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Walking Self-Portraits: Scores for Creative Exploration of Space

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Walking Self-Portraits: Scores for Creative Exploration of Space

Introduction and Rationale

In a single-file line, a group of around twenty-five participants wearing paper capes enter a campus art museum and begin a slow paced, silent walk around the galleries making them aware of their body as they move about the space. Between the walks, participants work from a set of movement and mark-making prompts called *scores* to explore three dimensions of experience—*memory, intervention, and collectivity*—in dialogue with art, the museum space, and one another. This is the practice of *walking self-portraits*.

This original teaching activity explores the experience of embodied *self* through relational and arts-based perspectives. It is a shared movement practice that problematizes assuming the *self* as a discrete and autonomous unit. Rather, rooted in feminist perspectives of difference and positionality theory (Alcoff, 1988; Lugones, 2003; Haraway, 1988, 2016; Ortega, 2016), this activity foregrounds the self as an experience in constant formation, interdependent with individual and collective histories, and always situated.

For this *walking self-portrait* teaching activity, we propose *scores*—creative prompts drawn from contemporary art— as movement-based pedagogical devices. We also use paper capes that we call *companions* that when worn, draw attention to the movements of the body/ies engaged in the scores. Each of these materials, *scores* and *companions*, highlights the role of movement in our experience of the self and in our teaching practices.

Scores

In art and contemporary dance, *scores* are playful invitations for creative exploration. In these creative traditions, *scores* are broad and imaginative making space for participants to interpret them in their own way. Our scores are designed on a single-sheet pamphlet and are intended to help participants keep the invitations and questions present (Figure 1). We used the *scores* as pedagogical devices for a form of feminist knowing that bell hooks (1994) calls *involved*. In this activity, scores invite participants to move through museum spaces paying attention to their bodies, their histories, the space, and the art simultaneously. Compared to how it was originally intended to be interacted with, *scores* present an alternative way of experiencing space. This intervention challenges the designed ways of guiding and controlling bodies through built environments, especially at an institutional level.



Figure 1. Scores for Creativity workshop: Exploring and dwelling in the museum through walking self-portraits (printed scores on the two-sided trifold pamphlet). 2020.

Companions

In addition to *scores*, each participant receives a *companion*, or large piece of bulletin board paper worn as a cape (Figure 2). Feminist educator and anthropologist Tania Pérez-Bustos (2022) describes this kind of material interdependence with the process of study as *material companions*. Understood this way, the paper cape functions as a *companion*. It brings awareness to the body and elements of our movement that we would not notice without this additional layer. The paper cape as *companion* underscores the materiality of our movement, and it provides a surface to inscribe participants' interactions between the scores, the art, the space, and with each other. Because of the resources available to us during the original version of this activity, we used white bulletin board paper. However, we encourage that each teacher considers what material qualities of the cape are relevant for their activity, including assessing the color of the paper.



Figure 2. Participants gathering for start of creativity workshop. (2020). Photograph used with permission of the photographer Patricia León Quecán.

Dimensions of Experience

Using the guiding scores and the paper cape as companion, participants explore three dimensions of experience: (1) memory, (2) intervention, and (3) collectivity. In designing the dimensions of experience to construct a *walking self-portrait*, we follow feminist perspectives of identity and difference (Lugones, 2003; Ortega, 2016; Alcoff, 1988), knowing (Haraway, 1988), and solidarity (Mohanty, 2003). Each dimension is explored through two scores.

Memory. Memory scores are woven into the lived experiences and personal histories of the participants. The scores guide the participants to engage with concepts like familiarity, warmth, and belonging in relationship to the art objects. The biographical character of these scores enacts feminist practices of situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988) and standpoint theory (Collins, 1997; Harding, 1986, 1992). These scores foreground our history as constitutive of the self and how it is present within our interaction with art objects.

Score 1: Notice a work which offers a sense of belonging. Using your entire body and cape, create a dwelling that evokes belonging and warmth.

Score 2: Find an artwork that makes you think about someone you love. On your cape, inscribe a love offering or letter connecting your loved one to the art. Repeat once.

Intervention. Intervention scores promote participants' power to reinterpret art objects, spaces, and their curation in dialogue with personal life experiences. Intervention scores draw from speculative feminism to compose versions of our past, present, or future that escape the linear narratives and hegemonic demarcations of time and space (Gopinath, 2018). This pedagogy disrupts an institutional codification of relationship with space and art in two ways: first, in relation to learning about art, specifically within museum spaces (Garber, 1992). The second considers built environment design which controls individuals' movement before they even enter the space. Our intervention scores question predetermined ways of interacting with the space that limit ways to move and be in one's body. Gesture, movement, and mark-making become creative and political resources to affect seemingly unmodifiable spaces.

Score 1: *Identify three works that you would like to change. Create a slow walking procession between the three pieces. As you walk, write or draw on your cape a title that connects the three artworks.*

Score 2: *Choose at least one work in this gallery. Embody the focal point. Now look closer. What's hidden? Bring it forward and recognize it using your cape.*

Collectivity. Collectivity scores encourage collaboration with others and with objects, blurring predetermined individualistic ways of thinking about self and existing in institutional spaces. They ask participants to create impromptu tours and notes of gratitude for experiences with an artwork and a peer. These are relational scores that foreground interdependence as a condition (Haraway, 2016) and solidarity as an achievement (Mohanty, 2003; Ahmed, 2000). Exploring art and spaces through the scores with our paper cape as companion, we discover that our *self* extends and entangles with many other human and more-than-human bodies.

Score 1: *Approach your favorite piece. Lie down in front of it. Wait until someone comes to lie down next to you. Contemplate together. Leave a thank you note to the moment. Repeat as needed.*

Score 2: *Find a partner. Take turns. One acts as a tour guide presenting the artwork through stories they want it to have. The listener should map the tour and stories on the guide's cape.*

In this original teaching activity, learning entails experiencing one's embodied self in movement, interdependent with others' histories, and in relation to artworks and the museum space. As participants walk and move while exploring the scores, their bodies crease, fold, and wrinkle the paper cape. This creates unexpected and individual sensory experiences, while also documenting the process through movement. Scores alter the pre-designed ways of interacting with the built environment by adding other dimensions of bodily experiences such as "skin, vision, hearing, haptic and kinesthesia" (Malnar & Vodvarka, 2004). Further, tools such as crayons and colored pencils provide more ways to document responses to artworks and experiences within the space onto the paper companions.

Placing the scores, the wearable piece, and participants' embodied history in conversation with art at the museum generates *walking self-portraits*.

Learning Objectives

Participants in this creativity workshop will:

- explore three dimensions of experience, (1) memory, (2) intervention, and (3) collectivity, in relationship to museum space and artwork through movement and mark-making.
- Document the experience on their paper companion (cape) to create a self-portrait.

While the workshop's objectives were specifically designed for the Krannert Art Museum on the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign campus, the broader goals for the workshop are widely adaptable to other institutions both with and without access to museums. The broader objectives for this exercise included an invitation for intentional reflection on the relationship between self, space, and objects, namely artworks. In our workshop, interest focused on the spaces of art museums and institutions of higher education as extensions of empiricism, colonialism, and exclusion (Lambert, 2012). Through embodied exploration as an intervention within these spaces, our lived, felt, and situated histories connect with specific sites and objects to explore the relationship between history and built spaces for a diversity of bodies and backgrounds. To make this teaching activity adaptable to your specific needs, consider where within your institutions, communities, and teaching spaces would embodiment and movement position students in relationship with history, objects, and the self.

Explanation

Before involving participants, facilitators should prepare materials for the wearable companion; decide if the cape-like structure meets your needs or if other materials better suit your lesson's goals of bringing awareness to the physical self. Our paper was approximately 6 x 4 feet and silkscreened with the logo we designed for the museum's event. The scores were printed on a two-sided tri-fold pamphlet. We provided materials to attach the paper around the body and a variety of drawing materials.

As the original teaching activity was designed as a museum workshop, our participants were members of the university community and the public who attended voluntarily. Our creativity workshop was one hour long. The activity can be adapted to shorter or longer versions by removing some scores or dedicating more time to each of the scores and the closing conversations, adjusting to the needs of the students.

This activity begins by offering participants the materials for the practice: the scores and the paper cape. The facilitator introduces the activity and the rationale and then gives time for participants to familiarize themselves with the scores. The facilitator invites everyone on an initial performative walk through of the entire museum or space of practice. We suggest creating a single-file line and asking the participants to remain silent (Figure 3). The walk has practical and performative functions. Before the walk, the facilitator asks participants to use the walk to identify the galleries and spaces that resonate with our proposed dimensions of experience: memory, intervention, and collectivity. The initial walking performance also invites participants to focus on their embodied sensibilities. Participants are prompted to attend to how their bodies move and change along with the cape as companion. Additionally, the walk is a choreographed intervention of customary ways of inhabiting spaces, revealing unwritten rules of movement in museums and in relation to artworks.



Figure 3. Performative opening, silent walk. (2020). Photograph used with permission of the photographer Patricia León Quecán.

Following the introductory walk, participants divide into smaller groups by self-selecting the set of galleries to explore the memory scores. After eight minutes of exploring the first set of scores, facilitators ask participants to choose different galleries to work on the intervention scores. The collectivity scores are allotted the same amount of time. Assorted drawing materials are always available to participants.

After working through the three dimensions of experience through the scores, participants and facilitators gather for a whole group discussion. Facilitators ask participants about the experience, their interpretation and impression of the scores, and any discoveries on their positions and movements within the space, alongside the artworks, and with one another.

To close the workshop, the activity includes a performative acknowledgement of the space. We reformed the single-file, silent line walking through the galleries as participants revisit the space. We ask them to consider the memory of the scores and acknowledge the experience as an intervention of conventional interaction with space. Our workshop ended with informal conversation. If this activity were replicated with a class, deeper reflective discussions and attention to the manipulation of the materials of the paper companion are rich points for continued learning and assessment.

Debriefing

While we firmly believe in the transformative pedagogical potential that movement-based and playful practices can have for most learners, it is fair to recognize that movement is not a usual approach in academic study or traditional classrooms in formal education. Initially, participants may feel uncomfortable or get easily distracted. It is fundamental that the facilitator installs an environment of concentration, seriousness with the playful, and openness to discomfort. Offering well-defined creative constraints ensure rigor alongside playfulness, both of which are fundamental to this activity. The initial performative silent walk is critical to instill a shared experience of movement-based exploration. The scores should be clear enough to provide creative constraints that give parameters and meaning for playful exploration, but also allow for interpretation. This generates a structure that eases the potential anxiety of participants who may be new to exploring movement while still encouraging play.

We also consider spaces for this original teaching activity beyond the art museum. There can be endless versions of this activity with different spaces and different bodies. The built environment is full of ways of experiencing and interacting with the space operate as oppressive forces on bodies and the understanding of self in relationship to space. The activity can be adapted to exploring other institutional spaces, public spaces, urban ecosystems such as

university quads, parks, schools, hospitals, neighborhoods, theaters, and other similar locations. We suggest that instead of asking people to find artworks to study memory, intervention, and collectivity, direct them to space demarcations, materials within the space, objects that represent histories of the space, objects that seem out of place, and other organizing elements or space-markers. This variety can lead to further discussions around selective inclusivity of public spaces including hostile design practices.

Assessment

Assessments for this original teaching activity were informal and formative. We organized open-ended questions to informally assess the group's understanding of expectations and reflections on the experience before, during, and after the activity. Adapting the activity for a classroom setting offers the potential for rigorous assessment, discussion, and data collection.

To create a more formalized approach to assessments for this activity, instructors and facilitators may consider carefully crafted reflection questions for oral or written responses. We suggest questions around the three dimensions of experience. For example: How did your personal memories and experiences shape your interactions with the space? In what ways did you intervene within the space? Did the scores encourage you to consider the space in a new way and how so? What differences or challenges did you observe in working alone versus working with partners or within the group? Incorporating reflective discussions and prompts offer criteria for assessment and deeper learning.

The paper cape as companion served as a formative assessment for our creativity workshop purposes, but a facilitator or instructor may choose to use it towards a summative reflection or as documentation of engagement and learning. The objects offer opportunities for visual analysis, emergent discussions, reflections on the experience, and a display or exhibition of capes as documentation of the activity. For our purposes, the participants left the museum with their capes and the experience of the evening as personal mementos. The informal discussions we built within the activity offered insight into the participants' experiences and reactions to the activity. We are confident that facilitators and instructors with the ability to revisit the activity with the participants in the classroom will glean many opportunities to discuss, reflect, and assess the experience of creating a walking self-portrait.

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