Modern Art

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Lesson Plans for Educators • November 1996

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Some of the ideas in these lesson plans have been suggested by ArtNews for students, Discover Art, Davis publication.

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Deep Sun   *Helen Frankenthaler*

Helen Frankenthaler (1928-), American
Deep Sun, 1983
Etching on paper
Gift of the C. Comstock Clayton Foundation
Museum # 1994.008.001

Abstract Expressionism
Color Field Painting, 1945-

Abstract Expressionism is the collective name for the work of a diverse group of New York artists who during the 1940's and 50's produced vivid, emotionally charged, non-representational paintings characterized by the very bold use of color and mass. With the development of Abstract Expressionism, American art led the world for the first time. While all art is to some degree abstract, twentieth century abstraction differed from what went before it in lacking a reference to any object whether real or imagined.

Color Field Painting

Color-field painting was one of two off-shoots in American abstract expressionism of the late 1940s and early 50s. After 1947 artists, such as Clyfford Still, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman concentrated on the expressive qualities of color. In order to maximize the visual impact of color, they applied their pigments over large areas. The result was the creation of a painting of a single color which relied on the intensity and saturation of color.

Helen Frankenthaler

The American painter Helen Frankenthaler, born December 12, 1982, is one of the inventors of a style of abstract art termed color field painting. After studying at Bennington College in Vermont, she returned to her native New York and through her relationship with art critic Clement Greenberg, was exposed to abstract expressionism in the 1950s. She was influenced by the work of Arshile Gorky, Willem de Kooning, Jackson Pollock, and the cubist painters.

After seeing Pollock's drip painting, Frankenthaler developed an innovative staining technique in which acrylic pigment is poured directly onto un-sized canvas. She does not make use of preliminary drawings and often begins a painting by arbitrarily selecting a color with which to work. The end result is both an expressive, personal image and sumptuous surface of vivid color. Since 1961, Frankenthaler's works have tended to become larger, simpler, and more geometric in form.

Untitled   *Ilya Bolotowsky*

Ilya Bolotowsky (1907-1981), Russian/American
Untitled, 1979
Serigraph on paper
Gift of the Associated Students
Museum # 1987.055.002

Abstract Expressionism
Hard Edge and Shaped Canvas Painting, 1960s

Hard Edge painting developed in the 1960's out of the Color Field tradition of employing color as subject matter. The colors on the canvas are flat areas of pure monochromatic color with crisp boundaries giving them the name Hard Edge.

Shaped canvas painting emerged as an outgrowth of Hard Edge during the 60's and 70's. Shaped canvases have been around for a long time, from the pointed medieval triptychs to the long narrow paintings of Pollock in the 1950's, but in modern painting there has been surprisingly little experiment with the actual shape of the painting unto recent times. Some shaped canvas paintings are also Hard Edge. Other shaped canvas paintings use a more painterly or abstract expressionist style that is very different from Hard Edge.

Ilya Bolotowsky

Ilya Bolotowsky was born in Petrograd, Russia in 1907 and died in New York City in 1981. Bolotowsky saw his first Mondrian paintings in 1933 in the Gallatin Collection, New York University. De Stijl was a form of nonobjective art that was organized in 1914 by the painters Van Doesburg and Mondrian. The philosophy of de Stijl art emphasized "the need for abstraction and simplification" and "for clarity, for certainty, and for order." The emphasize on the confrontation with the works of a premier de Stijl painter, Bolotowsky's work evolved from his earlier figurative and semi-abstraction to an even more abstract style that he called neo-plasticism. Through a gradual discarding of any illusion of space, he developed a true neo-plastic discipline. His work developed gradually from abstraction to neo-plasticism so that by the end of the 1940s his work had become his own version of neo-plasticism.

> "I work in the neo-plastic style because for me it is the most meaningful and exciting direction in art. As a neo-plasticist, I strive after an ideal of harmony. Neo-plasticism can achieve unequaled tension, equilibrium, and harmony through the relationship of the vertical and horizontal elements."
>   (Ilya Bolotowsky, March 15, 1969)

During the late 40s and early 50s, Bolotowsky explored the parameters of neo-plasticism, retaining much of the Mondrian imagery. However, just as the de Stijl painters were to take individual directions in their search for the "universal," so too would Bolotowsky depart from the influence of Mondrian to develop his own statement within the neo-plastic discipline.

De Stijl artists used only the straight line, the cube and the rectangle and only pure and simplified color: red, yellow, blue, black, white, and gray. Bolotowsky, however, did not confine his palette to yellow, red and blue although he generally used these colors in the larger areas of his canvas. His white areas are most often reduced in size and area. His continued exploration of the unusual canvas shapes—diamond and tondo (round)—combined with his greater range of colors has led to a highly distinctive and personal imagery.

Abstract Expressionism Lesson Plan

written by Bernadette Brown

Theme: Decoding Abstract Art.

Trying to decipher the meaning of an abstract painting can be fun. Help your students to study this painting carefully. Treat it as if it were a puzzle or a mystery. Abstraction is part of our daily lives. If one keep one's eyes open, it can be seen everywhere. Some artists find it among the objects in their homes – plants, kitchen ware, etc.

General Activities:
To help students understand the idea of abstraction, try this exercise:

Suppose you want to paint a picture about love. If you paint a picture of a couple kissing, that is one kind of love. But it is not the same kind of love you feel for your parents or your brothers and sisters and your pets. To express love, pure and simple, you might have to use an abstract style. Your style might be different from your classmates because your ideas of feelings about love are your own.

Show the students the images of Frankenthaler's *Deep Sun* and Bolotowsky's *Untitled*.
Ask students to choose a specific element – line, color, shape – and explore all its aspects. For example; how many kinds of lines can they make? What do the lines convey – direction, emotion, movement, etc?

On a blackboard write down a list of words that come to mind as the students look at each painting. Compare the list. Do the same words occur in each list? What are the different words?

Abstract art is created by changing lines, shapes or colors of something you see or remember.
Have students bring in a picture of a very realistic scene, animal, person, etc. Have them place tracing paper over their picture and create a more abstract version of their picture using pencils and colored pencils or crayons. Have them think of specific rules they will follow, for example, they could change all the straight lines to curved ones or draw patterns on all or some of the plain shapes. They can repeat this exercise by creating more and more abstract versions of the previous drawing.

Criticism and Aesthetics:
Using the image of *Untitled*, 1987 by Ilya Bolotowsky examine the painting with your students using the following questions to guide them in exploring the work.
Questions to Ask in Looking:
• Why do all these sizes and shapes balance so well?
• What would happen to the balance if you change one shape? One color?
• Reverse the image and explore with your students how the relations between the colors and lines change. Does the balance and mood of the picture change? How?

Using the slide of *Deep Sun*, 1983 by Helen Frankenthaler examine the painting with your students using the following questions to guide them in exploring the work.
Questions to Ask in Looking:
• Do the colors in this painting make you feel a certain way?
• If you could give this painting a title, what would it be?

Activities:
Deep Sun, 1983 by Helen Frankenthaler: The "subject" of the painting is its form and color and nothing else. Helen Frankenthaler invented the style of color-field painting. She was inspired by the work of Jackson Pollock who poured his paint on a surface lying flat on the floor. Frankenthaler pours thinned acrylic paint across raw canvas so it stains into the material. Using rollers, squeegees and towels, she controls the flow of the paint by pushing it into thin veils, pools it to make it thicker and blots it to achieve rich combinations of color fields. Sometimes she adds brush strokes that are reminiscent of Chinese calligraphy.

Have each student select an abstract idea – energy, freedom, or emotion – and try to depict it in an abstract manner using only color.

Have your students create a picture based on shapes and lines. They can use paint, colored pencils, markers, etc. or use the collage method of cutting up colored paper and place the shapes onto a surface to created their works. Have them think about shaping the surface rather than just using the rectangular shape of paper.

Art History:
Have the students research the history of abstraction by studying the works of artists like Paul Gauguin, Piet Mondrian, Ernst Kirchner, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque.

Have them read reviews of exhibitions of Abstract Expressionist art and compare them to what was said in the general press. Was the reaction of art critics different?

Have students collect reviews of contemporary art exhibitions and compare them to those of the Abstract Expressionists.

Have your students visit art galleries or museums to view exhibitions of contemporary art. Have them give oral reports on their reactions. They could also interview other visitors for their reactions.

Extensions:
Literature, music and painting are influenced by each other,
*   Have your students write a poem on one or both of the paintings.
*   Find tapes of music from the 1940s and 50s. Play different selections for your students while they draw what they feel from listening to the music.
*   Ask each student to create a picture based on their favorite piece of music.

Vegetable Soup   *Andy Warhol*

Andy Warhol (1928-1987), American
Vegetable Soup
Screenprint
Purchased with funds from Mrs. Paul L. Wattis
Museum # 1986.021.002
©2007 Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts / ARS, New York

Pop Art 1960s

The term pop art was first used in the 1950s in London by the critic Lawrence Alloway to describe works by artists who combined bits and pieces of mass-produced graphic arts, such as advertising to express contemporary cultural values.

Pop art was a major reaction against the Abstract Expressionist movement that had dominated painting in the United States during the late 1940s and 1950s. Pop artists, who found Abstract Expressionism to be elitist, began using images from popular cultures as the basis for their art. Comic books, mass produced items, celebrities and pulp photographs became the subject matter of the Pop artists. These artists emphasized contemporary social values: the sprawl of urban life, the transitory, the vulgar, the superficial, and the flashy-the very opposites of those values cherished by artists of the past. Seeking cultural resources, pop artists reworked such industrial products as soup and beer cans, American flags, and automobile wrecks. They turned images of hot dogs and hamburgers into gigantic blowups or outsize vinyl monsters. Advertising provided numerous starting points, especially in product labels, posters, and bill boards.

Each artist used popular icons to express his/her own personal message. Andy Warhol used supermarket items like Campbell's soup cans and Coca-Cola bottles painted in endless repetitive rows presenting the things that he thought Americans found most important in the 1960s. From there he turned to other images worshiped by the masses, famous celebrities that attained folk hero status like Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe and Elizabeth Taylor.

Other artists used popular images to relay different ideas. Roy Lichtenstein painted images form comic strips blown-up to gigantic sizes. Lichtenstein showed these images of modern industrial American in a detached and impersonal matter. The artist does not judge or comment on the images. He simply states that this is the world

we live in. In contrast, James Rosenquist used popular images to tell a story or excite an emotion. He juxtaposed images of destruction–contemporary fighter planes, bombs–with images of happy everyday American life in the 1960s.

In America, pop artists clustered in New York City and in California. Among the leading New York pop artists are Roy Lichtenstein, Claes Oldenburg, James Rosenquist, George Segal, Andy Warhol and Tom Wesselmann. Pop artists of California included Mel Ramos and Edward Ruscha.

Andy Warhol

The American artist and filmmaker Andy Warhol (wohr'-hohl), born Cleveland, Ohio, August 6, 1928, died February 22, 1987, was a founder and major figure of the Pop Art movement. A graduate (1949) of the Carnegie Institute of Technology, he gained success in New York City as a commercial artist in the 1950s. In 1960 he produced the first of his paintings depicting enlarged comic strip images-such as Popeye and Superman-initially for use in a window display. Warhol pioneered the development of the process where an enlarged photographic image is transferred to a silk screen that is then placed on a canvas and inked from the back. It was this technique that enabled him to produce the series of mass-media images-repetitive, yet with slight variations-which he began in 1962. These, incorporating such items as Campbell's Soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles, and the faces of celebrities, can be taken as comments on the banality, harshness, and ambiguity of American culture. Later in the 1960s, Warhol made a series of experimental films dealing with such ideas as time, boredom, and repetition; they include Sleep (1963), Empire (1964), and The Chelsea Girls (1966). A celebrity himself until his death, he founded *Interview* magazine and published *The Philosophy of Andy Warhol: From A to B and Back Again* (1975) and *America* (1985).

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Liberty '76   *Robert Indiana*

Robert Indiana

Robert Indiana, a leading American pop artist, was born Robert Clark in New Castle, IN, September 13, 1928, and later took the name of his home state. Having completed his education is 1954, he moved to New York. Indiana's early experiments with severely planned forms led n 1960 to his distinctive brand of pop painting, which combines stenciled lettering–DIE and LOVE–with clearly defined areas of bright color. Since the late 1960s he has expanded his LOVE theme to a series of sculptures, some of them monumental is size. Indiana has also designed sets and costumes for theatrical productions, most notably for the Santa Fe Opera's production (1976) of Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All*, based on the life of Susan B. Anthony.

Robert Indiana (1928-), American
Liberty '76, 1975
Screenprint on paper
Purchased with funds from Friends of the Art Museum and the
Associated Students of the University of Utah
Museum # 1987.055.018

Pop Art Lesson Plan

written by Bernadette Brown

Criticism and Aesthetics: Show both images of *Liberty '76* by Robert Indiana and *Vegetable Soup* by Andy Warhol.

Questions for Looking:
*   What do you see in these works of art?
*   Where do you think each artist got his ideas?
*   How are these works similar? How are they different?

Show *Liberty '76* by Robert Indiana: Indiana's distinctive brand of pop painting combines stenciled lettering with clearly defined areas of bright color.

Questions for Looking:
*   What do you think Indiana is saying through this work of art?

Show *Vegetable Soup* by Andy Warhol:.
Questions for Looking:
*   What is the subject matter of this painting?
*   Why do you think the artist picked a soup can to depict?

Activities:
Have each student create a drawing that focuses on one image from everyday life.

Have each student create a collage using images from everyday life – magazines, newspapers, etc. – that symbolizes or commemorates some event.

Create a sculpture using found objects – ordinary everyday objects found discarded

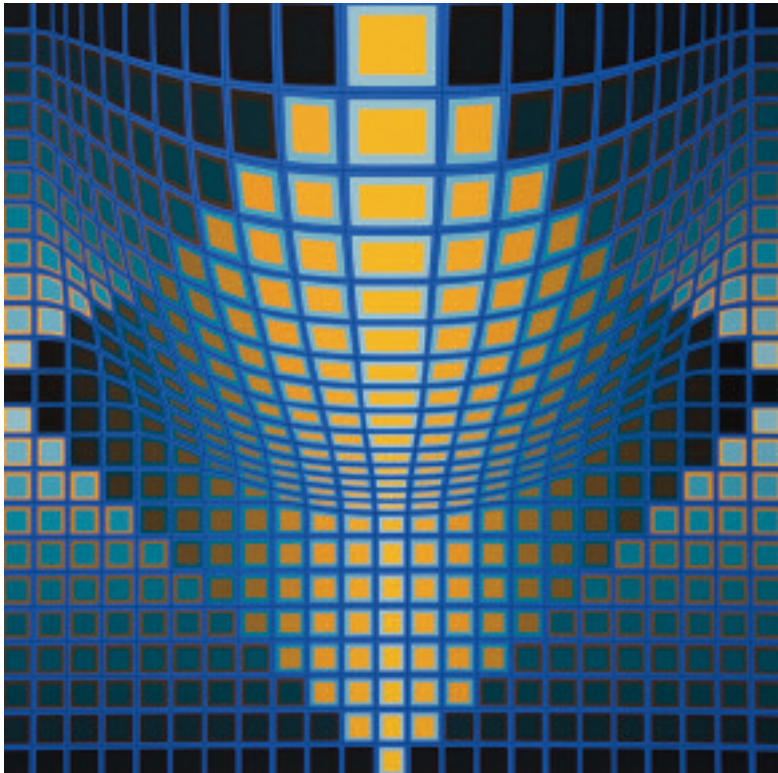Art is not always found in a frame on a wall.
As a homework assignment have each student find a label from a can, mount it on a sheet of paper and give it a title. They should bring it in and discuss with the class why they selected this particular label and why it might be considered a work or art by analyzing it using the formal elements of art.

Art History:
Research what was occurring in the 1960s that might have influenced artists to use the graphic arts found in everyday life as the source of their own inspiration for making art.

Kesege   *Victor Vasarely*

Victor Vasarely (1908-1997), French/Hungarian
Kesege, ca. 1980
Screenprint on paper
Purchased with funds from Friends of the Art Museum
Museum # 1979.187

Op Art

Op (for optical) art was a movement that developed in the 1960s in Europe and in the United States. As a movement Op Art involved a wide range of different kinds of art all involving optical illusion or some other specific aspect of perception. Because movement is important in both, op art and kinetic sculpture are closely related.

Victor Vasarely

The Hungarian artist, Victor Vasarely (vah-zah-ray-lee'), born April 9, 1908, is perhaps the best-known creator of post-World War II geometric painting. He worked as a graphic designer until 1944; this experience may have helped to shape the complex black-and-white patterns of his earliest paintings. Soon after, he added intense contrasts of color. The European pioneers of the style were Josef Albers and Victor de Vasarely. Vasarely was one of the most influential op artists. His writing defines the philosophy of Op Art and explored the science of optical effects and illusions. He was a pioneer in the development of almost every form of optical device for the creation of a new art of visual illusion. Typically, the artist arranges a large number of small, nearly identical geometric shapes in patterns that generate vivid illusions of depth and, in some cases, motion. For example, Vasarely uses various devices in his painting *Kesege* to create the illusion of movement and change within abstract elements. The painting looks like it is bulging at the top; but in reality it is a flat 2-dimensional canvas.

A citizen of France since 1959, Vasarely had some150 solo exhibitions in the half-century span 1930-80 and has won many international prizes.

Op Art Lesson Plan

written by Bernadette Brown

Theme: Non-objective Perspective
Show the students *Kesege* by Victor Vasarely. Discuss the optical illusion in the piece. Why do the squares look like they are coming out at you and then receding? Even though the canvas is flat, it looks three dimensional. Vasarely used perspective to get this illusion.

Art History Activity:
Discuss the Renaissance discovery of perspective. Show the students medieval painting reproductions and compare them to Renaissance painting reproductions. How does the use of perspective add a sense of realism to the painting?

Art Production Activity:
Have the students create a work of non-objective art using perspective. Let them create boxes, lines, squares, etc. receding or coming forward into the viewer's space. Discuss one point perspective (all the perspective lines converge in one spot) or two point perspective (they all converge to two points) like Vasarely's work.

Creating Rhythm And Movement In Art
Art Production and Music Activity:
Have the students create a work of art filled with rhythmic lines. Students may choose to close their eyes, silently hum one of their favorite songs and make gestures which fit the rhythms of music. When they are confident of the gestures which best fit the music, they should open their eyes and draw lines on their paper which seems to capture the gestured rhythms and character of the song.

Students can also draw rhythmic lines based on action verbs written on the board. Lead the class to make rhythmic gestures appropriate to each verb. Suggest students to choose one or combine several of these actions and draw similar lines on paper to create visual rhythms.

Stress that repetition of one or several kinds of lines helps create a visual rhythm. Paths of movement will be created by making lines go in one or several definite directions on the paper.

Color And Depth
Art Aesthetics and Production Activity:
Show the image of *Kesege* by Vasarely. Discuss with the students the concept that cool colors recede and warm colors advance (come forward) in a work of art. Have the students create a non-objective work of art or use the piece created for the above activity. Use geometric shapes like squares, rectangles, and triangles. Color the piece using a cool color (blue, green, violet) and a warm color (red, yellow, orange). Create duplicates of the art, but reverse the colors. How does the piece change when the colors are reversed? What part of the art attracts your attention first? Is it the same in both painting? Why or why not?

Study for the Red Smile   *Alex Katz*

Alex Katz (1927-), American
Study for the Red Smile, 1963
Oil on canvas
Purchased with funds from Friends of the Art Museum
Museum # 1978.410

Post Abstract or Modern Art

The Abstract expressionist movement of the 1950s has been followed by a number of diverse movements. Only two of these, minimal art and photorealism, have been born in America. The Pop art of the 1950s erupted simultaneously in the United States and Britain. Op art, in the 1960s, and Neo expressionism, in the late 1970s, was both international movements. In the 1980s and early 1990s, American painting can be characterized by a mix of different styles and materials. A number of artists reacted to Abstract Expressionism by choosing to paint in a highly representational style making a direct challenge to the principles of modern art.

Alex Katz

Alex Katz was born in New York City in 1927. He studied at the Cooper Union Art School and the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture. While it resists classification his art combines the twin streams abstraction and realism found in post-World War II American art. In his work are joined several of the most persistent concerns of American art–the Abstract Expressionist insistence on space and the Pop strain of borrowing from popular culture. Alex Katz has been a representational painter from the outset of his career in the early fifties. In his work modern images are rendered in an idyllic and simplified world. Emphasis is on skin-deep surfaces. "I like life to be pleasant and simple." (Alex Katz, Village Voice, March 15, 1976)

Katz fills his idealized universe with immense, billboard size portraits of the people who mean the most to him–his wife, Ada, and his son. Faces are simplified and reduced to a few flat-color areas with skin tones shown by shadows and highlights. His light is so schematic that all images are flattened. Although his paintings are big, bold and relatively arranged, Alex Katz is not a Pop artist because he does not use the images or techniques of commercial art and popular culture. Although his paintings depict actual personas and places, he is not a realist for the visual information. His depictions are relatively generalized rather than dense and particularized. The space of his paintings is more like that of abstract art. The size of his paintings seems to imply heroic or dramatic subject matter but his subject matter is always ordinary life.

Post Modern Art Lesson Plan

written by Bernadette Brown

Theme: Exploring portraits – discuss with the students that while portraits are often commissioned by a patron, they can derive purely from the inspiration of the artist.

•Ask why portraits are made. Some reasons are: to recognize authority (presidents), to document events (weddings), for remembrance or friendship (school photos), to honor someone (portraits in libraries). Portraits can be posed with the sitter seated, standing or in action. The painting may be a bust (head and shoulders) three quarter body or entire body. Persons are shown facing forward, turned three-quarter view or in profile.

Art Criticism and Production Activity:
Show the students a realistic reproduction of a portrait (George Washington, Mona Lisa, etc.) Look at the portrait as a group and ask the students questions about the person in the painting:
> • What do you suppose this person was like? What word could describe this person? Kind, powerful, stern etc.
> • Are there any clues in the portrait as to the occupation, background, interests of the sitter?
> • Would you like this person as a relative or friend? Why or why not? How did the artist's use of the elements of art affect the mood of this painting?

Then show the students Alex Katz's *Study for the Red Smile* and ask them the same questions.
> • Is it easier or harder to tell what kind of person the woman in this painting is?
> • Why? Alex Katz uses flat images and color to give more of a mood about the painting than to give information about the sitter.

Have the students create a portrait that only uses color to give a mood about the person and does not include objects that tell about them.

Art Production Activity:
Many schools have Polaroid cameras. If you have access to one, have the students take portraits of their class-mates. Discuss the different types of portraits (full length, profile, group, bust, three-quarter) and have them plan out their composition before they shoot. Show the effectiveness of leaving half of the composition blank or with just a color as with Study for the Red Smile.

Art Production and Literature Activity:
Alex Katz creates images using very flat color (no shading or depth). What other popular mediums use flat color (comic books)? Alex Katz also paints portraits of his family, wife and son.

Have the students create a one page comic book using their family as the main characters. Discuss the use of flat colors not only in comic books but also in Katz's portraits. Hand out a sheet with boxes already made as a starter (see attached sheets). Make sure they title the book.
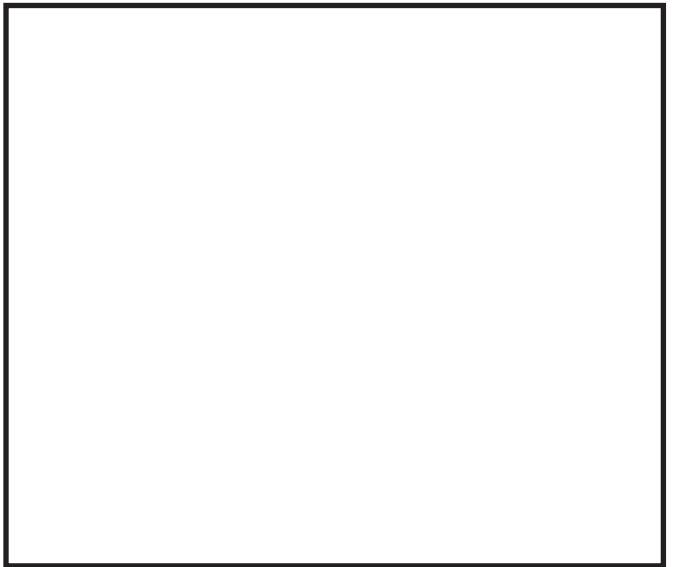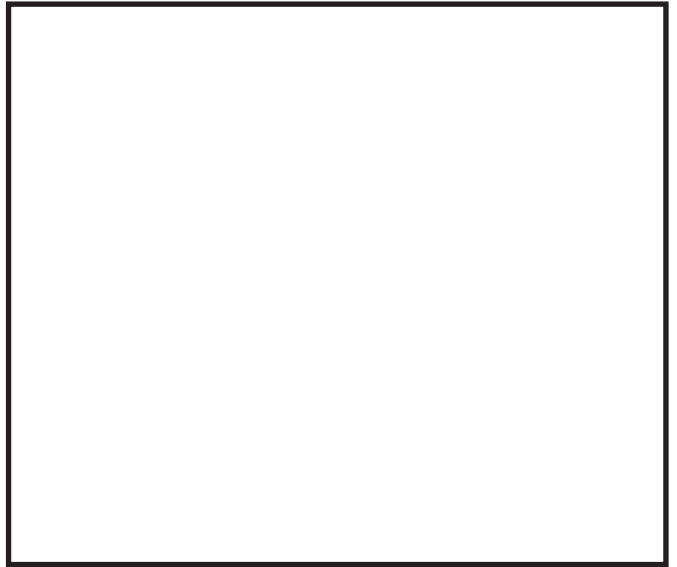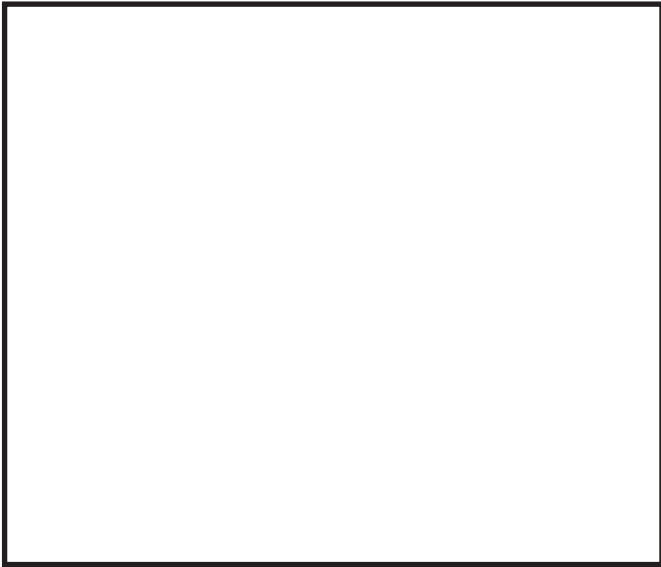
This is also a good writing activity. Teach the students how comic books need to use fewer words or ono-matopoeia to get an idea or emotion across. Challenge them to create an interesting story only on a one page comic book.
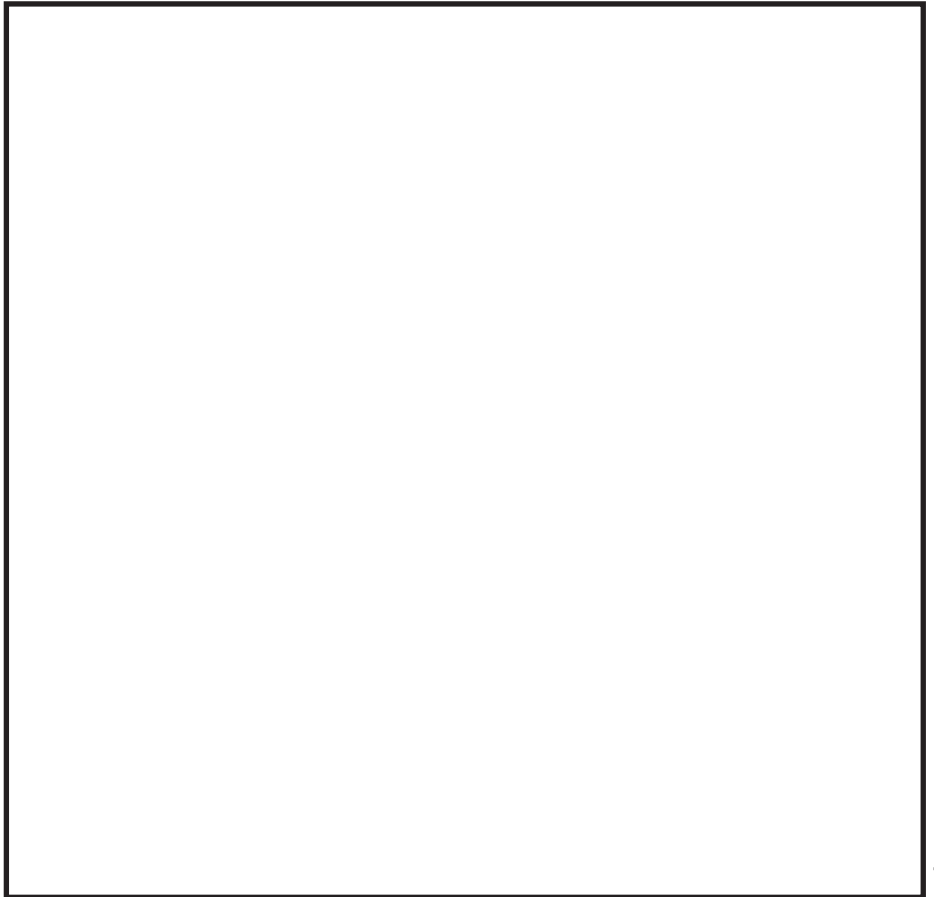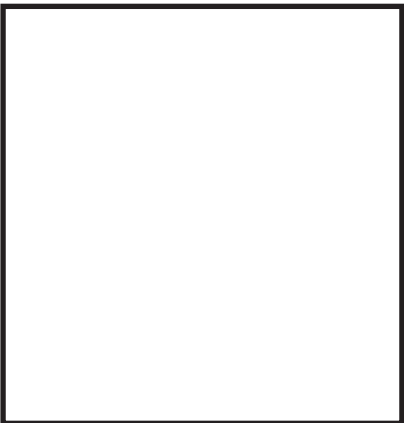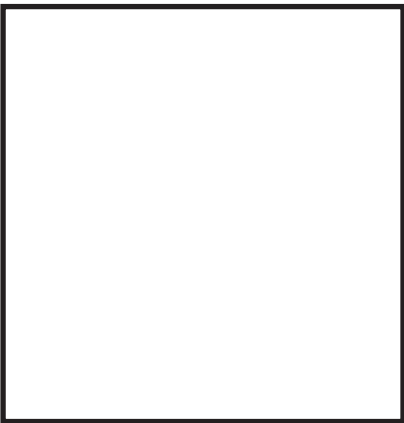
Color And Mood
Art Aesthetics and Production Activity:
Lead a discussion with the students on how color can affect mood. Ask them to describe a mood when they look at *Study for the Red Smile*. Then ask them to associate feelings or objects with the color red. Did those feeling or objects match the mood of the painting? What would the mood of the painting be if the background were blue? What if the background and her lips were blue? Discuss the concept that cool colors (blues, greens, grays) recede and warm colors (reds, oranges, yellows) pop out at you.

A good activity for associating color and mood is to have the students imagine they are sitting in an empty white room. Then think of a color. Have them imagine that the color is just a spot in the room and slowly it grows to cover all the walls and ceiling so that they are surrounded by one color. How does that make them feel? Is the color warm or cool? What made them choose that color? Have them create a painting or drawing using only that one color.

A Short Bibliography on Modern Art

If you would like to learn more about Modern Art these books will provide a comprehensive overview.

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