The Reflected Image of 'At Risk' Students
A Collaborative Art Program

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ABSTRACT

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High School students at risk of dropping out of school have often become disaffected with the institutional environment and learning process. In response to this reality two art educators set up an after-school art program for secondary students at risk of dropping out at La Voie High School in Montreal. This teaching report examines how a collaborative and interpersonal pedagogical approach to visual arts teaching combined with an artistic exploration of identity and self image can engage students in a process of learning. Central to this examination is how the process of creating self-portraits with drawing, photography and video, as well as reflections about art, can effectively allow 'at-risk' students to (re) discover the pleasure of learning and gain the sense of being able to create meaning for themselves and for others.

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Introduction

In the year 2000, in a busy corridor at Concordia University, Marianne Chemla, at that time an undergraduate art education student, approached me to ask if I would be interested in developing an after-school art program for 'at risk' students in collaboration with her. We had never met before. It was through a professor that she got my name and a 'hint' that I would perhaps be interested in joining her in the project. At that time, Marianne was also working at the Prometheus Project, a non-profit organization that paired volunteer mentors from the community with students at risk of dropping out of school. As part of her internship requirement at Concordia University she proposed to develop an art program at La Voie High School — a school in the Côte des Neiges district of Montreal with a significant number of high-risk students.

It was not until our first 'official' meeting a week later that I began to realize that Marianne and I had similar backgrounds and interests. We were both artists-teachers with previous experience in community-based settings in Montreal and in International Development in South America. Marianne had worked in El Salvador in the area of human rights and I had worked in Brazil carrying out projects where popular education and artistic practices intersected. In 1997, I spent two months teaching drama and visual arts workshops in a Landless Peasants' camp in São Paulo and in the shantytown Vigario Geral in

Rio de Janeiro. During these months I had the opportunity of meeting a number of inspiring Brazilian educators and artists who were working together "through the varied energies of the arts" (Paley, 1995, p.4) to get children and youth out of the streets and away from drug dealing.

Marianne's initial initiative to create an after-school art program for students at risk of dropping out was both a response to the alarming statistics that revealed that three out of ten High School students in Quebec drop out of school (Moreau, 1995) and to the lack of after-school programs in schools where the rate of dropping out was high.

Her initiative ran parallel to my concern of how the visual arts could rekindle the desire to learn among students who were in the process of disengaging themselves from school and learning in general. I believed that through the arts we could reach students that were not otherwise being reached by giving them an opportunity for social interaction and self-expression through a variety of media. One of our shared understandings was that such a rekindling could come about by creating an environment in which the visual arts provide adolescents with the means to explore questions of identity and self-image — of all the stages of development, adolescence is the one in which identity is at the heart of the individual's concern (Erikson, 1968). When I left our meeting I felt that our experiences with grassroots projects combined with our enthusiasm and mutual concerns were a positive source of collaboration between us. This very brief first meeting was the starting point of what was to become a long and fruitful journey.

Background to the study

As an art teacher I had been working in community settings where adolescents were struggling with definitions of themselves as being 'socially maladjusted', 'emotionally disturbed', 'at risk' or 'drop outs'. Such depictions served to mirror and confirm the adolescents' sense of inadequacy and precarious 'at-risk' social position. They also shared a common opinion regarding schools. For them schools 'were a no fun place to be at all' because they were places where they could not articulate their own thoughts and feelings, but places where they simply received information that they did not know how to apply to 'real life'. This perception had an important impact on how they engaged with the process of learning and knowing. Since their notion of learning was directly linked to schools and the school experience, it was therefore also experienced as not meaningful ('and no fun!').

My experience as an art teacher in these settings also provided me with the opportunity to observe that art allowed 'at risk' students to involve their imaginative faculties and to rework their personal experiences into creative, meaningful, empowering and playful activities. Furthermore I realised that through these activities a significant amount of learning in and through the arts was going on. As such, these findings called my attention to how artistic practice and its relation to knowledge could be explored to "nurture a special kind of reflectiveness and expressiveness, a reaching out for meanings, a learning to learn." (Greene, 2001, p.7).

As I look back today, I realise that these findings guided my teaching practice and laid the groundwork for this study: a study in which I reflect on how the visual arts can effectively allow 'at risk' students to (re) discover the pleasure of learning and gain a sense of being able to create meaning for themselves and for others.

Review of Literature

In my effort to create the conditions that would enable the students to engage themselves in a process of learning and knowing I consulted a body of literature from fields of educational philosophy (Dewey, 1934; Freire, 2001; Greene, 1978, 2001), and philosophy (Buber, 1970). Each one of these authors informed my approach in my teaching practice as well as my ongoing reflections.

Dewey' s experiential approach to learning provided a framework with which to think about the intersection of artistic practice and daily life. Dewey (1934) extensively discussed that all too often art is set on "a remote pedestal", divorced from daily life. He proposed to restore art's place within everyday experience by "recovering the continuity of aesthetic experience with normal processes of living." (p.5). As Paley states:

> The task that Dewey seems to set out for us then is to "see" art in its complex, differential relations to the fullness of human experience. And to see these relations is to reconnect art back to the place it emerged from – from the multiform "vicissitudes and undergoings" of individuals' daily struggles and experiences in human life. (Paley p.178, 1995).

Freire's (2001) liberatory pedagogy questions the student-teacher relationship based on a one-way transmission of knowledge from teacher to student. Freire advocates the importance of dialogue as an essential constituent of the process of learning and knowing. According to the author, dialogue can not be reduced to the act of one person "depositing" ideas in another, for it is an "encounter in which the united reflection and action of the dialoguers are addressed to the world which is to be transformed and humanized" (2001, p.89). Freire (2001) considers dialogue as an "act of creation and re-creation" where dialogue is a meeting between people who together "name the world." To be able to engage in dialogue as an "act of creation", one needs to recognize the experiences, values, knowledge, and humanity of the person with whom they enter into dialogue.

Freire's insights combined with Buber's notions of dialogue and interpersonal relations inspired my reflections regarding the development of pedagogical conditions in which individual voices (educators and students) could be woven into the collective shaping of a group. According to Buber there is genuine dialogue — "no matter whether spoken or silent" — only "where each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them." (Quoted in Arnett, 1986, p.6). Buber (1970) argues that dialogical relation is made possible only when we engage in a subject-subject relationship with the other. And to engage in the "subject-subject mode of intentionality" he proposes a relationship in which one perceives the other's uniqueness by perceiving the other as a person and not as a "client or a student";

to see the other as more than a "spatio-temporal bound entity" by contacting the other as "the dynamic being" who is continually in "process of becoming"; and perceives the other as a choice-maker, "not as a reactor but as chooser". (p.82).

Maxine Greene's (2001) philosophy of education serves as a basis to actively link aesthetic and artistic practice as a means of knowing. Greene proposes an aesthetic education that recognizes "perception, cognition, affect, and imagination as a way of knowing" (2001,p.3). She points out that students are too often numbed at school because they are not given the opportunity to bring their own experience into the realm of learning — and at moments of "boredom and disenchantment", nothing is more important, according to Greene, than imagination. Greene emphasizes the potential "imagination gives us to move beyond the actual and invented worlds...within our lived experiences". (Greene, 2001,p.82). Aesthetic Education is, as seen through Greene's eyes, as an intentional endeavor intended to foster "appreciative, reflective, cultural, participatory engagements with the arts by enabling learners to notice what is there to be noticed" — to make new connections in experience. (Greene 2001, p.6).

Though the intersecting views of these authors and theories inspired and informed the beginning of my teaching practice and reflections, I continued to encounter them and others depending on particular situations that arose along the path. Rather than being strictly guided by theoretical approaches, I often found myself intuitively making discoveries, which were then found confirmed and made explicit in these authors' ideas. In this sense my journey was not

mapped out from the start but developed through multiple encounters between theory and practice, in which theory sometimes caught up with practice and at other times practice would be asking theory to show the way.

Overview of the Study

This thesis focuses on my work in developing, implementing and teaching an after-school art program for a group of 'at-risk' students at La Voie High School between 2001 and 2002 in collaboration with art educator Marianne Chemla. La Voie High School has a significant rate of students at risk of dropping out of school and is located in one of the most ethnically diverse districts of Montreal. Our intention in creating this art program was not primarily to prevent students from dropping out of school, but rather to create a sense of belonging to the school and to awaken their desire to learn through a visual arts program that recognizes their experiences, needs and daily struggles.

Methodology

This study is a practice-centered inquiry. A qualitative approach, which has as its main goals, to describe, analyse and interpret insights gathered from lived experiences (Wolcott, 1994) allowed me to attend to the nuances of an art program that took form through a process of multiple encounters and experiences within a setting that reflected a diversity of voices.

I used a variety of documentary and record-keeping techniques to collect data, which would provide me with the necessary material to create a detailed narrative account and an analytical teaching report:

- field notes written between September 2001 to November 2002
- active in-class observation
- three videotapes recorded during the art workshops
- the art work produced
- reflective dialogue with my co-teacher

Invariably a narrative assessment puts one in the difficult position of synthesizing a learning experience in such way as to reveal the essence of what one has learned. This necessarily entails sacrificing some of the wealth of the experience itself. Eisner (1992) provides an insightful approach that allows one to overcome this dilemma:

> No narrative that seeks to portray life experience can be identical to the experience itself; editing, emphasizing, and neglecting through selection are all ineluctably at play. Hence we seek not a mirror but a tale, a revelation, or a portrayal of what we think is important to say about what we have come to know. (p.190)

My intention with this study is to tell a tale, to reveal and portray the essence of what I have learned about developing and implementing an art program for a group of fourteen 'at risk' students at La Voie High School from September 2001 to May 2002.

I analyzed the data by:

- carrying out several readings of my journal entries and videotapes to identify significant elements related to my question.
- selecting and organizing the elements, passages, ideas and observations that I found relevant to the data analysis.
- interpreting these findings in relation to my thesis purpose.

The thesis purpose is to bring to light how the visual arts can effectively allow 'at-risk' students to (re) discover the pleasure of learning and gain a sense of being able to create meaning for themselves and for others through a descriptive narrative, analysis and interpretation of the data.

Ethics Procedures

The after-school art program was a voluntary program; it was entirely the students' choice to participate in it. We have provided the students' parents and tutors with a consent form in which we asked for their permission to document on video and on photographs the art workshops and the students' art works for educational purposes and promotional material. The consent forms sample has been signed at the beginning of this art program. For the purpose of this study I chose to refer to the students' by pseudonyms.

CHAPTER TWO

Year One

The Pilot Project

Marianne and I started teaching the after-school art workshops in the month of January 2001, once a week for two hours. The participants were nine male and female students, thirteen to seventeen-year olds from different sectors in the school. The group was composed of Special Needs, and Welcome Class (newly arrived immigrants) as well as students from Regular Classes. The after-school art program was not mandatory; it was each student's choice to participate. We did not take attendance or grade their work. The school provided the funds for the art supplies and through Marianne's effort we received a sponsorship for the pizza, which we served at the beginning of all the art workshops.

The group of students were identified and referred to us by the school psychologist and most of them had a mentor from the Prometheus Project.[1] She referred students to the art program when they showed evidences of at -risk behavior such as: absenteeism; low self-esteem; a radical drop in grades in core courses; discipline problems; lack of motivation; and signs of family problems, such as violence and abuse.

The art workshops took place in a recently renovated, spacious and well-lit classroom from January to May 2001. During those months we all worked quietly without being really noticed until the day we installed the artworks in the school

and organized an exhibition to which the students' teachers, friends and relatives were invited. In response to one of our main objectives, to *develop a sense of belonging to the school,* we sought the school principal's permission (and trust) to permanently install three main art projects done by the students during that year.

These main art projects were a series of ceramic tiles, three large collective painted panels, and a photo installation. In the first project the students created two ceramic tiles each. On one of these they designed and carved the first letter of their names. The goal of this project was to discover the graphic power of a letter by creating their symbolic signature on the individual tiles. To do so, we investigated the graphic identity of a letter and its power of communication in graffiti art (tags) and logos. On the second tile the students printed their hands and wrote down the dreams and goals they wanted to attain in five years. This series of ceramic tiles was placed in the school library. In the second project the students collectively made three panels inspired by a variety of music and art materials. The students' interpretation of sound, texture, rhythm and 'color' of African drums, Arab uds, hip-hop, jazz, or pop were translated into three distinct visual explorations. The three large collective painted panels were placed on the school hall walls. In the third project, the students were introduced to photography. After learning the basics of framing, composition, angle and light they worked in pairs to make portraits of each other. The result of this project was a series of color photos in which one sees only the students' eyes. These 'portraits' were later permanently mounted on individual panels — hanging from

the ceiling — in the school entrance. A week after the show we were invited to meet with the school Principal — who enthusiastically referred to the painted panels as "as good as Chagal"— to discuss the possibility of developing an after-school art program for the coming year. It is this second year — September 2001 to May 2002— that I will focus on in this thesis.

Understanding the 'At-Risk' Student

The literature on 'at-risk' students continues to be troubled by questions of definition. The most common topic appearing in the literature relates to the identification of the potential dropout or student "at risk". Research on "at risk" students (Garibaldi & Bartley, 1987; Cullen & Moed, 1988; A National Stay-in-School Initiative, 1990; Morris, Pawlovich & Mc Call, 1991) consistently demonstrates that a common feature of the process of dropping out of school usually begins with a history of school failures, absenteeism, low self-esteem, lack of motivation and a loss of sense of belonging to the school. The features of this process might serve as a warning sign to identify students at risk of dropping out.

According to insights from research gathered by Donmoyer and Kos (1993) these indicators of "at-riskness", such as absenteeism and lack of motivation, are seen as variables caused by out-of-school factors. Richardson et al. have argued that the problems associated with "identifying characteristics and conditions which put students at risk are not merely technical; rather talk of

at-risk students is rooted in an epidemiological metaphor of school success and failure and this metaphor limits the characteristics and conditions we consider" (Richardson et al. quoted in Donmoyer and Kos, 1993,p.10). Richardson and her colleagues see the epidemiological research approach, which understands the problem as being inherent in the student, as problematic. They point out that "since the problem is believed to be inherent in the student, then the search for the cause is limited to the characteristics of the students themselves. Characteristics of our society and school are left unexamined".

The students that participated in the pilot project faced difficulties on many levels. Some students came from a reality of physical and psychological abuse at home. Some were facing the adjustment of displacement from one country to another where they often had to struggle with the pain of having left family members abroad in addition to the linguistic, economic and cultural challenges they were faced with in their new home. Furthermore they confronted emotional and social difficulties in adapting to school demands where curriculum is usually based on competitiveness and performance-based learning. To be labeled as individuals 'at-risk' or potential 'dropouts' made them feel even less adequate.

Even though our students had been identified as 'at risk' because they displayed one or more of the characteristics cited above, they were all motivated to participate in the art program and thus contradicted one of the central 'at risk' characteristics. Absenteeism and lack of participation was not a problem; on the contrary, the students were constantly engaged and motivated. All of the students that participated in the pilot project shared a common factor in that their

marks in core courses were very low. However, the reasons behind the low grades varied from one student to another, except for the newly arrived students, which led me to formulate a new question. Since most of these students had recently arrived in Canada, how could we identify them as at-risk of dropping out without having given them the necessary time to 'drop in' to a new country, new language, and new school culture? More precisely I became concerned about how the art program could facilitate their 'dropping in'. It was never our intention to counter the dropout rate of the students, but rather to provide a caring and engaging environment that inspires learning through the arts – a learning exempt from the pressures of academic performance and sensitive to the students' cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

La Voie High School

La Voie High School is a multiethnic school located in Montreal's Côte-des -Neiges district. Côte-des-Neiges is one of the most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in Montreal. It embraces eighty communities and a hundred different languages are spoken there. The richness and diversity of this neighbourhood is reflected on a hand written poster placed at the school main entrance during St. Valentines festivities, which reads how to say 'I love you' in forty nine different languages. Or, in the various spiced smells that emanate from the neighbourhood houses at suppertime. I recall the many times Marianne and I

tried to identify the rich aromas exuding from Côte-des-Neiges cooking pots while walking back home from La Voie.

La Voie High School is a public French school that serves 865 students in Regular Classes (secondary I to V), Welcome Classes (newly arrived immigrants) and Special Needs Classes. The school population represents seventy-eight ethnic groups and linguistic backgrounds. Most of the students are of East Indian (Tamil, Indian), West Indian, (Haiti, Dominican Republic) and Filipino origin. It is estimated that 40% of La Voie students do not complete their high school diploma.

In the academic year of 2000-2001 La Voie High School ranked number 436 out of 462 schools in Quebec in terms of academic success. (L'Actualité, 2001). La Voie has thus been identified by the Ministry of Education as a school with an important level of need and, as such, receives additional funding from the program École Montréalaise in order to develop strategies and projects that will guide the students toward academic improvement. The school Principal emphasizes the arts and the computer sciences as important components of La Voie High School. The school has a visual art teacher, a drama specialist and a computer lab.

Building from the Pilot Project Experience

Marianne and I began to discuss the second year of the art program during our summer vacation, evaluating the first year, discussing logistics, re-defining goals, concepts and ideas for the coming year. From reflection and analysis of the first year we concluded that the following elements were fundamental to the art program's success: a) the school support; b) a student-teacher ratio of four students to each educator; and c) the collaboration between Marianne and myself.

The positive support of the school staff contributed to our efforts to set up the art program. The school psychologist, gave us important insights into each student's particular struggles and needs. The school principal was an avid supporter; the door to his office was always wide open. The secretary kindly facilitated the flow of administrative calls and paperwork. The psychologist, the social worker and teachers very often stopped us in the hall to keep us posted about the positive impact the program had on some students that they were closely following. The janitor patiently responded to our requirements including a rescue from a critical accident we caused to the library air pipes while mounting artworks.

The reduced ratio was a fundamental element to the pilot project's success. One of the major problems in schools is the absence of meaningful relationship between teachers and students (Langevin, 1994). The limitation of school time schedules and overcrowded classrooms do not facilitate a close student- teacher relationship. The teacher-student ratio four- to- one combined

with two hours allocated to each art workshop created the essential conditions for the development of interpersonal relationship with our students. Our 'one-on-one' engagement with them helped us to better understand their personal stories and daily struggles as well as offer them individual positive reinforcement for their accomplishments.

The collaboration between Marianne and I was organically established throughout the year and our individual roles in the team emerged naturally through 'the making' of the art program. The 'novice' status of the project and Marianne's sense of inclusiveness offered a fertile ground from which our personal and professional experiences and interest could flourish.

The main source of our collaboration was a mutual concern with the benefits of artistic practice on the lives of at-risk students; willingness to collaborate; engagement in reflective conversation; accountability; shared decision making, and shared resources. Our collaboration took shape through a synergy of common and complementary interests, experiences and personality traits. The common aspects, such as care, determination, playfulness, enthusiasm and experience in International Development, provided us with a familiar ground from which to work. Whereas the complimentary aspects, such as Marianne's practical art making experience and my capacity to conceptualize art projects, allowed us to complement our respective strengths, which widened the scope of our teaching and propelled the project forward. For instance, I would develop an art concept related to identity to which Marianne would respond with practical input on how to implement it. This then led to a symbiotic process in

which we both became involved in the practical and conceptual aspects of the process. Furthermore, this symbiotic process created opportunities for us to consider our identities, background and experiences as educators while collaborating with each other.

Marianne and I realized that this collaborative partnership provided us with a rich pedagogical perspective and approach that could be explored within the context of this art program. Our supportive relationship, positive way of dialoguing, and shared decision making created a dynamic between the two of us that served as a model for our students. We believed that, through the example of the positive collaboration between us, we were helping the students to learn to collaborate among themselves and others, as well as see us as partners with whom they could participate in a process of learning through and about art.

CHAPTER THREE

Year Two

Defining the Art Program Goals

Building on our first year experience and reflections Marianne and I defined four main goals for the coming year:

- to create a sense of belonging to the school through the development of an after-school visual arts program
- to cultivate significant relationship with the students
- to awaken and cultivate their desire to learn
- to increase their self-esteem and self-confidence

This would be accomplished by:

- developing a personalized pedagogy, which stimulates dialogue and respects the student's interests.
- providing the vocabulary and tools related to visual and media arts.
- stimulating their aesthetic sensitivity and their critical thinking through the reading and the analysis of visual and media artworks.
- integrating aesthetic experiences into the student's everyday life.
- creating links with the surrounding community (cultural field trips, artistic events, guest artists, etc.).
- initiating collective projects that instill a sense of collaboration in the group.
- having fun.

- having the students mount an exhibition of their final artworks .

Getting Started

Contrary to the first year, in which we developed and taught the art program on a volunteer basis, for the second year, we had to negotiate our salaries with the school Principal. Since the cost of our salaries increased the cost of the art program, the school principal proposed to increase the number of students to compensate. Thus, to maintain a reduced ratio we proposed to split a group of twenty students into two groups of ten that were to meet every second week from September 2001 to May 2002.

As in the previous year, Marianne and I met with the school psychologist to discuss the recruitment of twenty at risk students interested in participating in the program. Since we had started the second year of the art program in September and not in January, the psychologist found that she did not have enough time to familiarize herself with at risk students who could benefit from the after school art program. To respond to the time limits she asked two teachers from Welcome Classes to refer some names. Instead of referring some students, the teachers ended up proposing the program to their entire classes. This approach became problematic for Marianne and me. It resulted in us having to interview a great number of students without being able to grant them a place. Consequently Marianne and I used our previous experience and intuition to 'read'

the students that showed signs of at-risk behaviors, the interest and a serious commitment in participating in the program.

Like the year before, the art program was not mandatory; it was entirely the students' choice to participate in it. The only condition we placed was their commitment to the project. We let them know right from the beginning that they could lose their place if they had more then three consecutive absences without justification. Before starting the art workshops, Marianne and I met with the students to chat about their summer vacation, school results, their 'artistic' interests and the changes to the art program. Except for Ariane, who attended a music summer camp (made possible through Marianne and the school social worker) and Amadou, who went back to see his mother in Africa, the majority of the students had not do much during the summer. Following our question: What did you do during the summer? We heard a choir of: "Rien Madame, rien" ; (nothing, madam, nothing !); "Je suis resté à la maison" (I stayed at home); "J'ai dormi tout l'été" (I slept all summer).

The increased number of students and the change from the previous room to the official school art class did not seem to please them. Until that moment I had not fully realized how our improvised room, completely independent from the school activities, had had a positive impact on the way the students felt about the art program. The previous spacious and colorful space gave our students a sense of privilege that their 'at-risk' status did not usually make possible. In addition, having a space 'outside' the regular school demands and rules, provided them with the opportunity to create a territory of their own. When they

were asked what kind of art media they would like to explore in the coming year, the majority responded "drawing, painting, photography, video".

Our biggest challenge at the beginning of the year was to integrate the students from the previous year (eight) and the new ones (twelve) into a new and bigger group. With the students' input and collaboration we tried out different formulas, such as having a large group of twenty every week, then dividing the group in two which resulted in meeting them every second week, and finally back to a large group every week. After a month it seemed that we had finally established the format and the number of students participating in the program. Of the twenty students that started the year, twelve were consistently present – six from the year before and six new students. The group was composed of eight girls and four boys of East Indian, African, Asian, Latin American (Chile), and West Indian (Haiti) origins.

Explorations of Identity through the Visual Arts

According to Erikson identity formation does not emerge nor does it end during adolescence, but rather it begins to evolve during the earlier stages of development and it continues to be shaped throughout life. (Erikson cited in Kroger, 1989). Identity formation is a process that is "always 'in the making' as [the] subjects move through time and space". Liechty (1995). He adds that:

> ... identity refers to a person's sense of inclusion in (or exclusion from) a range of social roles and ways of being, both 'real' (those derived

> from lived experience) and 'imagined' (those encountered in realms beyond the everyday: tales, religious epics, mass media, etc.) (p.167).

Identity is never fixed. It is in constant transformation, echoing our movement through life cycles, and social and cultural landscapes. To recognise the malleability of identity is very relevant in the context of the art program. The majority of the adolescents who participated in our art program were recent immigrants. Therefore, they are not only going through a physiological period of transition between childhood and adulthood but also through a transition from one culture to another. Very often this conflict-fraught period of transition brings about a process of transformation in which the perception of self is challenged.

Marianne's and my understanding of identity formation as being something fluid, malleable, and mobile became the leitmotif of our lesson planning process. This notion of identity as a continual process of becoming was explored through an examination of the self-portrait in a varied range of media and certain aspects of metamorphoses in Greek mythology (Myth of Narcissus); classical (Caravaggio); modern (Salvador Dali); contemporary art (Orlan, Janieta Eyre, Vanessa Beecroft, Spencer Tunick, Yan Pei-Ming, Harwood Mongrel); and in popular culture (Michael Jackson, images of fashion models and selected images drawn from cinema).

We examined the concept of metamorphosis such as transformation, oscillation of forms, and identity 'mobility' in relation to physical features of identity development from childhood to adulthood, as well as the interchange of their self-image among themselves. The self-portraits also underwent

metamorphoses from one medium to another. From the self image, first reflected and then drawn directly on the mirror, we then moved to paper and pencil drawing, the photocopier, acetate, photograms, video and finally to photo-collage. In the video and the collage segment the students negotiated and exchanged photocopies of their drawings and photo self-portraits to create hybrid images of themselves.

Our First Art Workshop

The first fifteen minutes of each class were always dedicated to snacking. The snack time was a very important moment in the art workshop as it served to develop bonds with (and between) the students. It was also a 'barometer' moment in which Marianne and I could measure how the students were doing.

The art projects that Marianne and I proposed to the students evolved from one to the other. We began with the students' desire to explore the medium of drawing, photography and video. Since my artistic practice had been very much related to drawing I ended up being the person that initiated our first project which consequently became the first step on a yearlong journey. The concepts and ideas that I proposed to Marianne and the students emerged very much from my interest in contemporary art, art history, mass media, popular culture, and my great passion for teaching.

The logistics continued to be a challenge for us in our first art workshop. We were assigned to share the room with the visual arts specialist. Her classes

ended at 2:45 p.m. and ours started at 3:00p.m. That left us with only fifteen minutes to set up the space, prepare the snack and organize the art materials and equipment. The rich collaboration between Marianne and I became especially apparent in situations such as this. Our communication was fluid to the point that we started to respond to stressful moments in a calm and efficient way, often by only using body language and eye contact. We exhaustively prepared the lesson plans in advance which gave us a good grasp of what was necessary to cover without having to delegate tasks to each other.

There were three interrelated sections in our first workshop. We welcomed the students with a brief overview of the art program; that was followed by a game to introduce and integrate one another; and finally a video exercise presented in which the notion of portrait and self-portrait was presented.

This first workshop was introductory and since we were starting with drawing activities, we integrated an 'ice breaker' game such as the Spider Web [2] with the idea of drawing in a metaphoric way. We introduced the video exercise by presenting photographs of myself from childhood to adulthood, followed by a short video self-portrait that Marianne and I made for the occasion. These video self-portraits served to introduce ourselves to the students as well as the art activity that we proposed to them. The students were divided into four groups per camera. Each student had 5 minutes to create a video self-portrait in which the only things they had as a 'prop' were their own bodies and the environment they were in. At the end of the workshop we reassembled into the larger group to present the video self-portraits which the students watched with great curiosity

and amusement. This first art workshop allowed the students to introduce themselves in a fun and unthreatening way. It was also an effective way to create a collective experience that build on individual explorations.

Intersection between Artistic and Teaching Practice

While we were teaching the art workshops at La Voie I was taking a studio inquiry course as part of my graduate studies in art education. Since I had a particular interest in drawing and was at the moment teaching it for the first time, I decided to draw as well. I engaged myself in making self-portraits from two parallel modes of observation. One mode I used a photograph. The choice of drawing from a photograph was based on the idea of how much the notion of drawing as a representational tool has changed with the invention of photography. Its invention liberated drawing from the need to replicate reality. The second mode valued looking at myself in the mirror, and drawing the self-portrait on the mirror surface. The choice of doing self-portraits looking in/on the mirror inspired me on two levels. First, because it has been a tradition in self-portraiture and as such it became an interesting element to explore. Second, because I thought that the notion of 'identity' reflected by/on the mirror is quite an appealing concept to explore with teenagers who tend to be very concerned with their self- image.

At the beginning I found it difficult to keep my interest in representing 'reality' either from the photo or from my own reflection in/on the mirror. This

exercise became really relevant when I realized that the two modes of observation were generating concepts and techniques that could nourish my practice as an art teacher. The photo self-portrait served as a matrix to create other self-portraits in which different kinds of technical possibilities were explored, possibilities that serve not only to demystify stereotypical notions of drawing (i.e. the idea that drawing's desired end is only to replicate a convincing likeness), but also to open paths in which one understands that creativity goes far beyond representational accuracy.

The process of doing self-portraits by looking at myself in/on the mirror inspired the unit we explored with the students throughout the year. I still recall the day when I literally ran into Marianne's office to tell her that I had a 'flash' that could become our leitmotif to explore with the students, and that 'flash' came from a self-portrait drawing I had done directly on the mirror surface. With great enthusiasm, trust and a big smile, Marianne embraced the idea.

Drawing Path

The crisis of representational accuracy that occurs in early adolescence, combined with my understanding that the ability to draw depends on one's ability to see (Nicolaides, 1969), was the main challenge of our drawing exploration. I observed that our students had a strong interest in drawing and yet they had no confidence in their capacity to do it well. Their frustration was based on their

convinced 'incapacity' to translate a three dimensional world into a two-dimensional image.

In my research about methodologies for teaching drawing I took into special consideration that learning how to draw included coexisting practices with multiple approaches for image making by learning how to draw from observation, memory and experience as well as copying from artists and popular culture. (Duncum, 1984; Carroll, 1994). As such, we started the drawing sections with a 'visual jamming' and a series of drawing exercises. 'Visual jamming' consisted of a slide presentation of drawings made in different periods in history, by artists and non-artists from diverse cultural backgrounds using a variety of materials, the students had the opportunity to discover multiple representational possibilities and artistic styles. The drawing exercises consisted of a series of drawings done by observation, memory and imagination. Blind, contour and upside-down line drawings techniques were extensively explored.

The Mirror

Any surface that reflects images, such as that of a calm pool or pond (Wordsmyth Dictionary).

Figure 1. Self-portraits on mirrors

In our third drawing lesson we introduced a drawing exercise in which the students made observational self-portraits by directly drawing themselves on the mirror's surface. In this exercise the mirror had an interrelated practical and metaphorical purposes. It served as a tool to enable the ability to 'see' and draw

the image of themselves reflected in/on it, helping them understand the illusive proportions of their reflected images. As a drawing support, the mirror allowed the students to easily start over, erase, and over again, thus breaking the sense of 'preciousness' that they usually attach to a drawing made on paper. – (and a fear that many times blocks their ability to learn how to draw). Aside from using the mirror as a tool to discover the technical aspects of learning how to draw a self-portrait, we also used it as a metaphor for the act of 'reflecting' about notions of self-image and beauty. We started the self-portrait classes by presenting the myth of Narcissus, which was illustrated with artworks by Caravaggio, Nicolas Poussin, Salvador Dali, Holger Trülzch, Sheila Butler and Ilse Bing. The choice of artists ranging from the classical to the contemporary allowed the students to see how the same myth could be represented and interpreted in a variety of ways according to the historical period and the artists' particular interpretation. Since our selection included both figurative and conceptual renditions of the myth, the students were invited to reflect on a variety of representational and aesthetic possibilities.

I recall the interest that the reading of the myth of Narcissus accompanied by a large slide projection of Caravaggio *Narcissus (1600)*, created among the students. The class was embraced by a silent attentiveness during its presentation. A few months later a student told me that since I had not continued to tell the myth (when Narcissus meets Echo) he decided on his own to do further research on it at the school library.

The introduction of the Narcissus myth was followed by the first self-portrait lesson. Each student had an individual mirror to depart from. At this point the silence we experienced during the introduction had turned into a frenzied excitement. Except for one student that found it too difficult to look at herself in the mirror, all the other students showed signs of great enjoyment in seeing and tracing their reflected image directly on the surface of the mirror. Their first reactions when 'facing' their images reflected onto the mirror varied between boisterous laughter and timid giggling followed by hair arrangements and glamorous, 'cool' or funny faces. Marianne and I observed that their immediate responses appeared to be influenced by their gender, specific personalities and cultural backgrounds. A group of girls originally from Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, reacted similarly with amusement and timid giggles, while the boys playfully showed assertiveness in looking at their self-reflected image.

We pursued the process of learning how to draw by exploring the illusive proportions of our reflected image. Before starting to trace their reflected image directly on the surface of the mirror I asked the students to sit in front of their mirrors at about arm's length and see if the image of their head in the mirror was the same size as their head.[3] Without any hesitation they all answered "mais, oui. Bien sur que c'est la même grandeur !!!" ("well, off course it is the same size!! ").

Figure 2. Eduardo's glance

To verify their affirmative answer I asked the students to make two marks on the mirror— one at the top of their reflected image and one at the bottom contour of their chin— and then compare its size with their 'real' head. With mixed feelings of fascination and astonishment they discovered that the reflected image was actually one-half the true size of their head. This revelation, which had the appeal of a magic trick, challenged the students' pre-conceived beliefs regarding the visual information they were faced with. This hands-on (or dare I

say, "eyes-on") experience disclosed the fundamental relationship between seeing and drawing to the students. This first self-portrait lesson continued with the students tracing their reflected image straight onto the mirrors with non-permanent markers. The majority of them drew their reflected image over and over again until they felt they had accomplished a likeness.

Figure 3. Student drawing a self-portrait

On the day we started teaching observational self-portraits using mirrors Marianne and I had a beautiful teaching "jamming session" in which we were able to 'play' according to our nature, experience, knowledge, and creativity. We had both agreed that I would start the motivational and the drawing activity on my

own. Just before leaving home to go teach that day, I thought that reflected images and mirrors were quite an appealing subject for a photographer, and since Marianne is one, I decided to bring my camera for her to use in class. So, a minute before the students began to draw themselves on the mirror's surface, I handed the camera to her. She smiled. She immediately understood the invitation. A few months later the photographs taken on that day were shown at the exhibition *Prendre Position (Take a Stance)* at the Maison Cormier in Montreal. For both of us these photos became a testament to our collaboration.

Figure 4. Students' at work

A Group Portrait

In the second self-portrait lesson we moved from small individual mirrors to a larger collective one. Here we worked collaboratively to create a group portrait by making a composition with the reflected images of everyone. This activity propelled the students to interact with each other in a constructive way. Together the students had to discuss and negotiate the composition of the group portrait.

Figure 5. Group Portrait

The Reflected Image

From these explorations we moved to the process of learning how to draw a self-portrait on paper. Each student had his or her own mirror to begin what was to become a long and rich journey for all of us. The moment the students

sat in front of their individual mirrors with a pencil and a blank paper in their hands a variety of concerns regarding their drawing abilities and issues related to self-image started to emerge. The classroom became an echo chamber of remarks:

Talinda: " Je ne suis pas bonne pour dessiner", ("I'm no good at drawing");

Ariane: "Je ne suis pas capable de me regarder dans le miroir", ("I can't look at myself in the mirror");

Isha. : "Est-ce que je garde ou non mon foulard"? ("Should I keep my shador or not.").[4]

In order to respond to these expressions of doubt and inadequacy we began to spontaneously engage in a one-on-one interaction with the students. This individually tailored interaction helped us to learn about our students' individual rhythm, mood, interests, and abilities in their process of learning how to draw their self-portraits. It also gave us the opportunity to better understand their personal stories and day-to-day struggles and intervene when appropriate. I still recall how difficult and frightening it was for Talinda to hold a pencil at our first workshop. She had had no schooling whatsoever before arriving in Canada from rural Ghana three years before.

Marianne and I very often reached out to students that were facing personal difficulties outside of school. Many times the schoolteachers, the social worker and the psychologist approached us to know how the students were doing. In some cases the art program was the only place the students still attended in school and we were the only ones with whom they still

communicated. By engaging in interpersonal communication with our students we were able to bring them toward personal and artistic accomplishments. For instance, we worked very closely with Talinda to provide her with technical information and constant feedback so that she could accomplish her goal to produce a self-portrait that satisfied her. We proposed to Ariane to draw her self-portrait from a photograph instead of the mirror and let Isha know that it was entirely her choice to keep or not her shador, and whatever her choice it would be fully respected by us.

After four weeks some of the students had finished their self-portraits, which were later photocopied onto acetate and fixed on the mirror from which they started their drawing process. Next they embarked on the photo journey.

Figure 6. Talinda and I

Figure 7. Talinda's self-portrait

Photography Path: 'The Image Shifts'

To respond to the students' desire to do photography we temporarily built a darkroom inside the school bathroom. The photo project consisted of teaching the students how to make photograms [5] by transferring their self-portraits (drawing) onto transparencies and then onto photo paper. Their self-portraits began a transformative process followed by the manipulation of negative and positive prints. We began by introducing a history of photography to the students. Then I continued to guide the students that were still struggling with their self-

portraits while Marianne worked with the other students in the darkroom. At this point in the art workshop the students started to interact spontaneously with each other. It was very satisfying to see Chea making a portrait of Talinda while she was waiting for her turn to enter the darkroom, as well as seeing the students enthusiastically sharing their photogram results with each other. They also showed a great interest in the history of photography especially when we presented them with the history and images of different *camera obscuras*. In addition the magical process of photography and its immediate results in comparison to the step by step drawing process revitalized the energy in the classroom.

Figure 8. Photograms of Chea's drawn self-portrait.

Black History Month

One day the school Principal asked us to respond to the Côtes des Neiges Black Community Association's invitation to participate in an art exhibition celebrating Black History Month with artworks from our students. While taking into consideration the great opportunity for the students to show their work in their community, we proposed to the students from the previous year that they exhibit the photo installation that they had done the year before.

Since Black History Month coincided with the photo workshop segment we celebrated it with a slide show and a response activity on the works of Black contemporary photographers such as Tony Gleaton, Reginald Jackson, Albert Chong, Witners, Coreen Simpson, Eli Reed, and Benford Smith. We noticed that the students, especially those that were with us since the first year, were developing a genuine interest in image reading. We were able to spend a long time with them carefully reading the images individually and as a group. Reginald Jackson's photo-collage *Last Frontier (1972)*[6] portrays a black girl with a Goodyear tire as a head-mask in the foreground, two peasant men in the middle ground, and a mountainous landscape in the background. This photo had an important impact on one of our students who had emigrated from rural Ghana three years before. The instant she saw it, she shouted: Oh!!! mais, mais!! Madame, je connais ça... je ne sais pas pourquoi, mais je connais ça, dans mon pays c'est comme ça!! (Oh!!! But, but !! Madam, I know it, I do not know why, but I know it, in my country it is like that!!). We noticed when we tried to understand

what she 'knew about it', that she was not talking about her familiarity with the landscape nor with the girls' features but rather with the social 'event' of carrying a Goodyear tire on the head. We came to realize that Talinda had made a link between the photograph and her personal experience even though she had difficulty in articulating it. She had 'understood' the image in a way that the rest of us could perhaps never understand. Furthermore, Talinda statement triggered curiosity among the students. They wanted to discover the "hidden" meanings attached to the image. The following is an excerpt from the conversation:

Marianne: (question directed to everyone) Why do you suppose the tire is on the girl's head?

Talinda: It is like that in my country.

Marianne: Do you know where rubber comes from?

Carlos: Rubber plantations.

Marianne: Who works in rubber plantations?

Carlos: Workers, people.

Adriana: What is a tire used for?

Students: Cars.

Adriana: What do you think Jackson's photo-collage is trying to tell us?

(silence in the room)

Adriana: Do you think he wants to show us that people use Goodyear tires as a hat?

Students: (laugh) Maybe.

Marianne: How would it feel to carry the tire's weight?

Students: Not easy.

Marianne: Do you think the work conditions in the rubber plantations are good?

Students: No, no.

Talinda: It is really hard.

Adriana: Would it be possible that Jackson's image is trying to show us a link between difficult work conditions in the rubber plantations and Goodyear tires?

(Silence)

The students showed signs of surprise and sadness at the revelatory link. We let the silence in the room speak for itself before we moved on to the next slide. This conversation, the silent one as well, activated by the students' engagement with works of contemporary art allowed them to make new connections in experience — "to notice what was there to be noticed." (Greene, 2001, p.6).

The Exhibition

The exhibition at The Côte des Neiges Black Community Association took place on a very cold winter evening. Five out of seven students exhibiting attended the opening with some friends and siblings. They were visibly impressed and proud of being part of the event. They enjoyed seeing their images included among nineteen other artworks done by 'adult' artists, and most of all, they were thrilled to read their names listed in the exhibition catalogue. They all made sure they had one or two copies in their pockets. To celebrate the

event we invited them out for dinner in a place of their choice in their neighborhood. Well, in a few seconds Marianne and I were outvoted by their unanimous choice to go to the local Harvey's. I observed that the teens were very excited and happy to have been given the chance to take charge of this event. By guiding us to the place and through the menu so familiar to them made them feel important. This informal encounter was a very important moment to get to know each other and to connect outside the classroom environment.

Figure 9. Students' photos exhibited at Côte des Neiges Black Community Association

Video Animation and Collage

> *To discover oneself in the metamorphic world is to see one's identity reflected in transformation.*
>
> (Barkan, p.90)

The self-portraits continued their transformation process through video animation and collage. At this point in our journey Marianne and I realized that

time-based media such as video offered an excellent means for exploring the notion of identity as a continual process of becoming, particularly with respect to the students' passage from childhood to adulthood. As Sobchack (2000) points out:

> Keeping animate subjects in the camera's gaze in a single shot of lengthy duration constituted the existential meaning of transformation and change as a visibly uninterrupted process of "becoming" (p.134).

For the video segment we invited the video artist and friend, Anick St. Louis, to collaborate with us. Her experience in video; and her desire to share it with young students, combined with our aspiration to bring a new dynamic to the art workshops, motivated us all. When Anick arrived to collaborate with us, we were examining the questions of physical appearance, body image/change/ manipulation in its real and fictional form (if such boundaries can still be traced nowadays!!) in contemporary art and popular culture. We started to explore theses questions by showing the students a sequence of film excerpts that included Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, The Beauty and the Beast, Frankenstein, Hulk, Space Jam, The Mask, and Microcosm.

We then looked more specifically at images of Michael Jackson's physical transformations through plastic surgery and the work of artists such as Orlan and Janieta Eyre. Michael Jackson's portraits over time, Orlan's body interventions and Eyre's photographs of human cloning, served as a basis to open a conversation about perceptions of identity, beauty and the impact of new

technologies in our daily life. The following is taken from one of these conversations:

Ariane, a Haitian girl, started the conversation by firmly stating that Michael Jackson "Didn't like to be black!"

Q- "Why do you think he didn't like to be black?"

Ariane: "Maybe because he did not feel pretty."

Q- (question directed to everybody) "Would you do a plastic surgery to change your appearance? "

Talinda- "No way! It's nuts!! Anyway, we have to see the beauty inside of people..."

Carlos: "When someone says beauty is in the inside, he/she is lying. They just say that to make you feel better."

Through Michael Jackson's portraits, and particularly Orlan's self-portraits, we were able to tackle issues such as the subjectivity and cultural relativity of beauty. The students seemed particularly interested (and disturbed!) by Orlan's "ugly" face transformation "in the name of art." Orlan's espousal of the large-nosed Maya ideal of beauty made them think about the varied contexts that underpin definitions of what is, or is not, beautiful. This process showed the students that art is not only a matter of making beautiful images, but that it involves an active process of thinking through and about images. The visual arts here became a multifaceted and connected means of communication. These conversations not only helped them to understand the artists' intentions, it also

gave them the opportunity to articulate their own opinions and positions regarding this subject. Furthermore the sequence of film excerpts, and the artists' artwork provided inspirational material for their creative explorations of their self-portraits.

These explorations inspired the development of video animations that were created by manipulating the students' self-portrait drawings and photograms, photographs of themselves in the present and as children, as well as images from magazines. Sharing their childhood photographs was a very important and enriching aspect of the project. The students were delighted to be able to tell the stories attached to their photographs; through their photos the students unveiled and shared their personal histories of their lives outside of the classroom.

Anick led three workshops. She introduced film animation, demonstrated how to prepare the self-portraits to be animated, and guided the students through their animation in the video camera. To be able to animate their self-portraits the students had to fragment the eyes, mouth, and nose from their photocopied self-portraits. They also found that the images of themselves, especially the color photocopies, were too precious to be 'destroyed' and they wanted to keep them as is. This process seemed difficult for some students. Anick's sensitivity was very important in this process. To relieve this sense of discomfort she first acknowledged how difficult it can be to fragment the image of ourselves, and she then reminded them several times that they were working from photocopies, which can be reproduced over and over again. At the end of the workshop the

students had gathered their material and were ready to start their animation. We provided them with regular assistance and three workstations, each equipped with a video camera and a tripod. Marianne, Anick and I assisted the students in each of these workstations. The students started to individually transform their self-portraits by manipulating their self-portrait drawings and photograms, photographs of themselves in the present and as children, as well as images from magazines. Then, working in pairs, they intersected and morphed the image of themselves with their partner's to create a transformative self-portrait animation. The resulting animations were later sequentially edited together on a single videotape by Anick St. Louis. (This video animation named *(auto)portraits* is included on a CD in the appendix)

After three weeks we continued to evolve from one medium to another. We proceeded to integrate the material gathered for the animation to create a series of individual collages. The students thoroughly enjoyed the process of continuously changing the images of themselves. The students were free to modify their self-image in a playful and imaginative manner. For instance Isha was free to playfully craft her image with or without the veil, while Amadou blurred gender barriers by morphing Ariane's hair and Daline's smile into his own image. Through animation and collage, the body became a transformative site where multiple forms of otherness became possible through an artistic exploration.

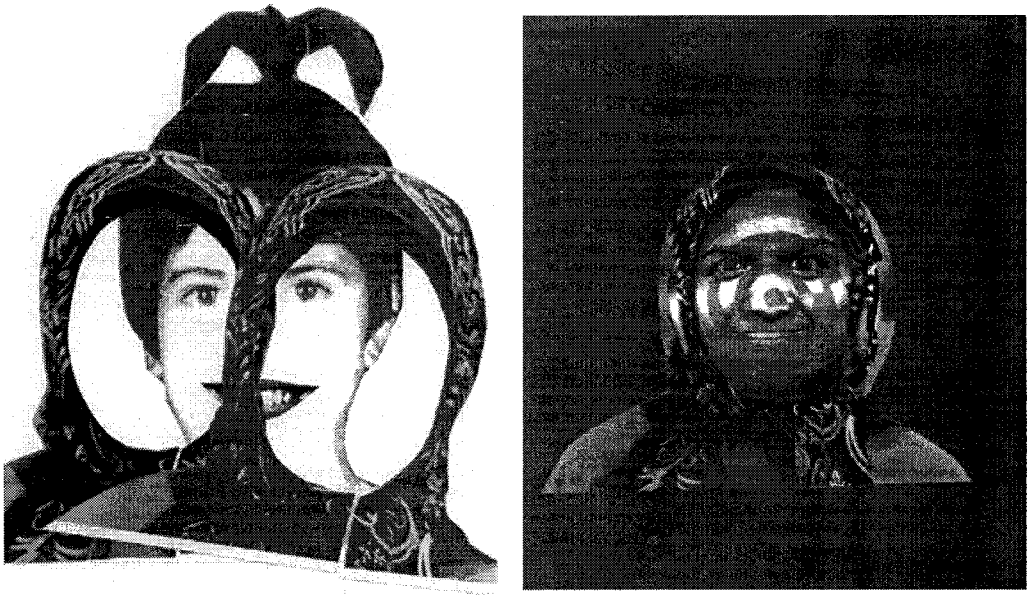

Figure 10. Isha's collages

Figure 11. Amadou's morphed self- portrait

Corps + Machine Exhibition

In the year 2001 we were invited to present a proposal to participate in the exhibition *Corps + Machine: Croisement d'art, technologie et pédagogie* an event organized by the Université du Québec à Montréal's Art Education Department in collaboration with the Museum of Contemporary Art and Centre Turbine[7]. This exhibition was part of an event whose goal was "to examine the impact of technology on our conception of humanity and the pedagogical strategies that allow one to apply technologies in visual and media arts education." (Free translation from Corps & Machine Press Release, 2002). At that time we declined the invitation since we could not predict the destination of our journey, or the kinds of artworks that would result from unpredictable manner in which one art project evolved from another. A few months had passed when we were approached again, days before the deadline, to present an art project for *Corps et Machine.* This time we felt that what was emerging from our art workshops could contribute to the project. In the summer of 2002 the product of our collective journey, an installation called *(auto)portraits*, was exhibited at the Museum of Contemporary Art and The Science Center in Montreal as part of the *Corps et Machine* collective exhibit. Exhibiting in these places, especially in the Museum of Contemporary Art, was a very positive experience for our students and for Marianne and me as well. It gave us the opportunity to integrate our workshop explorations of contemporary art and self-identity with art works from the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Art. To this end we, in

collaboration with a Museum guide, prepared a visit for our students that focused on artworks in the museum's collection that touch upon issues of identity.

At the opening of *Corps et Machine* exhibition the students were visibly proud and cheerful about participating in this impressive show housed in such a prestigious environment. It was with great enjoyment that I observed our students joyfully show their yearlong work and accomplishments to their families, La Voie High School staff and the public in general. The students seemed particularly surprised by the fact that people they did not know had a genuine interest in their work. This 'outside' recognition had a positive impact on the students' self-esteem. Also, the fact that their parents were witnessing this outside validation of their accomplishments created a mutual sense of pride. By listening to the students explain the art process to exhibit visitors, I realized how much they had learned through their involvement in the project. They eloquently explained their work by talking about materials, their methods and intentions. This was a comforting confirmation of how much this artistic process provided them with a rewarding learning opportunity.

With this exhibition and a dinner party we said goodbye to our students. The majority of them were leaving La Voie High School the coming year. [8] So, to share and celebrate what they had accomplished during the yearlong project we proposed to install the project *(auto)portraits* in the school's main entrance. When *(auto)portraits* was returned to us at the beginning of September 2002 [9] we decided to begin the new school year with a 'happening' at the school entrance

hall at lunchtime. The school population was taken by surprise with the video animation placed inside a display window along side the large. This event had an important impact not only on our students but also on the student's population in general. It triggered great curiosity, appreciation and enthusiasm among students, schoolteachers and staff. It raised questions, motivated dialogue and most of all it added a level of peer and school recognition — so crucial for adolescents that have been struggling with definitions of themselves as being 'at-risk'.

Figure 12. *(auto)portraits*

Conclusion

> *[Man] has always had his experiences as I, his experiences with others, and with himself; but it is as We, ever again as We, that he has constructed and developed a world out of his experiences.* (Buber, 1970)

This project demonstrated that the visual arts can effectively stimulate 'at risk' students to (re) discover the pleasure of learning and regain a sense of being able to create meaning for themselves and for others. From feeling unable to draw and/or uncomfortable to confront their own reflected images in a mirror the students gradually developed the, confidence, knowledge and the skills to present their 'reflected' images before peers, parents and the public. It was by way of their own reflection through art and about art making, a caring environment, an inclusive pedagogical approach, community involvement and interpersonal exchange that the students emerged from this experience with a positive self-image and knowledge about themselves and the world around them. I believe this was made possible through an ongoing pedagogical approach whose focus, among other things, was to make the visual art relevant to their daily life, to foster knowledge through aesthetic experience and to stimulate the students ability to "name the world" and create meaning for themselves.

In my view the effectiveness of this project was due to a number of crucial factors: 1) a collaborative pedagogical approach in which we departed from the individual "I" to move to the collective "We"; 2) art projects built around the notion

of identity and the reflected image of the individual and the group; 3) recognition and validation from teachers, peers and outside community; and 4) the engagement and input of the students. Among all these factors what was perhaps the most fundamental was the interpersonal teaching approach that focused on validation of individual voices that progressively grew into a collective art project and experience. Both in the teaching and the art projects there is a clear trajectory that traces multiple paths leading from concerns and difficulties with self-image "I" (mirror self-portrait), to exchange between pairs "I/You" individual and finally merge in the collective "We" video collage. The evolution of the art project ran parallel to the interpersonal teaching process in which the emphasis was on being attentive to each student's uniqueness, concerns and needs while at the same time trying to built connections between and within the group.

In many ways the art projects can be understood as a metaphor for identity formation as they were always in a process of 'becoming'. Ideas and concepts emerged through transversal (past and present) experiences and encounters that were lived, discovered, imagined, exchanged, negotiated, and played, between Marianne and I and the students. The journey was not composed of straight progressive pathways but rather of a web-like process in which zigzagging trails connected art historical and mythological references, popular culture, contemporary art and hands-on-art making. In this sense, our pedagogical and creative trajectory came into being through a journey of multiple encounters.

The visual exploration of the malleable nature of identity was also mirrored in the variety of artistic media, materials and techniques employed. Through integrating two or more media into 'hybrid' artworks the students were able to explore a wide range of artistic possibilities in crafting their self-portraits. Furthermore sharing and exchanging of their self-images was an important step as they gained enough confidence to "let go" of their images and opened themselves up to others. It was through interpersonal and collaborative pedagogical encounters, in which literal and metaphoric reflections played a prominent role that we were able to open a path on which the students engaged in a process of learning and knowing through self-discovery.

Implications for Future Research

During this study I identified and briefly discussed several issues, which merit further in depth exploration and research. However, given the nature and limitations of a Teaching Report thesis format these issues could not be adequately addressed. Issues to be explored in more detail are:

1) The humanitarian positions of Freire and Buber; that inform the development and implementation of this art program.

2) Investigating the question, "in what ways do art programs facilitate students, who are stereotypically identified as 'at risk' of dropping out, to engage in a process of 'dropping in'?".

3) The physical and psychological development of adolescents and how this parallels and relates to the exploration of identity formation through art projects.

Endnotes

[1] Prometheus Project is a Montreal community organisation that paired volunteer mentors from the community with teenagers at risk of dropping out of school.

[2] The Spider Web is a game in which a person throws a threaded yarn ball to another at the same time as they introduce themselves. The person that begins the web holds on to one end of the thread as the ball travels from one group member to the other. The thread becomes the trajectory 'line' of a collective drawing– a spider web drawn in space.

[3] An example of perceptual illusion found in Betty Edward's book *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*. (1999)

[4] Isha's conflict to wear or not to wear her shador for her self-portrait was directly related to a question of self-image and parental authority. When Isha, a very vivacious and opinionated teenager, arrived in Canada her Muslim father decided that she had to wear a shador.

[5] Photograms consist in placing opaque objects or images on photographic paper (light sensitive) and exposing it to some source of light. The image becomes visible, as a negative image, once the photographic paper is placed in the developer and then in the "stop" bath tray. It is not permanent unless it is "fixed" with another chemical and washed with water. A positive image can be made by pressing the negative face down onto a new sheet of photographic paper, exposing it to light and then developing it in the same way as the first, negative image.

[6] Reginald Jackson has been 'looking' at the "ramifications of the familial relationships in transatlantic slave trade on Africa as well Afro-America" for more then thirty years.

[7] Centre Turbine is an artist and educators' collective whose mandate is to create links between cultural, community and school milieu.

[8] Ten students out of fourteen had reached the age limit to complete their schooling in High School. They were transferred from La Voie High School to vocational schools.

[9]After the Museum of Contemporary Art, the art project *(auto)portraits* was exhibited at the Science Center of Montreal

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Programme d'art après l'école

Chers parents/ tuteur,

Les enseignants du programme d'art vont documenter les ateliers d'art en prenant des photos et en filmant (vidéo). Les photos et vidéos seront utilisées seulement pour des fins éducatives et comme matériel promotionnel.

Pourriez-vous, SVP, signer votre autorisation ci-dessous?

Merci de votre collaboration.

Marianne Chemla et Adriana de Oliveira
(enseignantes du programme d'art après-l'école)

***** Attention les élèves : SVP remettre le formulaire à Maria Giacomodonato avec l'autorisation pour participer dans le programme d'art.**

Je, le soussigné _____

Parent/ tuteur de _____

Aujourd'hui le _____

Donne mon autorisation pour que les photos et vidéos de mon enfant soient utilisés pour des fins éducatives et promotionnelles.