

Enabling Artistic Inquiry

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Early into my first year of teaching high school fine-art photography, I struggled with how to describe the processes of artistic inquiry to students in my Independent Photography course. The difficulty arose in trying to articulate a structure what was for me a nonlinguistic and non-linear process. My artist student's experiences in art to that point consisted of assignments that centered on photographic technique, the elements and principles of design, and the visual styles of established photographers. At the same time I was in the process of finishing a major exhibition from a post-undergraduate traveling fellowship, the result of three years of work. Bringing an extended and independent body of work to completion presented an opportunity to reflect on how I inquired as an artist. What I was able to identify was a process of entering into spaces of uncertainty that were orientated by un/articulated questions. This shaped many of my pedagogical approaches that developed over the course of six years in both tacit and explicit ways. In particular, certain sorts of questions and prompts—described in this writing as “constraints that enable”—offer opportunities

to create spaces of unimagined possibilities and an art curriculum that resemble more closely the practices of artists engaged in inquiry. It is a shift from curricula that models the inquiry of artists and art objects to individual acts of inquiry, situated between and amongst the inquiry of other artist-students, artists in history, cultures and contexts.

Constraints that Enable Artistic Inquiry

What would your self-portrait look like if you couldn't include yourself directly?

I presented this question in the second-half of my introduction to Photography course. I also included instruction on a variety of photographic and non-photographic materials that could be used to express aspects of self. From my perspective, at the center of this assignment was the importance of metaphorical embodiment in materials and visual forms. The metaphors we use shape not only our conceptual processes but also the structures we embody, design and how we live (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, 1999).

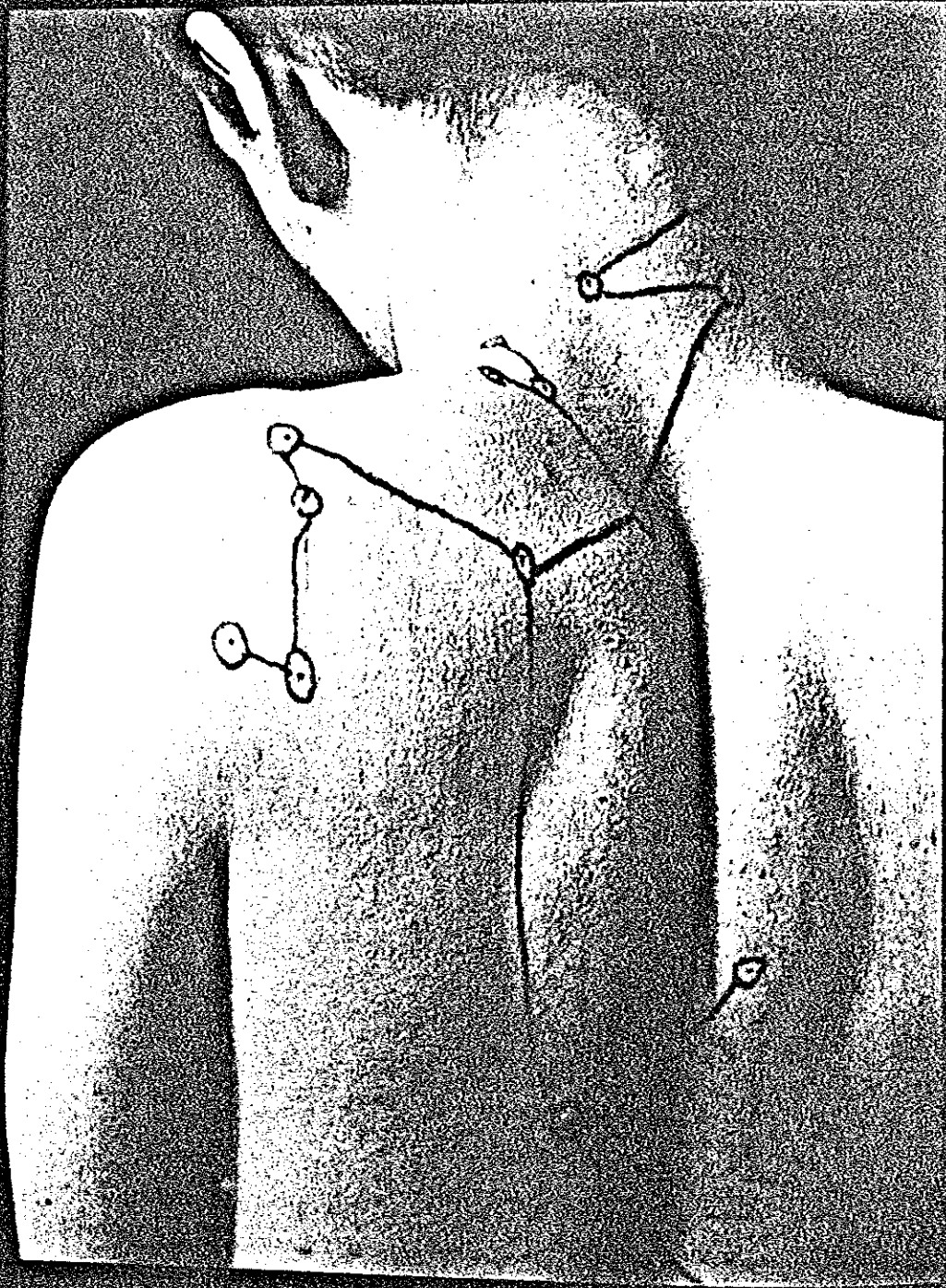


Figure 1. From Clarke's series: Constellations, an independent series in a secondary School Photography 4 course.

Questions that orient inquiry acknowledge and ask for a reevaluation of internal structures (including personal history, emotional states and cultural beliefs) and present occasions for the emergence of novelty by challenging prior possibilities (Juarrero, 2002). Complexity theory describes these types of questions and prompts as *enabling constraints*. They are articulated by Davis and Sumara (2006) as "structural conditions that help to determine the balance between sources of coherence that allow a collective to maintain focus of purpose/identity and sources of disruption and randomness that compel the collective to constantly adjust and adapt" (p. 147). Well structured constraints create a space that can orient and enable artistic inquiry.

Doll (1989) describes the qualities of an enabling constraint in the context of a sixth grade mathematics classroom as something which had "enough of a burr to stimulate the students into rethinking their habitual methods but not so much of a burr that re-organization would fall apart or not be attempted" (pp. 67-68). The questions and prompts used in my photography classroom, took on an existential quality (Castro, 2004), asking for a reordering and reconsideration of accepted understandings and inviting elaboration and extension. Juarrero (2002) adds that, "context sensitive constraints are thus the causal (but not efficiently causal) engine that drives creative evolution, not through forceful impact but by making things interdependent." (p. 150). It is important that the constraint should either acknowledge or be recognizable to the

individual's own experience, while creating a space that is oriented between the familiar and the uncertain. Constraints that enable provide the opportunity for non-linear dynamic behaviors that are unfolding and expansive like that of artistic behaviors.

The self-portrait prompt resulted in a wide diversity of work. Each artist-student chose not only visual metaphors to photograph, but also materials arranged and organized to represent themselves. By the end of the final group discussion the general consensus was that almost everything we photograph is in some way a mapping of our perceptions onto the world around us, a bringing forth a micro-world within the macro-world (Varela, 1999). The photograph becomes an opportunity not only to capture a moment in time, but also to be able to see the self in the world, as part of the world. Through questions and prompts, constraints that enable artistic inquiry, artist-students were able to enter into spaces of uncertainty and be able to reorganize previous understandings into new patterns of knowing about themselves in the world. These constraints, and many others presented, but not limited to characteristics like: being self-referential, making the familiar strange, and being scaled and expansive. Each question folded into the next through recursive elaborative process when "the starting point is the output of the preceding iteration, and the output is the starting point of the subsequent iteration" (Davis and Sumara, 2006, p. 43).



Figure 2. Stephanie's first black and white print, in Photography I, in response to the question: *If you were to be struck blind tomorrow, what vision of the world would you leave?*

In a three-year sequence, questions began oriented around perceptions of self, and moved towards perceptions of self in communities, later generating individual questions of inquiry.

A Space of Possibilities

If you were to be struck blind tomorrow, what vision of the world would you leave?

I would ask my students this question as the first assignment in my Photography I course. Students would shift uncomfortably and oftentimes a palpable silence would permeate the room. As they would leave, more often than not, I would hear statements like, "This is the hardest assignment. What am I going to photograph? Do you have

any examples that I can look at?" There were no examples presented, no master photographers to look at, just a question to begin and orient inquiry.

Dorothea Lange, the Farm Security Administration photographer who documented the narratives of migrant workers in the 1930's depression era United States, inspired the question. Lange stated that she photographed every day as if she were to be struck blind tomorrow (Coles, Heyman, & Lange, 1998). The urgency of this quote resonated with me as an artist. What visual statement would I make today if I were to be blind tomorrow? Stephanie brought me her first print (Figure 2) still wet in the darkroom tray and asked,

"Is this what you wanted?" To which I responded, "Does it matter what I want you to photograph? More importantly, does it address the question in a way that you would feel comfortable with this as a statement of how you see?" We then discussed some of the finer points of photographic printing and the link between visual qualities and emotional expression. Instead of darkroom techniques, Dorothea Lange's photographs, or a specific cultural phenomena becoming the focus of the assignment, they became the support for the artistic inquiry of students.

At the final discussion and assessment, a diversity of artworks covered the desks in our classroom. Our conversations moved through the relationships between contextual connections, interpretive possibilities, design qualities, and personal narratives. The object of art, as a result of artistic inquiry, became the occasion to teach about design, photographic techniques, art history, art criticism and context. Questions included: Why is your eye attracted to certain areas of a composition? What could result in a print with rich and varied tonal range? Who in the history of photography is addressing similar concerns? What biases and cultural prejudices are represented in our images? This organizational structure situates inquiry between and among disciplinary knowledge, personal experience, culture and context, rather than toward any one of these things. And in the words of photographer and educator Stephen Frailey (2006), "Students of photography can be empowered by seeing their work as part of a cultural matrix, as entering into a conversation

with the professional and historical community' (p. 188). This in not and should not be limited to students of photography and instead should be an attitude for all of art education.

Henri Cartier-Bresson (1999) describes the act of taking pictures as when "all faculties converge in the face of fleeing reality" (p. 16), he describes a process that many artists have experienced, one in which one knows when something 'looks right', 'feels right', or just 'makes sense' suddenly out of nowhere. Granted the actual resulting artwork is situated in culture and context, which is to say that what it looks like or will be is something quite different than anyone else's.

Self-organizing phenomena defy linear causal explanations. In the act of inquiry some artists describe a patterned process of coherence, when seemingly out of nowhere something is 'just right' in the process of making art. Returning to artist Henri Cartier-Bresson (1999) who describes this 'decisive moment' as:

a means to recognize, simultaneously and within a fraction of a second, both the fact itself and the rigorous organization of visually perceived forms that give it meaning. It is putting one's head, one's eye, and one's heart on the same axis. (p. 16)

Clarke, a junior in my second year photography course, describes a similar phenomenon. While sitting in a high school assembly he began writing notes on his arm with a ballpoint pen. Those notes in black ink soon became doodles. He describes what happened next as a process of

recognizing order. Moles and scars were circled and then connected with lines. Forms took shape that resembled constellation maps. Clarke began photographing those 'maps' drawn on friends to create images resembling star maps and molecular structures. Random noise, doodling, becomes a coherent and recognizable new pattern of relationships represented in his images (Figure 1).

Points of Divergence

During one of my prompts that asked students to respond to a personal space, Alex began wrapping dolls and photographing them (Figure 3). What resulted was an exquisite series of wrapped human forms in myriad materials, floating in black, and printed almost life size. When it was the time for our group critique, her classmates gathered around her work, curious as to what had happened. Alex's response was, "I'm sorry Mr. Castro, but I didn't do the assignment." Surrounding her work were the images made by her classmates; landscapes and interiors, much as one would expect from a prompt like the one I had given. Seeing her work differ so greatly probably made her feel as though what she did was outside the expectations of the assignment. How would I mark her work according to the rubric created? Hours were spent meticulously crafting her images and a well-developed sense of design and color was used. I couldn't help but feel what it would be like to be wrapped in those materials, the space within.

Alex's narrative is a common one for artists, who at points in the creative process seem compelled almost to the point of obsession to pursue a

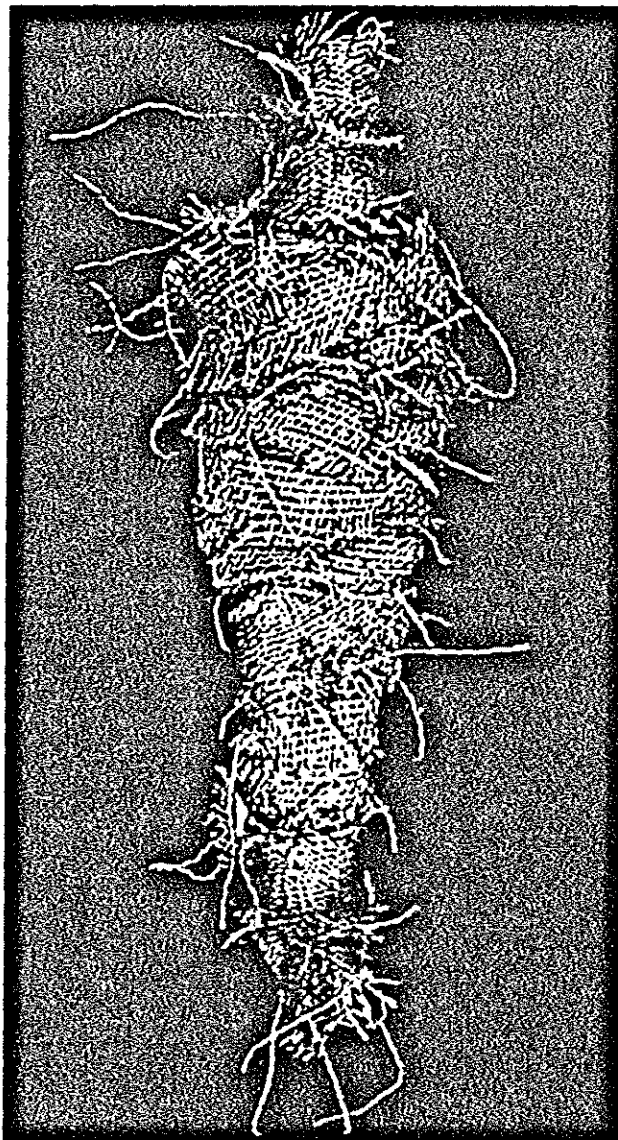


Figure 3. Selected image from Alex's wrapped human forms series in Photography 3

particular path of inquiry. This is similar to what Wilson (2004) describes as the post-conventional phase, which is:

reached by only a few individuals who have sufficiently mastered conventional art styles and ideologies to the point that they have become dissatisfied by their limitations. The dissatisfaction leads to such things as rejection, significant extension, reapplication of images of one mode of art to another mode of art, or on rare occasions, to the creation of an entirely new form of art. (p. 312)

Any individual rarely reaches Wilson's post-conventional phase, in his view. Is this an elitist attitude or an implication of current art educational practice? Where, in Wilson's words, do we build structures for "idiosyncratic behavior, the minor breaking of artistic rules and conventions, inventive and imaginative combing of images and a stretching from the known to the unknown" (2004, p. 314), that would lead to post-conventionalism? Inquiry directed towards the idiosyncratic behaviors of artist's artifacts of inquiry seems to be a second-hand knowing of artistic inquiry that is common in art classrooms (London, 1989). Through prompts and questions, as enabling constraints, spaces are provided to extend into the unknown, where learners have an opportunity to stretch forms through recursively elaborative processes seek emerging patterns of inquiry.

Points of Possibility in Paths of Inquiry

Jon's first photograph (Figure 4), in response to the question, "If I were to be struck blind tomorrow..." looks down from a bridge at a drainage stream flanked on one side by railroad tracks and on the other side by a wall of graffiti. Throughout the course of the year I began to notice that Jon had a propensity to photograph those places and peoples associated with graffiti art. In his response to "what places are special to me," he photographed inner city graffiti (Figure 5). When working through the questions, "what is family, who is my family," he responded with images of graffiti artists. Initially to the both of us, it seemed that the culture of graffiti would be his path of inquiry when it came time to work independently in his senior year. However, in



Figure 4. Jon's first black and white print, in *Photography 1*, in response to the question: If you were to be struck blind tomorrow, what vision of the world would you leave?

the fall of 2005, Hurricane Katrina ravaged New Orleans and it happened that Jon's aunt was living there at the time. On her invitation, Jon went to New Orleans to photograph the aftermath.



Figure 5. Jon's response to the question: What places are significant to me? *Photography 3*



Figure 6. Hurricane ravaged New Orleans, from Jon's independent series in Advanced Placement Photography 5

After his return, his classmates and I noticed a pattern emerging in the hundreds of images he made. On the exteriors of ravaged walls were the spray paint markings of search and rescue teams (Figure 6). In a new context, Jon's response wasn't necessarily about the photographing of graffiti; it was a response to the markings and messages made on the built environment. Jon was asking similar questions, but in a different way, one more centered on the relationship between the marks, messages and surfaces of our built environment. With scaled and sequenced questions and prompts that enabled inquiry through art making, opportunities for divergence, as illustrated in Alex's narrative and in Jon's unfolding understandings about his own processes of inquiry, are anticipated not predicted. The use of constraints that are not prescriptive, enables and orients inquiry through the process of art making.

As an artist, I embody eighteen years of formal art education. As a working artist it seems that the structures of inquiry I am engaged in are considerably different than the structures I have experienced and observe in formal K-12 art education today. Can these structures that I experience as an artist be prescribed, predicted and controlled? Yes and no. Yes, in the sense that as an art educator can create spaces that orients and supports artistic inquiry. And no, in photographer and artist Harry Callahan's (Traub, 2006) feeling about the process of teaching fine-art photography stating, "I still don't think you can teach anyone to be creative. All you can do is give them an environment" (p. 208). And this sensibility is what guided my own pedagogy: creating the conditions for the opportunity to inquire as artists, not model artist's inquiry.

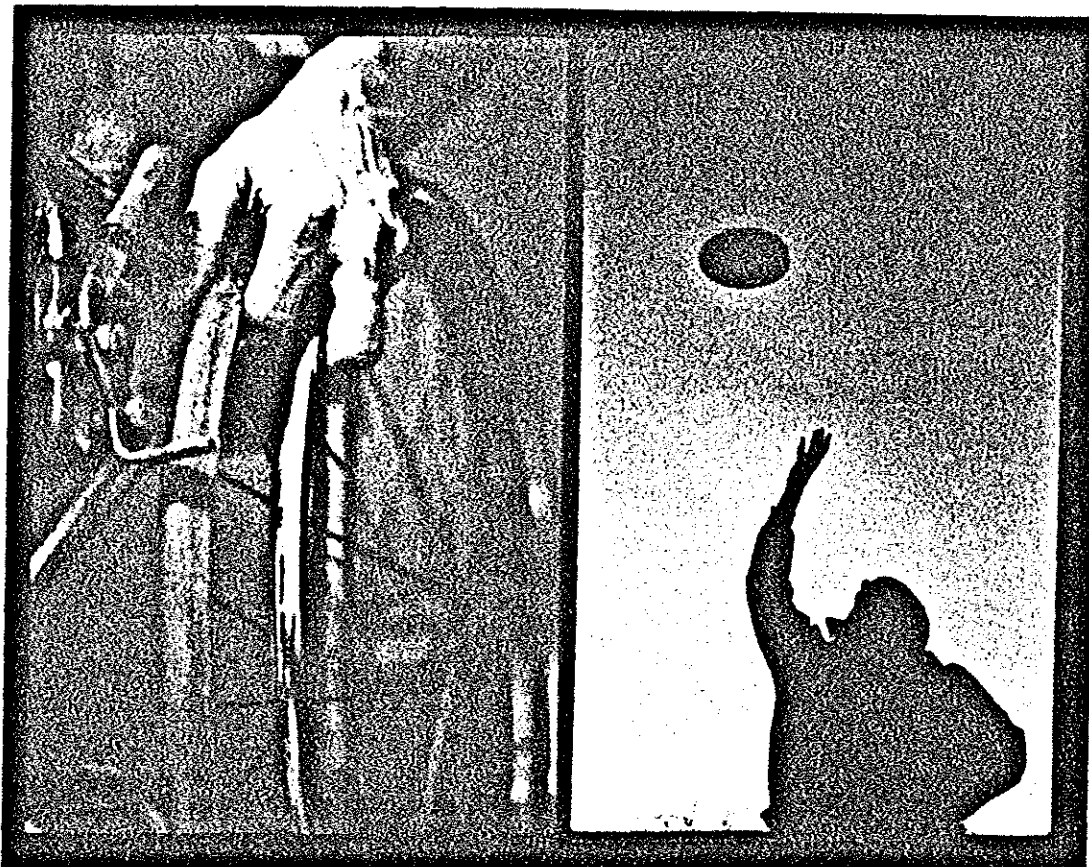
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I injured my ankle numerous times in the past 4 years of my skateboarding career. But in 2005 it came to the point where I needed surgery, or else I wouldn't be able to keep skating. So November 11th I went in to get it done. I was pretty nervous, but they walked me through it, gave me ~~some~~ sleeping medicine & I woke up with a cast on, and it was over. Since then I have just been recuperating, went for a brot, low brace, and the next step is freedom.

From Michelle's series in Photography 4, where she asked the question, "What stories do scars tell?"



Garrett's response to the question in Photography 2, "What do you love and what do you fear..."