

LESSON TWO: Gesture and Chance



IMAGE NINE: Jean (Hans) Arp. French, born Germany (Alsace). 1886–1966. *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance*. 1916–17. Torn-and-pasted paper on blue-gray paper, 19 1/8 x 13 3/8" (48.5 x 34.6 cm). Purchase, 1937. © 2008 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn



IMAGE TEN: William Anastasi. American, born 1933. *Pocket Drawing—Sept. 24, 2002*. 2002. Pencil on paper, 30 1/4 x 22 1/2" (76.8 x 57.2 cm). The Judith Rothschild Foundation Contemporary Drawings Collection Gift, 2008. © 2008 William Anastasi

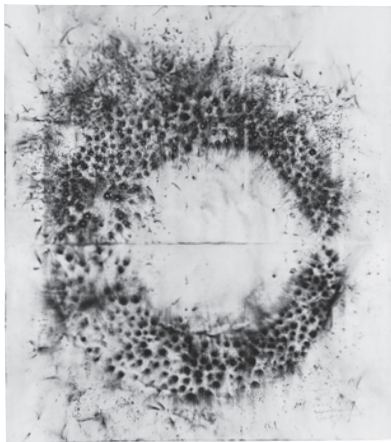


IMAGE ELEVEN: Cai Guo-Qiang. Chinese, born 1957. *Drawing for Transient Rainbow*. 2003. Gunpowder on two sheets of paper, 14' 11" x 13' 3 1/2" (454.7 x 405.1 cm) (overall). Fractional and promised gift of Clarissa Alcock Bronfman, 2004. © 2008 Cai Guo-Qiang

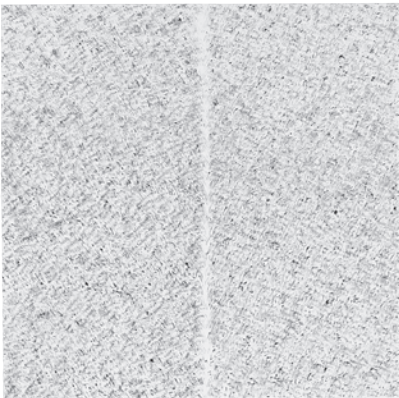


IMAGE TWELVE: Janine Antoni. Bahamian, born 1964. *Butterfly Kisses*. 1996–99. Cover Girl Thick Lash mascara on paper, 29 3/4" x 30" (75.6 x 76.2 cm). Purchase, 2001. © 2008 Janine Antoni

INTRODUCTION

Dada posed a fundamental challenge to prevailing art practices and social values when it emerged after World War I. In fact, Dada was known as an “anti-art movement.”⁹ (For more information about Dada, please consult *Modern Art and Ideas 5: Dada and Surrealism*). The disruption of the artist’s intention and his or her control over the creation of a work of art was a key goal of Dada artmaking, and chance was a key strategy employed towards this end. This lesson will examine the role of chance in creating a drawing and challenge the idea of **gesture** discussed in Setting the Scene.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- Students will consider gesture in drawings.
- Students will consider alternative materials and processes artists can use to create drawings.
- Students will consider the role of chance in the creation of drawings.

INTRODUCTORY DISCUSSION

Ask your students if they can define “gesture.” A gesture is a movement that communicates an idea to another person. How can you communicate to someone without speaking? Ask students to stand up and demonstrate communication by use of gesture. Ask them to say “hello” and “come here” and to explain, using their hands, how they feel. In drawing, gesture is the evidence of the artist’s hand in the work.

Some artists like to challenge the traditional reverential view of the artist’s hand at work creating an image. These artists replace the controlled hand of the artist with chance. To get a sense of what chance in drawing is, do the following activity with your students. Make sure each student has paper and a pencil. Then give each student a piece of string or yarn approximately twelve inches long. Do some or all of the following string-dropping exercises. If possible, replace the string-dropping with paint or ink drippings. Encourage students to vary the quality of their lines throughout the exercises and, if possible, change mediums from pencil to charcoal to conté crayon. Debrief with students after each exercise and discuss the process of creating a drawing using this method.

- Have your students hold their string above their piece of paper then all drop it onto the paper at the same time. Ask students to use their pencil to trace the line made by the string and then remove the string from the page. Using this line as a starting point give your students three minutes to complete their drawings any way they like.
- Have your students drop their pieces of string onto another piece of paper. After they trace this line on the page, ask them to remove the string and pass their paper to someone near them. When everyone has someone else’s paper, give them three minutes to complete the drawing before passing it back.
- Have your students drop their pieces of string onto another piece of paper. Have them trace the initial line then continue dropping their strings and tracing the lines they make. Give your students three minutes to complete their drawings in this way.

Gesture is an essential element of traditional drawing. The images in this lesson are created by artists who challenge the role of the artist’s hand and use chance to make a drawing.

9. John Elderfield, *The Modern Drawing: 100 Works on Paper from The Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1983), 108.

IMAGE-BASED DISCUSSION

- Show your students *Collage with Squares Arranged According to the Laws of Chance* (Image Nine), by Jean Arp, but do not tell them what it is called. After they have had a minute to look at the work, ask them to describe the image. Can they characterize the relationship between the blue squares and the white squares? Is it possible to determine a pattern?
- Tell your students the title of this image. Arp made several of these “chance collages” by ripping paper into pieces and then dropping them onto a larger sheet of paper. He claims that he then pasted the papers into place wherever they fell, but the fact that the pieces are equally spaced has led some art historians to believe that he did actually intervene in determining their placement. Arp wanted chance to play a role in determining how his piece was made, thereby separating the work on the page from the artist and his gesture. In fact, Arp believed that “the personality [of the artist] was burdensome and useless.”¹⁰
- Now show your students *Pocket Drawing—Sept. 24, 2002* (Image Ten), by William Anastasi, but do not tell them what it is called. Ask your students to look closely at the details in the image, such as the different tones of the markings on the page and the division of the page into a grid. Ask your students to look closely at the drawing and consider how it was made.

Anastasi also uses chance as a primary element in his drawings. His Pocket Drawings are part of a larger series begun in the early 1960s called Blind Drawings. He made them by placing folded paper and a small pencil stub in his pocket. As he moved around throughout the day, he made pencil marks on the paper while it was in his pocket, then he refolded the paper to allow for another part of the grid to be filled in. Anastasi made his Blind Drawings in dark places, like the opera or movie theater. He made his series of Subway Drawings as he rode on the subway to meet his friend the composer John Cage for a daily game of chess. The drawing that emerged was based on the motions of the train and how these motions guided his hand on the paper.

- Show your students *Drawing for Transient Rainbow* (Image Eleven), by Cai Guo-Qiang. Divide your class into pairs and ask your students to look carefully at the image. Ask each pair of students to spend some time writing a description of what they see. Then have the pairs create a list of questions about the drawing and how it was made.
- Tell your students that Cai, like Arp and Anastasi, is interested in using chance in his artwork. To make this work, he and a team of assistants arranged gunpowder, occasionally interspersed with stones or other material, in patterns between two sheets of paper and then exploded the gunpowder.

Cai’s gunpowder drawings are blueprints for actual fireworks displays. *Drawing for Transient Rainbow* was made in anticipation of the subsequent work *Transient Rainbow*, a fireworks performance over the East River in New York celebrating The Museum of Modern Art’s move to a temporary space in Long Island City, Queens, in 2002. For more information about Cai or to watch him make a drawing with gunpowder, go to www.pbs.org/art21/artists/cai/clip1.html.

- Ask your students to consider the different ways these artists used chance to create images. Does their understanding of chance change when they consider that these artists used the same process repeatedly?

10. Jean Arp, quoted in *Drawing from the Modern: 1880–1945*, by Jodi Hauptman (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 26.

- What are the similarities between the three images? What are the differences? How is gesture evident in each of these works? How do these works challenge a traditional notion of the artist's gesture? How do these works connect to your students' ideas about what drawing is? What questions still remain for them about these images?

ACTIVITIES

Another Form of Gesture

Janine Antoni made *Butterfly Kisses* (Image Twelve) by applying Cover Girl Thick Lash mascara to her eyelashes and then brushing them all over a large piece of paper as she blinked. Gesture usually refers to the movement of the artist's hand, but in this case Antoni translated the movement of her eyelashes onto the paper. Can your students think of other ways of creating gesture on the page without their hands? What medium will they work in? How will their images reveal the gestures they made? Have your students work in small groups or pairs to come up with an inventive way to apply gesture to the page.

Drawing by Chance

Have your students choose one of the drawing methods in this lesson to make a chance drawing. Can they devise their own process of chance drawing?