

# *The Art of Chance: Creating Collaborative Work*

A Lesson based on the works of art in  
***Imaging by Numbers: A Historical View of the Computer Print***  
At the Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, Northwestern University  
January 16-April 6, 2008

---

Situated at the intersection of art, technology, and engineering the computer has been a vital tool for visual art. This groundbreaking exhibition presents a history of the computer print from the 1950s to the present, ranging from early experiments with computer codes to inventive uses of twenty-first century technologies.

Approximately 60 works are displayed, from early plotter line drawings to monumental colorful inkjet prints, by both pioneers such as Ben Laposky and Herbert Franke and contemporary artists like C.E.B. Reas and Pascal Dombis. *Imaging by Numbers* is curated by Block Museum senior curator Debora Wood and artist and independent curator Paul Hertz.

Pioneers in this field initially used methods of experimentation and new machines to create visually interesting lines and curves. These artists explored the idea that computers could be an artmaking tool, producing images and forms by computing information given in the form of numbers and equations. As this process developed and artists became more familiar with new technologies, they were able to create specific lines, forms and patterns while continuing to discover innovative ways to use this new artmaking tool in their work.

This lesson explores the element of chance in artmaking. Often times, during the creative process, mistakes and unexpected outcomes can generate interesting idea and images. Artists working with computers and new technology embrace the idea that the computer is a mechanical tool that can be directed by the artist as well as produce unknown and new outcomes.

## Goals of this Lesson:

1. To examine the role of chance in artworks.
2. To understand the ongoing process of creating artwork.
3. To relate different objects/subjects/forms/ideas.
4. To learn and employ problem solving skills.
5. To work collaboratively.
6. To successfully present ideas.

## Illinois Learning Standards fulfilled:

<p><u>Age Level:</u> Elementary, Middle, or High School</p> <p><u>Estimated Time:</u> approximately 65 minutes/activity</p> <p><u>Specific Topic:</u> Recognizing the artistic significance of chance</p> <p><u>Subtopic:</u> Working collaboratively</p>
---

***Writing Activity:***

**English Language Arts**

State Goal 3: Write to communicate for a variety of purposes.

State Goal 4: Listen and speak effectively in a variety of situations.

**Fine Arts**

State Goal 26A: Understand processes, traditional tools and modern technologies used in the arts.

***Art Activity:***

**Fine Arts**

State Goal 25: Know the language of arts.

State Goal 26A: Understand processes, traditional tools and modern technologies used in the arts.

State Goal 26B: Through creating and performing, understand how works of art are produced.

Suggestions for student assessment:

Evaluate student work using the following criteria. It is advisable to share the criteria with your class before asking students to begin the assignment. Does the student work:

1. Convey an understanding of working collaboratively?
2. Realize how to work through disparate subjects/objects/forms/ideas?
3. Acknowledge how chance may be used to create artwork?

Teaching resources necessary to support this lesson: artworks or poems from Surrealist exquisite corpse works, and/or copies of works from *Imaging by Numbers*.

**Lesson Plan:**

This lesson can be divided into two activities. You may choose to do one or both. The exquisite corpse can be utilized for either drawing or writing activities. The following lesson plans reflect both activities.

**Writing Activity:**

I. Share and explain works from the *Imaging by Numbers* Exhibition and introduce Surrealist Exquisite Corpse artworks, artists and poems to your class. Good artists to explore are Manfred Mohr, Pascal Dombis, Georg Nees, and James Paterson. (Use resource section below for additional images and information)

[10 minutes]

**Supply List**

Writing Activity:

- ✓ Paper
- ✓ Pen/Pencil

Art Activity:

- ✓ Drawing Paper (if would like project to be longer, use larger paper)
- ✓ Scrap Paper
- ✓ Choice of dry Material (i.e. pencil, pastel, crayon, charcoal, pen)
- ✓ Erasers

## II. Discussion

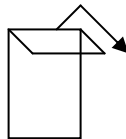
- i) Start with a looking exercise. Show the works you select to the group and ask for observations. Write their thoughts on the board of large paper for reference.
- ii) Follow this discussion with a brief overview of the artists shown. You can also talk about Surrealism in relation to exquisite corpse.
- iii) Go back to the images and ask more directed questions:
  - What are the different elements of the artwork? How do they interact with each other?
  - Ask students to explain back to you what exquisite corpse poetry/artwork is and how it may be related to the artworks of *Imaging by Number*.
  - How do artists use the process of exquisite corpse as a tool?
  - How can one interpret the works? Do they have a story?
  - How does chance play a part in the works?
  - How did artists' interactions with each other/computer programs play a role in their creations?
- viii) Compare the students' initial thoughts from exercise i) to the later discussion.

**[10 minutes]**

III. After discussion, give each student a piece of paper. At this time it is up to you to decide if you want the students to write in a theme. An example would be to tell them all to create a story about red hat. The theme could also be more abstract such as telling them to write about (or in) an emotion or any other idea you might have. Instruct them to write a sentence, phrase, or word at the top of the paper.

**[5 minutes]**

IV. Once students have written their sentence/phrase/word on the paper. Instruct them to fold the paper backwards so they no longer can see what they wrote. **[1 minute]**



\*example of how to fold paper

V. Since this is a group activity, be sure to establish a flow in the room. For example tell students they will be handing their paper to the person to the right. Instruct them to hand the folded paper to the next person. Again, be sure to remind students who have just received the paper that they cannot read what the previous student wrote.

**[1 minute]**

VI. Have the second student continue telling the story that they started on their previous paper. Once they are done, they too should fold their paper like before (so that the next student cannot see the previous two entries) and hand it to the third student.

**[1 minute]**

VII. Repeat steps III-VI as many times as you like. For every switch students should be writing the continuation of their story on the paper and folding it so that the next person cannot see what has been written and handing it to the next student.

**[time can range from 3-20 minutes]**

VIII. Once the rotation has ended instruct students to unfold their paper completely and read the sentences, words, and phrases together as a whole. Have students share their poems either in small groups or to the whole class.

**[10 minutes]**

VI. Discuss the poems as a class or in groups. Ask students:

- Are they funny?
- Do they make sense?
- Would they use this method again?
- Do they like them?
- How does the element of chance play a part in the experience?
- How do you think this kind of activity helped artists in the creative process?

**[10 minutes]**

### **Drawing Activity:**

I. Share and explain works from the *Imaging by Numbers* exhibition and introduce Surrealist Exquisite Corpse artworks, artists, and poems. Good artists to explore are Manfred Mohr, Pascal Dombis, Georg Nees, and James Paterson. (Use resource section below for additional images and information).

**[10 minutes]**

### II. Discussion

- iv) Start with a looking exercise. Show the works you select to the group and ask for observations. Write their thoughts on the board of large paper for reference.
- v) Follow this discussion with a brief overview of the artists shown. You can also talk about Surrealism in relation to exquisite corpse.
- vi) Go back to the images and ask more directed questions:
  - What are the different elements of the artwork? How do they interact with each other?
  - Ask students to explain back to you what exquisite corpse poetry/artwork is and how it may be related to the artworks of *Imaging by Number*.
  - How do artists use the process of exquisite corpse as a tool?
  - How can one interpret the works? Do they have a story?
  - How does chance play a part in the works?
  - How did artists' interactions with each other/computer programs play a role in their creations?

viii) Compare the students' initial thoughts from exercise i) to the later discussion.

**[10 minutes]**

III. After discussion hand each student a piece of scrap paper and instruct them to create an image with 4 connected elements (if you choose to pass the paper 4 times; 5 elements, if they will pass it 5 times; 6, if 6; etc...). These elements can be whatever you like, but good starters are subject, action, setting, and object. Each element should be easy to draw and take no more than 5 minutes to reproduce.

**[15 minutes]**

VI. Once students have created their basic image instruct them to take out their drawing paper (the bigger the paper the more time students should have to draw their elements)

**[1 minute]**

V. Instruct students to draw one of their elements on the drawing paper (i.e. the subject).

**[5 minutes]**

VI. Since this is a group activity, be sure to establish a flow to your room. An example would be to tell students that they will be passing their paper to the right.

**[1 minute]**

VII. Tell the students to pass their paper. (In this activity students *should* see the previous student's work. The element of chance is not what will be revealed, but what they will have to work with)

**[1 minute]**

IV. Once the paper is passed, instruct the second students to draw the second element (i.e. action). Encourage students to make slight alterations to their element that they are adding so that the elements interact with each other.

**[5 minutes]**

V. Once drawn, instruct students to pass the paper to the next person.

**[1 minute]**

VI. Continue the process of having students draw the next element off their scrap paper drawing with other people's elements until students have passed the paper enough times that all the elements are used.

**[5 minutes for each element]**

VI. Hang up exquisite corpse drawings and original sketches. Discuss how elements' meanings changed with each artwork, if works were successful, and how students solved problems.

**[10 minutes]**

## Resources

### **Manfred Mohr:**

<http://www.emohr.com/>

The artist's website is a good resource for images, explanations of works, information about the artist, and discourse about his work. The links to the works in *subsets.motion* and *space.color.motion* are especially helpful to show examples of chance in artwork.

### **Pascal Dombis:**

<http://www.dombis.com/>

This artist website contains images of artwork, explanations of artwork, and information about the artist. Many of the links to artwork may be used to introduce this lesson to either have a discourse on the role of chance and/or how to incorporate dissimilar objects/text. The work of *McLove* especially highlights using unrelated objects to form one harmonious artwork.

### **James Paterson:**

The Digital Design Museum website gives a good overview of Paterson's work including links to view it. The work that relates most with this lesson plan is

<http://www.insertsilence.com/>

As the viewer interacts with the work, it changes. Thus your class can view the work and talk about the role of chance in the work-both by the uncertainty of the user's clicks and the uncertainty of what those clicks will cause.

### **Exquisite Corpse Resources:**

<http://www.tcf.ua.edu/courses/Jbutler/T340/SurrealismLecture.htm>

Website contains a basic introduction to the exquisite corpse and gives artist examples.

<http://www.languageisavirus.com/exquisitecorpse/poem.html>

This website is a continuous exquisite corpse poem. Anyone can go to the website and add a line- hence chance is always present since the visitor does not know what will be added next.

[http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0044-](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0044-0078%281948%290%3A2%3C85%3AANOTEC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J)

[0078%281948%290%3A2%3C85%3AANOTEC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J](http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0044-0078%281948%290%3A2%3C85%3AANOTEC%3E2.0.CO%3B2-J)

Pierre Schneider's *A Note on the Exquisite Corpse* which can be found in article-database JStor (or in the Journal *Yale French Studies* No. 2, Modern Poets: Surrealists, Baudelaire, Perse, Laforgue (1948), pp. 85-92), is an excellent article about what the exquisite corpse is, under what conditions it was created, how it was used, and what it produces. We recommend this for teacher use, as it is a bit dense even for high school students.