



## *Teaching Critical Thinking to Freshman Writers by Engaging Contemporary Artists' Work*

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**Abstract:** Engaging fully with contemporary art requires analysis of the relationship between creative imagination, personal experience, and cultural context. This article discusses the study of contemporary works of art as an effective tool for fostering the development of critical thinking skills in a freshman writing class at an art college. In a carefully structured progression of written assignments, students are guided in the step-by-step exploration of the work of three specific artists and their writings. Close attention is paid to students' written responses to assignments to illustrate how close engagement with the work of specific contemporary artists is particularly well-suited to the development of students' skills in critical thinking and writing.

One of the most important aims of American art since the 1960s has been for artists and audiences to think critically about the principal assumptions that are embedded in aesthetic representations. Consider Claes Oldenburg's large-scale monument located at Yale University titled *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks* (1969) or Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds' indoor and outdoor language installations which he calls *Sharp Rocks* (1983-1987). Or consider *Mexarcane International* (1994-1995), a performance work for shopping malls in North America and Britain by Coco Fusco with Guillermo Gómez-Peña. How can audiences of such diverse public art learn to see, read, and understand the work? And how can the art and the writing

by influential American artists such as Oldenburg, Heap of Birds, and Fusco speak to young artists who are straight out of high school?

There are many answers to these questions. But it is helpful to know that much of the art since 1950 aims to challenge traditional Western definitions of art and art production, including conventional standards of excellence in craft and design and concepts of beauty in painting and sculpture. This change of direction in art theory and practice, from passive viewing to active engagement, encourages audiences to participate with empathy in the art and at the same time to examine critically the processes that the artist used to make the objective forms. In other words, contemporary

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artists expect audiences to be active viewers and experience the art from many points of view.

These critical approaches and thought processes lead to analysis and better understanding of the overall work. They include (1) becoming aware of and questioning assumptions that inform the art and the main idea projected by that art, (2) speculating on the ways that evidence or references are used to clarify or enhance the artwork's meaning, (3) boldly engaging in an inner dialogue with the artist about the artwork, (4) examining the sociohistorical context of the work, and (5) comparing the unique features, special content, and meaning of artworks by different artists or studying works from different time periods by the same artist.

Ideally, when audiences take on engaged participant-spectator positions, artists and audiences create dialogical and shared spaces where they become aware of the relationships between personal imagination, collective experience, and sociocultural contexts. In hermeneutic terms, this process acknowledges the dialectic of experience and interpretation between subjective response and objective reality. In essence, the ramification of this relational engagement with a work of art is highly pedagogical and deeply democratic. For this reason, examining work by artist-writers such as Oldenburg, *Heap of Birds*, and Fusco serves as an excellent model for teaching critical thinking to freshman writers at an art college.

Given this understanding of art as an open rather than a closed practice and field of study, teaching writing at an art school and using works of art as instructional material offers a unique situation for teaching and learning at the freshman level. As a writing instructor at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design, I am challenged by the pedagogical context and my own commitment as artist and writer to integrate contemporary art into my writing

class. My goal in approaching courses such as "Writing for Artists" and "Written Communication" (two courses that I have taught at this institution) is to develop and enhance my students' self-initiated creative and critical thinking skills in response to their own compositions and to the visual and literary works by others.<sup>1</sup> Finally, I am confident that these tools for critical thinking, reading, and writing are helpful to students not only in my writing class but also in other college courses.

## I. ASSIGNMENTS TO ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING

In this article, I share with readers my experience of using artworks by living artists to enhance the teaching of critical thinking in a required college freshman writing course. My focus is on the sequence of three informal writing assignments that inform my students' critical thinking skills as they develop their paper for an essay unit. In my class, an essay unit consists of a cluster of interrelated assignments and class activities that are devoted to advancing students' critical thinking, reading, and writing skills.

Each of the course's four expository essay units is devoted to a specific topic or rhetorical mode, such as cause and effect, comparison, definition, persuasion, and argument analysis. I discuss in this article only the comparison essay unit. In the first essay unit, students write a cause-and-effect essay about one of their own recently-completed artworks, learning to examine the dynamic movement from inspiration to outcome to developing an essay about making a work of art. The second essay

<sup>1</sup> The specialized literature on the relationship between art and cognition cites studies that show an increase in learning by students who engage in the arts. Eric Jensen, *Arts with the Brain in Mind* (Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2001): 58-61.

unit, which provides the context for this paper, unfolds over three to four weeks through a series of assignments and interactive class projects. Working on the comparison essay unit offers students the opportunity to build on the skills that they learned by writing about their own art and by extending those skills to works of other living artists. Several small and informal assignments, including the three writing projects that are the focus of this article, culminate in a 1500-word expository essay in which students compare two artworks by one artist that they choose from the reading list.

Here I tell the story of three key assignments that I have developed over several years of teaching and explain why these assignments are central to guiding my students toward viewing art and examining the cultural processes that are involved in making art with a critical eye and a mindful intellect. The writing assignments are (1) the Reading and Discussion Guides (handouts with questions about the texts), (2) the Connection Paper (the student's summary of the assigned text and personal connections to the artist's writing), and (3) the Self-Commentary (a student's brief reflection on the process of writing the essay). The writings and artworks that we study throughout the comparison essay unit are by Claes Oldenburg, Edgar Heap of Birds, and Coco Fusco. In past semesters, my students have also effectively examined works by Anne Truitt, Shigeko Kubota, and Adrian Piper.

Using these three assignments in sequence, my students acquire, one incremental step at a time, the reading and writing skills that enable them to compose critically aware comparison essays, while they explore the creative and thought-provoking questions that these artists raise in their work. A similar step-by-step approach applies to learning to solve the conceptual and organizational challenges of a comparison essay. Briefly, my students

learn that a comparison is an effective tool—a rhetorical technique—for analyzing works of art, texts, ideas, and points of view. This technique calls attention to similarities and differences between artworks, breaks broad categories into smaller ones for the purpose of close examination, and draws attention to a need for parallelism, which writers can satisfy by employing one of the two basic organizational choices (block style or point-by-point style). Though comparison is often limited to description, it is the analytical aspect of the comparative structure that leads to critical thinking. Like the art of relation, comparison is a method that seeks in its dialectic to find common ground as well as difference. A fuller discussion of the specific pedagogical moves required for writing a comparison of two works of art by one artist, which is the overall assignment for this essay unit, is beyond the limits of this article.

My students and I begin the comparison essay unit by researching the artists' works online and in print and by reading, discussing, and writing about the assigned class readings: "I Am for an Art ..." by Oldenburg,<sup>2</sup> either "Sharp Rocks" or "From the Personal to the Political" by Edgar Heap of Birds,<sup>3</sup> and "*Mexarcane International: Ethnic Talent for Export*" by Coco Fusco.<sup>4</sup> These text selections (all are usually unfamiliar to

<sup>2</sup> Claes Oldenburg, "I Am for an Art ...," in Claes Oldenburg and Emmett Williams, *Store Days: Documents from the Store and Ray Gun Theater* (New York: Something Else Press, 1967), 39-42.

<sup>3</sup> Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, "Sharp Rocks," in Brian Wallis, ed., *Blasted Allegories: An Anthology of Writings by Contemporary Artists* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art and MIT Press, 1987), 170-173; Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds, "From the Personal to the Political," transcription of artist's slide presentation on his artwork to students at Columbia University, [http://www.thephotohistoryinstitute.org/journals/1999/heap of birds.html](http://www.thephotohistoryinstitute.org/journals/1999/heap%20of%20birds.html).

<sup>4</sup> Coco Fusco, "*Mexarcane International: Ethnic Talent for Export*," *The Bodies That Were Not Ours and Other Writings* (London: Routledge, 2001), 18-21.

my students) introduce the diversity, cultural richness, visual complexity, and intellectual and emotional challenges that are offered in the artists' writings and artworks. By expressing themselves boldly through art *and* writing, the three artist-writers serve as powerful role models for my first-year art students. By studying these artists' works, my students learn that critical thinking, reading, and writing are joined with deep sensitivity and commitment to understanding subject matter, form, content, and context.

Although I limit my discussion in this article to the three above-mentioned assignments for critical thinking, my students also perform peer reviews and give oral presentations on their research and work in progress. These strategies and learning aids are helpful in the classroom because they create a community of writers and readers, provide an introduction to college-level work, and strengthen the critical thinking and writing skills of each student. Moreover, these activities encourage analysis and assist students with the many communication challenges that they face in freshman writing and in their careers as students and artists.

## II. WHY CHOOSE THESE ARTISTS TO ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING?

Each semester, at the beginning of our comparison essay unit, some students ask me for the basis of my selection of a particular set of artists and my reasons for limiting the choice to only three. This is an important and valid question, and I address it here briefly.

Most of my choices for this writing and research assignment on art and artists are guided by the pedagogical and practical matters of teaching a required freshman writing course in a public art college. My choices are also based on my background as practicing artist and my experience of

teaching writing. As a committed expository writing instructor, my focus is primarily on the college-level writing curriculum. Teaching art history and art theory are secondary concerns.

Below are additional criteria for offering to my students the work of Oldenburg, Heap of Birds, and Fusco:

1. The artists create work that takes critical and self-reflexive positions in relation to art and society.
2. The artists come from diverse backgrounds and address in their work the expanded field of ethnic and gender identities and/or national origins.
3. The artists have a significant body of written and visual artworks from which students can select works for their final comparison paper.
4. The artists' written and visual works are easily accessible in print or online.
5. All students in the class read the assigned artists' texts and are able to understand, discuss, and write about the artists' work.

The three artists that I chose for this essay unit share five important characteristics in their artworks that have led them to question the aesthetic as well as the sociopolitical status quo. Each artist demonstrates (1) a highly developed faculty for critical thinking, (2) a deep commitment to antihierarchical visions of art, (3) a preference for an aesthetic of art in everyday life, (4) a special affinity for popular-culture idioms and vernacular languages, and (5) a propensity for employing many different high-art and low-art media, including various technologies. Above all, I know from experience that these particular artists and their work inspire and also challenge my students to be stronger critical thinkers, more informed artists, and more adept writers.

Claes Oldenburg's analysis of art history, theory, and practice, as shown in his



**Figure 1: Claes Oldenburg, *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks*, 1969**  
**Steel, inflatable polymer**

Collection of Yale University Art Gallery

Photo: Shunk-Kender © Roy Lichtenstein Foundation

early environmental work *The Store* (1961-1962) and his public sculpture *Spoon, Bridge and Cherry* (1988), is profoundly democratic, “popular culture,” and often whimsical. The primary direction in his work is an attempt to erase or complicate distinct boundaries between high and low art and between elite and popular audiences. Fascinated by popular culture, his work reevaluates high-art conventions since the late 1950s. His antiwar sculpture *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks* [Figure 1] was too controversial for some Yale University elites in 1969, but since the 1970s his artworks have rarely been perceived as problematic by American viewers.<sup>5</sup> Today, many enjoy his sense of humor and dreamlike realism, which is rooted in the visual and visceral representations of consumer goods such as fast food, comic strips, movies, and other vernacular genres.

In comparison to Oldenburg’s approach to art and language, Edgar Heap of Birds’ critical approach tends to be unsettling to my students. During their first encounter with his work, they are greatly challenged by the complexity and rich layering of information that causes many au-

<sup>5</sup> Oldenburg’s 1969 version of *Lipstick (Ascending) on Caterpillar Tracks* was commissioned by graduate students in the School of Architecture at Yale University. The sculpture was installed at the Beineke Plaza during the height of student demonstrations against the war in Vietnam. Designed to provide a forum for public discourse, in this earliest incarnation of the work the lipstick’s soft tip, alternately inflating and collapsing during speeches, delivered a provocative yet ribald message of speaking truth to power. In short order, the monument was removed. In 1974, a revised version was installed at a less prominent location at the edge of the campus. Jonathan Fineberg, *Art Since 1940: Strategies of Being*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2000), 205.



**Figure 3: Coco Fusco, *Mexarcane International*, 1994-1995**  
Performance © Coco Fusco

diences to acknowledge their need for more information about the artist and the histories of indigenous peoples. Most challenging to my students is Heap of Birds' broadly historical perspective on American history and culture. For example, in works like "Sharp Rocks" (1985), a text piece for several exhibitions by that name, and the screenprinted text piece *Telling Many Magpies*, *Telling Black Wolf*, *Telling Hachivi* (1989) [Figure 2], Heap of Birds analyzes the sociopolitical construction of language, images, identities and seemingly neutral objects such as road markers and Native arrowheads. By studying these and other works, my students soon learn about research-based art and about critically examining the validity of historical interpretations of events and social relations that involve representations of Native and other marginalized peoples.

Coco Fusco's compelling analytical writing and outspoken artworks address popular-culture idioms, ethnic background, and gender and race stereotypes and add yet another dimension to the educational experience of freshman writers. Examining *Mexarcane International* (1994-

1995), an audience-interactive performance that has been staged in shopping malls, students are introduced to intercultural theories and practices while in the presence of art. Fusco's performance has offered audience-shoppers in malls a rare opportunity to analyze cultural stereotypes, patterns of desire, consumption, and the ways that we achieve satisfaction. In addition to using comparison as an analytical tool, students also learn about strategies such as parody and irony which are essential to understanding the intricate levels of meaning that are embedded in contemporary art and artists' writings.

In these different ways, the visual and written works by Oldenburg, Heap of Birds, and Fusco offer my students models and opportunities for critical thinking. By examining these artists' visual and language-based works, students come to grips with a variety of art and writing styles, aesthetic traditions, and art media choices. Best of all is their learning to analyze visual and textual representations and think critically about the social and historical contexts of subject matter. Exploring this rich field of aesthetic approaches and critical



**Figure 2: Hachivi Edgar Heap of Birds**  
*Telling Many Magpies, Telling Black Wolf,*  
*Telling Hachivi, 1989*  
 Screenprint © Edgar Heap of Birds

perspectives enables my student writers to apply these learning experiences to their essay writing, their viewing of art, and their own art making.

### III. THREE ASSIGNMENTS TO ENCOURAGE CRITICAL THINKING

#### *The Reading and Discussion Guides*

The one-page Reading and Discussion Guides are central to the first homework assignment that I give my students in preparation for their final comparison essay. Each Guide is a list of questions about one artist-writer's thesis on art, language usage (diction, tone, style, etc.), and argument. Students read the assigned text and write on the handout short answers to the questions.

The responses are discussed in class in small and large groups and later handed in for instructor's comments. These discussions encourage students to ask questions about their own art and related everyday-life issues. This sharing stimulates in-class discussions about an artist's point of view as expressed in art and writing. The sharing of responses also has an important social function in that it creates group spirit and class cohesion, which enables students to clarify their thinking and become comfortable with exchanging their views on the artist-writers' works and their artistic processes.

The primary aims of the Guides are to foster the students' close reading skills and support their understanding of what the artist's text says and how the text makes its point. In connection with those aims, the Guides encourage students' self-reflexive and analytical approaches to reading and to developing verbal and written communication skills.

Reading and Discussion Guide questions—such as “What would you like to ask this artist about his or her writing or art making?” and “What questions does this text raise for YOU?”—prompt students to engage the artist-writer in an imagined dialogue about art, the use of language in art, and related issues that are important to them. On the path toward becoming proficient critical readers and writers, such questions also invite students to articulate how they personally engage with the text. The questions model ways to engage the assigned text and the artist-writers' points of view and help students to articulate to themselves, their peers, and their teacher what is truly important, exhilarating, or puzzling to them about art, life, and writing.

#### *Claes Oldenburg's “I Am for an Art...”*

The Reading and Discussion Guide on Claes Oldenburg's text selection “I Am for

an Art ...” sets the stage for reading and writing about the artist’s works. The students’ homework is to accomplish the following tasks:

1. Read Oldenburg’s 1961 text selection “I Am for an Art ...,” and respond in writing to the questions posed by the Reading and Discussion Guide.
2. Find online or print images of the artist’s work and be prepared to talk to the class about one or two artworks by the artist. Prepare for class discussion one question on the art.

Beyond those directions, the assignment asks students to enter the historical period of the late 1950s and early 1960s, a time that was marked by rigid political power structures, hardened social conventions about race and gender relations, and experimentation and reevaluation of outmoded aesthetic paradigms. Adding such views on art to students’ own knowledge, the assignment inspires them to examine art and its meanings within Oldenburg’s art-historical frame and within their own daily life and sociocultural contexts.

To that end, on the first class of the essay unit, my students and I sit at the table in our classroom and read aloud Oldenburg’s “I Am for an Art . . . .” Taking turns, we read his seventy-six declarations about the art that he favors. Together, we feel the driving rhythm produced by each line and the verbal repetition of “I am for an art . . . .,” “I am for an art . . . .,” “I am for an art . . . .” We internalize the artist’s wildly diverse images and pile them up in our minds. As a group of readers, we try to imagine what he defines as “art that is political-erotic-mystical” and art “that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum” (Oldenburg 39).

Following the reading, students share their informally and hand-written responses to the Guide’s questions. These are the questions:

1. How would you characterize Oldenburg’s aesthetic as stated in his text “I Am for an Art . . . .” ? What adjectives would you use?
2. What literary form does Oldenburg use to make his statement about art?
3. What type of comparison does Oldenburg use in his text? Where (in what places) does he find the raw materials for the images that he paints with words?
4. Does Oldenburg’s aesthetic in this 1961 text suggest a social or political agenda? How would you characterize his sociocultural or political position?
5. What would you like to ask Oldenburg about writing about art?
6. What questions does Oldenburg’s text selection raise for YOU?

The responses below are by my student Kate, who has attentively read Oldenburg’s text and looked at some of his visual work. Her responses correspond to the numbered questions above:

1. Oldenburg’s aesthetic is one that glorifies everyday imperfections. His art is informal, edgy, spontaneous, honest, gracefully grotesque.
2. The “literary form” is 1st person narrative, bold simple “I” statements.
3. The artist relates to art using the metaphor of everyday objects and situations. He finds his metaphors in simple people’s lives, the city streets, convenience stores.
4. His aesthetic definitely hints at a social and political critique. He seems to glorify the common person and opposes the elitists, which most likely include politicians.
5. How long did it take you to write this list of statements about art? How important is the sequence of images you present in the art you are for?
6. What art am *I* for? What everyday events do *I* think are “art”?

Mary responds to the Guide's questions by focusing on the visceral elements in Oldenburg's manifesto-like poem:

1. Oldenburg finds art in everything, even if it is old, used, gross, dead or rotten. Life is art & art is life. Crazy Rawness.
2. Oldenburg uses a poem style, repetition with the words "I am for the art of"—and then on goingly persists to mention lots of things *no one would* consider art.
3. Oldenburg uses metaphors in a way that is sly; almost so they truly seem to belong, or explain it well. He's having *art* do everything: "Sits on its ass in a museum," smoked like a cigarette, "stuck in the eye," speeding clouds.
4. I think he is sarcastically suggesting that the U.S. government is life and therefore art. His position on politics is unclear to me.
5. So what do you think is art? Is it that you think a person and their activities is art? And the way that nature is too?
6. What is not art?

### *Edgar Heap of Birds' "Sharp Rocks"*

"Sharp Rocks" by Edgar Heap of Birds is a four-page text piece that addresses art-making, language usage, history, and daily life interactions between American Natives and non-Natives. As in the study of Oldenburg's poem, students read the text, search for images of the artist's work, and respond in writing to the Reading and Discussion Guide questions:

1. Describe the structure of Heap of Bird's text. What are its elements?
2. How many voices are in this text, and what or whom do they represent?
3. Who is Heap of Birds' primary audience? Are YOU, a student at an art college, his primary audience? Explain.
4. Is Heap of Birds' art primarily expres-

sive, formal, autobiographical, analytical? Explain.

5. Identify two "problems" or issues that Heap of Birds explores in this text piece.
6. What two questions about the function of language or making art would you like to ask this artist?

My students' encounter with Heap of Birds' work through their reading of "Sharp Rocks" raises many questions for them. Most challenging to them is his attempt to transform misinformation into transformative knowledge and understanding. This includes his critical views on popular representations of Native peoples, the suppression of Native languages, and the sociopolitical construction of indigenous identities.

The following three students' responses to the Reading and Discussion Guide questions highlight their close reading skills and their ability to interact with the text and identify with the writer's message. The responses show the challenges to critical thinking and reading that Heap of Birds' text poses to readers of this text. These informal responses (some are sentence fragments or phrases) also offer me an outline of the students' major concerns, which can be addressed in a freewriting exercise or in a large group discussion.

Beata and Annie offer a mixture of emotional and "first thoughts" responses to reading "Sharp Rocks." Although empathetic to Native Americans, they try to find their way through the artist's strong assertions about historical events and his argumentative and, in Annie's words, "accusatory" use of language. Here are Beata's strong responses:

1. Argumentative, informal essay, broken text.
2. Edgar represents all Native Americans. He is standing up for them in a world that he feels has hung them up to dry.

He is yelling *for* them.

3. I think he is just speaking to all the people he *blames*, all the people he *hates*, which in his case is mostly *white men*.
4. Expressive and analytical from what I have read, but I haven't seen it! It is inspired by what he feels for most, the tragedy of the destruction of Native Americans.
5. He believes that people are ignorant to Native Americans. Also that people are unable to properly interpret Native American art.
6. Who are you trying to influence? What have you personally ever done to help Native Americans and their culture aside from your art work?

The following Reading and Discussion Guide responses are by Annie:

1. 1st person, essay, structured, chronological, analytical, logical, thesis-topic & position (argument), not formal essay, bias, one-sided.
2. Two voices -- his, quotes from others (all are 1st person), works in his voice, provides brief examples of 1st person accounts from others he has spoken with.
3. Audience is Americans. I am not primary audience as an art college student but as a white American.
4. Analytical & expressive, accusatory, hard to relate, generalizes, stereotypes, anger, passion.
5. He makes me wonder how words can strengthen art.
6. (a) What should our generation do to learn to understand? (b) What is your objective with your writing? What is your objective with your art? *What change would you like to see in the world?*

Janelle used a Reading and Discussion Guide with slightly different questions than the Guide that Annie and Beata used.

Below I include the questions that are different from the ones already listed above. Janelle's responses are consistently thoughtful. She is listening to the artist's voice, not to her own emotional reaction. She uses words like "expressive," "political," and "message" to define the artist's activist agenda, and is on her way to effectively analyzing a given text:

1. The structure is blocks of information; also a story is being told.
2. Question: How many voices are in this text? How do these voices affect you, the reader?  
Janelle's response: Three voices. They affect the reader by giving them different viewpoints on the story.
3. His own culture or people and the people who hurt his culture.
4. Heap of Birds' art is expressive and displays a message. It is political.
5. Question: What literary strategy (figures of speech, symbolism, diction, etc.) does Heap use in this text?  
Janelle's response: Heap of Birds uses diction in the text as a form of a person being affected by the events the text is recalling.
6. The problem that he explores is the fact that he is reimagining his history and making art related to it.
7. Question: How do you connect to Heap of Birds' text? How do his questions—his "problem"—relate to your process or making art?  
Janelle's response: I can connect with Edgar's "problem" because I think artists need to reinvent themselves over time to keep their art "fresh."

### *Coco Fusco's "Mexarcane International: Ethnic Talent for Export"*

Coco Fusco's three-page statement describes her performance piece *Mexarcane International* with Guillermo Gómez-Peña

and cites a few of her concerns—hyperconsumerism, exploitation, historical amnesia, and racial and gender discrimination. She argues that these concerns are hidden behind the joys that are derived from shopping for exotic trinkets in malls (Fusco 19). The aim of her performance is to raise the awareness of her audience (shoppers) in a mall by exposing them to the sociopolitical economies that undermine American ideals (freedom, truth, justice, equality under the law). Below are the Reading and Discussion Guide questions for her text:

1. What is Coco Fusco's main interest in shopping malls? What is her position on this cultural experience?
2. What other views on shopping malls does she refer to in her essay? Which views do you prefer? State why.
3. What role did Fusco play in her performance, and why did she choose to remain anonymous?
4. Why do you think that Fusco chose to have a male partner for this performance? What would be missing had she not included his part?
5. What is Fusco's primary message in this performance?
6. What have your shopping-mall experiences been like? How are they different from or the same as Fusco's when she is not performing?
7. What question would you like to ask Fusco and Gómez-Peña about this performance?

For this particular class and largely to save time, I asked my students to respond to the Guide's questions as an in-class free-writing exercise which led to a large group discussion that was based on students' homework responses. As expected, we had a spirited debate about shopping and mall culture. One student who has consistently argued for conservationist approaches to making art and daily living agreed with Fusco's argument regarding American cap-

italism. She had much to say about wastefulness and compulsive shopping. She also advocated for recycling trash items to make art and for acquiring secondhand clothing to wear, rather than purchasing new materials from megastores. Students raised questions about Gómez-Peña's participation in the performance. Most had not yet researched Gómez-Peña and were unsure what his role was, except to show "gender inclusivity." Students who had done the online image search enjoyed the colorful costumes worn by both artists for the performance.

#### IV. THE CONNECTION PAPER

Following the Reading and Discussion Guide assignment, I assign the Connection Paper, a 450-word paper with two parts that require similar conceptual and critical "depth." Part 1 is the student's summary of the main ideas in the artist-writer's text selection; part 2 is the student's articulation of personal connections to the artist-writer's text. The purpose of the Connection Paper is to motivate the students to prepare for writing the five-page comparison essay. This preparation includes the following tasks:

1. Reread the assigned text thoughtfully and critically.
2. Participate in class discussions about the artist-writer's topic, position or point of view, and rhetorical strategies for clarifying the argument.

In this short academic paper, the student uses the *I* pronoun to assert a position on the artist's main argument, diction, or writing style. To support the position, the student must quote from the text and offer one example that shows a positive or negative connection between the artist-writer's and the student's views. The example should be based on the student's personal

experience or other knowledge and offer descriptive details that bring to life the student's connection.

In addition to teaching freshman writers academic writing conventions, the Connection Paper introduces them to the critical vocabulary of analysis, point of view, and self-reflection. They learn this vocabulary by articulating the artist-writer's thesis, posing questions about what they read, and examining the visual or textual evidence. Most important for my students' development as critical thinkers, readers, and writers are the connections and distinctions that they make between understanding their own lives and art processes and those of other artists.

For example, Annie summarizes Oldenburg's position on art in the following way:

In "I Am for an Art . . ." from *Documents from the Store*, Claes Oldenburg expresses his innermost definitions of and feelings about art. His views on art include anything from a pair of pants, to a spilled ice cream, to a tissue, to a sailing trip, to a scrape on the knee. Oldenburg has a very whimsical stance on what art's definition is .... Though he believes art is all around every person in everyday life, Oldenburg's work is not so subtle. Seeing art is not just about aesthetics for Oldenburg, but a way of life. For Oldenburg, art is the atmosphere in which we live. Art is natural, as well as manmade. Art is purposeful, as well as accidental. Art is an action, art is decision, art is a feeling, art is a way of life.

Annie continues to make the following personal connection with Oldenburg's views on art:

I agree with Oldenburg's fantastical view on art. I think art embodies all human beings and is our way of life. I believe not only are Oldenburg's works of art effective but also his writing. Oldenburg's view of art is beautiful and sensual. His definitions provide a connection between human and nature, as well as a connection between human and human. Oldenburg breaks human and our daily routines into their most simple forms. By glorifying our way of life, he makes his readers appreciate their surroundings and daily happenings.

Donna writes about the same Oldenburg selection by making explicit her personal connection with his preferred kind of art. In response to his assertion about favoring "the art of conversation between the sidewalk and a blind man's stick" (Oldenburg 20), she recalls her encounter with the arresting drama of a blind woman on the train reading in Braille:

I had to read the article more than once, because I didn't really get what was happening until I read it over a few times. Now I can kind of see where Oldenburg was going with this article when he listed everyday things that we usually take for granted, such as consumer products....

Oldenburg also lists not just consumer products, but activities that other people do, like a blind man tapping his cane to see where he is going. That kind of fascination reminds me of the time when I saw a blind woman get on the train and start reading a book that was entirely in Braille. I thought this was so cool, because she was sliding

her finger across the pages very quickly and I could hardly believe that she was actually reading. This fascinated me, because I had never seen a person read like that before.

Donna wrote her Connection Paper on Edgar Heap of Birds' "From the Personal to the Political" (1999), a transcript of his slide lecture and discussion about his artworks. (Students had the choice to write either on this selection or on "Sharp Rocks.") She summarized the writer-artist's views on his artworks, his reflections on growing up on the reservation, and his attention to the politics of language. However, the student's strongest writing reflects her personal connection to Heap of Birds' work—his relationship to the histories, languages, and lands of his Native people. Prompted by his emphasis on his culture, she articulates her concerns about losing touch with her own history and native language. In the following moving passage she analyzes her complicated responses to Heap of Birds' work and to her own roots:

Heap of Birds is a person who is very connected to his past and to his ancestors' past, and this is something I admire a little bit, because there have been times that I have wished that I was a little more connected to my family's past. I feel this way, because my parents always bring up the story of how they got to America from Vietnam and how we, the children, should appreciate this, because it gave us the chance to live this way. Whenever I hear that from my parents, I get a little annoyed because they mention it a lot and it's not like it's something that escapes me, but they keep mentioning it to a point that makes it something I do not like.

That is why it is very rare for me to ask my parents about the past. Also not being connected to the past makes me feel guilty, because it is a different culture and language that I once embraced, but growing up and going to school has made me forget my roots, and now that I think back on it I wish I still had the ability to understand and speak my native language better.... When I was younger I hung around a group of Asian kids and I always felt like the outcast, because (1) they were smart Asians and (2) I was a stupid artsy Asian that tried to fit in. Because of these feelings I find Heap of Birds annoying.

As Donna shows in this passage from her Connection Paper, Heap of Birds struck a vulnerable cord by writing courageously and forcefully about the plight of American Natives, the politics of language, and questions of identity—issues that Donna identifies with personally.

Vanessa begins her paper with a clear summary of the sociopolitical issues that Heap of Birds addresses in "Sharp Rocks," such as the massacres of Native peoples, their forced physical displacement, and institutional disenfranchisement of rights, social services, and human dignity. After her summary, she explains her personal connections to Heap of Birds' text and his perspective on issues related to the cultural construction of history and identity in American life:

I cannot connect with Heap of Birds from personal accounts. I do however understand what his intention is as an artist. He creates media [works] to confront today's white culture. Americans encounter privileges every day, while native people have to fight to obtain the same privileges.... I honestly

admit that I have never truly thought of what Heap of Birds writes about. I have grown up in this white culture that discriminates, but guiltily, never really took the time to think about how wrong it was until about the past eight years of my life. The events of September eleventh threw me into reality. I'm shocked at the way we discriminate against and associate nearly anyone who appears to be of Middle Eastern descent with terrorists. Even though I have only become aware of this kind of current discrimination the second half of my life, history has recorded the rest. Edgar Heap of Birds is a strong leader and I respect his dignity.

Coco Fusco presents my students with new challenges that are different from but also related to those offered by Oldenburg and Heap of Birds. Like Oldenburg, she is attracted to pop art and consumerist myths. Unlike Oldenburg, who explores the poetic and whimsical dimensions of contemporary everyday life objects, images and actions, Fusco challenges her audiences to examine America's political economy, social history, discriminatory practices, and economic exploitation that hide behind such seemingly innocent joys as choosing coffees from far-away places (Fusco 19). Unlike Heap of Birds, who emphasizes specific historical moments as well as ongoing oppressive practices toward indigenous peoples, Fusco offers an ironic view of American cultural practices, many of them driven by historical amnesia, American-style capitalism, and trading policies.

At first, my students are bewildered by Fusco's performance work and her description and interpretation of her *Mexarcane* performance. But some of my international students from south of the American border are quick to join Fusco's critique of

American capitalism, the North American Free Trade Agreement, and NAFTA-driven economic policies. In Fusco's critique, which is informed by what Linda Hutcheon calls "parody with a difference," the system depends on stereotypical representations of oversexualized *compadres* who speak a "broken" language and offer "native dances" and richly decorated Latinas selling Alpaca sweaters and audio tapes from the Andes.<sup>6</sup> As Kate reveals in her Connection Paper,

On first reading Fusco's statement on her performance, I was a little confused on how this excerpt was "an artist writing about her work." It seemed like she was just doing an amusing survey, but it wasn't doing art. I then realized that art is anything that makes a statement.

Kate learned quickly Fusco's critical perspective on American-style shopping malls. But where had my student learned to read the artist's work critically? Where had she learned "that art is anything that makes a statement" and that art can look like everyday life? Did she recall our earlier work with Oldenburg and Heap of Birds?

Kate does not reference the source of her insight into Fusco's performance work, but she does clarify the difference between growing up in Fusco's world and growing up in her own:

My home town, Marshfield, is ninety-eight percent Caucasian and so are most of the surrounding towns. Growing up, I experienced the world through a television screen. I realize this is a very sheltered way to live and that I'm only one step away from picking up

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<sup>6</sup> Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985), 2-29.

some "canned air" at Stop and Shop. I couldn't choose the area I was born into. However, I feel that Fusco's perspective stands for something more universal than a specific critique on cultural diversity. Society in general is becoming more and more fabricated because of the overwhelming influence of consumerism. In many areas, people purchase the illusion of an authentic lifestyle. For example, at our local shopping center, mall-obsessed middle schoolers flock to the store Hot Topic, spending hundreds of dollars on a shocking, seemingly unique image of themselves. Perhaps they waste their money on this "look" to rebel against their controlling parents. However, by participating in this store-bought rebellion, they are only bowing to an even mightier power: big business.

Fusco explains that her performance was inspired by the racial segregation that was routinely enforced by security officers at Los Angeles shopping malls. Private police in those malls, she argues, operated as if all white shoppers are harmless and all visitors of color threaten the safety, clientele and goods of white-owned establishments. According to Fusco's experiences as a racially mixed person, the mall is a racist and discriminatory environment. For her, American-style shopping malls are neither the nineteenth-century arcades that Walter Benjamin celebrated,<sup>7</sup> nor the "quintessential postmodern topography" that the American cultural critic Fredric has de-

<sup>7</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press: Cambridge, MA, 1999); Susan Buck-Morss, "Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk*: Redeeming Mass Culture for the Revolution," *The New German Critique* #29 (Spring-Summer 1983): 240.

finied.<sup>8</sup> For Fusco, the shopping mall is a public space where the politics and economics of desire are played out. Her message is for shoppers to think critically and contextually about the making and trading of consumer products.

Beata reads Fusco's piece about *Mexar-cane International* from a perspective that is slightly different from that of Kate's analysis of growing up in Marshfield, a mostly-white community on the East Coast. Beata's focus is on Fusco, the social critic and activist. She sees in Fusco a strong and determined woman with a personal experience that made her "mad enough to spit" (Fusco 18). This is how Beata begins her Connection Paper on Fusco's performance:

When Coco Fusco was introducing her art to Los Angeles, Latin Americans were experiencing severe racial segregation and political turmoil. So without wasting any time, she decided to do something about it.

Following these introductory lines about Fusco's preperformance thoughts, Beata summarizes the artist's execution of the work and postperformance reflections. In her summary of Fusco's sociocultural critique of malls, Beata exhibits considerable critical thinking skills. In the excerpt below, she summarizes Fusco's and Gómez-Peña's actions and feelings during their performance, their critique on excessive shopping and over-the-top consumption, and the specter of racism in shopping malls:

This work of art was meant to point out the awkwardness of every day in Los Angeles. The performers started out with a series of

<sup>8</sup> Frederic Jameson, "The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 1-54.

questions that Fusco presented in a strange Aztec costume. Then the shoppers were led to Gómez-Peña, who was dressed as an exotic multicultural character. None of the process was supposed to make sense or have purpose. Instead it was meant to mock the participants, who rarely caught this part of the performance. The majority of the shoppers simply did everything that Fusco and Gómez-Peña asked of them. After three days of this social experiment the artists left the shopping mall, successfully proving the stupidity of their fellow people.

Reading this passage made me smile. It's not every day that people stand up for their beliefs and do more than bang their heads against the wall or, worse, ignore reality. It seems so simple. Two artists were frustrated with an epidemic of racism and could not handle the way that their present was playing out. So they did something about it.

Students who participate in the Connection Paper assignment and do the assigned work quickly learn to read closely and critically. The Connection Paper, as Jamie states in the passage below from her end-of-term Reflective Self-Evaluation, is an effective assignment when used throughout the course:

The Connection Papers were always a great help when I sat down to write the big paper. I always liked the progression of writing, which went from in-class blue book essay, to Connection Papers, then beginning drafts, and then final drafts.

Jamie's Reflective Self-Evaluation sums up key elements that confirm the value of using the Reading and Discussion Guide, Connection Paper, and Self-Commentary assignments.

## V. THE SELF-COMMENTARY

The Self-Commentary is a highly effective learning tool for students' critical thinking and self-reflexive writing. I assign students a Self-Commentary of 150 to 200 words for most writing assignments, especially the four big five-page essays that we develop throughout the semester.

The Self-Commentary has many functions in the writing process. Like the transfer of ideas from writer to reader, the Self-Commentary helps students to reenter their own writing and become reflective about the processes that were involved in producing the just-completed essay. The Self-Commentary also can enrich discussions about an in-class freewriting exercise, an early essay draft, or a completed essay. In all cases, the Self-Commentary assists writers in exiting the writing process and acknowledging incomplete thoughts and underdeveloped ideas.

Ideally, the Self-Commentary helps writers to understand better their chosen topic, their relationships to the reader and to themselves, and their thinking and writing processes as reflected by the choices that they made. For this reason, the Self-Commentary becomes a reflexive, critical, and self-affirming writing tool.

Sometimes, my directions to write a Self-Commentary are as short as "Write a brief Self-Commentary on what it was like for you to write this." Other times, especially when students are puzzled by having to write about what they just wrote, I suggest that they respond to these specific questions:

1. Who is my ideal reader? (My teacher is an accidental reader.)
2. What is my main idea? (I know that a main idea is not yet a thesis.)
3. Have I considered and included opposing views on the topic?
4. What in my writing is most successful so far? What needs more work?

Ultimately, the challenge is for students to reflect on their critical thinking, writing, reading, and researching skills they employed in their work. A good example is Kate's Self-Commentary on her final comparison essay.

I've become very familiar with Claes Oldenburg through the process of researching and writing this paper. At first, I was attracted to Oldenburg because of his writing style, though I had never seen his sculptures or any of his artwork. His writing is very open, honest, and full of vivid detail. I liked the repetition in his writing *Documents from the Store*, which I eventually realized mirrors the repetition in his work.

This paper wasn't as much of a struggle as some others I have written for this class, but it took the longest by far. I don't know if the amount of time I spent on this paper shows that I have bad time management skills or if everyone spent an incredible amount of time on it. I am happy with the results, though.

I hope to become more familiar with many artists through my education at MassArt, and researching for this paper showed me how. I now know how to search for criticism and interpretations of art, as well as find specific books in the li-

brary. I also learned that it is easy to order a book through interlibrary loan from any local school, which is a great tool for future papers.

Vanessa's Self-Commentary on the third (final) draft for her comparison essay on Oldenburg's work also offers a positive reflection on her writing, researching, and learning. Cautiously yet proudly emphasizing the writing and researching process, she sums up her final draft on Oldenburg's work:

I think this is a good solid paper. The research I did definitely helped prove my points. I was pleasantly surprised to find out that many of the arguments I came up with in my paper were also written about in journal articles and books! I think this essay helped me expand my organizational methods for writing essays. The block by block method definitely works for me. Also the Writing Center was helpful because it made my paper more structured. And we worked on a better thesis. Some of the research was hard, . . . but I did eventually find good material in some books in the library. I think for my next paper, even if it isn't required, I'll do a little bit of research. It's good to know what I am talking about. . . . It was interesting to find more out about the art movement in the 60s, because it made Oldenburg's work less confusing. And because of the pop movement as an influence, I can see how Oldenburg's work progressed to his large sculptures.

Below is Vanessa's Self-Commentary for an earlier draft of the same paper. Here she lists the tasks that she wants to accomplish to improve her essay on Oldenburg's

work. It is instructive to place her two Self-Commentaries side by side and note her comments on the revision process. For her, the Commentary has become an internal checklist for critically examining the special features of her ideas and also for actively planning her research to attain the results that she aims for and describes in the following comments on her third draft:

I feel that for my draft three, I need to research more. I got a few books in the library, and it would be nice to find quotes that work with the points I bring up in my paper. In one source from a database I was able to find some good quotes by Oldenburg himself. I feel I also need to write more context—what movements, if any, were going on during the creation of each artwork. Movements on specific events definitely influence artists. Also, if I'm able to, I want to find information on the origin of the ideas for the pieces. I went to the Writing Center and came up with a more solid structure and a clearer thesis. I also shortened some of the biographical facts in the first paragraph and tried to introduce the pieces better. I think this creates a better opening for the paper. In my earlier draft, it wasn't clear what the paper was about. I also need to include some quotes and information about the critic I have chosen. Overall, I want draft three to be organized, informative, but interesting.

Kathleen also wrote her comparison essay on two of Oldenburg's artworks. Her Self-Commentary shows her ability to examine critically her writing and learning skills. This is her Self-Commentary on her final essay draft:

Overall, I am a lot happier with my final draft than with my earlier drafts. I feel that with each new draft and each bit of feedback I received, my essay was improved greatly. I feel that the final draft, though not perfect, is a pretty good essay. I feel that if I had more time to research Oldenburg's work and its cultural context, it would lead to a better essay than what I have as is. The research I did enhanced it, and the final draft is a fairly strong example of my writing skill. Through doing research on Oldenburg, I came to have a deeper appreciation of his work. While I initially saw it as frivolous and superficial, I have come to better understand its true meanings and aesthetics. His work now seems so much more dynamic and multifaceted to me now. Overall, I am quite happy with the final product of this assignment.

On the process of studying and comparing two of Heap of Birds' work, Coleen comments especially on her analytical skills. She wrote the following Self-Commentary:

This was an interesting assignment. I like analyzing and comparing different works of art because it got me to focus on elements that I may not have paid attention to otherwise. My biggest problem I encountered was distinguishing the difference between someone just talking about a work of art and someone critiquing it. However, I am confident the critic I chose did a good job of analyzing Heap of Birds and his work. My first draft focused on the writings of Heap of Birds, but as I did more research I wrote about his artworks. I went to

the Writing Center to organize my essay, and it was very helpful. I had a lot of great information, but I was having some difficulties figuring out what points I wanted to make. I like my essay and I hope whoever reads it likes it too.

Sarah, who also compared two different artworks by Heap of Birds, wrote the following Self-Commentary on her final comparison essay draft:

Writing this paper made me learn new things about a culture that I did not know enough about. At first, when I started the assignment I figured that picking a Native American artist would give me an advantage to just write about his culture. However, after completing draft two and taking a trip to the Writing Center, I realized that writing an effective comparison paper was more work than I had originally planned. The pieces that I compared became (I think) more invested in the final draft (#3), it was more obvious that my paper was about comparing an artist in a time period, but I managed to also not forget to include important details about the Native American culture and the background to the pieces that I compared. Now that I am completed with the paper, I feel more educated both in history and art but also in how to effectively begin and finish an assignment on a topic. I only can hope that my skills will keep improving.

Donna was less confident about her final comparison essay. Her Self-Commentary on comparing two of Coco Fusco's performances reveals her difficulty with the artist's work and with writing the paper. Yet she speaks clearly about the prob-

lems that students encounter when for reasons beyond their control, they are unable to take full advantage of class activities and other learning support systems. Her self-critical assessment of her work demonstrate the kind of insight, honesty and clarity that, as a writing instructor, I applaud:

I have never had much interest in performance art, and that might have been the reason I chose Coco Fusco instead of someone else. Also at first when I read the article on *Mexarcane International*, I didn't quite understand what Fusco was trying to convey. I finally understood why she did that performance, and it made me think more about consumerism.

I didn't really care for her performance *A Room of One's Own* as much as I like *Mexarcane International* because I didn't really like the method Fusco used in *A Room* to get to her audience. I didn't like it very much because I think the anonymity [of the performers] in *Mexarcane* was a more effective way of interacting with the audience. It also made the piece a little more personal because she is not separated from the audience by a stage and a TV monitor.

Overall, I think my paper is so-so. A few of the factors that contributed to that were that I did not have time to go back to the Writing Center for more help, I have never really written a comparison essay before, and also I am very bad at writing structured essays.

## VI. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The three assignments—Reading and Discussion Guides, Connection Paper, and Self-Commentary—offer my freshman writers support for reading and writing critically in each of the four essay units that we work on each semester. But the Reading and Discussion Guides' defining features (reading, writing responses, and class discussions) introduce them to critical thinking. Each Guide poses questions about the assigned texts and encourages an imagined dialogue between the student reader and the artist-writers that we study. The Guides also stimulate intense class discussions about the artists' writings, their ideas and the students' views. Through this combination of homework and class activities, students actively engage with the artists' work and ideas, which leads students to compare their own thoughts and written responses with those of their peers and the artists.

As the quoted passages from the Self-Commentaries confirm, students who participate in this process throughout the semester are encouraged to engage in thinking critically and developing their own ideas about art, themselves, and everyday reality. This was the case with Kate, who in her response to the Reading and Discussion Guide question on Oldenburg's aesthetic agenda in his 1961 poem offered the following insightful perspective: "His aesthetic definitely hints at a social and political critique" and "He seems to glorify the common person and opposes elitists, which most likely include politicians." Kate's response is unambiguously the result of learning the language of analysis and applying it to an artwork.

Annie's response to the Guide's question about Heap of Birds' primary audience for "Sharp Rocks" shows the effectiveness of that assignment. Assuming that as an art college student she is not his primary reader "but as a white American" she is, Annie responds to the Guide's question self-con-

sciously from a racialized position. During the class discussion, Annie revealed that she has Native American ancestry and therefore feels greatly challenged, even angered, by Heap of Bird's distinctions between "the white man" and "true Indians." In this case, Annie's learning to think critically enables her to reevaluate her earlier assumptions and articulate more fully the complexity of her own identity—one that through critical thinking may connect her to the artist's story and his text piece in a new way.

The Connection Paper, which is the second assignment in the unit sequence, takes up the challenge of moving students quickly from reading, informal writing, and class discussion to developing thesis statements, summarizing ideas, and forging connections with the artists' ideas. This involvement with the artists' writings, their art, and the different cultural contexts, helps students to become more discerning, analytical, and self-reflexive.

Toward the end of the semester, I often witness this kind of movement in my students' dynamic learning experience. For example, Vanessa's Connection Paper on "Sharp Rocks" acknowledges a new understanding of Heap of Birds' situation as an American Native. Because the events of September 11, 2001 had already informed her views on racial justice and social discrimination, she confesses that she "cannot connect with Heap of Birds from personal accounts" but can understand what "his intention is as an artist." With that admission, Vanessa introduces her evolving position on one of the artist's major themes—the devastation of Native cultures and the discrimination against indigenous peoples:

I honestly admit that I have never truly thought of what Heap of Birds writes about. I have grown up in this white culture that discriminates but, guiltily, never really took the time to think about it how wrong it was until the past eight

years of my life. The events of September eleventh threw me into reality.

As teacher, I anticipate and pay attention to the kinds of learning experiences that are described here by my students—the posing of questions about the artist-writers' text and about knowledge based on their own experiences. Annie's and Vanessa's Self-Commentaries coincide with Jamie's end-of-term Reflective Self-Evaluation. Here Jamie summarizes her experience of working with the assignment sequence throughout the semester:

I always liked the progression of writing, which went from in-class blue book essay, to Connection Papers, then beginning drafts and then final drafts, I think that is why my third essay was so successful for me because I finally got used to the progression of writing, and learned how to use it for my own benefit. I began with my blue book and then wrote a few Connection Papers that were strong and helpful. Then, I created a sort of outline of my final draft, which included thesis and all backup quotes and information. Then I sat down and wrote the final draft and also visited the Writing Center twice.

Jamie's Self-Evaluation reviews here the effectiveness of working with the Connection Paper and with the sequence of assignments that were adapted and applied to each of the four essay units in the course. As she acknowledges, following the progression of the assignments allowed her to benefit fully from their support. This sequence of three informal reading and writing assignments serves as a simple but highly effective strategy for the development of critical thinking, reading and writing.