

## IMPROVISATION AS A SOURCE OF MENTAL IMAGES

HOW DO STUDENTS  
BRING FORWARD  
VISUAL IMAGES  
THAT ARE FRESH?

WHAT ARE THE  
CONDITIONS THAT  
KEEP US REACHING  
FOR WORN OUT AND  
OVERUSED IMAGES?

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*In June of 2012, between Year 1 and Year 2 of the Studio Thinking project, Cynthia Gehrie, along with Kate Thomas and Matt Dealy, designed a professional development for art and content teachers that immersed participants in rich and emotional experiences in order to create authentic images, and deepen reflection. This essay is a recap of that intensive summer session.*

## IMPROVISATION AS A CREATIVE ENGINE

Students' work and reflective journals from previous *Arts at the Center* projects, facilitated by Kate Thomas and Matt Dealy, made us aware of the role of mental imagery in metacognition and critical thinking. We watched as visual artists rubbed shoulders with theater and dance artists, sharing techniques that encouraged children to use their bodies to express mental images, and to project new mental images as body gestures.

As teachers and artists gained confidence with imaging, they moved into deeper realms of improvisation. Improvisation pre-supposes that students already know how to express using their bodies, and are able to construct moving images using compositional elements of theater and dance/movement. Soon teachers were able to use improvisation as a tool in interdisciplinary projects like creative writing. They used tableau and improvisation like a sketchbook, working out characters, actions, props, and expressions. With these co-constructed mental images, students wrote stories independently and compared their stories with members of their improvisation group. With music artists, the students began to improvise with sound using percussion with body parts and objects.

In all of these explorations, what surfaced was the importance of initiating a project with vocabulary for both art and content, and generating mental imagery students could draw upon as the project developed. As we moved into our current project using the *Studio Thinking Framework*, we wondered how we could introduce improvisation and mental imagery building to visual arts teachers in Chicago Public Schools.

To bring these ideas to a new group of artist teachers, I reflected on our experiences with mental imagery in interdisciplinary learning and improvisation. In particular, I made connections to complex concepts articulated by Damasio (2000) in his book *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness*. I began to understand that during improvisation one engages multiple layers of self and responds in a way that spontaneously draws from a wider self than in everyday activities. In the spirit of interdisciplinary imaging, I saw three layers of self that emerge during improvisation.

### ESSENTIAL SELF

Mental images of the essential self divide into the conscious and the unconscious. We are aware of, and able to focus upon, those which are conscious. The unconscious mental images must be brought into consciousness in order to engage them in thought. Like an iceberg, most of our mental images are underwater, with only a small percentage actually visible by our conscious self. So, what is invisible in the unconscious? Damasio (2000) suggests that the unconscious includes:

"...all the fully formed images to which we do not attend; all the neural patterns that never become images; all the dispositions that were acquired through experience, lie dormant, and may never become an explicit neural pattern; all the quiet remodeling of such dispositions and all their quiet renetworking that may never become explicitly known; and all the hidden wisdom and know-how that nature embodied in innate, homeostatic dispositions" (p. 228).

The unconscious is a vast reservoir of unused experiential material. But what is the connection between conscious and unconscious? Is the unconscious active or dormant until called upon by the conscious? These are questions of a modern mind resembling Dr. Freud's postulation of an unconscious state, and



conception of psychoanalysis as a method of putting the conscious mind in contact with its own unconscious counterpart.

The Surrealists, parallel to psychoanalysis, used games and drawing techniques to extract mental imagery from the unconscious. In *Paris Peasant*, Aragon (1926/1994) offered these thoughts on the unconscious and its relationship to the conscious:

“Obviously there can be no true sense of the unconscious if we limit ourselves to the general conception of this faculty. At least, one could not have more than an abstract knowledge, or rather a logical intuition, of it. But if we consider that the conscious can derive its elements from no other source than the unconscious, then we are obliged to agree that the conscious is contained within the unconscious. It is thus a preliminary sense by the conscious of the unconscious, a sense (of direction) which starts off figuratively but extends itself logically, and which in this way occupies the whole mind, that we may justifiably name the sense of the unconscious” (p.125).

### **AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SELF**

Damasio (2000) speaks of the autobiographical self as a sense of self that “appears to remain the same... because it is based on a repository of memories for fundamental facts in an individual biography that can be partly reactivated and thus provide continuity and seeming permanence in our lives” (p. 217). It is the source of a mental image we construct of ourselves and constantly remodel. Who directs this process? Damasio (2000) asserts, “I believe that much of the building occurs nonconsciously and that so does the remodeling” (p. 224).

When students work with mental images through the arts, and step through the frame into a virtual reality within the art form, they are often surprised to find themselves knowing what to do, how to pose, or how to move. Inspiration and new “ideas” flood into their conscious minds, feeding a fluid and plastic process of exploration and expression. They express surprise at what they can do, as do their teachers and peers. Where does this newfound capacity come from?

### **POTENTIAL SELF**

I call this capacity that suddenly emerges when students engage in the arts a *potential self*. Somehow, parts of their self become conscious and available as we make or do things.

“The heart of improvisation is the free play of consciousness as it draws, writes, paints, and plays the raw material emerging from the unconscious.”

—Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990), *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*

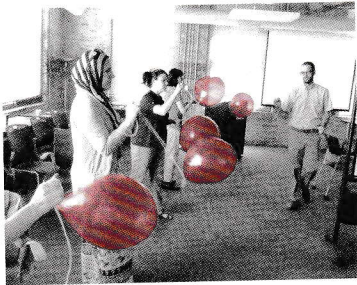
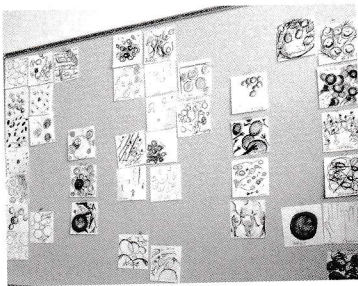
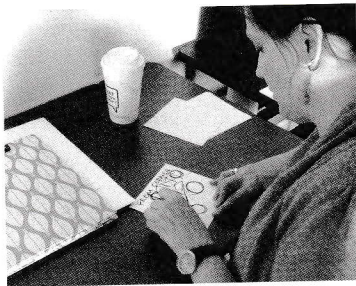
How can improvisation be used in visual arts classes to build strong images in student artwork? Thomas, Dealy and I began to imagine how to use improvisation as a source of strong visual images. We began to think of setting up a zone of experience where art teachers would step through a frame into a visually rich environment. We would present them with an improvisational situation within which they were obliged to respond. We hoped to stimulate a response by the whole self, at all three levels: the essential self, both conscious and unconscious; the autobiographical self, drawing on prior knowledge and experience; and the potential self, emerging with a new perspective and responding with fresh images.

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## IMPROVISATION (CONTINUED)



## RED BALLOON IMPROVISATION

During our session, after introducing project teachers to the psychoanalytic foundation we were coming from, we engaged them in an improvisational activity. Thomas and Dealy introduced large red balloons into the meeting space, inviting everyone to join in keeping the balloons in the air. They continued to bring out more balloons until the room was filled with red balloons, as everyone batted them and kept them aloft. We did not rush through the balloon float. The energetic movement of these large, buoyant, red objects was calming and hypnotic. As they all eventually dropped to the ground, Thomas and Dealy quietly removed them from the room.

### ENVISION #1

Everyone stood together as I read instructions for the first mental imagery exercise. In a peaceful tone, I asked the participants to envision themselves observing this activity from three different perspectives. With my verbal guidance, I had them develop mental images of what this sea of red balloons looked like as a bystander in the corner, as someone floating above and looking down, and as someone standing in the middle of all these people tapping the red balloons. I asked, "What images do you see?" The teachers then used black charcoal to draw one image from each perspective on a 6"x6" piece of white paper, adding one descriptive word to go with each drawing.

The drawings were collected and hung in groups according to the represented perspective. One artist teacher was asked to lead the group in selecting images and words from each set that represented the strongest images. Selections were set aside into sub groups from the perspective of a bystander in the corner, floating above, or in the center of the improvisation. When a drawing was nominated, the sponsor was asked to explain why they had selected the drawing and to articulate its appeal and strengths. In each case, the nomination process was allowed to continue as long as people continued to nominate new drawings. Each defense stimulated responses from the group, which generated a sense as to whether the drawing should be advanced to a "selection" for future work.

The next activity began when Thomas and Dealy brought a few balloons back into the room. This time the balloons had short strings tied to them. Thomas and Dealy held the string at one end, and punched the balloon to make it move the end of the string and then spring back. More balloons with strings were passed around until everyone was working with the balloons, trying to bat them out and pull them back using the string. When everyone was successfully bouncing the balloons, Thomas and Dealy began to use the outward stroke to gently bounce the balloon off of another person. This started a mildly aggressive period of playfully bouncing the red balloons off of each other. Suddenly, a balloon popped. Then another POP. And another POP. Thomas and Dealy concealed pins and conspicuously began to pop the balloons. Soon most of the balloons were popped, while a few remained. The surviving balloons were vigorously protected by their "keepers." As Thomas and Dealy tried to reach a balloon, the rest of the group cheered on the "keepers" to prevent the balloon from being popped. The atmosphere in the room was electrified as each remaining balloon was tracked down and popped. When the last balloon popped, a shout of outrage erupted.

### ENVISION #2

Once again, I verbally guided the artist teachers through the visualization activity. I asked them to envision that the activity was still happening; the people are batting their balloons to the end of the string, and yanking them back to bat again. Envision yourself floating up to the ceiling and looking down

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at the balloons bouncing off all the people and everyone batting the balloons at one another. Imagine yourself dropping down until you are standing on the floor. Imagine walking over to the corner and turning around and watching the balloons bouncing off one another in the center of the room. Now imagine you are walking into the balloons and standing in the middle of all the people. Imagine the loud pop as balloons burst. I asked, "What images do you see?" The teachers then used black charcoal to draw one image from each perspective on a 6"x6" piece of white paper, adding one descriptive word for each drawing.

### COMBINING MENTAL IMAGERY WITH VOCABULARY

The improvisation with the red balloons created a shared event that immediately allowed mental images to surface from three perspectives (above, from a corner, and in the center of the action). The mental images are transformed into expressive black charcoal drawings with a word or phrase associated with the experience written within the drawing. By grouping the images by perspective, it is possible to view common threads and the range of images, and vocabulary generated. Both vocabulary and mental images become artifacts.

### KEEP THE BALLOONS IN THE AIR

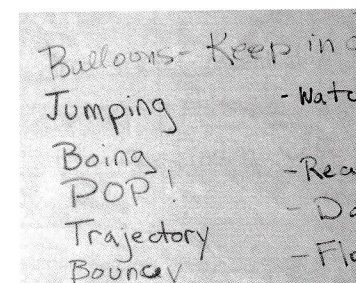
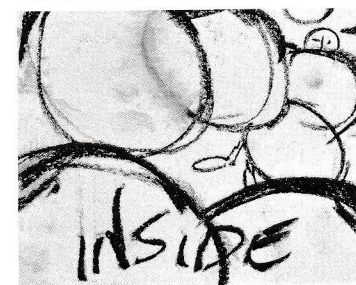
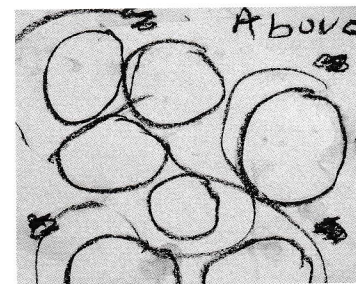
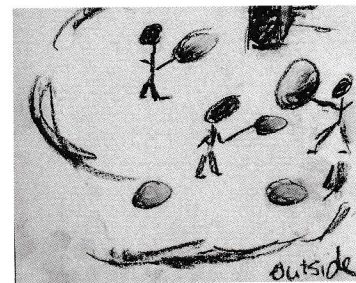
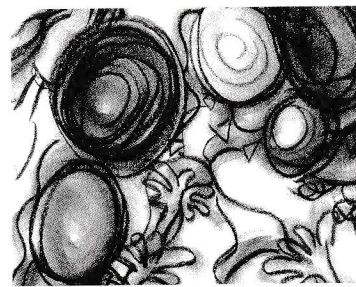
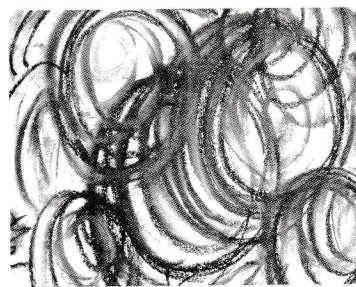
The vocabulary list from the above perspective during the first "Keep the Balloons in the Air" improvisation included such terms as jumping, boing, pop, trajectory, bouncy, flight, movement, and calming. The images and words are dynamic as they incorporate movement and sound into the mental image. In "Jumping," the spiral circles and filled in circles give the sense of rising and falling spheres, which is how the balloons rose and fell. This is enhanced by perspective as smaller, more distant circles, are in the center. By varying the diameter of the circles, a sense of nearness and distance is communicated. "Pop" brings in the audio image of a balloon bursting, which happened spontaneously during the first improvisation. The star and balloon are boldly drawn, giving an impression of impact. Other circles near the word "pop" recede in size like an echo of the single explosive "pop." The audio "pop" becomes a visual "pop."

From the standing in the corner perspective, the vocabulary list included react, dance, floating, circles, boiling, waiting, and pop. These words attached to their black and white images captured the suspended rising of the balloons, the way the moving balloons interacted as in a "dance." "Circles" and "boiling" suggest the movement of the balloons and the movement of the participants as they kept the balloons aloft.

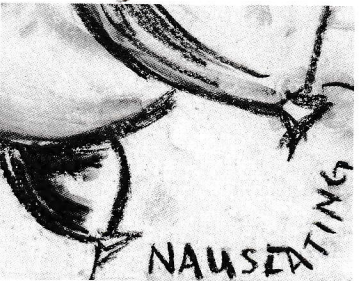
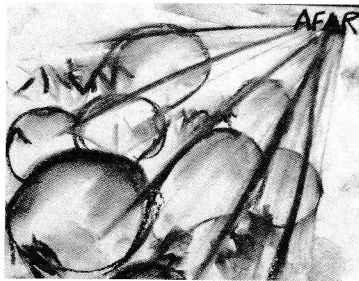
Terminology attached to the images from the center of the action during the "Keep the Balloons in the Air" improvisation included bump, surrounded, looking up, molecule, central, caution, impact, and eye protection. "Surrounded," "central," and "bump" communicate the sense of crowded action in the center of improvisation. People and balloons were bumping into one another, competing for space as balloons moved haphazardly and people lunged to bat them up before they fell to the ground. This sensation of spontaneously responding to unpredicted action is a key element of improvisation. "Eye protection," "caution," and "impact" all carry a concern for safety in the midst of a chaotic, improvised moment.

### BATTING BALLOONS AND POP

Artifacts from the "Batting Balloons and Pop" activity provided a new set of vocabulary and mental images. The vocabulary list from the above perspective included push-pull, reverb, vibration, mingling, collision, and snap. The "Push







and Pull” drawing used arrows pointing up and down. It abstracts the power in punching the balloon away, and its quick return from the end of the string. Yet, the string provided a limit, which added control to this dynamic action. “Reverb” and “vibration” reference the sound of punching that filled the improvisational space. In journal reflections, participants wrote about finding a rhythm, or using a pom-pom, or returning to their childhood.

From the standing in the corner perspective, the vocabulary list included terms like afar, energy, concentration, finding, pulse, and attack. The “afar” drawing focused on being distant from the balloons, their compression, and vibration. “Energy” shows movement in the balloons, and the ceiling fan above. “Concentration” and “finding pulse” illustrate the energy created from the balloons and makes visible the process of gaining control of the bounce, and establishing a rhythm that is efficient and consistent. “Attack” shows this energy in a different way, expressing confusion and shock.

Images from the center of the action in this second improvisation included game over, threat, disappointment, frenzy, hunting, amid, and attach. This new image of “attack” (different from the standing in the corner perspective) shows the balloons beneath a dark shape of confusion and aggression. The emotion shows the balloon as prey, “hunting” each balloon with a pin. A moment ago we were “amid,” but now there is “threat” and “frenzy.” With the bursting of the last balloon, there is “disappointment” and a sense of “game over.”

### MURAL DRAWING – SESSION ONE

The improvisational activity transformed into a collaborative mural making exercise. The 6”x6” drawings, previously selected as the strongest images, were placed around two large pieces of brown craft paper. One paper was surrounded by the selects from the “Keep the Balloons in the Air” improvisation while the other large paper was surrounded by the selects from the “Batting Balloons and Pop” improvisation. Everyone was invited to pick a mural to work on, to meet with the others who selected to work on that mural, and to decide how to go about creating a mural using black charcoal, white chalk and red pastel sticks. Each group was instructed to reference the drawings and vocabulary to create a complex visual image of their respective improvisation.

### MURAL DRAWING – SESSION TWO

After each group completed the first draft of their murals, they switched places so that the “Keep the Balloons in the Air” group was now working on top of the “Batting Balloons and Pop” mural, and vice versa. They began to alter the images, tone, and mood of the other group’s original draft by adding images from their own mural. The first mural was attacked with images from the second. The second mural was relaxed and hidden behind a veil of white chalk and circles. Images from the 6”x6” improvisational drawings were woven into the second mural, including the whirling fan, broken balloons, words and strong arrows. Through this exchange, each mural came to express a fusion of both red balloon improvisations.

### REFLECTION

When the murals were finished, artist teachers had a chance to reflect on their experience of using improvisation as a source of mental images. One artist teacher said that she worked more slowly the second time around when creating the individual images. Several agreed that the visions were getting more exciting and interesting with each experience. Here are some of their thoughts:

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"I was made very aware, through the essential self exercise, of how we all see differently, how we connect to different ways of kinesthetic activity. The Studio Habits of Mind work differently with each individual."

"I was reminded to use drawing as notation, as well as to create situations that allow students to respond openly and improvise."

### ANALYTIC INQUIRY

A day later, the artist teachers returned to find the murals on a wall and all of the 6"x6" images placed on large tables. They formed groups and were asked to examine a section of images in order to organize them into categories. They began by selecting images that went together, deciding on characteristics the drawings shared and which categories they represented as a group of images. One teacher asked, "Can we look at the skills involved as a place to start?" This group located images and brought them together according to certain criteria, for example, setting aside those that were linear drawings, representational, or abstract.

Working in two groups, artist teachers shared their inquiry into the database to generate vocabulary around art skills. The vocabulary was transcribed onto a whiteboard and key images were added to the list. The art skills vocabulary list from the first group included pattern, representational, narrative, unique, quality, express, provocative/evoke, mood, emotion, energy, contrast/space, negative value, positive value, use of medium, engagement, shape/form, line, quality, and impact. Art skills vocabulary generated from the second group included mark making, movement/composition, directional lines, technique, line quality, value-contrast, application for expression, risk taking, stretch and explore, unique interpretation, and visualizing experiences.

As a final step of analytic inquiry, each group created critique questions based on the art skill vocabulary that emerged in the analysis of the set of images. The first group asked, "What engages you as a viewer? Why do you think the artist only used black? How do artists use elements and principles of art making? Create a narrative for this image - what provoked the artist to make it?" Critique questions from the second group were, "What mood does this involve/provoke? What about the work causes those feelings? What common thread is there between these images?"

As they continued to engage in a dialogue around the assessment of these 6"x6" images, the categories became more and more filtered. The artist teachers generated vocabulary from an open-ended inquiry into the image database of these drawings. They developed emergent questions for critique informed by the artwork and the data embedded within them. The artist teachers used their own process made artwork as material to be mined for further evidence of knowing. In their reflective writing, the artist teachers discussed this process.

"Is learning a linear process? Is learning a more disparate global process?

A combo? How do we capture the deep/complex multi-level learning that happens in art without reducing it to measurable components?"

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Today I feel that I have a stronger approach to the process of identifying relational visualizations also having the tools were very helpful - I know how to approach into and what to look for.

