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Lessons the Bauhaus Vorkurs Can Teach a 21st-Century Art Teacher

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Abstract

The teachers of the Bauhaus Vorkurs used the formal elements of art to construct classroom exercises that sought to enliven creative thinking. The exercises were designed to give students hands-on experience with various materials and left ample space to experiment until an inventive solution was found. Many activities incorporated aspects of play which helped to engage the senses and summon originality. To test how relevant the Vorkurs assignments could still be today in promoting play and experimentation in adolescents, a small selection of practical Vorkurs activities were implemented in a secondary school art classroom. The results revealed that the activities challenged students' typical approaches to the creative process, nourished their subjectivity, and increased their understanding of materials and composition. The study also inspired reflection on how art activities are composed and the benefits of creating activities that offer digital-age students meaningful opportunities for tangible play and problem-solving.

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Introduction

On the Bauhaus's centennial anniversary in 2019, several notable exhibitions arose to honor the legacy of the school. As part of a research project in art education, I attended the Bauhaus-Archiv und Museum für Gestaltung's centenary exhibition titled *Original Bauhaus* at the Berlinische Galerie in Berlin. I also visited the purpose-built Bauhaus school building in Dessau designed by its founder Walter Gropius, and the Bauhaus Museum Dessau which houses a large collection of work that was created at the school. The exhibition and museum were unique in that instead of only displaying polished pieces of work, they also hung the results of learning activities that took place in the classrooms. Therefore, the level of completeness and refinement in some of the displayed work differed from a typical art exhibition while also offering a unique window into the Bauhaus pedagogy.

A significant portion of the work displayed in the *Original Bauhaus* exhibition came from what was called the Vorkurs, or the Preliminary Course. It was a first-year foundation course that was taught primarily by three instructors: Johannes Itten, Josef Albers, and László Moholy-Nagy, and was supplemented by Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, and Oskar Schlemmer. In conjunction with the exhibition, the gallery composed the *Original Bauhaus Workbook* which outlines the Vorkurs classroom activities and was constructed from the teachers' original writings, photographic documentation, and classroom work found in the archive. The exhibition and the workbook provided student-made examples of the exercises and what could be found and pieced together about the teachers' instructions. Descriptions of Vorkurs activities in this paper are derived from the workbook, the work viewed firsthand in the museum and exhibition, and a review of literature written by the Vorkurs instructors and their former students.

Research into the Vorkurs's exercises revealed a focus on developing practical skills in areas like visual perception, physical dexterity, spatial reasoning, and haptic sensitivity. The exercises also appeared to include opportunities for play and left ample space for hands-on experimentation with materials. I therefore began to question how useful these Vorkurs exercises could be in a modern-day art classroom, with secondary students who are firmly planted in the digital age. Students are now statistically spending a significant amount of their school and free time on screens, and consequently, less time doing activities that would help to develop practical skills and sensibilities in the three-dimensional world. Therefore, my research questions became: Would students enthusiastically engage with art exercises that are over a century old and require skills they use infrequently? Would the exercises encourage a level of play and experimentation that would be atypical of their normal creative processes? Would students produce work that displays a creative and original solution to the visual challenges presented to them? Would students produce work that demonstrates an understanding of materials and formal visual elements? To answer these questions, I borrowed

a selection of four Bauhaus Vorkurs exercises and used them in my own secondary school art classroom to observe how my students would engage and respond.

The Vorkurs

Walter Gropius (1923), the Bauhaus founder, felt the purpose of the Vorkurs was to liberate students from conventional thought patterns through opportunities to be inventive and make discoveries. Therefore, mastering conventional techniques or repeating existing models was avoided. In the pursuit of evading any preordained artistic style, both the objective and subjective were explored as well as representational and abstract forms (Gropius, 1965). The Vorkurs teachers sought to synthesize the intellectual with the practical by creating aesthetic situations that required problem-solving and therein imaginative solutions. Former student Hannes Beckmann (1971) stated, "we soon learned that habitual thinking was in the way of creative thinking" (p. 35). The Vorkurs used a laboratory model to explore artistic concepts like texture, haptic qualities, and color interactions in the pursuit of training perception and making students skeptical of their initial visual assumptions.

Johannes Itten, the first instructor of the Vorkurs, focused primarily on developing personality and individuality and sought to create an atmosphere for students to produce original work. When Itten (1965) began teaching, even prior to joining the Bauhaus, he felt the biggest problem in art education was "creative automatism" and wanted to rid it of mechanical techniques and copying (p. 104). László Moholy-Nagy (1947) focused his Vorkurs on activities that promoted thinking, sensory experiences, and what he described as the "enrichment of emotional values" (p. 19). Josef Albers was far less concerned with any emotional or personality development. He believed the goal of studying art was not self-expression but visual articulation (Albers, 1946). He went as far as to differentiate between studying art and making art, and repeatedly used the phrase "study, not art." (Horowitz & Danilowitz, 2009, p. 7). Therefore, according to Albers (1939), the study of art only prepares one for self-expression, which is the result of mastery and not done in school. However, Albers (1946) fully embraced the experimental aspects of the Vorkurs and stated that trial and error was the most important educational experience, as failure counts for more than simply knowing something. In general, Itten focused most on personal expression, while Moholy-Nagy focused on sharpening the haptic senses, and Albers on developing visual acuity.

Educational Theory

The Bauhaus faculty did not align themselves with any specific educational theorist as they were striving to create an entirely new approach to art education. However, some parallels can be made with progressive theorists and educational movements of the time. For example, the founding of the first Waldorf Steiner school in Germany which is known for emphasizing

imaginative play also took place in 1919, the same year the Bauhaus opened. The Vorkurs pedagogy can also be compared to older theorists and reformers such as Italian educator Maria Montessori and Swiss pedagogue Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi who both focused on sensory experiences with objects and materials. Connections can also be drawn to Friedrich Fröbel, the German inventor of kindergarten, who also spent time in Weimar, the city of the Bauhaus's first location. The basis of Fröbel's philosophies was that children learn and develop creativity through experimentation, play, and other active learning methods.

As Itten was trained and worked for a short time as an elementary school teacher, his approach is often associated with that of Fröbel and Montessori, as his methods consistently involved play and open experimentation. Itten (1975) credited his teacher training for his early educational ideas as there he discovered that "children in their natural lack of inhibition are capable of composing astonishingly original drawings, essays, and songs" (p. 6). As a primary school teacher, he learned that correcting or criticizing student work was destructive to this natural lack of self-consciousness and harmed their imagination. Therefore, he learned to protect and encourage the subjectivity of his students. His colleague László Moholy-Nagy (1947) also recognized the importance of subjectivity stating, "The method is to keep, in the work of the grown-up, the sincerity of emotion, the truth of observation, the fantasy, and the creativeness of the child" (p. 21).

Josef Albers was also an elementary school teacher early in his career. He recognized that when children hit puberty, they begin to compare themselves to adults and lose their spontaneity and often their enthusiasm for art. To combat this, he believed they must be given meaningful creative work where they can make discoveries and invent (Albers, 1952). With children, Albers (1952) encouraged three-dimensional work before two-dimensional because he believed volume is easier to perceive than a flat plane and therefore recommended the exploration of tactile and found materials prior to attempts at picture making with paint. Albers (1928) thought that construction exercises led to invention but only when students work independently, uninterrupted, and devoid of preconceptions. He refers to this as "playful tinkering" with materials as it employs novice experimentation unburdened by prior instruction and he believed that it developed courage (Albers, 1928, para. 6).

While the study of the Bauhaus Vorkurs teachers provides a historical model of playful, studio-based learning, contemporary work in art education emphasizes similar principles. Incorporating play into learning, even while working with students beyond elementary school age, has been increasingly recognized as a valuable pedagogical strategy that supports student engagement, problem-solving, and the development of creativity (Mardell et al., 2023). In addition, recent studio-based conceptual and pedagogical frameworks such as Studio Thinking and Teaching for Artistic Behavior emphasize playful, process-focused learning (Douglas &

Jaquith, 2018; Sheridan et al., 2022). These frameworks offer a contemporary comparison to the concerns of the Bauhaus Vorkurs, as they also encourage experimentation, material exploration, and the development of artistic habits.

Selected Vorkurs Activities

Working from Memory

Johannes Itten created several exercises for the Vorkurs that required students to work from memory, while leaving ample space for the inclusion of subjectivity. Itten often asked students to repeatedly study, experience, and draw materials like bark or fur, then he removed the object from sight and had them draw from memory. He explained that the process for these memory drawings was interpretative instead of imitative, stating that "drawings produced in this manner appear instantly alive and convincing" (Itten, 1975, p. 35). At his later school in Berlin, he crafted an exercise where students studied a fern for thirty minutes every day for a week, and on the last day, he removed the fern and gave students fifteen minutes to draw it from memory. He recalled the "continuous state of excitement" the students were in for those fifteen minutes (Itten, 1975, p. 110). Itten (1965) believed that the more developed the image was in the student's mind the more expressive they could be with their gestures.

Itten would also conduct exercises in the Vorkurs where students analyzed the aesthetic elements of masterworks. He would use old masterworks for studies in perception: analyzing pictorial construction, how order was created, the feeling of the rhythm in the work, and essentially observing how a problem was solved (Itten, 1975). He would also ask students to analyze the level of expressiveness and the emotional disposition of the work. The analysis exercises included abstract tonal contrast studies using only black-and-white media and sometimes rhythmic line drawings of the masterworks. Itten (1965) explained that these activities gave students "insight into objective creation," while also helping to reveal and expand the "subjective tendencies" of the students (p. 121). At times, he would then remove the projection of the masterwork and get students to reproduce the work from memory, creating a general impression in charcoal (Holländer & Wiedemeyer, 2019). Instead of focusing on the details of the masterwork, the students attempted to capture its essence by obtaining a similar level of harmony conveyed in the piece. Itten (1921) believed that students therein gained a new level of understanding of the masterwork through the "re-experience" of it and they were able to discover its "essential and living character" (p. 304).

Assemblage Sculptures

In addition to memory exercises, Itten also directed several material study exercises in the Vorkurs to engage different senses. He asked students to explore materials in many ways,

including detailed representational drawings, collages that focused on contrast, and playful sculptural assemblages. Piles of scrap wood, metal, paper, and cloth used for collages and assemblages could be found in Itten's classroom. There is also evidence of students using commonly found everyday materials like glass, corks, tin foil, and feathers. László Moholy-Nagy also did assemblage sculptures during his Vorkurs lessons, but his activity required more planning, and therefore the results were less whimsical than Itten's. He had students design dynamic equipoised sculptures that demonstrated an understanding of materials and structural integrity. As opposed to the fanciful assemblage sculptures in Itten's course, Moholy-Nagy's classes employed simple geometry and economical use of material to create sleek sculptures. Having his students plan and calculate to reduce volume was Moholy-Nagy's way of encouraging ingenuity. These equilibrium studies were not only supposed to achieve visual balance but also gravitational balance while appearing to defy it with dramatic asymmetry.

Paper Sculptures

Albers designed several exercises for the Vorkurs that centered around the material of paper. He took credit for introducing paper to his students as a three-dimensional or "structural" material (Holloway et al., 1970, p. 460). He wanted to challenge the notion that paper was only a flat surface used for drawing. Giving the material three-dimensionality activated both sides of the paper, created multiple planes, and pulled it more firmly into the domain of objecthood. The paper sculptures made by his students through the use of strategic cuts and folds confronted the limitations of paper and sometimes appeared to defy its capabilities. Although the sculptures were ephemeral due to their natural fragility, Albers (1928) felt that the assignment helped to train "constructive thinking" and "spatial imagination" (para. 26). As characteristic in his teaching, he would set restrictions for the paper sculptures, often forbidding the use of cutting or binding agents and would require students to use all the material, resulting in no paper being lost in the process. Accounting for these restrictions was part of the learning experience, and while it made the activity more difficult it also encouraged innovative thinking. Preliminary studies were always made smaller using cheaper paper and aided in the planning so wastefulness could be avoided in the final work. In addition, Albers (1928) wanted students to consider the amount of effort versus the result of that effort, or in his words, "the relationship between *expenditure* and *effect* is the measure of success" (para. 15).

Material Collages

The Vorkurs pedagogy greatly valued experimentation with materials which resulted in several different assemblage and collage activities. Itten, Moholy-Nagy, and Albers all had versions of a textural composition exercise that combined various materials. The resulting

work fell between assemblage and collage and therefore could be categorized as a loose form of relief sculpture. Students rediscovered their environments by searching for interesting objects and materials in their daily lives that could be used in their collages. Itten (1975) noted that "the newly awakened sense of discovery found inexhaustible treasures of texture and possibilities of combination" (p. 34). Although the collages were meant to focus on contrast and strengthen perceptive abilities and constructive thinking, Itten recognized that these playful, tactile exercises were particularly engaging and stimulating for his students. He stated, "while solving these problems the students developed a truly creative fervor" (Itten, 1965, p. 106), and "the students were gripped by an almost feverish activity of composition" (Itten, 1975, p. 34).

Albers's version of the activity expanded when he began teaching in the United States and incorporated various papers and fabric scraps as well as found objects. The combinations were meant to create either a harmonious composition through the selection of materials that complemented one another or created strong contrast through intentional juxtaposition (Albers, 1928). Albers (1928) later came to call this exercise "matière" and likened the application of the materials to painting as opposed to a construction exercise (para. 30). It was one of the only activities Albers did not place any limitations on, and therefore it fully embraces the act of play in its process. He felt that undirected play with materials early in art learning helped students develop material familiarity and prepare them for later art studies. Albers (1934) came to refer to his three-dimensional assignments as "construction exercises," and his collage activities like matière as "combination exercises" (paras. 18-19). He also differentiated between material studies and matière studies, explaining that material studies (like his paper sculpture exercise) dealt with the capacity of the material; its properties, abilities, and limitations, while matière dealt with the surface appearance or "epidermis" (Albers, 1934, paras. 18-19).

Four Bauhaus Activities in Practice

Method

In the midst of the digital age, children and adolescents are spending significant amounts of time on screens and therefore less time engaged in non-screen-based activities that would encourage physical play, experimentation, and dexterity. One aim of the study is to observe how engaging the Bauhaus activities would be for a contemporary adolescent as they do not incorporate the use of any digital devices. Itten noticed the feverish excitement of his students while making their drawings from memory and their material collages, and I wondered if the same enthusiasm would be observed in modern students. Could a spark of creative motivation and the instinct to play be ignited with these activities? Would they hold the student's attention throughout the lessons? Another aim of the study was to observe how well the

activities promoted and developed competencies that are becoming less exercised by digital-age students such as manual problem-solving, fine motor skills, and spatial awareness. The exercises chosen for the study were selected primarily for their ability to activate senses that typically remain idle while using digital devices and for their ability to offer largely unguided play opportunities to students. The drawings from memory evoke the memory games many play as children, the paper exercise provides the feeling of attempting to solve a complex puzzle through trial and error, the equipoised sculptures essentially allow students to play and build with small objects, and the material collages encourage students to go on a haptic treasure hunt.

The study is grounded in reflective teaching practice and draws on Vorkurs-inspired activities conducted as part of a secondary school art education program. The student artworks and reflections discussed were produced in the course of regular classroom instruction, and the activities were incorporated into an existing unit of study in the curriculum on abstract art and Modernism. The article offers a qualitative reflection on pedagogical exploration and student engagement in the art classroom. The study took place in the Spring of 2024 with twenty-five Grade 10 students, aged between 15 and 16 years old. The lessons were held in the visual arts classroom of an international secondary school in Austria. The students involved came from a variety of countries including China, Japan, Russia, Ukraine, other parts of Eastern and Western Europe, and the USA. Their previous educational experiences and knowledge of the visual arts differed significantly. A small portion had been art students of mine for several years while others were newer to the school, having been in my art classes for only a few months or even weeks. Although the sample of students is diverse, the study is limited in its sample size as the activities were performed with only one group of students. All student-generated work and quotations included in the study have been fully anonymized. No identifying information is disclosed, and publication has been authorized by the school administration.

Masterwork Memory Activity in Practice

A version of the drawing a masterwork from memory activity was completed with secondary school students using a famous Henri Matisse painting. A digital image was projected for a few minutes and discussed as a class, specifically pointing out objects, patterns, and colors. Certain details were visually and verbally identified in the work, especially ones that could be easily overlooked when initially taking in the work, for example, the pearl necklace, the tile pattern on the floor, and how a hand rested on the side of the subject's face. Then the image was removed and students were asked to reproduce what had just been analyzed. The task was not explained beforehand to prevent them from taking notes or making sketches to help their memory. It was reiterated several times while they were working that they should not stress over their accuracy, as creating an exact replica was not the goal. The objective was to create

an interesting image that captured the essence of the masterwork and used their subjective instincts to fill in the forgotten details. It was explained that their subjectivity was what would make their work compelling.

The Response

When the projected image of the masterwork was removed, an initial buzz of excited panic ensued. The students immediately began having spirited debates with one another over what they remembered about the work. In the end, every student's work missed something from the original, yet all the pieces successfully captured the general mood and composition of the Matisse painting. The students enjoyed comparing their work to their peers and were surprised at how diverse the outcomes were, especially the works made in a different part of the room where they could not converse about what they remembered. One student expressed: "It's strangely hard to picture in your mind what you just saw, your memory plays tricks on you." When Matisse's work was projected again at the end of the lesson, they compared it to their work to note the level of accuracy, but only out of curiosity as they knew it was unimportant. The exercise not only honed observational skills but also illustrated to students the importance of including their subjectivity in their work and valuing what it adds to their art.

Figure 1. Results of the masterwork memory activity which show how students utilize their subjectivity to fill in the gaps in their memories.

Assemblage Sculptures in Practice

The assemblage sculpture activity created for secondary school students landed somewhere between that of Itten and Moholy-Nagy. Students were offered a large pile of diverse scrap

wood that included different sizes, shapes, and textures. They were instructed to make a sculpture that appeared off-balance while also being structurally sound. Therefore, the equipoised aspect of Moholy-Nagy's assignment was borrowed—albeit somewhat ignoring his concern for volume reduction—along with the intuitive found-object arranging of Itten's. The equipoised challenge helped to avoid a feeling of aimlessness when constructing the work and aided in producing dynamic outcomes that may have been static otherwise.

The Response

After rummaging through boxes of scraps for interesting shapes of desirable sizes, the students all began by stacking the wood pieces in various configurations akin to toddlers playing with a wooden block set. The play generated ideas and students then began to envision their sculptures. Although these students were around 16 years of age, the play instinct was energetically activated and explicitly observable throughout this activity. Thereafter, some responded completely to the pre-cut pieces by only doing a bit of sanding, while others immediately began using saws to cut the pieces into other sizes and shapes. This revealed differences in the personalities of the students: those who enjoy working more intuitively and those who like having more or full control over the material.

The equipoised assemblage activity challenged students with a different way of working. They had done assemblage-style sculptures in the past, but the structural materials were always later covered by a layer of papier-mâché or plaster gauze. In this assignment, instead of disguising the natural qualities of the materials, they had to work knowing the wood would be exposed in the final sculpture and therefore had to give more consideration to its form and surface quality. Students were also more familiar with using malleable materials like clay or aluminum wire to create sculptural forms, so using wood introduced new obstacles. Many students mentioned that the weight of the wood posed a significant challenge to them, especially with the goal of creating visual imbalance. Many students had trouble exercising patience when attaching the pieces, questioning how long wood glue takes to dry. The impatient students went straight into using nails unnecessarily so they would not need to wait or plan, again revealing interesting aspects of their personalities. The more patient students used less visible mediums and found clever solutions to attaching pieces, often resulting in more visually compelling sculptures.

Students wrote a reflection on their experience making the wood sculptures and many admitted that they found the assignment peculiar. One student stated in reference to the equipoised aspect of the assignment: "It is unusual to find the least practical ways to compose a wood sculpture." Students had to fight their proclivity towards symmetry and at times needed encouragement to construct riskier compositions. They recognized in their reflections that the task activated their creative thinking as they were attempting to "solve the puzzle," as

many put it, while being able to "play around freely" and experiment to achieve the most effective assemblage. Students enjoyed using the wood scraps because they already came in a variety of forms and therefore were an easy starting point that allowed them to begin sculpting immediately. They also enjoyed the tactile qualities of the activity, describing it as a "fun sensory experience," and one student expressed that they found it "far more interactive than painting." Many found novelty in using unfamiliar tools like saws and sandpaper, and the fact that they were using waste material (offcuts), essentially creating something from what would normally be discarded. Several students came to the realization that sometimes less is more as the sculptures that used fewer pieces of wood were often more considered and calculated and therefore more effective.

Figure 2. Results of the equipoised sculpture activity which demonstrate how solutions were created through unfettered play with the material.

Paper Sculptures in Practice

When conducting the paper sculpture activity with secondary school students, it was immediately apparent that the activity sparked a level of experimentation that was atypical. They were given the option of making a full in-the-round or high-relief sculpture, and in Albers's fashion, the use of glue was restricted and they were asked to use the full piece of paper with no waste. As the activity progressed, the rules became less strict and were changed to "minimal use of glue." However, it was important to fully ban it at the beginning so students would not rely on it or plan their designs around it. Each student was given the same size sheet of white paper. Some asked if the use of colored paper was permitted but the request was denied because the addition of color would have likely sparked associations with objects that contain those colors, leading to the temptation to make something representational instead of abstract. The students found it challenging to translate a conventionally flat material into something with volume while responding to the characteristic qualities of paper at the same time. Being able to envision paper as a three-dimensional form required a significant amount of trial and error to test the capabilities of paper as a sculptural material. A notable highlight of the activity was that due to the inexpensive and ephemeral quality of the material,

students took more creative risks with their designs.

The Response

At the start of the activity, students simply experimented without any image in their minds of what they were attempting to make because they were unsure of what was possible. Some students made two or three small mock-ups while others made six or seven before moving on to the final large paper, and many had trouble remembering the steps they took to make their mock-ups. Some began by chopping the paper into pieces right away while others played with folding first: immediately making three-dimensional forms before making any cuts. Those students who searched for the harmonious relationship between folds and cuts were ultimately more successful. The longer the mock-up stage went on, the more some students began to gravitate away from abstract forms and towards objective representation. They began attempting to make houses or faces or asking if origami was permitted. Therefore, with time their experimentation became overly rational, and they had to be steered back. One student expressed in their reflection: "Although I have a lot of experience with origami, this was very different because it had to be abstract and not necessarily symmetrical".

In the student reflections, several mentioned how much they got to use their imaginations, while at the same time their logical thinking was being stretched. They found planning challenging as it was often difficult to predict how a specific action would transform the paper. Then because each action was essentially irreversible, making mistakes or changes to the plan during the process added to the complexity of the task, hence the need for extensive trials. At the same time, the students enjoyed the inherent "artistic freedom" the material offered as it is highly flexible and easy to cut and fold, making it easy to manipulate. They also enjoyed playing with form as the material could make biomorphic abstract forms just as easily as geometric ones. They noted the ease of getting "unique results" as "there are endless ways that you can fold or cut a piece of paper," and were surprised by the diversity in the outcomes.

Students recognized in their reflections that the activity required manipulating the material and was not an additive process like the sculptures they had made in the past. However, most students reported enjoying the wood sculpture more because it was easier to find a solution and their actions could be reversed. Although the wood took much more physical effort to alter than the paper, it was easier to visualize and caused less fear of mistakes, allowing for more free play and intuitive response. Even though both activities have seemingly "endless possibilities," the students felt they could find the best version of their ideas with the wood instead of the paper because it was easier to envision all the possible outcomes.

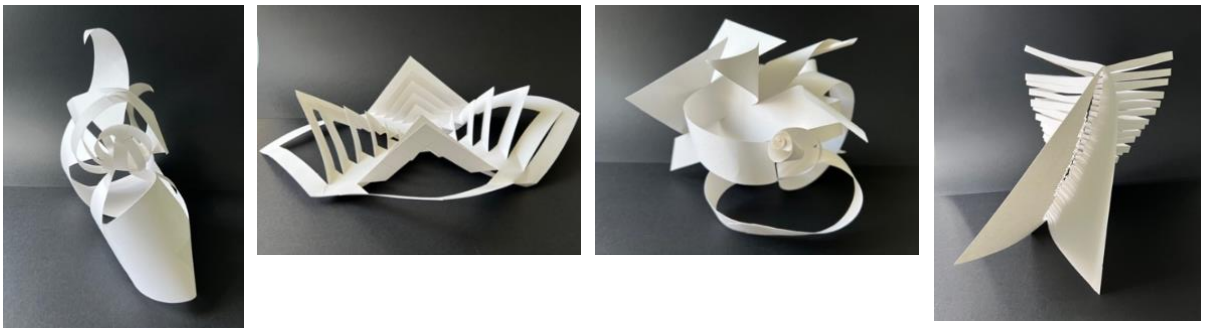

Figure 3. Results of the paper sculpture activity which display diverse outcomes despite everyone beginning with the same simple sheet of white paper.

Material Collage in Practice

While doing matière style collages with secondary school students, no direct instruction was given on how they were meant to put their collages together. The only stipulation was that they needed to focus on either harmony or contrast in each collage they made. I had conducted an open collage activity with the same materials in previous years that did not guide students towards harmony or contrast, and the results were not as well resolved. This small stimulus informed the students' choices of textures and colors and helped to create more dynamic outcomes. They were given no limits on adhesives or even the addition of found objects or acrylic paint. For a base material, pieces of heavy cardboard were all cut to the same size which made it easier to compare and critique them later. Students were provided with several large boxes of scrap paper and scrap fabrics, as well as a box of random small objects such as buttons, strings, and bubble wrap. There was no limit on how many small collages they could make, and therefore there was the opportunity to change their approach when beginning the next collage.

The Response

The initial childlike treasure-hunting through the boxes was playful and free while at the same time students were closely analyzing the scraps in terms of texture, color, and pattern, and testing what relationships could be formed between them. While rummaging through the boxes, a race ensued between some students to find the most interesting scraps and thereafter bartering, bargaining, and trading when someone else found a piece they desired. Once a pile of materials was selected, a compositional dance began with arranging, cutting, and layering. Some students went immediately into gluing something down to cover the bare cardboard and then layering on top of it, while others would plan and arrange the entire collage before using any glue. In this regard, it was similar to the wood sculptures in that one can easily distinguish between the students who enjoy following their intuition and those who like to have more

control over the outcome. One student noted in their reflection: “Most of the time you mainly use your eyes to make artistic decisions, but here your hands became more important.” The students enjoyed the haptic quality and openness of the activity, and the exercise clearly sparked an uncommon level of productivity and creative motivation.

Students thoroughly tested the relationships between the materials through experimentation and trial and error. Many students realized that making small substitutions or altering the amount of a certain material had a large effect on the overall appearance. They also learned the complexity of using mixed media and how to strike an interesting balance between two-dimensional and three-dimensional. The resulting works of the activity were surprising in their level of variety and visual playfulness. One student commented: “It’s such a freeing process: there are no mistakes.” Many students who were typically precious and pedantic with their artwork were able to embrace the freedom in this activity, finding more joy in the process while having less concern for the outcome.

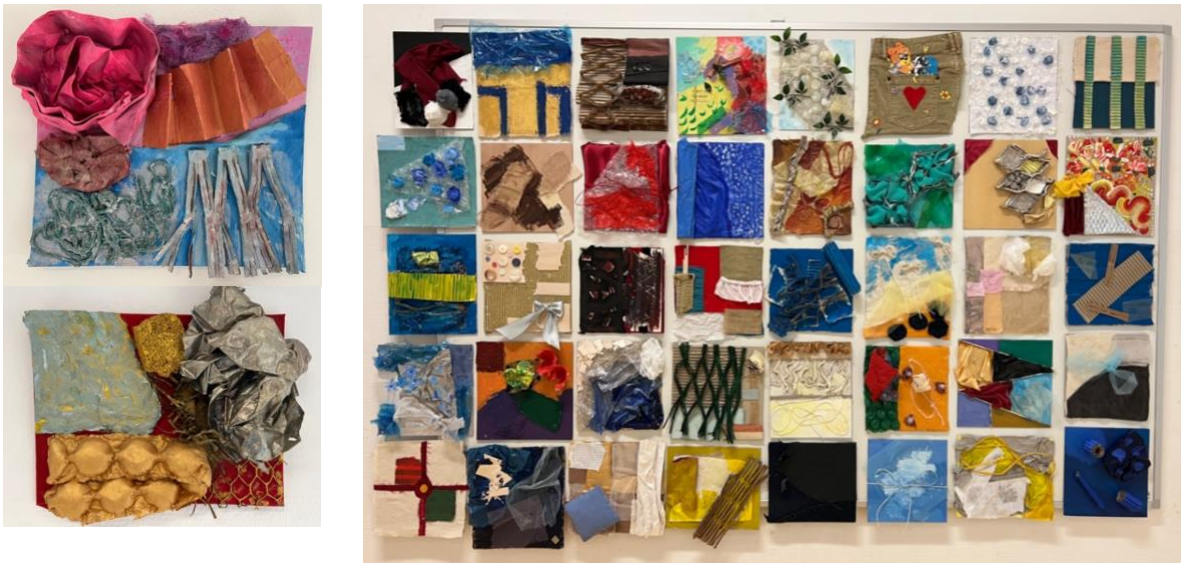

Figure 4. Results of the matière activity which reveal high levels of creativity through sustained experimentation.

Conclusion

This study revealed the unique benefits of formulating opportunities for secondary school students to play and experiment in the art classroom. The Vorkurs's activities challenged students’ typical approaches to the creative process while requiring them to think both logically and creatively. Incorporating a small stimulus, even if just by using words like

"equipoised" or "harmony/contrast," helped to direct experimentation in a meaningful manner while building skills and still leaving ample space for play. There was an element of childlike innocence visible in the approach to making work through actions like treasure hunting, play, stacking, building, cutting and pasting. In addition, using cheap or offcut materials resulted in less fear of mistakes and in turn richer levels of experimenting and risk-taking. Students were able to come up with unique solutions to each exercise while exploring their subjectivity and at times produced work with an unexpected level of sophistication.

In this study, the Vorkurs exercises were proven to be engaging and beneficial for contemporary adolescent art students. Similar to Itten's observations of a "creative fervor" and "feverish activity" in his classroom, my students displayed a surprising level of engagement with the exercises as a high level of creative energy and productivity was seen during each of the four activities. A good deal of student enthusiasm came from the challenge of having an aesthetic problem to solve as it sparked their imagination and drove their artmaking. Another contributor to student motivations was the novelty that the exercises activated skills that are typically less exercised in the digital age, like physical dexterity and haptic perception. The results invite a broader discussion on how hand-making and tactile interactions can benefit or enrich the school experience for digital-age learners, particularly as learning is increasingly occurring through screens. In line with contemporary perspectives on playful learning, the findings suggest that embodied and haptic explorations in the art classroom can support attention and engagement, material understanding, and the development of creativity and problem-solving skills, even in older age groups. This study underscores the need for art teachers to continue to reflect on the types of learning experiences being offered to students today with consideration for how past models can potentially enliven and elevate them.

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