



### TRAINING ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY IN VISUAL ARTISTS

How is the reflexive impulse recognized, valued and taught to the visual artist? Reflexivity is the artistic response to the idea or impulse from the brain. Training reflexivity as a tool is not about training the impulse, but about training the reflexive response to impulse. Acting pedagogy, through improvisation and repetition improves the reflexive response. Using actor-training methods that I have adapted into gestural drawing exercises, visual artists can practice responding reflexively in collaboration with others. Learning and artistry are social processes; they require embodied engagement with others to teach reflexivity and artistic individuality. This research contributes new interdisciplinary language and innovative techniques to visual artist training and identifies artistic reflexivity as a trainable part of a developing artistic process.

JENNIFER WIGMORE

MEFA

2016

TRAINING ARTISTIC  
REFLEXIVITY IN VISUAL  
ARTISTS JENNIFER WIGMORE



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# TRAINING ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY IN VISUAL ARTISTS

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BY  
JENNIFER WIGMORE

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# ABSTRACT

Training Artistic Reflexivity in Visual Artists

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OCAD University, 2016

## TRAINING ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY IN VISUAL ARTISTS

How is the reflexive impulse recognized, valued and taught to the visual artist? Reflexivity is the artistic response to the idea or impulse from the brain. Training reflexivity as a tool is not about training the impulse, but about training the reflexive response to impulse. Acting pedagogy, through improvisation and repetition improves the reflexive response. Using actor-training methods that I have adapted into gestural drawing exercises, visual artists can practice responding reflexively in collaboration with others. Learning and artistry are social processes; they require embodied engagement with others to teach reflexivity and artistic individuality. This research contributes new interdisciplinary language and innovative techniques to visual artist training and identifies artistic reflexivity as a trainable part of a developing artistic process.

### KEY WORDS:

Reflexivity, collaboration, visual art education, creativity, impulse, intuition, interdisciplinary, a/r/tography, play, pedagogy.

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Lucas and Daisy  
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## INTRODUCTION

I wasn't the best or brightest student. Being held back in grade three was my first fall through a series of cracks in the education system. It destroyed my confidence in my ability to learn. A reading disability undiagnosed until I was in my late twenties was partly to blame. Little was expected of me so I was never pushed to achieve much. Eventually I dropped out of high school.

My safe haven was always the arts; I could always find myself there. My father was a theatre director, and I spent countless hours in the theatre with him as he created his shows. The actors, musicians and technicians working with him became my role models and my teachers. My activities in visual arts, music and drama were how I learned about the world, so it's not surprising that I became an artist. Since completing my acting training in 1992 I have never been anything else. I've had a career as a multi disciplinary artist, an actor on stage and screen, a singer and a visual artist. I've built theatre companies and visual art collectives. After many years as a professional artist I extended my love of being an artist into a love of teaching artists. Teaching my first acting class in 2004, I made a connection to a love of artistry that extended beyond myself. Being a teacher gave me a brand new vision of a what it was to be a student, which was very different from the student I had been. Through my students I understood what it takes to be a good teacher. I realized that my challenging experiences in the education system hadn't stopped me from learning, I had just chosen different teachers. This realization made me want to help younger artists feel valued and supported in their choice to be an artist. I have been teaching ever since.

Soon after I started teaching, my artistic focus changed to the visual arts. I wanted to expand my education, so with trepidation I walked into the Toronto School of Art (TSA). Within weeks I was enrolled full time, spending the next two years learning skills to make me a better visual artist. TSA ignited in me a love not just of making art, but of learning about it. I had become the student my students had taught me to be. I established a visual art practice which quickly



grew. Before long I wanted more education and my new confidence as a student propelled me to obtain my undergraduate degree at the Ontario College of Art and Design University (OCAD U).

At OCAD U I realized that being a painter was not so different from being an actor. I was still the same artist I was just using different tools. I realized that I was able to transition so quickly from acting to painting because my training and experience as an actor had given me skills at taking risks and saying yes to my ideas. Working in my studio during my undergrad, I wondered how visual artists were taught to take risks. This led me to my first research questions: How is the reflexive impulse recognized, valued and taught to visual artists? How can visual art educators enhance and develop artistic intuition? These questions propelled my masters' research and led me to evolve the concept of *artistic reflexivity*.

Actors need to be very flexible, able to respond readily to direction, the text and to each other. Great value is placed on training actors to respond reflexively to their impulses. It is the single most important skill for an actor to develop, because training the reflexive response teaches an actor to say yes. Could the tools I use to train actors be applied to the training of visual artists? Could such tools teach the visual artist to say yes? **The aim of this research inquiry is to introduce curriculum designed for actors to visual artist's, and to use collaboration and repetition as a method to engage their reflexivity.**

In chapter 1, *Creativity*, I address the way cultural myths and perceptions of creativity, talent, and play influence artists and the way they are trained. As well, I define my concept of *Artistic Reflexivity* and argue that it is integral to artistic identity in how artists turn their ideas into art.

In chapter 2, *Skills*, I outline how acting pedagogy is designed to develop *artistic reflexivity* and how collaboration and repetition promote the reflexive response. Collaboration teaches essential skills that are very difficult to develop in isolation. I also talk about the body's role in developing *artistic reflexivity* and muscle memory.

Chapter 3, *The Circle of Engagement*, introduces my methodological framework and what Jungnickle and Hjorth (143) would call my “interdisciplinary entanglements”. As this MFA program is interdisciplinary, I use a/r/tography as my methodology to weave together all facets of my life and practice, asserting that they are embodied and intertwined. My artwork is a product of this entanglement, the manifestation of engagement with material as a collaborative partner. My artistic experiments are distributed throughout this thesis document because, like the rhizome, they grew from and branched off my research and teaching. My exhibition artwork concludes this chapter and represents the culmination of my reflexive dialogue with material, and the hindsight derived from this project.

Chapter 3 also includes discussion of the workshops and the exercises that I created to teach *artistic reflexivity* to students at OCAD University. Throughout this thesis, I refer to surveys filled out by students before and after their experience of my workshops. Their voice in this thesis is a significant component of the findings of this research and make a direct contribution to my artistic practice. The voice of the student is of fundamental value to the development of this pedagogy.

In my paper I did not venture into comparisons to other artists, but I would be remiss if I did not mention some of the artists who I have discovered along this journey. Firstly, the influence of Lynda Benglis is clear. In the 1970's she pushed the limits of material to new heights. She was fearless and also provoked the notion of what painting is. Louise Bourgeois with her hanging sculptures evoking the feminist body, my black *Paint Net* could be an homage to her. Eva Hesse and her innovative exploration of materiality through minimalist sculpture. Jackson Pollock and his action painting that accepts the unknown and the unpredictable as part of the process has long been influential to my artistic practice. His immersion into the moment of creation and the use of his body in a dance of action/reaction was the genesis of the concept of *artistic reflexivity*. 1970's American post modernist, neo-geo painter Steve Parrino with his folded and twisted paintings and Italian painter Alberto Burri, both used unconventional materials and exploratory techniques to

create imageless sculptural paintings. All of these artists as well as the artists in my cohort have become part of the circle of influence and inspiration to my work and research.

As an artist first, I want my thesis document to reflect the way I think, teach and make art. This is why I chose the Bespoke format, which allows me to present these thoughts in a more informal manner. I have also created a separate guide called *Training Artistic Reflexivity: Collaborative Drawing Exercises for Visual Artists*, describing the exercises I created as part of this project. The guide is attached as an appendix to this document. I hope this guide will be useful to educators who would like to incorporate more reflexivity training in their curriculum.

OCAD University has been my artistic home for the last four years. The depth and breadth of my experience and knowledge have expanded exponentially under its roof. While at times I may be critical of OCAD U, it is because I care deeply for its future and see limitless possibilities of what it can achieve. It is my hope that opening a dialogue about how we train artists will contribute to advancements in teaching practices for the betterment of future artists.

## Experiment One

### Asian Apple-Pear Casing Sculpture

The origin of my graduate thesis work was a single moment of wonder. I held in my hands the netted foam casing from an Asian apple-pear, strange and squishy, moldable and stretchy (image 1). The casing seemed both odd and beautiful. Could I pour something into it? Could I use it as a mold? These were unusual thoughts for me as a painter. My training as an actor pushed me beyond mere playfulness to ask the most creative of all questions: What if? What if?' prodded my imagination and provoked my curiosity, creating puzzles that I wanted to solve.



*Image 1, Asian Apple-pear casings, 2016*

In my initial experiments I poured plaster into the casings. The casings proved to be excellent receptacles for the plaster, coming away easily when it was dry. I experimented with the consistency of the plaster, making it firm enough that it wouldn't leak out of the holes. In order to create round forms, I held the mold till it had dried enough to keep its shape. Then I put the mold in a yogurt container and use crossed chopsticks sticks to keep it from collapsing.



The finished sculpture is mysterious. Reminiscent of washed ashore dead coral life. You would never guess how it was made.

*Image 2, Plaster cast of Asian apple-pear casing, 2014*

# Intuition

## 1.1 - THE ARTIST'S CREATIVE PROCESS: BREAKING MYTHS

There is no consensus on what creativity actually is - no tidy operational definition that would enable a line to be drawn objectively between a good idea/solution and a 'creative' one, or between a creative person and the rest of us.

- Susan Greenfield, ID: *The Quest for Meaning in the 21st Century*, 113.

Talent is the yardstick the world uses to measure genius. Without talent, it is believed, it is impossible to be an artist. But there is no way to get talent, to buy it or to make it. As the old adage goes; you either have it or you don't. Creativity has been mixed into the same mysterious pool as talent, making creativity itself seem unattainable to those without talent.

Martin Ryan (1), in his MDes thesis at OCAD University, *The Social Construction of the "Non-Creative" Identity*, analyzes what self-described non-creative people think about people who identify as creative. "Creativity Culture"<sup>1</sup> and the stereotypical assumptions about who is creative and who is not, have deterred "non-creatives" from tapping into their creative potential (Ryan, 1). "Creativity has remained an ill-defined, elusive subject matter that more often breeds confusion and conflict than it does productive clarity" (53). Artists are not isolated from these cultural stereotypes, so it is reasonable to assume that they are influenced by the same pervasive cultural myths.

To qualify as a "creative person," you must identify as an artist above all other professional identities, your work must consistently make a socially recognized impact on the world or your professional domain, and in doing so you must think far "outside of the box" and produce ideas from nothing, that have never been conceived of before. (86)

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<sup>1</sup> "By conceptualizing the sum of a society's creative and "non-creative" identities, we arrive at an ideologically neutral and fundamentally whole view of what can be described as a society's "Creativity Culture"" (Ryan, 54)

This societal myth about what creative people are and what they do, not only prevents self-identified non-creatives from exploring their creativity, but puts incredible pressure on those who do. “The fact that artists are still so creative and productive speaks eloquently of their determination to create in spite of the odds against them” (Task Force, 8).

These kinds of mythologies can damage the budding confidence of emerging artists, by putting undue pressure on them to assign tremendous value to their output. How can visual art pedagogy circumvent these stereotypes and cultural generalities if “product-driven relationships serve to create significant distance between creativity and the individual?” (Ryan, 105).

How do we promote the growth of artistic individuality and creative identity in a culture that places such value on product? In her book *ID: The Quest for Meaning in the 21st Century*, Susan Greenfield (34) suggests that we foster our creativity “through the development of a robust sense of identity”. In *How Art Cannot be Taught*, James Elkins (21) states that “virtually all our instruction goes into fostering individuality”, but I would argue that while contemporary visual art pedagogy appears to promote individuality, the emphasis on outcome, on product over process, creates an environment antithetical to building artistic individuality.

As an artist/educator for over 25 years, I can confidently say that artists discover their identity through hard work at their practice, through trial and failure, through research, and through perseverance at evolving and expressing their ideas. In my experience within the academic environment, the practical tools at evolving an artist’s creative identity are not weighted equally with the cerebral and skills’ building domains of knowledge. Technique and “text [are] privileged over vision” (Nadanner, 179) while “conceptions of intuitive knowledge are largely elided within postmodernist art school pedagogy” (Fisher, 13). My experience at OCAD U as an undergraduate and graduate student as well as a teaching assistant in studio classes, is that there is overemphasis on finished artwork and that the experimental processes that led to that artwork are rarely considered in assessment.

Talent demonstrated at the portfolio review does not necessarily indicate skill at thinking or behaving like an artist. Technical practice and skills-building begin with the fundamental basics: colour-mixing, drawing and mold-making are introduced and developed incrementally. Art history, colour theory, critical discourse, and writing are also cerebral spheres of knowledge that are integral to building a balanced artistic practice. These are important pedagogical foundations, but they do not help a student artist figure out how to stand alone in front of a canvas for eight hours and create something from inside their head.

It isn't the lack of technical know-how or inability to write a good art statement that blocks an artist's creative output. As Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels (74) found in their thorough analysis of the creative process, "perhaps the most difficult thing for a creative individual to bear is the sense of loss and emptiness experienced when, for some reason or another, he or she cannot work". Lack of confidence in artistic ability translates directly to lack of confidence in identity. The question of how to teach artistic identity is much more difficult to answer. Perhaps that is why the language and pedagogy to address it at art school are underdeveloped.

## PLAN TO BE AN PROFESSIONAL ARTIST?

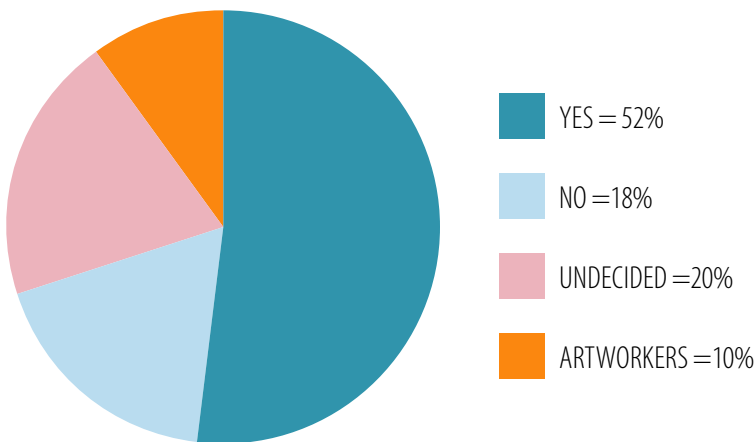


Fig.1

In the intake survey in my workshops<sup>2</sup>, 52% of students responded that they plan to become professional<sup>3</sup> artists upon graduation. A further 20% indicated that they were undecided. Only 18% responded that they did not intend to become professional artists. 52% is a much higher number than I anticipated. It is unlikely that 52% of these students will actually realize their dream, because “there is perhaps no other course of professional training where the discrepancy between aspirations and achievement is so great” (Csikszentmihalyi & Getzels, 29).

I wonder were these same students to be polled again in the final year of their studies if this number would change. In some ways the answers are irrelevant, as educators we have a responsibility to support and encourage that 52%, whether they become “professional” artists or not. If for no other reason than that the “desire to make your art is integral to your sense of who you are” (Bayles & Orland, 12).

Visual art curriculum must begin with the basics, but I assert that those basics must also include practical tools at how to evolve and strengthen one’s artistic identity. If Ryan (105) is right that “process-driven relationships serve to create proximity and intimacy with a creative identity” then placing value on process in visual art pedagogy could be the key to building skills at artistic individuality. This idea leads to the first questions of my thesis: How is the reflexive impulse recognized, valued and taught to visual artists? How can visual art educators enhance and develop artistic intuition? Training *artistic reflexivity* in visual artists is the heart of this research and the basis of my teaching philosophy.

---

<sup>2</sup> 87 intake surveys were gathered. 73 students were in 1st year or General Art classes.

<sup>3</sup> I realize that “professional” as used in this question is open to some interpretation. I should have been clearer about what I define as a ‘professional’. However, I believe that most artists entering art school whether they have a true understanding of the word or not, believe that being a ‘professional artist’ means to make your living as an artist, to have your main source of income derive from your art practice. Even if the definition of ‘professional’ is subjective, the overwhelming results shows that students desire to make their art work an important factor in their lives. 84 students answered this question, 44 yes, 17 undecided, 15 no, 8 other.



## 1.2 - COGNITIVE CREATIVITY

**Your brain is home to an immense repository of information... this collection of information is unique to you. No one else has this particular mental library. That's why there is no doubt that you can create novel and original ideas- because nobody else has your unique database.**  
- Shelley Carson, *The Creative Brain*, 63.

In recent years, creativity has become a hot topic, a great mystery to unravel. Books about tapping into your inner-creative seem to come out weekly, because as Edward DeBono (11) points out in his seminal book, *Lateral Thinking: A Textbook of Creativity*, "in order to be able to use creativity, one must rid it of this aura of mystique and regard it as a way of using the mind". Corporations striving to evolve within the creative economy desperately search for competitive innovation and keys to access one's creativity are at the forefront of cognitive research.

Physiologically, all humans are remarkably alike. It is our collection of individual experiences that make each of us unique (Carson, 63). As the educational philosopher John Dewey (3) states in *Art as Experience*, everyone "experiences life from a different angle than anybody else, and consequently has something distinctive to give others if [s]he can turn his[her] experiences into ideas and pass them on to others". (sic) Anyone is capable of conceiving big ideas, but not everyone has developed the ability to act on them.

All people - including artists - can train themselves to reflexively respond to their intuitive impulses. Shelly Carson (4) in her book, *The Creative Brain*, points to new cognitive science suggesting that the ability to respond and react to flashes of insight is not a mysterious ability, but a skill that can be improved. "Creative mental functioning involves a set of specific brain activation patterns that can be amplified through conscious effort and a little practice" (4).

Through practice and hard work, some artists learn to respond reflexively to their ideas and develop them into works of art, but when asked to describe what happens to them in the studio they often have trouble “articulating [their] practice as a meta-dialogue” (Prior, 164). Artists have unique descriptions for how they channel their ideas or get themselves into a reflexive state. In my interview with abstract painter John Kissick (2014) he said that his practice is “way too messy and non linear” and that he makes “messes and riddles”. Abstract painter Erin Loree shared similar thoughts, “it’s a strange thing, I consider that place to be so different from other conscious, analyzing, logical states” (Loree, 2015).

Training the artistic impulse is part of other arts pedagogies. Acting, music, and dance training all begin with technical skill building including practice at improvisational intuitive response, a subject I will cover in more depth in 2.1, *How Acting Pedagogy Trains the Reflexive Impulse*.

While the cognitive research surrounding creativity is outside the scope of this paper, there is a tool that educators can use to train the reflexive response. It is a tool all people use and implicitly understand. A tool available to those who say they are creative and those that don’t. The tool is: Play.

# Experiment Two

## Bubble Wrap Sculpture

After working with the apple-pear casing, I was drawn to other objects that could be unlikely molds. My next idea was bubble wrap. To create a mold out of it, I needed to delicately cut away the plastic behind each bubble, creating a kind of muffin-tin of plastic. I made a thinner plaster than I had for the apple-pear mold, but still let the plaster dry for a while in my hands.



*Image 3, Plaster poured into bubble wrap, 2015.*

I tried the process with several sizes of bubble wrap. I created a silicone mold from the largest bubble sculpture. Then I made multiple castings with different plastic resin in a variety of colours.

Bubble wrap is used to protect objects, but these bubble sculptures seem to protect themselves and the air forever trapped within them.



*Image 4, Bubble wrap sculptures, plaster, resin, concrete, 2015.*

## 1.3 - DEFINING ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY

Everything tends to come together if you work at it and you trust your gut. – John Kissick, Personal Interview, 2015.

The great visual art teacher Hans Hoffman (59) said, “artistic intuition is the basis for confidence of the spirit”. A strong sense of confidence in a self-propelled profession may be the determining factor of an art student’s ability to transition into a self-employed artist. I think the concept of intuition gets muddled in the waters of academia. It is a confusing subject even for established artists who think of intuition as something we simply feel, not something we are not supposed to understand or control. The Canadian philosopher, John Raulston Saul (164) in his book, *On Equilibrium*, devotes a whole chapter to our fear of intuition, how our inability to control it continues to perpetuate our ambiguous relationship with it. He says, “conscious skill or craft is essential in any art. But the result is mediocre without the force of intuitive expression, like a great riptide carrying us out into a world beyond the page or the canvas” (210). How do artists harness this “force” and use it in a directed way? As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (105) identifies in *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, “keeping the mind open and flexible is an important aspect of the way creative persons carry on their work”, but how does an artist, while using ‘conscious skills’, keep their mind ‘open and flexible’ in order to respond to their ‘intuitive riptide’?

Many people have tried to describe the way that artists work intuitively. Csikszentmihalyi (112) famously dubbed it, “flow” an “intense concentration on the present”. Edward DeBono called it, “Po”<sup>4</sup>, Maxine Green in her essay, *Releasing the Imagination*, calls it the “pre-reflexive”<sup>5</sup>. The “pre-reflective”, she says, happens before reflection or hindsight, before the “I” has a chance to criticize. Shelley Carson (18) calls it “streaming”, describing the intuitive state as a kind of brain function called the “stream brainset”, which “is a unique melding of self and action that feels almost religious in its intensity” (Carson 18).

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<sup>4</sup> “PO is an insight tool since it enables one to use information in a way that encourages escape from the established patterns and insight restructuring into new ones” (DeBono, 262).

<sup>5</sup> “The pre-reflective, that is, what we perceive before we reflect upon it” (Greene, 53).

Tacit knowledge, lateral or divergent thinking<sup>6</sup> are also other names for this state of thinking, being, and working. (DeBono 1970, Carson 2010, Courtney 1987, Crowther 2009, Brockbank & McGill, 1998) Actors and athletes call it 'the zone'. Art critic Jan Verwoert (42) uses the word "emergence" to describe the intuitive process of painter Tomma Abts. Sandy Groebner (3) in her MFA thesis paper, *The Intimacy of Presence*, defined the intuitive impulse as "embodied cognition...something that rests in the sphere of fleeting tangibility" and "within the realm of the experiential and the pre-lingual".

Reflection is a term that comes close to defining this phenomenon, however reflection implies hindsight, looking back on something that has already happened. The term reflection does not accurately describe what happens while an artist is in the act of making. Spontaneous decision-making happens so quickly for the artist that it can hardly be categorized as a reflection; it is immediate and often improvisational. Brockbank and McGill (72) follow Donald Schon in making a distinction between, "reflection-on-action" and "reflection-in-action". On-action "convey[s] interaction between action, thinking and being", while in-action "suggest[s] an immediacy inherent in reflection and action" or "thinking on [one's] feet" (Brockbank & McGill, 72). While "reflection-in-action" comes close to describing a reactive state, the term still implies looking back while doing.

The action and reaction of creation is an intrinsically reflexive process, part of a lived embodied experience that artists find difficult to describe. It is an intense, focused experience, in which a sense of time disappears and action is effortless. For me, it is not just a space where the "flow" of collected experiences mingle and merge, but a deliberately reflexive process I have trained myself to enter into and remain in.

Reflexivity describes the site of connection between the artistic response in the body and the idea or impulse from the brain. Reflexivity is the immediate response to stimuli, internal or external; it happens in the moment an idea or impulse meets consciousness. It occurs in that split second in which a decision must be made to react or ignore that impulse. That decision is the reflexive action.

<sup>6</sup> "Creativity is too often only the description of a result, lateral thinking is the description of a process" (DeBono, 11).

For artists, the reflexive response is artistic because training and personal aesthetic have formed muscle memory and conditioned the reflexive response. **Training reflexivity as a tool is not about training the impulse, but about training the reflexive response to impulse.** In acting pedagogy, the ability to react spontaneously, truthfully, and without reservation is a skill that is practiced repeatedly until it becomes second nature. Visual artists too can learn to react faster and with less fear or resistance, trusting their artistic muscle memory and developing quicker access to their authentic voice.

Engaging *artistic reflexivity* requires the suspension of critical or evaluative thoughts. Three of the artists I interviewed said that to be in “the zone” they must be in a place free of internal judgment, and that with freedom to play, ideas begin to flow (Loree, Northan, Kissick). Reflexivity is similar to the state we inhabit when we are playing. Artists use ritual, routine or habit to develop pathways to this state of play, but few understand that they can in fact improve their *artistic reflexivity* with training and practice. Saying yes, as one does spontaneously in play, opens up new pathways of thinking and leads to unconscious decision-making, where “critical evaluation is temporarily suspended in order to develop a generative frame of mind in which flexibility and variety can be used with confidence” (DeBono, 121).

The term *artistic reflexivity* also acknowledges artistic muscle memory, which develops over time with practice. Responding without “consciously evaluating”, using skills developed and honed with practice, is what Shelley Carson (237) calls “trained impulsivity”. Repetition and practice are tools to transition a conscious deliberate behavior or action into the unconscious. Developing muscle memory enables *artistic reflexivity*, and to use it requires immense trust and confidence in oneself.

Athletes have a profound understanding of how to use muscle memory with reflexivity. The gymnast on the balance beam will tell you the fastest way to fall off is to focus on the mechanics of walking on the beam. She must trust that her body knows what to do, that she has practiced enough to perform her routine without needing to be conscious of technique.

Just as an athlete works on the mechanics of his or her sport that don't come naturally in order to improve or excel, you need to broaden the mechanics of your comfort zone to improve your creative thinking skills. This means that you may have to venture into mental territory that feels strange or unfamiliar to your creative brain (Carson, 38).

The same is true of the artist: "paradoxically, the self expands through acts of self-forgetfulness" (Csikszentmihalyi, 113). When an artist is responding reflexively, she is not consciously thinking about colour-mixing or composition, she is immersed in creating, trusting that her technique will instinctively support her improvised decisions. Reflexivity engages muscle memory because learning to step outside your comfort zone into unknown territory requires one's full focus and being able to rely on practiced behavior enables freedom in spontaneous decision-making. Learning to trust muscle memory is really about learning to trust one's self. "If you find that you have trouble letting go of planned and consciously controlled behavior, then one of your missions has to be to loosen up and learn to trust the expertise within you" (Carson, 245).

Artists use reflexivity to act on their ideas and respond to their inspiration, but *artistic reflexivity* is not about training the intuition, it is about training the reflexive response to intuition. "When you are streaming," Carson says (244), "you lose yourself in the activity and your moment-to-moment responses seem automatic and appropriate... the mental vehicle you use to make this happen... is improvisation".

The value placed on training actors to respond to the reflexive impulse is paramount. It takes time and practice to learn to say yes, to embrace the possibility of the unknown, and to relinquish control over an outcome. Fear prevents students from saying yes. Fear of being wrong, fear of being judged, fear of the unknown. As the improv artist Rebecca Northan stated in our interview, "if you are always in a place of fear then how can you see what's going on around you". Students don't need to overcome fear; they need to embrace it, and embracing fear is much easier to do when one is not alone.

## 1.4 - PLAY: IT'S A SERIOUS BUSINESS

**Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.**  
– Albert Einstein, *The Saturday Evening Post*, 1929.

Many creativity researchers have identified play as the conduit through which human creativity develops. (Ashton (2015), Brown & Vaughn (2009), Carson, (2010) Csikszentmihalyi (1997), DeBono (1970), Greene (1995), John-Steiner (2000), Panksepp (2004), Pink (2005). *Play* by Dr. Stuart Brown (60) identifies play as “an absorbing, apparently purposeless activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of self-consciousness and sense of time”, but for the artist, it can be a tool to help bring imagination into reality.

Play is improvisational; it is a series of instinctual reactions to something or someone. Play is a physiological process in which all animals participate; it “involves multiple centers of perception and cognition across the whole brain” (40). The nature of play teaches behavioral rules and has a profound linkage to our evolution and brain development. “Play seems to be one of the most advanced methods nature has invented to allow a complex brain to create itself” (40).

Play is an excellent tool for teaching student artists because playful activities stimulate imaginative connections and “activate functionally diverse brain regions to synergistically integrate their function” (136). Acting pedagogy makes great use of play because play automatically shifts focus away from the self and onto others, which helps students practice responding instinctively to their impulses. Jacques Lecoq (30), the French movement based acting teacher, believed that “true play can only be founded on one’s reaction to another” and that “the interior world” of the artist “is revealed through a process of reaction to the provocations of the world outside”.

Repeated practice at responding reactively is a tool for teaching artists to be reflexive. To engage fully in the present moment an artist must suspend the internal judgment and self-criticizing faculties that undermine reflexive play. Creating a classroom environment of trust



and support is imperative when asking artists to take risks and to work outside their comfort zones. It is much easier for a student artist to explore risk when they are surrounded by others doing so. As Sarah Lewis (155) identified in her book, *The Rise*, “direct teaching is important but learning that comes from play and spontaneous discovery is critical.”

Play runs very different risks than work, and Shelly Carson agrees that play suspends reality and enacts a kind of ‘what if?’ hypothetical thinking that is “not limited by the constraints of current reality” (110). We take risks when we play, that we might otherwise be too frightened or embarrassed to take outside the safety of play. “The paradoxes of creativity are embodied in play”, we extend ourselves beyond our comfort zones and propel ourselves into imaginary circumstances that have limitless possibilities because “play promotes mixing fantasy and reality” (Brown, 136).

Taking risks is a trainable behavior; artists can learn to accept the accidental and the unexpected as process drivers and through playful repetition open up new ways of thinking. When students engage in play they readily say yes because there is less anticipation or emphasis on the outcome. Accidents or mistakes become part of the improvisational process and teach students to allow their instinctual reflexes to lead their reactions. As the post modern writer Katherine Hayles (210) identifies in her interview with Arjen Mulder, *How does it Feel to be Posthuman?* “when a plan is in place, and an event happens which has not been anticipated, we call that event an “accident” because it does not coincide with our expectations...accidents have the capacity to reveal things undreamed-of and paths unknown.”

Inviting the students in my workshops<sup>7</sup> to play creatively without pertaining to any specific assignment made some of them feel like the exercises were “childish” or that they couldn’t “take them seriously”. They may not have understood what skills they were developing or technique they were advancing. Perhaps this reflects how cultural stereotypes have evolved a preconceived notion that in order to be a serious artist making serious art, the art making process must

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<sup>7</sup> The workshops and data garnered from them are discussed in more detail in Chapter 3: The Exercises

also be serious...i.e. not fun. The exercises work on deeper levels of metacognition that may not be readily apparent to them at the time of participating.

Our cultural ideas about who is creative and how these creatives are supposed to behave point directly to creativity as “a social identity, not a professional one” (Ryan, 27). These social constructs have contributed to a devolved pedagogy in art school that reinforces the seriousness of visual art making. Certainly, art school should reflect a level of seriousness about the art form, but must that professionalism exclude a sense of play? A sense of fun is important to developing a sustained love for making art. A number of visual art professors at OCAD University expressed to me their ambiguous relationship with the words play and creativity. Those words, they told me, equate the making of art with hobby or craft and are deemed by some as not professional enough for the academic environment.

A large number of students in my workshops reported that the exercises were “stress relievers” and that they had “fun”. Matthijs Baas (139) at the University of Amsterdam, concluded that laughter and positive feeling improved divergent thinking skills and that play “increase[s] activation in the very parts of the brain associated with creative thinking” (Carson, 138). Developing a playful attitude to one’s work boosts self-esteem and motivates an artist to “overcome obstacles and achieve goals” (139). Fun is not antithetical to professional, “the opposite of play is not work, its depression” (Brown, 126). As Sarah Lewis (153) identified in *The Rise*, “playfulness lets us withstand enormous uncertainty” because “negative emotions such as fear and anxiety can block learning” (Kolb, 208).

The great educator and philosopher Paulo Freire (37) insisted that curiosity leads to innovation: “there could be no creativity without the curiosity”. Developing an insatiable curiosity may be one of the most important components to accessing the imagination. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (185) has spent his career analyzing the creative process and emphasizes in his many books<sup>8</sup> the importance of developing curiosity. “Curiosity and drive are in many ways the yin and

the yang that need to be combined in order to achieve something new.... both are required for creativity to become actualized.” Curiosity leads an artist to seek out and learn new things, to combine disparate ideas, and to imagine fascinating problems to solve.

Student artists need to foster and develop regular connection with their imagination in order to develop original ideas. Breaking down cultural myths and acknowledging that playful exploration is not shameful and/or unprofessional will enable student artists unfettered access to the richest source they have as creators: their imagination. Play can be a tool for art educators to strengthen a students’ reflexive ability, and to build classroom environments that acknowledge the joy in creation.

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<sup>8</sup> Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention. Harper Collins, New York, 1997. The Creative Vision: A Longitudinal Study of Problem Finding in Art, John Wiley & Sons Inc. 1976

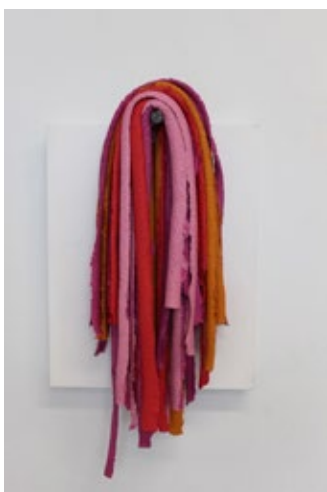
## Experiment Three

### Pool Noodle Paint Sculptures

When my daughter's crib was replaced with a big-girl bed, we wrapped a pool noodle over the edge of the wooden frame in case she fell out and hit her head.



*Image 5, Pool noodle molds paint process, 2015*



*Image 6, Paint Noodle, mis-tint house paint, 2015*

After she got used to the bed, my husband removed the pink noodle. As he cut the noodle into pieces I said, "I wonder what would happen if I poured paint in that?" (image 5) I took them to the studio and began layering paint inside the channel. It took a bit of trial and error to keep the paint from spilling out, and many layers to fill the mold, but eventually they formed fat ropes of paint.

After many weeks of pouring and drying and pouring again, I pulled the paint out of the noodle mold. They were bendy paint dreadlocks that held infinite possibilities. In the iteration shown here

(image 6) I dropped them over a rusted old screw that I found. This painting removes the visible hand of the brushstroke, the image and the frame and challenges the notion of what we call a painting.

In Paint Knot, (image 7) I twisted white paint noodles into a ball. The paint lines tangled, knotted and entwined like a forgotten fishing line.



*Image 7, Paint Knot, mis-tint house paint, 2015*

# Skills

## 2.1 - HOW ACTING PEDAGOGY TRAINS ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY

**We begin in silence, for the spoken word often forgets the roots from which it grew.**

**– Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, 29.**

Actors use many different methods to create a role. Some acting techniques focus on the internal motivation and/or emotional life. My own training and consequently my teaching philosophy, centers on training an actor's reflexivity, their reaction to what is happening.

My teaching philosophy has grown out of two actor-training methods. The first is that of Sanford Meisner who developed a branch of 'method acting'<sup>9</sup>, focused on actors creating truthful behaviors in imaginary circumstances through repetition. Meisner (16) developed a series of improvisational exercises that enable the actor to focus on their reaction to impulse, rather than on the text. He believed that "the foundation of acting is in the reality of doing".

The second major influence on my teaching philosophy is a training technique called the *Zone of Silence* (ZOS). Developed by Canadian acting teacher Perry Schneiderman, based on his work with French movement-based acting master, Jacques Lecoq (2000). ZOS is a series of silent improvisational exercises, placing the actor in simple imaginary situations and requiring them to respond truthfully to their environment. One of the first ZOS exercises is *The Doctor's Office*. The actors imagine themselves in a doctor's waiting room – an situation that they will have found themselves in many times – and then simply wait.

While the exercise appears relatively simple, as Lecoq (31) says, "waiting is never abstract" and it is immensely difficult for student actors to resist the urge to manufacture action or behavior to make

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<sup>9</sup> Method Acting is an acting technique developed in the United States, which focuses on the psychological complexities of human beings. This technique has been controversial, as branches of it have emphasized a kind of submersion into a role that creates an almost altered state of being and "a subjective, autobiographical approach to performance" (Brunstien qtd. in Krasner 2000).

themselves more interesting. Eventually students come to realize that watching someone live truthfully within imaginary circumstances is the only interesting thing to watch and is the heart of the craft of acting<sup>10</sup> (Meisner, 87). The absence of text sharpens the focus on the actor's instinctual impulse and the evolution of the scene depends on the actor's courage and ability to respond to those impulses, "rediscovering those moments when the words do not yet exist" (Lecoq, 18).

Over the course of the first semester the ZOS exercises continue, changing location and complexity of circumstances and increasing intensity of experience until eventually the situation requires words. As Lecoq (18) explains, the essence of such exercises is that "words are born from silence" and speech erupts out of a need. There may be an "absence of words, but never an absence of meaning" (Meisner, 29).

The ZOS and the Meisner technique use spontaneous improvisational exercises to train actors to remain in a perpetual reactive state by using their reflexive instincts as the main driver for action. As Meisner (50) explains, an actor's entire focus is on their scene partner, and on changes to the environment within the given imaginary circumstances, because "you learn to use your instincts based on what someone else does to you". Nisha Sajjani (79) explains in her essay *Improvisation and Art-Based Research* why improv is such a useful tool for training artists. "Improvisation, with its emphasis on risk, responsiveness and relationship, is at the heart of the artistic process and of art-based research". In order for student actors to learn how to respond reflexively to their ideas - that is to say, instinctively, without thinking before doing - they must practice with others.

First year acting pedagogy centers on playful, collaborative games and exercises that teach reflexive response and incremental risk-taking. The exercises ignite the play impulse, strengthening one's confidence to follow impulsive risks, flexing artistic muscle memory, and getting out of the head and into the body.

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<sup>10</sup> Meisner's exercises centered on truthful interactions between actors, removing the "head work"(36), the "intellectuality" and focusing on the instinctive impulse. "Don't do anything unless something happens to make you do it" (34). He believed that repetition eventually led to a truthful emotional impulse (36) and that all good acting came from the heart, not the head (37).

Placing emphasis on the “other” provides additional lessons: how to collaborate, how to sustain focus, how to fail forward<sup>11</sup> (Kettering 82), how to trust and listen (to ones self and others), and how to hear critical feedback without taking it personally. These skills are practiced and developed over time. While some actors have a natural aptitude for taking risks, I know from teaching actors for years that every actor can improve their ability to respond reflexively. Why wouldn’t the same be true for other kinds of artists?

As an art educator, I began to examine how risk taking and reflexivity are taught to visual artists. I interviewed and have worked with many visual art educators who incorporate exercises that engage reflexivity and enable risk-taking in their curriculum. But as students navigate their own course curriculum they may not necessarily encounter such educators or their exercises.

While similarities exist in the pedagogies for acting and visual art, an essential difference I have noted is in the amount of collaboration. Acting students constantly work together in a tight conservatory<sup>12</sup> group, which keep the same students together for the entire course of their training. Every student gets the same basic fundamentals regardless their skill level entering the training. Visual art students spend the great majority of their time working alone on their own assignments/projects. While some foundational visual art curriculum - observational drawing/painting for example - teach skills in sustaining focus, hearing and incorporating feedback while developing a work ethic, foundational visual art curriculum does not emphasize risk building, reflexivity, or the value of collaboration.

The conservatory pedagogical structure builds strong, family-like bonds, creating supportive frameworks that enable and encourage reflexivity and risk-taking. Working in collaboration could provide visual art students practice at risk-taking and reflexive skills very difficult to develop in solitude.

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<sup>11</sup> I discuss failing forward in more detail later in this chapter.

<sup>12</sup> The conservatory model of acting pedagogy is the norm for professional training programs in Canada.

## 2.2 - HOW COLLABORATION BUILDS ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY

Fears about yourself prevent you from doing your best work, while fears about your reception by others prevents you from doing your own work.

– David Bayles & Ted Orland, *Art & Fear*, 23.

When I first had the idea to adapt acting exercises to teach visual art students, I had not realized how much of visual art pedagogy is geared toward independent work. The biggest difference between the training methodologies results because visual artists are creators, while actors are interpreters. Interpreters perform the work of creators. Musicians, dancers or actors work within a framework given to them by a creator - composer choreographer, playwright.

While visual artists don't work in total isolation, many spend most of their lives working alone and pedagogy has evolved to train them to be independent creators, self-generators and entrepreneurs. For the actor, working collaboratively is always part of the job and in fact integral to creation. While much of an actor's work is done alone, in preparation for work with others, curriculum focuses on *how* the actor is to work alone. Visual artists could benefit from this same focus during the early years of their training. As Raqs Media Collective (76) notes in their essay, *How to be an Artist by Night*, "the work of art is not just about making art but also about making the conditions and initiating the networks of solidarity and sociality that enable the making of art."

Collaborative environments create connections that foster community and build support networks of trust and empathy. These networks provide "emotional scaffolding" (8), eloquently described by Vera John-Steiner in her book, *Creative Collaboration*. This "scaffolding" (8) she argues, builds confidence and bolsters independence, making artists feel supported and encouraged. Collaboration also creates healthy competition that pushes risk-taking and stretches comfort zones. Students learn through strong peer connections that a sense of community is essential to developing a robust, sustained artistic practice.



Students who participated in my workshops also strongly support the value of collaboration. Out of 87 respondents, 66 said collaboration was helpful to their practice. (Fig. 2)

## IS COLLABORATION HELPFUL TO YOUR PRACTICE?

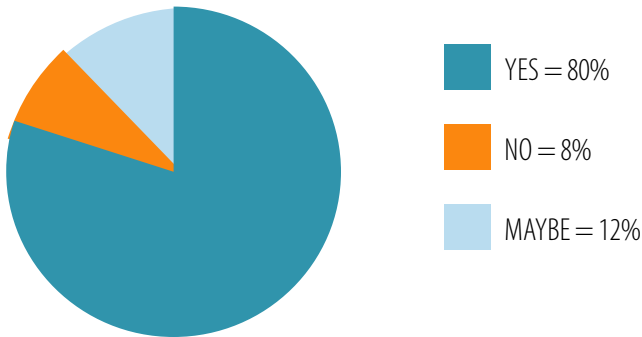


Fig 2

Working collaboratively on drawing exercises that are not to be marked or assessed allows students to establish connections, internal and external, without the pressure of making *art* or completing an assignment. When I asked the students about how they felt about working collaboratively with their classmates, they spoke of inclusion and getting to know their peers. In a notable number of responses, they said the workshop was the first time they had had a meaningful exchange with their classmates. Students indicated they wanted more engagement with each other, and to feel part of a supported community inside and outside the classroom. Here are some of the responses to the question: "Do you think collaboration with other artists is helpful to your practice?"

"Everyone brings something new to art. Everyone has solutions to their own problems. You can learn a lot from other people about how to improve yourself, and in return they can learn from you."

"I hate collabs, but it's very helpful."

“To me collaboration offers a path to understanding the same things differently with the help of someone else.”

Students value collaboration and understand its important to their development as artists: “for many students, creativity is less about ‘abandon’ or pure expression and more about community and connection” (Mark A. Pachucki, 39). I also asked how they felt about working collaboratively. Their answers point to how making artwork together moves beyond just making marks, and builds emotional connection.

“I feel less shy and more open to conversation. By seeing the marks they make, I feel like I know them a little better.”

“Even though I barely know them this practice made me comfortable with them.”

“In spontaneous thinking you have to listen to what they’re drawing.”

Developing “emotional scaffolding” (John-Steiner, 8) in practice with peers may also enable students to hear and use critique more effectively. With an average of three to five classes per semester, visual art students face approximately eighteen to thirty critiques a year. Artists need to become keen observers, able to learn about themselves through watching the critiques of others. As John Kissick points out, “part of learning the critique is also learning the skills to self-critique”. The ability to self assess, mirror, and translate observed experiences can be difficult for the student artist to learn alone. Learning to incorporate feedback is a skill that needs to be modeled and developed. Anne Brockbank and Ian McGill (97) also talk about building support networks in their excellent guide, *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education*, “enabling students to develop their own critical stances in a ‘non-threatening’ environment, that sustain them beyond in the future careers will not just happen by exhortation”.

Collaboration can build the “scaffolding” (John-Steiner, 8) needed to create a healthy support system, enabling students to better hear and utilize the critical feedback they receive from faculty and peers. Further, learning to process critical feedback from others is a transferable skill an artist can use when working alone and responding to their own internal critic. This is part of what it means to have a reflexive practice. When I asked abstract painter and educator John Kissick in our interview about what is the best way to help young artists he explained,

the most vulnerable time for an artist is that first two or three years out of school, when your cohort’s gone and you might be making a painting next to a washing machine in the basement somewhere...how do you move forward when you’re not getting any feedback at all?... Get them to understand collaboration and community as essential parts to their development.

Working collaboratively gives student artists practice at responding reflexively, without thinking, exercising the muscles that enable divergent thinking. Thinking divergently allows artists to make innovative leaps by making unusual connections. Working collaboratively provides numerous opportunities for learning and in building *artistic reflexivity* that students can use to navigate their own path as innovators.

## Experiment Four

### Puzzle Lid Paint

My family and I enjoy doing jigsaw puzzles, often reclaiming them from second hand stores. One such puzzle contained pieces separated into eight plastic ice-cream tub lids. I thought immediately, "Forget the puzzle, what if I pour paint into these lids?" (image 8)



Image 8, Ice-cream lids from the puzzle box, 2015



Image 9, Poured paint from ice-cream lids, 2015

Paint lifted very easily out of the lids, making paint a usable material to sculpt with, and I began making multiple paint circles. (image 9) Their uniform shape led me to create several pieces, folding and bending the circles together to build new forms.

Dollar Hide (image 10), was created by lining the ice-cream lids with dollar store bags – also accumulating in my studio – and allowing text on the bags to transfer into the paint.



Image 10, Dollar Hide, mis-tint house paint, 2015

## 2.3 - IT'S NOT ALL IN YOUR HEAD! - CONNECTING VISUAL ARTISTS TO THEIR BODIES

The training of the body as an instrument of the mind is of the greatest importance for creative man.

- Johannes Itten, 1963, qtd. in *Artist Teacher*, 112.

Another important distinction between visual art training and acting training is in the importance placed on the body. As the body is the actor's instrument, acting pedagogy centers on the body, training it, testing it, manipulating it, and most importantly, listening to it. From my observations and research, visual art training, and indeed visual artists themselves, seem detached from their bodies. Little attention is paid to the body, other than occasional references to safety protocols. There seems to be very little curriculum emphasis or value placed on helping students acknowledge and improve this important connection. In order for an artist to be reflexive, they need to be connected, present, and responsive to their body.

The mind/body divide in the training of visual artists is not at all surprising as there is a long standing tradition in academia of privileging the mind, with all its rational predictability, over the emotional and unpredictable body. As Brockbank and McGill (45) argue, "the dualist roots of the academy has led to devaluing the body, emotions and feelings, privileging only the mind and the intellect". There could be profound benefit to visual artists in addressing the artist's body as part of their training as new "neuroscience research is showing that the fundamentals of perception, cognition, and movement are very closely connected, and that the circuits for higher functions such as planning and recognizing the consequences of future actions require movement" (Brown, 214).

Artists embody and employ their reflexivity in different ways, but the body is always the vehicle through which their reflexivity is enacted. In her MFA thesis, *The Intimacy of Presence*, Sandy Groebner (24) eloquently stated that,

if we proceed with the premise that we are embodied beings whose cognition relies on an intricately woven network of neural and biological circuits, then it stands to reason that our bodies possess intrinsic intelligence, awareness and ability to perceive in ways not always consciously recognized.

Connecting students to their bodies builds mind-body connections, develops muscle memory, and is a crucial step towards practicing *artistic reflexivity*.

For actors, deliberate focus on the body enables them to begin to use and listen to their body as a tool in their practice. This involves learning to listen not just with their ears. Students can learn to listen to their bodies and the world around them. Listening is also important if artists are to learn to hear and process criticism usefully. If artists are too emotional to hear and receive feedback objectively they will be unable to process notes and apply them to their work. As Carson says in the *Creative Brain* (209), “emotions demand your attention; you will be focused on the emotional material to the exclusion of other thoughts. If the emotion is intense enough, you may feel completely controlled by it.” Learning to re-direct emotion and objectively hear the opinions of others is a skill that develops with time and which needs to be practiced in an environment without pressure or anxiety.

The participants in my workshops were asked if they believed it is important for visual artists to be connected to their bodies. Their answer was an unequivocal yes.<sup>13</sup> (77%) (Fig 3)

## IS IT IMPORTANT FOR ARTISTS TO BE CONNECTED TO THEIR BODIES?

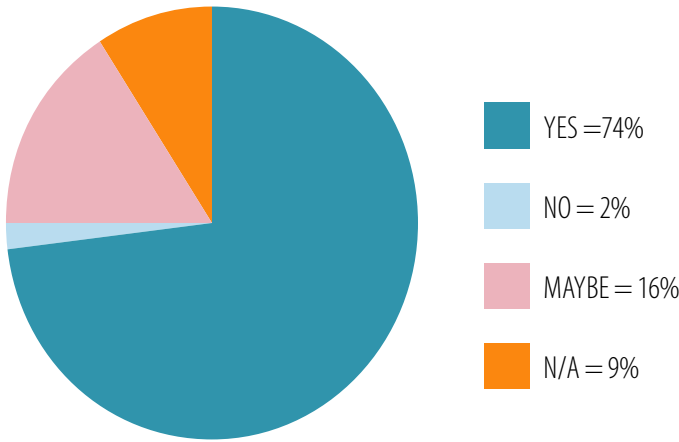


Fig 3

These are some more specific responses.

“Very important. The body, the mind is the most valuable thing to an artist. We use it to receive and process information. We express ourselves using our body.”

“Yes drawing and painting should be as the music performance, the bodies would subconsciously respond to the artist’s ideas.”

“Your body is your connection to the world and is also an extension of your tools.”

The body is the source of *artistic reflexivity* and muscle memory. It is integral for artists not only to connect with their body in their practice, but also to acknowledge their body as the source of impulse and reflexive action.

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<sup>13</sup> 95 out of 127 responded yes, (77%), 20 responded maybe, (16%) while only 3 (2%) said no. 11 respondent's provided no answer.

## 2.4 - LEARNING TO FAIL-FORWARD

All the best ideas come out of the process; they come out of the work itself...if you just get to work, something will occur to you and something else...you reject will push you in another direction.

- Chuck Close, qtd. in *The Art Rules*, 120.

The thing that prevents an art student from working is the same thing that prevents a professional artist from working; “the fear that your fate is in your own hands, but your hands are weak” (Bayles & Orland, 3). Lack of confidence in artistic ability translates directly into lack of confidence in identity and as Edward DeBono (109) points out “the importance attached to being right all the time breeds the inhibiting fear of making mistakes.” Fear of failure can disable the artistic impulse and stop the reflexive action from happening. As Rebecca Northan said in our interview, “if you are always in a place of fear then how can you see what’s going on around you”. The acclaimed improviser and creator of the hit show, *Blind Date*, went on to say this about fear.

We also have an instinct to avoid what scares us, because we’re hard-wired to think that if something is scary that it is there to alert us to danger, and you might die. So you have to train the opposite, you have to train yourself out of that because it’s unusual to say yes when you’re afraid.

Martin Ryan (71) also discovered that wrapped up in the personal fear of failure is also the “fear of judgment”. Societal pressure and fear of what others will think of you, is what inhibits creative leaps (Ryan, 71). In art school, it seems as if everything is being judged. Evaluative measures at art school are assignment based, focusing on finished work presented at critique, placing little value on the experiments that may have happened along the way. In my experience at OCAD University, as an undergraduate and graduate student, as well as a teaching assistant in studio, failures, work ethic, and experimentation are rarely included in the grading rubric. The journey of the artwork from inception to completion may be mentioned in the discussion at critique, but that journey is rarely unpacked. Multiple classes



with multiple assignments leave little space or time for error in experiment; there simply is no time to play. Shelly Carson (66) stresses the crucial importance of the “incubation period”, in which “the unrelated environmental information you perceive could act as a clue to a possible creative solution” (66).

Within constrained time frames in which artwork is expected to be finished at critique, how can we expect students to move beyond their first idea? How are students to incorporate and understand the value of experimentation if the finished work is predominantly what is evaluated? “Pressure to be creative, pressure to be interesting, pressure to get it right; the first thing a scared mind does is start to disconnect” (Northan 2015). Despite the reality of time constraints, 44% of the students surveyed in my workshops indicated that ‘trial and error’ was how they learned about risk and failure. Here are some of their responses:

“By being encouraged to experiment.”

“Risk and failure is often what shapes a person’s personality, strengths, ideals, etc. and these are the aspects that are going to give form and meaning to ones art and artistic statement.”

“By trying things they’re not comfortable doing.”

Experience and trial and error both acknowledge failure as a method of learning. 69% of students believe that taking risks and experimenting is how artists propel their practice, but is current pedagogy set up to reinforce this?

What is the goal of twenty-first century art school pedagogy? James Elkins (100) suggests that if we look at the numbers and compare “great artists” to the number of graduates, “it is clear that most art instruction does not produce “great art,” not to mention interesting or successful art” (Elkins, 100). But is it the role of the art school to produce “great artists”? Was it ever? According to William Deresiewicz (2015) in his article for *Atlantic Monthly*, in the new millennium we

## IN WHAT WAYS DO VISUAL ARTISTS LEARN ABOUT RISK AND FAILURE?

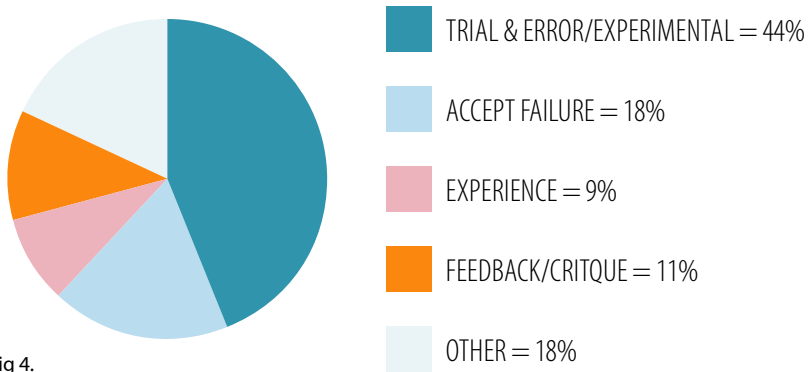


Fig 4.

have replaced the title of artist with that of “creative entrepreneur”. Is art school set up to train creative entrepreneurs? Elkins (70) argues further that 90% of artwork produced in art school is “mediocre”, if this is true, should there be such emphasis on the judgment of finished work? It’s not unusual that University students have a lot of work to do, but to focus on product leads students to misunderstand the amount of effort, thinking, and craft, that sometimes go into an artwork before its potential has been exhausted. As Ute Meta Bauer (222) writes in the essay *Under Pressure*,

it seems, on the one hand, that students are allowed to do whatever they have in mind. Yet what they have in mind is increasingly shaped, if not dictated, by the allure of success in the art market, which is to say that the wild growth of experiment is more and more subject to the biotope of uniformity that the market enforces.

Without time to experiment the number of ideas one can generate is limited because the “people who produce the greatest number of ideas generally produce the greatest number of high-quality ideas as well” Carson (113). Or as John Dewey (47) states “nothing takes root in the mind when there is no balance between doing and receiving.”

Work ethic and experimentation are what create ideas. From my experience in training actors and my own career as an artist, I know that the only way to instill work ethic is by learning to love process. As Sarah Lewis (198) poetically states in *The Rise: Creativity, The Gift of Failure and the Search for Mastery*, “like the number zero, [failure] will always be both the void and the start of infinite possibility.”

In the artistic process, success is typically born of failure and failure is born of risk. At what point does an idea become risky? When the outcome is unknown and thinking about that outcome is nerve-wracking. Incremental practice at taking risks stretches a student’s courage, helping them to see that taking risks is not only beneficial to their practice, but fun. Small risks help students get used to the idea of taking risks at all, and small risks lead to bigger risks. Through playful collaboration, students learn that risk taking and failure are part of the artistic process. Leaping without a safety net gets easier with practice, and when you’re not alone. Failure is the key to the thought that may unlock the solution to the problem.

If teachers expect their students to take bigger and bigger risks, to be true innovators, teachers need to give their students practice at failing without consequence. Some of the excellent faculty at OCAD U have developed curriculum and focus around the experimentation process, using alternative evaluative techniques and methods in their classes. These teaching practices are on the rise at OCAD U, but remain part of optional courses predominantly in upper years, rather than being included in foundational first year courses.

The American inventor, Charles Kettering (82) coined the phrase, “failing forward”<sup>14</sup>, which captures the essential virtue of failure as a discovery path, of failing forward towards something new.

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<sup>14</sup> “We seldom take the trouble to explain that every great improvement in aviation, communication, engineering or public health has come after repeated failures. We should emphasize that virtually nothing comes out right the first time. Failures, repeated failures, are finger posts on the road to achievement. The only time you don’t fail is the last time you try something, and it works. One fails forward toward success” (Kettering, 82).

Learning to embrace the pain of failure is crucial. Students can learn that to fail is not a matter of life or death and can sometimes be exhilarating. Shifting the focus of failure away from the **artist** and putting failure onto the **work**, reframes failure as part of the process and part of the job of the artist, as falling off the balance beam is part of the work of the gymnast. When I asked John Kissick how he deals with failure in his artistic practice he called it “the inability to resolve”, implying that without work at something it is difficult to know if it can be resolved. Failure can lead to the unexpected, and embracing the risk of failure can be an exciting part of the process of making.

In their quantitative study, *The Creative Vision*, Csikszentmihalyi and Getzels studied in depth the development of the artistic process. They concluded that “the most important quality, the one that is most consistently present in all creative individuals, is the ability to enjoy the process of creation for its own sake” (75). If students are to learn to love process while in art school, process must have more value at assessment. Creating value for process over final product is key to developing artistic identity and to evolving ideas past their inception. By placing pedagogical emphasis on experiment and risk-taking students can develop an artistic hunger for process.

## Experiment Five

### Paint Nests

Malleable paint noodles led to the idea of wrap paint around objects to create free standing paint sculptures. The drawings created by students in my exercises are a mess of lines, interwoven and connected. I wondered if I could make an artwork that would echo these collaborative drawings. I made paint ribbons that I wound around balloons. (image 11) When I popped the balloons the paint created nests that I could bend or mold into any shape or form.



*Image 11, Paint Nest process over semi-deflated balloon*

In a few weeks they began to harden, creating structures that could be hung on a wall. (image 12, 13) These *Paint Nests* blur the lines between painting and sculpture asking questions about the behaviours and definitions of material. They echo in a three dimensional form the collaborative drawings created by my students.



*Image 12 Paint Nest, mis-tint house paint, 2016*



*Image 13, Paint Nest white, acrylic paint, 2016*

# The Circle of Engagement

## 3.1 - MY INTERDISCIPLINARY LIFE AS AN A/R/TOGRAPHER

**A/r/tographical questions may permeate a life and engage emotional, intuitive, personal, spiritual, and embodied ways of knowing—all aspects of one's private, public, and/or professional self.**

**– Stephanie Springgay & Rita Irwin, 2004.**

I am a reluctant scholar. Perhaps the challenges I faced in my early education or the fact that I've been an artist my whole life make me feel like a misfit in the scholarly world. My evolution into the role of an art educator came from within my 25 years of art practice and through my lived experience. When I began my journey at OCAD U in 2012, I could not have predicted that my defining path would be the way we teach artists. As an undergraduate, I had never heard the words research or methodology applied to the process of creation; it had never occurred to me that my artistic or teaching practice could be a form of research. Perhaps this is because, as James Daichedt (41) says in, *Artist Scholar*, "success as an artist is held within the values of the profession and not within the ideals of the University" which "causes confusion as artistic peers use their own criteria to evaluate arts scholarship".

So foreign to me were the concepts of methodology and research that I felt forced toward a scholastic buffalo jump, from which I would leap, free falling towards certain academic doom. I needed to embrace what Ross Prior (166) acknowledges in his essay, *Knowing What is Known* that "art-based research offers artistic solutions to methods of researching itself, without the need to layer non-related methods borrowed from other disciplines". Fortunately, as an artist, it is in a state of free fall that I feel most at home. I embrace the immediate, the accidental and the unknown as part of my process. I have learned through my interdisciplinary art practice and through teaching, to trust the embodied experience that allows me to act reflexively. While I remain in part profoundly confused by the academic application of the terms research and methodology, I accept what Katrina Jungnickel

and Larissa Hjorth (136) call the methodology of “Mess”; where “interdisciplinary entanglements operate within and on the edges of disciplinary boundaries”. I embrace this scholastic free fall as a challenge to examine artistic methodology from the inside.

I researched many art-based methodologies in pursuit of one that could define me and that had tangible qualities compatible with my artistic practice. A contender was action research, which can be traced to the work of Kurt Lewin in the 1940’s and later to the educational pedagogy developed by Paulo Freire (1998). A branch of action research, “PAR [Participatory Action Research] is considered an alternative approach to traditional social or scientific research, as it moves social inquiry from a linear cause and effect perspective, to a participatory framework that considers the contexts of people’s lives” (Macdonald, 36). PAR itself was extremely attractive to me, because of the way it incorporates and validates data collectively obtained by researchers in cooperation with participants, this resembled what I knew I would be doing with the exercises in classroom research. While action research has components that were harmonious with my research, it was not a perfect fit. Action research is focused too specifically on social and political goals, and while this aligns with my personal world view its focus is too divergent from my reflexive artistic practice.

It seemed I was destined to cherry pick from various methodologies those pieces applicable to me and my work, that I would have to sew the pieces together to create my own unique methodological flag. Then I found a/r/tography.

Developed by Rita Irwin (2008), a/r/tography is a methodology that acknowledges the entwining of research, art practice, and teaching. Irwin argues that the artist/researcher is a multi-dimensional worker, inhabiting a space in which practice, research, and teaching bend and twist into one another to create new meanings and expand practice. At a/r/tography’s heart is the ideal of working in a constant state of “becoming” rather than “arriving” in a state of resolve”.

While many arts-based methodologies focus on the end result, a/r/tography is concerned with inquiry" (Springgay, 37); the a/r/tographer is constantly learning, evolving, analyzing, and interpreting in what Irwin (1) calls "walking pedagogy". Knowledge and research are produced through improvisational moments that allow for reflexivity and experiential learning, and "a/r/tographers understand that who they are is embedded in what they know and do. Theory and practice are no longer divided but rather folded together through lived experiences and lived inquiry" (26).

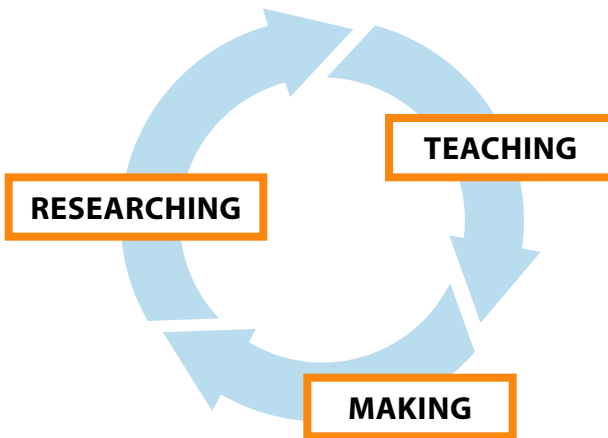
In a/r/tography the textual and visual interrelate to produce artwork. "A/r/tography interfaces art and scholarly writing not as descriptions of each other, but as an exposure of meaning, pointing towards possibilities that are yet unnamed" (Springgay, 37). Writing becomes an extension of art making. A/r/tography does not "identify specific research problems" or set defined "methodological protocols that lead to specific research findings" (Irwin, 26). Outcomes are not necessarily fixed and may remain in flux as new research is incorporated into the experience.

The roots of a/r/tography are found in the theoretical groundwork laid by John Dewey (1934), Donald Schön (1983) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1945). Philosophically a/r/tography is also linked to Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of "becoming" (232) and their metaphor of the "rhizome" (3) in their seminal work *Anti Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1983). The rhizome is an underground plant stem that can grow new life from any point on its surface. A/r/tographers use the metaphor of the rhizome to "stress the importance of the 'middle' by disrupting the linearity of beginnings and endings" (Irwin et al, 71), because in the rhizome, "there are no points or positions... there are only lines" (Deleuze & Guattari, 8). A/r/tography embraces this metaphor by connecting the "knowing, doing and making" (Springgay, 903) as embodied and intertwined. The a/r/tographer, like the rhizome, is in a continual state of growth, "the art making process is conceptualized not as a predictable or identifiable aspect of change (i.e., becoming something else), but instead as a quality associated with the effects of art as a process-event" (Richardson & Walker, 1).



For a/r/tographers this 'process-event' (1) intertwines their experience with research and teaching in a performative circle of experiential engagement and forms a collaborative feedback loop. This circle of engagement includes the artist/researcher/teacher, student, and/or viewer in the action/reaction of the present moment, creating a reflective reciprocal relationship that is mutually beneficial. This research creation methodology centers on the principals of working, creating, researching, experiencing, and teaching from within one's own practice and is performative because it is embodied in the present moment, in reaction to the experiential environment. For the a/r/tographer it is a relationship that Donald Schön (68) referred to as, "reflection in action". "When someone reflects in action, [s]he becomes a researcher in the practice context. [S]he is not dependent on the categories of established theory and technique, but constructs a new theory of the unique case".

## PERFORMATIVE CIRCLE OF EXPERIENTIAL ENGAGEMENT



*Fig. 5. Performative Circle of Experiential Engagement*

In my circle of engagement, the collaborative nature of teaching makes it a reflexive experience and all of my roles - teaching, researching, and art making can be sources of inspiration.

Comparing John Dewey's theories to a/r/tography, Richard Siegesmund (103) suggests that "where art and science diverge is an opening where a/r/tography emerges. Science focuses on the manipulation of symbols; a/r/tography spins an aesthetic sensory world that communicates, outside of semiotic discourse, to the imagination". Deleuze and Guattari, Dewey, Schön and Merleau-Ponty are only a few of the thinkers who situate a/r/tography within the academic world, making it a methodology that has been adopted within and through artistic practice, not one to which artistic practice has been grafted.

Before I discovering a/r/tography, I had created an artwork entitled *Embody* (2015), which visually represents the interconnectedness of my artistic practice, teaching practice, and personal life. In *Embody*, three wooden dice have simple descriptive titles etched on each of their faces. Each die represents one of the roles I play in life: Artist, Educator, and Woman, and has six titles with different iterations of those roles.



Image. 14. *Embody*, wood, acrylic paint, 2015

**The Artist: painter, sculptor, actor, singer, director, writer.**

**The Educator: teacher, curator, student, scholar, researcher, writer.**

**The Woman: mother, friend, wife, daughter, activist, sister.**

The dice are instruments of chance, each roll redefining me, eloquently and succinctly describing the roles I might embody at any given moment. I didn't realize at the time that I was making a manifestation of what it is to be an a/r/tographer.

As a trans-disciplinary process-based artist, all aspects of my life permeate my artistic practice. Experiences that range from exploring materiality in the studio to watching my daughter at gymnastics, from seeing my students work through their ideas, to learning to crochet, all fuse together and fuel my practice. Sometimes they become the catalyst for an artwork. Sometimes they lead to a new exercise in my teaching practice. However they manifest, the process is reflexive, more about listening and responding than thinking and pronouncing. My artistic process, my teaching practice, and my life experience merge. They comprise my lived experience as an a/r/tographer.

A/r/tography resolved the particular challenges I was facing, and while it has been a light in the storm for me, it is not of course the methodology for all art practice-based researchers. It suits the kind of artist, one who will “engage in ongoing inquiry around particular issues or curiosities through their art forms and pedagogies and, as a result, use their ongoing inquiries to pursue change in their practices” (Irwin, 27).

## Experiment Six

### Paint Skins



*Image 15, Paint Pod, paint skin, formed plastic, 2014.*

I had been collecting paint skins for a while. These are dried remnants of paint peeled off palettes and plastic sheets like scabs off healing wounds. In the first semester of my masters, at the height of my confusion regarding artists as researchers, I tried to feel like a scientist, constructing two plastic petri domes in the vacuum former – they resembled transparent salad bowls – and filling the space between them with paint skins. (image 15)

I followed my fascination with reusing discarded paint, and shifted my focus to mis-tinted house paint. This is perfectly good paint, its colour carefully selected from a rainbow of paint chips by someone who upon opening the can, viewed it as an aberration, not worthy to cover their walls. A sad life of promise and rejection, sent to a discount warehouse, doomed to be under-paint. Mis-tints are chromatic waste, a symbol of our detachment from materiality and of our avaricious consumption habits. As a material to work with, reclaimed mis-tinted house paint was important to me. I recognized it as a refugee and longed to give it meaning and purpose. I started buying mis-tinted paint and pouring it onto plastic surfaces. (image 16) My studio is full of large plastic bags that once protected canvases from rain and dirt. Initially used as cheap drop sheets, in time they also became part of my process, another reclaimed material. I let the paint ooze over the plastic's crinkled surfaces.



*Image 16, Poured paint process, 2014*



*Image 17, Hide 2, Topology of Tailings series, 2015*

As the paint dried a skin would develop, taking unpredictable shapes and textures. Like a hide, it became the skin of consumerism's tailings. I would peel the skin away from the bag and flip it over. This action dripped wet stringy trails onto other works-in-progress. Creases in the bags permanently etched veins and textures into the paint's surface. Transferred text and bits of studio waste imbedded themselves in the tacky coat. By collaging, sculpting and draping them, I allow these skins to embody materiality and explore the dimensions we ascribe to painting. (image 17)

## 3.2 - THE EXERCISES

The interior world is revealed through a process of reaction to the provocations of the world outside.  
- Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, 30.



Image 18, *Body Puppet exercise*, 2015

To explore my research question of whether or not tools used to train actors could be used to improve and expand the *artistic reflexivity* of visual artists, I needed to engage visual artists with language and media from their own discipline. This meant redesigning improvisational acting exercises as gestural drawing exercises. Some are adaptations of common acting exercises.

Others, less well known, and are adapted from the work of acting/improv teachers Keith Johnstone<sup>15</sup> and Perry Schneiderman.<sup>16</sup>

In the summer of 2015 I approached faculty at OCAD University to host my workshops in *artistic reflexivity*<sup>17</sup>. I created a separate companion guide called *Training Artistic Reflexivity: Collaborative Drawing Exercises for Visual Artists*, and it is attached as an appendix to this thesis. The guide is for any educator who would like to incorporate the exercises into their curriculum. While I can't describe the entire workshop experience here, I'm going to provide a quick snapshot of the exercise that I use to begin each workshop, to give the reader a sense of this training method.

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<sup>15</sup> Keith Johnstone is the creator of Theatre Sports and has been teaching improvisation to actors since the 60's. He has written several books and is the founder of several theatre companies including Loose Moose in Calgary, Alberta. *Impro for Storytellers* is an excellent book full of exercises for improvisers. I learned the *Line at a Time* exercise from Rebecca Northan.

<sup>16</sup> Perry Schneiderman has been teaching acting for 30 years in Canada. He created the ZOS exercises and is currently a professor at Ryerson University Theatre Department. He has been my mentor for the last 5 years.

<sup>17</sup> Two different types of workshops were offered to faculty, either single or multiple workshops. Single workshops ranged from 1.5 to 3 hours. Multiple workshops were either 2 or 3 class sessions ranging in time from 1 to 2.5 hours each session.

Before the workshop begins, I have the students put away their belongings, especially their cell phones. I bring the students together in a circle to do a physical warm up. I've always been perplexed that visual artists don't warm up. Doing a warm up is not just good for the body, it stimulates the brain. It warms up the mind and prepares it to make art. Stretching in the art studio is such a foreign experience that students feel very uncomfortable. I expected the surveys to say the students hated the warm up, but was surprised to find the opposite. They loved the warm up, wanted more, and wanted it to last longer. This flummoxed me as their body language seemed to be telling me something different, but after receiving such strong feedback, I extended the warm up in spite of their discomfort. Throughout the remainder of the workshops, students went out of their way to express their appreciation for the warm up. Physically stretching gets them into the rhythm and routine of the class, and by the third workshop the students seemed more comfortable with me and each other.



*Image 19, Yes...And? exercise, 2015*

Immediately after the warm up in every workshop we do the Yes... And? exercise. (image 19) First in it spoken form which encourages the student to respond to their partner without thinking about what they will say.

- Student A says to student B the first word that comes to their mind: "Strawberry".
- Student B says, "Yes...." - acknowledging they have heard the word and then says "And?..." - the first word that comes into their mind in response to strawberry..."Hedgehog".
- Student A says "Yes...And?" the first word that comes into their mind in response to hedgehog..."Paper".
- Etc.

In this exercise, speed of reaction is important; the student's focus on the present moment does not allow them to think ahead. The objective is to react automatically with the first word that pops into the head. After we have tried this a few times, they get the idea and we do the same exercise again this time replacing the words with marks.

- Student A makes a quick mark on the page.
- Student B sees that mark and responds with their own mark.
- Student A sees the mark of Student B and responds to their mark.
- Etc.

After some practice the student begins to focus less on the mark they are making and focus on the mark their partner is making. The key is that they respond quickly enough; that there is no time to be clever, only to react instinctively to the mark just made by their partner. This quick back and forth, gives the student practice at saying "yes". In the midst of the exercise one student called out, "it's just like jazz!" She is spot on: students who give themselves over to this exercise often make improvised marks unlike any they have made before and are surprised by how playful it makes them. The room tends to become a dynamic, playful, and relaxed space.

As facilitator I encourage them to go faster and to think less, to resist the urge to chit chat, and to focus on responding. Their marks become quicker, the gesture shorter and the student begins to just react without thinking about where their mark is coming from. This simple exercise is gentle practice at responding to an external impulse in order to create.

I have them work together in pairs for a few minutes and then we switch partners. I have observed that working with a variety of partners seems to create an atmosphere of support and encouragement in the room. Switching partners allows students to interact in new ways getting them more comfortable with each other and with taking risks. Once they begin to relax into the exercises their focus improves and I know we are ready to move on to progressively more complicated exercises that require greater concentration and communication.



In the survey, many students talked of these new social connections. In some cases, my workshop was their first significant interaction with their classmates. Moments of connection in the workshop include looking into eyes of someone else, getting to know someone through their mark making, and sharing laughter. Soon the ice is broken, and they seem less intimidated and nervous. But the exercises are not just party games of introduction, they encourage visual artists to say yes.

In building these exercises, I made adjustments based on the feedback I received from students and faculty. I created two surveys (intake and exit) and invited students to fill them out anonymously.<sup>18</sup> Having had little experience at survey creation, some of the questions cast a wider net than I had intended. While the answers may not be entirely quantifiable or represent the truth for all students at OCAD U, they are none the less important and illuminating. The student voice is important in the presentation of this research, which is why I have included some of their longer responses.

## EXIT SURVEY RESULTS

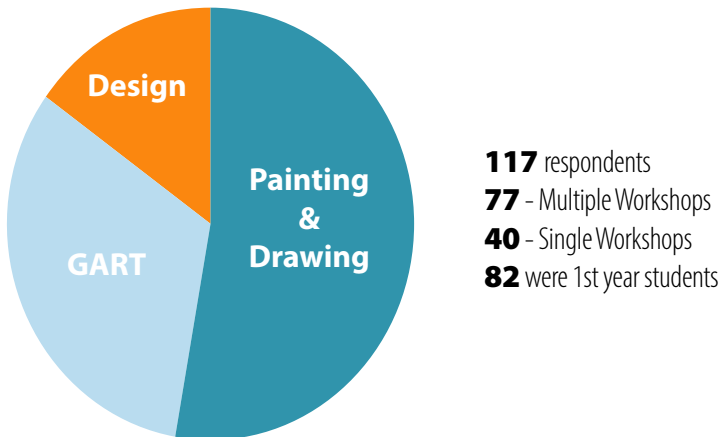


Fig 6.

<sup>18</sup> As is true of all my work with students at OCAD University, these surveys were approved by the Research Ethics Board and supervised by participating faculty members in their classes and by my principal advisor, Nicole Collins.

## THE STUDENTS

117 students completed the exit survey. (fig 6) 77 were part of multiple workshops, 40 experienced single workshops only. 82 were in first year and came from a variety of programs. 53% were Painting and Drawing, 32% were GART (General Art students) and the remaining 15% were from the Design program. The majority were under 21 years of age.

It was important to know if in their experience they had encountered similar exercises. In my research of OCAD U first year pedagogy I came across nothing like these exercises. Those who had encountered similar exercises had done so predominantly in drama classes or in playing games with friends. (fig 7) A few had previously participated in my workshops. Only a very small number said that they had experienced similar drawing exercises in a visual art setting. I asked the students what they thought the exercises teach. I recognize that this question prompts very subjective answers, but I was curious what they thought they were learning in my workshop. As this is a reflexive experiment, in which I too am learning, I was enlightened by the clarity of some of their answers.

### HAVE YOU EVER ENCOUNTERED THESE EXERCISES BEFORE?

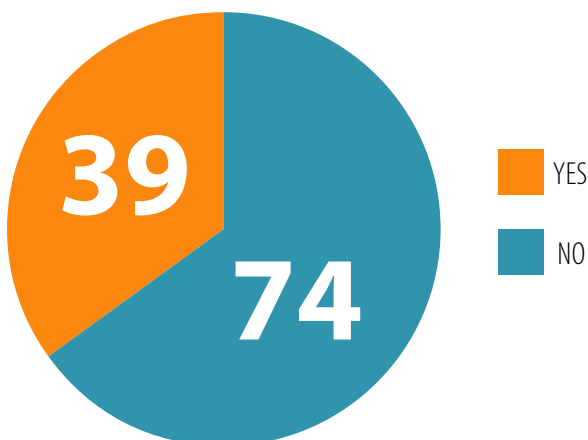


Fig 7.

“How to enjoy being an artist”.

“These exercises teach you that you really need to listen to someone and let them explain their thoughts, because we’ll often misinterpret what others are saying.”

“They teach communication. I learnt to listen and consider others. And it is important because it relates back to critiques.”

Their answers point to why collaboration is such a valuable teaching tool. The collaborative work I am exploring is about sharing ideas and learning to trust other people, which is important for artistic growth. Collaboration provides practice at skills difficult to learn alone: listening, responding without fear, taking risks, and focus. These fundamental skills learned in collaboration become part of how the individual develops their artistic identity. We work collaboratively not to make better collaborative artists, but better solo artists.

The workshops evolved each time I taught them and I learned something new from every group. Some students were hesitant, some jumped right in. I could not predict how any particular student would react to the exercises. While some of the learning opportunities within the exercises are obvious to the student, many of the lessons are subtler and build in layers with repetition. The exercises gently stretch the student’s sense of self, build their confidence, tone their reflexive muscle memory, and expand the limits of their comfort zone.

In crafting the exercises, I paid particular attention to the fact that visual art students are accustomed to creating autonomously and generating their own ideas. Several student participants said they wanted to know why they were doing the exercises and that they were uncomfortable doing something without prescribed meaning or defined goal. Without knowing the direct benefit to their practice they could not take the exercises seriously. This made me wonder what they thought they were supposed to learn at art school. I asked, What does art school teach you? (fig 8) That “technique” was the predominant answer came as a surprise.

## WHAT DOES ART SCHOOL TEACH YOU?

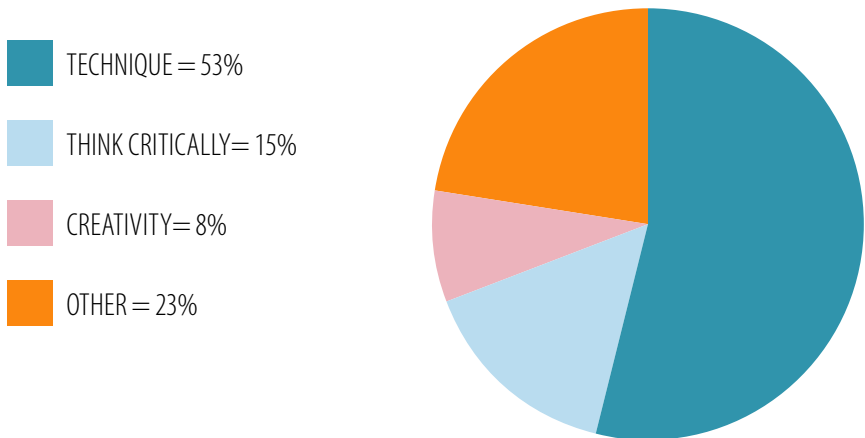


Fig 8.

Some of the longer answers reveal that students expect to be taught more than just technique,

“I think it teaches you more of how to think like an artist.”

“It should teach us to think beyond ourselves.”

Why half of the students put technique first requires further study. Ironically these exercises do teach technique. They address what Alice and David Kolb (207) call a “a growth-producing experience”, in which the student encounter “refers not only to a direct experience related to a subject matter under study but also to the total experiential life space of the learner.” The exercises contribute to building *artistic reflexivity* through practicing instinctive response to external stimuli. They teach a profound technique that gives the artist the ability to respond reflexively to impulse.

Enacting reflexivity while teaching allows me to continue to adapt the exercises in response to my students. I took a tip from Keith Johnstone’s book, *Impro for Storytellers* (60): “Rather than explain games exhaustively - which implies that errors should not be made - it’s better to correct errors as they occur”. I give the students limited instructions allowing them to interpret and create new ways of doing the exercises.

Their process of discovery inspires me. The idea for *The Mirror*<sup>19</sup> exercise for example, came to me while I was watching two students unique interpretation of the instructions for the *Follow the Leader* exercise. By emphasizing that there is no right or wrong way to go about the exercises, I enable their sense of ownership in their learning. This is what Brockbank and McGill (5) call the “social process” of learning and “is crucial because transformational or critical learning requires conditions that enable the learner to reflect upon her learning not only by herself, but with others.”

When I speak of the learner, I include myself. As an a/r/tographer I am continually learning about myself and my practice as an artist/researcher/teacher. In the workshops I try to maintain the role of facilitator, rather than guest professor, relating to the students as a fellow artist/student. While I may be further down my own artistic road and certainly have opinions and lessons to share, I gain their respect and trust faster by showing them my commitment, enthusiasm and love of the art form.

I asked, do you feel that this work has changed or contributed to your practice or the way you think about your practice as an artist? This question requires reflection, asking the students if the exercises altered the way they think about themselves or their practice. Ultimately this is the purpose of the exercises, to help students develop their practice and think more reflexively. Here are some of their responses,

“I think the spontaneity and gut feeling part of it helps me as an artist to let loose and let my thoughts flow rather than editing in my head all the time. The collaboration also lets me be vulnerable among artists, which can be hard because of a strong artist-ego.”

“I think I’ll be a lot more easy going, and accept imperfections and work with them.”

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<sup>19</sup>The Mirror Exercise – Draw the exact mirror image of your partner’s mark.

“I feel my work is more relaxed and confident, I can see that in the brush strokes and mark making.”

While I believe that training of this kind is beneficial for students and artists at any level of experience, I observed that first year students were more engaged in and receptive to the exercises. They tend to have little hesitation about participating. My theory is that by third year most students feel they are beyond developmental types of exercises. Were students to be introduced to this kind of training in the first year of their studies their opinion might differ by third year. This is a comment from a first year drawing and painting student,

“This is very great. It is an important movement that you are developing and this could and should be done in more classes, especially with this younger generation of artists where it is harder I find for us to find our voices and not be afraid.”

Another interesting observation came from the two workshops I conducted with first year Design students. Design students were much more actively engaged in the exercises than students in Drawing and Painting or General Art. They laughed more, and were much better at listening to instructions and to each other. They were more focused, and chatted less during the exercises. They seemed to accept the exercises without hesitation and to jump into them without resistance. I have limited experience with Design students and was truly surprised by this. They behaved more like actors would. Perhaps Design students, who often work on projects in teams, are more accustomed to collaboration. This may also explain why they were better at listening and at following instructions. It is an interesting observation and perhaps warrants further study.

## FINDINGS

I conducted 17 workshops, totaling 22 hours with students at OCAD University. The response to the exercises from both students and faculty has been positive. Students responded with enthusiasm, openness and energy to this study. The majority see value in continuing to explore collaboration as a way to foster community and build relationships, as well as a way to expand their own practice. My findings echo the ideas underscored by Vera John Steiner (5) in her book, *Creative Collaboration*.

An individual learns, creates, and achieves mastery in and through his or her relationships with other individuals. Ideas, tools, and processes that emerge from joint activity are appropriated, or internalized, by the individual and become the basis of the individual's subsequent development.

Students indicate they want more connection to their classmates and more opportunities to do that. They identify that they would like more focus on how to connect to their body. Faculty members who hosted my workshops also gained valuable insight, I believe, into the benefits of collaborative pedagogy. Professor James Olley, in whose classes I conducted four workshops commented,

The observations I made during the workshops were an increase in community as the students worked collaboratively. The level of mark making became more expressive and less hindered by the fear of an outcome. The general atmosphere in the classroom became increasingly positive.

I believe that working on process-driven collaborative exercises would have significant impact on visual artists in their first years of study. Lecoq (30) says that the "interior world is revealed from reaction to the provocations of the world outside"; these exercises provide practice, in the classroom, at exactly that sort of reacting. Not only does this work create and foster relationships among peers, it deepens one's relationship to their own practice. "Desire to make your art is integral to your sense of who you are", (Bayles & Orland, 12) and *artistic reflexivity* opens possibilities for fuller engagement with individual identity and builds a foundation on which to create a developing artistic practice.

### 3.3 - ENTANGLEMENTS - AN EMBODIED REFLEXIVE DIALOGUE WITH MATERIAL

If you're going to teach spontaneity, you'll have to become spontaneous yourself.

- Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 55.

My research, teaching and artistic practice led me on a journey of exploration with materials I had not experienced before. I had always thought of materials as tools to manipulate and to master. I had never allowed my materials to speak directly to me or guide my next action. I have been primarily a figurative painter prior to this project. Being flexible with material is similar to what I ask of the students in my exercises -that they be reflexive to their partner, that they work in collaboration. Was it possible for me to substitute a material for a partner? To collaborate and open a dialogue with material? To play, *Yes...And?* with material?

As a reflexive artist, I constantly battle with what John Dewey (124) calls the "inertia of habit", in which "ideas of possibility are trapped in predictability". It feels comfortable and easy to repeat what I have done before. To make assumptions about how a material will behave or what I will do with it, can make me blind to its possibilities. Embracing the unknown as part of my artistic process allows me to let go of habitual patterns and stay reflexive to the material in the present. The first time I poured plaster into an Asian apple-pear casing and allowed it to transform, I became fascinated by the idea of following my materials where they led me. While I enjoy working in plastics and plaster, I wanted to bring the materials into my work as a painter and began to explore my relationship to paint.

This exchange with material led me down many paths and to many experiments in the studio, some of which I have documented in this paper. Other experiments ended in what John Kissick would call, an "inability to resolve". Each experiment, regardless of its outcome was a stepping stone in my a/r/tographical process.

Writing a thesis paper was a daunting and intimidating experience for this maker. While I have written many things in my life, my uneasiness with the academic world and the peculiar demands of scholarly writing was causing writer's block. I needed an escape from thinking about writing this paper, an activity that would keep my mind occupied, but satisfy my need to be making



something. I decided to crochet my daughter a mermaid tail.

Crocheting requires dedicated focus and doesn't allow me to think about other things. It gave my subconscious time to work and distill. Often after I'd spend some time crocheting, I would suddenly realize I'd resolved an issue I'd been struggling with in my paper. My relationship to crochet became part of how I as an a/r/tographer encompass and enfold ideas from all aspects of my experience into my artistic and writing process. I wanted to incorporate in this body of work the way that crochet helped me knit together ideas, so I began creating paint yarn with which to crochet an installation piece for the exhibition.

While I was writing this paper, I started my day with the ritualistic process of mixing paint and medium into a gel consistency and squirting it out of squeeze



*Image 20, Paint Yarn process, 2016*



*Image 21, Paint Yarn spool, 2016*



*Image 22, Crochet Paint Yarn chain, 2016*

bottles into long lines on plastic. (image 20) The inconsistencies in the paint lines I left to add texture and character to the "paint yarn". Within 36 hours the paint yarn would dry and I would pull it up and spool it into balls. (image 21) Eventually I had enough paint yarn to begin to crocheting. (image 22) I quickly discovered that paint is not yarn. Weaving and knitting the paint yarn, mostly by hand, it morphed into a net of sorts. After hanging like a tapestry on a rod (image 23) it stretched and pulled to the point that I needed to reinforce the links with more crocheted paint and then eventually black electrical wire to provide more structure. The installation of the piece provided further challenges. When I hung it on the wall like a tapestry it seemed too lose its complex and moldable form. I began to play with possible hanging ideas. Eventually leading to the final installation. (image 24) Wound around aircraft cable and suspended from a hook on the ceiling, this version allows for the viewer to walk around the piece, examining it from all sides. The liquid blackness and folds evoke the body or some organic form. Dynamic multiple shadows are created on the wall. This piece remains open and malleable as it could never be installed in the same way twice. (image 24) This crocheted painting embodies the way life, practice and research fuse together in my life as an a/r/tographer.



*Image 23, Paint Net in process, 2016.*



*Image 24, Paint Net, (installed) acrylic paint, medium, 2016*

A diagram charting the chronological process of my experiments would resemble a taxonomic tree, or a map detailing the tributaries of a river. Each experiment grew out of a material action and led me in a new direction. I was able to follow simply by asking *what if?* and replying *Yes!* I was allowing myself to follow my own internal impulses, and to be led by the materials. I trusted the process and immersed myself in it without prejudging the outcome. The materials became my scene partners in a maximalist process rooted in painting that enabled a reflexive topology with material.

From the beginning of my time at OCAD U I have been asked about the performative nature of my work. I had assumed that because I am an actor, people expected me to perform. I would insist that I was not an actor in the art studio, deny there was any performance in my art making. Now I see, of course, that I was wrong, that my reflexive engagement with material is intrinsically performative. In a way, the material and I are collaborators, reflexively responding to each other.

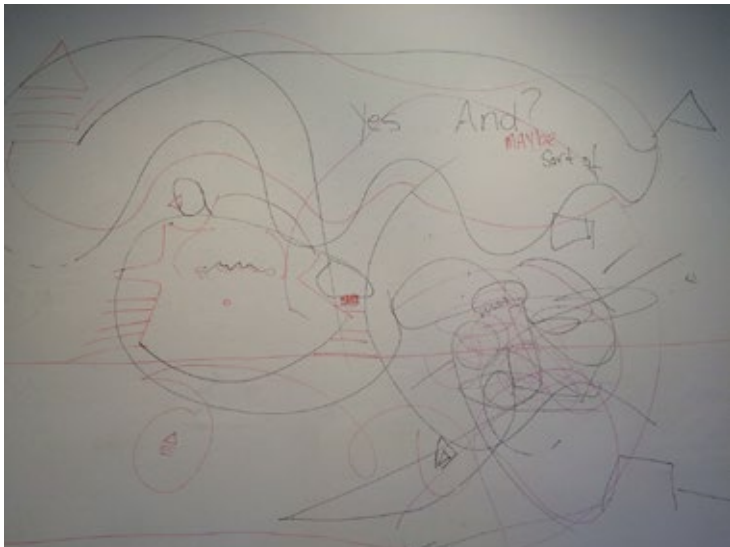
A/r/tography allows me to understand that my research, artwork and teaching create a performative circle of experiential engagement<sup>21</sup> and that this engagement extends to include the viewer. The viewer is also engaged and embodied with the artwork within the physical space of the gallery. Their reactions and experiences complete the performative circle of experiential engagement. I wanted to directly acknowledge this circle so left one wall in the gallery empty to create a performative drawing piece with viewers at the exhibition opening. I extended to audience members an offer to perform the *Yes...And?* exercise with me, creating an improvisational, reflexive, site specific drawing which brought the exercises into the exhibition. The Keith Johnstone (55) quote at the beginning of this chapter talks about modeling spontaneous behavior in order to teach it. In following material and in being responsive to the students in my workshop I am closing the experiential circle of my research and bringing all elements of my a/r/tographical practice together.

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<sup>21</sup>The performative circle of experiential engagement forms a collaborative feedback loop. This circle of engagement includes the artist/researcher/teacher, student, and/or viewer in the action/reaction of the present moment, creating a reflective reciprocal relationship that is mutually beneficial.



*Image 25, Yes...And? Drawing Performance, 2016*



*Image 26, Finished Yes...And? Drawing Exercise at Reflex exhibition, April 9th, 2016.*



*Image 27, Reflex Exhibition, 2016.*





*Image 28, Butter-Scotch Ripple, mis-tint house paint, 2015*



*Image 29, Paint Tongue, Reclaimed Acrylic paing,, 2016*



*Image 30. Paint Carpet, mis-tint house paint,, 2016*



# Conclusion

**Artists often face loneliness, poverty, and doubts about their ability, particularly in the early stages of their careers. Creative work requires a trust in oneself that is virtually impossible to sustain alone.**

**- Vera John-Steiner, Creative Collaboration, 2000.**

In the course of this research, I have shown that improv exercises and repetition are tools to teach *artistic reflexivity* and that collaboration provides a method for artists to take more risks and learn about their artistic identity. Collaboration creates the supportive framework necessary for students to build social and community ties, while learning that risk and failure are necessary parts of the artistic process. Students clearly identified that they want more opportunities to collaborate and that they understand the benefits of collaboration to their practice.

Further, I argue that the body is the source of *artistic reflexivity* and muscle memory. It is integral not only that artists connect with the body in their practice, but also that they acknowledge the body as the source of impulse and reflexive action. Student feedback clearly expressed a desire for more engagement with each other and greater connection to their own bodies.

Two questions on my surveys provided clear answers from the student's perspective as to whether or not these exercises were beneficial to them. I asked, did you feel a difference, and would it be helpful to do more? With even a small amount of repetition, 65%<sup>22</sup> of students said they felt a difference. These are some of their written responses:

**"I feel more relaxed and open to new ideas and activities. I also feel like I would talk or contribute more to the class. The activities led me to the conclusion that each mark is equally important, kind of like everyone's ideas."**

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<sup>22</sup> 64 out of 77 participants in multiple workshops responded to the question; "Did you feel a difference doing the exercises more than once?" 34 said yes, 18 said no.

“Yes I feel like I have come up with more creative idea since then.”

## WOULD IT BE HELPFUL TO DO MORE OF THESE KINDS OF EXERCISES?

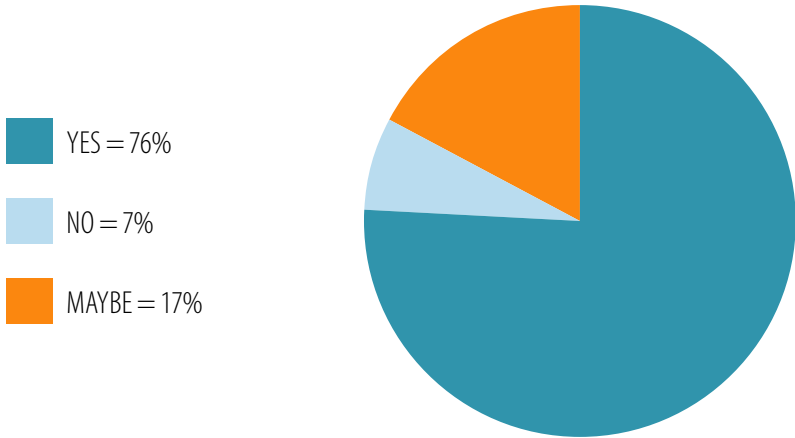


Fig 9.

76% of students said that it would be helpful to do more exercises like these.<sup>23</sup> This resounding yes indicates to me that while students might not be aware of all the benefits of the exercises, their experience was positive enough that they wanted to do them again. Here are some of their longer responses.

“I think it’s a great way to build trust within your classroom. It allows for mistakes which are important and you learn something different from everyone you collaborate with. It allows your mind to open to the unexpected, where I think most magic happens.”

“Its also a fun way to get to know others in class. Usually no one speaks to anyone unless they sit directly next to them.”

“Yes I get anxious looking at a blank surface.”

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<sup>23</sup>107 students responded to this question. 81 yes, 18 maybe and 8 no.

## DID YOU FEEL A DIFFERENCE DOING THE EXERCISES MORE THAN ONCE?

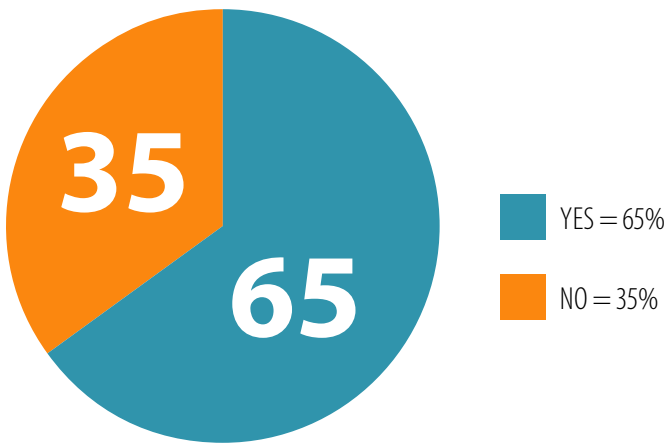


Fig 10.

In retrospect I should have worded the question differently. I chose the word ‘helpful’ because I wanted to indicate that these exercises are not just for fun or stress relief, but contribute to the growth and development of the artist. I see now that ‘helpful’ might be taken to mean that the exercises are ‘helpful’ in reducing stress and in creating relationships with peers.

The neurophysiologist and behavioural scientist Ralph W. Gerard (499) said how “to teach rigor while preserving imagination is an unsolved challenge to education”. Placing an acknowledged focus on incorporating *artistic reflexivity* and body awareness through collaborative practices into foundational curriculum is a way to address that question.

Artists also could do a better job at confronting myths and stereotypes surrounding their artistic process. *Artistic Reflexivity* is a way for artists to describe their process not as “magical gifts bestowed by the Gods” (Bayles & Orland, 3), but as a reflexive process of idea creation that is arrived at through training, practice and hard work.

My artistic practice has evolved and been influenced profoundly by this research. The art work made through this project came from my entanglement with my own reflexivity and my exploration of what it means to be reflexive. In following my material and reacting to influence from diverse sources the work at my exhibition represents a woven mesh of a/r/tographical rendering. The performative drawing piece completes the circle of engagement between my artwork, my students, my viewers and my research, and embodies the finding that collaboration is part of artistic identity.

My research has opened up questions and areas of inquiry that call for further study. This study was conducted exclusively at OCAD University. Further research might examine other Canadian art institutions such as Emily Carr University or the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, to see if their pedagogical models might benefit from more collaborative practices and more attention to developing *artistic reflexivity*.

This research has also opened up questions about millennial learners. Studies have shown that millennial learners are “active learners” (Wilson, 2004) who “benefit from discussion, group projects, and shared problem solving, which attend to their interest in group work and reflective activities” (Conklin, 2012). Further research would need to be done about the specific needs of millennials in the art school environment, but potentially reflexivity and play introduced at foundational levels may help engage students in a learning style that better addresses their generational needs.

Finally, critique culture, a subject which frequently arose within this research, deserves more study. There is some research and writing about critique practices, notably by James Elkins and Sarah Rowles.<sup>24</sup> OCAD U has developed some excellent written resources, both The Writing and Learning Center and the Faculty of Curriculum Development Center at OCAD U have created some comprehensive handouts for faculty on the use of critiques and how to facilitate them. However, there is little written research or tools for art students

<sup>25</sup> James Elkins, *Art Critiques: A Guide* (2011) with an expanded edition in 2012. Sarah Rowles created a critique guide with tips from numerous art teachers called, *Art Crits: 20 Questions* (2013).

to learn how to navigate, develop skills or make the best use of their critiques. There could be real value in opening up discussion about how art students can better learn critique practices and etiquette in the foundational years of their training. As well as discovering and documenting alternative critique practices that foster emphasis on in-process work.

The pathway to becoming an artist is rewarding and perilous. It is different for every artist that walks it. It takes courage to decide to dedicate your life to art making and this is why it is vital that this decision be supported and validated in the first years of an artists formal training. Acknowledging that the artistic reflexive response is trainable helps artists develop the confidence and skills to stay on the path in their journey to becoming lifelong makers.

Having completed this research in parallel with my artistic practice, I feel a deep connection as an artist and art educator to the promotion of more collaboration within visual art pedagogy. Through a/r/tography this research has highlighted for me that learning and artistry are social processes; they require embodied engagement with others to teach self-reflexivity and artistic individuality.



*Image 31. Paint Scab, acrylic paint, 2015.*

# GLOSSARY OF TERMS

**Artistic Reflexivity** – Reflexivity describes the site of connection between the artistic response within the physical body and the idea or impulse from the brain. *Artistic reflexivity* is a reflex, an immediate response to stimulus, internal or external, it is the moment after an idea or impulse meets consciousness. It is that split second, when a decision needs to be made as whether to react to that impulse. That moment that ignites action and spurs a consequent reaction is reflexivity. It is artistic because layered into that split second decision is the artistic self, where personal aesthetic and muscle memory reside and inform how to reflexively respond. Training reflexivity as a tool is not about training the impulse, but about the reflexive response to impulse. Repeated practice at responding reactively is a tool for teaching artists to be reflexive.

**A/r/tography** – A/r/tography, developed by Rita Irwin, is a methodology that acknowledges a reflective circle of experiential engagement and entwines research, art practice, teaching and students in a collaborative feedback loop. The artist researcher is multi-dimensional, inhabiting a space where practice, research and teaching fold into one another and create new meanings and expound thought. Living in a state of becoming rather than arriving in a state of resolve is at the heart of a/r/tography. Constantly learning, evolving, analyzing and interpreting is what Irwin calls “walking pedagogy”, where knowledge is produced through the improvisational moments that allow for reflexivity and experience (Irwin 1).

**Collaboration** – Collaboration used in this context is about creating supportive environments to create and build connections that foster community and support networks through trust and empathy. This environment is not so much about production of work together, but exercising/practicing together to develop skills. Collaboration creates healthy competition that pushes risk-taking and stretches comfort zones. Students learn through strong peer connections that a sense of community is essential to developing a robust, sustained artistic practice. Working collaboratively provides numerous opportunities for learning and building *artistic reflexivity* that students can use to

navigate their own path as innovators. Working collaboratively gives student artists practice at responding intuitively, without thinking, exercising the reflexive muscles that enable divergent thinking.

**Curiosity** – Curiosity may be the most important component of an artists life. Developing curiosity about things propels the question, “what it?” Passion may be the engine that drive the artistic process but it is the moments of genuine curiosity that lead artists to combine disparate ideas that lead to innovation.

**Embodiment** – The body is the vehicle through which creative expression is actualized. The body is the source of *artistic reflexivity* and muscle memory. It is integral for artists not only to connect with their body in their practice, but also to acknowledge their body as the source of impulse and reflexive action.

**Failing Forward** – Charles Kettering in 1944 coined the phrase, “failing forward” (82). There is no failure, or practice at failure, without risk. Reacting without thinking is risky, but incremental practice at taking chances will stretch a student’s courage, helping them to see that taking risks is not only beneficial to their practice but fun. Small risks help students get used to the idea of taking risks at all, and small risks lead to bigger risks. Through playful collaboration, students learn that risk is a necessary part of the artistic process and that failing is part of risk-taking.

**Focus** – Focus is a learned skill that requires deliberate attention and practice. Focus is how an artist is able to listen to their intuitive impulses and respond reflexively. *Artistic reflexivity* requires focus. Play is the vehicle that practices focus.

**Intuition/Impulse** – The moment of spark or Ah ha! When an idea comes into the mind. Artists have a hard time describing where impulse comes from or how it arrives, but it is the genesis of creativity. *Artistic reflexivity* responds to impulse by reacting to it.



**Artistic Muscle Memory** – Muscle memory is the deliberate suspension of practical knowledge in order to access it again impulsively while in the act of making. Reflexivity engages muscle memory because learning to step outside one's comfort zone and into unknown territory requires one's full focus. Being able to rely on practiced or rehearsed behavior enables freedom in spontaneous decision-making. It is important to learn to trust muscle memory, because learning to trust muscle memory is really about learning to trust one's self.

**Play** – Many creativity researchers have identified play as the conduit through which human creativity develops. Play is a series of improvisational instinctual reactions to something or someone. The nature of play teaches behavioral rules and has a profound linkage to our evolution and brain development. Play automatically shifts focus away from the self and onto others, which helps students practice responding instinctively to their impulses. To engage fully in the present moment an artist must also suspend internal judgment and self-criticizing faculties which undermine the ability to be reflexive in play. When students engage in play they readily say yes because there is less anticipation or emphasis on the outcome. Accidents or mistakes become part of the improvisational process and teach students to allow their instinctual reflexes to lead their reactions. Student artists need to foster and develop regular connection with their imagination in order to develop original ideas. Breaking down cultural myths and acknowledging that playful exploration is not shameful and/or unprofessional, it will enable unfettered access to the richest source they have as creators: their imagination.

**Performative Circle of Experiential Engagement** – The theory that art making intertwines experience, research and teaching in a performative circle of experiential engagement and forms a collaborative feedback loop. This circle of engagement includes the artist/researcher/teacher, student, and/or viewer in the action/reaction of the present moment, creating a reflective reciprocal relationship that is mutually beneficial. This research creation methodology centers on

the principals of working from within one's own practice and it is performative because it is embodied in the present moment, in reaction to the experiential environment.

**Saying Yes!** – Saying yes is a common improvisation term that reminds performers to not block their instinctual responses to what is happening to them. As one does spontaneously in play, saying yes opens up new ways of thinking and leads to immediate often risky decision-making. It takes time and practice to learn to say yes, to embrace the possibility of the unknown and relinquish control an outcome.

**What If?** – What if? thinking activates curiosity because thinking with the imagination is not limited by reality. What if? thinking stretches the imagination and leads to innovative combinations of experience and imagination.

**The Zone of Silence** - ZOS is a series of silent improvisational exercises, placing the actor in simple imaginary situations and requiring them to respond instinctively to their environment. The ZOS motivates critical decision-making, engages the impulsive process in repeated risk taking and helps develop and strengthen the actor's reflective reaction. ZOS is a technique that develops reflexive skills in the artist.

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*Image 32. Bubble Sculpture, plaster, 2015.*





APPENDIX

# TRAINING ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY:

COLLABORATIVE DRAWING EXERCISES  
FOR VISUAL ARTISTS ©

JENNIFER WIGMORE

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**“The interior world is revealed through a process of reaction to the provocations of the world outside”  
- Jacques Lecoq, *The Moving Body*, 30.**

# TRAINING ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY: COLLABORATIVE DRAWING EXERCISES FOR VISUAL ARTISTS

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# TRAINING ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY: COLLABORATIVE DRAWING EXERCISES FOR VISUAL ARTISTS

**If you're going to teach spontaneity, you'll have to become spontaneous yourself.**

**– Keith Johnstone, *Impro for Storytellers*, 55.**

My MFA thesis research at OCAD University was about how to train artistic reflexivity in visual artists through collaboration. This research involved transposing improvisational acting exercises into gestural drawing exercises for visual art students. Visual artists do occasionally collaborate on specific artworks, but collaboration in their learning is not typical. There is real value in learning with someone else rather than learning alone. For actors, working collaboratively is always part of the job and in fact integral to creation. While much of an actor's work is done alone, in preparation for work with others curriculum is focused on how the actor is to work alone. Working with others is not just about making better collaborative artists, but about making better solo artists.

These exercises use repetition as a tool to practice taking risks and responding without thinking. The collaborative environment makes risk-taking feel more like playing, which fosters a sense of community, building trust and empathy. This not only reinforces existing relationships but also encourages students to see their peers as allies, rather than competitors. Students re-discover how to play, how to listen to their bodies' impulses and how to reconnect with their curiosity. Through these playful exercises, students strengthen their concentration and focus, stretching their creative limits through incremental risk-taking. Training artistic reflexivity is not about creating art, but about training the reflexive impulse that allows art to happen. Training the reflexive impulse teaches artists to say, Yes!

## WHAT IS ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY?

Reflexivity is the site of connection between the artistic response in the body and the idea or impulse in the brain. Artistic reflexivity is the immediate response to a stimulus, internal or external; it happens in the moment an idea or impulse meets consciousness. It occurs in that split second in which a decision must be made to react to or to ignore that impulse. That decision is the reflexive action. It is artistic because the artistic self is part of that split second decision, where personal aesthetic and muscle memory reside and inform reflexive response. Training reflexivity as a tool is not about training the impulse, but about training the reflexive response to the impulse. In acting pedagogy, the ability to react spontaneously, truthfully and without reservation is a skill that is practiced repeatedly until it becomes second nature. Artists can learn to react faster and with less fear or resistance, trusting their artistic muscle memory and developing their authentic voice.

## WHAT IS ARTISTIC MUSCLE MEMORY?

Muscle memory is the ability to recall practiced behavior without giving it conscious attention. It is the deliberate suspension of practical knowledge in order to access it again impulsively while in the act of making. For the actor, learning lines or blocking (physical action) become how they use muscle memory in performing a role. Athletes have a profound understanding of how to use muscle memory reflexively. The gymnast on the balance beam will tell you that the fastest way to fall is to focus on the mechanics of walking on the beam. She must trust that her body knows what to do, that she has practiced enough to perform her routine without needing to be conscious of technique. Likewise, when an artist is reflexively responding, she is not consciously thinking about colour mixing or composition, she is immersed in creating, trusting that her technique will instinctively support her improvised decisions.

Taking risks engages muscle memory because stepping outside your comfort zone requires complete focus; being able to rely on practiced technical knowledge enables freedom in spontaneous decision-making. Learning to trust muscle memory is really about

learning to trust oneself.

Artists use reflexivity to act on their ideas and respond to their inspiration. But artistic reflexivity is not about training the intuition, it is about training the reflexive response to intuition.

## **TEAM BUILDING – VISUAL ARTISTS NEED TEAMS TOO!**

Even though the myth of solitary genius is still pervasive, it is not actually the way artists describe what they want and need. The artists I spoke with and the students I worked with understand the need for community to develop and support their practice. Friendship and community are crucial to thriving at art school and for survival in the art world after graduation. While the curriculum for acting students has a strong emphasis on learning to collaborate with others visual artists have little focus on collaborative training. Collaborative environments create connections that foster community and build support networks through trust and empathy, vital factors for navigating critiques. This “emotional scaffolding” (Vera John-Steiner, 8) builds confidence and bolsters independence. This scaffolding makes an artist feel supported and encouraged. Such scaffolding can also create healthy competition that pushes risk-taking and stretches comfort zones. Collaboration also builds skills in learning how to work alone.

## **FAILING FORWARD – LEARNING TO SAY YES!**

What prevents an art student from working is the same thing that prevents a professional artist from working, “the fear that your fate is in your own hands, but your hands are weak” (Bayles & Orland, 3). Lack of confidence in artistic ability translates directly to lack of confidence in identity. Fear of failure, as Martin Ryan (71) discovered, is more often a “fear of judgment” than a fear of experimentation. Societal pressure, fear of what others will think of you, is what inhibits creative leaps (71). It takes time and practice to learn to say yes, to embrace the possibility of the unknown and relinquish



control of an outcome. Fear prevents students from saying yes. Fear of being wrong, fear of being judged, fear of the unknown. Students don't need to overcome fear; they need to embrace it. Learning to embrace fear is much easier to do when one is not alone.

In the artistic process, success is typically born of failure and failure is born of risk. At what point does an idea become risky? When the outcome is unknown and thinking about that outcome is nerve-wracking. Incremental practice at taking risks stretches a student's courage, helping them to see that taking risks is not only beneficial to their practice, but fun. Small risks help students get used to the idea of taking risks at all, and small risks lead to bigger risks. Through playful collaboration, students learn that risk taking and failure are part of the artistic process. Leaping without a safety net gets easier with practice, and when you're not alone. Failure is the key that might unlock the solution to the problem. If teachers expect their students to take bigger and bigger risks, to be true innovators, teachers need to give their students practice at failing without consequence. The American inventor, Charles Kettering (82) coined the phrase, "failing forward", a phrase that captures the essential virtue of failure as a discovery path, of failing forward towards something new.

Learning to embrace the pain of failure is crucial. Students can learn that to fail is not a matter of life or death and can sometimes be exhilarating. Shifting the focus of failure away from the **artist** and putting failure onto the **work**, reframes failure as part of the process and part of the job of the artist, as falling off the balance beam is part of the work of the gymnast. Failure can lead to the unexpected, and the risk of failure can be an exciting part of the process of making.

## DOING WITHOUT THINKING

Fundamental to these exercises is the principal of being present in the moment and of responding without thinking. Students should be encouraged to continue saying, "Yes". Even if it makes them feel silly, saying yes to each other helps the students hear themselves

saying yes to their instincts over and over. Without necessarily realizing it, this affirmation begins to affect the way they think about themselves and the exercises. They find themselves in a room literally full of 'Yes'! Practice at saying yes in a safe and supportive environment increases the chance that the next time they have an impulse or idea themselves, they may have the courage to say yes to it instead of no.

## DEVELOPING LISTENING SKILLS

Artistic reflexivity helps an artist practice listening to themselves and to others through engagement in reacting to impulse. Listening is also important if artists are to learn to hear and process criticism usefully. To hear the opinions of others objectively without emotional reaction is a skill that needs to be practiced in non-pressure filled environments.

## ACCEPTING AND REJECTING OFFERS

The greatest principle of improv is that of saying yes. Practically it means that when one person makes an 'offer', the other must accept and react to it. In collaboration other people make 'offers' that one must react to. An 'offer' is an invitation to react. In improv saying yes to an offer keeps a scene alive and opens the door to inspired riffs of invention. To say 'no', or to in any way ignore or reject an offer is called 'blocking' and in improv it is a cardinal sin. Rejecting offers is often about fear of the unknown and the destabilizing fear of not being in control. Accepting another's offer is how one learns to say yes to ideas. Learning to say yes to another's ideas is transferable to listening and saying yes to your own ideas. Accepting an offer without judging it is practice at saying yes.

## THE BODY

In order for an artist to be reflexive, they need to be connected, present and responsive to their body. In actor training, the deliberate focus on and the awareness of the body in action enables students to use and listen to their body in their practice. The body is the vehicle through which artists express their creativity. Sharpening the ability to listen to the body and the world around it opens access to stimuli. Connecting student artists to their bodies builds mind-body connections, develops muscle-memory and is a crucial step towards practicing artistic reflexivity.

## NOT EVERYTHING IS ART

In art school it can feel like everything you make is being judged. So much emphasis is placed on final product that it clouds the value of experiment and play. When there are too many assignments to complete, no room is left for experiment and error. There is simply no time to play. Focusing instead on process (rather than result) builds an understanding of work ethic. Placing value on trial and error, helps emphasize how much thinking and craft go into a piece before its potential has been exhausted.

An important principle of these exercises is that the marks made by the students not be judged or valued as “art” objects. I repeatedly say during the exercises; “We are not making art, just making marks” or “Think less and just do”. When students talk about the drawings afterwards the comments I make are always about collaboration and partnership, not about the drawing itself. I remind them that the drawings they have made together could never have been made by one person alone. I encourage them to talk about the moments of connection or disconnection. The idea that these exercises are not about making art could be reinforced if the drawings were temporary, on a chalkboard or whiteboard, where they could be erased immediately.

## ALWAYS START WITH A WARM UP

Why don't visual artists warm up physically before making art? Is not the body an instrument? I always begin my workshops with some stretching. It is a relaxed time when we can talk informally. I usually mention the work of Amy Cuddy (2012), social psychologist specializing in non-verbal expression and power. Her work on body language has proven that the body can rewire the mind: assuming her power poses (making your body bigger), for example, boosts your testosterone levels and makes you feel more confident. Warming up also gets the blood flowing and increases the supply of oxygen to the brain, getting the mind ready to make art. Visual artists tend to feel awkward doing a collaborative warm up. Get them involved, ask them to suggest stretches they enjoy or find useful. It's a great way to get the class thinking as a group.

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## THE EXERCISES

These are the exercises I invented or transformed to use in my workshops. All exercises are done in pairs or small groups, with all groups working at the same time. The facilitator should walk around the room helping and encouraging.



## “YES...AND?” – PAIRS

*Yes...And?* is a very common acting and improv warm up exercise, used all over the world. It is a foundational exercise for encouraging automatic response. I have adapted it for visual artists as a gestural drawing exercise. It's a game that focuses attention on the present moment, the action/reaction, not allowing the students to think ahead. The game keeps them engaged in the here and now. The student cannot predict what kind of mark their partner will make, so must focus on their partner's mark. This leads to insight into how others' think and reinforces that saying "yes" to others ideas can help them to say yes to their own ideas.

Students stand beside a pad of newsprint, one student on either side. I usually begin with the verbal form of the exercise to introduce the idea.

- Student A says to student B the first word that comes to mind: "Strawberry"
- Student B says, "Yes...." acknowledging that they have heard the word and then says "And?... the first word that comes to their mind, "Popcorn"
- Student A says "Yes...And?" the first word that comes to mind, "Bubbles".

This back and forth continues with impulsive one word responses. Once students get the idea of the exercise, I introduce the gesture version, which adds the element of drawing.

## GESTURE VERSION

Instead of replying to their partner with the first word that comes to their mind, students now respond with a gestural mark on the paper. Yes, I see your mark and I respond with this mark. Students continue saying "Yes...And?" as they make marks. This keeps them focused on the mark being made and gets them in the habit of saying, Yes!

**The Yes...And? exercise has a few phases.**

**Phase 1 – Gesture:** One mark in response to the mark of another while saying, Yes...And?. Let them do this until they start to get the hang of it. Then have them switch partners. Continue Phase 1 with a variety of pairings in the class.

**Phase 2 – Speed:** Get them to start the exercise with new partners. Once they get the hang of it, ask them to go faster. See how fast they can respond, without thinking about their own mark.

**Phase 3 – Touching the Last Mark:** The mark made by each student must in some way touch the last mark made by their partner. They don't have to continue their partner's mark, but their mark must cross or touch that mark in some way.

**Phase 4 – Drawing Together:** While focusing on their partner's gesture, ask them to speed up to the point where they are both drawing at the same time, anticipating their partners mark. Students usually start moving so quickly they start laughing.

**As the students perform the exercises the facilitator should walk around the room and keep reinforcing these ideas aloud:**

- Go faster
- Focus on your partner's mark, not your own
- Don't think about your mark just respond
- Its not about making art, just marks

## TOOLS

A pad of newsprint paper  
1 marker each  
Flat surface

Alternate: You could use a chalkboard or white board and erase the drawings each time

## HELPFUL HINTS

Students like to chit-chat while doing the exercises. If you are talking the students are less likely to talk to each other.

Use constant gentle reminders that they need to focus on listening. Students get more out of the experience if they save their conversation until after the exercise.

## FOLLOW THE LEADER – PAIRS

This exercise directly follows the Yes...And? exercise. It's a very fun exercise and there is always a lot of laughing. It practices the intense focus and listening skills necessary for being present in the moment. The fun they have tends to keep the students engaged and focused in the moment of creating.

- Student A is the leader. The leader slowly draws a continuous line.
- Student B follows directly behind the leader with a second line.
- The object for the leader is to draw slowly enough that the follower can keep up, tracing exactly the same line.
- After they get the hang of this, coach the leaders to speed up a little, still keeping their followers.
- Once they have a comfortable rhythm, get the leader to go faster and faster. Then instruct the leaders to lose their followers. Tell them to do whatever they have to do to lose them. This exercise usually ends pretty soon after that.

### TOOLS

A pad of newsprint paper  
1 marker each  
Flat surface

Alternate: You could use a chalkboard or white board and erase the drawings each time

- Have the students switch roles and do the exercise again.
- As with *Yes...And?* this exercise can be done with several different pairings.

## FINISH THIS – PAIRS

This exercise asks the drawer to interpret a mark made by their partner, turning it into something unexpected. This exercise reminds students that everyone thinks differently, by showing how their own marks can be interpreted or misinterpreted.

- One student makes an abstract mark on the page
- The other student finishes their mark and transforms it into a representational image
- After each person gets a turn to lead, switch partners

### TOOLS

A pad of newsprint paper  
1 marker each  
Flat surface

Alternate: You could use a chalkboard or white board and erase the drawings each time

### HELPFUL HINTS

The more abstract the original mark, the more options your partner will have.

### HELPFUL HINTS

Students may not get the instructions correct at first. Go around and observe them, sometimes their interpretations of the instructions are very interesting. If they are lost you can gently correct them, but always be interested in how they interpreted the exercise.



## MIRROR IMAGE – PAIRS

This exercise continues from Follow the Leader but is more intense and requires greater skill. The students make exact mirror images of their partner's mark. To do so requires considerable focus and power of observation. It's a bit tricky at the beginning but they get the hang of it quickly.

- Students decide who will be the Follower and who will be the Leader.
- Divide the paper vertically in half, one student working on each side.
- Students should stand beside each other with the pad in front of them.
- The leader makes a mark on one half of the page.
- The follower makes an exact mirror image of that mark on the other side of the page.
- The Leader should start slowly, with simple clear marks. The marks can be one continuous mark or separate marks.
- The object is to create two halves of the same image.
- Switch roles.

### TOOLS

A pad of newsprint paper  
1 marker each  
Flat surface

Alternate: You could use a chalkboard or white board and erase the drawings each time

### HELPFUL HINTS

Remind them not to talk. Make not talking a challenge. Can they create a drawing together without talking? This exercise is about learning to communicate ideas.

### HELPFUL HINTS

After every drawing, give the group time to talk about it. Allow them to walk around and see the drawings of the other groups.

## A LINE AT A TIME– GROUPS (3 TO 4 PEOPLE)

Developed by Keith Johnstone (Improv teacher and inventor of Theatre Sports), this exercise builds team work and skills at simple, clear communication. As a drawing exercise it is perfect for visual artists to learn to work in collaboration. The exercise teaches listening in a direct way. Accepting a gestural offer means letting go of your own ideas and having the courage to follow. Being a good listener to the ideas of others is directly transferable to being good at listening to your own ideas.

### Phase 1

- Ask them to make a drawing together without talking about it.
- 1 person makes 1 line and then passes the marker to the next person
- The next person adds to that line.
- Have them make a drawing with these limited instructions.

### TOOLS

Shared pad of paper  
1 shared marker  
Flat surface

## HELPFUL HINTS

These exercises work best if the partner or group use clear, short, phrases i.e. she's wearing hat or meets dog, it's raining.

### Phase 2

- Keep the same groups. Tell them that they are making a representational picture together
- Again, no talking.
- Tell them they need to come to some agreement about what they are drawing, but they must do so through their drawing.
- They must use only one line at a time to indicate what they are making.
- When this second drawing seems complete, have them try another.

### Phase 3

- By now they should be getting the hang of it.
- Remind them they are making a picture, together.
- Talk to them about the idea, tell them that every line is an offer. An offer another person will add too. Some offers are open and some are closed. How can they make open offers? Ask them, are you making a generous offer? Or are you trying to take control of the drawing? Are you working together to make something?
- Try the drawing again.

### HELPFUL HINTS

Students often giggle during this exercise. It can be uncomfortable for some. Gently encourage the Drawer to focus on communicating their marks, to actually draw something. Remind them that their Puppet can't listen if they are talking to them.

## WHAT COMES NEXT – PAIRS OR GROUPS

Keith Johnstone (134) created a great improv exercise in which the student is asked to act out whatever the group or a partner says. It makes a great drawing game.

- One person draws what their partner or the group tells them to draw.
- When the drawer is done drawing what has been said, they ask, "What next?"
- Ask the partner/group to say things that are logically connected, i.e. person walking, wearing a hat, steps in a puddle....
- After a couple of such drawings ask the partner/group to be more imaginative, saying more disconnected things, i.e. person walking, pumpkin, space ship...

### TOOLS

Pairs: pad of paper  
Marker or Drawing tool  
Groups: Large paper stapled to the wall  
Marker or Drawing tool

## BODY PUPPET EXERCISE – PAIRS

This exercise is a variation on an acting exercise in which the actor's body is manipulated by fellow students who control the actor like a puppet. The Body Puppet introduces new ways of making marks and encourages a level of intimacy unfamiliar to most visual art students. It literally brings the students closer together. This exercise works best when students are standing.



### TOOLS

1 large body length piece of paper stapled to the wall  
1 marker

- Divide the students into pairs.
- Have them decide who will be the Drawer and who will be the Puppet.
- Instruct them to make a representational drawing (as opposed to abstract mark making).
- The Drawer will create their drawing on the back of their Puppet using only the touch of their index finger.
- The Puppet will translate the feeling of the marks being made on their back into actual marks on the paper in front of them.
- The Drawer is making the drawing, the Puppet is simply a tool, the extension of the Drawers hand.
- Allow enough time for them to find a rhythm together.
- Discourage talking. Have them focus on communicating clear marks to their Puppet. The Puppet should focus on “listening” to the Drawer’s marks.
- After 10/15 minutes, have them stop and talk about the drawing.

- Invite them to walk around and see other students' drawings.
- Get them to talk about the experience together. Ask if it was harder than they thought it would be?
- Turn the paper over and switch roles.

## ALTERNATE

If a student is uncomfortable touching their partner, have them use the end of a pen. Remind them to be very careful not to press too hard.

## WHISPER PUPPET – PAIRS

This exercise is similar to the Body Puppet except this time, the device rather than touching is whispering. The exercise intensifies listening skills and places focus on how one communicates ideas.

- Divide students into pairs
- One student will be the Drawer and the other the Whisper Puppet
- The Whisper Puppet sits at a table with the drawing pad in front of them and a marker. They put on the blindfold.
- The Drawer whispers instructions for the drawing into the ear of the Puppet.
- The Drawer is not allowed to touch the Puppet and should use clear short drawing instructions

### TOOLS

Drawing pad  
Marker  
Blindfold  
Table

## BLIND PORTRAIT - PAIRS

Blind Portrait is a blind contour drawing exercise. Students draw their partners without looking at their drawing. This exercise provides an opportunity for bonding and for focusing observational skills. By drawing their class-mates, students are given permission to look at each other and observe things they may not have seen before.

- Students stand facing each other, an easel placed beside but out of their peripheral vision.
- Each student draws their partner without looking at the paper they are drawing on. It is important that they go slowly and really try to study their partner. Observe all the important elements of their partner, getting all the details they observe on paper.
- Once they have finished, have them show the drawings to each other. Give them time to talk to each other about what they saw and what they drew.

### TOOLS

Drawing pad mounted on an easel  
Marker or drawing tool

## COLLAGE PARTY – SMALL GROUPS

This is a very fun exercise in which the students build collages in a team. It requires good communication and cooperation and emphasizes team work and listening. A large amount of collage materials is required. Material can be in all forms, from magazines clippings to string or cardboard. Solid colour paper sheets are also great to have.



- Gather all the materials/ resources together in a pile in the center of the room.
- Split students into groups of 3 or 4 and organize them around large pieces of paper on the floor.
- Tell them they will have 5 minutes to build a collage together.
- To begin, each group is allowed to take any 5 resources from the pile.
- One person at a time is allowed to go and get another resource from the pile. Once that person returns with a resource another member of their group is allowed to go and get another resource. A different person must go every time.
- The group begins constructing the collage on the paper. In this exercise they can talk to each other.
- Once the time is up, allow them time to talk about their collage.
- The group returns all resources to the central pile.
- Have them try it again.

## TOOLS

Large pile of collage materials  
Large paper on floor to build the collage on top of.

In the third round, keep the same groups, but tell them that they are now allowed to take a resource from another group's collage rather than the pile. The facilitator can also choose to give any group a resource that they must incorporate. The facilitator can also take resources away.

## HELPFUL HINTS

Snap pictures of the collages after each round. You might be able to use printed versions of them in a later project!

## HELPFUL HINTS

Use a timer and give them reminders about how much time they have remaining.

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## JENNIFER WIGMORE BIOGRAPHY

A trans-disciplinary artist and educator (in both acting and visual art), Jennifer completed her MFA in the Interdisciplinary Masters of Art and Design program at OCAD University. Her research focus hybridized her theatre and visual art disciplines and adapted improvisational acting techniques into collaborative gestural drawing exercises for visual artists to train them to be more artistically reflexive.

Jennifer has a successful visual art practice and regularly shows her work. She has curated many exhibitions and is a founding member of **Blunt Collective** which takes her work to an international audience. Jennifer's work is in private collections throughout Canada, the U.S. and the U.K. She continues to work as a teacher, in theatre and the visual arts. She is currently collaborating on a book about the *Zone of Silence* acting technique with master teacher, Perry Schneiderman.

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## TRAINING ARTISTIC REFLEXIVITY IN VISUAL ARTISTS

The exercises created in this guide use repetition and collaboration as a tool to practice taking risks and responding without thinking. The collaborative environment makes risk-taking feel more like playing, which fosters a sense of community, building trust and empathy. Students re-discover how to play, how to listen to their bodies' impulses and how to reconnect with their curiosity. Through these playful exercises, students strengthen their concentration and focus, stretching their creative limits through incremental risk-taking. Training artistic reflexivity is not about creating art, but about training the reflexive impulse that allows art to happen. Training the reflexive impulse teaches the artist to say, **Yes!**

### PRAISE FOR THE EXERCISES

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*"The observations I made during the work shops were an increase in community as the students worked collaboratively. The level of mark making became more expressive and less hindered by the fear of an outcome. The general atmosphere in the classroom became increasingly positive" – James Olley, BFA, MFA Assistant Professor OCAD University, Curriculum Leader, First Year Digital, Analogue Painting and Printmaking, Faculty of Art, OCAD University.*

