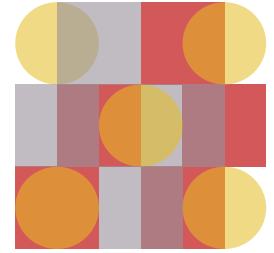


PICTURE OF PRACTICE

Art to Systems and Back



Teenagers scatter through a gallery at the Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland (moCa). It's a wide open space, practically empty except for the occasional painting or sculpture - some blocky, some colorful, some expanding to touch the ceiling. These teenagers are students in a three-week course called *The Creative Process* designed and taught by Jodie Ricci and Jessica Ross. Equipped with a set of prompts, students decide amongst themselves which work of art they are going to discuss. As they walk through *Invisible Cities*, an exhibit by the artist Liu Wei, they look as if they are explorers in some strange, otherworldly galaxy.

Eventually, everyone chooses a work of art and settles into groups. One group of four sits in front of *Survival No. 2*, an abstract, brightly-colored painting. There is no wall text next to this work - or any of the others for that matter - so the students begin by making observations.

"I notice a landscape," says one student.

"I see mountains."

"A sunset."

"Grass and a river."

"There is a lot of contrast."

"Three panels."

"It reminds me of New Mexico."

A member of the group records these observations on loose-leaf, while another keeps track of the time. Notably, the teachers stand on the other side of the room. From their vantage point they can see their students, perhaps hear bits of the conversation, but they maintain a distance as if to stay out of the way and encourage the teens to direct themselves.

Sometimes, giving students less information about a work of art can lead to deeper discussion. It can be helpful to be selective and intentional about the information you share with students.



Installation view: Liu Wei, *Invisible Cities*, moCa Cleveland, 2019

The timekeeper suggests that the group move on and the facilitator - a third student - reads aloud the next prompt.

"What civically-related systems does this work invite you to think about?"

For the first time, students are silent.

"What exactly is a civically-related system?" someone asks.

The two teachers are not surprised that this term feels a little new. They had not introduced the idea of civically-related systems, or systems in general, before inviting students to try out the Art to Systems and Back experience.

"We could have primed them for systems," Jess reflects after class, "but they came up with things that were interesting that they might not have come



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up with if we had primed them.”

“Kids prefer to figure stuff out rather than receive all the instructions or directions,” Jodie adds.

They are right. Despite some initial hesitation, the students brainstorm a lengthy list of civic systems - systems of immigration, sustainability, the environment, man vs. machine, economic systems, systems of technology - all inspired by this single abstract painting. The notetaker writes furiously, trying to catch them all.

A museum Engagement Guide walks by.

“What are you doing with these kids?” he asks Jodie and Jess.

What the man really wants to know is how the teachers managed to get kids to discuss a single work of art for over 40 minutes. Having seen so many other groups of students - and adults for that matter - walk through this same gallery in less than ten minutes, he found it refreshing to see people taking so much time to engage with a single work of art.

Jodie and Jess are somewhat surprised as well. It was the second half of a full museum day and, as experienced teachers, they knew how exhausting long days of sustained looking can be. However, the students “hung with it” even though many of them had never visited a contemporary art museum before.

Reflecting on the session later, the teachers identified a few strategies that they thought were particularly helpful in supporting this deep discussion. First, they let students choose which Liu Wei work they discussed.

“The students had choice; that was a big part of it,” explained Jess. “They chose a piece that they felt connected to and that gave them investment.”

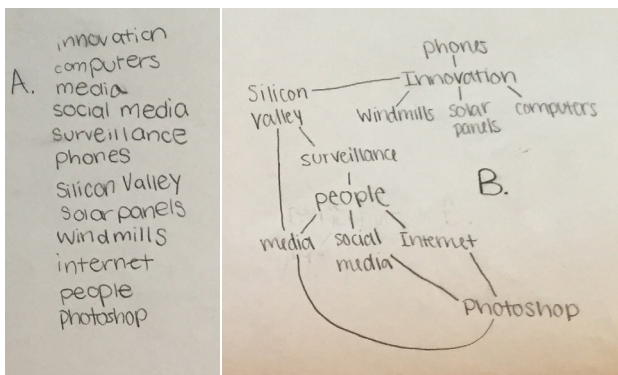
Second, each student in the group took on a role - note-taker, time-keeper, facilitator, etc. As Jodie explained, each student “had something to do and they felt it was important.”

“And, as we are helping students develop dispositions and capacities,” Jess adds. “A lot of the world is working on teams and in groups. Using roles and naming those roles when students are in groups can be valuable for this purpose.”

“However, this type of independent work needs a lot of scaffolding to help make it successful for students. I might have chosen a different tactic if I were working with younger children.”

Jodie and Jess suggest reflecting with the students after the activity about the role they played and how successful they felt their collaboration was.

Back at *Survival No. 2*, the students move on to the next prompt. They notice that the work of art is pixelated and decide to focus the remainder of their discussion on the system of technology. They spend a few



Student notes listing and connecting some parts of the system of technology.

minutes identifying parts of the system, making a rough map of how all these parts might be connected.

When their discussion comes to a close, the group looks back at the work of art one last time.

“What more do you notice? What new thoughts or feelings do you have about it now?” The facilitator asks.

“Maybe the work of art is saying how digitalization is masking the beauty present in real life?”

“Or, perhaps it’s saying that the media is distorting the murky reality of our world?”

“Or, it’s saying that the world is full of insecure people and they rely too heavily on tools like photoshop.”

The students don’t land on a single interpretation. Rather, they end by raising questions and leave seeing the work just a little differently than they had when they started.

**Special thanks to Jodie Ricci and Jessica Ross.*