

Creative Strategies in Contemporary Art

Art is a way to investigate our experiences, our world and our selves. This is a potent idea that has caught the imagination of artists. Indeed, many contemporary artists understand their practice to be inquiry or even **research**. Calling art practice research implies that art making is essentially about learning. Research in all fields is about creating new knowledge. It follows that art is about creating new knowledge too. In art, this new knowledge is wisdom that comes from seeing things in a fresh, surprising, insightful way. When artists do art research, they investigate something just as scientists do. However, art research is different from scientific research; it is more flexible, less rule-driven and, in the end, more open to creative interpretation than scientific research. So, this is what artists do: they investigate an idea, a time, a place, an object, a person, an event, or an experience and they interpret it creatively.

This presentation is about the ways artists creatively interpret information and ideas from their research; it is about how artists develop and convey meaning through artistic creative strategies. There are many creative strategies that contemporary artists use. For this presentation, I will cover just a few—**juxtaposition, projection, formatting and metaphor**—and show you artwork that illustrates these strategies in very accessible, visible ways. These are artworks that make thinking visible.

Juxtaposition:

Juxtaposition is **collage**, which means placing one image in the context of another. Juxtaposition can also mean relating one idea to another; this is **conceptual collage**. In both cases, the juxtaposition constructs meaning by setting up a relationship between the entities that are put together. This is a relationship based on a shared concept. When we see these entities together we search for and discover that concept that links them. Many learning theorists

believe our minds naturally juxtapose things—see things in relationship to other things, or according to categories—in order to make sense of them.

Juxtaposition is a very common art strategy for artists and has its origins in early 20th century collages of artists such as Hannah Hoch and Raoul Hausmann. These artists used collage to comment on critical issues of their time. Today, many artists do the same, bringing surprise, humor and irony to their commentary. For example, the tension between traditional culture and contemporary popular culture in our age of globalization is one concept addressed by artists around the world. Juxtaposition is a great strategy for highlighting those tensions. Tenmouya Hisashi, is a Japanese artist who makes good use of juxtaposition to do this; he juxtaposes traditional Japanese printmaking styles and imagery with hip-hop, graffiti and sports images (see images). The Luo Brothers from China make similar juxtapositions. They merge the happy baby propaganda posters of the Communist era with the fast food and consumer goods of today's global culture and economy (see images). Another artist is Enrique Chagoya, a Mexican-American who puts together icons from American popular culture with the style and imagery of ancient Mexico to make witty, insightful commentary on cultural and political imperialism (see images).

Young artists can practice juxtaposing imagery and objects in their artwork. For example, college students at San Francisco State University juxtaposed paintings from Western art history with icons from current popular culture to reveal timeless themes behind the artwork and comment on current cultural and political issues (see images). Using juxtaposition in a different way—to understand how we think abstractly—middle school students in Napa, California went through an art making process that built awareness of and skills in abstract thinking. In this project, each student chose a personal object that was meaningful to him or her. They then brainstormed all the associations they had with their objects and got into groups of two to juxtapose their objects. They then drew the concept that connects them as a bridge. In doing so, they revealed an

underlying concept those objects had in common and came to understand how concrete objects can represent abstract ideas and how we can unearth those ideas through analysis and through connection-making (see images).

Projection

Projection is something we all do when we think ahead and take something to its logical or illogical conclusion. This is essentially storytelling about the way things could be. Children do it all the time. It is, therefore, important for educators to see projection as a thinking strategy and as an art strategy. Teachers will then have a new perspective on children's fantasies and will link artistic thinking with the way children naturally think. Fantasy and fiction are important because they open up possibilities; they allow us to see what is not there, what could be.

One artist who 'projects' to open our eyes to possibilities is Packard Jennings. Jennings is an American artist who portrays the future in witty, whimsical ways and he does this in a comic book style (see images). Alexis Rockman is another American artist who 'projects' and illustrates the future. Rockman's future, however, is less rosy than Jennings; he depicts a world where humans have damaged the world through intervention, alteration and pollution (see images).

In addition to tapping into young people's natural ability to imagine and fantasize, art projects that promote projection are also ways to make learning fun and personal. They are also a way to make learning fun and personal. For example, young artists at Sunset Elementary School in San Francisco 'projected' when they were studying dinosaurs. They imagined their dinosaurs traveling to New York City and writing postcards back to them (see images). In a similar vein, a college student at San Francisco State projected into the future and imagined Venice as it may be someday (see images). Students at Lincoln High School in San Francisco 'projected' and invented imaginary tools to solve real life problems. One student made a remote control device to help her take control of her life. Another student, who tackled the problem all students have—absorbing

great amounts of information fast—invented a helmet with a food processor on top that pulverizes books and transmits information directly into the student's head. Another student created a series of collectable, pop-culture trash compactors. These examples show how imaginative projection can help students understand complex realities and help them to think positively and creatively about problems (see images).

Formatting

To format is to illustrate an idea in an arrangement or system not usually associated with the idea or with art. Re-contextualizing in this way compels the viewer see the idea differently. It also introduces new visual 'languages' to art. Formatting is a very sophisticated strategy; to grasp the meaning of an artwork that uses this strategy, the viewer must recognize the format and understand what it means in its usual context. Often artists use formats and tropes that are meant to convey concrete information. These are **information images** like instructions, maps, diagrams, graphs and charts. English artist, Simon Evans uses these informational tropes in his collages, drawings and paintings to tell us about his life, his thoughts, his mental states, and his fantasies (see images). Other artists use scientific formats. Mark Dion is an American artist who does this. Dion pretends to be a scientist; he has played the role of an anthropologist, a naturalist, and an archeologist. In his scientific personas, Dion collects specimens or artifacts and arranges them as a scientist would in rows and then he categorizes and labels them. This is a scientific format, a three-dimensional natural history-style display that does not resemble conventional art (see images).

At Berkeley High School in California, students learned from Mark Dion's example. They pretended to be anthropologists and researched different sites in and around Berkeley. For this research, they divided into groups of two, observed a site, interviewed people at the site, and gathered images and objects. They then created displays of the artifacts they found. These displays were essentially

documentation of the site but they also conveyed the young artists' thoughts about their sites and their experiences there (see images). At San Francisco State University, students mimicked Simon Evans' process in their research into social issues; they used maps, charts and visual tropes of natural history drawings to convey information and their opinions about their topics (see images).

Mapping is a form of formatting that deserves special attention. Many contemporary artists play with the ideas, forms and aesthetics of maps to convey personal experiences or a social phenomenon. A powerful example of this is the maps of Bamanani Women's Group, a group of women with AIDS in Cape Town, South Africa. These women worked with artist Jane Solomon to make life-sized maps of their bodies that visualize the virus and tell the stories of their struggles (cite). Another kind of mapping is Abigail Reynold's topographical map of violent crime in London, England, which presents a variety of crime rates as hills and valleys (see image).

Metaphor

Metaphor is perhaps the most powerful and comprehensive creative strategy. Indeed, the other creative strategies often play into metaphor; they can either generate metaphorical connections or expand and extend a metaphor. Metaphor is essentially framing or seeing one thing as another. When we see something through a metaphor, we see it in a new way. Metaphor is most often associated with poetry. However, we do find it in visual art. One example is American artist Dennis Oppenheim's *Virus* in which American popular culture, represented by Mickey Mouse, is seen as a disease (see image). Another is *St. Barbie* by American artist, Mark Ryden, in which a Barbie Doll is compared to a Catholic saint (see image). Sui Jianguo, a Chinese artist does a similar thing when he compares Mao Tse Tung to the Buddha (see image). All three of these examples begin with a simple comparison but when we 'unpack' them or follow the trail of association, we see that they cast a new light on contemporary culture.

Since art research is all about seeing things from new and varying perspectives, metaphor is a powerful tool in research. In the art class, students can use metaphor to explore and investigate things. One example is exploring oneself through a metaphorical self-portrait. Examples from San Francisco State University show students casting themselves as animals and household appliances (see images). Once you establish a metaphor, you need to see all its implications. Mapping associations a metaphor generates helps us see the full meaning of the metaphor. San Francisco State students made maps of their metaphors and discovered new things about themselves (see images). Another example of metaphor employed as a research strategy is the metaphorical interpretations Berkeley High School students used to encapsulate their understandings of the places they investigated in their (previously mentioned) anthropological research. The richness of their metaphorical perspectives was explored and uncovered when these students analyzed and then drew or mapped their metaphors (see images).

Creative Research, Metaphor, Mapping and Archiving

The artwork discussed here reveals how important thinking is to making art. It follows that art making is a good way to teach children to think, especially to think creatively. Contemporary art that makes thinking visible can help here, especially if students are directed to focus on thinking and the way it is manifested in art. I suggest we take this a step further: we take the lessons of contemporary artists who juxtapose, project, format, map and make metaphors to shed light on creative process itself—to **make process visible**. By this I mean creating metaphors for creative process and then mapping those metaphors. This is called **cognitive mapping** or **process mapping**. Researchers who use art in their inquiries (art-based research) often do this in order to better understand their research process. It makes sense for young people to do the same. Cognitive mapping is used in art-based research at Berkeley High School as a way to build **metacognition**, the understanding of one's learning and how one

learns. It also helps students to better understand their creative process (see images). Cognitive mapping sounds really abstract, complicated and sophisticated but even first graders are capable of doing it. They can also make metaphors for thinking and learning (see images).

A **resource archive** is also a helpful tool for building creative thinking skills and propelling creative process. A resource archive is a collection of useful, evocative **words** and **visual imagery**, which an artist can mix and match or tap into when making art (or metaphor), reflecting on it, or constructing cognitive process maps. The words in the archive should be verbs that describe creative thinking, such as wonder, ponder, ruminate, analyze, collect, distill, connect, question, transform and envision. These words can make different kinds of thinking tangible and concrete and, therefore, assessable and ultimately intentional.

The visual images in the archive should be rich in meaning; they should represent a significant idea, or a set of personal or cultural values, beliefs or practices. Many images are vessels for meaning; they can tell stories and give information about their time, place and culture if they are 'mined' for meaning. Building an archive of visual imagery is a great exercise for young artists. It helps them notice the imagery and objects in their world not only for their physical appearance but also for their underlying conceptual aspects and meaning. It also gives young artists unintended options when they make metaphors—ideas for metaphors they would otherwise not have imagined (see images).

How Contemporary Art Fits into Education

When art is seen as research, learning and constructing new knowledge or perspectives become the focus of art. Art practice is educational; it rises above making beautiful or expressive objects and becomes about learning, discovery and invention. This disposition toward art helps to justify the inclusion of art in schools, even in a country like the United States where the educational value of art is often overlooked.

Art-as-research is important because it emphasizes process: the cycle of thinking and doing. In art research, thinking is as important as making. The artwork we have seen today highlights and visualizes the thinking behind it; it makes thinking visible and accessible to students. When young learners examine these images and many others like them, they can see how artists think and construct meaning and commentary. Then, in their own artwork, they can use strategies artists employ and generate their own meanings. Art educators often ask their students to copy an artist's style or technique. Why not switch and ask them to use a creative strategy they see in an artist's work? This would be much more in line with contemporary art and practices and it would help a young artist learn how to think creatively.

Visible thinking in contemporary art de-mystifies creativity; it allows for identifying creative strategies and describing them in words, and sets the stage for inventing new creative strategies—ones young artists can invent themselves. In other words, this is where we, as art teachers, start to teach creative thinking and where kids begin to invent new ways of making meaning and making art.

We are so fortunate to have contemporary art with its focus on research and creative thinking to help us to re-envision the processes of art and the role of art making in contemporary society. Let us open our eyes and teaching practices to these examples.