhibition discussing the project. We also hired models to walk around, fully decked out in makeup and wild hair, to showcase the wearable art that had been accepted into the show (Figure 8).

More than one thousand people attended the exhibition reception. As I looked out over the crowd examining the works, and the artists who were beaming with pride, I could not believe that all of this happened because a group of high school art students and their teacher decided to take action. I remembered that I was concerned that no one would enter our contest—only to be flooded with over 500 submissions. When Chelsea Clinton walked into the gallery and gasped, stating that it was so much more than she had expected it to be, my students and I were immensely proud. Seeing what other artists had made from recycled items, along with the information boards we had created to educate the public made it worth all the hard work. The artists did exactly what we had hoped they would do by turning trash into treasures (Figure 9)!

### Conclusion

Overall, the metamorphosis project has gone well. Although we had ups and downs, we will continue to grow as we move from doing everything as

a class to creating an actual non-profit called Green Hope Project (see [www.GreenHopeProject.org](http://www.GreenHopeProject.org)), which we have just begun.

For me this project demonstrates that environmental consciousness and change must involve young people, not only in my community but across the world. What better way to address our concerns than through the arts? By repurposing materials discarded, the messages we convey in our artworks about the environment carry more weight.

As a teacher, I learned that I am also an activist, environmentalist, counselor, animal rescuer, and artist. Modelling my engagement for my students increased their involvement and can most definitely change our world, leading to a healthier society. The project has already inspired students to vote, major in environmental engineering, apply to art school, and become local activists. We better all get busy though, because there is still a lot more work to do!

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SERENDIPITY





# SEEING THE UNSEEN: A COMING-OF-AGE STORY INSPIRED BY SOAP AND BUTTONS

by  
Ayelet Danielle Aldouby  
& Chris T. Radtke

## From Site to Soap

In a historic house in a small town in the Deep South near the Mississippi River stood a group of girls at the cusp of their coming-of-age. Growing up, each had absorbed the complex cultural messages embedded in their shared environment, fueled by a long history of racial segregation, family, and community. Together with the city of Natchez, Mississippi, the girls were participating in an artistic and community collaboration, from September 2016-October 2017, inspired by handmade soap with healing properties. The journey they would embark on together was a search for affirmation and equality by connecting the past to the present and future. In collaboration with their community and with the guidance of two social practice artists, the girls had created three interactive sculptural projects to mark the start of their journey: Keepsake Palm Soap, the *Equity Platform*, and Button Soap. Each object and installation had been informed by the Black imagination that drew on both

“IF YOU CAN SEE  
IT, BE IT”

*Figure 2. “If You Can See It You Can Be It” workshop. Photo courtesy of IDEAS xLab.*



FIGURE 1.

*Angelely House on St. Catherine Street, Natchez, Mississippi. Photo courtesy of IDEAS xLab.*



narrative and history, while celebrating site, building trust, and facilitating equity and a rite of passage.

The town of Natchez, a 300-year-old city located on a bluff overlooking the Mississippi River, is still surrounded by working cotton plantations. Near the center of town runs the mile-long corridor of St. Catherine Street. At one end of the street, prior to the Civil War, stood Forks of the Road, the second largest market of enslaved people in the Deep South. During Reconstruction, many freed Blacks moved to St. Catherine Street to find paying jobs in the domestic help market. With the bitterness of the war still prevalent in the form of structural racism, wealthy white families who seldom hired Black men were willing to hire Black women to work as laundresses. The women took those jobs even though they barely sustained a living because they were the sole supporters of their families (M. Miller, personal communication, April 4th, 2017)<sup>1</sup>.

One hundred years later, at the opposite end of the road, St. Catherine Street

FIGURE 3.

*"If You Can See It You Can Be It" workshop. Photo courtesy of IDEAS xLab.*



became a hub for activists during the 1960s Civil Rights Movement. As the girls and the artists independently began to research the site and understand the stories that shaped Natchez, they found that St. Catherine Street emerged as the single location holding the most significance for the Black community. In dialogue with members of the larger community, the artists learned that St. Catherine Street reflected a century-long quest for equity through its stories and could serve to inspire hope based on heritage. Furthermore, the artists selected soap as a material catalyst by which to explore its stories and the people involved.

#### **Reactivating the Site: Self-Care and Self-Advocacy**

Just a short walk down St. Catherine Street, one can find the current home of the local chapter of the National Coalition of 100 Black Women (NC100BW). The women's organization had hoped to turn it into a meeting place for community renewal. Seeking new ways to re-activate





**FIGURE 4.**

*Metal plaques engraved with each girl's empowering words. Photo courtesy of IDEAS xLab.*

the house, the NC100BW had established a program to mentor neighborhood girls during their coming-of-age journey focusing on health, etiquette, and academics. As program mentors explored new projects for the girls, the city of Natchez won a national multi-agency art grant<sup>2</sup>. The purpose of the grant was to elevate local history and integrate artists in the development of artistic and cultural tools to strengthen a sense of place. Since the grant required building partnerships between a government agency and non-profit sectors in the community, city officials initiated meetings between our artists' group IDEAS xLab<sup>3</sup> and civic organizations, including the NC100BW. We then jointly decided to partner with the NC100BW for the grant.

To provide a framework for implementation, two artists were selected to participate in the project: Cadu, a Brazilian social practice visual artist, and Hannah Drake, a spoken-word social justice artist from Louisville, Kentucky. They connected with local historians to research the project. The historians shared archival photographs, documents of St. Catherine Street, and stories about both the laundresses and the civil rights movement, which became foundational sources for the development of the project's themes of self-care and self-advocacy. Cadu and Drake hoped the photographs, documents, and stories would support their intention to educate, enlighten, and empower the girls and

the city. In the process of coming to understand Natchez and its history, the idea to explore the expanded materiality of hand-made soap also emerged.

While researching sources for soap, Scent From Natchez, a local family-owned shop founded by Ann Grennell Heard, was identified for collaboration. Heard used her grandmother's recipes forged at local plantations to create soaps with healing properties. Heard supported the artists' pursuit to work with materials used by the laundresses to make the soap for the project. In turn, the engagement with soap making motivated the girls to recognize the significance of the stories they had heard of the courageous women who had supported their families as laundresses (Figure 1).

#### **Keepsake Palm Soap**

At the project's start, trust needed to be built to enable a positive atmosphere for working together and building self-confidence. The first step taken by artist Hannah Drake was to collaborate with members of the NC100BW chapter to design a weekend long trust-building workshop called DreamGirls. During an activity entitled "If You Can See It, You Can Be It," each girl wrote three empowering words to describe her future self. Then the workshop facilitated intergenerational bonds among participants. The camaraderie and support shown during the weekend was captured by the girls who decided to name their group Girls'n Pearls,

highlighting pearls as a cultural symbol for womanhood (Figure 2).

Afterwards, the journey began. The first art project created by the girls in collaboration with the artists initiated the spirit of the journey and spoke to the materiality of soap as vibrant matter. Bennet (2010) discusses vibrant matter as the interconnectedness of things. We embrace this idea because we believe people and their objects do not exist in isolation but act, react, and come into being in relation to one another. As each girl cupped her hands together, the negative space was filled with liquid soap to create a cast of her palms. A small metal plaque engraved with the three words describing her future self, generated from the workshop, along with a single pearl, were placed inside each soap formation to be saved as a keepsake. The bond between the girls and their unique palm soap, along with their words of empowerment and the inserted pearl, forged a relationship embedded in the history of the place and a connection to the past and future (Figure 3 & 4).

#### **The Equity Platform**

The second art project, *Equity Platform*, was inspired by the Civil Rights Movement in Natchez. In October 1965, nearly 800 men and women attempted to march from their churches to protest segregation, discrimination, and mistreatment by white leaders and the Ku Klux Klan. Over one hundred people were unfairly arrested and imprisoned in high security cells for many days, suffering abusive punishment during their stay. This came to be known as the Parchman Ordeal (LaFrancis, Morgan & White, 2018). Only recently have victims felt safe enough to tell their stories following a public apology from the city of Natchez in 2015, during the 50th anniversary of the event (Lindsey, 2015).

Against this historical and political backdrop, a need to highlight contemporary social justice conversations emerged. The two lead artists teamed up with local artists and the girls to co-create a visual art installation and performance centering on the theme of equality. Cadu built a stage using soap, and Drake partnered with the girls to choreograph a performance that would activate the concept of self-advocacy. The result was the *Equity Platform*, a stage made from



FIGURE 5.  
Soap slabs used to produce the Equity Platform.  
Photo courtesy of IDEAS xLab.





FIGURE 6.  
Artist Cadu and Girls'n Pearls member after measuring her height.  
Photo courtesy of IDEAS xLab.



FIGURE 7.  
Girls'n Pearls perform on the Equity Platform. Photo courtesy of IDEAS xLab.

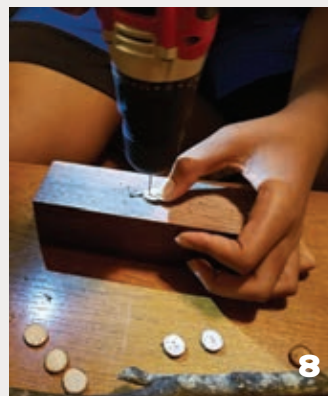


FIGURE 8.  
Carved magnolia buttons. Photo courtesy IDEAS xLab.

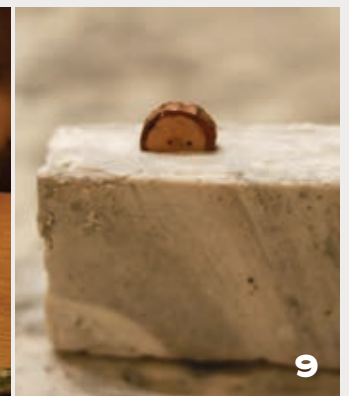


FIGURE 9.  
Soap with inserted button. Photo Courtesy of IDEAS xLab.



FIGURE 10.  
Packaged Button Soap. Photo Courtesy of IDEAS xLab.



FIGURE 11.  
Video of Girls'n Pearls performance projected on the Soap Equity Platform soap slabs at the Angelety House. Photo courtesy of IDEAS xLab.

slabs of marbled soap, cast from molds created by the artists. Once hardened, the soap slabs were stacked together, like pedestals, to reflect the height of each member of Girls n' Pearls. When the girls stood on the platform they became equal in height, symbolizing equity. Scent from Natchez produced 750 lbs. of soap to form 36 slabs, each two-feet square foot and one inch thick. The stacks were placed on a grid at the Angeley House, one of the only remaining pre-Civil War houses on St. Catherine Street, and adjusted for the heights of the girls who were between 4'11" to 5'7" (Stallcup, 2007). The artists and girls selected magnolia as the scent for the soap because it represented Mississippi's state flower (Figure 5 & 6).

When the girls stepped up onto the *Equity Platform*, they instantly shared the same eye level. The gesture of rising up in unison celebrated their coming-of-age journey as individuals and as a group. As they stood in solidarity with each other they sang "Rise Up" by Andra Day (Batie, 2015), a song about hope, healing, and the power of communal art rooted in Black history and storytelling. A story of resurrection was heard as the Girls'n Pearls performed the song. Merging their voices with each other connected them to the laundresses of the past and to the Civil Rights movement, in a resonant and powerful performance of identity, femininity, self-care, and a sense of camaraderie (Figure 7).

#### **From the Equity Platform to Button Soap: The Transformation of the Object**

At the conclusion of the equity event, another project began. Inquiries into the history of Natchez had revealed stories about artifacts found at Forks of the Road, the site of the enslaved people's market from 1830-1861, including buttons lost from their clothing (D. White, personal communication, April 5, 2017)<sup>4</sup>. This discovery became the inspiration for Button Soap, a sustainable entrepreneurial enterprise.

The *Equity Platform* was disassembled and cut into 2000 individual bars of soap. A single handmade wooden button, carved from magnolia branches by Natchez artisans, was inserted into each bar, transforming it into Button Soap<sup>5</sup>. The button served as an homage to the lost lives and the separated families of

enslaved people. After using the soap, the button could be extracted and attached to a piece of clothing, restoring its utilitarian use as a gesture of social and historical consciousness. (Figure 8.)

The story of the button, written by a local artist, appeared on the wrapper of each bar of soap<sup>6</sup>. In this way Button Soap became an opportunity for local fundraising, since it was marketed to support NC100BW's mentoring program, as well as a way to support efforts to make a history visible. (Figures 9 & 10.)

#### **Connecting the Dots**

Throughout this multifaceted project, exploring the materiality of the soap expanded the interactive and collaborative potentials of the sculptures created by the girls and their collaborators. As a series of connected artworks, *Keepsake Palm Soap*, the *Equity Platform*, and *Button Soap* became a journey of self and community empowerment that invited people to connect to the past, to activate the present, and to be inspired for the future. The rich abundance of documentation describing the history of Natchez served as a testament to the city's significance in the Deep South and the nation. Unearthing the hidden narratives of St. Catherine Street and Forks of the Road gave voice to adolescents for the purposes of forging equality and creating a space infused with trust-building and with personal poetics.

In addition to the Girls'n Pearls at the center of the project, collaborators included mentors, teachers, health professionals, artists, small business owners, and activists<sup>7</sup>. Each must be truly considered co-authors of this story about Natchez. As the artist Cadu attested, "Without them we would not have reached the level of lyrical metaphor we have achieved by engaging economic, historical, and social justice aspects so important to our work" (personal communication, October 10, 2017). The soap became the cohesive material that made connections visible across time, sites, narratives and most importantly, the people of Natchez. (Figure 11)

#### **Endnotes**

- 1 Mimi Miller is the Director of Historic Natchez Foundation.
- 2 The funding was from the National Endowment for the Arts Our Town Grant for

2016-2017, with additional support from Humana Inc., the Mississippi Humanities Council, and the We Shall Overcome Fund. 3 IDEAS xLab is an artist-run organization based in Louisville, KY that works in multiple states throughout the U.S. Project partners include Theo Edmonds, Josh Miller, Ayelet Danielle Aldouby, and Chris Radtke.

4 Darrell White is the Director of the Natchez Museum of African American History & Culture.

5 The Natchez artists Johnnie and Loraine Griffin created the soap molds and their grandson Daniel J. Hartwell carved the magnolia wood buttons.

6 Natchez artist Jeremy Houston wrote the story.

7 Community Health Director Madeline England at the Mississippi State Department of Health Community Health & Prevention Program, Southwest, Mississippi was integral to these collaborations.

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# MAKING THEIR MARKS



## ***GRAFFITI EXPLORATIONS AS TODDLER'S ARTISTIC PRACTICES***

by Marta Cabral, Emmanuelle Fincham, and  
Tran Templeton





## GRAFFITI WALL DETAIL

Detail from wall where children used spray bottles to create a graffiti installation

What happens when toddlers take up graffiti as an aesthetic and experimental practice? What happens to teaching and curriculum when teachers choose to follow a child's lead in redefining the possibilities of spaces and materials?

These were some of the questions that arose for us when we let ourselves "get lost" in the children's desires for artistic materials. Block (1998) describes teachers' opportunities for "getting lost" as a way of venturing off the path of expected teaching practice. As we came to recognize the toddlers' artistic investigations as "graffiti" we ventured off our own beaten paths into new understandings of what was allowable in the classroom. In the context of a university-managed early childhood lab school, we followed our students in redefining appropriate uses of materials and the boundary faded between our classroom and the center's art studio.

### Reimagining A Child-Led Practice

As head teachers in the classroom (Emmy and Tran), and as the center's artist-in-residence (Marta), we explored these ideas over the course of a semester as we joined a group of toddlers in graffiti practices. A common mantra in early childhood education, "following children's lead" had guided our practice.

**"graffiti became  
a metaphor for  
disrupting our own  
practices."**

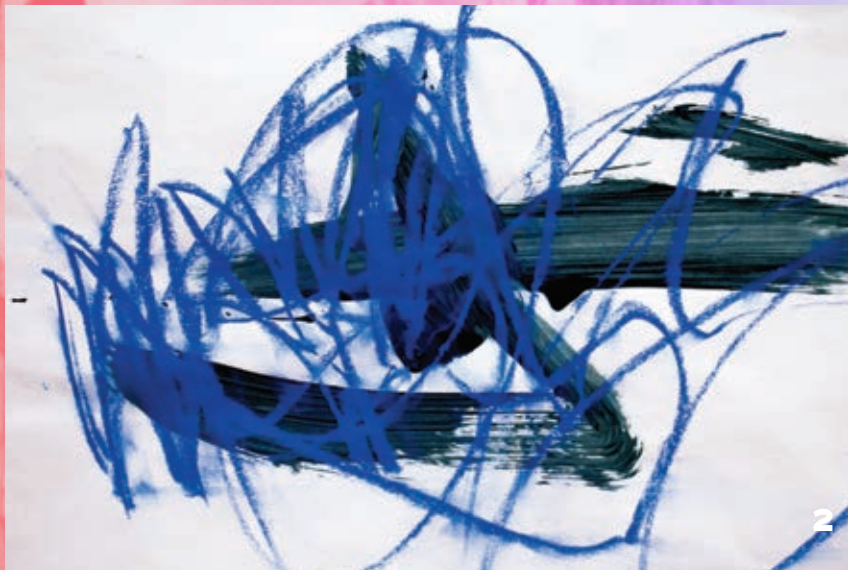
We, however, recognize that teachers still often set the boundaries for where children can take us. That is, "child-led" practices are still contingent on adults maintaining authority on determining what materials are to be introduced and dictating how those materials are to be taken up by the children. For example, if teachers plan for the use of tempera paints in "fall colors," they might then pre-mix browns and oranges and place pieces of paper on a table or easel. Further, teachers are often likely to connect such an activity to a seasonal read-aloud about apple picking or a visit to a local park where dry, crunchy dark leaves cover the ground. These ways of designing curriculum are thought





**FIGURE 1.**

*Children interacting with graffiti all exhibited in the annual art exhibition at an on-campus art gallery.*



**FIGURE 2.**

*Stray marks on unsanctioned graffiti spots in the classroom.*

to be child-centered and child-led, building on children's experiences and informed by guidelines known as developmentally appropriate practices (DAP) (Bredekamp & Copple, 1997). These guidelines rest heavily on a knowledge base from developmental psychology, outlining what many think is unquestionable knowledge about children, including what they need and are capable of at different developmental stages. Yet we have always been skeptical of this one-size-fits-all approach because it strikes us as generalizing young children's identities to fit within narrowed notions of capability.

Prevailing discourses around young children have not always accounted for their agency and intellectual capacity, casting DAP as taken-for-granted material, spatial, and temporal rules that we understand to be limitations. Yet as we observe each of our students, we witness engagements in practices that are developmentally appropriate for them individually, but not necessarily for any of their peers. In many cases, adults expect young children to work with only certain kinds of materials, in certain kinds of ways, within adult-designated spaces and timeframes (Yoon & Templeton, 2019). Often, early childhood classrooms are partitioned into centers where particular materials belong to one center or another, and children are rarely invited (or able) to mix them. For example, dolls must remain in the home center; markers must stay at the art table. When materials can mix, it is usually in the service of adults' desires for children to achieve a specific outcome designed by the teacher, such as when objects from the puzzle center are allowed at the art table for children to do texture-rubbings, or when clay is allowed in the housekeeping center to extend children's pretend baking.

In our childcare center, materials are less constrained by their most common connotations. As teachers responsible for the safety of our students, we select and organize materials to decrease the chances of a disaster (for example, to work with wire or nails and hammers, children have to wear protective goggles). However, we are more interested in how the materials take on new forms and how they force understandings of their properties in response to the children's exploratory hands and bodies.

We wonder how the materials can help children think, and how we can give the children agency to decide if, when, and how that will happen. If objects are to be used to think about anything at all, it is

not up to the teacher to decide how, or exactly with what, that thinking will happen. Even less desirable is that teachers decide what that thinking should amount to. As children become familiar with materials, tools, and techniques, it is up to them—and to the serendipity of new discoveries—to decide what and how they will use in their explorations.

As we allow ourselves to step back and let our students guide the way, we see them taking on the same trusting and exploratory stance we are taking. When materials are taken as unwritten possibilities, the children themselves think of what objects can be. “It used to be a plastic fork, now it’s an art material, right, Marta?” This was one child’s conclusion during art-making, while rummaging through a bin of random things in Marta’s art studio—a box full of possibilities, or not, depending on how each child saw it. As we witness the children’s expeditions and consider the work of Deleuze & Guattari (1987) or Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher (2017), we want to learn more about the kinds of thoughts, sensations, feelings, and relationships that these interactions between materials, bodies, and spaces may provoke.

### **The Graffiti P object**

We were not planning to engage in graffiti as an activity or a project. Yet, what became “the graffiti p object” happened as we let the children lead without our usual concerns for what was or was not appropriate for classroom curriculum. Instead we were guided by observations of the children’s aesthetic play with unusual tools and in clandestine spaces. These tools and spaces were not extraordinary in a classroom setting. However, the ways they were taken up or encountered crossed pre-determined boundaries: stickers once used on paper or in books were now stuck to the toilet; utensils were part of clay sculptures, and paint was...everywhere. Similarly, the idea of offering children spray bottles filled with watercolor—which we saw as equivalent to graffiti artists with spray paint—emerged in response to what was happening in the classroom: the children were getting frustrated as they tried to make crayon and paintbrush marks on pieces of fabric hanging from the ceiling. Instead of asking the children to paint on a flat hard surface and leave the hanging fabric alone, we asked ourselves what materials would allow them to keep exploring in the direction that they had determined worthwhile. The set of engagements we describe in this section were suggested by the ways in

which children used, or didn’t use, specific materials.

The classroom teachers, Emmy and Tran, had been exploring ways of thinking about curriculum and materials with the toddlers (a group of 12 children ages 18 months to 36 months). They had been experimenting with a tiny, windowless room at the back of their classroom, using it as a place to engage with found, open-ended materials. While this little room had previously contained the play kitchen, or served as a reading nook, Emmy and Tran started adding new materials so the children could animate the space in new ways. Letting go of DAP-type suggestions for specific curriculum centers, they thought about this backroom space as a place for children to engage in aesthetic relations with materials, not for any specific developmental learning purpose but to see how the children would act on the materials or how the materials would act on them. In this way the room, in its open-ended lack of specific, pre-determined uses, became an experimental space. Here the teachers challenged their own perspectives on what counted as curriculum, testing their biases about what materials and behaviors they would allow in a classroom. At one point, in fact, the little room became a space for sanctioned vandalism. For example, one of the children, Leo, had been fixated on stickers; he could lose himself for long swathes of time, peeling stickers from their glossy paper backing and attaching them to other sheets of paper. One afternoon, Tran noticed that he was not in his usual spot. After looking around, she found him crouched in the backroom, putting tiny circular stickers in the corner where two walls and the floor met. He looked up and smiled with mischievous delight.

We welcomed subversion, rather than deterred it. As we thought about art-making opportunities for the toddlers, the three of us wanted to investigate what it meant for a child-centered classroom to actually be a children’s space. With that in mind, objects found and foraged by the children during outings and by adults while cleaning out closets were brought into this space. This included rocks and sticks, random arts and crafts materials like fuzzy pom-poms, leftover puzzle pieces or manipulatives that were missing their sets. Other materials included excess fabrics which we tied to the fixtures on the ceiling and which in due time, sparked the idea for the classroom-wide graffiti p object.

As we planned our art activities in the classroom, Emmy told Marta that the

toddlers had been playing with the fabrics that hung and swayed in the air of the classroom. Halloween was around the corner and some of the children had been exploring “floating” objects, inspired by children’s books featuring ghosts and other hovering creatures. The “things hanging and floating” that Marta had set up as a thematic element in response to this interest was not lost on the children. Taking this as a starting point, Marta planned art activities that involved fabric and vertical painting. She brought in watercolor paints in spray bottles to spray-paint on the gauze-like fabric.

Spray-painting occurred at first in the art studio with toddlers taking to the small spray bottles of watercolor paint. Marta’s observations of the toddlers’ use of the materials led her to combine the fabrics with massive pieces of paper. Each variation in surface was another opportunity to experiment. The act of spray-painting drew some children physically from the center of the paper to the edges and moved others to think outside the boundaries of the paper. Noticing the intensities with which children used their bodies to move with the marks they were making on the large-scale paper, we started to conceptualize this art-making as “graffiti.” The children seemed to take on a different kind of ownership over these marks than the ones they made with more traditional art materials (e.g., paint on an easel).

Different children (and sometimes their parents) discovered different uses for the variety of tools, and naturally the toddlers took the tools and their newly discovered uses to the classroom. Some children (or parent-child teams) worked in more representational ways, building on specific thematic interests. For example, Luis and his mom experimented with round shapes that resembled the piñatas Luis was so interested in. In the process of working together they introduced the use of cardboard pieces (one of many different materials that Marta left freely available around the studio) as stencils to create marks and negative spaces. Dion, after spending quite some time figuring out how to get the paint out of the bottle, creating puddles of watercolors on the floor by his feet in the process, slapped his hands in the liquid colors and then stamped them on the floor, Marta’s legs, and eventually the canvas in front of him. Silvana, on the other hand, took to holding a couple of oil pastels in each hand and, standing front and center of the large canvas, draw almost symmetrical lines to each side of her. As the



materials and their setup changed, allowing for each person to determine their use in each specific instance, we noticed that the children seemed more purposeful in their active interactions with them, taking the initiative to physically move materials to different places and use them in different ways.

The children were eager to work on their graffiti, but the size of the art studio limited their explorations. This realization led Marta to stretch large canvases that she brought to the classroom. The canvases were sturdy enough to withstand toddler manipulation but light enough to be transportable between spaces. We began to deliberately investigate graffiti as a(n) (artistic) practice, noticing the ways the children's work left imprints and trying to make more space for it in the classroom. As the toddlers worked with the spray bottles, evidence of that work gathered on the graffiti wall itself, as well as in the surrounding classroom and art studio, on our clothes, skin, and other surfaces. As we progressed in time, the marks on the graffiti wall all became a physical memory of our experiences, a byproduct of our explorations (Cabral, 2018). We came to understand that this kind of experimentation, highlighting the physical results of the interactions between children and materials, "[revealed] what human and nonhuman bodies can do and produce when they encounter each other" (Pacini-Ketchabaw, Kind, & Kocher, 2017, p. 5). The ways in which materials were made available and experimented with by the toddlers, were representative of processes of engagement among children, teachers, and the materials themselves. Responding to each other, each maker adding onto an ever-growing work of art. In this context, materials and the things we made with them became important features of the larger project, representing processes and experiences in non-definitive ways.

### Implications of the Graffiti Project

Not only did this investigation assist the toddlers in their explorations of new art-making techniques (e.g., exploring positive/negative space with non-representational, non-restricting stencils made out of oval openings on tops of tissue boxes or other cardboard shapes), it also expanded our thinking as teachers about what was "appropriate" art practice in a toddler classroom, especially when the spray-paint exceeded the bounded canvas space. In the course of going out-of-bounds, we experienced a disorienting shift in how we thought about materials, curriculum, artistic practice, and teaching. These shifts, which we have also written about elsewhere, included Marta's consideration of art spaces as moveable places, defined by a physicality that follows practices instead of restricting them (Cabral, 2018), and her recognition that children saw their roles as part of a community of artists (Cabral, 2014); Emmy's expansion of her understanding of children's narratives to include the body and utterances (Fincham, 2015); and Tran's consideration of young children's narratives through image-making and narrative fragments (Templeton, 2018; Yoon & Templeton, 2019).

Rather than relying on the child-centered pedagogy that dominates early childhood education, graffiti became a metaphor for thinking about disrupting our own practices. In doing this, we were not focused on the children but on the "children's meaning-making fantasies and their affects at work" (Lenz-Taguchi, 2010, p. 27)—the materialization of material and children's desires. Rather than trying to keep the walls clean when Leo adorned a classroom corner with stickers, we offered him more stickers and appreciated the way the layers of paint peeled when someone removed the gooey remnants. We held ourselves back from regulating the children's spaces and started to think of walls and objects in the classroom as inviting children and materials into meaningful relationships. We saw children's tableaux of objects and toys, seemingly random to us, as their own experiments with multimodality. While we understand that welcoming

## “What happens when toddlers take up graffiti as an aesthetic and experimental practice?”



these (minor) transgressions might not be possible in some early childhood spaces—where graffiti is considered illicit, for example—we hope readers can agree that different contexts require different parameters. That is, our specific explorations fit our context, but we hope the shareable take-away from our journey is about how we learned to listen, to hold back on placing our own agendas on our students' explorations, and to welcome the disruptions of our own "comfortable" practices.

## Conclusion

So much of schooling seems to be about the relentless omission of the past, of previous classroom occupants; stray marks on the floors and furniture are forbidden, and everything should be "clean" of the marks of creative use. Transgressing that restriction (such as with the lamp photographed above), suggests that our preschoolers' unsanctioned mark-making practices resemble the tagging practices of graffiti writers. That is, by inscribing these spaces, which were previously non-spaces for art, the children gave them new meaning, defining them and turning them into places. Throughout the early childhood center, this shift from space to place changed the way we saw the children's use of what had been predetermined in the classroom. For example, one day we found a group of toddlers sitting on the kitchen playset, feet in the sink, eating pretend pizza, defining for themselves the kind of place a classroom kitchen set might become. In this action we recognized the "enactment of graffiti as a risky pleasure" (Holmes, 2010, p. 872), even though mark-making was not involved at all.

This mindset equating risk with expanded learning spread beyond the classroom to encompass the outdoor learning environment as well. For instance, when we took the children on outdoor walks, to the playground, the park, or the woods, we began to conceptualize the wrought iron fences and gates as containers for children's bodies and play. Recognizing the power of our graffiti space/place transgressions, we began to take risks with our outdoor curriculum by leaving the "safety" of those fenced spaces and venturing into the woods adjacent to our usual walking path, or into nearby churches and memorial buildings. As we found ourselves "getting lost" with the children,

welcoming the fact that we did not hold full control over where these explorations were taking us, and encouraging the children to embrace this notion of the unknown as well, we were reminded of Block's (1998) urging that the teacher "accept herself as itinerant, and teach others the freedom of intellectual vagabondage" (p. 330).

Ultimately, the children produced a large 6' by 12' canvas wall that was exhibited in the university art gallery as part of a yearly exhibition curated by Marta and installed with the children at the childcare center. As the toddlers got familiar with their work in the gallery space, they shared it with the older preschool class and welcomed visitors with guided tours and invitations to engage with materials to create their own painted "wall" nearby. Spray-painted, marked up, and worked out by the toddlers, we came to understand these walls not merely as product but as a manifestation of thought in action. Watching the children and their visitors we recognized that the thing we call product is but a by-product of the relational experiences entailed and provoked by nonpredetermined learning—in this case, in a practice that is constantly updated as each new interaction takes place (Cabral, 2018).

Toddler graffiti provoked discussions that shifted our thinking about teaching and curriculum. As we let ourselves be guided by our students into unsanctioned spaces of mark- and meaning-making, a newfound fluidity with the boundaries between these spaces helped us reconceptualize our roles in the classroom. By experimenting with new forms of control, where the children have agency to decide what happens in a given place, and with new ways of listening, where materials might write their own possibilities, the toddlers led us toward definitions of artistic practices that we might have otherwise not encountered.

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# MEDIA AS INDICES IN VISUAL ART

BY SAHAR FATTAHI

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**While my choice of material connects to my concepts, I like to explore how the process of making also embeds signs.**

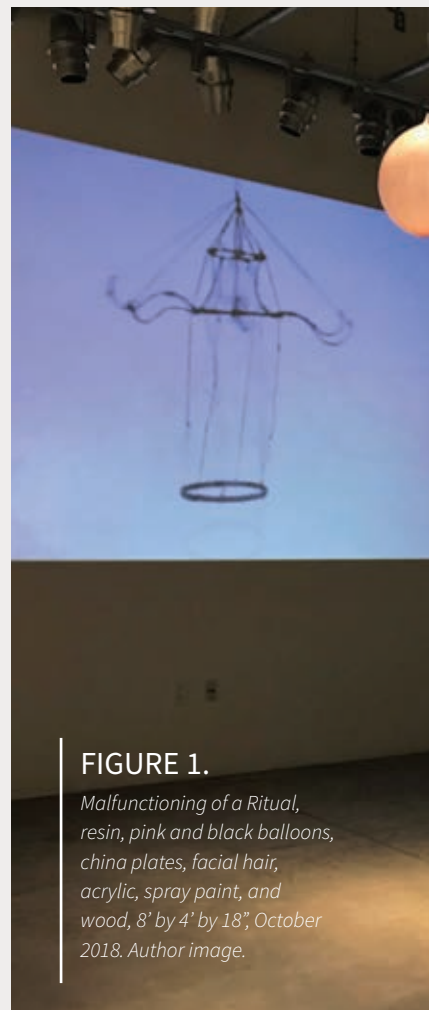
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My artworks reference the imbalance of power among gendered bodies and their codification and sexualization. I experiment with various media and materials such as paint, fabric, paper, clay, metal, concrete, resin, hair, plexiglass, paint, video, and techniques such as stitching, mixed media, and paper mache. While some of the materials and techniques in my work are exploratory and research-based, most refer to the sexualization and objectification of the female body, which I work to designate or signify.

According to Pierce (1955), an index is a mode in which the signifier might not resemble its signified object but indicates or point to it. It focuses the attention. For

example, smoke indicates fire. I learned about materials as indices through my research of Anselm Kiefer's paintings and sculptures. I became aware of how the artist's choice of media can embed a concept and narrate a unique story through codes and clues. While symbols cannot be signs without an interpreter, indices cannot be signs without objects. Kiefer's vast landscapes stun the viewer at first encounter and then they begin to speak through the forms pictured and materials used. His use of ash, straw, hair, and lead as indices connect to German mythology and the horror of the Holocaust. The rough texture of his paintings adds to the power of the imagery and stimulates tactility in viewers.

The concept of indices plays into my own work too. I use shredded hair mixed with resin and pour it onto balloons that lay on plates to create breast-like forms in *Malfunctioning of a Ritual* (Figure 1). The hair is a type of index that refers to a women's body made hairless to fit social norms, while the plates point to service, often the expected role of women in male-dominated societies. The use of lace in the *Absence is Presence* (Figure 2)



**FIGURE 1.**

*Malfunctioning of a Ritual, resin, pink and black balloons, china plates, facial hair, acrylic, spray paint, and wood, 8' by 4' by 18", October 2018. Author image.*

FIGURE 2.

*The Absence is Presence*, acrylic, lace fabric, and elastic on canvas, 48" by 60", October 2018. Author image.



FIGURE 3.

*The Fragmentation of the Chandelier, done by a Middle Finger*, fabric dye on canvas, 38" by 48", September 2018. Author image. (Cropped)



FIGURE 4.

*The Cost of the Chandelier*, clay, glue, powdered Styrofoam, enamel, acrylic and fabric dye on canvas, 38" by 48", September 2018. Author image. (Cropped)



FIGURE 5.

*Solomon's Prison*, concrete, glue, acrylic, fabric dye, and gesso on canvas, 4' by 6', April 2019. Author image. (Cropped)



suggests lingerie that reveals and conceals the body and suggests sexual intimacy. The lace fabric stretches tightly around the canvas transforming it into a body. The piece conveys the often prescribed dress codes that impact the ways in which female bodies can be imagined or defined.

While my choice of material connects to my concepts, I like to explore how the process of making also embeds signs. The piece *The Fragmentation of the Chandelier, Done by a Middle Finger* (Figure 3) employs such an approach. The process of using my middle finger to tap on the wet inked surface shapes the imagery. Here, the middle finger is a symbol of contempt, relying on conventional Western usage to determine its meaning. The immediate reference to the conventional sign helped me to weave the process into the concept where the scattered little dots created by the middle finger is an index having a physical cause and effect relationship. The chandelier itself as also an index of oppressive systems. The process as index is incorporated in *The Cost of the Chandelier* (Figure 4) as well. After the application of texture onto the canvas, I scratched the form of the chandelier in the thick media.

The form of the chandelier is obscured by the embedded dots and appears like a cervix with red scars.

I focus on texture in my works to activate senses beyond that of vision so the viewer creates a deeper connection with the artwork. In *Solomon's Prison* (Figure 5), I used construction grade concrete to build the environment from which my subject emerges. I preserved the central shape, free of any association with the artist's hand, and I covered the surface of the canvas in thick drips of layered cement. The rigidity of the cement is an index for the inflexibility of social structures.

Layering black tulle to create a cavity shapes *Taking Me in Softly I* (Figure 6) and suggests acts of covering and wrapping that can be related to the veil. For many women, the veil is an act of obedience as well as a symbol of modesty and womanhood. These head coverings vary from culture to culture, are worn through mandate or by choice, and can be an expression of faith. The tulle offers up soft and subtle g ays that gradually transition into a central black, portraying the act of covering up and suppression through structures.

Experimentation with unconventional



FIGURE 6.

*Taking Me in Softly II, elt fabric, tulle, and stiches, 48" by 48", May 2019. Author image.*

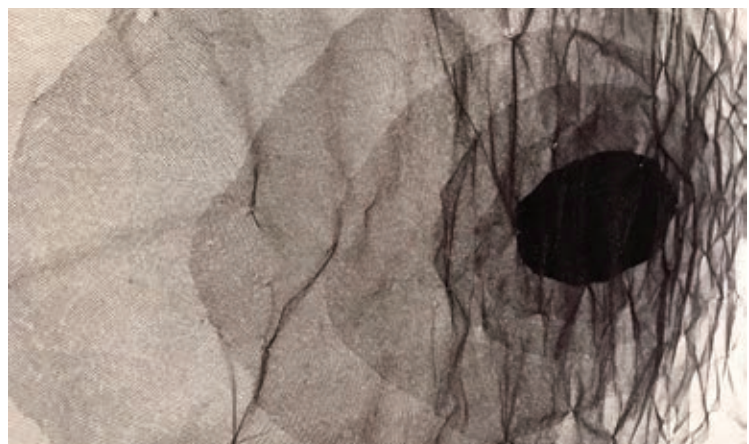
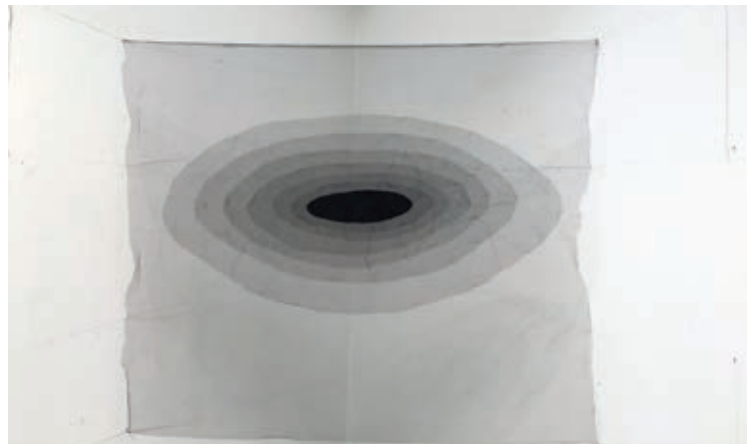
media and materials liberates art from privileging form alone. Materials for me become agential, entangling me in a web of connections to gender. The artistic dialogue that I have with my materials connects to meanings that go beyond conventional formalism to suggest relationships between matters and bodies through process and participation.

#### Endnotes

1 *Solomon's Prison* is inspired by the "Prison of Solomon" an archeological site in northwest Iran. The crater at the site is associated with a folk legend that tells of King Solomon using it to imprison disobedient monsters. This site inspired me to reference how women who are feminists are often thought to be disobedient monsters who should be subject to punishment.

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# MATERIALITY





# PARAKEETS WITH DIPLOMAS

BY CHARLES KOEGEL

In my experience with school art programs in New York City, I have at times encountered a generalized disapproval about teaching creativity in visual art class. The rebukes follow a similar format: “while we have studio art class, we aren’t an art school,” or “we don’t do art for art’s sake.” In rebuttal, I ask naysayers to consider how creativity affects school-wide learning outcomes. This response has developed from my classroom experiences, studio practice, and pedagogical studies. It is meant to embrace an ongoing examination of visual art curriculum in schools.

## Masks and Parakeets

An example that demonstrates the benefits of creative objectives in my classroom comes from teaching 2nd graders at a general education school. This school mandated that 2nd grade students produce a mock Lewis and Clark Expedition Museum in the school gymnasium. This goal was rationalized as a way to “show students the importance of social studies.” One project for the museum included sculpting ceramic masks to mimic Native American masks, rather than asking students to design their own masks. In accordance with the school mandate my teaching resources included examples of historical wood-carved Native American masks and explanations about how they were integrated into traditional ceremonies. Inside my classroom however, the assignment was to design a mask that granted its wearer supernatural power or gave them the ability to protect themselves from something they feared. First, students had to decide what superpower they wanted, and then they had to imagine a design that would represent that power. Their ideas varied with their interests, including a mask with the power to help its wearer meet Janet Jackson, and one titled “the



choper” that was designed with large, sharp teeth (i.e., non-baby teeth) to enable its wearer to chew or chop food (Figure 1).

To assess students’ knowledge of art history, and the effectiveness of my teaching, I gave my classes a quiz a few months after completing this assignment. The evaluation asked students what they knew about Native American masks and other artifacts, including Mandan huts, which the “museum” accepted and all my 2nd graders imitated by adhering to the school tradition of “engineering” paper mache over a bowl and painting it brown. Quiz results showed students frequently gave short answers that merely described the color and/or shape of artifacts (such as the Mandan huts) rather than describing their purpose. On the other hand, students included details about context and purpose when answering questions about Native American masks. I take these results as supporting my decision to teach both creativity and more complex learning objectives about social studies with my “superpower mask” activity.

Another illustration involving knowledge across subjects comes from my own studio practice. Figure 3 is a colored pencil drawing plan of a Persian-style rug composed of tile floor designs and a few other geometric motifs. At a glance one might say its devotion to ornament appears non-utilitarian and befitting of the label “art for art’s sake,” but my process began with identifying an area of historical research by finding and photographing antique ceramic tile floors around New York City. From these resources I started arranging and drawing tiles. This required measuring the tile dimensions to determine how many repetitions would fit into segments of my 30-x-22-inch size paper. Bordering the perimeter of the paper are Greek keys. To make these vertical and horizontal repeating tile motifs join at the corners, while maintaining a continuous pattern, my math needed to be very precise to be sure they converged at exact locations.

At the center of the drawing is a collage depicting a medley of parakeets wearing mortarboards and holding diplomas under their wings. I borrowed the image from a 7-inch record sleeve I found in a thrift store. The record was pressed for the purpose

of training pet parakeets to talk. I felt this diploma earned for mimicking simple information—words like “hello” found on the recording—parodied my pursuit of a master’s degree in education at the time. Titling my artwork *The Parakeets with Diplomas* also suggested a conceptual contradiction. That is, the title highlights the irony that parakeets, who can mimic operations and have diplomas, cannot setup and solve the algebraic equations required to create my synchronized drawing.

Since I was able to explore combining different materials in this artwork, my repertoire for communicating meaning

expanded. The interplay of the painstaking hand drawing with simple offhand collage helped conjure the aforementioned contradiction or irony. This ties back to my Native American mask story. While following classroom instructions and mimicking a teacher’s ideas is often an extrinsic motivation, allowing and demonstrating material explorations are a way of intrinsically motivating students to discover new ideas. Investigating one’s own ideas can also be used to stimulate students to connect curricular subjects with their own extracurricular interests. The guided inquiry-based dialogue during the mask assignment facilitated this



FIGURE 1.  
2nd grade mask design



FIGURE 2.  
4th grade outer space animation



by prompting 2nd graders to consider knowledge they had about supernatural powers, and then to express it in preparatory sketches of masks. This process enabled students' ideas to be related to a broader range of experiences than just the school-mandated artifacts and established associations that helped students retain information about those artifacts.

### **Adaptations**

Students have helped me develop my teaching practice to amplify the connections between subjects. For example, challenges encountered by the student who made the meet-Janet Jackson mask reminded me that different materials offer different ways of expressing ideas. This student was excited about how she was going to meet Janet Jackson but struggled to represent it in her mask. To explore her options, she made multiple sketches that began to take on the look of a comic strip. The separate sketches, which were boxed and numbered on the same page, appeared like different scenarios or stories for how her dream encounter with Janet was going to happen. Watching and participating in her journey through these material explorations sparked an idea for my curriculum. That is, the mask making activity itself, where sketches became ceramic sculptures, would evolve into biographical comic strips about characters that wear and use their superpower masks. Unfortunately, comic lessons involving some of the medium's history and its visual and literary devices such as panels, captions, speech bubbles, and onomatopoeia did not fit into the timetable because of requirements for the mock Lewis and Clark exhibit. However, I was able to implement the mask comics at my next teaching job at another general education school where my students participated in a year-end art show rather than in a mock museum. At that point I realized that to continue developing the comics further, it might be useful to plan with homeroom teachers and to incorporate specific writing and composition standards.

Another curriculum idea put into effect at my new school stemmed from mimicking Lewis and Clark Expedition artifacts. On one occasion I provided students with Native

American pictographs as resources for an animation. During this activity, a student bravely and plaintively asked, "Why can't I do my pictographs of a black hole?" Once again, the idea did not fit the required parameters, however; his question inspired me to prepare a topic dialogue for a 4th grade outer space animation project. For that project the resources included an animation I created of a cube jumping up, hanging in the air, and then being pulled back down to the ground by gravity. There was also a discussion on outer space based on a video about the scale of the universe.

When implemented, the discussion produced a variety of intrinsically motivated responses. After a student asked me the name of the first monkey in space, I suggested she look it up and she eagerly did so. Although her research did not pan out into a drawing of a monkey in space, reading about the first space flights prompted another idea. In this case she decided to depict a scrolling "1961" (the year Yuri Gagarin became the first human in space). This required a series of nearly 50 drawings which would have become too time consuming given the class time allotted. Recognizing the challenge she faced, I suggested all students sketch a storyboard similar to a comic, in which the number of panels would represent the duration of the sequence. As pacing charts, these storyboards helped match ideas to the animation process by organizing work time in class. Additionally, they helped students plan the movement of their subjects. Several students were able to express ideas through text. These included "Space is empty," "My life could not get any worse," and "Oh no, a black hole!" Some depicted gravity with a series of progressively compacted drawings that accelerated toward a singularity. By understanding animation students learned the concepts of velocity and acceleration. Next time, it might be interesting to plan lessons with a physics teacher and perhaps apply measurements and equations or consider taking a class trip to the Hayden Planetarium.

### **Training and Practice**

Art educator Judith Burton (1980) has written about material exploration

and holding subject matter open. In her article, "The First Visual Symbols", she analyzed children's artwork as examples of cognitive development. Burton described a "sensory logic stage" (Burton, 1980, p. 61) where children's representational art making advances from knowledge of what they can do with materials. In addition, materials (such as my parakeet training record) can prompt an array of responses during art making. Burton observed that developmental phases are fluid and that students within the same age and class cohort often go back and forth between stages.

The meet-Janet Jackson mask suggests an example of a sensory logic stage artwork. This 2nd grader struggled a bit to control materials. Her ceramic mask sculpture deviated from her sketches because what she could draw did not transfer to what she could make with clay. As a result, her mask sculpture became more abstract, although still recognizable as a face. After finishing it she titled it, "Michael Jackson Face." The open-ended outcome enabled her to feel successful with sustaining her idea of a mask that was going to help her meet Janet. This emphasizes Burton's argument that teachers should support and encourage students in coming up with ideas, by holding subject matter open. In this case, with more experience and perhaps more ability to sustain longer periods of attention this student will be able to make other designs.

Additionally, there were social and emotional issues for this student. At times throughout the year, she had unusual difficulty focusing. In these instances, this child, who was African American, and who seemed to have trouble finding social similarities amongst a majority of one-year younger White students, sometimes complained about other students looking at her and needed some emotional support. When frustrated she advocated for herself by asking for help and benefited from occasionally working at my desk where we talked about her admiration for entertainers such as Steve Harvey. She also was curious about what happened to Michael Jackson. While my classroom was a comfortable place for her to express

herself, perhaps I could have encouraged her to speak to her classmates about her questions and artwork. This might have helped her form more social connections and become more comfortable with the responses she had to being looked at. I also wonder whether making a comic about masks would have helped her work with her Michael idea, by better illuminating how she felt Janet might perceive Michael's mask face.

### The Diplomas

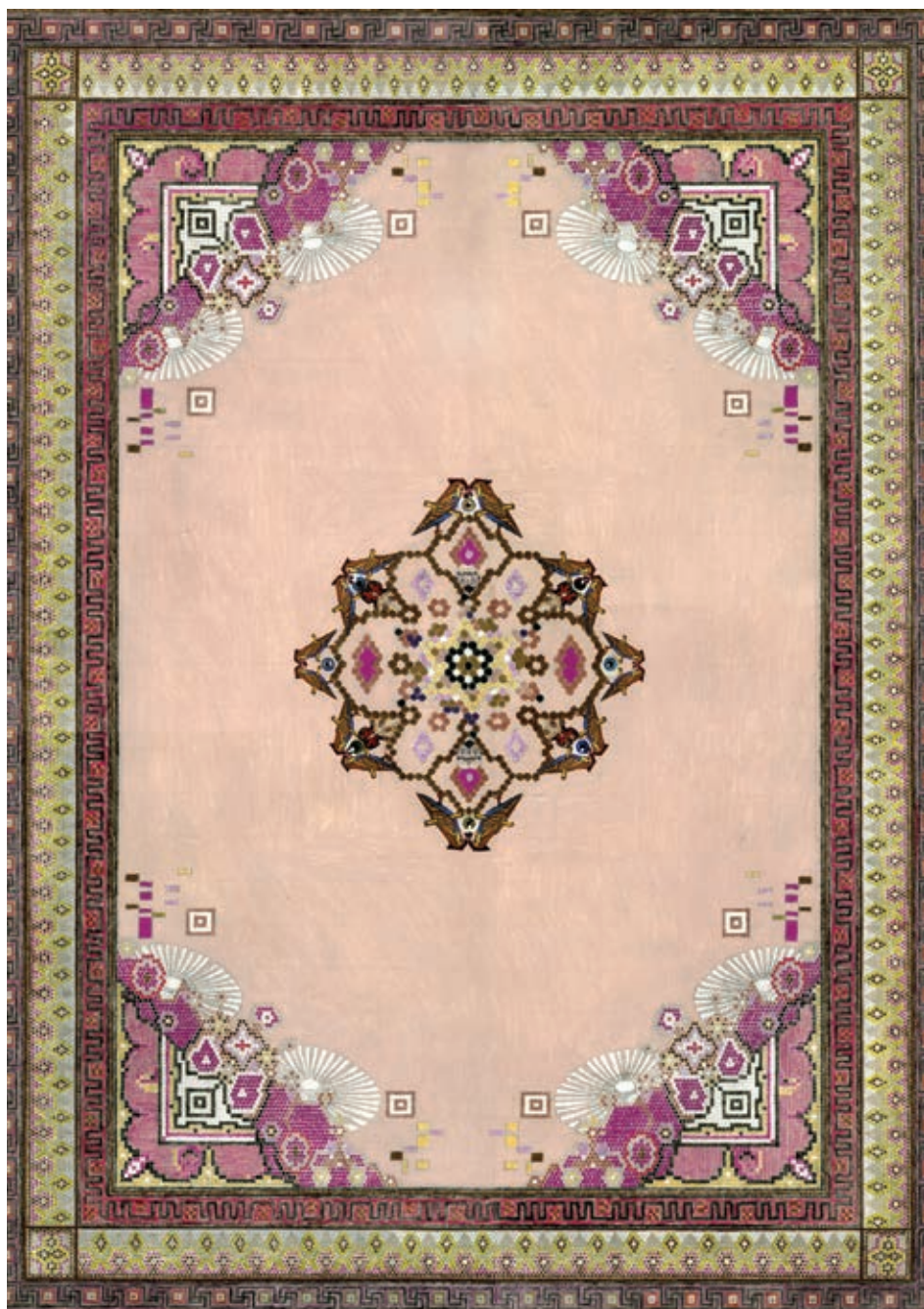
Although I have not developed a one-line reply to the short rebukes about the place of art in a non-art school, or about art for art's sake, perhaps I can suggest an artful question to elicit support for the importance of art in schools. For instance, what visual art learning objectives address cross-disciplinary connections for other subjects' sake? I might then anticipate explaining that creativity through guided, open-ended topic dialogues and art making explorations can support a range of learning objectives across a range of subjects. In light of my experiences with a mixed-media studio process, it is worth thinking about how to make a variety of materials available simultaneously so that students can spontaneously intertwine them on their own.

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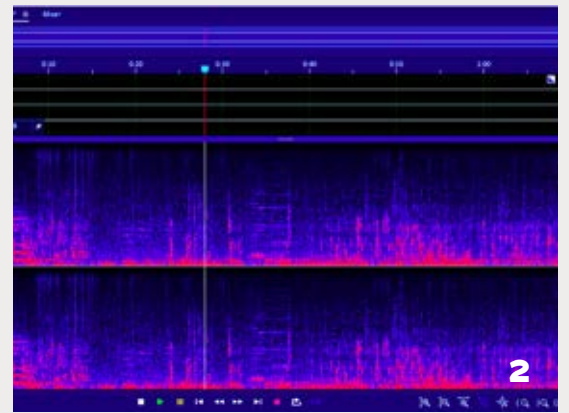
Burton, J.M. (1980). Developing minds: The first visual symbols. *School Arts*. (October Issue), p.60-65.

FIGURE 3.

*The Parakeets with Diplomas, 2012, pencil and collage on paper, 30 x 22 inches. Author Image*







# VISUALIZING SOUND WITH SPECTROGRAMS

by Marie-Claire  
Valdez

## FIGURE

1. Spectrogram of Sound Art Poem in Adobe Audition. Author Image.
2. Spectrogram of Silence in Adobe Audition. Author Image.
3. Spectrographic Lines of Flight, Watercolor and collage on paper, 8.5 inches X 11 inches, 2018. Author Image.
4. A Glimpse of the Virtual, Digital Painting from Colored Pencil Drawing, 8.5 in. X 11 in, 2018. Author Image.
- 5.. Harvesting Sounds, Digital Painting from Silk Screen Print, 8.5 in. X 11 in, 2017. Author Image.



At the start of every school year, when I introduce myself and talk about my approach to teaching, when students and I are playing ice-breaker games, there is one question that makes me instantly self-conscious: “What kind of art do you make?”

My personal work has always been experimental, cerebral, and conceptual, and does not get the instant nods of approval that street art or realistic paintings do. How can I compete with the likes of Chuck Close, Edward Hopper, or Banksy? My mixed media sound art is probably too out there for my students to grasp, I used to tell myself, so I never shared it — until this year. And what a surprise: art made from spectrograms turned out to be a big hit with my students.

### The Materiality of Sound

I find making art from sound infinitely interesting because it challenges me to continually expand the notions of my art practice. One of the mainstays of my artistic practice is creating visual renderings of sound, which I generate from spectrograms.

Think about the sounds around you right now. How do they look? Birds chirping, people talking, cars, white noise, and even the hubbub in your classroom — even silence. On a computer, sound becomes

visual by way of soft are tools that map audio frequencies as a lines or bars and assign colors that correlate to frequency. Spectrograms are a visual graph of frequencies of sounds over time. Color schemes made of gradients of reds, oranges, and violets as well as a plethora of other beautiful color combinations, denote density, repetitions, patterns and depict the peaks and valleys of a sound clip. The soft are tools to edit spectrograms allow for altering pitch, duration, and more. Just like a painter adds layers of color to create vibrancy, anyone who plays with spectrograms can add layers of sound by duplicating tracks and stacking them on top of one another. The editing process allows for one to duplicate sounds you enjoy, cut ones you do not need, and repeat or layer sounds with a click.

When I discovered spectrograms years ago, I uploaded recordings I had captured on my phone when something captivated my imagination, like thunder, or even just sounds in my classroom. In programs like Adobe Audition I was amazed that I could see and manipulate those sounds. I was intrigued by the visual complexity of simple sounds like birds chirping. I decided to draw and paint the spectrograms and they subsequently became integral to my collages and art making. My process started with found sounds that I would open in Audition and then draw, sketch, or paint into an artwork. This process was cyclical and endlessly rewarding. I could even incorporate the sound of the drawing and painting itself to reference how it sounds to make the art. Figure 1 is a spectrogram of paintbrushes scraping a painting, birds chirping, and my own voice in Adobe Audition. Figure 2 shows a spectrogram of silence.

The practice of making 2-D paintings and drawings from spectrograms is a source of inspiration and curiosity for me. Every sound has a visual footprint that leaves a trail to be explored with paint or mixed media. Working this way has allowed me to make invisible sounds, which envelop us all the time, into images that have their own voice and presence. My process is cyclical, without end or beginning. I make recordings, draw responsively, listen critically, re-draw, re-record, re-listen, and so on. I attempt to use sound like a material that is in dialogue with other art making techniques.

### Theory to Practice

The process of creating art from spectrograms parallels an idea called lines of flight (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 87). When applied to art making this concept can mean creating art that goes beyond the thing itself. For example, when a drawing transcends paper and marks and becomes an event

of sounds, where the layers of process harmoniously speak together to create a vision on paper—the artwork has taken flight. This notion of lines of flight advocates for the artist to explore and embrace unusual materials to help liberate them from their constraints. By letting the material of sound inform my process I follow tangential threads of recording, painting, and layering.

My process begins with importing sounds into a soft are program and seeing how they look as spectrograms. From there, I sketch the spectrogram and add other mixed media elements. In Figures 3, 4, and 5, the spectrograms are incorporated into watercolor paintings, collage, and layered digital manipulations. In these spectrogram-based artworks I am responding to how it feels to see the sound of birds and wind, and to hear a clear Texas day. I am inspired by the color and rhythm of the serendipitous landscapes in spectrograms, and by the enigma of my visual relationship with sound. With new sonic visualization tools emerging all the time I look forward to growing as an artist and continuing to explore my “lines of flight” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 87).

### Furthering Sound in Practice

Playing with the materiality of sound has exciting implications for art students of all ages. Soft are programs for sound editing are pre-loaded on almost all computers today, or available for free download. There are also recording apps on phones that can capture sound files which can then be opened in online spectrogram generators. Finding these tools requires only a basic Google search because numerous online programs to generate a spectrogram are available. With these tools, students and educators can create hyper-colorful sonic landscapes that can become the foundation for paintings, drawings, collages, sound machines, and more. Experimenting with sound as a material is worthwhile because it can generate new creative happenings in both classrooms and personal art practice.

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### Resources

1. <https://musiclab.chromeexperiments.com/Spectrogram/>
2. <https://www.sonicvisualiser.org/>





# ***THE BODY ELECTRIC***

Social Media and Embodied Identity

**ANDRÉS PERALTA**

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## **“I am the beginning. The end. The one who is many.” --Borg Queen, Star Trek: First Contact (1996)**

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### **Introduction**

My connection to my body seems incongruous with the standards of beauty with which I am confronted. The mundane task of morning ablutions—washing and tidying my body, readying it for the day ahead—have always been daily reminders of how I differ. Looking at my body in the mirror reminds me that I am not like the men on television programs and commercials. I am not tall, blond, blue-eyed, muscular, nor particularly masculine. I am confronted by this other self, ever present in my mind yet detached from my body, looking back at me in the mirror—I think this is my body, but not my body also. In my search for possibilities by which to enact my identity beyond those that confront me through the media, I embrace the attitude of the Borg in the Star Trek universe, who were a hybrid and sentient life form, both biological and technological in matter and collective in action.

The Borg's search for perfection provides an immediate appeal for me. Embracing technology, they infuse their bodies with it in their search for self-improvement. They believe that neither technological nor biological matter are different from one another. All matter has value—the biological and technological resonate within the same being. The Borg represent possibilities opened up through technology, where seemingly inert matter possesses a lifelike quality. The Borg serves as a representation of the pervasiveness of technology in our daily lives and bodies today. For example, most of us are not without our cell phones. Although the Borg predates cell phones, they speak to the advent of technology within and throughout our bodies and challenge individuals to reevaluate human nature. How can technology enable the shaping of our bodies?

Bodies are significant. They evoke

cultural fears, register anxieties, and act as sites of engagement. As such, students and educators can explore the materiality of embodied identity. Inhabiting a body can make individuals feel comfortable, uncomfortable, sublime, ridiculous, and so on. They provide an arena through which people enact their identities. Bodies are the matter that performs the ceremonial rites of passage and cultural practices through which identities are partially formed. They tell the world if we are happy or sad, rich or poor, lazy or disciplined, healthy or sick—or so we believe. As much as social and cultural groups invest in a fantasy of what bodies should be like, individuals, like myself, are often confused by what their bodies mean, are baffled by how they operate, and are frustrated by their recalcitrance to show the world who individuals are. Social media, visual culture, popular culture, and technology in general, informs, alters, and redefines our perception of self and others and can create issues that are significant to parts of our lives. Educators can broaden students' understanding of gender, sex, sexuality, race, and class by examining bodies as enigmatic yet readable sites that are entangled with social and cultural constructs and perceptions of identity.

### **Connections to multicultural art education and technology**

In a course on integrating technology in the classroom, I asked pre-service art education students explore technology's effects on embodied identity. The students, ranging from millennials to post-millennials, engaged in a paper doll project that provided them with an opportunity to explore dolls as a template for understanding identity. Multicultural education is explored through visual culture representations of gender, sex, and race in connection to identity. Dolls represented

specific types of bodies which we, as a class, used as a vehicle to discuss how identity is enacted and how it signifies. We discussed hairstyle, clothing, make-up, and skin color and how these representations are based on socially constructed ideals. Although the paper dolls exhibit stereotypical features of male and female characteristics, their gender is assumed but not known. The dolls, in fact, have no gender, only what we, as viewers, impose on them. Furthermore, the project included an exploration of social media spaces as well. Students were asked to investigate how they negotiate social media. We focused on how they curated their lives through the images and texts they chose to share, and how these changed based on what platform they are using, including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and Tinder. Similar to the Borg, we discussed how we reshaped ourselves with technology, treating our bodies as blank slates, outfitting them like paper dolls with social markers that conveyed how others should perceive them within a virtual social space. Social media became the space our bodies adapted to in order to assimilate.

### **The Body as Matter**

During the project we discussed consciousness, agency, and the body as material and how they converge, like with the metaphor of the Borg, as an assemblage of matter, organized and reorganized to fit the needs of whatever environment encountered. Matter, in this context, is organic and inorganic, combining the mechanical with the biological, where limbs, organs and faces are augmented with technology. The Borg represent bodies as self-perpetuating, self-enhancing transformative forces, integrating and incorporating the material and immaterial. Borg bodies are treated as matter that extends identity through a continual process of definition and redefinition. New materialist scholars such as Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (Coole & Frost, 2010) discuss the relationship of body and identity as a formative process where the understanding of self, the self's place in the world, and the body's movement through the world are interwoven. Moreover, Barad (2007), Braidotti (2013), and Fausto-Sterling (2000) assert that the body is not an inert mass of matter; rather it continually reconfigures its own image in response to the physical and psychological environments it inhabits. Like the Borg, individuals learn to adapt to their environments and perform identity based on the social and cultural practices they learn.

When dealing with the complexities



of racial and gender identity through multicultural education I utilize my life as an example of navigating difference, assimilation, and acculturation. Like the Borg, I too adapted to the places/ environments in which I lived. I was part of a family of migrant workers. Moving constantly, my family was insular; our bonds were reinforced through the teaching and reteaching of cultural protocols, familial histories, and language. I came from a cultural group that privileged the family over the individual. Like the Borg, individual needs were irrelevant to the collective well-being of the family. Assimilation, another Borg ideal, reflected my family's values in terms of navigating the many places, spaces, and cultural groups we moved through. Being a migrant family meant we would move as a unit, from town to town, state to state, following the work. The unity of the family was the only constant and environments differed. We learned to adapt, learning from each place and cultural group we encountered.

### Environment and the body

My skin is the first contact the world has with me. The sun has worked in tandem with my physiology to make my skin dark. I call my skin dark although how others view it varies—some see it as light or as tan—and some don't see me at all. There was a time that I was taught to see my dark skin as ugly. I remember telling this to my mother to which she replied, "En tu rostro se refleja toda la grandeza de tu heredad, en tu piel está escrito la historia de tu familia, nunca estarás solo si te acuerdas en esto siempre estamos contigo (All of the grandeur of your heritage is reflected in your visage; the history of your family is written on your skin; you will never be alone if you remember we are always with you)." Another reminder of why I embrace the Borg collective. According to feminist scholar, Lisa Adkins (2004), the body becomes the primary way of learning about and engaging with the world. Even before an individual can rationalize the world, the body experiences it, relating to what it has learned subconsciously. For example, a body learns what cold is before it learns the word for cold; a body shivers and reacts independently of the conscious will to act. Environments shape the body, as do experiences.

### Identity as a construct

Judith Butler (1993, 2004, 2010) contextualizes gender as a complex relationship between the intersections of agency, power, and culture. Butler asserts that identity is a performance, constantly in

flux, and fluid. As a result, identity is never finished and is always a work in progress. Furthermore, individuals have agency over their perception of self. However, they do not have complete agency over how they are perceived by others. Many of my students, specifically those in the course integrating technology and multicultural art education, imagine themselves as other bodies through the material processes of social media spaces. For example, students often use multiple social media accounts to enact multiple aspects of their identities. They use different social media spaces to interact with parents, friends, school, employer, and potential relationships and sexual partners. Within these spaces, identities form and are formed by entangled socio-cultural, gendered, sexual, and racial practices that are actually embodied as well as desired embodiments (Rauchfleisch, 2017).

The premise is that identity is not situated solely on the materiality of the body, but emerges from the intra-action of the body, mind, environment, and non-temporal systems of perception, according to trans-theorists and historians Stryker (2008) and Halberstam (2018). The body becomes a scaffolding for individuals to mold identity, and the internal becomes the process where the body enacts identity through performative discourses with the environments it inhabits (Fausto-Sterling, 2000). In the virtual world of social media spaces, the body is disentangled from physical limitations through various apps that allow it to be manipulated in real time, including Facetuning, Snapchat filters, and photo editing. All of which allow new perceptions of self to emerge. Within social media spaces an individual's perception of self can be curated and validated. Liberated from the constraints of material body, social media spaces establish sites that expand the possibilities for individuals to cultivate a representation of self through multiple embodiments based on the way they identify.

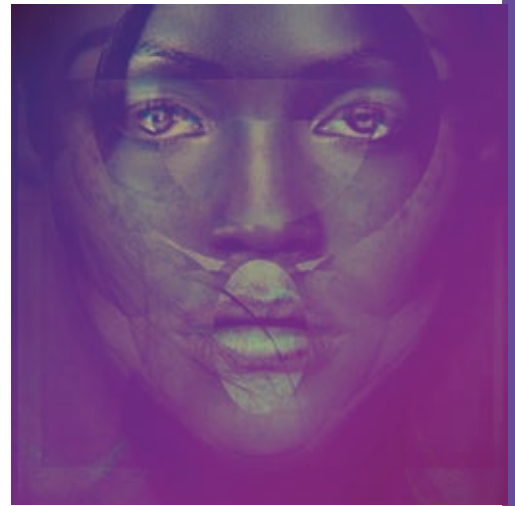
As an example, in my academic life as an educator I am often confronted with the reality that others do not see me as I see myself. I see myself as a Latino because I am confronted with that image of myself first thing in the morning when I look in the mirror, and the last thing at night when I do the same. The history of my experience, including my familial ancestry, is written on my skin, although I do not claim to know what it is to be completely Mexican. Even though my skin is dark, I inhabit a position of privilege that is distant from the alfalfa fields we worked when I was a child. My position remains tied to Borg ideology—we

FIGURE 1.

3 Stages of Eve. Digital Collage/Print. A composite of multiple versions of self. Part of the paper doll project that is taught during a course on social media, technology and curriculum in art education. Author Image

move through life encountering difference, taking what we need, what we like, and what we desire, assimilating it into our ourselves to navigate the different worlds we inhabit. We are constantly adapting to new environments, sometimes consciously sometimes subconsciously. Nevertheless, like the Borg, our identities are composed of multiple parts working in unison to create a perception of self.

In addition to discussing the possibilities of extending the performance of identity via social media during the course, students also discover that most social media sites provide a limited menu of items from which to choose a racial/ethnic identity such as; 1) White Non-Hispanic/Latino, 2) African American, 3) Hispanic/Latino, 4) Asian, 5) Native American. Most sites only allow the user to choose one and the choices for gender offer even more limited choices—male, female, and sometimes other. However, some students, from multiracial, biracial, multiethnic, or transgendered backgrounds create multiple profiles each with a different race or gender that they feel represents an aspect of themselves. Other students challenge the notion of their own perceptions adopting a completely different identity with which to explore themselves. Some explore what social media might be like for someone who identifies as straight, white, and male even though they themselves do not physiologically represent that identity. Social media spaces provide students opportunities to engage with and curate their identities by exploring, taking, and assimilating seemingly disparate parts of visual culture/social media practices and incorporating them to create who they are, much like the actions of the Borg.



## Conclusion

Throughout all of my experiences of moving with my family, technology held a constant presence in our lives. I use the metaphor of the Borg because it/they represent how I understand the world. By discovering ways of integrating what I learned from each of the places I inhabited throughout the country I embodied similar strategies of adaptation and assimilation. The Borg consider the body as matter, where agency has a nuanced relationship between individuals, their body, their psychological consciousness, and how these intertwine to create identity. Within this complex relationship between body and identity, for the Borg, individuality consists of multiple selves, multiple bodies, and a unity of body and mind that can only be achieved through self-transformation. Agency, and the shifting nature of identity, is often neglected in multicultural education that tends to hold culture still or fixed but is worth investigating with students as they interact with social media to invent and reinvent self.

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# SELF-T ART IN A MUSEUM



FIGURE 1.

*A docent leads a dialogue with students about Lorenzo Scott's Day in the Park (1996) in the galleries. Author image*

FIGURE 2.

*A figure created in the galleries while exploring Charlie Lucas's Girl with Balloon (n.d.). Author image.*

FIGURE 3.

*A sculpture made with found objects created in response to Charlie Lucas's Girl with Balloon (n.d.). Author image.*

FIGURE 4.

*This portrait is directly inspired by Thornton Dial Sr.'s Spirit of Grand Central Station: The Man That Helped the Handicapped (1990). Author image.*

FIGURE 5.

*This work uses materials and ideas found in Thornton Dial Sr.'s Spirit of Grand Central Station: The Man That Helped the Handicapped (1990). Author image.*

# AUGHT

## Material Investigations Create Surprises

by Carissa DiCindio

A group of fifth-graders sits in front of a work of art by Lorenzo Scott, a self-taught artist. The painting *Day in the Park* (1996) (Figure 1) focuses on being outdoors, attending to friends, and making connections through conversation and play. Together, we talk about details the students find familiar—for instance, the friends and activities they might include in their own scenes of everyday life—and about how the artist creates a sense of community in the painting.

As the children talk about the painting, they notice the ornate frame that was created by the artist. After visiting museums, Lorenzo Scott was compelled to make his own paintings based on biblical scenes inspired by Renaissance art, and sometimes, as in this example, scenes of everyday life. But Scott also wanted to make frames that looked like those he saw in museums. Using wooden frames covered with Bondo, a putty-like filling agent used in automobile repair, he created textual effects by incising lines in the material and painting the frame gold. The students are thrilled with this discovery and spend a lot of time speculating on how the frame was made and what materials they could use to create similar frames for themselves.

How can we heighten visitors' experiences with self-taught art in museum galleries? How can we inspire students to explore materials and connect to their communities through

the material culture that surrounds them every day? I suggest that we do this through the spirit of play and experimentation with materials, ideas that many self-taught artists display in their work. By incorporating these artists' playful interactions in their gallery tours and studio classrooms, museum educators can expand the perception of art and increase visitors' engagement. As museums continue to add the work of self-taught artists into their collections, they not only make openings for artists whose vision and drive to create art is so powerful that they use whatever means they have to make it, but they also offer museum visitors a broader understanding of what art can be.

### Opportunities for New Museum Experiences

I first began working with art made by self-taught artists when I was the Curator of Education at the Georgia Museum of Art. I had not had a lot of previous experience with these artworks, but I was immediately excited about the possibilities of working with them. Gradually, these works of art became an important component of my tours, educational programs, and written guides. The materials and construction techniques resonated with me because they reflected the ingenuity and experimentation of the artists. The more I interacted with this art and learned about the artists who created it, the more I realized the unique potential we had to inspire visitors.

Self-taught artists do not have formal training and often do not set out to be artists. Although their styles are extremely diverse, they draw inspiration from the world around them, which can include religion and spiritual themes, social justice issues, nature, and visual culture. Works of self-taught art might be inspired by the materials available to the artists (Fine, 2004), and many incorporate found objects,



earth pigments, and household paints to explore multifaceted meanings.

As the fifth graders and I engaged with artworks in the museum, we began to appreciate their complexity by discussing the imagery, symbols, and emotional content. I structured activities with self-taught art in the galleries and the studio classroom at the museum in the spirit of playful discovery. Scholars (e.g., Branscombe, Burcham, Castle & Surbeck, 2014; Göncü & Gaskins, 2011) have described play as constructivist. Through play, learning is active, hands-on, and open to multiple solutions. Play has also been associated with how children develop creativity, language skills, and social and cognitive skills (Pellegrini, 2009). Adult audiences also can interact with museum objects through play (Grenier, 2010). Burnham and Kai-Kei write about interpretive play as “an open, dialogical approach to teaching that embraces interpretive freedom” (2011, p. 131). To be engaged in play is to be “caught up” and absorbed in the moment with each other and with the work of art through these shared experiences (p. 131). As the facilitator, I too was a part of this play, swept into the activities and discussions that consistently allowed me to discover new aspects of works and audience perspective.

### Surprise in Materials

The materials in the work of self-taught artists are familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. They can include anything from building materials such as tin and plywood to everyday consumables such as Coca-Cola cans to found objects such as car parts. These materials signify the resources available to the artists, reflecting the environment and culture in which the artists work. Although audiences recognize and are acquainted with the materials found in self-taught art, when they see those materials in art museums, they are surprised. These works are exciting to explore as a group because different visitors will bring new observations and knowledge into the discussion based on their own experiences with these materials. In the museum, we often spent so much time with these objects on guided tours that we did not have much time to visit other parts of the museum.

I love to engage with visitors through self-taught art because of the elements of wonder and surprise—the potential of these objects to embody experience and materialize the intangible. Although in some cases, objects and materials are individually identifiable, when combined they can resonate beyond their formal

qualities to suggest poetic implications. For instance, Charlie Lucas’s three-dimensional sculpture, *Girl with Balloon* (n.d.), incorporates found objects such as bicycle wheels for balloons, a spring as a locket of hair, a pedal for a foot, and an oil can as a torso. The result is a three-dimensional sculpture of a human figure with many connotations. On our tour, the sculpture practically stood on the floor of the gallery with us, creating an intimate relationship between the artwork and those that approached her.

I had a lot of fun creating opportunities for play with self-taught work in the galleries. With groups of children, we sometimes created our own people on the floors of the galleries by piecing together small found objects brought along in a tote bag (Figure 2). These objects and materials can be understood as “loose parts” with open-ended potential that the children can combine, manipulate, and reconfigure as they explore possibilities (Daly & Beloglovsky, 2015, p. 13). In the museum, children experimented with the individual objects by trying out multiple combinations before deciding on the finished piece.

Sometimes we would also turn this activity into a group challenge where each child would get a piece to add to the figure. With older children, we divided into small groups to create multiple figures using objects randomly assigned. Later, in a studio classroom, we would extend this play with materials further by experimenting with found objects, glue, and paint to create permanent three-dimensional figures that the children could take home (Figure 3).

Each of these playful activities initiated a sense of discovery and revealed different materials. Environments conducive to play and discovery need to offer a breadth of opportunities for joint activities, interactions with others, and resources for children to use. In the galleries, nontraditional materials are often grouped into the category of “mixed media”, and as such, visitors have to take an extra step to discover what is actually used to create the work. For instance, Jimmy Lee Sudduth’s materials were directly drawn from both natural and manmade resources around him, but it would be difficult to identify them through observation alone. He created colors from pigments including weeds, berries, soot, types of mud, and house paints, and then applied binding agents that consisted of soft drinks, sugar, honey, molasses, and instant coffee (Cargo, 2009). He often used his fingers to paint, and sometimes would burn and scratch areas of his paintings to get particular textures (Cargo, 2009). As we investigated

the “mixed media” materials of Sudduth’s work together, we often came away with more speculations than answers, as visitors debated the materials that made up the artwork.

Like a lot of artists, Sudduth’s process with materials was based on trial and error. He described how he used cardboard for his paintings created with mud, but when the material would not hold up, he switched to plywood. He also discovered syrup as a binding agent because he could not figure out how to get the mud to harden on the surface (Fine, 2004). For museum visitors, discussing Sudduth’s experimentation, including successes and failures, gives insight into the process of making art. In fact, by describing these processes, the materials and the act of creating became central components of the work. Furthermore, having visitors involved in process-oriented experimentation in the studio spaces of the museum facilitate an understanding of the materials through actions, choices, and problem solving.

Although many of the materials Sudduth used cannot be handled in the galleries because of their organic nature, asking visitors to first describe the sensations of painting with honey or syrup on their fingers creates reflective dialogue that can be revisited later through a multi-sensory experience in a studio space or outdoors. Playfully asking children what they feel, smell, hear, and taste from the painting gives them opportunities to explore the physicality of the work (Blandy & Bolin, 2018), and to think about their own experiences finger painting and playing in the mud. For example, children loved yelling “ewwww!!” when asked if they would like to finger paint with these materials, but they had many ideas for food-related finger paints they would use if given the chance. On more than one occasion, we extended this experience by using the studio classroom to paint with different colors of mud.

As Dudley (2010) argues, although art museums are primarily visual, “all senses are intertwined, and all objects are experienced multisensorially” (p. 11). Even if the smells of the mud or coffee grounds no longer linger in the works by Sudduth, discussions about the materials triggered memories of these scents, emphasizing their tangible presence in these spaces. Likewise, discussing the sounds, smells, and feelings generated by scratching and burning works created some knowledge of these actions. By including a discussion of these processes in the galleries and revisiting them through experimentation that involves the sense of touch, visitors

can better understand the physicality of the objects they are seeing and explore the relationships they create with us and with the other objects in the museum.

### Materials and Meaning

Often materials and meaning are intertwined, and exploring them leads to interpretations and connections to the artworks. Self-taught artists sometimes draw conceptual ideas from the way the materials take shape through the process of making. For instance, Sybil Gibson created pictures from the shapes that emerged on paper bags when they were wet (Fine, 2004). Another artist, Nellie Mae Rowe, talked about exploring ideas through the process of drawing.

I take my pencil, I look at the paper, and when I get to marking, it comes to me. . . When my pencil moves and which way it turns. . . I may start drawing a flower but if it comes to me, I put an eye on it and a nose on it and it becomes a person or a mule. (as cited in Kogan, 2007, p. 124)

For Rowe, the marks dictated the direction of the work. As she drew, her ideas changed and evolved. She was playing with her ideas directed by the marks.

In the studio classroom, children often extended the subject and/or content of their works of art during the process of art making. They did this sometimes by responding to the materials they had been given, identifying marks, stains, and blots in their drawings that led in other directions, or by being inspired by their classmates' examples. Building off of these processes of playful discovery, we prompted children to draw organically without an advanced plan or asked them to draw together on the same paper to encourage relational processes.

Thornton Dial Sr.'s artworks use the layering of found objects to emphasize messages and experiences. The work in the galleries of the Georgia Museum of Art incorporated enamel paint on braided rope carpeting and industrial sealing compound to create a portrait of a philanthropist Dial knew in New York. This work, *Spirit of Grand Central Station: The Man That Helped the Handicapped* (1990), radiated with bands of colors that took on a halo effect around the figure's head. Similar to Row, Dial saw materials not only as media through which he could express ideas, but also as vehicles that gave him a freedom to create.

My art is evidence of my freedom. When I start any piece of art I can pick up anything I want to pick up. When I get ready for that, I already got my idea for it. I start with whatever fits with my idea, things I will find anywhere. I gather up

things from around. I see the piece in my mind before I start, but after you start making it you see more that need to go in it. It's just like inventing something. (as cited in Souls Grown Deep Foundation, n.d., para. 36)

Dial stressed that he wanted to work with materials that people had used and discarded to make something new, and his statement here conveys the potential of an object to be transformed.

In the museum when I spoke about Dial's work, I sometimes had small samples of paint and rope on hand so students could connect materials to meanings by investigating textures and colors. The samples also made the work more physically present and immediate. From these experiences in the gallery, students were inspired by the materials which then shaped their experiences in the museum studio, helping them come up with multiple solutions for creating textures and meaningful connections to people and things (Figures 4 and 5).

### Conclusion

As we get lost in the materiality of works of art, we gain new insights (Hood & Kraehe, 2017). In the museum's studio space, found objects and art supplies were available to students, but we would leave it to the students to decide what to do with these items. Students often started with materials that drew them in, deciding through the process what it was that they wanted to create. They talked with each other, sharing materials, ideas, and reflections from the galleries as they worked. As I had observed in the museum's gallery spaces, museum educators can explore self-taught artists' works not only for ways to experiment with nontraditional art materials, but also as inspiration for connecting materials from our everyday lives to our art making in order to embody our viewpoints and experiences of things.

Furthermore, by investigating works of art from the perspective of materials, stories emerged. The story of objects, of the artwork, of the artist, and of the viewers all came together through our conversations about materiality, forms, and ideas. With Bolin and Blandy (2018, p. 37) I would argue that in this way museum visitors and educators come to understand that "objects and stories have the strength and potential to shape us in dynamic and resolute ways." At the museum, discovery unfolded as children and adults engaged with the materiality of objects, which led to wonder and more questions. Self-taught art not only delivers surprises, it also inspires. The resourcefulness and ingenuity of

artists who make art from found objects and nontraditional materials provides us an opportunity for museum visitors to see themselves as artists. This is because works of art by self-taught artists indicate not only their own engagement with their environment, but also suggest new ways for everyone to communicate about the world.

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Solar Powered Painting is an art workshop I developed to get participants thinking about intersections between art, environment, and sustainability. In this article, I focus on four separate projects that offer different approaches to this goal. These projects demonstrate how the workshop offers strategies on how

## “While sunlight—the global source of all human life—is a tangible part of the process of making”

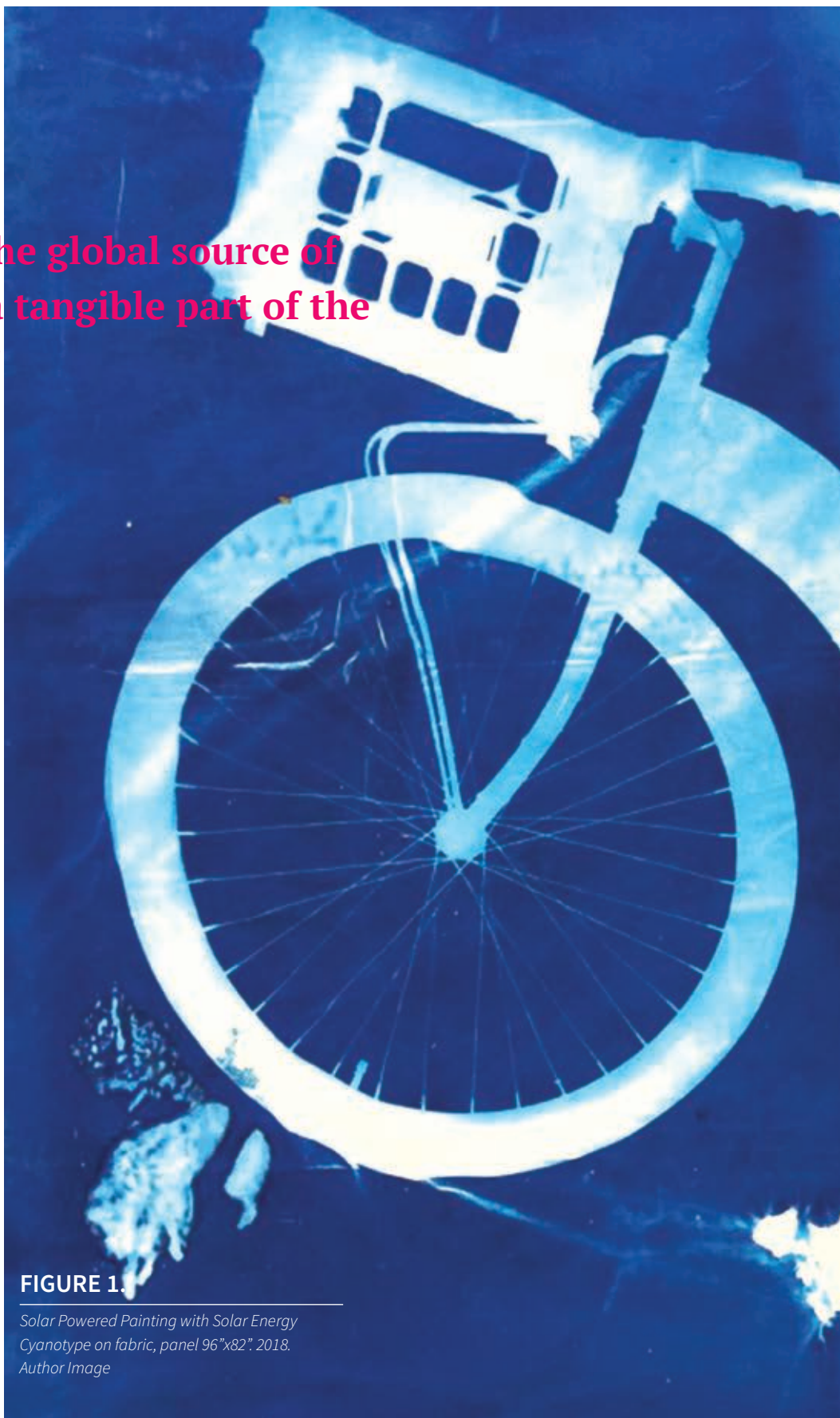
the art classroom can engage community outreach and industry partnerships. The projects described here include: Earth Day, Solar Energy International, Freedom Solar and Bicycle Collection.

To make the work, large pieces of cotton fabric—bed sheets—are coated with ammonium iron citrate and potassium ferricyanide, cyanotype chemicals (note: the cyanotype is commonly known as a blueprint). The fabric dries overnight and then is spread out in a sunny location. To make an image, various objects are placed on top of the fabric. After six minutes in the sun, the objects are removed and the sheet is rinsed in water to fix the image.

This work is linked to the creation of our environment because its materiality is derived from daily weather patterns and sunlight. In this way, studio art disciplines such as painting, drawing, photography and printmaking become blurred. In fact, because I collaborate with sunlight to make these artworks, I think about them as part of the landscape painting tradition. At the intersection of art, environment and sustainability, the Solar Powered Painting workshop is an example of how materiality redefines the genre of landscape.

### Earth Day 2019

On April 22, 2019 I did a workshop celebrating Earth Day to demonstrate support for environmental protection. Molly Farrell, a BFA painting student at Texas Tech, helped print six panels in my Lubbock studio. The panels were displayed on Texas Tech University campus in the architecture building during Earth Week to show students how to integrate art and society. We decided to use a bicycle theme to emphasize individual human energy. We spelled out



**FIGURE 1.**

*Solar Powered Painting with Solar Energy  
Cyanotype on fabric, panel 96"x82". 2018.  
Author Image*



# SOLAR POWERED PAINTING

*by Carol Flueckiger*



**FIGURE 2.**

*Solar Powered Painting with Solar Energy International, pop up installation, Paonia, CO. Cyanotype on fabric, each panel 96"x82". 2018.*

**FIGURE 3.**

*Solar Poowered Painting: Luca's Bicycle. Cyanotype on fabric. 96"x82". 2017.*

Earth Day, in homage to parade signs or political march banners, in order to be clear about our intent to celebrate this global environmental event. The work was printed on full size bed sheets, 92x82 inches. It was displayed with push pins and since it folds up, was transported easily. The goal was to make something mobile that could install easily, be clear on message, and have large visual impact.

**Solar Energy International, Paonia, CO, 2018**

During an artist residency with Elsewhere Studio in 2017, I learned that I was within a mile of a Solar Energy International (SEI) training campus. SEI engages, educates, and empowers students from around the world through onsite classes in solar power installation. I asked Instructor Kristopher Sutton if SEI would be interested in my workshop on Solar Powered Panting. And they were! We printed six panels on their flat grade roof during a lunch break. We were able to install the panels in the alley behind the artist residency for an evening pop-up exhibition. Later in the month we installed some of the panels for a First Friday event at the Charles Adams Studio Project in Lubbock, Texas.

**Freedom Solar, Austin, TX 2018**

I reached out to Freedom Solar in Austin, Texas, to tell them about my Solar Powered Painting workshop. I wondered if they would be interested in a one-hour onsite workshop. I felt I would learn about how the solar energy industry, works because they install residential and commercial panels throughout Texas. As a bonus, they are art friendly! I showed up at their warehouse in Austin and we spent an hour visiting and printing. It was very powerful to print an actual solar cell and think about the sun, art, industry and aesthetics. Sherren Harter, Director of Marketing at Freedom Solar, created a



blog post detailing the experience: <https://freedomssolarpower.com/blog/solar-art-day>.

One thing that struck me on a personal level while working with both Freedom Solar and Solar Energy International, was that my work experience is very consistent. While working for my family's commercial roofing company in Minneapolis, I spent six years loading and unloading roofing tar into our warehouse, processing material shipments, and driving equipment to job sites. I did this while enrolled in art school. At that time, my world was all about art and roofing. At the Freedom Solar warehouse and the Solar Energy International workshop it occurred to me that my work is still all about art and roofing!

#### **Bicycle Collection**

This ongoing series of bicycle prints

is a favorite. While sunlight—the global source of all human life—is a tangible part of the process of making the work, the subject—a bicycle—is emblematic of energy on an individual level. This series helps me realize that energy, as a subject, is complex and interwoven into individuality and society. For example, as an artist I connected with Tim Dallas, Associate Dean of the Department of Electrical & Computer Engineering at Texas Tech University. With summer session students in his Solar Energy course, we printed a bicycle together, making a STEAM connection between art and physics.

Images for this submission that will aid in reading are located at this website <https://www.carolfueckiger.com/#/trends-2019/>



EARTH



DAY





# BECOMING THE TRAVELER

## *A Journey Into the Land of Frustration and Opportunity*

by Kate Wurtzel

### **The Entangled Feather**

I've set the stage with an exploding bag of feathers in hopes of capturing that perfect picture: the one of you throwing feathers about and everything appearing effortless. And yet, it is not. I feel frustrated or even border-line angry and begin to sweat. Logically, I know that perfection does not exist outside the camera, like some objective truth. Yet for some reason, I still strive to achieve it, to find that perfect shot. I am lost as an artist. I am lost as a parent. I am lost as an educator.

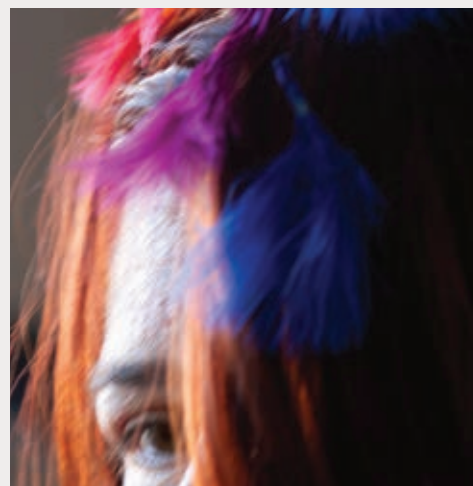
I put down the camera, place some feathers on my head, and decide to let go. In that moment, you pick it up. Subject becomes object-object becomes subject-the distinctions begin to blur. You turn and capture one of my all-time favorite

photos. An eyebrow and some feathers are on top of my head; a yellow feather sticks between my tense lips; a slightly blurry shot of my left eye appears. Each is a portrait that speaks directly to the destabilizing event that has just occurred when I came face to face with the self-imposed boundaries of my material body.

During that moment of frustration, followed by the moment of letting go of the camera, my body was existing and moving with all other materials, including the feathers, the camera, the sunlight, the used TV in the garage, and you –my young child. Once I placed it down, you picked up where I left off. You expanded me. For a moment my focus was narrow. I could not recognize my place within the larger entanglement of our interactions and in turn, I closed myself off to what might become. But you, my little one who is often my teacher in life, showed me another way.

### **Art Teacher as Intra-active Agent**

The scene described here was a turning point for me as an art educator, parent, and artist. As my emotional response to the moment shifted from frustration to creative play, I felt an opening or expansion occurring inside of me. I began



**“my role in the world is not fixed nor the center of all experiences”**



to see how letting go of control meant honoring how I am only a part of a larger interconnected web—my role in the world is not fixed nor the center of all experiences. Instead, I am always acting and receiving in relation to materials in the world, including the feathers, my daughter, the camera, and the sunshine streaming into the garage, among many other things. They were all active with and alongside me in that moment.

This idea that in the moment described above I was not only in relation to my daughter but also in relation with the materials in our garage is a concept explored by the theoretical physicist and feminist theorist, Karen Barad (2007). In her writings on philosophy, feminist theory, and physics, Barad identifies the term *intra-action* or *intra-activity* as a way to address ongoing relationships with materials in the world. *Intra-action* is a movement away from the concept of individual entities, or what she calls *agencies*, existing on their own. Instead, Barad proposes that these individual agencies, such as me, the camera, the feathers, etc., exist only in relation to one another. As she explains, “agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement” (Barad, 2007, p. 33). In the

moment described above, my daughter and I were mutually entangled and our sense of agency was constantly being re-negotiated as we moved through the experience.

I am using the word *intra-action* as a way to look closely at what transpired when I let go of the camera and my daughter picked it up. In that moment, I could not have predicted the shift that would occur, from me being the person behind the camera giving directions to me being the one in front of the camera embracing whatever might unfold. Our *intra-action*, the mutual entanglement that existed as we moved in relation to one another, revealed to me that my sense of power was actually false. Instead of trying to maintain control and construct a “perfect” photo, I needed to honor how my relations with the materials could actually open up creative possibilities that could emerge from our ever-shifting relations.

As art educators, what does it mean to *intra-act* with materials, to give up one’s own agenda and follow the materials as they present themselves and as you present yourself? What might that experience look like or feel like in the body? Looking critically at the moment

when I set down the camera and released the desire to control both the outcome and the materiality of the camera actually opened up possibilities for creation. By letting the physical body of the camera go, placing it on the garage floor, I unexpectedly created a space where my daughter could pick it up and begin taking photos of the scene herself. Instead of working in opposition to the camera and continuing to face my frustration, ultimately I had to release my desire to control the end product and engage in a collaborative art making experience. This collaboration was not only with my daughter, but also with the body of the camera and all the other materials that had a presence in that moment. British anthropologist Tim Ingold identifies this kind of art making as a process where humans and materials “unfold within the weave of the world” (2011, p. 9). In my situation, this unfolding meant being open to new ways of engaging with the materials on that very memorable and somewhat confrontational afternoon.

The entangled feather moment challenged my position as the photographer behind the camera and enabled me to engage in another role—one that was open, expansive, and not



predetermined. It unexpectedly provided space for me to rethink my relationships to materials and led me to consider how I was shutting down creative possibilities. By staying behind the camera, I was creating physical boundaries that enacted false artistic boundaries or limitations. But once I released control, and was no longer behind the camera, new potentials surfaced. In some ways, letting go of the camera was the physical and emotional action that created the eyebrow picture taken by my daughter (Fig. 1), enabling me to rethink my entangled presence with materials in this world.

### Art Educator as Traveler

Shifting perspective to include ideas about entanglement means attending to qualities and collaborations that might emerge between the self and materials. In some ways, one has to become a traveler, staying attuned to relations with materials in one's environment and following where intra-actions takes you. However, the challenge, is figuring out how to do this in real-time and not just in theory. How might we become art educator travelers, paying attention to relations between the self, materials, and students? And why is this important for art educators to cultivate as a practice?

As an art educator, staying open to ideas about intra-action and entanglements with materials has the potential to significantly alter teaching and learning. This shift in thinking offers a different kind of engagement with materials, where we are not simply trying to use them but be in relation to them; it opens up curricular possibilities and new considerations for teaching. For example, rather than simply giving students a piece of wire and asking them to make a cubist style portrait, the art educator traveler might give students a piece of wire to explore possibilities that emerge through intra-actions. Students and teacher might begin by looking at the materiality of the wire itself, and then move into an examination of how they intra-act with the wire and their bodies in a particular space, or with other materials. This way of teaching is different from teacher-directed instruction aimed at specific learning

outcomes. By allowing this type of engagement with a material, the learning becomes unpredictable and potentially more meaningful. Students construct their own knowledge through intra-actions and learn to embrace experiences that are not only longer lasting, but also have the ability to shift engagement with materials in the world.

### Encounters with Frustration

For me, the ability to honor my entangled existence with materials was only accessible after I encountered a significant moment of frustration. It took a collision between my desire to construct a perfect photo with feathers effortlessly swirling around my child, and the falsely presumed passive nature of materials, before I could release control and become the art educator traveler. Facing this moment of frustration, where things were not necessarily going as planned, creating a need to open toward other outcomes, showed me how frustration can be a useful tool for art teachers.

Encountering moments of frustration is bound to happen in any art room. Each day is going to present its own challenges and irritations, from the child who accidentally spills the freshly poured red paint, or the one who tells his neighbors their work is terrible, to the sound of your own voice saying "class, class" ten times in 45 minutes. While I am not saying that every day is filled with these moments, the reality is that there are times when we all have to take a deep breath and quickly count to ten. And when these moments do present themselves, it is important to consider how you will face and, most importantly, embrace them, placing the metaphorical camera on the ground and taking up the opportunity to shift your own point of view towards materials. For example, instead of yelling at the child for spilling paint, make the choice to get on the floor and play with the glorious pile of redness. In the end, these encounters with frustration are actually hidden gems, moments where intra-actions with materials open teachers to exploration.

### Conclusion

Teaching in a way that honors the intra-actions of all material in this life means

pressing up against one's own borders and considering why certain things call to the self, excite the self, and maybe even displace the self. As an art educator, this is a challenging task, but one that carries strong potential in terms of instructional and curricular shifts. Recognizing one's own intra-active nature means staying attuned to relations with materials and noticing when moments of frustration might become opportunities for expansion and engagement. While there might be an inherent desire to cling to structure and feel in control of materials, by letting go and considering new ways of intra-acting, there could also be great growth and unexpected surprises...such as fun pictures of eyebrows and yellow feathers.

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# PLACE-CONSCIOUS ART EDUCATION

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## WANDERING, ENCOUNTERING, DWELLING

*Trends 2020* invites essays and artworks that explore emplacement in and through art and education. In anthropology, the notion of “place” has traditionally been associated with bounded localities and contained cultures. In recent times, however, there has been a move toward rethinking place as relational, involving entanglements. Researchers argue that we cannot dismiss the fact that people form relationships with certain places in concrete and important ways.

Art education should investigate relationships between people and places and consider when, how, and under what conditions they are formulated. This involves posing questions about the role of emplacement and displacement, as well as asking how both people and places might constitute each other. In other words, place and space should not be thought of merely as passive backgrounds for people to act upon or “do something” to, but as active partners in the construction of the self. What is place? What does it mean to belong to a certain place? How is place articulated, written, enacted, or performed? Do others shape how bodies react to place? How do scents, sounds, sights, objects, etc. construct place?

*Trends 2020* welcomes submissions that explore emplacement, the process of setting something in place or being set in place, by attending to these questions and other, in relation to bodies, minds, and the materiality and the sensoriality of environments that include art. Experimentation with creative processes that explore notions of emplacement in relation to identities, memories, and surroundings are encouraged.

Guidelines depend on the type of submission: arts-based submissions with minimal text should be accompanied by a 200-500-word description (which might not be published but will be used to review the submission). We also welcome creative written submissions of between 1000-2000 words, as well as traditional research manuscripts (which should follow the *Trends* Author Guidelines).

*Trends*, The Journal of the Texas Art Education Association, is a refereed professional journal, published annually by the Texas Art Education Association. The journal accepts articles written by authors residing both inside and outside of the state of Texas.

Deadline: Original manuscripts must be received by January 15, 2020 as an MS Word document. Please submit via e-mail to: [tateatrends@gmail.com](mailto:tateatrends@gmail.com).





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