

## **Capturing the Ephemeral: Altars, Mandalas, and Time Capsules: Similarities in Ritual - Depictions of a Culture**

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### **INTRODUCTION/ELABORATION**

In some ways all traditional art attempts to capture the ephemeral. Art creations, including photography, preserve to varying degrees a point of time but are limited to representing an artist's viewpoint held in that time. Even if an artist was seeing possibilities beyond the time s/he lived in, this imagination was limited by the broadest cultural beliefs or scientific and other information then accessible. Leonardo DaVinci, for example, could only create on paper his invention of a helicopter. This was a far-reaching imagining for his time, yet based on real engineering and technical foundations. Without more advanced technological information he could not, for example, imagine the possibility of building a jet.

None of us can ignore the information and social influences around us. They form collective cultural consciousness. A basic concept we all can hear and see is that the heartbeat is a sign of being alive. As humans we are capable of conceptualizing our own thoughts and are able to make the leap to understanding that all marks are a record of movement and life. Thinking about this has changed my perception of why a line on a page – a memory of the movement of someone's hand – can trigger a very human emotional response. I am more fully aware now that when I make art, it is an urge to express my life force. Any art product represents the life force of the artist, and life is deeply connected to the passage of time.

This connection of art to humanity has recently changed how I present the curriculum, which has led to a more involved responsiveness from my students. It has brought me to a conscious focus on how art creation is ephemeral in nature even when in permanent format.

There are artists who purposefully focus on the ephemeral experience. Dancers, theatrical actors, and visual performance artists concentrating on live performance are aware of the energy of the moment, and the living vibration of the other humans in the space. They usually do not try to capture these bits of performance in a permanent format because they know instinctively that trying to place the past into the present or future is always limited to vicarious visual imagery that does not adequately capture time, space, and physical dimensions.

As an artist, dancer, and photo artist myself, I know a dance can be recreated, but the energy in the room can never be exactly the same. Visual art can certainly trigger something in the viewer, but the passion of the artist is stopped at the canvas or paper, and the viewer is forced to see either a narrative or an abstract trace of what was likely a passionate dynamic force in creation. Viewers must go through their own physical, emotional, chemical, or mental reactions to decipher meaning from the image.

Aware of these limitations, some artists have nevertheless tried to capture the ephemeral. Some artists try to create experiences engaging multiple senses to stimulate the connection, such as adding sounds while having us walk through spaces while looking at art in a museum.

Photography can capture one moment from a continuum. We are familiar with how the blurring of time can be shown by the blurring of a photo. Some painters have borrowed this knowledge to show exactly these ideas of speed, transportation, and transformation – both mechanically and of human into other dimensions such as death or angelic. Gerhard Richter uses this element of photography to intentionally show the life force transforming into spirit in his painting *Annunciation after Titian* (Richter).

At times a photo can blur further beyond reality appearing to the eye as disappearing substance. I have caught subjects during dance movements where apparitions seem to occur – a body appears to spiral away into spirit – and create the powerful illusion of seeing into another time and space dimension (B. Lambourn).

Then there is Andy Goldsworthy, who creates design and then records it in still (and filmed) photography in order to expand on what is that spirit and power of life. He forces the rhythm into nature in a way that makes us reexamine its ephemeral nature. Goldsworthy creates design from nature in ways that break the continuum of time. He takes natural materials and moves them to his will – creating impermanent rhythmic designs from natural resources, building ritualistic stone pilings, weaving together grasses into energistic spirals, or simply deciding on placements of leaves which he then captures in photographs for eternity. His sculptures and still images evoke indigenous cultures’ spiritual symbols and altar making rituals, and thus connect us to a deeper and wider past while threading into an infinite future.

Today technological advances have dramatically altered who makes art as well as how we make art. We are bombarded with constant media “bytes” which feed a desire for ever-increasing stimulation. We are using technology such as cell phones and computers to make contact without true connection, without touching and often without knowing other humans. For better or worse, individuals feel empowered to say things they might be afraid to say in person. The Internet especially is offering ways to organize politically, in business, and to share creative product. Technology is also being used to create new ways to make art.

Artists have forever fused and converted the old into new genres of art, and when the camera came about it forever altered the way we saw and recorded events. Even nature was altered before our eyes. We finally saw close up, closer than our eyes could see alone. With the developments in cameras and film types, alterations of shutter of speed change our perceptions. If fast enough, an image captured may stop an action in midstream, removing any visual record of movement. Alternately, using a video camera to film slow occurrences, such as a plant growing, with the capability of speeding up the final images, we were able to study the ephemeral nature of life itself.

Whereas a photo artist like Andy Goldsworthy creates varying degrees of ephemeral art and then photographs it to capture its visual essence for posterity, some of the young visual artists of the 21st century are creating art that is not even intended to stay around for the future. They are all about change, and their social connection is in immediate attention, gratification, response, and thus indirectly changing others’ art making in dramatically new ways, even beyond past performance artists as extreme as Yoko Ono.

Over the past 20 years of personal computer development and access increase, visual arts have seen an influx of appropriation (using others works of art or photos within an artist’s work). It makes some sense to see more desire to appropriate that which is more accessible. In fact, many artists in history have used alteration and appropriation. Leonardo DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa* inspired probably more appropriations than any other work of art. Grant Wood’s *American Gothic* is another example (“Mona Lisa Parodies”).

## Synthesis and Relevance for the Young Artist

Young contemporary artists are not merely accessing information or altering past art, as when Marcel Duchamp painted a mustache and goatee on a copy of the Mona Lisa. They are cutting or breaking things apart from the past, altering them to change perspective of what is now past in time and mashing things together into new forms incorporating the old into the new ("Role in Popular Culture and Avant-garde Art").

At a time when many educators worry that students are lacking knowledge, and exhibiting less ability to work persistently and cooperate, it is important to understand students' perspectives and present material relevant to their real lives. In order for young artists to say something relevant, they also need to have experiences we deem important. Yet a phenomenon is occurring where youth are being expected by our school system to choose what they are good at earlier, as demonstrated in the competition required to enter many Magnet programs. And this is during a time when they are less prepared by the school system to do so, since there is no mandate requiring classes in the arts to all students. When the regular school programs do offer art or music, they are usually limited access rather than in-depth or broadly enriched experiences.

Though we bring computers, television, and other media into the school experience, which expand access to the global community, our students often have very limited access to their own place on the earth. Ozone problems have limited recess times, so students are forced indoors and asked to sit still more than is healthy. Most children in the United States are well protected from exploitation by child labor laws. However, the opportunities to learn about oneself and responsibility by doing neighborhood jobs such as baby-sitting has been curtailed, while schools offer few opportunities to experience vocational training. The economy and social issues have forced most parents into long work hours, and the dangers in children on their own has heralded an indoor life for many baby-sat by media machines. They are being offered a media diet rich with so-called reality shows that at worst degrade humanity, and at best create superstars. We must recognize young artists know only the environment in which they live. If we want our students to make connections with life and honor a sense of the past and passage of time, we have to understand and respect their present reality before we expect them to become excited about a larger world they only hear and see in the abstract.

An example representative of their culture is Cory Arcangel, a young digital artist whose work was featured in the 2004 Whitney Biennial and has also been exhibited in the Guggenheim Museum and MoMA. Arcangel takes old computer games, hacks into the programs and alters them into art about computer art culture. For example, he erased all images but the clouds from a Mario. In his work titled "I Shot Andy Warhol," he replaced targets in the shooting game "Hogan's Alley" with images of Andy Warhol, the Pope, the rap artist Flava Flav and the fried chicken icon Colonel Sanders (Grohol).

In an interview with Simon Houpt, Arcangel said, "I'm 25 and I have no experience with anything except media, so it's like, I can't make anything. ... The language I understand is media, so when I make something, as a raw material it's the only thing I'm comfortable with. It's not a conscious effort, being a hacker or making a political statement.

"I grew up playing video games..." he added. "It doesn't make sense for me to make work out of anything else. It doesn't make sense for me to just draw stuff. I think with a lot of artists my age, it's all just mashing stuff together, and it's all about connotation ...and it's all just about cultural references" (Arcangel, qtd. in Houpt).

Young artists are not merely trying to bring art *to* the masses as Andy Warhol did. They are creating art *of* and *by* the masses, interactive, and calling it democratic. Sites such as NewGrounds.com host animations by anyone with a Flash program, allowing viewers to join in,

give written critique, and rate them in various categories. They can thus determine which work will stay online and receive time and space access. While such sites are restricted at school, due to their uncensored content, many of our students are using these actively from home (“Newgrounds”).

Self-taught artists are changing art by participating across the Internet. My own son is a typical artist of his culture. Starting at the age of 13, he collected information and free software downloads via the Internet to teach himself, and now produces animation as well as sound mixed music to his own rap lyrics, programs games, alters video games into animations, while continuing to dabble in some traditional comic book production and creating t-shirts with his characters (R. Lambourn).

*Multi-tasking, diversified, interactive* are the buzz words of our times. Initially independent, he now produces many of his animations with input from people he has never physically met. From across the globe via connections made on such sites, and using microphones plugged into separate PCs, they transmit sound across continents. They access political and scientific information to incorporate into scripts via World Wide Web [www] searches, e-mails, list servs, and by tapping into sites such as *Wikipedia* where they can update living knowledge into a free common access encyclopedia (“*Wikipedia: About*”).

These young artists see no boundaries. They live in a time where the Cartoon Network has chopped up old cartoons and reused them in entirely different sorts of scripts for adults, in a time when [in arguments about copyright] some artists are arguing for anti-copyright and public domain as free speech rights. Unlike their elders, these younger artists have a perspective that is entirely about rights and privileges over fear of copying.

At a time adults might say youth have no original ideas, there is an element of truth in admitting that few ideas ever stood uniquely independent of others. The media has fed this generation with a brazen bravery that they can keep creating and will not run out of ideas – even while they are unsure if any are original – since everything can be twisted and reformed or recycled. Once we understand students’ perceptions of the world, we can help them build the important connections of past to present that will enrich their lives and outlooks.

## **ACADEMIC SETTING AND CURRICULUM OBJECTIVES**

My students come from the entire middle school population which, according to HISD statistics for 2005, is approximately 59% African American, 8% Hispanic, 29% “White,” with the other 2% various other racial groups. I have had students from Sudan, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Liberia, Togo, Cambodia, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Viet Nam, Cuba, and El Salvador. Some are new immigrants or refugees. Some speak little or no English when they enter my class. Most of my students come from families in the low to lower-middle socio-economic range. Some receive special education services, for learning and or behavioral needs. They are in grades 6 through 8 and ages run from 11 to 16.

Because our school is divided into Small Learning Communities, I see some obvious differences from class to class. In classes designated mostly ESL students, there are not surprisingly more students who are less adept in both verbal and written English. I also observe learning styles vary. Where a class is designated from the Physical Development Community, these students have more physical outlet throughout the week in their programs, and continue to exhibit kinesthetic styles of behavior and learning more often than other classes. From new immigrants I observe obvious cultural art styles. On a regular basis, I observe these students comfortably creating images in color, and using the space on the page in a naturally abstract way while representing themes of family and homeland. Performing Arts students desire to learn how to command attention, so I stress this portion of learning in share and critique. ESL students

generally prefer to show themselves through visual product. Recognizing these differences helps me to adapt lessons or expectations of product. It also helps me key in to how to present lessons geared to each class based on these and interest areas.

Sometimes it is easier for students who have difficulty communicating verbally to synthesize through art, but it also can be potentially threatening for the majority of students. So much of current school practices seem to be about filling in sheets which end in grades based on exact answers. While middle school students are at the developmental age to often exhibit defiance to demand freedoms, they are simultaneously apprehensive of the freedom aspect inherent in art. They wish to know exactly how to get a grade over open inquiry and variable outcomes.

So many students say they are bored and have no sense of anything beyond the present moment. That in itself would not be negative, but most do not focus on the wonder or joy of being in the now. I want my students to feel this brave sense of creative power to live a vital thought-provoking life. Art presents them with a different way to work out problems, use another side of their brain, stretch their abilities, and discover who they are.

I want to help my students to understand that even while the world is in a state of flux, uncertainty, and dynamism, they are a part of history past, present *and* future, with the power to provoke and change their own and others' thinking and feelings. I want them to experience what scientists have found is possible, that even our physical states of well-being can be altered while participating in expansive creativity. Art is creativity and synthesis, and thus it can also facilitate learning about content material in ways that create authentic useful knowledge and deep memory.

I want to go beyond proving art and artists' importance in the world and how they influence social change. By providing opportunities to participate in art-making combined with social consciousness, I hope to help students become more aware of the world, how the historical has transformed and created present forms of social issues they now face. Students can gain understanding of how art can provoke others to emotion or action, potentially creating political and social change. This awareness can lead to empowerment to change their own status in the real world. It can help students realize that they can create a way to live, and in the near future support themselves in some real way. Art can provoke them to explore further careers, to think outside of their box, and to leave behind the idea of boredom.

In order to get to this stage, students will need to see that media affects their choices and decisions, but that they are not owned by these influences. They have the power to examine the reasons behind the messages splashing at them from television, the Internet, and films. To attain this empowerment, they must first self-examine, and allow themselves to face some vulnerabilities so as to discover they are strong enough to be who they are without fear.

I want them to see that artists are not limited to traditional ideas, methods, or materials. They can use all the art elements with whatever media or tools that they can access, or that stimulate this motivation in them. And I want them to experience using a modern technological media tool, to see that it can have an expanded function – in this case, the scanner as camera for mixed media production.

Art also has a spiritual possibility, a function as personal ritual – to the artist in the process, or to the viewer in the personal response provoked. This can also be communal if it is interactive with participants [i.e.: performance art – or participatory collective dance or visual art making]. Thus I hope to enrich the life force connection in art, so students can feel a purpose to use art in their lives, and connect to all persons via the commonalities they view in artworks of diverse cultures.

## **THIS UNIT: CAPTURING THE EPHEMERAL: ALTARS, MANDALAS, AND TIME CAPSULES: SIMILARITIES IN RITUAL - DEPICTIONS OF A CULTURE**

### **Curriculum Unit Objectives**

The focus on time and life rhythm – past, present, future – starts by soaking up background material, connecting to examples from artists whom I have mentioned in my elaboration, and viewing artwork and photographs via web sites, audio, and video.

Then students explore how throughout history into the present people have placed items from their lives in tombs, time capsules, and on altars. We look at various types of altars and discuss why particular objects on altars were believed to have special powers. In examining the use of tombs briefly, we see how a tomb or casket is viewed by many as a form of time capsule to cross over to “the other side.” King Tut is a classic example of how he is now experienced or “seen” by the items buried in his tomb, and an entire cultural history surmised, as well.

Exploring further what a time capsule is, why it is used, we take a guided tour of the TIME CAPSULE 21 collections created by Andy Warhol, via the internet (Varner).

We also study mandalas and see that some people are creating mandala art to promote inner and world peace. They use the mandala image to focus on present consciousness, with the goal of transcending into a suspended state of acceptance and bliss. Mandalas are being created in both temporary and permanent materials to connect humans to a state that is measured to be immediately passed. Following these explorations, students create ephemeral art using these elements.

Students collect and bring small items from home according to a list of headings. These are used to create a mandala, an altar, and three types of time capsules.

In my list, I present alternate titles to further stimulate possible viewpoints students may take in each activity.

While I number the activities, I offer the opportunity to work in a different order. Creating a Treasure Chest could be done prior to collecting the items, or at the very end. Most of the activities would require items. However the treasure chest of objects, mementoes, or ritual items could be added to throughout the unit. Items could be changed out or eliminated, since each activity has its own set of criteria and values. Students can also create facsimile objects through drawings, silhouette or magazine cutouts, or model building.

Throughout all the activities, students are required to keep a log listing and explaining each item, why each was chosen, and what it represents. This can be a detailed journal or simple notations using thumbnail sketches. While I encourage writing, my key interest is supporting creative and connective thinking, and organizational record keeping.

I created a pictorial web overview of this unit on the computer. I created this using the Inspiration software provided by our school. To facilitate my students’ understanding of the entire unit, I present this from the computer with an LCD projector. The review helps them to understand what types of items to seek, and the applications for the items. My students are also given a text overview of the unit to keep. I explain the possibility that they can work at their own pace and in different order on some portions, checking off what they have completed once grades are received.

### **LESSON PLANS**

The primary objective is to help students apply problem solving of artists and understand that artists consider exciting ideas that go beyond everyday thinking, even into the metaphysical. This is an enriching exploratory unit with multiple rigorous higher order thinking skills objectives.

While rigor in the art skills is also expected, in teaching multilevel programs or classes, it is possible for students to meet the thinking objectives in a variety of ways even when art skills vary. Some students will be able to produce the work though they fall short on speaking or writing ability. A richly layered set of criteria allows the possibility of success for every student.

Every student has the objective to create artworks synthesizing and extending from personal and cultural experiences and studies, exhibiting knowledge of the art elements, while using a variety of art media and materials in traditional and experimental ways. Using historical and cultural design references, students will be able to analyze and compare relationships, such as function and meaning in creating their own personal artworks.

They will survey artists, both famous and lesser known, working on similar topics, thus identify and compare career and avocational opportunities in art.

Throughout the unit, students go through the steps of initial understanding; interpretation; critical analysis; application of knowledge and comprehension; organization, summarization, thinking skills.

### **Background Lessons – Precursor Unit**

I teach a prior unit on lines. I find extremely useful a video on graffiti artist Keith Haring titled *Drawing the Line*. This video begins to explain semiotics [the study of symbols as words] and how Egyptian hieroglyphics influenced later art. It also explores how the rhythm of life can shine through art by use of line. After sharing this with students, I have them create a drawing using lines, which supports the idea of freedom within the space. While Egyptian history comes into the discussion of semiotics, I do not make it the focus of the drawing. Another teacher could productively concentrate on Egypt in more depth and breadth. Some students choose independently to include symbols they have seen from this source or Haring's art. This brings up a teachable moment for connections to appropriation which is also inherent to Haring's art. It is an important point of understanding in conceptual art seen so much today, as well as the power of commercial design and political propaganda.

I instead choose to reach first backward before moving forward again, and introduce in a very brief way early earth based religions and cultures, their historical connections, and similarities as viewed through art forms. Through study especially of early symbols, and design patterns, students can see the similarities from one group to another, and from past to present times. They can observe how a spiritual connection was symbolized by designs of similar elements. Many of these impart perceptions of an infinite source or energy by the use of lines which either circularly knot or extend outward into intricate patterns. Examining comparatively these symbols in the art of various indigenous cultures, including First Nations, Celtic, Arabic, Islamic, Aboriginal African and Australian, emphasizes that all these cultures used elements from nature and the idea of a power infinite beyond human. I also introduce instances of symbols being appropriated for financial gain or political power, as in the wind element turned into a logo for Nike, or the appropriation of a Japanese ancient symbol of energy and power into the Nazi swastika.

In the activity which I call Symmetry & Infinity, students draw on these examples to begin evolving their own design using the elements of symmetry or radial symmetry and infinity. They are to design either in patterns which extend off the page, or circling, knotting, enclosures with no beginning or end. Symmetry & Infinity replaced an older lesson I had which was simply on symmetry. By incorporating the ideas of Spiritual Infinity from historical design sources, I found my students were inspired from more than formal design elements, and the art became more varied and effecting. Now that I have developed the unit on ephemeral art, in future years, I might consolidate the Symmetry & Infinity lesson with the mandala lesson since these are similar. Yet the exploration of historical references and line through that activity is an appropriately powerful

metaphor for infinite freedom. In the following unit, the mandala appeal is similar, yet may be more specific and personal, especially in creating it from personal items. Though similar to the idea of connection to an Infinite Source, it represents the idea of self empowerment by an action bringing peace within, by being present in the here and now.

I have found my students receptive to this information. They were eager to hear details to accompany and support activities.

In the subsequent unit I expand on these ideas. The video on Haring is also a good introductory to explain appropriation art and how artists can create to honor social consciousness. It makes connections to Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol, each who honored their personal heroes in their art. Basquiat's use of semiotics was more intensely personal and coded than Haring's. Warhol's iconic images were more mechanical. All three artists managed to achieve personal style, recognition and status at young ages. While Haring focussed more on the positive, Basquiat and Warhol seem to have been pointing out the historical and ongoing devaluing of individuals and groups and society as a whole. Haring and Basquiat died very young. Warhol faced a death threat, and collected life items in boxes as time capsules. Examining the work and lives of these artists is a perfect segue into the unit on Ephemeral Art.

### **Activity 1: Creating a Treasure Chest**

***Alternate Title: "Memory Box"***

Specific Criteria: [decorate or build a container to hold personal 'treasures']

Students are "sent" on a "Treasure Hunt" to find items to use in the rest of the unit. In finding the items [treasures] they create a "Treasure Chest." I offer this portion of creating an actual container as extra credit. While I allow the box to be any clean container, I suggest a shoe box or similar sized container. Students decorate the box to be special to themselves in any way they choose. In order to emphasize this, I ask questions such as: "What do you treasure most?" and "If you could design the most special box in the world, what would it look like?" This is an excellent time to look at the art boxes of Joseph Cornell (Share). Many of his boxes are similar to this idea, and since many hold collections there is also a strong connection to the idea of time capsules. There are links that can also connect to science and other content areas by looking at his work (Whitney).

### **Activity 2: creating an altar**

***Alternate Titles: "Honor Structure" Or "Sacrifice Sculpture"***

Specific Criteria: [must be built upward]

One of the first concepts I introduce is the difference in the two words, "altar" and "alter" and the relevant connection that people often use altars as a way to alter their emotions or spiritual connections or believe they will transform actual events, such as to bring rain, increase fertility of crops, animals, or people, or assist a person transition through life cycle, such as birth, birthing, and death.

The elements of the altar are those which a student feels are essential to their life – either they need them to survive, worship them or through them, or sacrifice them to stay alive. Examples I share include how many early cultures included food offerings and animal sacrifices, as well as flowers and other plants, rocks, and many natural objects in their altars. I ask students about contemporary examples of similar practices in ways such as, "For what types of occasions do we use flowers on altars?" I also share information where they are unfamiliar, such as the practice in Judaic funerals to place stones on the grave rather than flowers.



I share that altars are usually impermanent, or if a permanent base structure are foundations for impermanent offerings. Items selected can be symbolic, such as a leaf for shade or a food item for nourishment, or a coin for increased prosperity.

We look at some images of altars by everyday people from the internet. Then I introduce the art and photo art of Andy Goldsworthy at this point, through both the internet and also a children's magazine (National Gallery of Art). Afterwards I share the video *Andy Goldsworthy, Rivers and Tides*, which can be shown in shorter segments. This award winning documentary filmed Goldsworthy in process of building ritualistically structures out of nature forms, explaining his concepts and connection with nature and understanding of the life force.

In creating this altar, I want my students to feel the difference related to this being a three-dimensional creation. In my talks with them I share the idea that altars are offerings up, and thus are often rising up in structure.

I arrange trips to the library or computer labs for students to access the websites for background information. Where we have no access to labs due to scheduling conflicts, I check out the LCD projector from the school library for two to three days to allow ample time required for each class to view websites, and as supplementary guided background time for discussion. We spend time on many sites, especially to see examples of still photos from the Internet in which Goldsworthy has captured some of the essence of altars, and energy symbols. I ask students to compare the criteria of each of our activities to his sculptures, and decide if and how they might be like an altar, mandala, or time capsule ("Andy Goldsworthy-Google Image Search").

The relevance I feel in showing his photos, even after seeing the DVD of his work, is the design sense Goldsworthy pays to the elements when framing still photos. Via the DVD, we discover that rather than allowing natural objects to speak for themselves, he carefully builds and frames every element, altering nature in ways that makes us look at the objects again in awe and wonderment.

I show different segments of the DVD before and after viewing the still images – with activity time between – in order to allow for adjusting viewpoints and responses to the meanings or relevance of each. I frame questions such as, "What is Goldsworthy interested in us seeing?" "What is the power – nature or the artist's impact on changing it?" "Goldsworthy designs the placement of objects within the space. What impact does his photo framing have on the viewer?"

I ask students to consider what they "worship," in both the literal sense and the suggestive idiomatic sense. For instance, I open the discussion about what people place on a display table or fireplace mantel. I ask, "Can these items indicate the place of status money holds in the belief system of that person? If items obviously representative of money value are placed on a mantelpiece, rather than family heritage values, would this suggest financial status is held in a position like that of worship? Or could the objects possibly stand for something else?" These are open-ended questions. There are no exact answers in this unit. But criteria include students keeping a log and reflecting on their choices.

The log should cover such questions as, "Why did I choose these items to hold up in honor or to sacrifice to a greater cause?" "Is this religious or spiritual for me?" "Are there items I honor such as daily practices or material items that are not religious?" "How can one compare or contrast a display on a coffee table, mantelpiece, or car dashboard to spiritual altars?" "Are there similar belief structures such as power of objects or 'superstitions' that may be involved when someone creates these displays?"

### **Activity 3: Creating a Digital Photo of the Altar**

***Alternate Titles: "Ephemeral Capture" or "Abstract Close-Up Photo"***

Specific Criteria: [must be a close-up photo with uncluttered background]

I take a digital photo of each student with their original altars. In the past, I have recorded work this way, and found it tedious timewise to attach identifying information to the work. With the simpler camera owned by the school, I discovered by chance it is a wonderful way to keep track of student solutions for objective grading after students have left the room. Since it utilizes a floppy disk, it was quicker to save and transfer images, and these turned out much better than I imagined. In future, I would like to get a permanent camera in the room to keep more visual records of student project completion. It is still important to make certain a written record is recorded of completion since occasionally disk failures occur.

Originally I intended to teach use of the viewfinder. The camera available for student use had no viewfinder. Using the LCD screen is simpler for students, and this camera actually writes a message out in red font to alert when the image is recording properly. After a very brief instruction showing students individually or in small groups how to use the camera, the zoom, and things to consider in taking a close-up photo, I allow a short time with the digital camera to shoot this/her own altar.

For our purposes, this is a perfect way to teach general art composition, as well as a simple effective way to achieve an excellent still life photo composition. I encourage students to see this photo as abstract art. I also show them how to set up a backdrop, and discuss why this might be desired. I supervise during every photo shoot. After each student takes an initial photo, I ask him/her to point out visual clutter. Then I encourage retakes for those cluttered or lacking a viewpoint.

After photographing, the images are uploaded onto my classroom computer and on a disk. (Students are allowed to copy their own image onto a personal disk they bring in.) Once I have all these images on the computer, we share them via a computerized slideshow. While viewing, students are able to comment and critique, compare and contrast which photos are effective or not, and why. I also plan to implement this strategy again for group critique. Compared to critiquing the original art, I find increased student attention and involvement with the visual focus on-screen.

### **Activity 4: creating a mandala**

***Alternate Titles: "Peace Zone-in Sign" "Meditation Focus Picture"***

Specific Criteria: [must be circular, repetitive, and radially symmetric]

The mandala is an image of repetition and circular symmetry, used to busy the mind and thus free it from worrying on the mundane past and present. While focusing on a repetitive pattern, the mind becomes free to be in the here and now, to experience the space outside of time, unconcerned with time. While I do not expect my students to experience this within the classroom, by introducing them to the concept and explaining how it can create these effects, they have an opportunity to synthesize within their creation, and carry the product home to try out in private. We examine some information on mandalas via the Internet – either in a computer lab or with the LCD projector borrowed from the library.

I also have collected in a folder some examples and descriptions of mandalas made from various subject materials available for students to look at closely. Since this activity has so much similarity to the Symmetry & Infinity activity we did in the prior six week cycle, students have a good amount of confidence in the concept. This makes it an ideal activity for students to work on while others are using either the scanner or cameras for the altar and Time Capsule number One.

After a review and a brief demo on creating a rubbing, they can proceed without much assistance, as they will be able to compare and contrast the two.

While this could be limited to traditional mandalas, I share images of various types of mandalas, traditional and modern. There are a number of artists who are doing mandala design out of various materials. Bryant Holsenbeck creates environmentally conscious and impermanent mandalas, from recycled materials. Her designs are disassembled after a viewing period (Backer).

Virginia Fleck's series of work exhibited at Finesilver Gallery in Houston in February 2006 plays on mandala forms - but with shopping bags from chain megastores. Her commercially derived mandalas allow us to explore the question of how material effects message. The fact that recycled materials were utilized might impart one message, while the political connections to the megastore logos imply another. A connecting example for students of how artists make these seemingly contradictory conceptual design decisions can be made by this quote about her work, "...in *allah dollar mandala* (2006), Fleck ringed the circle with script *W*'s from the Walgreens logo because of their similarity to the Arabic script for Allah" (Klaasmeyer, *et al.*; Klaasmeyer ART, 45).

Students may take the elements used to create an ephemeral altar and by drawing, tracing, and/or rubbing, transfer the items onto a paper in suitable repetitive patterns. An element can be used once or multiple times to create the mandala. Used in this way, the elements can be reused in time capsules, if desired.

Alternate methods I allow for creating the mandala include collage, mixed media, and ephemeral [temporary] creations. Ephemeral materials could include natural items of sand, earth, rocks, plants, or recycled manmade materials such as bottle caps or gum wrappers.

### **[Activities 5-7]: Time Capsules (Overview)**

The time capsules are made of everyday objects, photos or other memorabilia. Students work in rotation shifts as needed on individual and group design components of the unit. This enables one student to use the scanner while another prepares to use it. Others may be simultaneously designing time capsules, building altars, taking a photo, or using a lightbox to trace items for mandalas.

The criteria and focus for each "time capsule" is as follows:

#### **Activity 5: Individual Time Capsule**

***Alternate Titles: Eulogy" "Tomb Treasures" "Remember Me"***

**Specific Criteria: [must fit on the scanner]**

In this format the items need to be arranged to fit on a standard sized scanner. The scanner will *capture the ephemeral* by capturing the image of the items. If items and layout are planned on a paper in advance, with a tracing and notations much like a blueprint, actual scanning can take place quickly, in turns.

This activity includes items to be remembered by – personally, within our social structure, or a family. Writing a family story may be part of the log or included in the image itself. Questions I ask students include, "What will represent you as individual when you are gone?" "How do you want to be remembered?" "What are your positive accomplishments?" And I suggest they consider, "Are there items which represent negative situations or memories about yourself that you might prefer were buried?" In recording for their log they should answer, "Why did I choose this to be remembered by?" "Did I include a fair representation of myself or only how I want to be fondly remembered?"

Design considerations are criteria in this activity. Using a specific size rectangular space demands certain considerations. The fact that the scanner has a limited depth field also creates certain limitations. Some experimenting with different covers will determine whether items that are not flat can be successfully photographed with the scanner. Overlaying or not is a design decision. Students will be able to compare the type of image they create using the scanner with that of the digital camera. They will be able to immediately make some adjustments to scans, by both moving items physically, and also by learning how to use some basic portions of a photo editing program.

### **Activity 6: Interactive Time Capsule [Intragroup or Intergroups]**

*Alternate Titles: "Remember us" "Archaeologist/Sociologist/Anthropologist Study"*

Specific Criteria: [must fit in a tube or small box]

Since this time capsule is most similar to those most often seen in contemporary times, students visit examples via the internet of modern time capsules and the objects placed in them. We visit the library or computer lab to access the internet or if unavailable, I check out the LCD projector from the library and connect to the classroom computer to project. In either case, I post a list of sites and direct students on a semi-guided tour. This varies to some extent based on particular student and class interest areas. An important site of focus is about Andy Warhol's 21 Time Capsules. From viewing these sources, students get a sense that various types of items may represent us as a culture, including articles and photos from magazines and newspapers, advertisements or real articles of clothing, jewelry, small and large machines, artworks, etc.

When students create their own cultural time capsules, they place the items they choose in a closed container. They are asked to choose items that will determine not only what is known in our time but also about whom – such as, age group, school, Houston, America.

I encourage this to be a group project, but allow for individual completion. One of the requirements of the log is listing who worked on this portion and if independently created, why. I ask, "How did shared decision making [or independent completion] assist or frustrate this portion of the project?" As much as working in cooperation with others, I feel it is important for students to be able to recognize how they work best and to be able to adjust this evaluation when necessary from real experiences.

In the case of an interactive creation, each can bring a single item for a time capsule of art and a team of artists arranges the items according to space. Once it is determined which items fit into the space, the items are removed to trace or draw from observation a picture recording the items. The picture can be a realistic representation, an abstract, or a narrative of the items. A narrative should include information on the relevance of the items, or the process of creating the time capsule and opening it. The log should answer such questions as, "What will represent this/my time?" "How would a later people in this place see my culture as history from the items I selected?" "Why did I choose this to show later humans?" "Was it an honest a fair representation of this time and place or self-aggrandizing [promoting only the best]?" "How did I feel when I closed the items away, and when I opened the container again?"

### **Activity 7: Individual Time Travel Capsule**

*Alternate Titles: "Time Travel" "Essential Life Force Bag"*

Specific Criteria : [must fit in a paper lunch sack]

The focus is to answer: "What would you bring if being transported into an unknown future time and space, and can only take the items that fit in the bag?" They should be thinking, "What I choose will determine whether I might survive in an entirely unknown environment."

This time the items can not be symbolic. They must be literal, such as a specific book they would bring or a tool. The items, however, could be to support other than the physical. They could be chosen to support emotional needs or educational requirements. For example, having a photo of a family member or an old teddy bear might comfort one to function more successfully in fearful or dangerous situations. Having a book about basic emergency medical care in the woods might help survival in an alternate location. In their journal some questions to answer include, “Why did I choose this?” “How will I use it?”

### **Ongoing Review & Analysis**

Review & Analysis will be ongoing. Questions which may be explored throughout or at the unit’s end include:

- How were decisions made about what to keep in and what to omit?
- How did space limitations impact choices?
- Did considerations about design of space receive priority?
- How did these design considerations impact choices of items – use of the space, an interesting shape, size of items, contrast, colors, texture?
- In what ways did the time capsules present fair representations and/or biased representations of the person or society?
- What types of direct communication could be found [printed material with messages] and did these help or hinder fair and unbiased interpretation by someone from another culture, place and/or time?
- If there were metaphorical meanings utilized [i.e.: a key - a key to...], could a viewer easily interpret these?
- If not were they mysteries or did they provoke obvious misinterpretations?
- How has mass media influenced the viewer’s interpretations?

### **Challenges - Helping Students Succeed**

The greatest challenge I face in accomplishing my objectives is to stimulate students to bring in items from home about themselves and family. Middle schoolers span the spectrum developmentally from child to teen. Most require more physical play than they get in school. Some are already seeking out relationships with the opposite sex. Chemistry plays against any motivation to do school related activities outside of school hours. Foresight on long projects is still in the development stage, and students often do not see the benefit of planning ahead. While frustrating, this is another learning process. Eliminating multi-part projects avoids some pitfalls, but restricts students this opportunity to develop these important skills.

This being the case, I always have a fallback plan for students not bringing in requested items. For this unit, I have magazines ready, there is some natural material outside, and I allow the students to draw certain items. In the case of the activity on creating an altar, with so much inspiration from Andy Goldsworthy, it is possible to use nature materials such as he did but on a smaller scale. There is a wonderful selection of student examples online (Jones).

But it’s best if students bring items which hold personal significance or memories. As a tangible force of energy and discussion, to hold something in one’s hand is an entirely different experience than looking at a picture of something similar. Part of this experience should be to see and feel the transformation by photographing or creating art forms from these objects, whether empowering or dis-empowering. Therefore, I stress that at least some parts of this unit be: 1) from concrete materials; 2) created in a temporary way; 3) be 3-dimensional; and 4) express an individual experience or viewpoint of the artist (student).

In order to increase the response rate in students, I supply a treasure hunt approach to finding items. A “treasure hunt” list is provided, with many items included and titled such as “1st

Childhood Toy,” “A Family Treasure,” “Something Belonging to A Pet.” Points per item or a bonus for finding a certain number of these items is given as added stimulus.

As additional incentive, I have added a section for extra credit for each student decorating their “Treasure Chest,” the place to hold these “treasures.” Essentially this allows a student to either get extra credit or “trade” for one of the activities.

### **Final Evaluation & Exhibition**

Each activity section has a specific set of criteria which is conferenced throughout development and graded as that section is completed. Throughout all stages a log and journal are kept, and discussion and inquiry are taking place. Being a visual thinker myself, I also create graphic organizers to benefit me in organizing lessons, trips to the library, and serving as a rubrics for grading. I manage grades on a grid sheet of all the assignments, and by grading artwork directly in front of me or from visual record such as a photo. Since this unit is so large, and time limitations from testing or student absences occur, I provide the students point values for excellent completion and determine the number of activities each must complete in the unit based on our schedule. Since I teach three different grades inclusive of students with individual educational plans, this can vary from class to class or student to student. For example, one class or student may have the requirement of completing six of the seven activities, while another might only be required to complete five. I make these determinations clear to students prior to implementation of the lesson, and allow flexibility for calendar changes or emergency situations. I want my students to feel they can accomplish all of the portions to the best of their abilities, but without feeling overly pressured every step of the way. I always offer extra credit for completion of additional assignments. I would rather see depth in research and understanding of the portion, and attempts at going beyond to individualize, rather than simply polishing the surface.

Selections of results from each section of this unit are displayed on bulletin boards, in display cases, and on tables in the room. Where captured by scan or camera, a slideshow via the computer is projected. Invitations are sent to administrators and teachers.

### **Followup Lesson: Connections to Architecture**

The building and architecture fields offer some ideal connections to teach after exposure to the work of Andy Goldsworthy. One wonderful site is about Canstruction, a project combining a design/build competition with a fundraiser to help feed hungry people (Melillo). It is a good follow-up, to see how architects use the same mathematical and structural building skills as a sculptor such as Andy Goldsworthy as well as how they integrate social responsibility into their lives and work.

This also is a perfect connection to famous architects who are sculptural artists in their unique approach to designing buildings. Frank Gehry and Antonio Gaudi are two of my favorites and most representative. One good place for information on them and the buildings they have designed is accessible at Great Buildings Online (Matthews).

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This lecture is given by Cory Arcangel. The site also has Quicktime video of his art running concurrently, and a lecture table of contents [which can be clicked on to hear that portion]. Arcangel talks about his stealing and recycling of code & aesthetics, plus his other work, how he became a digital media artist via his music and computer game involvement. Sections might be used with students who have specific interest. The entire video is 60 minutes and would not appeal in totality to entire classes of middle school students. Teachers would definitely want to pre listen. \*He uses one school restricted word during section between Sound of a 303 and Art from Pranks. Playing an unrestricted section of this could especially be very inspiring for students who think differently though creatively than their peers. Laden with science technology information. Multimedia.

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Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc. This page offers loads of information on the subject of Appropriation in Art, with main source material from Wikipedia. 1 History. 2 Appropriation art and copyrights. 3 Appropriation artists. 4 Appropriation art links. This web page includes some art examples on this page plus numerous links to other pages on artists who used Appropriation in their art making.

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### **Books**

Andy Warhol Museum. *Andy Warhol Pop Box: Fame, the Factory, and the Father of American Pop Art* [BOX SET]. San Francisco, CA: Chronicle Books, 2002.

Boxed edition (September 1, 2002). This box offers exact reproductions of fascinating ephemera from Warhol's "Factory" years and beyond. It would serve as a model if desired for students to create similar.

Warhol, Andy, John W. Smith, Mario Kramer, and Matt Wrbican. *Andy Warhol's Time Capsule 21* (Board book).

Cologne: Dumont, 2004. Essays by John W. Smith, Mario Kramer and Matt Wrbican. Introduction by Thomas Sokolowski and Udo Kittelmann.

In essence, this is two books, with the same name and authors. One is a visual representation and as such would be another good way to present Warhol's work to children of all ages. The larger book has more visuals and a collection of writings about the work, thus might be more suitable for teachers and older students.

### **Videography – Additional Video for Students**

*The Photographer*. 15 min. video from MFAH Teacher Resource Library. VC922 [Brenda Lewison - Photographer and Garrie Crawford - Color Xerography].

This video shows two artists at work. Garrie Crawford uses a scanner as her camera, placing objects directly onto the platen, and then using the prints in a sculptural collage.