

Autobiographical Artworks: Digitally Projected Identities

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In your beginning there was just you.

Really – just *you*: cute, round, and drooling...and if you think about it, you probably had very little in the way of identity.

The people who raised you were probably part of your first perceptions. Then came the sights and sounds and smells around you. You experienced your first bump on the head, the first scrape of the knee, your first step – and someone along the way probably put into words encouragement, discouragement, or some similar rejoinder. In short, from day one you began to experience the sensations that determine how you became you.

What makes you who you are? What makes you *you*? Think about all the things that go into the makeup of your identity, things such as:

- Words – things people have said to you, things you have read, things you have said.
- People – people you have known, people close to you, people who have treated you kindly or unkindly or ignored you
- Experiences – actions you have engaged in, events you have witnessed, incidents you have heard about, actions you've



been forced to confront

- Things – items you own, objects you've desired, artifacts that convey some importance to you

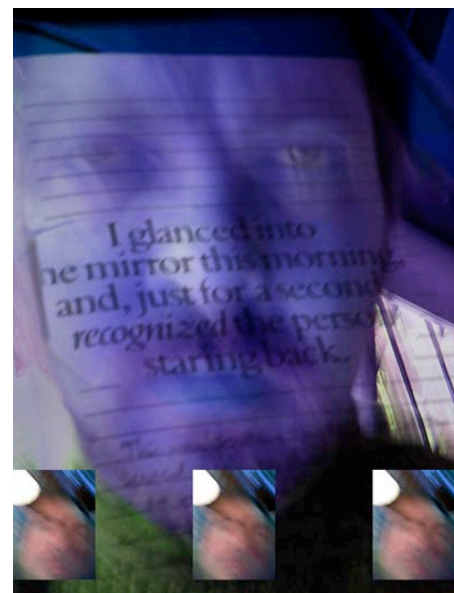
Each, on their own is a significant component; together they comprise powerful influencers in the framework of your individual character: the constituent autobiographical parts of your personal identity.

Exploring personal identity through autobiography

Words, in particular, can trigger powerful emotions. In 1990, artist Ken Aptekar began to explore the way language affected his life.

Aptekar's audience may presume much about his life from the careful viewing and reading of his paintings. Drawn from fragments of remembered childhood conversations, audience responses to his in-progress artworks, and memoir-like passages, the artist includes as part of his paintings his own text. These responses are often deeply revealing and personal phrases that embolden a dialogue between Aptekar the artist and Aptekar the individual. By involving his audience in the creation of dialogue, Aptekar also blurs the boundary between viewer and artmaker: visual and verbal reactions of both viewer and artist are conjoined. What makes Aptekar *Aptekar* are the lifetime of words and phrases conveyed to him

Aptekar often re-examines the remembrance of things said earlier in his life: issues surrounding questions of gender, heritage, and personal identity. Leaving much unanswered, his works often suggest an intensely personal narrative.



The artmaker provokes viewer participation.

By bringing together personal evocation of words, images, audience, and autobiography, a student artmaker's own art may confront such conflicting identities as gender, ethnicity, artistic vision, intention, and self. When students examine the power words have upon themselves, they place themselves in a unique position to comment upon their own lives as well as the world that surrounds them.

In "Projected Identities," learners fuse hand artmaking processes and digital image manipulations in a series of exploratory artistic self-examinations. At some point in every person's life they've been told something hard to forget. Learners might, for example, translate phrases like, "Good job!" "That was really stupid," "I love you" or "What did you do to your hair?" from a memory into a powerfully designed hand-cut linoleum block. This process of discovery and commentary is only a beginning: Learners might continue the process with a "projection" self-portrait, in which a digital projector is used to cast the image of the hand-lettered phrase over their face. The projected montage might then be recorded with a digital camera. In the process, various pleasing arrangement of image and words they consider to be of importance might be explored.

By journaling, learners create short works of prose in which each of six lines begin with the phrase, "I am"... For example: "I am an artist" or "I am a brother." Scans of such phrases may be combined with a digital portrait montage. Learners may be encouraged to project the combined montage by using a digital projector to fill a large theater space, inviting classmates to appear in the projection and "become" part of another student's



identity.

Common connections

Layers of autobiographical meaning are infused in such images, becoming a supplementary façade etched with words and phrases written by each artmaker. Autobiography is a manifestation of personal memory and the artworks described respond not only to one's own personal memory but to that of a greater collective consciousness as well.

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