



NEWSPAPER GROUND

The Newspaper Ground project was developed by Olivia Gude, Jason Bozonelos, and Lacy Foy in the Express Yourself! group of the 2001 Spiral Workshop at the University of Illinois at Chicago.



Artists make work in response to their own internal visions, interests, obsessions, desires, and dreams. Yet the work of artists is always situated in the zeitgeist—the times, the place, and the conditions—in which they live and work.

It can be difficult for art classes to find effective ways to involve students in framing their work processes within social, cultural, and historical contexts. Unfortunately, in trying to help students to understand how the meaning of their work is generated in response to a contemporary milieu, art projects have a tendency to ask students to express a fixed opinion or take a stand about “what’s happening.”

There’s nothing wrong with polemical art, but making authentic art usually means that the artist does not have a total a priori stance in relation to subject matter. Rather, a basic assumption of aesthetics is that the artist comes to understand his or her relationship to the content through the sensuous and intellectual activity of artmaking.

The Newspaper Ground project encourages art students to use the context of the daily news as the starting point for a personal artistic exploration by literally using the pages of a newspaper as the ground on which to begin an artistic exploration. The process of the project rejects pre-planned solutions in favor of giving art students the experience of letting content emerge through expressionist strategies—opening themselves to what is given, downplaying unimportant text and imagery, emphasizing significant words and pictures, and juxtaposing additional materials to the emerging work.

Though Expressionism is a popularly accepted strategy for understanding and valuing works in much middle school and high school art curricula, there is a real need for projects that encourage students to thoughtfully engage in work processes based in Expressionist techniques. As experienced art teachers know, just telling teens to “express yourself,” doesn’t usually work.



The Newspaper Ground project gives students in-depth experience in working in an expressionist manner—responding to the pre-existing and emerging imagery in the artwork. It is a time-consuming project—probably lasting 2 or 3 weeks—and it’s a labor intensive project for the art teacher because of the need to use in-process individual and group critiques to encourage students to be attentive to the developing artwork. Interestingly, it’s also a cheap project—requiring mostly newspapers, acrylic medium, and small amounts of paint, pastel, and colored pencils.

INTRODUCTION TO EXPRESSIONISM

Introduce or review expressionist styles of working. Explain that expressionism is not so much a single artistic period, but a recurring attitude and style of artmaking. Show work by Van Gogh. Discuss how the texture of the painting creates a sense of agitation in skies, landscape, and rooms. This is a good time to “break the grip” of realism as the dominant criteria of quality in art. Ask students to consider what Van Gogh gained when he eschewed verisimilitude.

BUILD KNOWLEDGE OF EXPRESSIONISM

Continue the slide show with examples of artists from other times and places who have worked in expressionist styles. Laying a firm ground of understanding of the expressionistic methods of various artists greatly improves the students’ engagement with this project. Despite the myths of expressionism itself, expressionist strategies are not acultural, “natural” approaches to artmaking. Students can learn to understand and authentically enact expressionist strategies of artmaking.

Throughout this project, take time off to introduce new artists. Continue to build students’ awareness of various expressionist strategies and conventions.

Explore the subject matter choice, brushwork, compositional strategies, and color of James Ensor, Edvard Munch, Ernst Kirshner, Emile Nolde, Oskar Kokoscka, Kathe Kollwitz, or Gabrielle Munter.

Teaching Abstract Expressionism is a necessary, but often frustrating task for art teachers. It is much easier to get students to tolerate and, perhaps even appreciate, works by such artists as Jackson Pollack, Lee Krasner, and Willem or Elaine de Kooning when students have already become aware of how abstract markmaking contributes to the meaning of expressionistic figurative works.

It always creates interesting classroom discussion to present students with work from the career of Philip Guston. Review his early, highly polished, realistic work; his transition to abstract action painting; and his eventual return to figuration in the form of blocky, humorous, and grotesque hooded figures and bodies represented by the soles of cartoon-like shoes.

Other artists who might be introduced include Cobra artists—Asger Jorn, Karen Appel, and Pierre Alechinsky. Include a discussion of artists of the late 20th century who work in an Expressionist manner such as Italian Neo-Expressionists—Francesco Clemente, Enzo Cucchi, and MIMO Paladino; German artists—Jorg Immendorf, Georg Baselitz, A.R. Penck, and Anselm Kiefer; and American Neo-Expressionists—Julian Schnabel, Robert Longo, Alice Neel, Robert Colescott, and Jean-Michel Basquiat.



Obviously, one can't meaningfully introduce the students to all the artists listed here. (And, of course, there are many other artists who might also be listed.) However, be sure to include artists from various periods and places so that students are aware of expressionism as a vital strategy—not as a mere historical artifact.

A possible curriculum sequence would be to introduce early expressionist works in the context of an expressionistically painted self-portrait project and to later build on this knowledge and skill by introducing expressionists who are more contemporary, as a prelude to the Newspaper Ground project.

PREPARE NEWSPAPER GROUND

Working with the entire class, choose double page spreads of the front pages of newspapers. Be choosy, but not too choosy. In other words, the teacher or the students might be somewhat conscious of choosing a page with a dramatic, odd, or ambiguous picture or headline, but recognize that there is an important element of surrender to chance at the beginning of this artmaking process.

Carefully turn the page over and gesso the back of the page. Apply the first coat very delicately as the paper has a tendency to tear. On ensuing days or class periods, add one or two additional coats of white paint to the back of the newspaper pages.

Alternatives for preparing the pages to make them less delicate include: using the gesso to glue the pages to another sheet of paper or, after the first coat of gesso, covering the entire back of the newspaper page with inexpensive (buy at a Dollar Store) wide, clear, plastic tape.

Apply one coat of acrylic matte or semi-gloss medium to the front of the newspaper page. Allowing a texture or grain from the brushstroke to remain gives an interesting tooth to the surface. If desired, apply a second coat of medium in a perpendicular direction to the first.

If the pages are wrinkled—stack, lay flat, and press with heavy books or iron between clean sheets of white paper.

Create 20% more pages than students who will be doing the project so that all the students will have a choice.

PREPARE STUDENTS TO MARK ON THE GROUND

The Headline Poetry project makes a good one or two-day introduction to the Newspaper Ground project because it familiarizes students with using recycled materials from commercial culture as the basis for their own artmaking.

Prepare students for the idea of developing an artwork on a newspaper ground by introducing them to works by artists who have used printed materials as a base for or element in their work. In the 1950s, Franz Kline created hundreds of drawings, utilizing bold black marks on pages taken from telephone directories. In the 1980s, Adrian Piper created a dramatic series called *Vanilla Nightmares* in which pages from the *New York Times* were re-contextualized with interwoven charcoal drawings of African Americans. Tim Rollins and K.O.S. (Kids of Survival) are well known for their many stylish works in which various symbols are drawn and painted onto the pages of classic novels. The South African artist, draughtsman and animator William Kentridge, sometimes chooses newspaper pages as the base on which to develop the drawings for his animations.



CHOOSE PAGES

Tape or pin newspaper pages to the wall. Have students circulate while looking at the pages. When a page “calls out” (makes an emotional impression in some way) to a student, tell the student to select that page, even if he or she does not consciously like the page or have a plan as to how to proceed.

OBLITERATE

Give students black oil pastel or black pastel. Have them begin work on the project by obliterating and marking out some of the imagery and text. It is important that this work be done with “smudgy” materials so that some of the marking out can be bold and direct, other areas muted and subdued.

Surprisingly, this is often the most difficult stage for students. They have often not learned to surrender themselves to a process and are reluctant to make interventions on a page.

CONTINUE MUTING

At this stage, it often helps to pin up all the works and to consider which pages have enough marks to begin to be transformed. Which make a strikingly different visual impression? Take the time to discuss interesting emerging imagery such as the blurring of images into text or the dramatic re-interpretation of a photograph based on drawn additions.

Give students new media for muting—now including white oil pastels, black and white chalk, and black and white tempera paint. Encourage students to be experimental in their use of materials. Blot or sponge paint onto surfaces. Use the side of chalks or pastels. Smudge oil pastels onto the surface with fingers or q-tips.

At this stage, don’t use markers, pencils, or permanent paint. The project is now in a “push” stage, muting and subduing imagery and text to the overall composition. Later the project will move to a “pull” stage and students may want to remove portions of the materials and then use media suited for details.

LOOK FOR MEANING

This is perhaps, the most difficult and most important aspect of the project. Through personal response paragraphs, partner analysis, small group discussion, teacher/student conferences, and whole class in-process critiques have students identify the meaning and style that they are beginning to see in their artworks. Discuss ways in which the emerging meaning can be enhanced or contradicted.

Most people who have not had sufficient art training assume that artists have an idea clearly in their heads and that artmaking is the process of illustrating those ideas. This misconception keeps students from surrendering to the experience of making—letting the final form become apparent through the process.

PULL

Having successfully created a direction for the artwork through muting, the student artists can now begin to “pull” significant imagery and text into greater prominence. At this point, using finer brushes, pencils, and markers, can aid students in creating points of emphasis. Another, often very beautiful strategy, is to use the back of brush handle to scrape away oil pastel—allowing parts of a photograph or text to re-emerge. Similarly, areas of tempera paint can be removed or made more transparent by wiping with a damp cloth or cotton swab.

ADD

Students may wish to add imagery or text to the piece. There are a number of strategies for achieving this, including: hand drawing onto the work and collaging images and words from other sources onto the ground.



LAYERING & PROJECTING

Though not a necessary step, this can add new levels of interest and meaning to the piece. Use a computer to type up words in an appropriate font. Scan line drawings. Print out or xerox letters and images onto an overhead transparency. Project the image onto the piece using an overhead projector. Experiment with scale and placement. Draw the projection onto the piece using oil pastel, marker, colored pencil, or paint. The advantage of projecting is that the students are likely to come up with interesting juxtapositions that they would not be likely to discover if they were composing their drawing or text on the artwork.

PUSH AND PULL

Encourage students to continue the process of “pushing and pulling.” Emphasize and mute. Add and subtract. The advantage of working in an expressionist mode is it gives students the freedom to sensuously explore and let content emerge spontaneously from the piece.

COLOR EMPHASIS

Toward the end of the project, allow students to use very small amounts of color to emphasize some aspects of the piece. Caution students against losing the muted tones of the project. Point out that in a piece with subdued colors even a hint of low chroma hue can be dramatic.

IN-PROCESS CRITIQUE

Many teachers organize one or two sessions of class critique time at the end of a major project. An interesting variation is to host a class critique one or two days before the end of the project. The emphasis of the critique should not be on telling students how to “fix” their work. Instead, make sure that each work is noticed and described by the group. Sometimes it helps to begin the critique by assigning each work an “observer” who writes a statement describing the work and the ideas and feelings the work generates. Begin the analysis of each piece with a report from the assigned observer.

Students, excited because people are responding to the meaning and emotion inherent in their artworks, are inspired to return to work for a day or two, emphasizing the most important communicative qualities or style of the artwork.

ARTIST STATEMENT

Each student writes an Artist Statement in which he or she describes the artistic and thought processes out of which the artwork emerged. These should be typed up and displayed with the artworks.



MATERIALS

for Newspaper Ground

Newspapers

Gesso or leftover white latex or acrylic paint

Matte or semi-gloss acrylic medium

Black and white oil pastels

Charcoal sticks

Black and white tempera paint (do not use acrylic paint)

Black and white pencils, markers, and pens

Small assortment of colored pencils and pastels

Tissue paper

Sand paper

Glue or glue sticks

Scissors

Brushes

Erasers

Transparency film for xerox machine (optional)

Overhead projector (optional)

Xerox machine (optional)