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Creating A Self Portrait exercise used in ARTH 101

Self Portrait Assignment

This assignment teaches students visual analysis through a creative process. By making their own choices, students have to decide how to convey meaning in a picture. What does angle or point of view convey? (looking up at a figure from below can demonstrate power and authority, whereas looking down on a figure oftentimes suggests the opposite). What do clothing, attributes (the objects shown with the person depicted), or posture tell us? Lighting or color choice? What artistic choices have the strongest impact or tell the story in the most convincing way? By creating a self-portrait, students start to realize that images don't just tell the "truth," they tell us the story that the artist or patron (the person or authority who requested/commissioned the image) wish to convey.

Assignment Directions:

- Create a self-portrait in any format. You may take a photograph, make a drawing, use a digital drawing program or filter, build a sculpture, or any other medium you choose.
- Write a short paragraph about your process (200-250 words):
 - Discuss why you made the choices you did and what those choices mean.
 - What overall message about yourself did you want the viewer to take away after seeing the portrait?
- Upload a photograph of the final image and text to the Discussion Board Thread on Blackboard.
 - Select "Create Thread"
 - Enter your text in the "message" box
 - Select "Attach file to upload your image"
- Label the image as [Your Name] Self Portrait in the subject line

Criteria:

- You should aim for resemblance, in other words, the image should look like you. You may exaggerate or distort the image, but please do not submit an image that is completely abstract.
- Your portrait should include at least 2 attributes (objects such as a baseball, a camera, a ballet shoe) that tell the viewer something about you.

Consider the following:

- In what way will I be depicted – my whole body or a part?
 - Will I be sitting/standing, or engaged in a particular activity?
 - What am I wearing and what does my clothing choice convey?
 - What hairstyle or makeup (if any) will I wear?
 - What physical attributes will I emphasize?
 - What material objects or symbols will I include? (include at least 2)
 - What are my surroundings (interior, exterior, location)?
 - What kind of lighting will I use (natural, artificial, directed, bright or dim)?
 - What time of day is it?
 - What style and medium will my portrait take (naturalistic, caricature, distorted)?
 - Think about how the forms and content of the picture convey a particular (or multiple) meaning(s) about yourself
- **How does this exercise support student learning?**

Students learn much more about how portraits work if they have to make one themselves than if they have to write about one. This assignment involves "making" without intimidating students by requiring "artistic skill." Taking a selfie with a cellphone camera is a technique familiar and accessible to almost all students of this generation. (I did ask students to speak with me for an alternative option if they didn't have access to a cell

phone; no one requested an alternative). By having students design a selfie and then reflect on the process, my goal was for them to realize all the choices that go into the process and how those choices communicate meaning.

- **Evidence of Growth:**

The creation of this assignment pushed the boundaries of art historical practice and helps students to analyze art in museums in writing in later classes. By asking them to create first and then write, they gained more insight into the steps artists follow in designing a composition (color, lighting, items to include, pose...). This assignment took a process that many assume is intuitive (taking a selfie) and made it into a reflective exercise on composition. This assignment leads to a deeper-level of understanding of process and visual communication.

- **Measurement of Learning:**

While this assignment was graded, the grade was based primarily on how well the student followed the directions provided. But for me, that was not where the learning occurred. This assignment was set up on the Discussion Board in Blackboard so that everyone in the class could see the submissions of everyone else. I even encouraged the students to look at the works of others for inspiration. Creativity and presentation do not necessarily come from working in a vacuum and having access to what others created often provides incentive for individual ideas. On the day the assignment was due, we spent most of the class discussing a selection of the self-portraits submitted (I asked for volunteers and no one was required to discuss their self-portraits.) That said, many students volunteered and in each case we discussed process, challenges and end results. One of the points of discussion was whether what their classmates saw in the image matched what the student wished to convey (Were they able to project the "vibe" they wished to the class?). Students were often surprised that intent did not always match perception. This experience led to a discussion of whether we can ever truly know an artist's intent? Whether our perception of intent could change according to the personal experiences of the viewer, or the historical moment in which it was viewed? In other words will the image be read in the same way 100 years from now?