

Start exploring

Chapter  
1

## 1

## Start exploring

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## Introduction

This chapter examines how inquiry, exploration and reflection inform all of art-making. We will look at a range of strategies for getting started in the course with various activities for making discoveries, building confidence, considering different visual and conceptual approaches, playful exploration and self-reflection.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Identify creative starting points for exploration.
- Experiment with ways of looking, thinking and making.
- Explore an idea using a variety of visual approaches.
- Engage in creative discovery through play.
- Explore how to transform failures.
- Through the above, develop higher-level thinking skills.



Figure 1.01: Art begins with exploration. Exploration is led by curiosity, fed by investigation and developed through intentional experimentation and reflection.

## 1.1 Starting strategies

Starting strategies are entry points, activities to get you looking, thinking and creating. While these are mainly suggestions for getting started, you can come back to them at any time during the course when you are stuck for ideas.

- Create a viewfinder (cut a rectangle from a piece of card) and use it to frame different **compositions** within the same view, then record it in your journal.
- Enlarge something tiny using a gridding system.
- Collect multiples of one thing: many different-shaped leaves, bus tickets, teabags. Create a method of display with labels. Photograph or draw this in your journal.
- Collect things in varying **hues** of the same colour. Arrange your collection into a composition. Document it. Give it a title.
- Look for found patterns, and record them with rubbings and drawings in your journal. Note where each pattern was found.
- Take something apart and put it back together in a completely different way that alters the form and the function.
- Make a 3D piece of work that fits in a matchbox.
- Choose a building or a landscape in your area, and draw it in chalk or charcoal at different times of day, observing the changing light, like Monet's paintings of Reims Cathedral.
- Select a small square section of the earth and meticulously record it, like Dürer's piece of turf.
- Design something to place on an altar. Explain why.
- Reinterpret an artwork in a completely different medium: for example, make a video of a drawing, or a construction of a painting.
- Make something ugly. Make something beautiful.

**Composition:** Composition in art refers to the arrangement of visual elements (shapes, lines, colours, forms) and their relationship to each other.

**Hue:** Hue refers to the gradation or intensity of a colour, such as 'the brilliant hues of autumn leaves'.

### Start with something

Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.  
 (Jasper Johns, 1964)

There are an infinite number of things you can do to an image, or to an object. In 1964, American **pop artist** Jasper Johns famously made this note in his sketchbook: 'Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.' We might even say that making art is a series of decisions enacted on an image or an object, or an idea. Do something to it, then something else, and something else; through persistent visual exploration you can evolve and change even the most boring thing into something interesting – art? Maybe.

**Pop art:** Pop art was an art movement of the 1950s and 1960s in Britain and America. The artists of the pop art movement drew their imagery from popular culture, mass media, advertising and consumerism, often with an ironic or critical undertone.

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**Figure 1.02:** Jasper Johns, American pop artist, *Bronze*, c. 1960-1. Johns plays with the idea of low and high culture, taking a banal object from everyday life and elevating it to the status of 'fine art'.



In the 1960s, sculptor Richard Serra's interest in materials and the physical process of making sculpture led him to compile a list of action verbs: 'to roll, to crease, to curve', which he then carried out using the materials he had collected in his studio.

#### ACTIVITY 1.1: TAKE AN IMAGE. DO SOMETHING TO IT . . .

Make different-sized good-quality prints of a single image. Carry out the following actions by drawing, collage or a combination.

- Remove something.
- Expand or enlarge a portion.
- Fragment it.
- Simplify everything.

Continue to change it with your own actions.

It struck me that instead of thinking what a sculpture is going to be and how you're going to do it compositionally, what if you just enacted those verbs in relation to a material, and didn't worry about the results? (Richard Serra)

#### ACTIVITY 1.2

Instead of an image, start with a piece of (choose one) rubber, fabric, wood, metal, plastic ... and so on.

'Enact these verbs' on your chosen material:

- |            |                        |                |
|------------|------------------------|----------------|
| • Roll it. | • Rearrange it.        | • Divide it.   |
| • Bend it. | • Turn it upside down. | • Compress it. |
| • Fold it. | • Mirror it.           | • Expand it.   |

## Looking, thinking, making



Figure 1.03: Pablo Picasso, *Bull's Head*, 1942. In this **ready-made** Picasso combines two objects, a bicycle seat and handlebars, and there you have it: a bull's head!

**Ready-made:** A 'ready-made' is a commonplace object or combination of objects selected and presented as an artwork. Marcel Duchamp created the first ready-made (*Bicycle Wheel*, 1913) by mounting a bike wheel on a stool. Duchamp and members of the Dada movement challenged the conventional notions of what is art and influenced much of the art that followed – including pop art, which took its subject matter from everyday objects of pop culture, and conceptual art, which values the artist's idea over the actual product.

### ACTIVITY 1.3: READY-MADE AUCTION

Create your own ready-made from a found object or objects, give it a title and present it to the class. Be prepared to defend it as ART! Stage an auction of the works, just for fun. See which pieces are convincing enough to hold value.

Art lives from constraints and dies from freedom.  
 (Leonardo da Vinci)

What do you think Leonardo meant by this? How does having set limitations encourage creative thinking?

## 1.2 Looking, thinking, making

This section offers the opportunity to carry out a comprehensive activity, the object study. The study shows you how to look at a single object in depth and breadth, considering its visual qualities, form and function, context and meaning. The activities in the object study will enable you to generate many valuable visual journal pages, which you could also use in your process portfolio. As the object study has many parts to it, you could develop your work on it over several weeks.

### TOK and art: Language and art

- Does art need to be explained?
- Can an idea be more important than the physical artwork?
- How does a title influence our reading of an artwork?
- Can the ability to discuss and defend your ideas carry more weight than the actual piece itself?

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ACTIVITY 1.4: OBJECT STUDY

- a) Choose an object that interests you for both its visual qualities and its symbolic value, preferably something small enough to hold in your hand. This will be your object of study so choose thoughtfully. It helps if the object has an interesting shape to draw, and lends itself to multiple meanings (for example, an apple, an egg, a lightbulb or even a teacup!).
- b) Draw your object from different viewpoints. Try unusual points of view, distortion, changing scale.

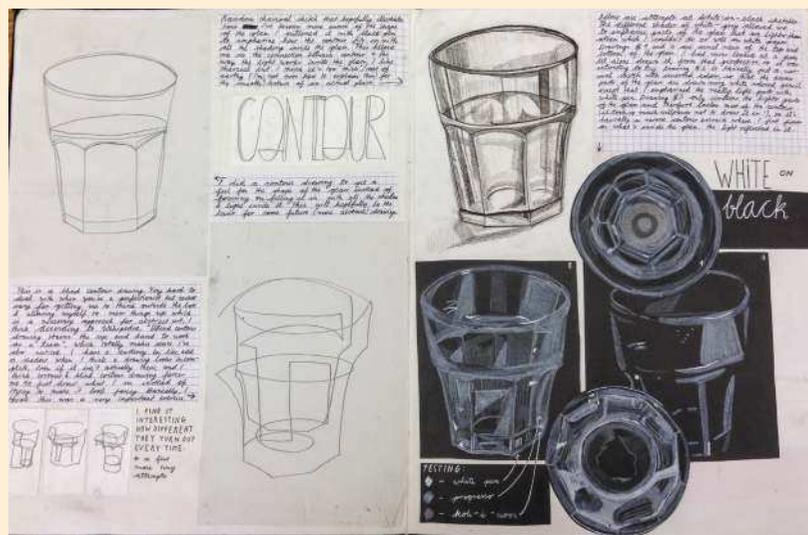


Figure 1.04: Page from student Ewa Nizalowska’s visual arts journal. Ewa takes a simple object (a common drinking glass) and using different drawing media, contour lines, shading and reflections, she observes it from different points of view.



Figure 1.05: Ewa practises observational drawing of a glass, using cross-hatching to create subtle variations in tone. She has written ‘This is not a glass’ boldly across the top of the page, referring to René Magritte’s famous painting *The Treachery of Images*. With the addition of this text, she is introducing a conceptual way of thinking about the object and representation in general.



Figure 1.06 *The Treachery of Images*, 1929, by Belgian Surrealist René Magritte, is a painting of a pipe with the words ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (This is not a pipe) painted underneath. The painting depicts an image of a pipe but it is a painting, not a pipe, making the point that an image is a representation of a thing, not the thing itself.

- c) **Place in different contexts and draw.** Alter the surroundings, the composition, colour and/or juxtaposition (place it next to something else). How does this affect the meaning of the object?
- d) **Use different materials to interpret your object,** such as pencil, paint, clay, words, fur, print, photo, film, cardboard, wax . . .

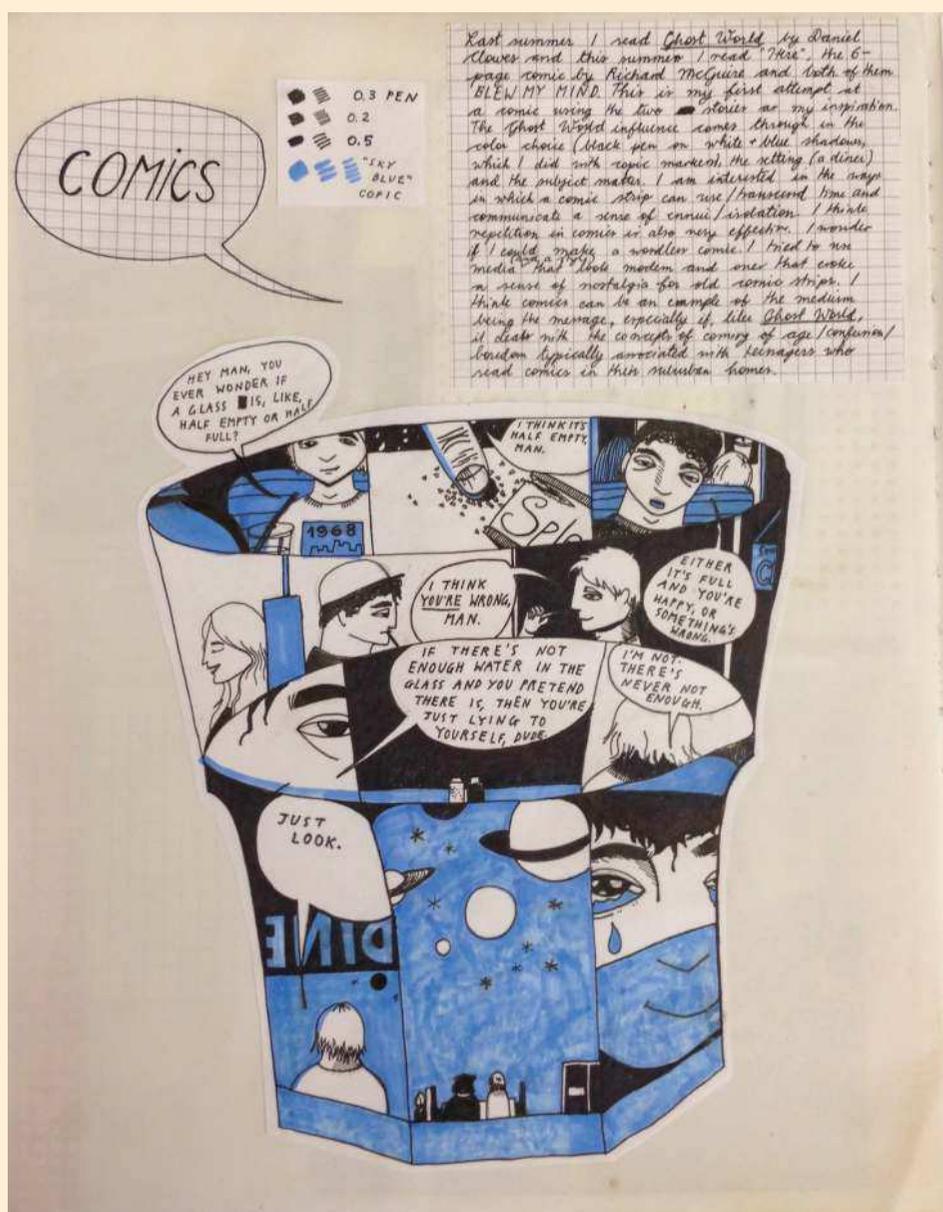


Figure 1.07: In this drawing, Ewa has turned her glass into a cartoon in which the characters discuss the notion of 'the glass half empty or half full', in a humorously philosophical take on teenagers in suburban homes.

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**Iconography:** The use of a symbol or specified image associated with a subject or theme in art.

**Vanitas:** A still-life painting genre of the 16th and 17th centuries, mostly Dutch, that references the transient nature of life through the use of symbols of death and decay: for example, skulls, hourglass, jewels, fading blossoms, rotting fruit. Vanitas is the Latin term for vanity, the vanity of wealth and clinging to earthly existence. These pictures were intended to remind people of their mortality and the passing nature of all things. Ironically they became desirable worldly possessions themselves.

- e) **Consider possible meanings and symbols.** What is the significance of your object: inherent, attributed and invented?
- f) **Consider the historical and cultural context.** How has this object evolved in time? Consider the design: how was the object used in the past? What is its cultural **iconography**, its role in technology and its social significance?
- g) **Make connections to other artworks.** What relationship does your object have to art history and other artists? How have examples of this object been addressed by others? Make connections and use visual examples in your journal (remembering to cite your sources).



Figure 1.08: Francisco de Zurbarán, *A Cup of Water and a Rose*. A rare still life by the 17th-century Spanish painter, who often painted works with religious themes, or with **vanitas** (works that reference the transitory nature of life). It is likely that the objects depicted here also have a religious symbolic function: the water in the cup signifies purity and the flower a 'mystic' rose. The contrast of the velvety dark background and the luminous objects evokes the duality of shadow and light, form and emptiness, life and death. It is also a delightful example of observational painting.

#### ACTIVITY 1.5: MIXED MESSAGES

- Read the caption to Meret Oppenheim's *Object*. What messages do the materials in this artwork communicate?
- What do you think is meant by the phrase 'Art . . . has to do with spirit, not with decoration'?
- Now combine two unlikely materials to create a new message of your own.

## Spirit, not decoration

The materials an artist uses may have their own inherent significance already, and when materials are combined in unusual ways they can create new meaning altogether. (Chapter 4 takes a closer look at this topic.)

Art [ . . . ] has to do with spirit, not with decoration, Meret Oppenheim.



Figure 1.09: Meret Oppenheim, *Object*, 1936. This piece (also known as *Breakfast in Fur*) began as a joke. The artist took a porcelain teacup, covered it in fur and gave it the title *Object*. '... a work as small and economical as *Object* has such outsized spirit because fur combined with a teacup evokes such a surprising mix of messages and associations. The fur may remind viewers of wild animals and nature, while the teacup could suggest manners and civilisation. With its pelt, the teacup becomes soft, rounded, and highly tactile. It seems attractive to the touch, if not, on the other hand, to the taste: imagine drinking from it, and the physical sensation of wet fur filling the mouth. This humorous juxtaposition of unlikely materials and their connotations earned Oppenheim a reputation as a **Surrealist** artist'. ([http://www.moma.org/learn/moma\\_learning/meret-oppenheim-object-paris-1936](http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/meret-oppenheim-object-paris-1936))

## 1.3 Fun and games

On those days when inspiration is elusive, or your inner critic is being particularly harsh, you could try a more playful approach. When we are free from the expectations of perfection we are able to experiment and make mistakes without fear of failure. A playful approach can introduce a sense of lightness into the serious business of making art. You might even find that through play and accident you make some discoveries worth pursuing (seriously).

**Surrealist:** Historically, the Surrealists were a group of artists, writers and intellectuals in Europe between First and Second World Wars who responded to postwar society's rigid order by creating works that intentionally challenged rational ways of thinking. Led by the poet André Breton, the Surrealists made work that arose from the unconscious, from dreams and the imagination. When we say an artwork is Surrealist we mean that it is not bound by the rules of the conscious, rational mind.

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**Juxtapose:** To juxtapose is to place things next to each other in contrasting relationship. The Surrealists used juxtaposition by rearranging everyday things in ways to create new meaning, challenge reason and open the doors to the freedom of the subconscious mind.

#### ACTIVITY 1.6: (DE)FACING THE BLANK PAGE

That crisp white page or canvas can be pretty scary sometimes. Here are a few ways of getting over the fear of making the first mark:

- Spill a cup of tea on your paper and begin a drawing from the stain.
- Walk on your paper, making footprints.
- Rub the page all over with charcoal and buff it off so you have a nice atmospheric surface to work on.
- Erase an old drawing you don't like, almost all the way – now start drawing on top of this ghostly image.



Figure 1.10: "There's some wonderful things in the world" a playful piece of sculpture by artist Maurice Citron using a cable drum and exercise balls. Maurice says *I love making things that end up surprising me.*

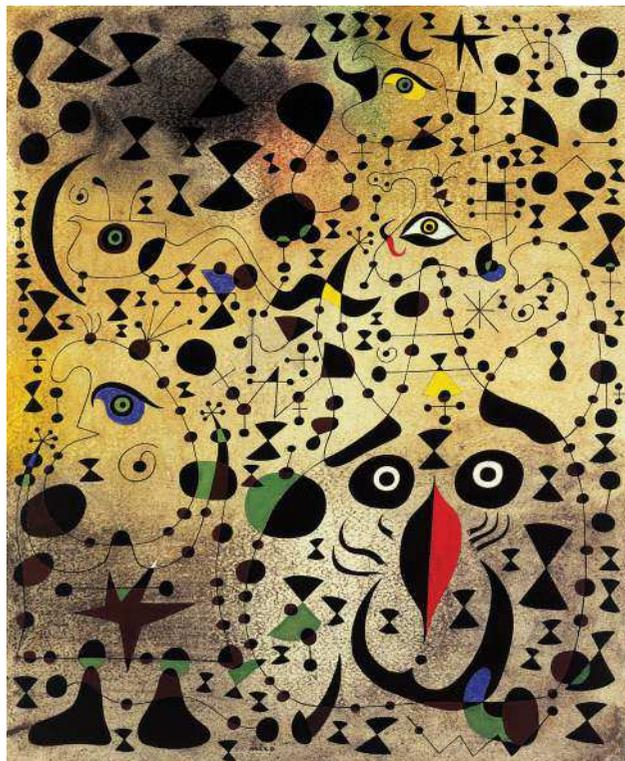
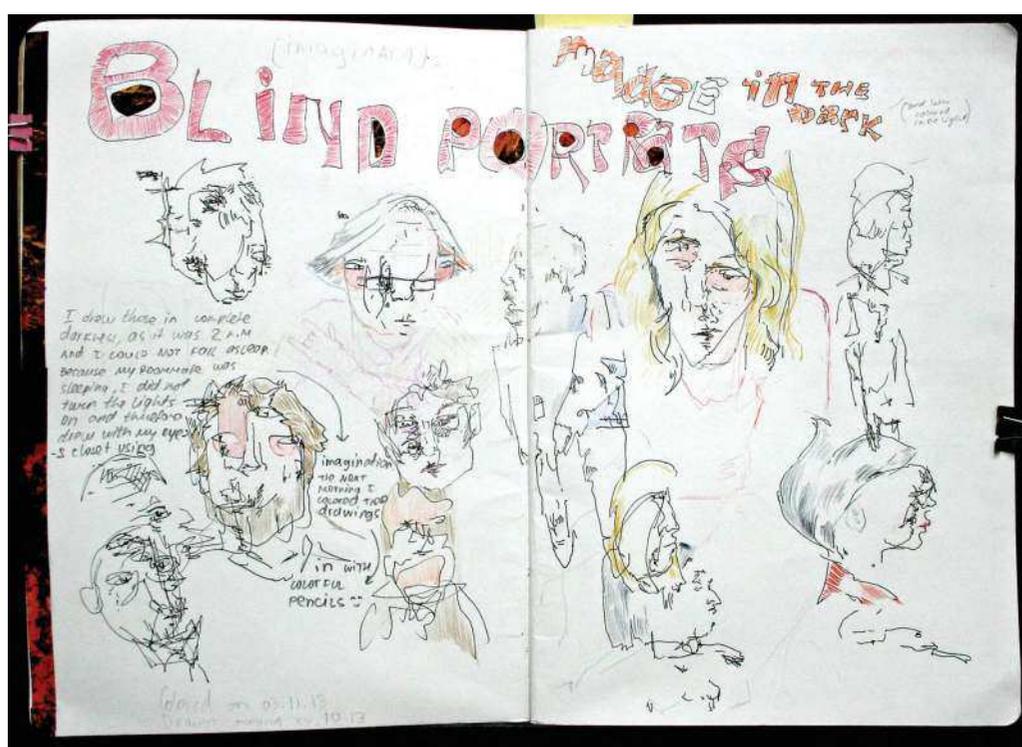


Figure 1.11: Joan Miró, *The Beautiful Bird Revealing the Unknown to a Pair of Lovers* (from the *Constellation* series), 1941 (gouache, oil wash, and charcoal on paper). Miró recalled how he began these small works on paper: 'I dipped my brushes in solvent and wiped them on the white sheets of paper with no preconceived ideas.' Then he drew animals, stars and other whimsical figures on the already marred surface.

### ACTIVITY 1.7: DRAWING WARM-UPS

These warm-up drawing exercises require you to focus completely on looking at your subject; they also help you to loosen up and let go of expectations . . . You might even be pleasantly surprised by the results!

- Draw with the 'wrong' hand.
- Draw blindfolded or without looking at the paper.
- Draw an object you can feel but can't see, held under the table.
- Draw with chalk taped to a very long stick.
- Draw symmetrically, with a pencil in both hands.
- Draw, with a continuous line, a figure who is moving around the room.
- Try a collaborative drawing (see Activity 1.8).



**Figure 1.12: Blind drawings by student Polina Zakharova. Polina drew her classmates without ever looking down at the paper. Drawing like this forces you to relinquish control of the outcome and surrender to the act of looking.**

In the 20th century, the Surrealist artists brought a sense of play into art-making, favouring approaches that involved elements of unpredictability, chance, unseen elements and group collaboration – all to disrupt the waking mind's desire for order. They would play a collaborative, chance-based game, typically involving four players, called 'cadavre exquis' (exquisite corpse). This was originally a game based on words, resulting in nonsensical phrases, but it developed into one using drawing, resulting in absurd combinations of drawings.

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## ACTIVITY 1.8: CADAVRE EXQUIS

All you need is three or four people, paper and pencil, but collage works well for this too. Each person begins by making a 'head' on a piece of paper then passes it to the next person who makes a 'body', and so on. The work has no individual ownership; it is truly collaborative. Warning: this activity may generate ideas that are absurd, whimsical and wild!

## ACTIVITY 1.9: TAKE A COLOUR WALK

Pick a colour and follow it wherever it appears, down the street, through a museum, wherever it leads you. Notice the variety of **hues** within a colour range. Can you find an interesting way to document your colour walk?



**Figure 1.13:** This 'exquisite corpse' collage from 1938 is by the Surrealist artists André Breton, Jacqueline Lamba and Yves Tanguy. It depicts a body that is part human, part mechanical and part mannequin.

## 1.4 Failures and transformation

Sometimes things don't work out as we would like them to. In fact, the number of successful art works produced by most artists is probably far fewer than the number of unsuccessful ones. One solution might be just to make a lot of work to increase the likelihood of getting a good one!

Of course we have to be able to define what we mean by 'successful' and 'unsuccessful' work. Discernment is an important part of IB DP Visual Arts. You need to learn to recognise your stronger work and, just as importantly, to see what is weak or unresolved, and reflect on this constructively.

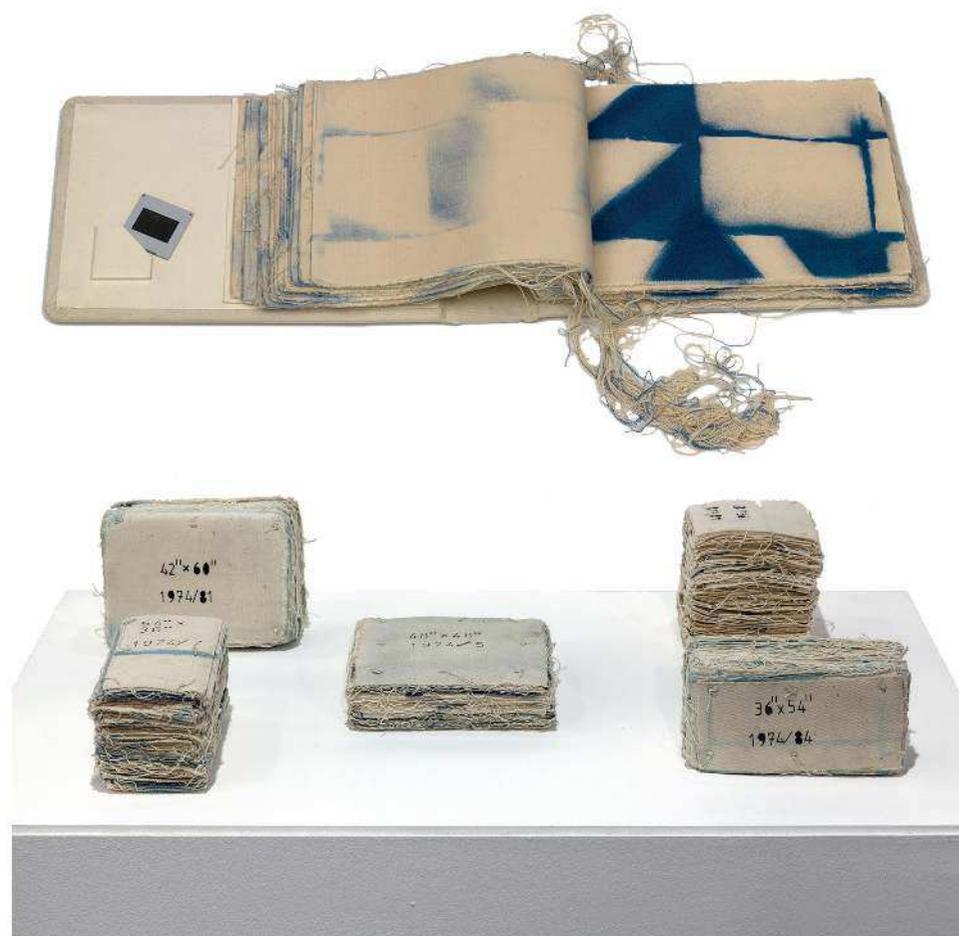
Your less-successful works are as much a part of your learning process as the successful works; one cannot exist without the other. It is the so-called 'failed' pieces that point the way to something else – sometimes by knowing what we **don't** want to do we understand what we **do** want to do. When confronting a disappointing piece, you might ask yourself what you could do differently. Then forgive yourself: you are not defined by your 'failures'.

The seed for your next artwork lies embedded in the imperfections of your current piece. Such imperfections (or mistakes, if you are feeling particularly depressed about them today) are your guides – valuable, reliable, objective, non-judgemental guides – to matters you need to reconsider or develop further. It is precisely this interaction between the ideal and the real that locks your art into the real world and gives meaning to both. (From *Art and Fear: Observations on the perils (and rewards) of art making*, David Bayles and Ted Orland.)

Everything I needed to know about creativity I learned by making mistakes.  
 (Tanner Christensen, product designer)

## Failures and transformation

Artist Susan Hiller deals with failed paintings in a different way: In *Painting Books and Painting Blocks* she reconfigures old unwanted paintings on canvas as books, or sewn together as blocks. The paintings are given a new chance at life as a different art object.



**Figure 1.14:** Susan Hiller, *Painting Books and Painting Blocks*, 1972–84, two series of previously exhibited paintings, reconfigured in sculptural formats. (Top, open: *Big Blue*, 1976. Bottom: *Three Painting Blocks*, dated with size of originating works.)

Artists have a vested interest in our believing in the flash of revelation, the so-called inspiration . . . shining down from heavens as a ray of grace. In reality, the imagination of the good artist or thinker produces continuously good, mediocre or bad things, but his judgement, trained and sharpened to a fine point, rejects, selects, connects . . . All great artists and thinkers are great workers, indefatigable not only in inventing, but also in rejecting, sifting, transforming, ordering.

(Friedrich Nietzsche, in *All Too Human*, 1878)

## Inspiration: where does it come from?

To inspire literally means to breathe in. Inspiration is simply whatever we take in from outside us. Each one of us creates our own opportunities for inspiration – it doesn't just descend from above (or very rarely).

**Tip:** Record your critical reflections on your successes and failures to include in your process portfolio (covered in Chapter 8) as part of the progression and development of your work.

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**ACTIVITY 1.10:  
 TRANSFORMING  
 FAILURES**

Give an unsatisfactory piece of work a new life. Deconstruct it and put it back together in a different way, making it into something else altogether.



**Figure 1.15:** *Detonate* (ceramic and glaze) by student Eleanor Wells. Eleanor reflects on how her piece *Detonate* was the result of an accident: 'I was looking at the work of Cornelia Parker, whose work is inspired by destruction and often incorporates broken fragments. When one of my ceramic pieces exploded in the kiln, I decided to create a new artwork, with glazed pieces piled on top of one another. These form a volcano structure ready to explode – a volcano made of pieces that are the result of an explosion!'

However, if you look for inspiration, it is everywhere – it's a matter of paying attention and being curious. If you give something your full attention – a human face, a humble leaf, a maths problem – you may be surprised to find there are infinite possibilities for creative exploration. Making art is 99% perspiration and 1% inspiration . . . so don't wait for inspiration to visit you – go look for it, and sweat it out!

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## Summary

This chapter is designed to help you enter into the spirit of art-making with curiosity, seeding ideas for you to build upon throughout the course. The starting strategies in this chapter have launched you into a playful exploration of ideas for making art. You have experimented with a range of activities using different visual and conceptual approaches. You have seen how this kind of exploration can help you start thinking about and making art. Now you are ready to follow those ideas, developing your own lines of inquiry, deepening your knowledge of artists and techniques.

(Chapter 5 looks at cultivating individual areas of focus in your art-making and developing a coherent body of work.)