

GENRE BENDING



an invitation to playful discovery

Joelle Te Paske




The page features several abstract, colorful patterns in the corners, resembling marbled paper or stained glass. These patterns include green and black swirls, yellow and red geometric shapes, and various other vibrant colors and textures.

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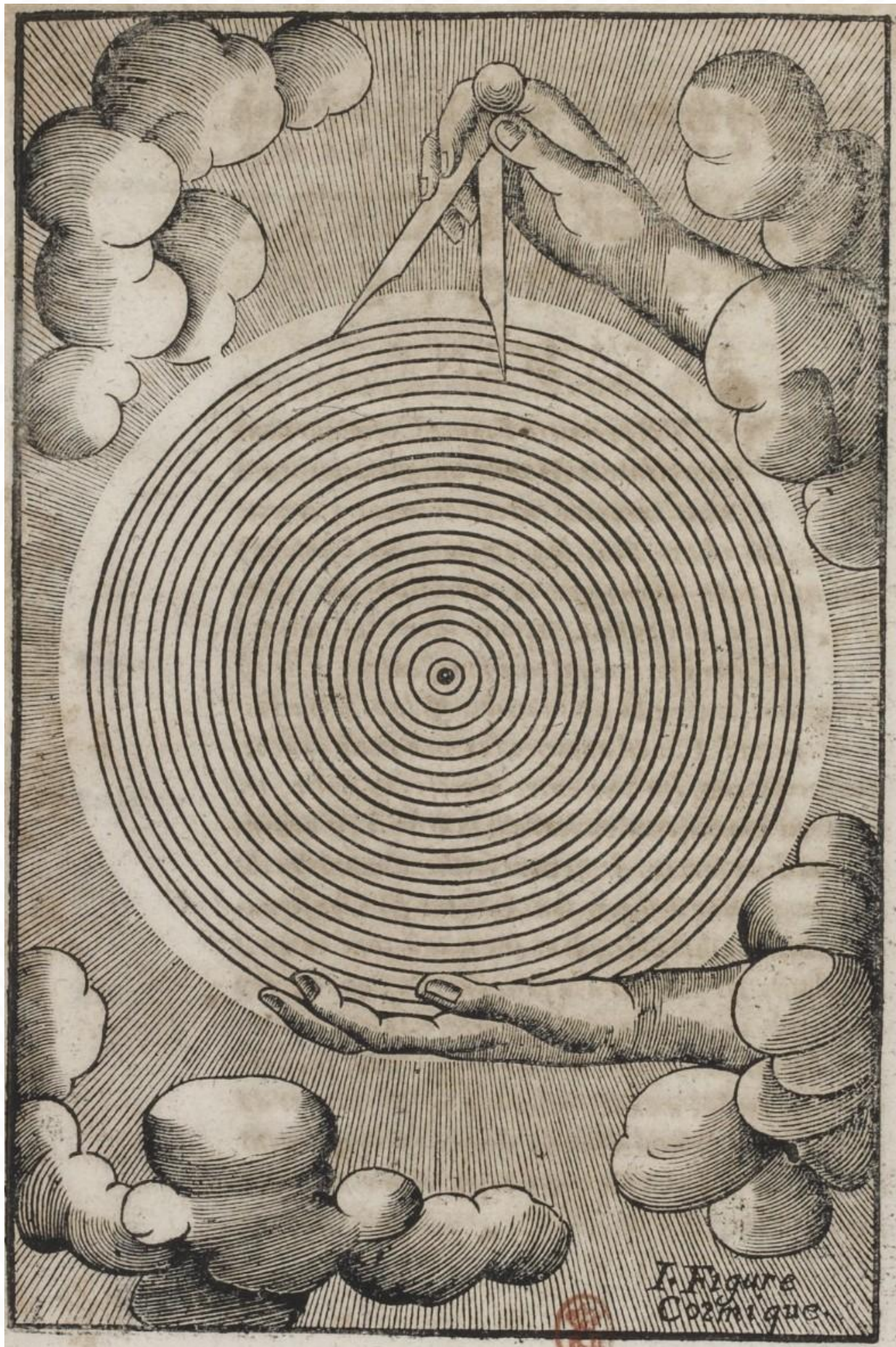
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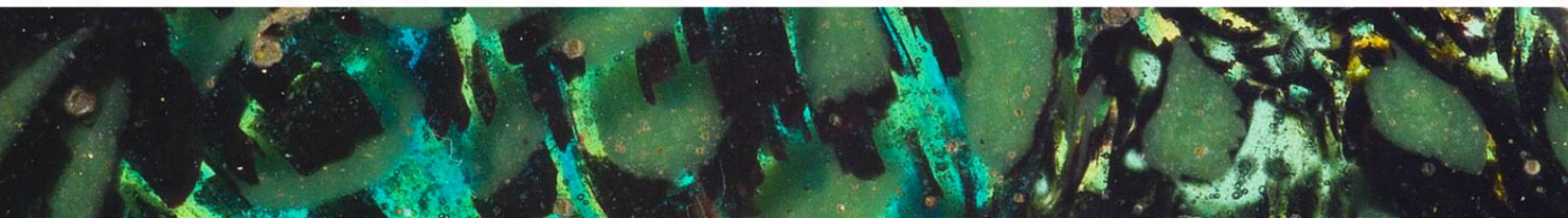
Annibal Barlet, *I. Figure Cosmique*, 1657

INTRODUCTION

In 1913, French artist Marcel Duchamp took an everyday bicycle wheel, flipped it over, and stuck it in a stool. Declaring it a work of art, he deemed the sculpture a “readymade,” and set the stage for many of the century’s later experiments in conceptual art. A few years later, Duchamp would continue his readymades with one of his most famous, *Fountain*, 1917. This time he selected a urinal, tipped it on its back, and signed it with a favorite pseudonym, R. Mutt. Here the readymade moved beyond a flip-flop of meaning and into a more complicated terrain—tongue-in-cheek humor. What is this nonsense? Not nonsense—art, Duchamp said. And how? Because I say so.

While a direct link between a maybe-brilliant, maybe-arrogant French surrealist and our day-to-day lives may not appear to have much in common, there are intriguing questions contained in the readymade. Who or what makes art “art”? Who or what makes the meaning of anything? Do we have the power to change that? Is that a revolutionary act, or boring day-to-day life?

In flipping over that everyday bicycle wheel, Duchamp flipped the script, relying on his role as an artist—the power and creativity of that role—to fundamentally change the meaning of things. We imbue the role of the artist with a special kind of power as meaning-maker—a symbolic power, making metaphors, representations, and mirrors of the belief systems that surround us. But of course, artists are not the only people to do so. We each make meaning—consciously and unconsciously—in thousands of thoughts and actions every day.



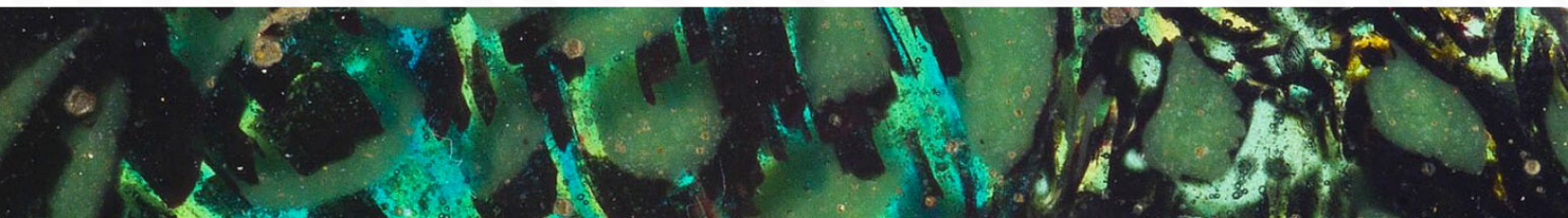
I begin with a big example from art history to use Duchamp as one of many guides, not a gleaming example to put on a pedestal. Because while Duchamp was doing quite a hat trick—as Artist I will say this is Art—aren't we all creative beings?

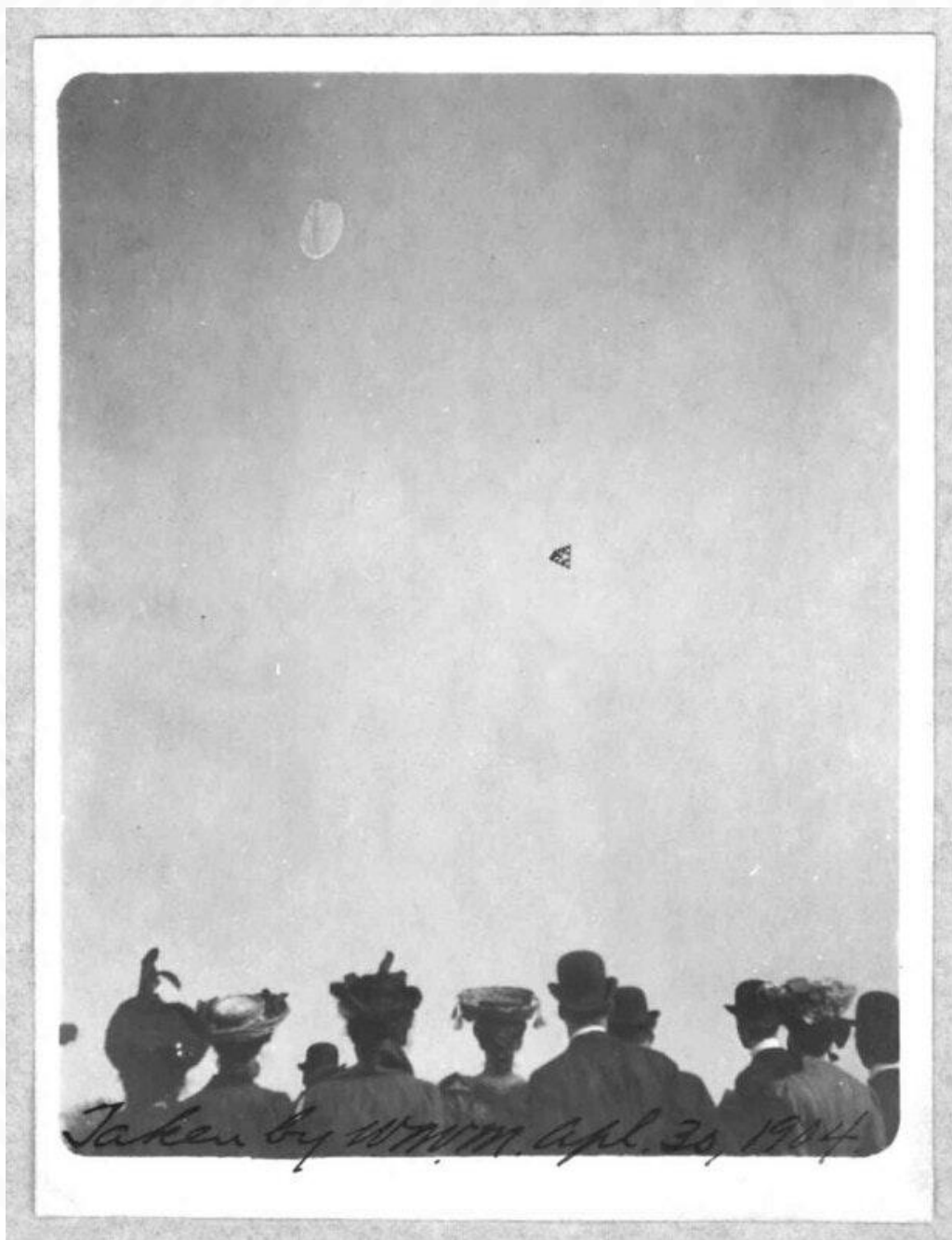
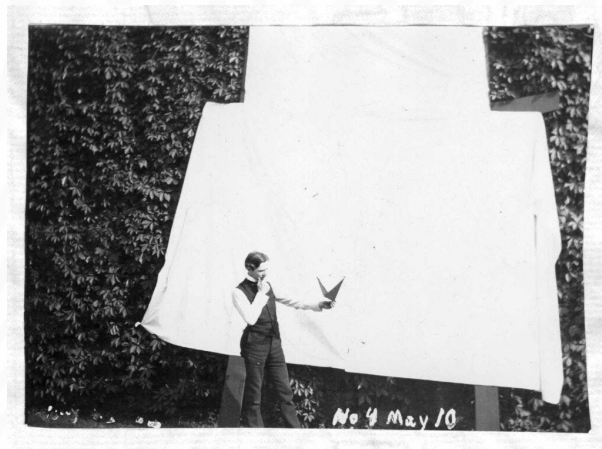
Aren't you making meaning all the time, in your daily life?

Think of your day as a poem. Are you not its poet?

With a focus on religion, technology, and visual culture, my research has been an interwoven study of how belief systems create meaning in real time, every day, by people just like you.

I bring to this work my perspective as someone who believes in the power of cultural strategy, fueled by a belief in its capacity to create greater understanding and joy.

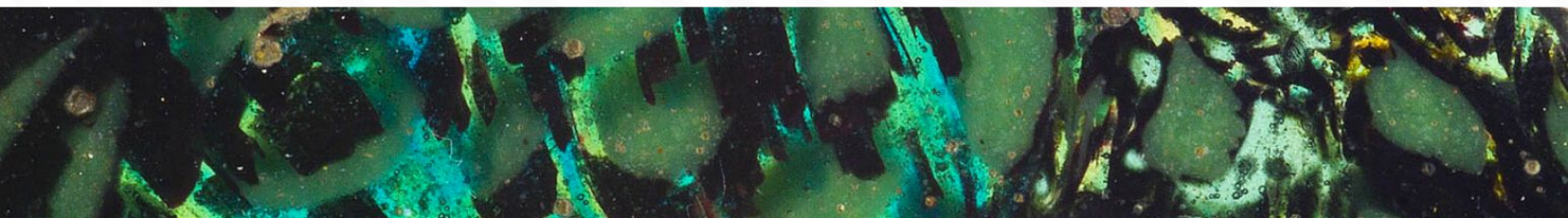




Testing tetrahedral kites by Alexander Graham Bell, 1903

When I first learned about Duchamp I remember being in between the stacks in an enormous research library, trying to understand the rush of excitement I felt. The way I perceived what art could be was changing, and with it, the way I perceived what the world could be was, too. Like a dam tumbling down, I felt the category of “art” rushing out of the studio and soaking into everyday life. I wondered: *What would it be to live inside the readymade?* Not in the object itself, but the space of possibility that this re-definition provided my mind, my heart, and my body. I felt this was beyond art history and into belief itself. It was philosophy, religion, poetry, and the divine.

I wanted to live inside the readymade. So I created a course of study focused on “art practice as political play”—an interpretation of art as a process of continuous play and a manifestation of active ideas within the politics of the subject and the world around her/him/them/it. Thinking of art this way activated it differently for me, welcoming the teachings of the creative process to reveal new realities of meaning. Art-objects became markers of active practices rather than aesthetic treasures.

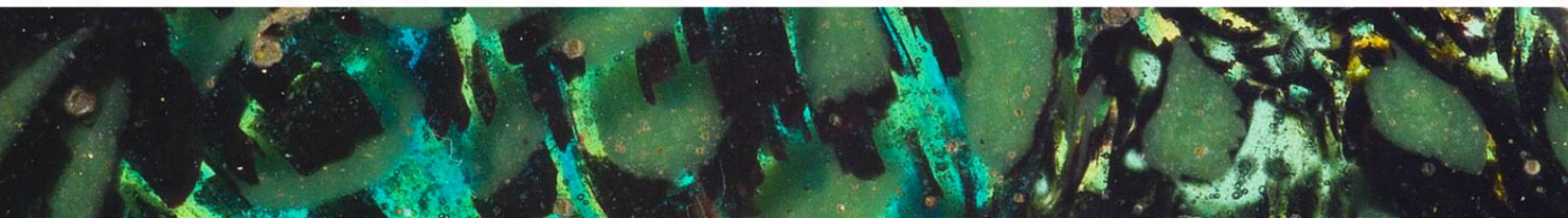


Thinking about art this way brought me into a world of ritual, belief, and play. In turning my attention from the art-object to the creative act, I found myself linked to a bigger story, which is the sacred histories of creation writ large.

In his book *The Work of Art: Rethinking the Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Michael D. Jackson describes the expansive potential—and mystery—of creative action. He writes:

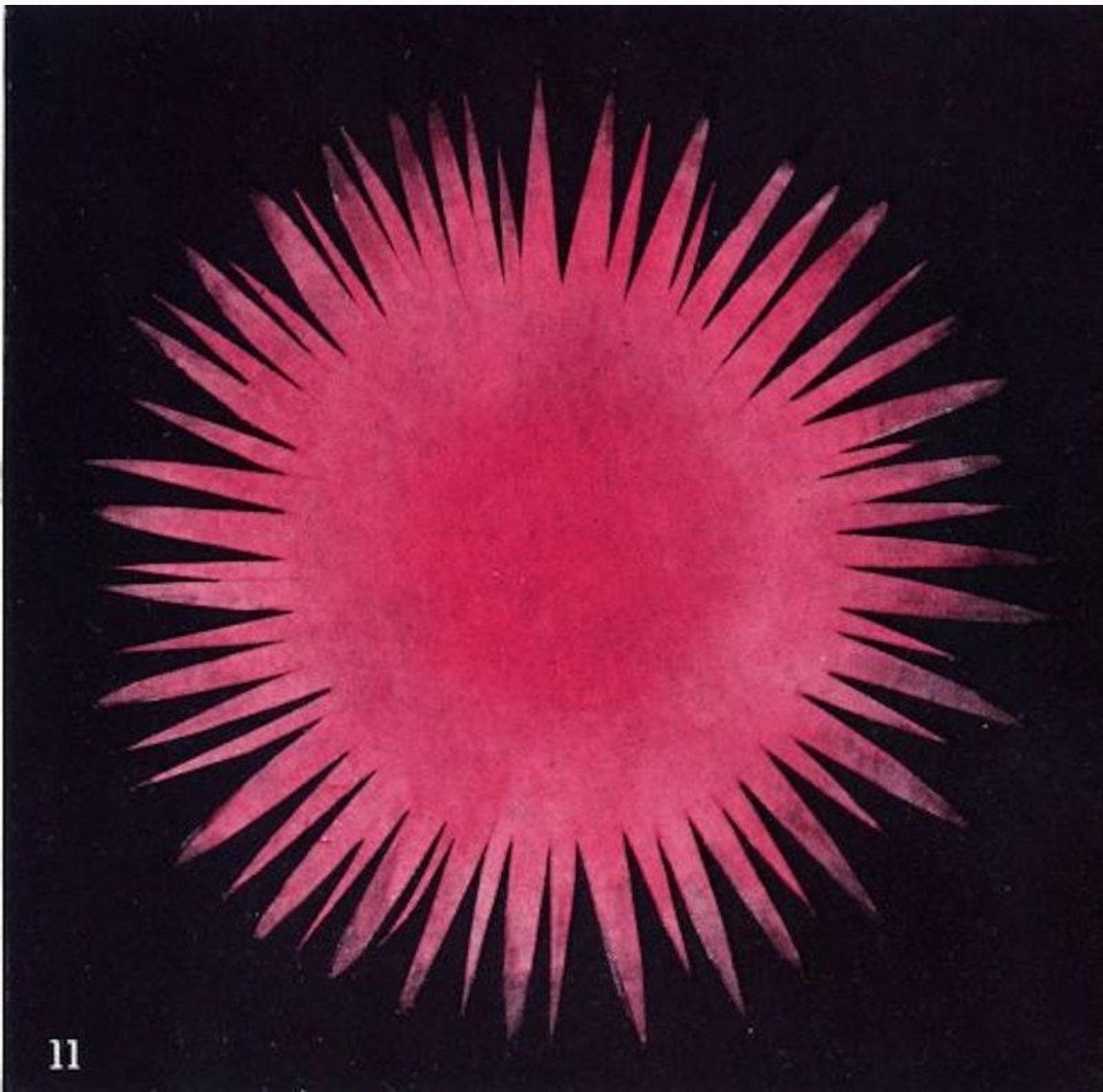
“Inasmuch as every act—whether of parenting, painting, paper cutting, praying, or parlaying—brings something new into the world [...] a mystery always attaches to such acts, for they can never be reduced to the conventions, experiences, and materials on which they were predicated or to the effects they have in the world into which they pass. Like a sacrifice to the ancestors, an appeal to a divinity, a ritual to bring rain, a magnanimous gesture, or a conscientious act of parenting, the origins and effects of a work of art cannot be fully fathomed.”

This space of possibility, full of imagination and questions, is where this text lives and breathes.



Some will say that all we have are the pleasures of this moment, but we must never settle for that minimal transport; we must dream and enact new and better pleasures, other ways of being in the world, and ultimately new worlds.

José Esteban Muñoz



“Radiating Affection,” Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, 1901

WHAT IS CULTURAL STRATEGY?

As Jackson describes, this creative work, this “bringing something new into the world,” inserts moments of wonder into the day-to-day. By opening up these instances of what *could be*, creative expression and dreaming imagine new possibilities. Wonder invites curiosity.

When these values are woven through social justice movements, this insistence on imagining and creating something new can create lasting political change. Jeff Chang, Liz Manne, and Erin Potts describe this work as *cultural strategy*, a field of practice that centers the work of artists, storytellers, media makers, and cultural influencers. They write: “Over the long term, cultural strategy cracks open, reimagines and rewrites fiercely-held narratives, transforming the shared spaces and norms that make up culture.”

The image of cultural strategy “cracking open” fiercely held narratives is a powerful one. Within the terrain of culture—at its simplest, how *things are done in a particular time and place*—these strategic interventions offer a different way of conceptualizing what the world can be. In this book you will find activities to enter different ways of being with other people (and yourself!), inspired by cultural strategy.



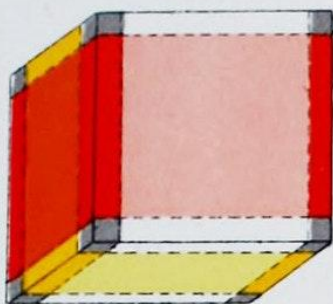
As we consider together what these “different ways of being” could look like, it is important to consider how each of our creative impulses are situated. When we think of “creating a better world,” that does not look the same for each person. Jackson points out that “religion, art, and even personhood are not *sui generis*, coherent, internally consistent categories that hold true for everyone in exactly the same way...but are deployed as shorthand terms to mask the phenomenological diversity and multiplicity of experience.” This multiplicity of experience is both the power of creative expression and its lived complexity. This text seeks to create a world that is equitable, joyful, and loving. But your version of that may look quite different than someone else’s.

The power of embracing creativity is both in our individual contributions and in the collaboration, sharing, and growing of these visions, together.

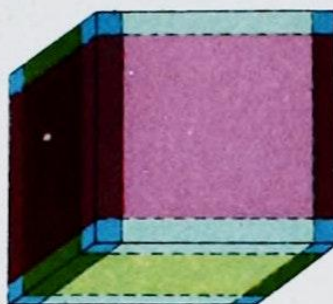
The goal is to create *situated* cultural strategy. There is no one approach to this work.



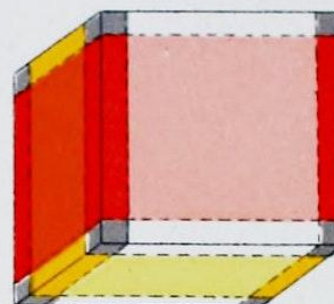
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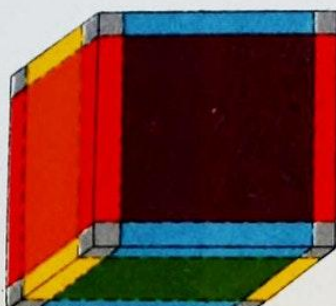
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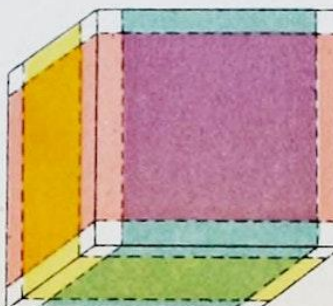
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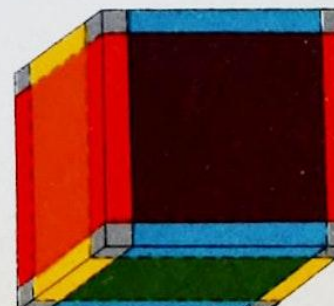
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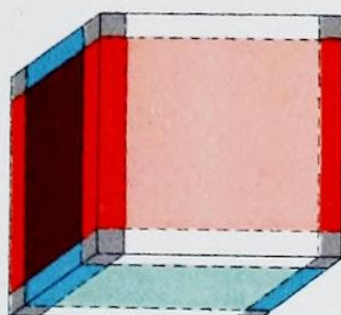
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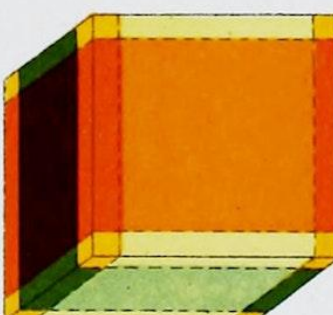
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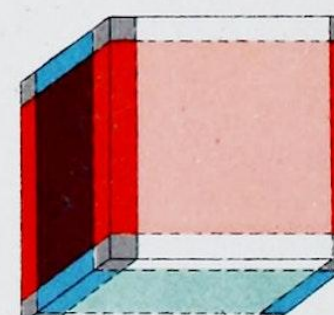
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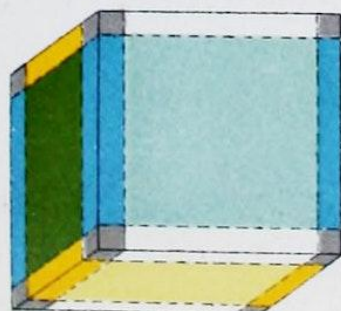
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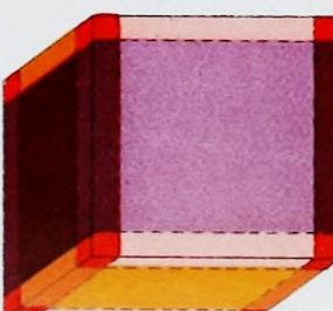
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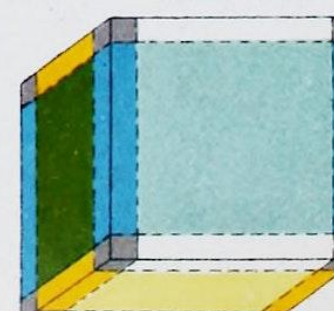
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Very quickly in discussions of creativity, we begin to feel a production-oriented mindset beginning to creep in. If we can be more creative, find better solutions, scale up, and monetize the results, it can *feel* that progressive change is happening. But this type of thinking is just a different brand of the drive to make money and conquer land that has caused so much harm throughout history. This is not the type of imagination I am seeking here. Writer Octavia Butler described an alternative. She called it her “radio imagination,” an imagination that truly *listens*, tuning in to unseen airwaves, before jumping into action.

Ruha Benjamin, a scholar of race, justice and technology, describes how the Butler’s radio imagination provides a needed ethical framework “where the zeal for making new things is tempered by an ability to listen to the sounds and stories of people and things already made.” This is a crucial intervention because what is at stake is “the category ‘human’ itself—who defines it, inherits it, wields it...who rents it, tills it, toils for it...who gets expelled from it, buried under it, or drowned as they risk everything to inhabit it?”

We do not create in a vacuum, but from our past experiences, biases, histories, and beliefs. And we create what it means to be human in doing so.

In looking towards cultural strategy, we must not forget to listen to the *sounds and stories of people and things already made*.



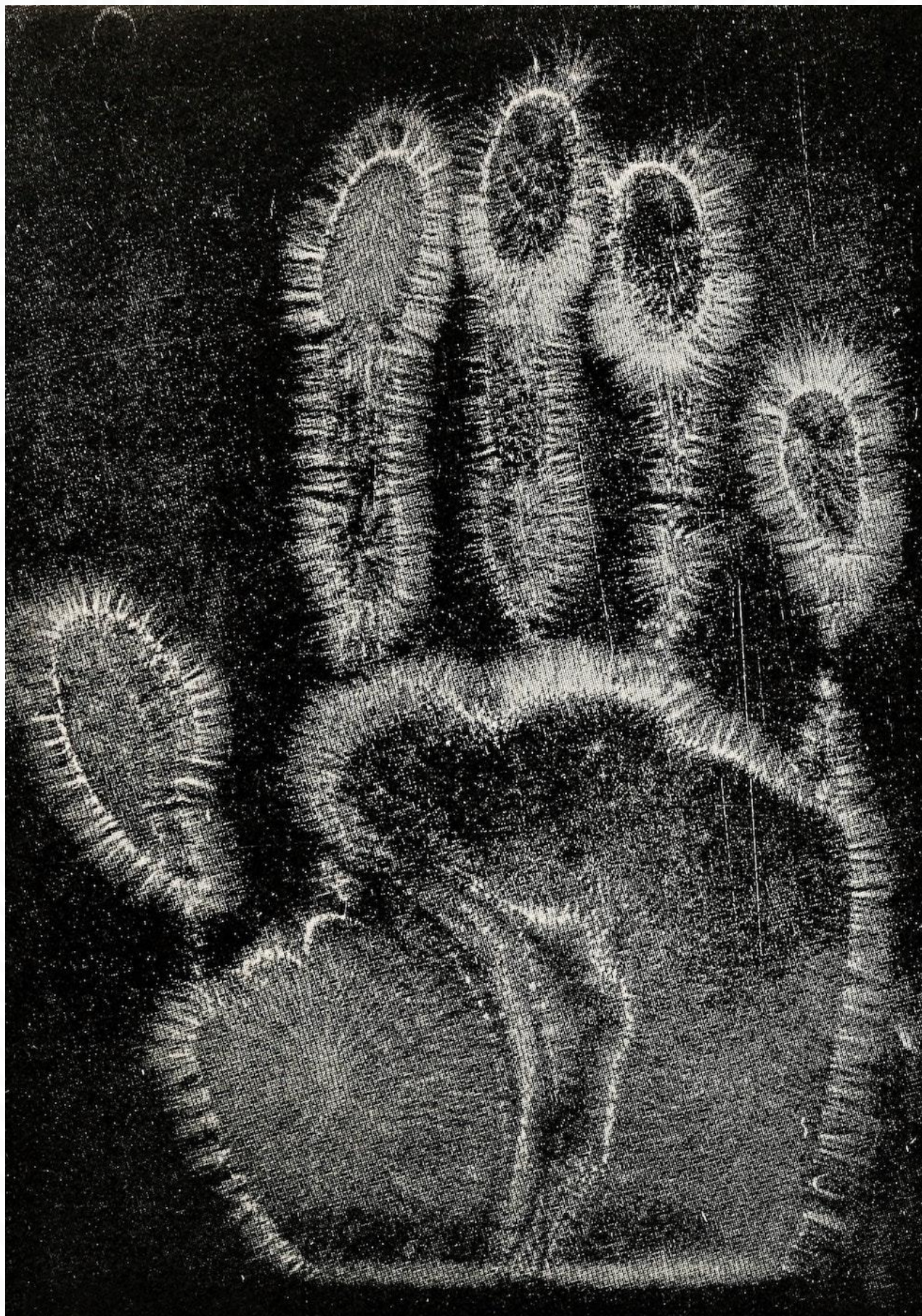
In *The Native Creative Process*, Jeanette Armstrong (Okanagan) and Douglas Cardinal (Métis/Blackfoot) write: “To the Native, balance is a way of describing how change, which is the natural outcome of any creative process, can be brought about by humans in a deliberate, mutually beneficial pattern as an enrichment process rather than one which is competitive and therefore occurs as a destructive force.” To me, this is the work of Butler’s radio imagination.

In listening carefully to the past alongside the future, we can realize creativity that seeks balance and enrichment.

The mitigation of harm, healing of intergenerational trauma, or refusal of pain-centered discourses can be creative acts unto themselves. A wise therapist once told me: saying no is also saying yes to something else.

In a society often focused on exploitative growth, *deliberate non-destruction* is also a creative act.





“Pure electrography of the hand” from *The Human Soul: Its Movements, Its Lights, and the Iconography of the Fluidic Invisible* by Hippolyte Baraduc, 1913

I am for
an art that is
political-erotic
-mystical,
that does
something other
than *sit on its
ass in a museum.*

Claes Oldenburg

GENRE BENDING

People have been reimagining and building new systems for as long as there have been people. While Chang, Manne, and Potts describe this work as cultural strategy tied to specific roles (such as artist or media maker), I welcome a more expansive definition of cultural strategist that moves us into thinking what it would mean to consider *everyone capable of this work*. I call this *genre bending*.

Genre bending is about taking things that already exist and looking at them differently, turning them this way and that way in the light, and seeing how they might be adapted or synthesized into exciting new forms.

Coming from a divinity school context, I perceive this work as political and strategic but also spiritual, connecting ourselves to the complex creative forces of the universe. This is my own take on bending the categories, norms, and genres that structure day-to-day life. Undoubtedly where I see bending potential you may not, and there are places you will that I won't.

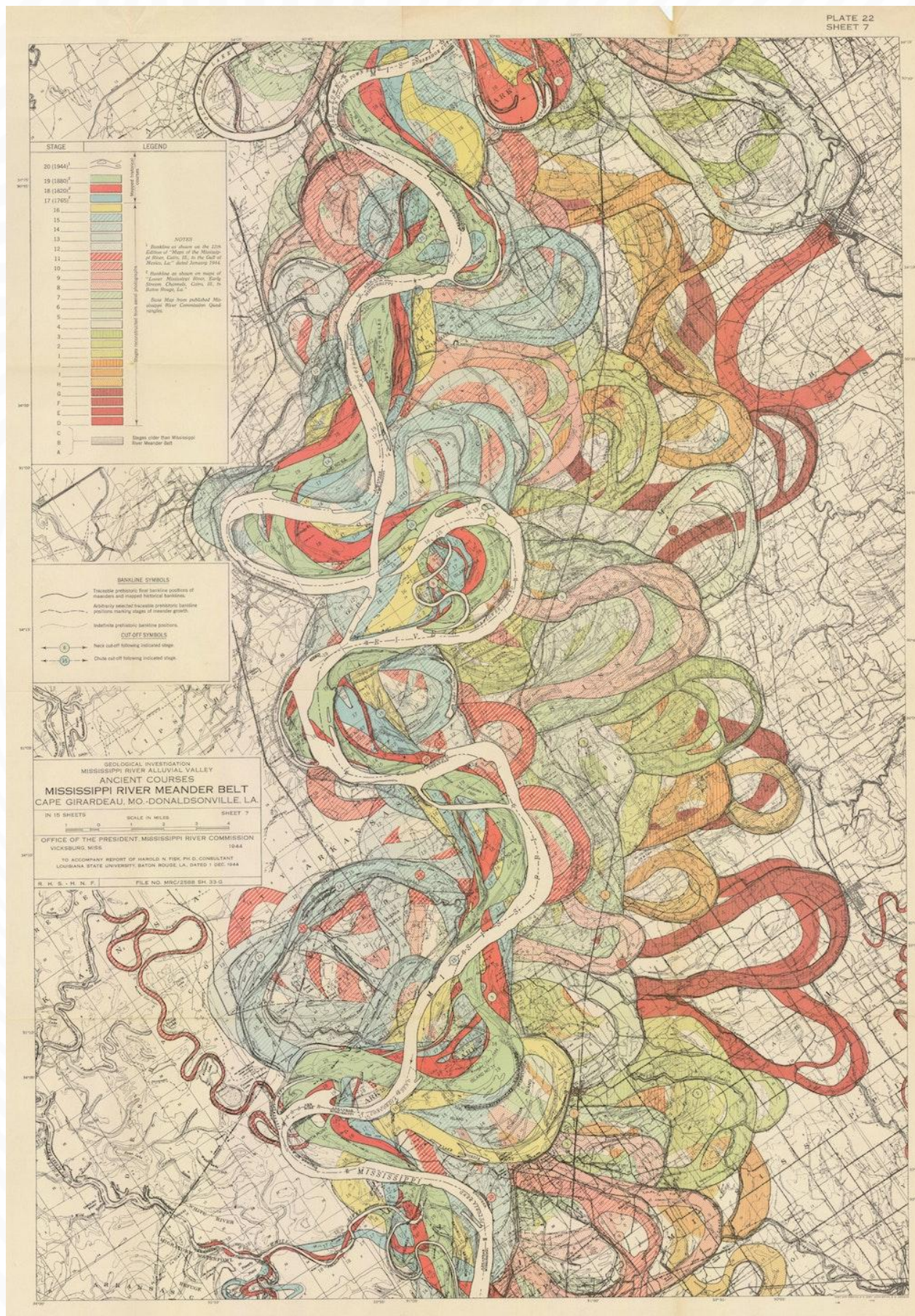


Why genre bend? Our waking lives are made up of thousands of daily actions, perceptions, and belief systems. In genre bending, there is time and space to take a look at those patterns and play with their forms and expectations. It can spark new ideas and inspire more conscious living.

When done in collaboration with others, genre bending is especially powerful. I believe everyone is a genius of their own life experience. When genre bending, people share this expertise with one another and create deeper networks of meaning and collective flourishing.

This text pulls from my life and the stories, lessons, and provocations of creative people like artists and spiritual leaders, but also children, philosophers, teachers, technologists, parents, and many others. It offers gifts of wisdom that have inspired me alongside activities to create new relationships and understandings.





Harold Fisk, Map of the "meander belt" of the Mississippi, 1944.

Genre bending is not a research interest for me but a way of moving through the world. I am a queer woman, Unitarian Universalist, humanist, and center curiosity and exploration in the way I live my life. I love show and tell, science fiction, and thrift shopping. I prefer questions and jokes to declarations and absolutes. And I believe that that creativity—in writing, in visual art, in performance, and in daily life—can help us collectively imagine a more equitable and joyful world.

When I began graduate school, online amidst pandemic precautions, I spent my first year discerning if my calling was to be a Unitarian Universalist minister leading a brick and mortar church. I realized the calling was related but different—I kept imagining a fantastical space, a community center that was part science fiction, part art museum, but with kitchens and tables instead of exhibition galleries. This is the realm of genre bending, where the practice of ministry—caring for others, dreaming together, and reaffirming our collective values—has left an indelible mark on my thinking.



For me, genre bending is secular ministry. I want to understand why people believe what they do, the stories that got them there, and help them craft the stories they will bring in to their futures.

From adaptive leadership models we know that it is less that people fear change but the *loss* that accompanies change. Dreaming up new ways of being is not always comfortable. It is contextual, messy, and ever-changing.

Sitting with, acknowledging, and helping people move through the feeling of loss that undeniably accompanies change is part of the ministry of genre bending, too. This helps people and organizations to think of different approaches and inspirations for the work they do and highlights creativity as a cultural force that affects what people believe and invites people to believe in different futures.





Albert Robida, *Le Sortie de l'opéra en l'an 2000* [Leaving the Opera in the Year 2000], ca. 1902

Creativity is
unimaginable
without some
visionary or
spiritual fuel.

Rosi Braidotti

WHERE I'M COMING FROM

I grew up just outside of Boston, in leafy Cambridge where I sit now, and then Belmont, a suburb that had public schools that sent me to play the cello in Austria when I was fifteen.

Within this New England context, I had two other cultures meeting at home. My mother Francesca is a painter and multimedia artist who grew up in apartheid-era Johannesburg, South Africa.

My grandfather, a Brit through and through, and my grandmother, Italian and French by way of Egypt, were part of an artistic social circle of families in Joburg, spurred on by my grandfather's founding of the first Town and Regional Planning department at the University of the Witwatersrand in 1964.

My grandmother was a talented painter who had studied at the Sorbonne and at one time did forgeries of Georges Braque paintings, made hats, and drew animations to make ends meet before meeting my grandfather.

My aunt Gaiki, a painter who became a Buddhist later in life, was banned by the South African government in 1967. My mom remembers being brought along to a multiracial party, an illegal gathering at the time. Gaiki's name ended up on a list and she was unable to get a passport for twenty-five years.



My father Derrick is a former professor and current sculptor who grew up in a Dutch Reformed immigrant town in the northwest corner of Iowa.

His dad was the town mayor and prominent lawyer, a distant, well-respected man who in my father's words, "worked himself to death" at the age of 60. I never got to meet him.

My grandmother was a champion of the town theater and art programs. People describe her as an avid reader and "good Christian." She spent the majority of her life in a wheelchair following a family automobile accident, and passed away when I was very young.

Dad was the basketball star, class valedictorian, and presumed inheritor of his father's small-town political legacy. But rather than law school, my dad went to Grinnell, studied English, and soon after, moved to Boston to get a graduate degree in education.

It was a creative change that ruptured his family's presumed way of life. My dad likes to tell a story that around this time in Grinnell's history, the official transcripts read "grades canceled due Vietnam War protests." It was a time rupture on every side.





Joseph Sell, *Motivated Representation of God (Crayon)*, early 20th century

My older sibling Daniel was devoutly atheist from a young age.

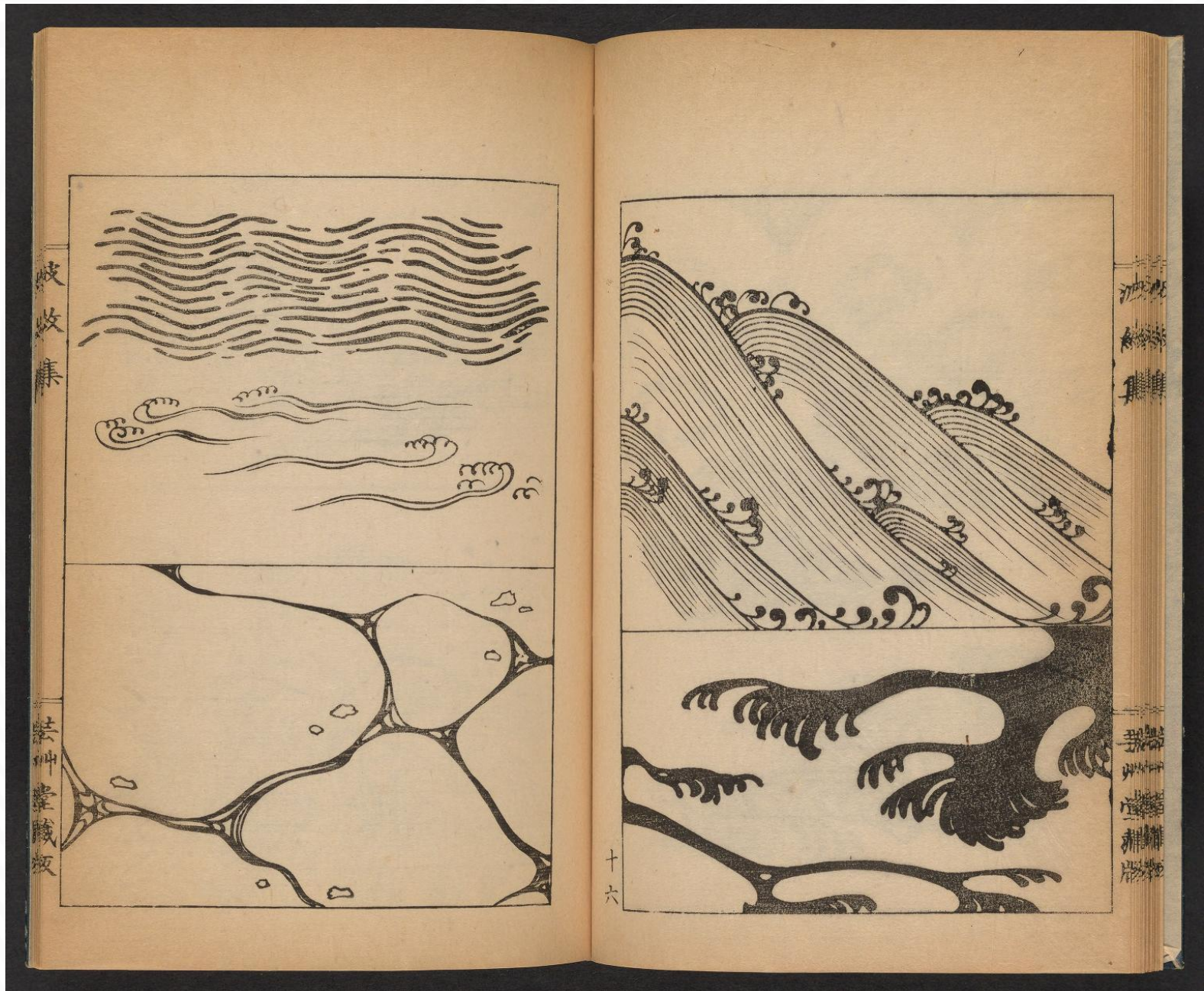
After refusing to be confirmed in the Episcopal church my parents asked them to read an enormous book on “world religion.” I can still see in my mind’s eye. At least a foot tall and almost as wide, it had a white cover and large, red font that declared *WORLD Religion: The great faiths explored & explained*. Daniel read it dutifully week after week. Not easily held, it was a book that needed a floor or table to support its weight.

While Daniel was religiously non-religious I visited many different imaginations and dreamworlds because of them. They gave me the world of video games, RPGs, *Star Trek*, and later, cyberpunk literature.

They told me nerds are always excited to share what they love.

To this day we have a shared visual and auditory vocabulary. It is sarcastic, loving, and chrome-tinted.





When I think of the
sea of my life,
I'm not a strong swimmer,
and I never had the
stroke for mainstream.

But the flotsam and
jetsam of tides is what
I make my art from;
I recycle things that I find.

It's not only materials,
images and objects, but
feelings and ideas.

Betye Saar



French silk sample book, ca. 1900

AN INVITATION

I share these snippets of my family to give a sense of my own situatedness, but also to focus on the fact that we shape our imaginations in *community*—with family, friends, children, teachers, writers, coaches, spiritual leaders, and many others. We shape our imaginations with characters we read about, podcasts we listen to, and dreams we travel in.

Culture scholars Alex Khasnabish and Max Haiven write: “The radical imagination is something we do, and something we do together. Imagination, our capacity to project into the present and the future, is constantly in the dialogic process of reweaving itself in both explicit and subtle relation to those people, institutions, and forms of power that surround us. For this reason, the radical imagination is *never one thing and is always changing*. We cannot grasp it or measure it or define it. But we can convoke it. That is, we can call it into being as part of collaborative praxis.”

When we convoke our imaginations, there is unbounded potential for what we can dream, realize, and transform. And when we can harness that power in community, our genre bending can create dynamic movement.



In the following mixture of exercises, visuals, and quotations, we can explore these ideas, together. I offer not a manifesto or heroic argument but rather a collection of jumping off points for you to explore and share.

Writer Ursula K. Le Guin called this her “Carrier Bag of Fiction,” an approach to writing that prioritized the collection of miraculous odds and ends rather than a single heroic story. On her own “sack of stuff,” she writes:

“When I came to write science-fiction novels, I came lugging this heavy sack of stuff, my carrier bag full of wimps and klutzes, and tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed, and intricately woven nets which when laboriously unknotted are seen to contain one blue pebble, an imperturbably functioning chronometer telling the time on another world, and a mouse’s skull; full of beginnings without ends, of initiations, of losses, of transformations and translations, and far more tricks than conflicts, far fewer triumphs than snares and delusions; full of space ships that get stuck, missions that fail, and people who don’t understand.”

My hope is these jumping off points will live and breathe in the real world, your particular world, as conversation-starters and bridge-builders between different disciplines.

So let’s open the bag, shall we?





John H. White, photograph from *DOCUMERICA*, Chicago, 1973

Everyone
you will ever
meet knows
something you
don't.

Bill Nye

ACTIVITIES & INSPIRATIONS

In this section you will find activities to inspire creative thinking, collaboration, and play interspersed with some of my favorite quotes and images. Most of these activities are intended for small to large groups of people, but there are also two focused on independent reflection.

Feel free to pick and choose, edit, and adapt as needed. Your mission is: Have fun!

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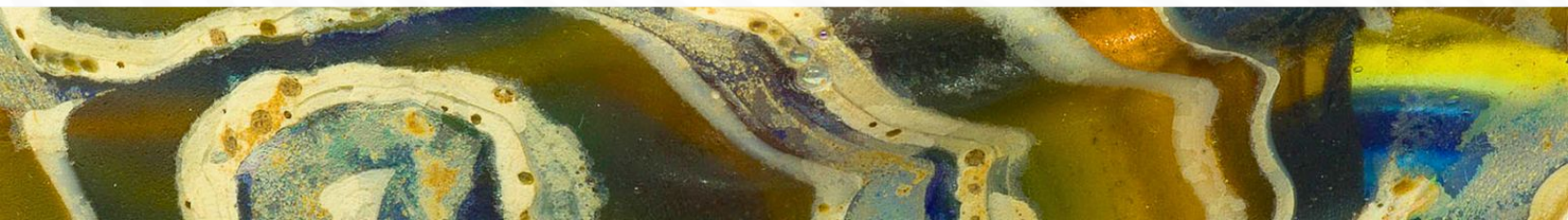
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WELCOME



Becoming Present through Breath, Movement, Sound, and Silence

This exercise comes from the [Work That Reconnects \(WTR\)](#), an open-source resource library and network founded in the late 1970s by Joanna Macy and colleagues. Macy is a respected facilitator and scholar of Buddhism, general systems theory, and deep ecology with five decades of activism experience. WTR uses what is called a “spiral journey” to move participants through four stages of reflection: Coming from Gratitude, Honoring our Pain for the World, Seeing with New/Ancient Eyes, and Going Forth. This exercise is adapted from the first stage and can be facilitated in person or online.

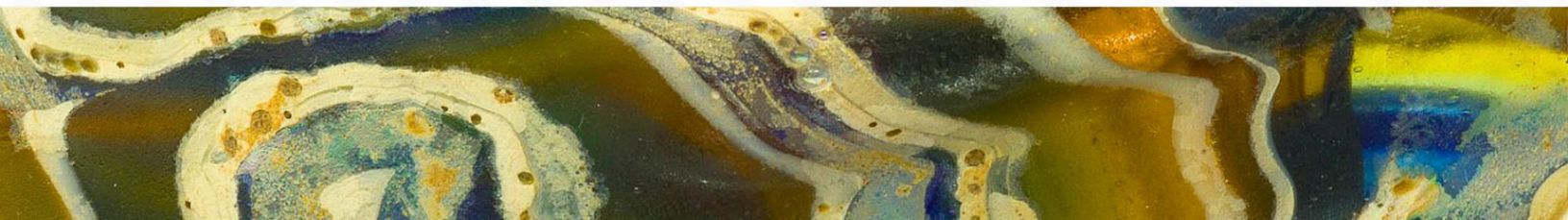
Opening through the Breath: At the outset of a workshop, we can turn to the breath, the body, and the senses to relax and tune in to the wider currents of knowing and feeling.

Begin by having everyone pay attention to their breathing for a few moments. Invite participants to sit or lie down, soften or close their eyes, and tune into their natural breathing rhythm. You may lead the group in a brief breathing practice of your choice or read out the following words:

The breath is a helpful friend, for it connects the inside with the outside, revealing our intimate and total dependence on the world around us.

It connects mind with body, lending attention to that ever-flowing stream of air, stilling the chatter and evasions, and making us more present to life.

The breath also reminds us that we as open systems are in constant flow, not stuck within any given feeling or response, but dynamic and changing as we let it pass through us.



After some time for continued quiet breathing, invite participants to slowly return to wakefulness. The exercise can end here or continue to open through the Body or Silence.

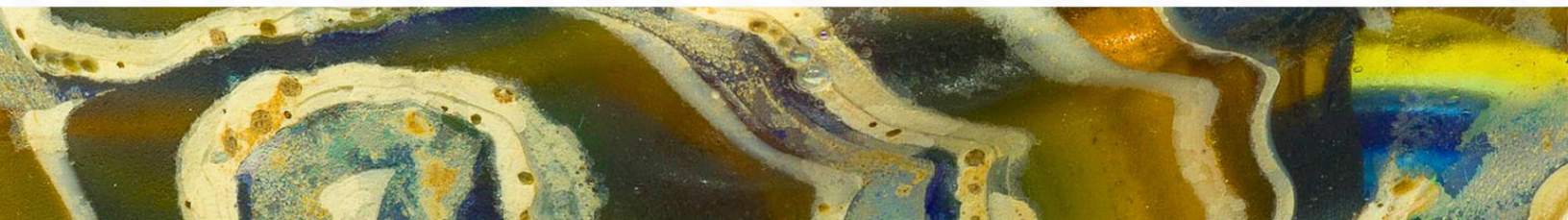
Opening through the Body: Our bodies pick up signals that our minds may refuse to register.

Essential joys come through the body as well: the tastes, sights, sounds, textures, and movement that connect us tangibly to our world.

To bring attention to the body, continue the guidance you began with the breath, using your own words to suggest something like the following:

Stretch. Stretch all muscles, then release. Slowly rotate the head, easing the neck with all its nerve centers. Rotate the shoulders, releasing the burdens and tensions they carry. Behold your hand, feel the skin. Feel the textures of the world around you, clothing, arm of chair, tabletop, floor. Your senses are real; they connect you with your world; you can trust them.

Opening through Silence: Many traditions, like the Quakers, know the power of “gathered silence,” where together in stillness we attune to inner and deeper knowing. Some facilitators like to begin a session with a period of silence, eyes closed, just to settle in. Feel free to use this exercise alone or in combination with others.





Reverse cassetta mirror frame, ca. 1950

Ice Breakers

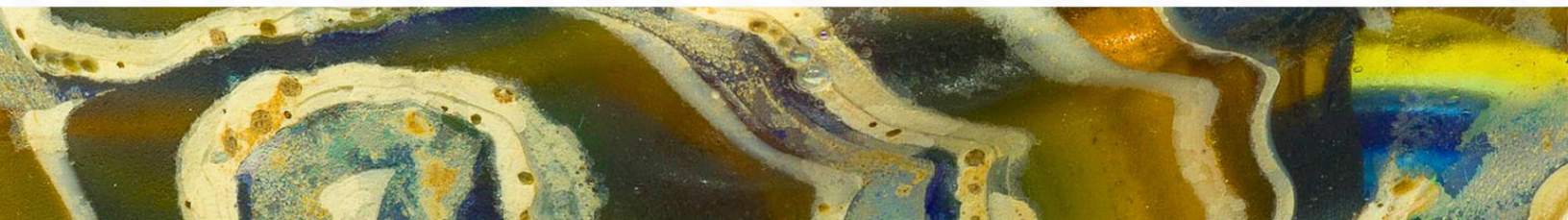
Below are some of my favorite questions from the organization [Museum Hack](#), which leads “renegade museum tours” throughout the United States. Depending on the size and make up of your group, tailor the questions to your context and make sure to offer people the option to pass. These ice breakers can be used at in-person or online gatherings. Try one out at your next work meeting or dinner with friends and see if you notice a change in the conversation that follows.

QUICK QUESTIONS

- What did you eat for breakfast?
- What’s your favorite flower or plant?
- What is your most used emoji?
- Do you play any instruments?
- What season would you be?
- What is your cellphone wallpaper?
- What’s the last great TV show or movie you watched?
- If you could write a book, what genre would you write it in? Mystery? Thriller? History?
- If aliens landed on earth tomorrow and offered to take you home with them, would you go?

DIGGING DEEPER

- You have your own late night talk show, who do you invite as your first guest?
- If you could instantly become an expert in something, what would it be?
- What fictional world or place would you like to visit?
- What is one thing we would never guess about you?
- What would your superpower be and why?
- If you were famous, what would you be famous for?
- What is the most amazing story about your family?
- What is your best idea for a new invention?
- If you had to teach a class on one thing, what would you teach?
- What was the worst job you ever had?
- What’s the best piece of advice you’ve ever been given?

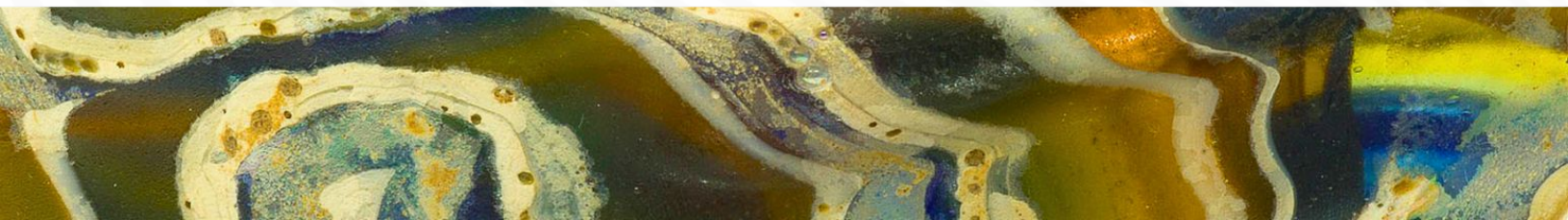


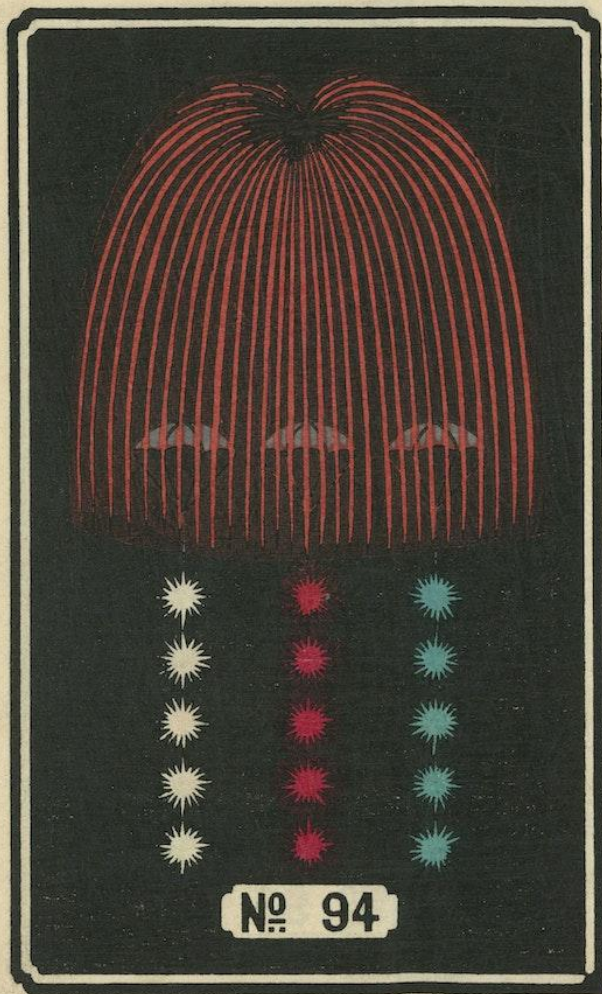
WOULD YOU RATHER

- Would you rather live in the ocean or on the moon?
- Would you rather lose all of your money or all of your pictures?
- Would you rather be able to run at 100 miles per hour or fly at 10 miles per hour?
- Would you rather travel back in time to meet your ancestors or to the future to meet your descendants?

WHAT'S YOUR FAVORITE...

- What is the best book you've ever read?
- What is your favorite dessert?
- What is your favorite time of the day?
- What was your favorite game to play as a child?
- If you had to eat one meal everyday for the rest of your life what would it be?
- What's your favorite place of all the places you've traveled?
- If you could see one movie again for the first time, what would it be and why?
- If you could bring back any fashion trend what would it be?
- Have you ever met your idol or someone you revere greatly?
- What is your favorite musical instrument and why?
- What is your favorite magical or mythological animal?
- What was your least favorite food as a child? Do you still hate it?
- If you could donate a million dollars to any charity, what cause would you choose?
- What song or album could you listen to on repeat?
- If you could choose any person from history to be your imaginary friend, who would you choose?
- You can have anyone fictional as your imaginary friend, who would you choose?
- What movie do you think everyone should watch?
- If you had to be on a reality TV show, which one would you choose and why?
- What sport would you compete in if you were in the Olympics?





The Pie of Life

This activity comes from the Unitarian Universalist [religious education library of “Deep Fun.”](#) It utilizes a simple activity to better understand where people are coming from, how they spend their days, and what their priorities are. Encourage participants to share whatever they feel is relevant and leave out anything they’d rather not share. This activity requires paper and writing utensils for the group. It can be completed at an in-person gathering or online with video.

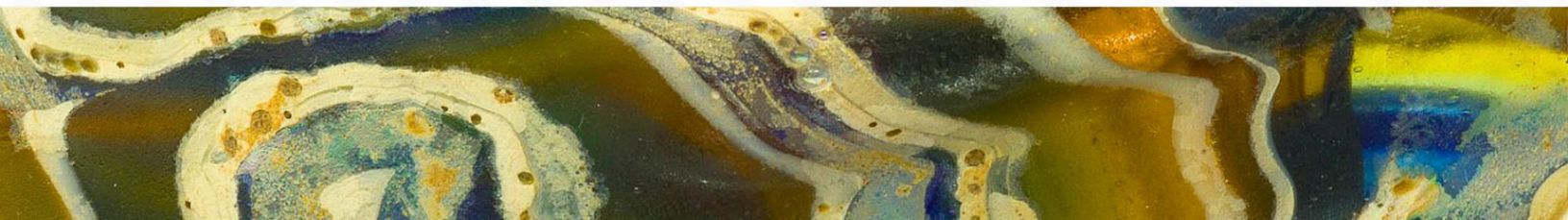
Ask the group to draw a large circle on a piece of paper.

Tell the group that the circle they just drew represents a day in their life. Ask the group to cut slices of the pie to represent the amount of time they spend doing different things.

Example: the amount of time you sleep on a typical day, at school, daydreaming, with friends, alone. Have them label their slices.

After the group has finished slicing their life pies, have them share with the group (if they are comfortable).

Give each person time to talk about one or more of their slices.



See Think Me We

This learning activity comes from the [Arts as Civic Commons](#) project developed by Shari Tishman, Flossie Chua, and Carrie James at Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. I had the pleasure of learning with Dr. Tishman in a class focused on the art of “slow looking,” which explored what happens when people use a variety of observation strategies in order to move past first impressions. This exercise can be facilitated in person or online, and is suitable for use in school, museums, galleries, or anywhere else people gather to explore art together.

Facilitator Notes: First, choose an artwork or image. This routine works well with a wide variety of works, so feel free to be experimental or adventurous in your choice.

At the time of the workshop, prompt participants with the following four steps and related questions:

1. SEE: Look closely at the work. What do you notice?

The SEE step encourages close looking. Ask learners to fully describe what they see, and to hold off making interpretations or giving opinions until the THINK step.

2. THINK: What thoughts do you have about the work?

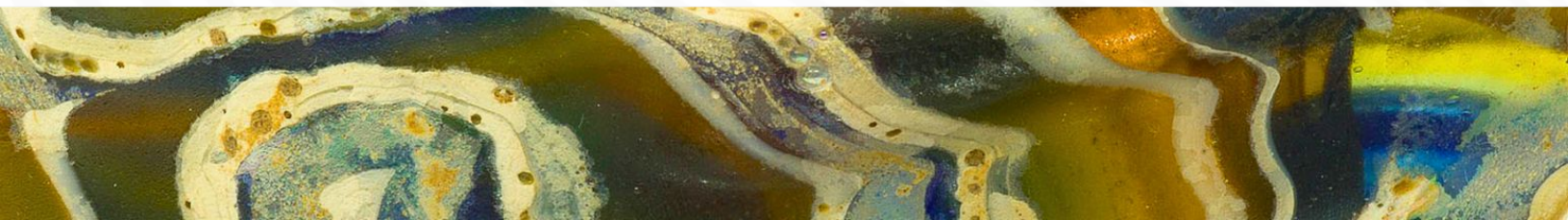
The THINK step encourages learners to share thoughts about the work. If need be, you can give some direction by asking: What’s going on in the work? What makes you say that?

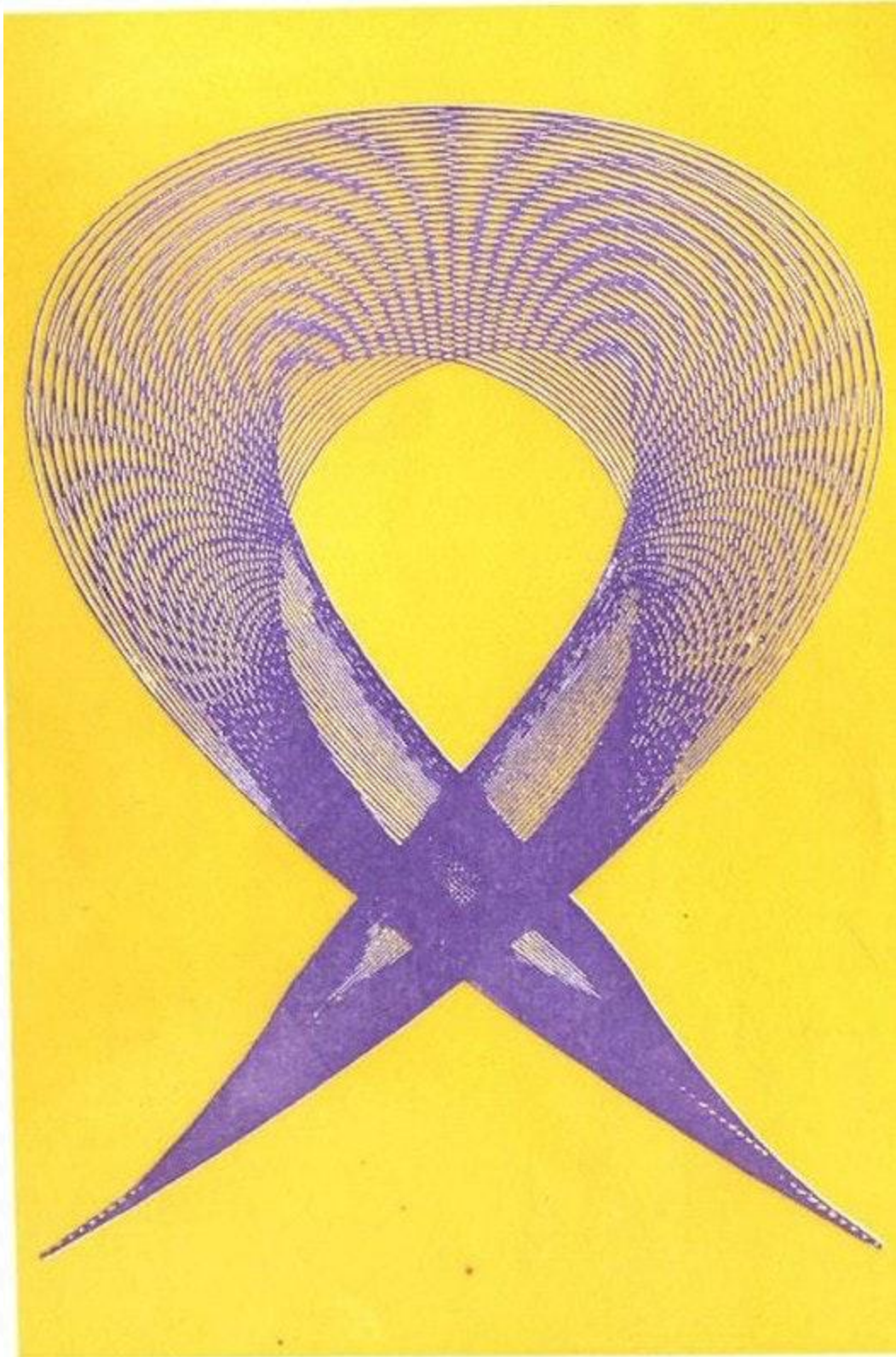
3. ME: What connections can you make between you and the work?

The ME step asks learners to make personal connections, so it’s a moment when a safe and trusting atmosphere is important. You may want to model this step by sharing your own personal response first. If you’re working with a large group, do this step in pairs or trios.

4. WE: How might the work be connected to bigger stories—about the world and our place in it?

By asking for “bigger stories,” the WE step invites learners to reach for connections beyond themselves. One way to help them do this is to ask them to consider how the personal connections they identified in the ME step might connect to larger themes of human experience. As with the ME step, it can be helpful for you, the facilitator, to model a response by sharing your own reflections.



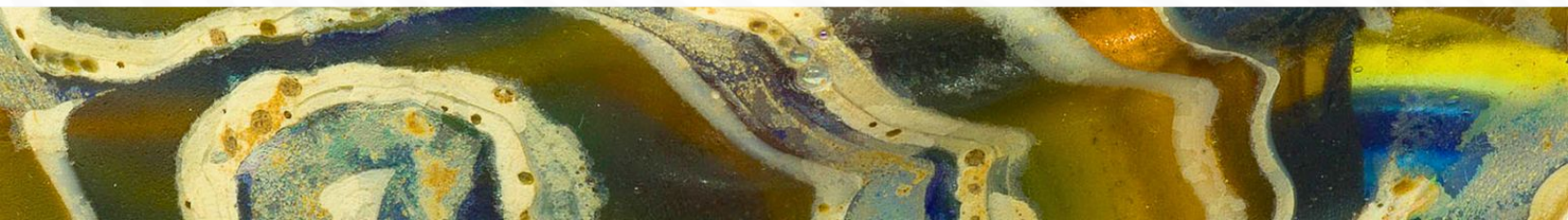


“An Aspiration to Enfold All,” Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater,
Thought-Forms, 1901

Societies never know it,
but the war of the artist
with his society
is a lover's war,
and he does, at his best,
what lovers do,
which is to reveal the
beloved to himself
and, with that
revelation,
to make freedom real.

James Baldwin

WARM UP



Cover the Space

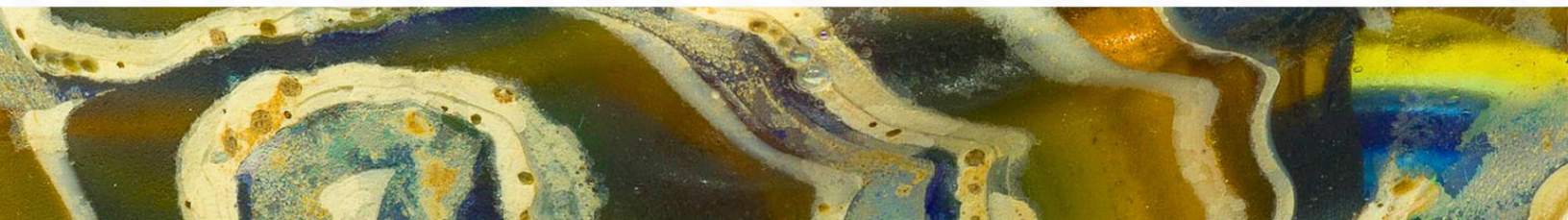
An initiative of the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Texas in Austin, [Drama for Schools](#) provides helpful methods for public school educators to integrate drama-based instruction into their curricula. This warm up activity is intended for groups gathering in person.

Description: This strategy encourages participants to be aware of space and present in their bodies, as they move safely around a defined area. It is often used at the beginning of a series of activities as a warm-up.

Directions: Begin by designating a playing space with a very clear perimeter. Next, ask a group of five or more people to move around the space without talking or making contact with any of the other participants. During the silent movement participants can be asked to stretch their arms, reach for the ceiling, and/or shake out as they are able. Invite participants to notice their pace and to consider the pathways they are making; encourage participants to vary their pattern and their pace (while remaining respectful of other bodies). Next, invite participants to make eye contact with one another as they pass. A verbal or physical greeting can be added to eye contact if desired. Then return to silent and individual walking.

Side-Coaching: “What do you notice in your body as you move around the space?”

Reflection questions: What did you notice about yourself in this exercise? What did you notice about the group? How did you communicate with one another during tasks that required you to work silently? Why might it be important to take time to settle yourself into a space and group at the beginning of our work together?



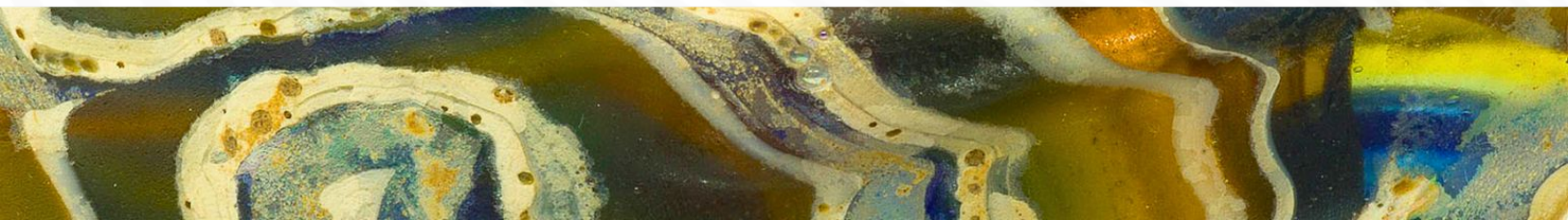
Object Stories

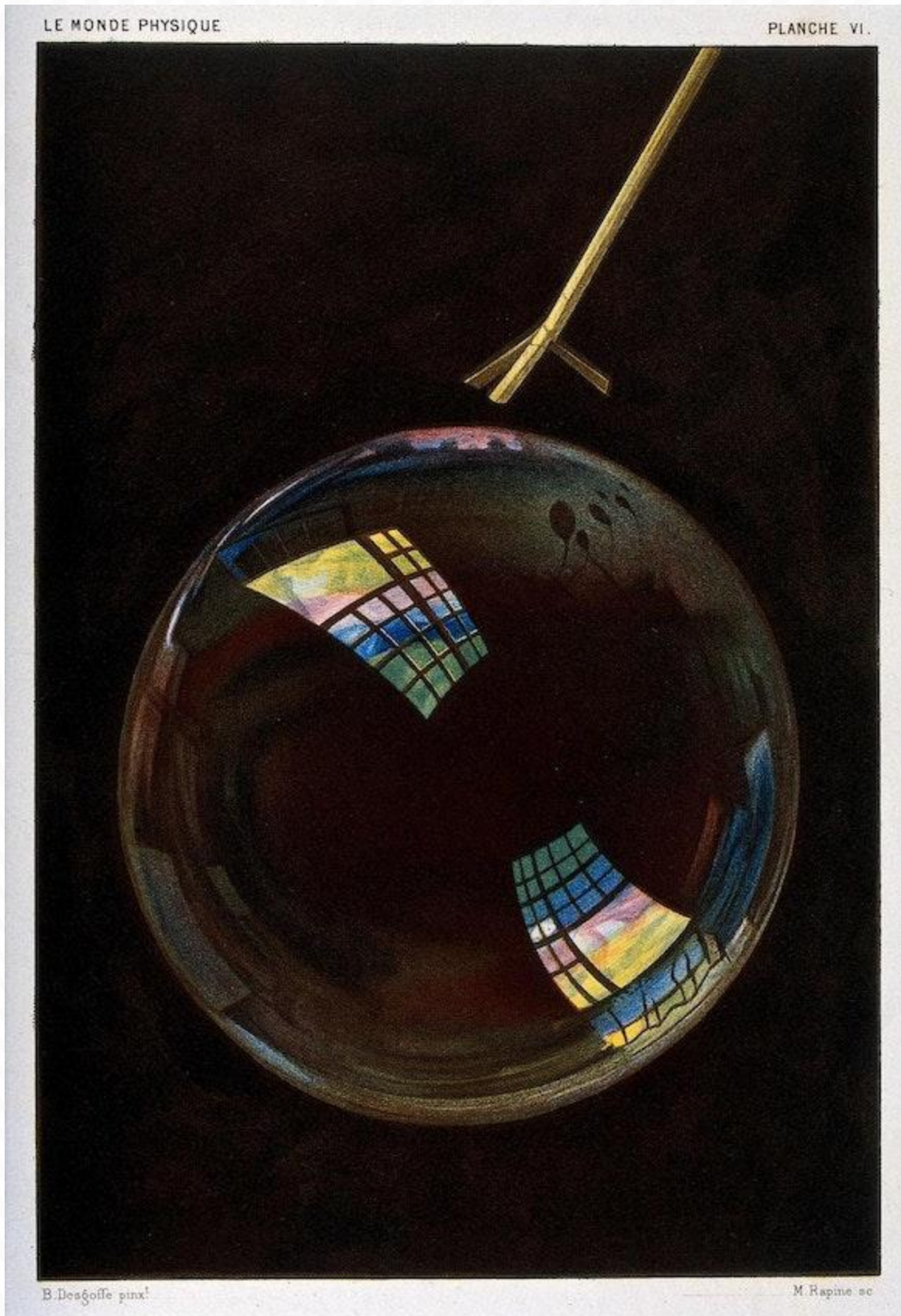
An effective activity from Unitarian Universalist religious education to spark imaginative thinking and practice storytelling. This activity can be adapted to almost any-size group or and can be repeated with several different objects.

Pass a small object around the circle and make up incredible stories about it. Often the more mundane the object, the more fantastic the results!

Example: “This paperclip is actually the key to a spaceship that crashed in my yard when I was five...” Participants can jot down their favorite parts of each story to share with the storyteller afterwards.

At the end, if desired, vote as a group on the best story overall, the most unexpected, the best details, and the funniest.





Alexandre-Blaise Desgoffe, *Soap Bubble*, 1882

Heads Up

This activity is also sourced from [Drama for Schools](#), which provides helpful methods for public school educators to integrate drama-based instruction into their curricula. It is intended for groups gathering in person, ideally who are not meeting for the first time or have established some vulnerability with one another.

Description: Head's Up is about building ensemble through eye contact and non-verbal, personal connection. It also explores ideas of chance.

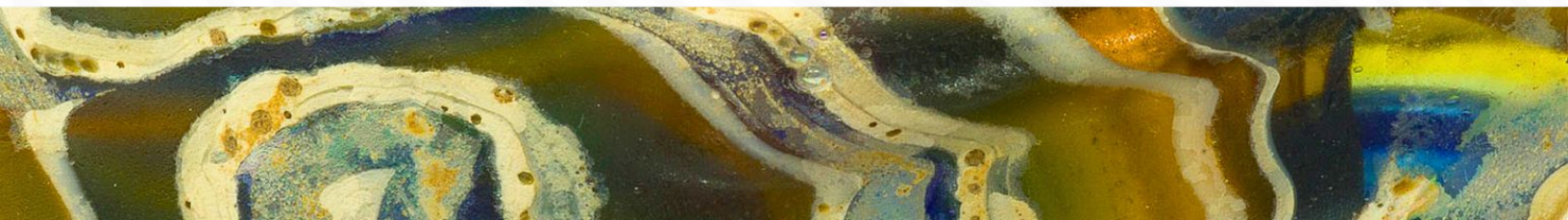
Directions: Invite students to stand in a circle. Introduce the activity: when I say “Heads down,” everyone put their heads down. When I say, “Heads up,” please lift your head and look directly at one other person in the circle. If two people happen to randomly choose to look at each other, then you both are out of the game. If you look at someone and they are looking at someone else, stay in the game. Next, I will say “Heads down” and people still in the game, put heads down; people out of the game, step out of the circle and the game to watch. As the game gets smaller students may need to step closer in to make a smaller circle. Continue to say “Heads down. Heads up” until one or two players remain. When this happens, the others re-join the circle, and the game restarts with every player for another round.

Side-Coaching:

Let's adjust the circle to see who is still playing.

Remember you must choose a specific person as your point of focus each time you look up.

Reflection: What did you notice about yourself as you participated in the activity? What did we do in this activity? What skills does this game require? Why was there laughter?



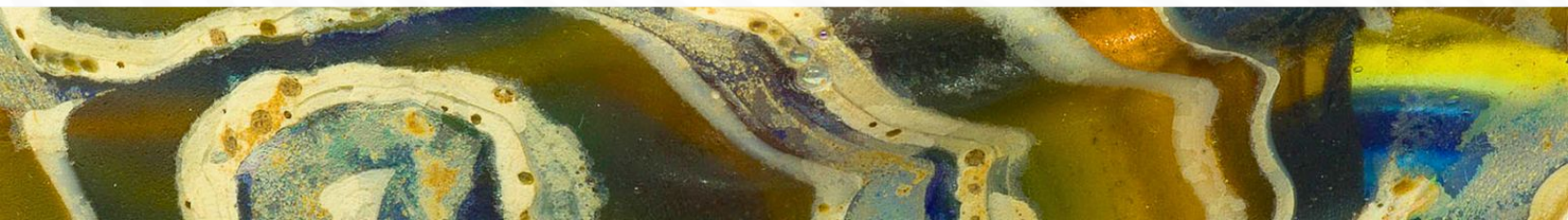
In filling the well, think magic.
Think delight. Think fun.
Do not think duty.
Do not do what you should
do—spiritual sit-ups
like reading a dull but
recommended critical text.
Do what intrigues you, explore
what interests you;
think mystery, not mastery.

Julia Cameron



Costumes by Lavinia Schulz and Walter Holdt, ca. 1924

CREATE



Great Game of Power

Augusto Boal (1931-2009) was a Brazilian theater director, writer, and politician who is best known for developing the [Theater of the Oppressed](#), a theatrical form that aims to empower marginalized communities and promote social and political change. One of his best-known games, The Great Game of Power is an activity that explores representations of power through the construction of a visual image made of everyday objects. I've done it in groups as small as four to as large as twenty.

Directions: Place a set of four chairs in a row, along with a water bottle in front of a seated group. Ask for a volunteer to silently arrange the four chairs and a water bottle in such a way that, in their opinion, one chair has more power than all the other chairs. Explain that any of the objects can be moved in any direction or placed on top of each other, but none of the objects can be removed altogether from the space. Sit in the audience and wait for a volunteer to arrange the chairs. Once the chairs have been arranged, ask that volunteer to return to their seat and to not reveal their thinking. Next, ask the group to interpret or “read” the image made by the chairs and water bottle:

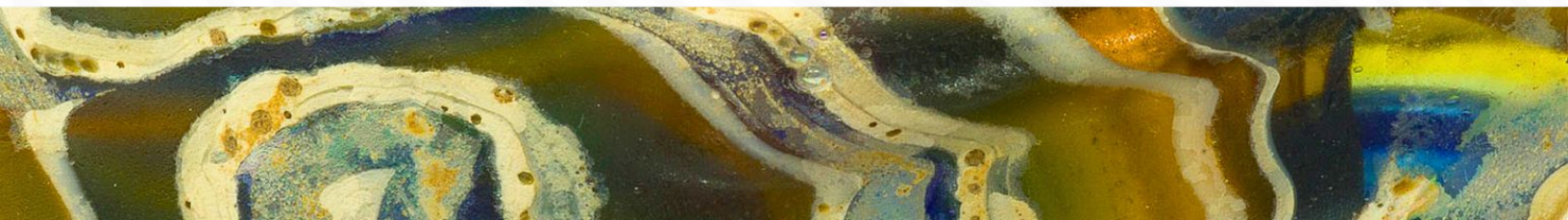
Side-Coaching: Remember you can arrange the chairs in any position you wish. How is the water bottle positioned in the image? Consider what it represents.

Describe: What do you see? Describe the way the chairs are positioned.

Analyze: What does that position represent or make you think of? Why do you say that? What is another interpretation of this position? Which chair has the most power? Why?

Relate: If this image represents a moment in history/a scene from our book/an interaction at our school ... what does this image represent? Why? What else could it be? Encourage a number of different interpretations. Have another volunteer repeat the activity.

Reflection: What are some of the different ways we saw power represented in this activity? What makes someone or something powerful? Who or what is powerful in our world now/was powerful then? Why?



Exquisite Corpse

Surrealist artists played the game Exquisite Corpse to stimulate creativity through collaboration. Players would contribute to a drawing of a figure without seeing what the others had done. Like a game of Telephone, the figure would become stranger with each player's addition. The name Exquisite Corpse came from a version in which each contributor added a word without knowing the ones that came before, resulting in the bizarre phrase, "The exquisite corpse will drink the new wine."

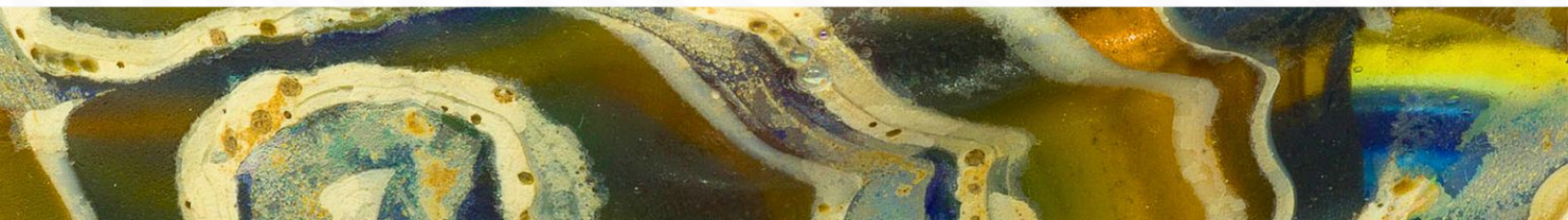
This version works best in person and is adapted from [educational materials](#) from the Museum of Modern Art.

Try making your own Exquisite Corpse by following these instructions:

- Take a piece of paper and fold it into four equal parts.
- Draw or collage on the top section of the paper to create the head of an imaginary character. Use whatever materials you have around you.
- Fold your image back to conceal it. Extend the lines of your character's neck over the edge of the fold so that your collaborator will know how to connect their image to yours.
- Pass the paper on to a friend or family member. Keep your image hidden and have them add a body to your figure in the middle section of the page.
- Repeat! Pass the paper to a third person, concealing the first two sections of the page, and have them add the legs. Then hide that section and pass to a fourth person to add the feet. Remember to draw lines over the fold into each new section so the following person knows where to start.
- Unfold the page and reveal your collaborative image.

Surrealist artists played this game to get unpredictable results far stranger than an individual could make on their own.

How did it feel for you? Were you surprised by the final image?





Limestone hand holding a pyxis (Cyprriot)

Mash-Up Innovation

[Hyper Island](#) is a Swedish educational company that offers a range of programs and courses in digital media, innovation, and leadership. Founded in 1996, it is known for its unique approach to learning that emphasizes hands-on, experiential learning and collaboration. This activity is imagined in a work setting at a retreat or longer meeting. It is described as an in-person gathering but could be adapted for online meetings with access to communal digital tools. For more casual gatherings, I recommend doing this activity with different categories (such as “Hobbies Mash-up” etc.) and using it more as an improv lesson or creative play.

Goal: Bring two ideas together to create new, “mashed up” concepts.

Materials: Post-its, markers, large poster paper

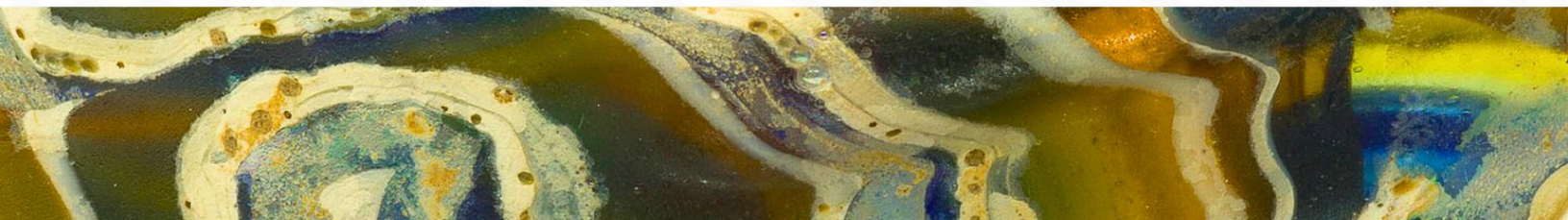
Step 1: Ask the group to brainstorm around three different areas such as:

- Human needs (e.g. love, food security, community)
- Technologies (e.g. telephone, 3D printing, GPS)
- Existing services (e.g. Google translate, libraries, Candy Crush)

The three areas above can be adapted for different contexts. For example, sources of data (e.g. health records, subway timetables, census data) or global challenges (e.g. climate change, income inequality) can be added.

Spend three minutes brainstorming around each area. Have participants write one idea per post-it. Make the brainstorm active and fast-paced and have participants call-out each idea as they place it up on the wall.

By the end of the brainstorming there should be three large clusters of post-its on the wall, one for each area. The more the better!



Step 2: Organize participants into small groups of 3-5. Explain that they will have 12 minutes to come up with as many mash-up concepts as they can.

A mash-up concept consists of two or more elements from the wall combined together to create a new concept.

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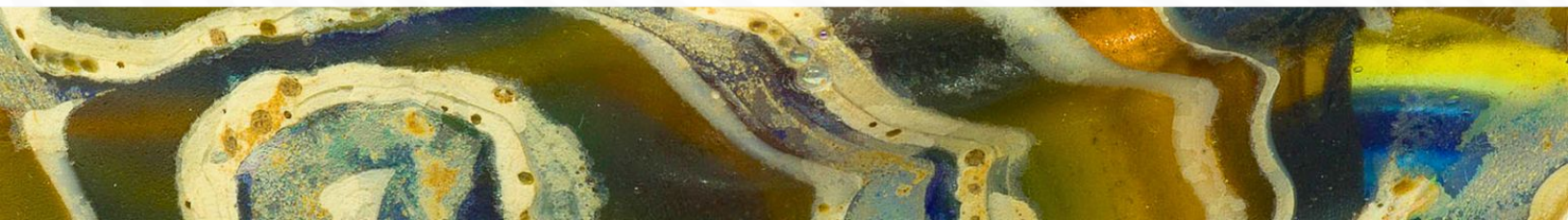
For each mash-up that a team creates, they can give the concept a name and capture it on poster paper. The poster should include the elements that combine to make the new concept (e.g. iPads + Doing Laundry + Paypal) and the name of the concept (eg. Launderfy).

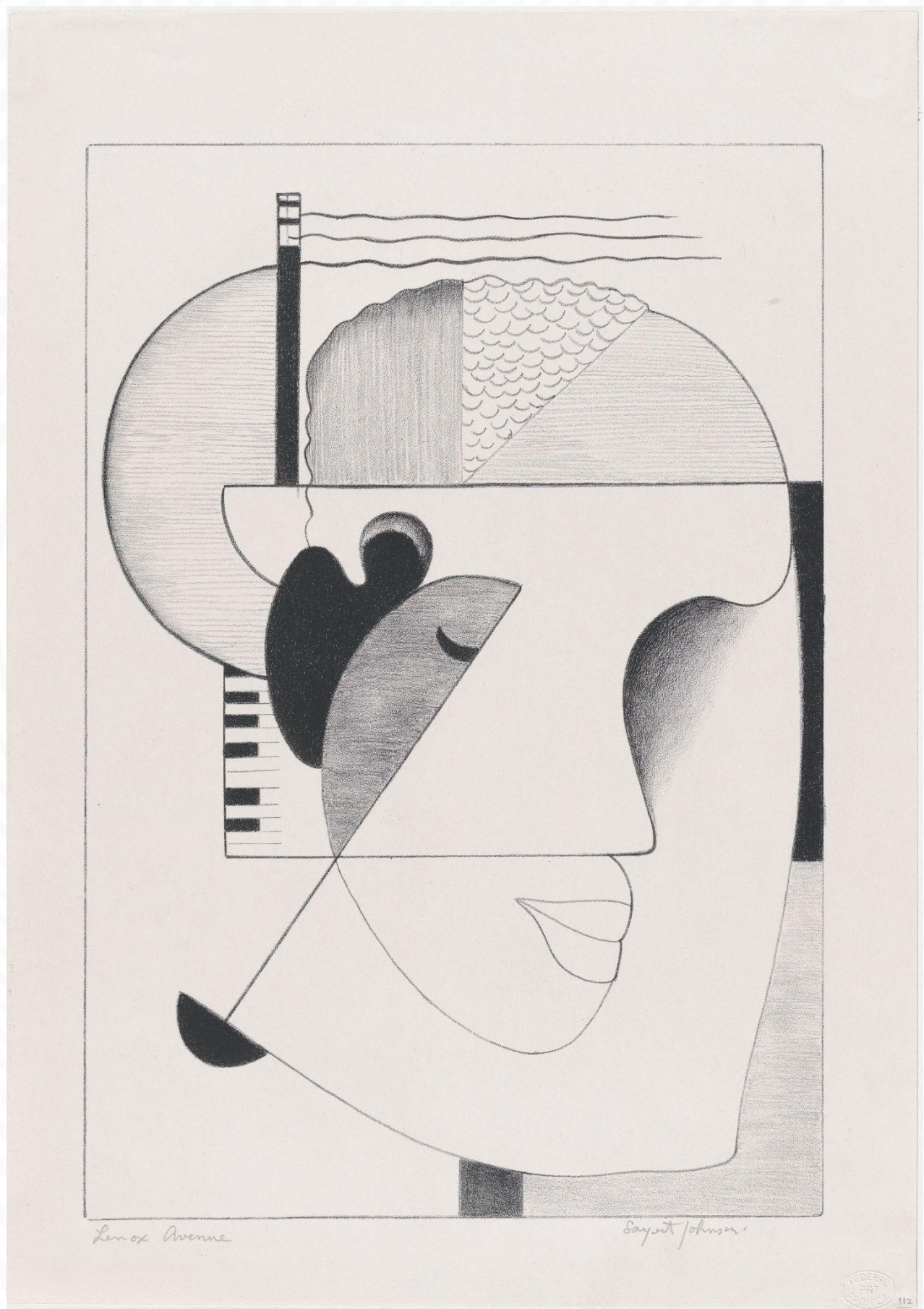
Facilitator notes: During these 12 minutes, put on upbeat music and encourage the participants to be on their feet, active, and working quickly. Every few minutes, call out the number of minutes left.

Step 3: Once the time has elapsed, have each small group present their mash-up concepts back to the rest of the group. Put up all the ideas on the wall to visually display the volume of concepts generated. Emphasize the volume of ideas created in the short amount of time.

Step 4: Debrief the experience, by inviting participants to reflect on questions such as:

- How did it feel to work creatively in this way?
- What was easy about it? What was challenging?
- How did you feel? How did you behave, react, respond?
- What insights or learnings do you have about yourself?
- What insights or learnings do you have about idea development?
- How can you apply your learnings going forward?





Sargent Claude Johnson, *Lenox Avenue*, 1938

To look at an
object is to
plunge oneself
into it.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty

Inside the Object

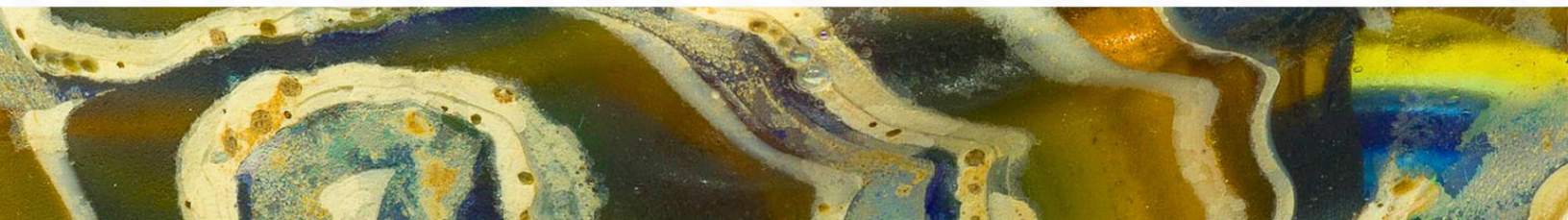
When I first read the quote by Maurice Merleau-Ponty on the previous page it made me think about wanting to live *inside the readymade*. Merleau-Ponty was a French philosopher who wrote about the relationship between perception, embodiment, and human consciousness. This quote also reminded me of a much more literal interpretation from one of my favorite authors for young people, Roald Dahl. I created this exercise with Merleau-Ponty and Dahl's work in mind. Allow yourself to plunge both philosophically *and* literally!

“The tunnel was damp and murky, and all around him there was the curious bittersweet smell of fresh peach. The floor was soggy under his knees, the walls were wet and sticky, and peach juice was dripping from the ceiling...He was crawling uphill now, as though the tunnel were leading straight toward the very center of the gigantic fruit. Every few seconds he paused and took a bite out of the wall. The peach flesh was sweet and juicy, and marvelously refreshing. He crawled on for several more yards, and then suddenly—bang—the top of his head bumped into something extremely hard blocking his way. He glanced up. In front of him there was a solid wall that seemed at first as though it were made of wood. He touched it with his fingers. It certainly felt like wood, except that it was very jagged and full of deep grooves.” Roald Dahl, *James and the Giant Peach*

Consider a simple object sitting close to you.

For the next five minutes, you will imagine what it would be like to be inside of the material it is made out of. What does it look like, smell like, sound like, or taste like?

Write a creative description of the experience. You will be invited to share a portion of this with the group.





Sergei Prokudin-Gorsky, Sawmill of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property, 1912, digital color composite by Blaise Agüera y Arcas, 2004

Oobleck

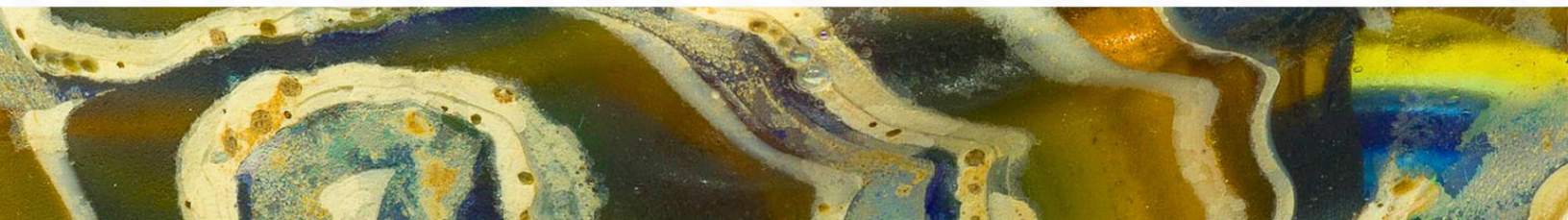
Another fun one from Unitarian Universalist religious education. This one is about low-stakes art making and dreaming together. Ideally it is done with an in-person group.

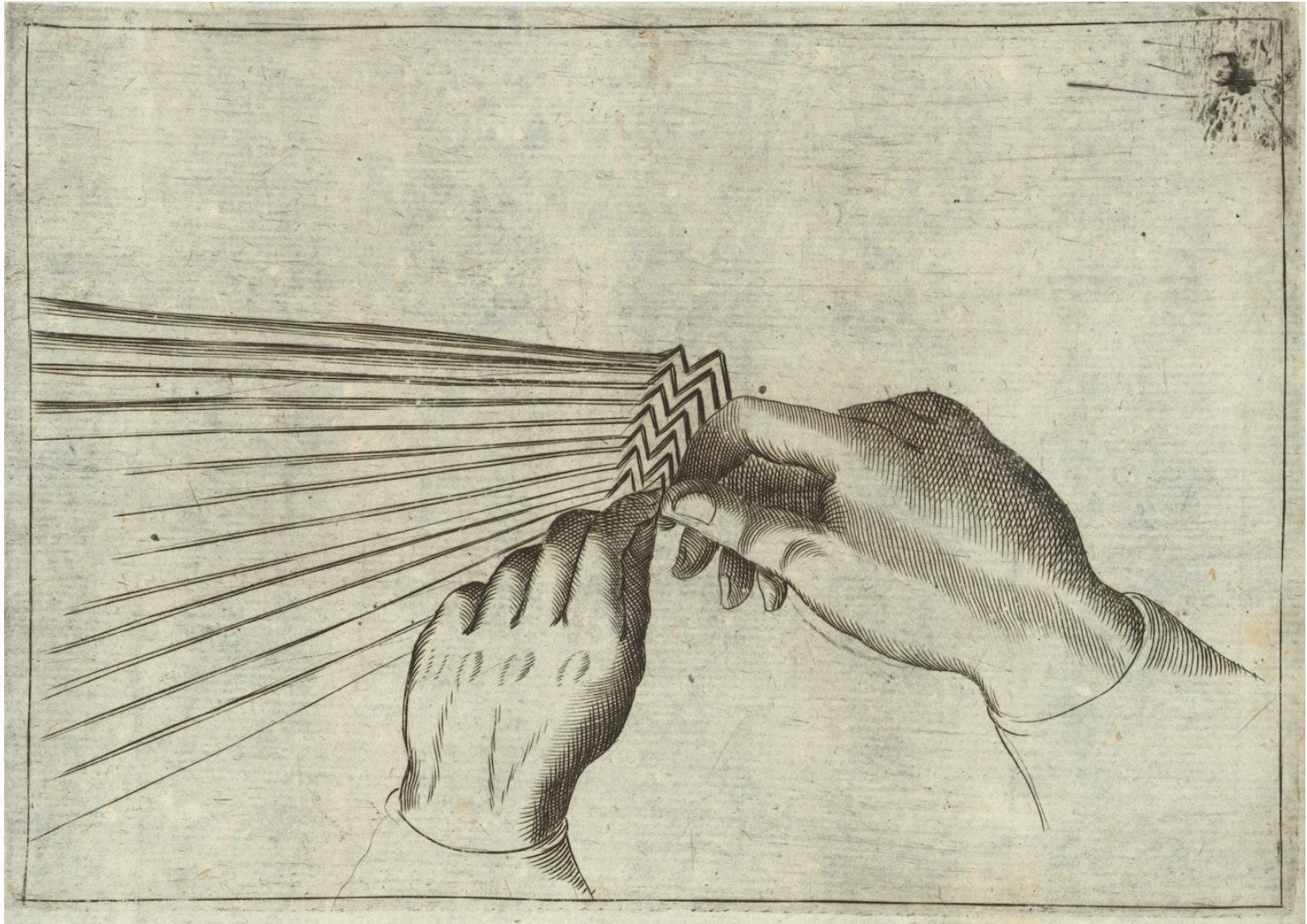
Materials: Cornstarch, water, food coloring, measuring cups and a large bowl.

Measure out 1/4 cup of cornstarch for each person in the group. Add five tablespoons of water per 1/4 cup and mix. Add more water little by little until the concoction is malleable. Add some food coloring.

This is some crazy stuff to make and play with. When you squeeze it, its dry and hard, but release it and it melts into a puddle.

Make sculptures and watch them melt. Talk about metaphors for life. Think of new names for the stuff. Have periods of silence.





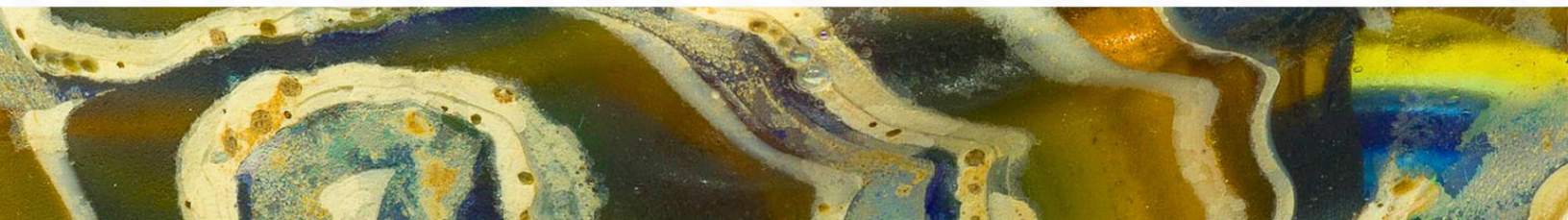
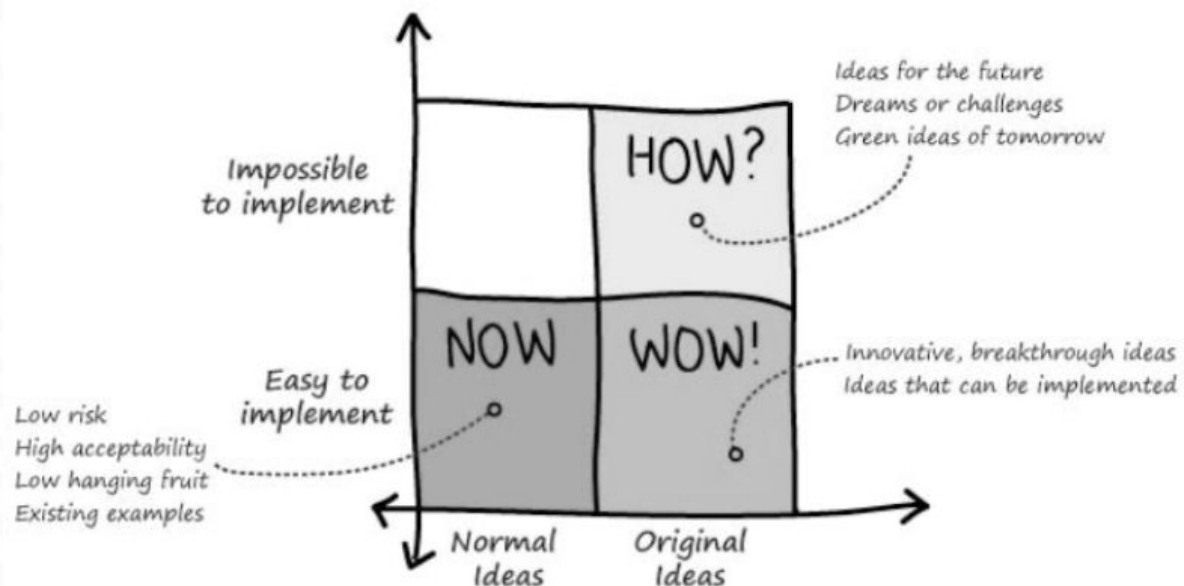
How-Now-Wow Matrix

This activity comes from *SessionLab*, a workshop planning platform and [library of facilitation techniques](#). It is written for use in work contexts with groups but could also be adapted for individual reflection and creative brainstorming.

Description: When people want to develop new ideas, they most often think out of the box in the brainstorming or divergent phase. However, when it comes to convergence, people often end up picking ideas that are most familiar to them. This is called a ‘creative paradox’ or a ‘creadox’.

The How-Now-Wow matrix is an idea selection tool that breaks the creadox by forcing people to weigh each idea on two parameters.

Goal: This game naturally follows the creative idea generation phase and helps players select ideas to develop further.



Materials: Flipcharts, Markers, Voting dots (yellow, blue, green)

Draw a 2-by-2 matrix. The X-axis denotes the originality of the idea and the Y-axis shows the ease of implementation.

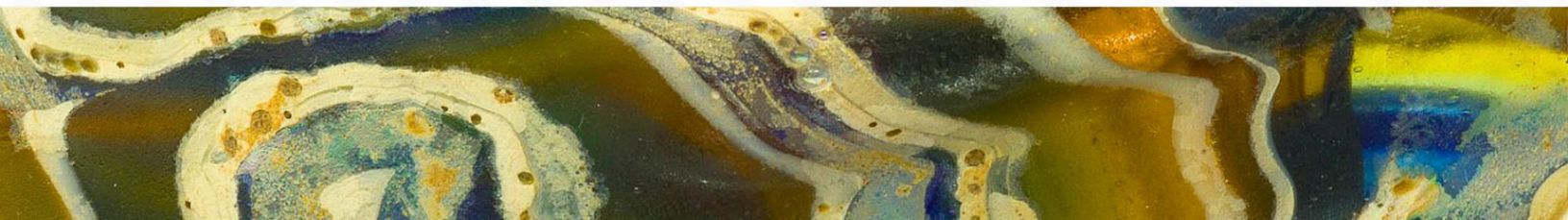
Label the quadrants:

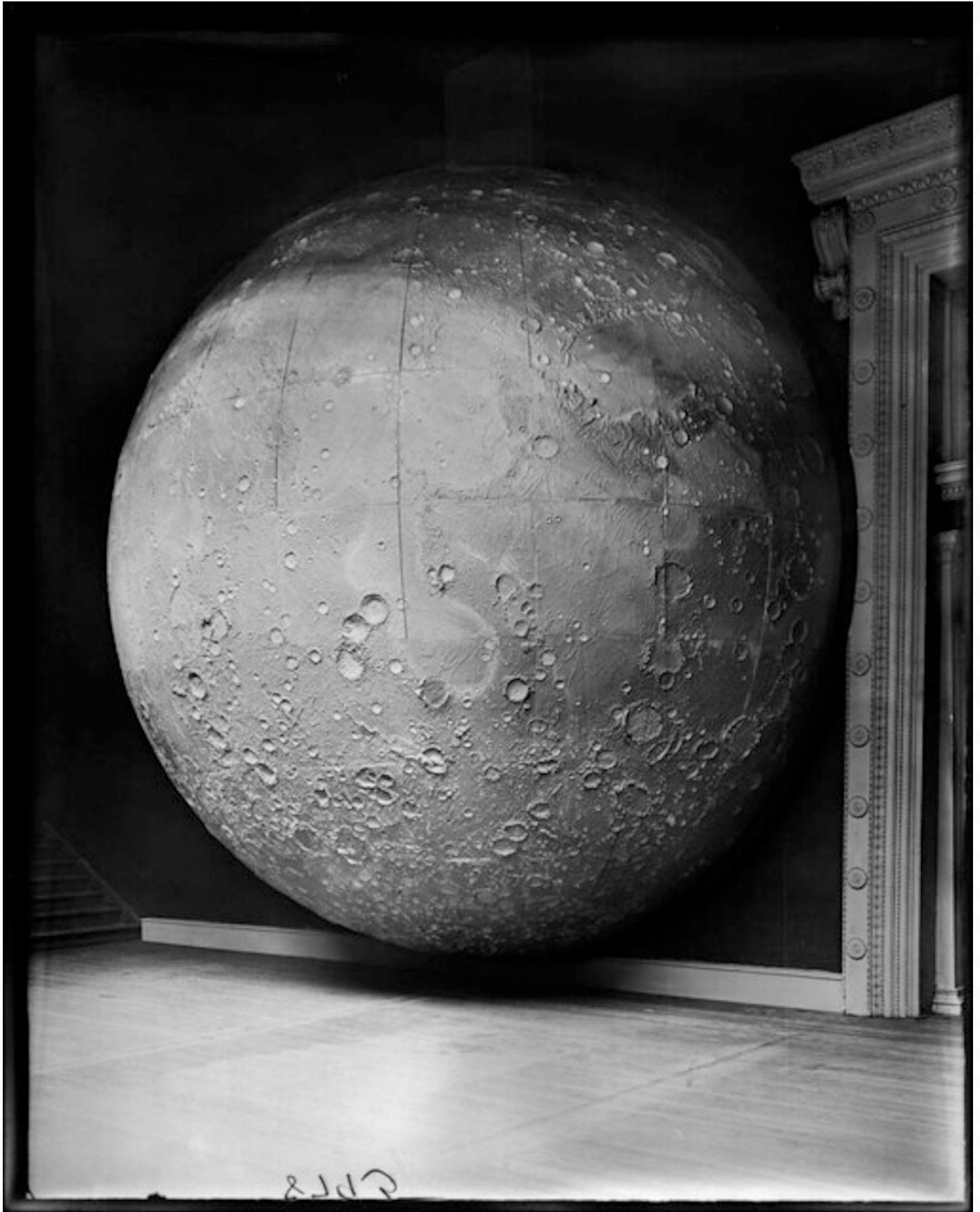
- Now/Blue Ideas — Normal ideas, easy to implement. These are typically low-hanging fruit and solutions to fill existing gaps in processes.
- How/Yellow Ideas — Original ideas, impossible to implement. These are breakthrough ideas but absolutely impossible to implement right now.
- Wow/Green Ideas — Original ideas, easy to implement. Ideas with potential for orbit-shifting change and possible to implement within current reality.

List down the ideas that emerge from the creative ideation phase on large charts of paper stuck around the room. Give each player 3 sticky dots of each colour — that is, 3 blue, 3 yellow, 3 green. Ask each player to step forward and vote for 3 best ideas in each category by sticking a coloured dot in front of each idea they choose.

In the end, count the number of dots under each idea to categorize it. The highest number of dots of a certain color categorizes the idea under that color.

You now have a bucket of Now/Green ideas to work on further. Make sure you also collect the low-hanging blue ideas for immediate implementation and the yellow ideas to keep an eye on for the future.



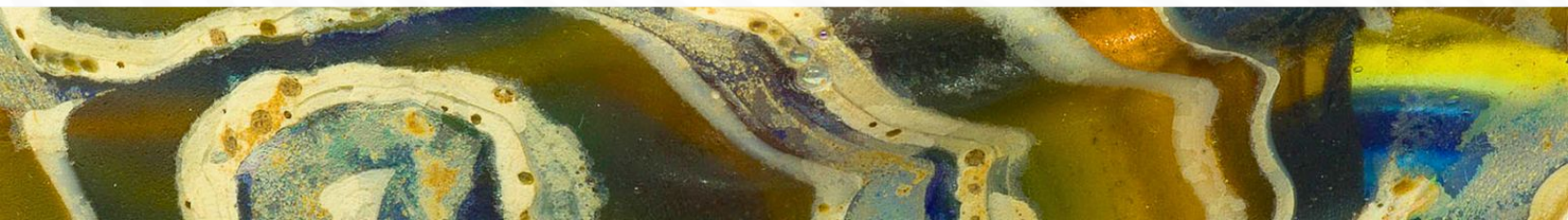


Moon model at the Field Museum, Chicago, 1900

We live in capitalism.
Its power seems
inescapable.
So did the divine
right of kings.
Any human power
can be resisted
and changed by
human beings.
Resistance and change
often begin in art,
and very often in our
art, the art of words.

Ursula K. Le Guin

DEEPEN - GROUP



Yes, AND...

[Viola Spolin](#) (1906-1994) was an American theater educator, director, and writer known for developing improvisational theater techniques that are widely used in modern theater, comedy, and education. This game is a classic for learning improvisation and expanding the imagination. It can be done in-person or online.

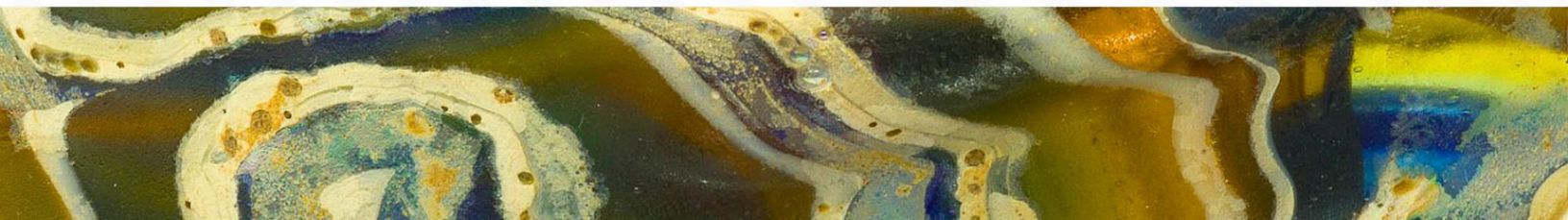
Directions: This game is a brainstorming technique, and illustrates the difference between constructive and critical group decision-making. The group chooses a problem that needs solving (i.e. picking a class field trip). One player begins with an idea, such as, “I think we should go to the zoo for our field trip.” First, other players must respond only with “Yes, and...” statements: “Yes, and we could bring a picnic lunch to the zoo.” “Yes, and we could bring water bottles for when we get hot and thirsty.” “Yes, and if it gets really hot, we can go into the penguin house to cool off,” etc.

Then repeat the exercise with the same opening idea; this time, however, players may only respond with “Yes, but. . .” statements. The conversation will sound like something like this: “I think we should go to the zoo for our field trip.” “Yes, but the zoo is all the way across town.” “Yes, but we could take the bus.” “Yes, but renting a bus is expensive.”

Variation: Begin with an object rather than a problem. Give pairs of players an object and ask them how the object might be used beyond the obvious. (“This sieve makes a great catcher’s mask!” “Yes, and you can use it to catch butterflies,” etc.)

Side-Coaching: “Say anything that comes to mind—no idea too big, too small, or too silly! Keep the ideas coming! If you’re stuck, can someone else help?”

Reflection: What did we do in this activity? What was challenging/interesting about this activity? What did you notice about how you participated in this activity?



Open Sentences

This exercise also comes from the [Work That Reconnects \(WTR\)](#), an open-source resource library and network founded in the late 1970s by Joanna Macy and colleagues. This can be hosted in person or using online break out rooms.

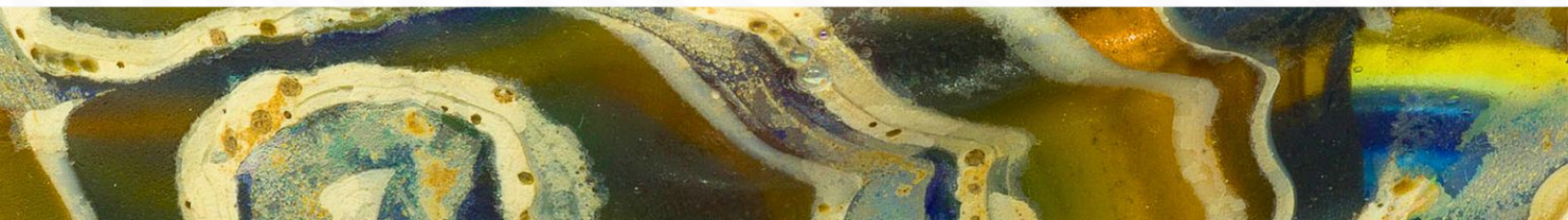
Description: Open Sentences is a structure for spontaneous expression. It helps people listen with rare receptivity as well as speak their thoughts and feelings frankly.

People sit in pairs, face to face and close enough to attend to each other fully. They refrain from speaking until the practice begins.

One is Partner A, the other Partner B. When the facilitator speaks each unfinished sentence, A repeats it, completes it in his own words, addressing Partner B, and keeps on talking spontaneously for the time allotted. The partners can switch roles after each open sentence or at the end of the series. The listening partner—and this is to be emphasized—keeps silent, saying absolutely nothing and listening as attentively and supportively as possible.

For the completion of each open sentence allow a couple of minutes or so. Give a brief warning each time before it is time to move on, saying “take a minute to finish up,” or “thank you.” A small bell can then bring people to silence, where they rest a few seconds before the next open sentence. This is a highly pleasurable activity, and you may want to invent your own open sentences. Or pick from these favorites of ours (#5 always comes last).

1. Some things I love about being alive in Earth are...
2. A place that was magical (or wonderful) to me as a child was...
3. A person who helped me believe in myself is or was...
4. Some things I enjoy doing and making are....
5. Some things I appreciate about myself are...





Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, *Self-Portrait*, 1928

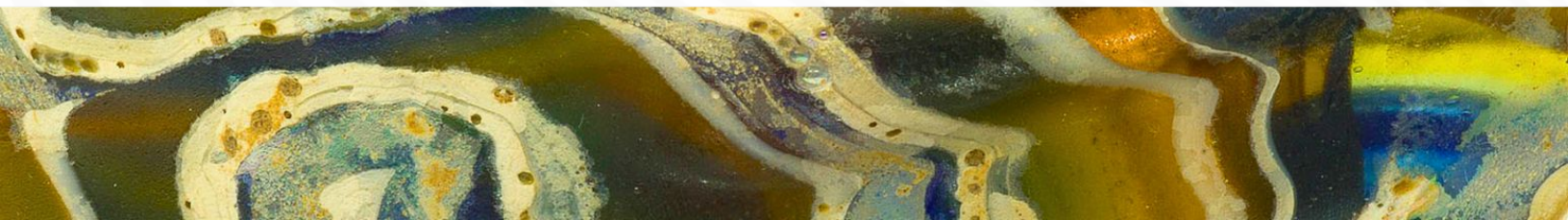
Four Questions of Preparation

This exercise also comes from the [Work That Reconnects \(WTR\)](#). This version was created by Mordechai Liebling and Sarah Nahar for online sessions but it could also be hosted in person.

Coaching script for online groups: This exercise is called “The Four Questions of Preparation.” We will reflect on Deep Time, the vast scale of geological time which spans billions of years, during which the Earth has undergone countless transformations. Let yourself think as expansively about time as you can during this exercise. I will read all of the questions now - let them wash over you. Don’t plan your answers, just listen. After a few more thoughts, I will put them in the chat.

- 1: What are your gifts from your tradition, lineage, teachers, family that have prepared you for this time?
- 2: What are your gifts from the earth that have prepared you for this time?
- 3: What are your gifts from your visions, dreams, calling, and intuition that have prepared you for this time?
- 4: What are your gifts from the work, leadership, experiences you have had that have prepared you for this time?

After a timed period of writing in silence or with soft music accompaniment, invite people to share out verbally or as a “chat waterfall”—have everyone type their answer in the chat and hit enter at the same time (“on the count of 3.”). This creates the waterfall effect where everyone’s responses come in at the same time.





Rendering from space colony studies program led by Gerard O'Neill and NASA, 1970s

Gratitude Rounds

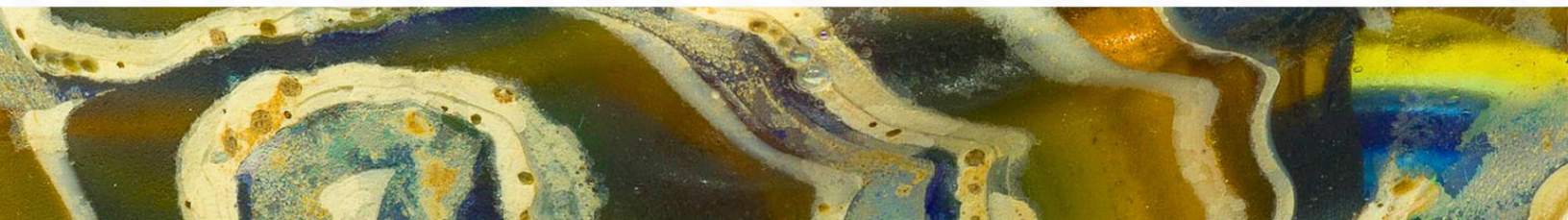
Another great exercise from the [Work That Reconnects \(WTR\)](#). These prompts are best suited for in-person groups who have built some trust with one other.

Description: Sitting in circles of 5 or 6, people imagine they are at a point outside of space and time. After a short spell of silence, they start remembering together what they loved about living on Earth.

That's the first Round, which can circle more than once, and last for ten to fifteen minutes.

The second Round focuses on what they liked about the humans of planet Earth.

And in the Third Round, they reflect on what they were grateful for in being themselves.

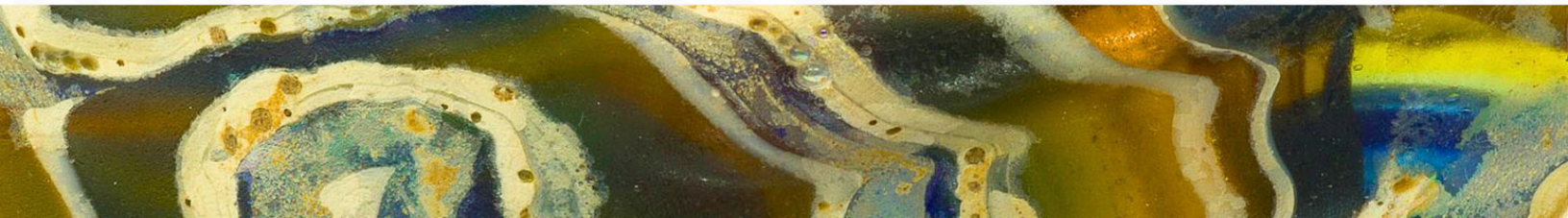


Watching the movement of
the ripples on the water,
I realized that seemingly
ordinary moments like these
could take me into
magical consciousness
through participation with
the tree, sky, water, river bed,
sun, the ripples, my friend,
the dog, the stick and all the
feelings and connections with
this myriad of kaleidoscopic
imaginal associations in time.



Samuel Joseph Brown, Jr., *Self-Portrait*, ca. 1941

DEEPEN - SOLO



Play Histories

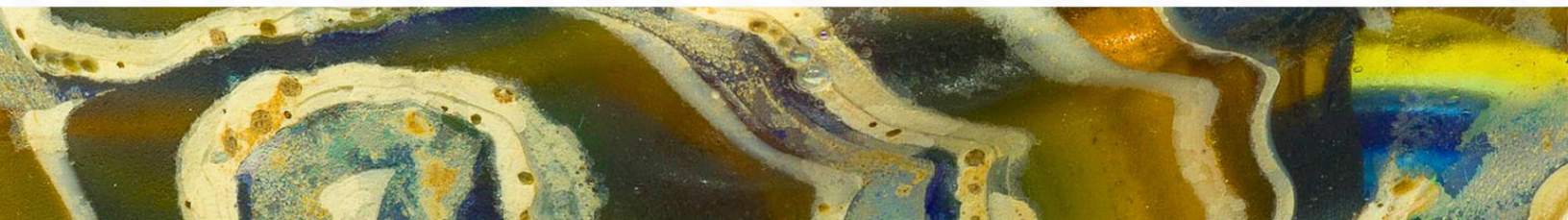
In their book *Play: How It Shapes the Brain, Opens the Imagination, and Invigorates the Soul*, Stuart Brown and Christopher Vaughan offer a reflective exercise for adults to think about how they have enjoyed playing in their lives. This activity is best done on one's own with ample time for reflection and journaling.

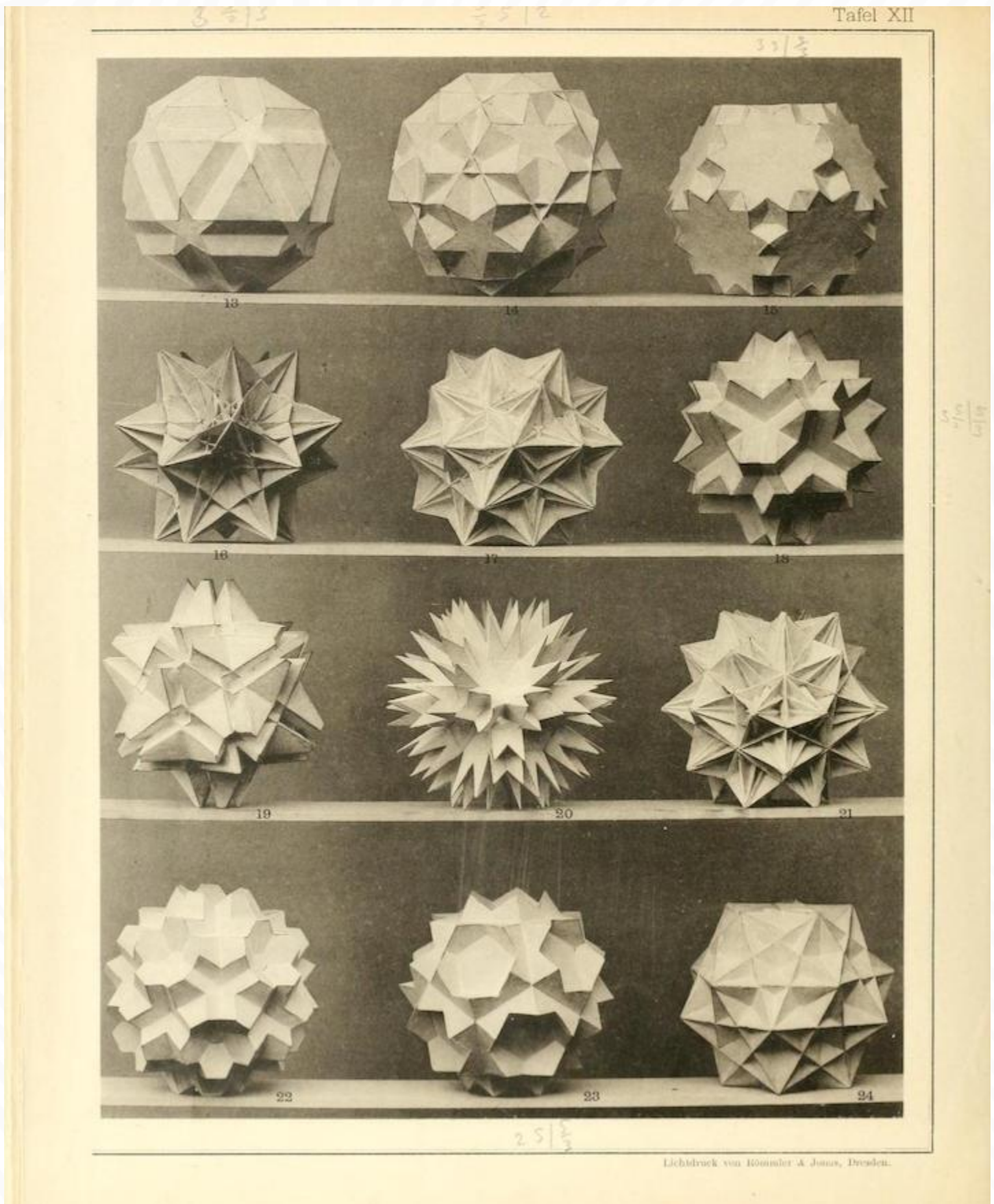
Use the following prompts to reflect and journal your thoughts. This is best done with a generous window of time, around 60-90 minutes. Consider:

- When have you felt free to do and be what you choose?
- Is that a part of your life now? If not, why not?
- What do you feel stands in the way of your achieving some times of personal freedom?
- Are you now able to feel what engages you most fully is almost effortless? If not, can you recall when you were able to experience such times? Describe. Imagine settings that allow that sort of engagement.
- Search your memory for those times in your life when you have been at your very best. (These are usually authentic play times, and give clues as to where to go for current play experiences.)
- What have been the impediments to play in your life?
- How and why did some kinds of play disappear from your repertoire?
- Have you discovered ways of reinitiating lost play that work for you now in your life?
- Are you able to imagine and feel the things you most desire and enjoy are really things you ought to have? Why so, or why not?
- How free are you now as you play with your spouse or your family [or your friends or yourself]?

After allowing yourself some time for journaling, read back on what you wrote to see if there are overarching themes to any of your thoughts. What stands out to you? What surprises you?

Are there ways you could think of adding the type of play you enjoy to your life now?





Max Brückner, from *Polygons and Polyhedra: Theory and History*, 1900

Artist Dates

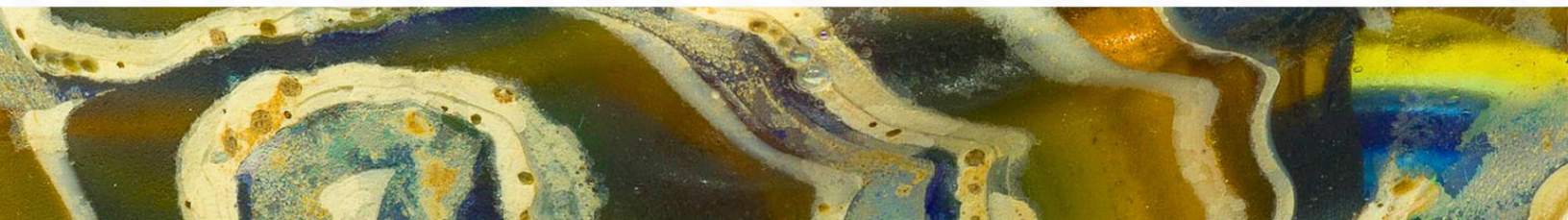
The Artist's Way by Julia Cameron is a bestselling book that describes how people can rediscover their creativity alongside spirituality. This activity, which is one of my favorites, is designed for independent exploration.

In Julia Cameron's famous book on creativity and spiritual practice, *The Artist's Way*, she offers a novel way for people to connect with their inner artist: artist dates as “assigned play.”

She recommends that readers spend two hours of alone time each week at a “place where a new experience might be possible.”

The Artist Date is a once-weekly, festive, solo expedition to explore something that interests you. The Artist Date need not be overtly “artistic” — think mischief more than mastery.

Cameron offers: Artist Dates fire up the imagination. They spark whimsy. They encourage play. Since art is about the play of ideas, they feed our creative work by replenishing our inner well of images and inspiration. When choosing an Artist Date, it is good to ask yourself, “what sounds fun?”—and then allow yourself to try it.



Imagination and
creativity are a
collaboration between
human beings,
our community,
our ancestors,
future generations,
other creatures,
spiritual beings
and the world itself.

Jeanette Armstrong and Douglas Cardinal



Artist unknown, *Decorative-Symbolic Drawing (Crayon)*, early 20th century

PARTING THOUGHTS

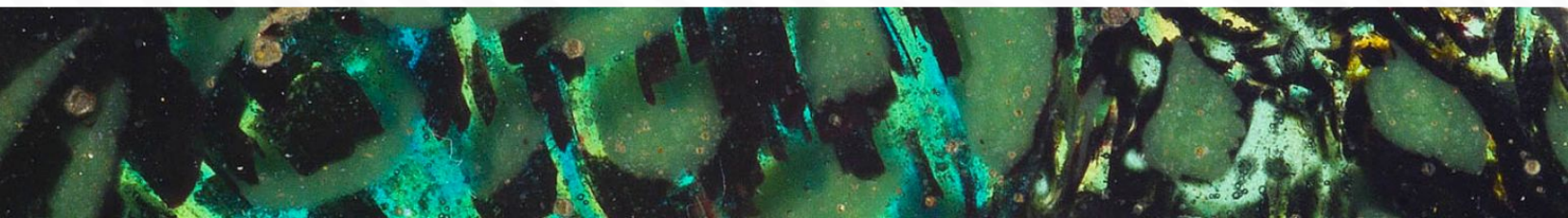
Stepping out from my office job in downtown Manhattan, I walked quickly to the yard of Trinity Church Wall Street, its church spire and graveyard dwarfed by the gleaming skyscrapers surrounding it. I had noticed an interesting banner on my way to grabbing a sandwich the day before. A sign advertised a program to “Take a Break With Us,” a fifteen-minute Wednesday noon time meditation session available to all people, of any faith, every week. I had been flirting with the idea of divinity school, which felt very distant in the context of my job and daily commute, and figured stepping into a church in the middle of the work day might be a welcome relief.

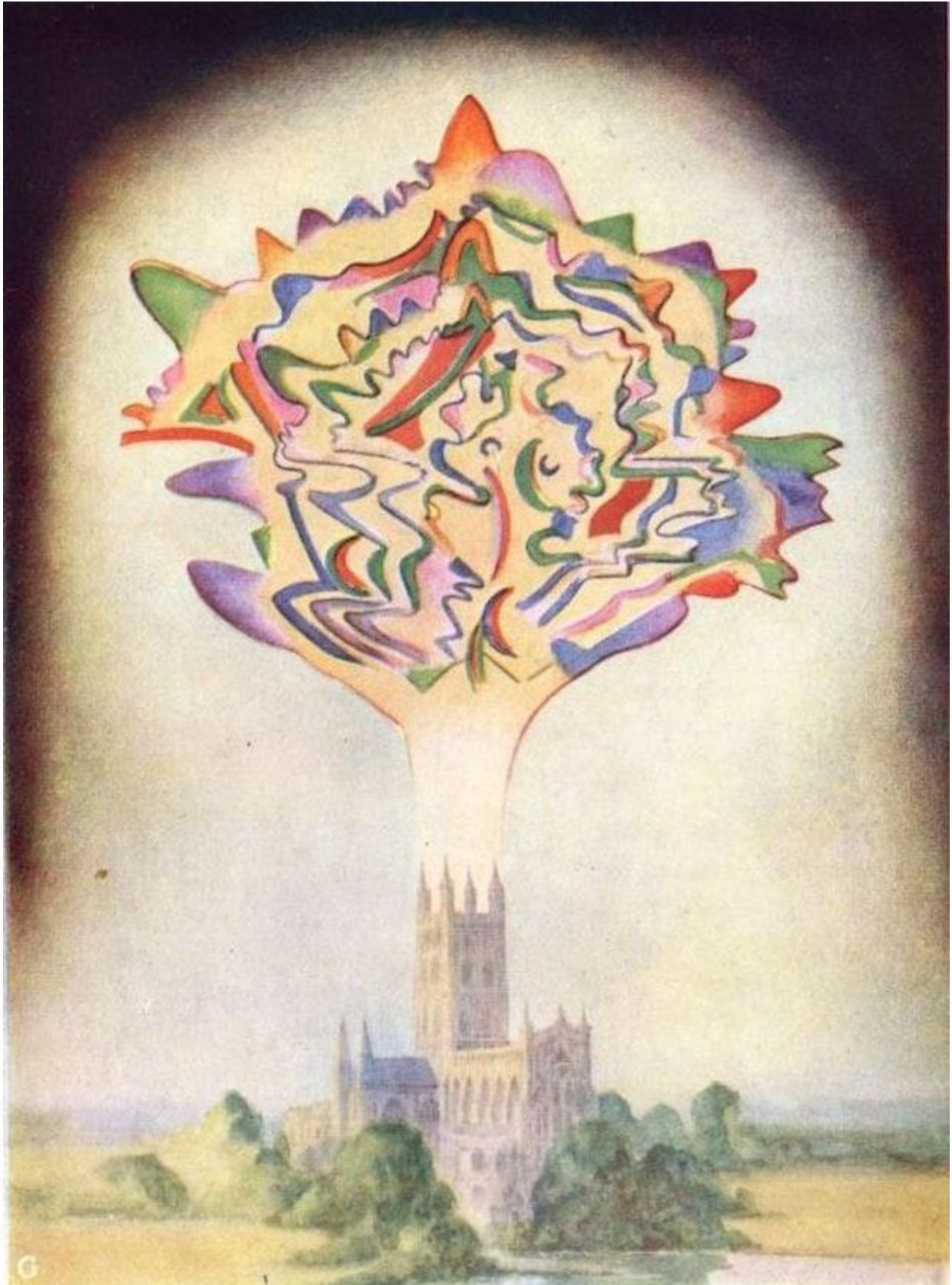
As we gathered in a circle the minister came in and welcomed us to the space. She invited us to go around the circle and check in using one word, if we so wished, and allowed people to pass if they would rather sit in silence. In the calm dark of the space, the smell of old wood polish and dust, people who I normally would have passed on the street or squeezed next to on the subway named how they were doing. They were sad, excited, confused, calm. They thanked God, they talked about prayer, about nature, and about family.

I was grateful at how a space dedicated to the communities’ needs with the gift of grace, some would say God, allowed myself and strangers to voice how we were really doing, perhaps differently than I ever would have at my office.

It was a feeling I knew from worship spaces, but also from my experiences with art and creativity, from witnessing the beauty of what humanity has tried to make sense of for thousands of years.

I hope the activities in this text have offered glimpses into different ways of being and different forms of bending the genres of the day-to-day lives we live together. There are no answers here, only more questions and more paths to take. I hope you will take it into the future, mark it up, share it with others, and expand upon it in your own creative world of everyday play.





“The music of Gounod,” Annie Besant and Charles W. Leadbeater, *Thought-Forms*, 1901

Notes

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(11) Image from Charles Howard Hinton, *The Fourth Dimension*, 1904. Public Domain Review. Accessed March 30, 2023.

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DESIGN

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GENRE BENDING: An Invitation to Playful Discovery

Joelle Te Paske

2023

A thesis submitted to the faculty at Harvard Divinity School in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Divinity.

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