



# Blogging, Zines, and Narratives: New

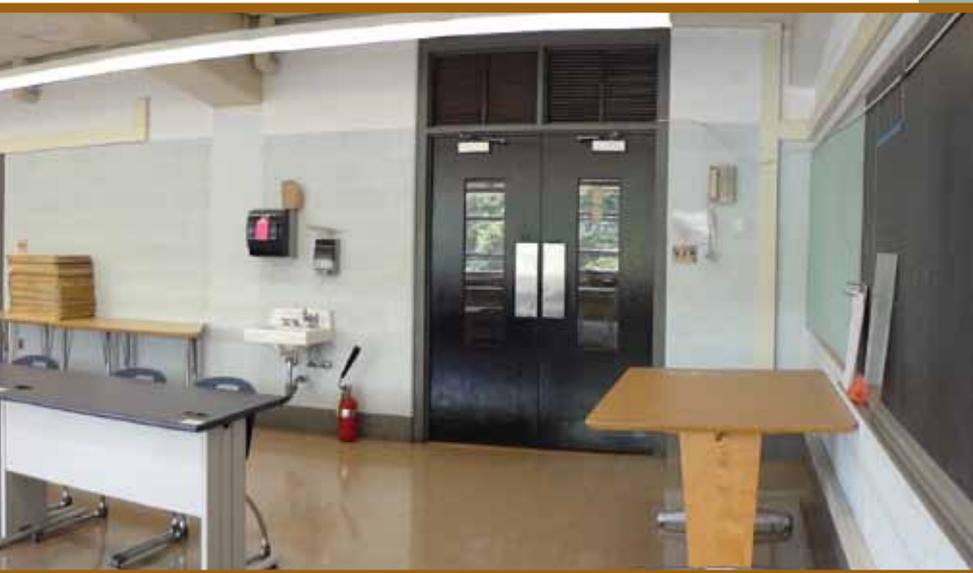
**S***tale, list-oriented, exclusionary, non-relevant*—these are words that describe my encounters with art history as it is popularly taught; as such, it is no wonder that some people do not associate the subject with deeply meaningful content that is exciting and relevant to their lives. During my early years as an undergraduate art student, the content and language of art history seemed so foreign to my life that I had a difficult time relating to the subject matter and internalizing the information.

Reflecting upon my own experiences led me to the questions guiding this article: How am I to present the same information I struggled with as a student to my urban 11th- and 12th-grade students and expect scholarly interest? How can we, as art educators, make an *elite* subject matter—having historically been narrated by a select and educated few who likely viewed art history through misogynistic and socio-economically privileged lenses—accessible to urban students? In addressing these questions, I will examine how we might create narrators of art history rather than those who ascribe truth to the opinion of a few, and present a series of tangible classroom activities that will potentially help art history become meaningful to students' lives.

Who are these urban students of which I am speaking? My students attend a Title 1 high school with a population of roughly 1,500 students in a medium-sized east-coast city known for its mix of poor working class and affluent people. Although the city itself has large swaths of wealth and poverty, the school primarily consists of students of poverty with a small smattering of upper-middle-class students enrolled in a science and engineering program for the gifted. All students have tested in the top 75th percentile on their middle school state math assessments in order to attend this high school and are generally college bound.

Why teach art history to students? Is it important anymore? I struggle with these questions for many reasons, but every time I doubt the importance of the subject, I am confronted by references to art history in everyday culture that provide insight into our society. By possessing knowledge about art history, I am able to notice connections and understand more about our collective lives, culture, and humanness. I believe that art history is important because people's thinking is important. Artists investigate and express in ways that both coincide with and go against the culture of their time. Art history is a way to peek into the thought processes of people of a particular place and time; through these glimpses of the past, we are better able to understand our present and future.

It is my belief that an understanding of art history can benefit our cultural navigations, though the probable majority of it is narrated through the perspective of a select few. Professor Mary Ann Stankiewicz (2001) reminds us that historically “most art students were men” and “access to the fine arts was limited to upper-class men and women.” Although at times historical narration silences the voices of many, my goal is to create a classroom where this is not the precedent and art is accessible to all regardless of race, class, or gender. Art history has



Art history can be taught in more exciting ways, emphasizing students' unique perspectives by encouraging them to become bloggers, resident experts, or narrators.

Figure 1. Classroom.

# Dialogues in Art History

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historically been taught in a way that acknowledges the artist as genius and the artwork as possessing a singular truth. Modernist principles do not allow for multiple interpretations of works of art; Postmodernist principles, however, embrace pluralism in a way that validates many truths instead of a singular one. This potential can empower our diverse population of students and thinkers in American urban schools and, I argue, encourage empathetic thought. Empathy is discussed by Daniel Pink (2005) as “the ability to... understand the subtleties of human interactions, to find joy in one’s self and to elicit it in others, and to stretch beyond the quotidian in pursuit of purpose and meaning” (pp. 65-66).

The American Association for the Advancement of Science (1990) suggests that science education is in a particularly strong position to foster the following attitudes and values: “curiosity, openness to new ideas, and informed skepticism” (para. 9). It is my belief that these same attitudes and values can hold true for the teaching of art and art history. Art history does not exist in a vacuum, as artists are human beings inspired by the world around them, their thoughts, the thoughts of others, and everything in between. Our students are the same. By allowing and encouraging students to make connections between their personal interests and art history, we acknowledge their opinions as valid and potentially provide access points for them to make meaning from a subject that on the surface can feel impervious and out of touch with their lives.

Art history does not need to be treated as reverential and holy—as, in my experience, it has sometimes been presented in lower-level Art History courses and texts—but as an extension of someone’s thought process in relation to the culture in which that person lives. Students can make the connection between their personal experiences with culture and an artist’s without concern of watering down the meaning or intent of the original work. Students have the right—and I argue duty—to create these

connections and take art history into their own hands. They are the meaning makers for their own lived experiences. I suggest that we as art educators apply some of these postmodern principles to our teaching. Art educator Wanda B. Knight (2006) argues that when the power of interpretation is given to the viewer, the viewer’s opinion is validated. By acknowledging the viewer’s individual opinion, their interpretations of the artwork become valid and relevant in the field of art history, negating a potential singular meaning of the work from art historians.

I want to create *narrators* of art history, students who feel comfortable and confident loving the artists and art that they want to rather than the ones they feel obligated to respect in order to be seen as “cultured.” When previously unengaged students latch onto artists whose thought processes attract them and thus encounter a different perspective, I am excited to hear of the deeply personal realizations that come to fruition. Olivia Gude (2004), a proponent of post-modern approaches to art education, describes this need for personal identification and challenged perspectives, which she terms *representin’* and *re-contextualization*. Gude argues that students who can create and read artworks through both personal (*representin’*) and foreign (*re-contextualization*) viewpoints develop greater critical thinking skills and are more adept to understand and interact with the world around them.

## Art History Addressed From Different Viewpoints

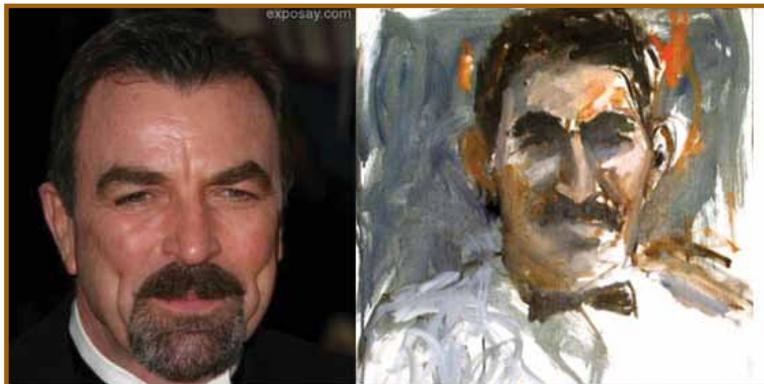
How does one get students to make personal connections with art history? In the following sections, I describe four assignments that work in my classroom. Each of the assignments acknowledges the students’ opinions and interpretations of artworks as valid and necessary and encourages them to gain an understanding of art history through their own perspectives and present life experiences.

# I want to create narrators of art history.

## Blogging Art History

Art is alive and well on the Internet, and so are our students. Students who blog often post pictures of contemporary culture; sometimes these posts consist of references to art of which they are not aware. Fashion designers and hip-hop musicians make myriad allusions to contemporary art that go unnoticed by the unknowledgeable viewer. Blogging Art History is a weekly blogging assignment in which students research images related to a list of five to eight artists—selected by the teacher—through an Internet search engine. From these initial searches, the students select artworks that speak to them for various reasons. They then post an image of this work on their individual blogs, along with paired images, videos, sound clips, or pieces of writing, and brief explanations of the pairings. Why did they select that particular artwork? Why did they choose to pair it the way they did? By explaining these seemingly simple decisions, students who previously did not know how to talk about artwork beyond acknowledging whether they liked it or not become comfortable ascribing and discussing personal meaning relevant to their interpretations of the work (see Figure 2). The pairing allows the student the freedom to see the work in his or her own terms instead of potentially through a dialogue constructed of “art speak” initiated by an art critic, museum curator, or historian.

Through this assignment, students often find powerful connections between their personal lives and art. One of my students, Benjamin,<sup>1</sup> a senior who kept to himself, became entranced in the Surrealists’ acknowledgment of the subconscious. He researched the writings that the Surrealists referenced and discovered an interest in Jungian dream theory, which kept surfacing throughout the semester in the form of conceptual links between the remaining artists, the Surrealists, and other students’ examples explained in



My first thought when I saw this portrait was “Wow - that guy looks a lot like Richard from Friends.” As I looked closer, though, I saw more similarities between the two images than simple likeness of feature. What I like about Elaine de Kooning’s painting is that it contains colors you wouldn’t normally think appear on a face. The skin above his right eyebrow, for example, is bright orange, while his left cheek is dark gray. And when I looked at the photograph of Tom Selleck, I noticed the area between his eyebrows is orangish and his dimples are almost yellow. I love that de Kooning’s painting isn’t what she knows a person looks like; it’s composed of the colors she actually sees. Without using the usual portrait technique (hardly any lines), she’s managed to create an image that bears a striking resemblance to an actual person.

Figure 2. Student blog post.

class. After graduation, he has kept up his interest in psychology with readings on the subject and further self-motivated exploration. Another student, Isabelle, who was quiet and reserved, became interested in contemporary installation work and chose to maintain her individual blog after the class had ended. She continues to post new and interesting contemporary work almost on a daily basis but chooses not to pair the images with anything aside from an occasional comment (see Figure 3). Through the Blogging Art History assignment, both Benjamin and Isabelle found personal meaning and connected to art history in different but significant ways.

## Zines

I am always hesitant to assign a textbook to students in my art history courses for fear that one text will reinforce the idea of a singular narrative or a “right” and “wrong” way of viewing art history; instead I prefer to draw upon multiple texts by authors with diverse backgrounds. I provide content from the various books that is relevant for the week. Students read and notate the text with various marks to indicate statements that they believe are important, phrases that confuse them, vocabulary they do not understand, and selections that excite them. The students form into groups of two to four and decide what their narratives will be, based on their interpretations of the readings. They cut passages and images

from their selections, look up vocabulary that is new to them, and as a group work out the answers to their questions from the text. They paste their selected passages onto large pieces of paper and draw and write to illustrate their art historical narrative (see Figure 4). Through this process, students see the ways in which different texts address similar themes and are able to formulate their own narratives rather than accept a singular truth from one author’s perspective.

One student who seemed to flourish with this assignment was Jerome, a junior who was deeply interested in fashion and kept to himself. Jerome broke character by taking charge in his zine group. He led the discussion and kept the other members of his group involved in the activity by asking their opinions and demanding that the group seriously consider composition and construction when it came to the production of their zines. From this activity Jerome gained more and more confidence in his art historical knowledge and would excitedly tell me after class about various art references he had seen on the runway or in music videos. Jerome blossomed from a disengaged student to one who could not wait to make more personal connections to art history in and out of class.

## Talking Pictures

When looking at art, one of the first questions that may come to mind is, “What is this work saying?” Again in small groups, students select an artwork from a table in



Figure 3. Isabelle's continuing blog post of Kyung Woo Han's work.

the room. The images are sourced from art magazines, books, posters, and the Internet. The works are by the artists that students have been researching in the Blogging Art History assignment, so the students are familiar with the artists' processes and biographies. With their selected image, the students dialogue a potential thought process in the form of a narrative that is either theoretically occurring in the work or in the mind of the artist as the piece is being created. Questions dealing with the artwork's subject matter, formal qualities, place in history, and potential innuendos are asked between the partnered students. After students provide each other with their answers to these questions, they write a first-person dialogue from the perspective of either the artist or the subjects of the artwork. Finally, a display of the dialogue is paired with the image and the name of the artist. This activity allows the students to use their imaginations and cultural knowledge to place themselves in the created world of the artist. Students generally enjoy this activity because they can "spin" the work however they like. Morgan, a disengaged senior, began participating in class when she was presented with the images of Kara Walker and Carrie Mae Weems. She took particular delight in narrating the voice of Kara Walker's silhouetted characters, especially when dealing with mother and child imagery. Morgan is a young mother who battled with her time away from her son while in the classroom. The Talking Pictures assignment engaged Morgan because she was able to identify thematically with the artists' works.

### Resident Experts

After conducting research on artists in various ways (Internet images, multiple readings, videos in class, online museum profiles, and transcribed interviews with artists), the students each became a "resident expert" and presented a 5-10-minute Power-Point or Prezi presentation on an artist of their choice. The students talked about the



Figure 4. Students working on zines in the classroom.

artists, their artwork, and their personal connections to the artists and artwork. It is interesting to see the transition from the beginning-of-the-semester biographies copied almost verbatim from Internet sources to the middle- and end-of-semester presentations in which the students felt comfortable and empowered to talk about the work from historical and personal perspectives. Grace, a senior and valedictorian of her class, seemed to delight in the fact that her personal opinion mattered in terms of the subject matter. After class one day, she told me that this was the only class where she was asked her opinion of

a topic and it mattered. In addition, the research was deepening her appreciation of contemporary art, whereas before she saw the field as ridiculous and lacking meaning.

### **Artists Are Human, Too**

I am lucky to teach in a city with an art institute that employs generous professors and working artists, many of whom are willing to visit my classroom. I arrange for painters, installation artists, sculptors, fibers artists, and sound and game design professors to come to speak with my classes each week. I want to expose my students to work from the perspectives of those who make it, complete with their personal opinions and insights into their investigative processes. Professor Deborah Kuster's (2008) experience with bringing artists to the classroom resulted in students understanding artwork from multiple perspectives, and understanding pluralistic meanings within a work.

All of my classes are invited to the 45-minute lectures, and week after week 50 to 75 students and colleagues stuff themselves into my classroom to listen to what these professionals have to say and present. Sometimes the talks are too conceptual for the students, but most of the time students are exposed to work that tests their theories of what art is and spurs further discussion after the visiting artists leave. Reggie, a junior who was seen as an outsider, took particular interest in a fibers discussion and afterwards began an e-mail correspondence with that particular professor. Having the artist in the room, either physically or through an Internet service such as Skype, makes that person real and just as fallible as the students, bringing the students' comfort level with art to a new threshold.

# We can affect real and meaningful change when it comes to our students' personal relevance with art history.

## Further Questions and Final Thoughts

I continually revisit and question my assignments and teaching practices. How do I raise student engagement further? How are art historical writings incorporated in a more fluid and meaningful manner? Which artists are chosen for discussion, and which are left out? And finally, how can art educators come together to discuss our successes and failures in a forum directly relevant to our teaching at hand? Through the wealth of knowledge and experience in our teaching community, it is important to keep revisiting these questions and making adjustments as our students and cultures change.

Our students have a right to access art history in a way that is meaningful and relevant to their 21st-century lives, which I believe involves varied approaches to understanding artists and their artwork. By addressing art history through myriad lenses, students can access a foreign world of ideas and attain the tools necessary for lifelong exploration and meaning making. As a community of art educators, in my

opinion, we ought to focus on ways in which we can make art history as exciting and tangible in the classroom as seeing our favorite work of art in person. A singular narrative and truth is not conducive with our pluralistic and diverse world, so how is our classroom approach to the teaching of art history being modified to reflect this notion? Through extensive conversations with one another and intellectual experimentation in the classroom, we can affect real and meaningful change when it comes to our students' personal relevance with art history. It is our duty to raise the level of discourse and viewing habits surrounding the art world to include not only the canonized perspective but also the perspectives of those who we teach.

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## ENDNOTE

- <sup>1</sup> All student names are pseudonyms.