

Explore new strategies for making meaning in art projects, breaking free from traditional molds, and employing a variety of aesthetic strategies.

**T**hough the field of art education increasingly advocates for the importance of having clear criteria for judging the quality of a student's arts learning, we have not yet been as thorough and rigorous with ourselves in articulating the necessary qualities of the basic building block of visual arts curriculum—the *art project*. Perhaps the assumption that visual arts education will be *project-based* (unfortunately often translated in actual practice as *product-based*) has been so dominant and unquestioned, the field has not adequately theorized the structures, uses, varieties, and sequencing of these projects as an educational form.

## New School Art Styles: The **Project** of Art Education

OLIVIA GUDE

In 1976, Arthur Efland published “The School Art Style: a Functional Analysis,” in which he pointed out that there were distinct styles of art made in schools that were unlike art made in other settings. He argued that these school art styles did not actually create possibilities for free expression for youth, but instead served the symbolic purpose of representing to others that there were opportunities for creativity and free play in otherwise regimented school systems. Looking at the actual work produced based on a given project, Efland noted the lack of meaningful variation in the “art” that was created and famously concluded, “The self same creative activities may not be as free as they [initially] looked” (p. 41).

Drawing on characteristics identified by Brent Wilson, Efland described school art as “game-like, conventional, ritualistic, and rule-governed.” He also observed that “the school art style does not seem to be a pedagogical tool for teaching children about art in the world beyond the school, though this is its manifest function” (1976, pp. 38–39). Efland’s conclusions that many of the art activities in schools do not actually support creative self-expression and that they are not effective in teaching students about methods of artmaking outside of school contexts, echoes in the literature of art education over the ensuing decades. Almost 40 years later there is lingering uneasiness

among thoughtful scholars and teachers as they continue to observe and analyze the everyday practices of art education and as they question whether art projects made in schools can provide opportunities for students to truly explore personally meaningful subjects while supporting clear learning objectives about art content.

Many art educators and art education historians have grappled with questions of the appropriate philosophy, content, theory, scope, and sequence of visual arts education (Efland, 1990; Eisner & Day, 2004; Stankiewicz, 2001). What’s striking is that whether the dominant or proposed paradigm is Discipline-Based Art Education, creativity enhancement, visual culture, or another formulation, the range of projects that are actually taught in most schools has remained strikingly similar for several decades.<sup>1</sup> When I scan the suggested projects in popular project-sharing art education magazines and websites, I see that many of the projects are eerily similar to those I saw in magazines as a young teacher in the 1970s, despite the many dramatic changes in the styles, materials, and methods of making meaning in contemporary art practices (Foster, 1983; Gude, 2004; Harrison & Wood, 1992; Riemschneider & Grosenick, 1999; Wallis, 1984). The fact that suggested projects in such magazines are now routinely paired with a national art standard seems to have done little to encourage careful

analysis by authors or editors of whether the instructions or resulting projects are actually in sync with the stated standard.<sup>2</sup>

We cannot envision and manifest new styles of art education without examining and reconsidering art education curriculum as it is currently taught. **We must be willing to let go of some of the old familiar projects (and their myriad variations) in order to make room for other sorts of projects and other kinds of art experiences.**

Sometimes it is suggested that school art rooms don’t need projects at all, that students should be given the freedom to pursue their own creative agendas (Douglas & Jaquith, 2009). While this is the ideal end point of quality art curriculum, most students today could not initially make good use of this sort of freedom without a great deal of individual support. When students are not introduced to a wide range of meaning making strategies (and encouraged to analyze and re-purpose strategies they absorb from popular culture), they tend to fall back on hackneyed, kitschy image-making techniques. Because of logistical constraints of availability of materials, space, and time as well as the number of students in an average class, it is not realistic to assume that most art classes in school settings can (at least initially) function as open studios in which each student re-invents his or her own methodologies of making—discovering artistic precedents,





**VALUE: Contemporary uses and practices of a medium, over curriculum that merely recapitulates the history of the medium**

**Social Situations project.** Rapidly changing technologies as well as contemporary commercial and fine art practices have shifted the ways in which photography is practiced and utilized. Eschewing the more traditional strategy in which photography mirrors the world as it is, many contemporary photographers (such as Cindy Sherman, Lorna Simpson and Charlie White) utilize carefully chosen costumes and sets. *Party Fight* directed by Yetzinia Diaz. For the sequence of projects that led to this work, see the Spiral Workshop NAEA e-Portfolio, *Liminality: Alternative Practices* group.

materials, and methods on a need-to-know basis, supported by teacher input when needed.

Thus, art projects are appropriate building blocks for visual art curriculum because **good art projects encode complex aesthetic strategies, giving students tools to investigate and make meaning.** Good art projects are not old school art-style recipes to achieve a good-looking product. Quality art projects are also not mere exercises in which students manipulate form according to teacher-prescribed parameters without any intrinsic purpose.

Good art projects are not assignments to *illustrate* or *symbolize* a theme, even an important theme, in students' lives. In an article also inspired by Efland's "School Art Style," Tom Anderson and Melody Milbrandt list three strategic goals for curriculum that authentically engages students: "1) the use of discipline-centered inquiry, 2) the construction of knowledge (rather than its passive acceptance), and 3) teaching and learning that make connections beyond school" (1998, p. 14). Note that discipline-based *inquiry* is first on the list, recognizing that there is no contradiction between teaching discipline-based knowledge and skills and making work that explores meaningful connections in students' lives. Indeed, choosing applicable contemporary means of artmaking (often

emerging out of traditional methodologies) is a prerequisite of making meaningful art that investigates contemporary life.

Art made in schools will inevitably be some form of "school art," defined by Efland as "a form of art that is produced in the school by children under the guidance and influence of a teacher" (1976, p. 37). However, **the influence of teachers can support as well as stifle individual creativity and meaningful exploration of content.** "School art" does not inevitably signify educational art activities that are inauthentic and rule-bound. New school art styles can be developed that skillfully and creatively utilize available materials, tools, technologies, critical theories and contexts to introduce students to a wide-range of developmentally appropriate aesthetic practices—means of artmaking based in particular methodologies of experiencing, producing, making meaning, and interpreting (Gude, 2008). With such an education, students can now (and then later as adults) utilize various aesthetic sensibilities and practices to frame and re-frame experience, to develop "their own unique idioms of investigating and making," and to generate patterns of perception that enable them to see the world with fresh insight (Gude, 2009, p. 10).

**Propositions About What to Value and What to Avoid in Choosing and Constructing Curriculum**

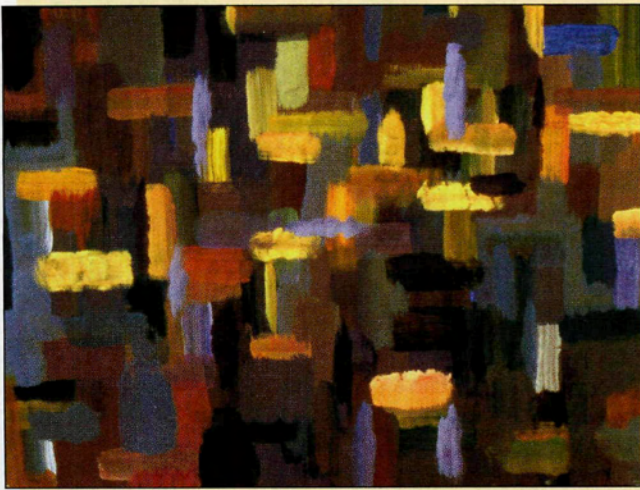
The possibilities for 21st-century art education cannot yet be fully known, envisioned, or articulated because the field is in the process of being re-imagined and revitalized. This is the contemporary research and development project of the field of art education being conducted by thousands of practitioners—art teachers, professors, community artists, teaching artists, and museum educators—in collaboration with their students and other community participants. New models, methods, objectives, contexts, and projects will be generated from a wide variety of cultural positions.<sup>3</sup>

My current contribution to this unfinished project of reimagining visual arts education is based on identifying a number of familiar, commonly taught projects and exercises. I then ask if there are other frameworks and valuing systems through which these projects can be reconsidered and then redesigned to broaden and deepen the potential for students to have meaningful experiences and to make meaningful art. This then supports students in developing more wide-ranging and nuanced understandings of the world, conducting investigations through gaining and utilizing relevant disciplinary knowledge and skills—rooted in the past and including the latest contemporary developments within various relevant disciplinary practices.<sup>4</sup>









**VALUE: Utilizing skills, forms, and vocabulary in authentic contexts over de-contextualized exercises and recipes**

**Free Form Color Investigation project.** Students experiment with variations of hue, value, and chroma while enjoying the freedom to make an abstract painting. The project begins as a monochromatic exploration, adds the use of complements and then concludes with a free choice of hue to be added as an accent. Utilizing this project in Spiral Workshop for many years, we've noted the high degree of transfer to carefully mixing and choosing colors in other painting projects.

**left:** *Untitled Color Study* by Faith Wilder, Spiral Workshop 2003.

**right:** *Painting Color Investigation*, Pui Ki Law, 2011. For a complete lesson plan for this project, see the Olivia Gude NAEA e-Portfolio.

Good art projects encode complex aesthetic strategies, giving students tools to investigate and make meaning.

**VALUE: Investigating over symbolizing**

**Conflicted Characters project.** Conflicted Characters project. Rather than make an anti-bullying poster with clichéd messages, students created a "cyber classroom" populated by their hand drawn characters and utilized the mix of characters to tell personal stories involving unresolved conflicts in home, school and community settings. *Cyber Schoolyard* by students of the Conflict & Resolution: Pencils & Pixels group. *She's Too Rough; He's Too Delicate* by Diane Dominguez, Spiral Workshop 2004.



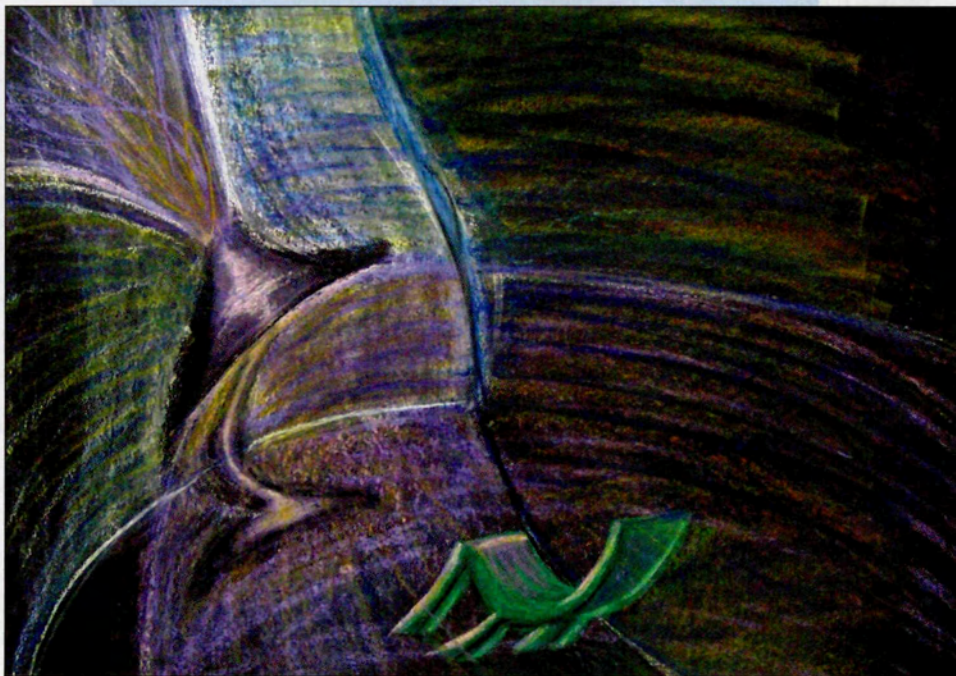
She's too rough and he's too delicate



**VALUE: Utilizing skills, forms, and vocabulary in authentic contexts over de-contextualized exercises and recipes**

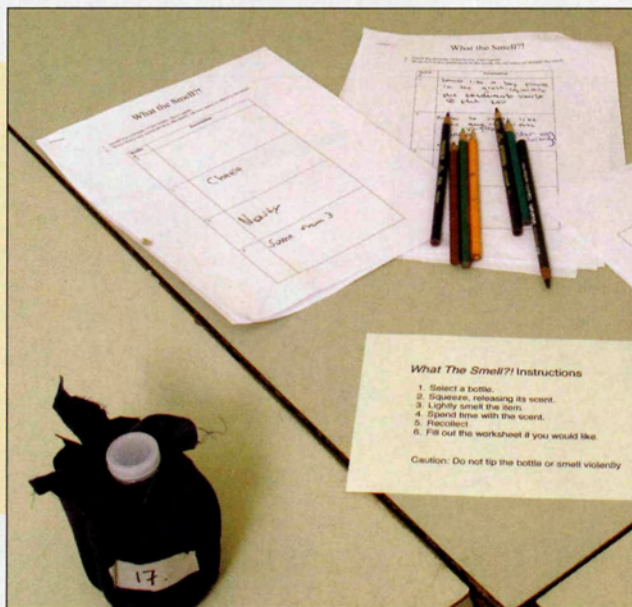
Teaching art vocabulary within rule-bound projects in which students must demonstrate knowledge by making works that display (and will be assessed by) pre-determined formal characteristics (such as “must be monochromatic” or “must have dark outlines”) doesn’t integrate learning arts vocabulary with exploring how such visual principles operate to generate meaning in actual art and design practices. Students may not internalize the usefulness of what is being studied because in most of these exercises nothing meaningful is at stake. How can you determine what is a “good composition” or the “right color” if the visual organization is not at the service of some desired communication?

If enhancing creativity is to convincingly be an important goal of art education, projects must be designed to open out into unexpected possibilities, not narrowed into pre-determined channels. It makes sense to begin an art activity by drawing students’ attention to particular sorts of visual descriptors—such as color schemes or how *contrast* functions in a design—but then the students need to be freed to utilize or *not utilize* a particular technique or form in order to experience the key component of artistic expression—*freely choosing* to use form to make meaningful gestalts. The practice of creating rubrics for each project that specify what formal characteristics must be displayed in a project is neither good, authentic assessment, nor good authentic artmaking (Beattie, 1997; Dorn, Madeja, & Sabol, 2004). Art projects shouldn’t be turned into tests. Instead, assessment of knowledge and skills can be conducted by methods such as asking students to utilize art vocabulary to *explain choices* in their artmaking or by teacher evaluation of each student’s contributions to group discussions in which students work together to describe and interpret artworks, making use of increasingly complex vocabularies.



**VALUE: Engaging in authentic artistic processes over making facsimiles**

**Expressive Rooms project:** Students recall an emotionally charged moment—ranging from delight to anger to uneasiness. After writing about and entering into the bodily experience of this emotion and after observing how distorted space contributes to the meaning of expressionist artworks, students created large chalk pastels on dark-toned paper. *A Big Warm Hug* by Sean Castillo. Spiral Workshop 2009. For a complete lesson plan for this project, see the Olivia Gude NAEA e-Portfolio.



**VALUE: Experiencing as much as making**

**What the Smell?! project.** Following the methodologies of much contemporary art, not every art project must result in objects. Students created *bottles of smell* and recorded experiments in how smell can stimulate forgotten memories. What the Smell?! installation of the Agency of Recollection: Assorted Practices, Spiral Workshop 2011.





### VALUE: Engaging mess

**Bodies of Water project.** Students are often inhibited in spontaneously evolving an artwork based on accidents in the making process. In the Fluidity: Wet Media group, students were shocked when the teacher's sample depicted the common occurrence of discovering that one's clothing is stained by menstrual blood. Initial embarrassment, followed by sympathetic laughter, turned to relief as the young women (and the guys) discussed this common unnecessarily shame-inducing experience. *Bleed Through* by Sofiya Freyman, Spiral Workshop 2010.

### VALUE: Investigating over symbolizing

Quality art education does not merely picture what is already seen and understood. Quality art generates new knowledge. Students should not be instructed to *illustrate, symbolize, or represent* (i.e. RE-present) things (such as ideas, beliefs, emotions) that are already fully formed, fully understood. Instead, quality art projects ought to enable students to reframe experiences, thus supporting students in individually and collaboratively finding out something new about a subject. Such new insights cannot be summarized in simple language, but instead become vivid constellations of experience that remain in the consciousness of the artist and the viewers. Good art—and good art projects—transform the way in which we understand and process life experiences.

“Imagine being isolated in a gloomy place in which there are confusing encounters and uncanny occurrences with not quite understandable implications and consequences.” Students began with this prompt in a project of the Spiral Workshop Decomposition group in which the youth artists studied the narrative structures and sensibilities of gothic art and literature in order to use these as a lens through which to examine experiences of frustration, confusion, and anxiety

that are sometimes aspects of everyday life in schools.<sup>7</sup> Of course, classic life drawing and one-point perspective wouldn't suffice to explore these emotionally complex tales. Understanding that what gets left out of images in fixed-point perspective is also “real,” the students began the project by smearing, crushing, and crinkling their papers and then allowing these mutilated surfaces to act as conduits to remembering and developing the pitiful, stoic, heroic, sinister, or harassed characters needed to tell their school stories. One surprise of this project was that a number of artworks focused on experiences in art classes! Students depicted such “horrors” as being commanded to have a clearly stated purpose before beginning an artwork or being “forced” to make paintings based on gridded photographs.

### VALUE: Contemporary practices of a medium, over curriculum that merely recapitulates the history of the medium

While art projects may usefully be inspired by other art, including artworks of the past, artistic practices modeled in schools must be open-ended, capable of making fresh contemporary meaning. Projects based on techniques of realist drawing or on formulaic modernist elements and principles of design are overrepresented in current art education curriculum, especially at the middle and high school levels. Occupying so much curricular space, such projects crowd out possibilities of teaching a wider range of ways of making art, aesthetic methodologies more suited to investigating contemporary life.



### VALUE: Blurring the boundaries between art and life

**Outside the Label project.** Students who had never before learned to sew immersed themselves in altering everyday clothes to become “art clothes.” However, as the project continued, students began wearing versions of their art clothes in everyday life. Altered clothes by Mia Sol de Valle in *Outsiders: Alternative Media*, Spiral Workshop 2009.









**VALUE: Designing your environment**

**Collaborative Mural project.**

When asked to do a mural for the entrance to the high school fieldhouse, the art teacher and the “Mural Team” took the unusual approach of picturing representatives of all of the sports teams. The coaches of teams other than Men’s Basketball were enthusiastic to be honored in the mural. The mural reshaped the physical environment of the school and also the relationship between the athletic department and the art department. Bloom Trail High School Sports mural installation by student artists, directed by Olivia Gude, 1989.

important to recognize that we all always “jump in” the middle of a discourse and begin by eclectic from the past to understand and make from the perspectives of today.

**Contribute to “New School” Art Styles**

Teachers, take a fresh look at your old familiar projects. Honestly and fearlessly analyze the forms, functions, artistic methodologies, and conceptual understandings that each project teaches. When examining projects, **it’s important to be both skeptical of an art projects’ current worth and non-judgmental of your own past choices and pleasures.** Perhaps this project did meet some of your curricular needs at one time. Now we are asking different questions: Is this as relevant to artmaking processes today as it once was? Are there other ways of teaching

this content that provide more compelling learning experiences that are faster, more fun, and more likely to create knowledge and skills that transfer to other contexts? What aesthetic values are being promoted (and which are being left out)? What do students (as well as their families and the school community) learn about the functions and value of art in contemporary life? Is the amount of time spent on the project proportionate to what is being learned about art and culture? While conveying disciplinary knowledge, does the project have the potential to be used by students to explore and communicate personally significant ideas and themes?

Be willing to re-imagine your teaching in light of your 5, 10, 25 or more years of life experience as a participant in unfolding, contemporary culture! Strength of character means NOT using your considerable

creativity to come up with defenses for your past choices. In “Beyond Us Now: Speculations Toward a Post-Art Education World,” Laurie Hicks writes, “In our post modern world we have come to accept that many concepts critical to our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world are no longer meaningful” (in Congdon, Hicks, Bolin, & Blandy, 2008, p. 5). Acknowledging that such shifting understandings can produce defensiveness and resistance, Hicks draws upon the Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso’s conception of “living well and dying well” to suggest how we might imagine bringing new manifestations of art education into being. She affirms that “We need to understand and value the contributions of art educators in the past and in the present, because it is their contributions that open up the possibility for us to do what we must do—imagine and enact new directions” (2008, p. 6).



**VALUE: Investigating the construction of meaning**

**Cute Investigation activity.** Students surveyed a collection of cute objects and then began the process of defining “cute” by creating a continuum of most cute to least cute objects in *Painting So Cute and Creepy*, Spiral Workshop 2007. *Cute Value Scale* classroom chart (far left) compiled by Pui Lam Law.



### VALUE: Trying a wide range of aesthetic practices

**Blind Dérive project.** After viewing the work of artists whose work explores walking including Vito Acconci, Gabriel Orozco, Yukinori Yanagi, and Richard Long, students used walking as a methodology for reframing urban experiences. *Agency of Recollection*, Spiral Workshop 2011. Photo by Aaron Arreguin.



## Art teachers can contribute to the reinvention of schools and invent not only a new form of art education, but perhaps also a new collaborative art form.

If we are to evolve art education curricular practices that have relevance to the lives of students and their communities, we must **imagine an art education that is grounded in the realities of contemporary cultural life as well as in the realities of current school settings.** To do this, the field will have to relinquish the ungrounded fantasy of endless, unequivocal originality in the work of students and teachers, the fantasy that every work of art invents entirely new symbolic systems. Recognizing that quality art and quality art education are made in the context of previous artmaking practices, art education curriculum ought to be structured to carefully introduce students to conceptual, aesthetic, and technical methodologies by which various artists have generated meaning.

A project format is a clear and useful structure to introduce students to processes, valuing systems, techniques, and worldviews embodied in various artistic practices. Good art projects are designed to mirror actual aesthetic practices in ways that support students in utilizing these practices as means by which to experience, investigate, and make their own meanings.

We must create an art education that is not retro, rigid, or reductive in its understanding of what constitutes the necessary knowledges of artmaking. We must create an art education that is rigorous in its selection and transmission of a wide range of aesthetic strategies because in a democratic society it is the responsibility of teachers to enable students to understand, participate in, and contribute to contemporary cultural conversations.

We can think of school-art style projects in the sense that Arthur Efland described/ decried—as recipes to make things without the possibility of making meaning—or we can foster a conception of art projects in schools in the sense that John Dewey conceived of project-based learning in which students are researchers who learn by doing (1938). In that sense, each classroom's art education curriculum can be conceived of as an ongoing collaborative art project, as an experiment in “relational aesthetics,” in which teachers create spaces within which students and others in the school community can interact and create new knowledge by using artistic methodologies to experience and interpret the world in fresh ways (Bourriaud, 1998/2009).

Arthur Efland concluded “The School Art Style” by suggesting that perhaps focusing on changing school art was a mistake “when we should have been trying to change the school!” (p. 43). Today evolving “new school” art styles can place the field of art education in a central position in school transformation because of art education's potential to integrate art into the core mission of truly successful schools—stimulating engaged inquiry utilizing a variety of methods drawn from a wide range of disciplinary practices. In the process of collaborating with our students to identify and investigate significant content with living interdisciplinary aesthetic practices, art teachers can contribute to the reinvention of schools and invent not only a new form of art education, but perhaps also a new collaborative art form.

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*Olivia Gude is a Professor in the School of Art and Art History at the University of Illinois at Chicago. E-mail: gude@uic.edu*



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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> In 1976, Arthur Efland, referring to the work of Vincent Lanier, estimated that the school art style had remained largely static for the previous "forty-five to fifty years", bringing the total time of relatively static curriculum content in 2012 to 75 or 80 years.
- <sup>2</sup> It is disheartening that the 1994 National Visual Arts Standard "Students select and use the qualities of structures and functions of art to improve communication of their ideas" is often cited for recipe-like projects in which students have virtually no opportunities to choose and develop meaningful content.
- <sup>3</sup> This research must be rooted in actual practice. Too often curriculum guides suggest projects that have never been taught or that haven't been re-taught and re-thought in recent years. Thus, educators are encouraged to utilize projects that don't meet contemporary criteria for meaningful arts education. One result of this practice is the relentless repetition of steps such as "sketch thumbnails" without considering whether there are other methods (both analog and digital) more commonly used by artists and designers today to experiment with composition and form.
- <sup>4</sup> This includes the disciplines identified as "the 4" in Discipline-Based Art Education as well as such fields as visual culture, material culture, critical theory, and cultural studies.
- <sup>5</sup> I use the terms *artistic methodologies*, *artistic practices*, *aesthetic methodologies* and *aesthetic practices* interchangeably to describe the procedures by which an artist or group of artists conceive of, develop, and judge the success of artworks. These include perceptual, experimental, and conceptual strategies as well as choices of media and technologies. The way in which media and technologies are utilized is never neutral; their uses always imply worldviews—ideologies that determine what is significant and what is not noticed.
- <sup>6</sup> Both of these artists are featured in the "Loss & Desire," Season 2 (2003) episode of the Art 21 (*Art in the 21st Century*) series.
- <sup>7</sup> For the complete sequence of gothic-inspired projects see the Department of Decomposition in the Spiral Workshop National Art Education Association e-Portfolio, [https://naea.digication.com/Spiral/Spiral\\_Workshop\\_Theme\\_Groups](https://naea.digication.com/Spiral/Spiral_Workshop_Theme_Groups)
- <sup>8</sup> In the age of the Internet, it is always possible to find some artist, somewhere making work in any style, but this does not mean that this is a particularly relevant or prevalent style of contemporary making. Also, in postmodern times one may find artists who deliberately appropriate and re-contextualize a historic art practice in order to generate fresh meaning—teaching about such an artist would require teaching about the original artistic practice and post-modern practices such as reclamation, appropriation, reinterpretation, irony, pastiche, positionality and context, thus encouraging students to make these sorts of contextualized, postmodern "moves" in their own art thinking and making.

## AUTHOR'S NOTES

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