
empty canvas : wondering mind

an artisan's workbook

compiled and written by miriam louisa simons

for all the extraordinary students
I have been privileged to work with and befriend

you asked for it: here it is

may it nurture your own creative questions
as they form the ground beneath your feet



Blind Men on a Log bridge
By Hakuin Ekaku
(The Gitter Collection)

empty canvas : wondering mind

relax
into the art
of not knowing
...
revel
in the joy
of wondering mind

contents

1 intro & info

exposé
a web of wonder and wondering
a series of nine
crucial concepts
myth-busting
creation is where you are
r & r
the X-file
"we have no art ..."

2 believing is seeing . . .

the artifice of perception
pictures, puzzles and perceptual illusions
correspondences
references

3 wildsight – the innocent eye

observer, observed, or observing?
what is looking and what looks back?
enigmatic emptiness, magical marks
exploring perception's toolbox
references

4 outside in and inside out

secret senses
crossing the threshold
playing in inner space
the dreamtime
beyond space and time
references

5 making fun of play

getting going
chance
connections
colour & line
constructions
cloth & cord
references

contents

6 creative constraints

the power of limits
scaffolds and structures
shape : geometry
form : function
line : words
light : colour
references

7 outside the square

unfamiliar perspectives and altered realities
space
time
place
persona
references

8 creating from wonder

wonder and wondering
unfold your myth
stitch up a life vest
Buddha-body
the heart of the story
animated grey matter
a sanctuary for the secret senses
playing with process
metaphorically speaking ...
objets trouvées
deconstructing & recycling
shape-shifting
quantum realities
culture and creativity
the three questions
references

9 notes & anecdotes

index of activities
index (elements of visual language)
technical books and tips
bibliography
notes about this series
anecdotes

Please refer to individual e-books for page numbers.



FAIR USE NOTICE

This document may contain copyrighted material the use of which has not been specifically authorized by the copyright owner. I am making such material available in my attempt to share understanding of, and promote inquiry into, the workings of human perception and its relationship to creative thinking and artisanship. I believe this constitutes a 'fair use' of any such copyrighted material as provided for in section 107 of the US Copyright Law. In accordance with Title 17 U.S.C. Section 107, this material is distributed without profit to those whose interest in the subject is for research and non-commercial educational purposes.

For more information go to: <http://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/17/107.html>.

If you wish to use any copyrighted material from this paper for purposes of your own that go beyond 'fair use' you must obtain permission from the copyright owner.



empty canvas : wondering mind

an artisan's workbook

compiled and written by miriam louisa simons

1 intro & info

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| exposé | 2 |
| a web of wonder and wondering | 4 |
| a series of nine | 5 |
| crucial concepts | 7 |
| myth-busting | 10 |
| creation is where you are ... | 12 |
| r & r | 12 |
| your X-file | 13 |
| we have no art ... | 13 |

To be creative ultimately is to be nothing more than human.

To be human is of necessity to be creative.

Peter Evans and Geoff Deehan, *The Keys to Creativity*

This whole adventure of creativity is about joy and love.

We live for the pure joy of being

and out of that joy unfolds the ten thousand art forms
and all the branches of learning and compassionate activity.

Stephen Nachmanovitch: *Free Play*

I believe that the most important thing for mankind is its own creativity.

The Dalai Lama

exposé

empty canvas : wondering mind acknowledges the difficulty – the freeze-up – many would-be creatives experience when faced with the blank paper, the lump of clay, the pile of fabric scraps – whatever – without any idea of where and how to begin. It simply offers ways into the creative playground. And the best way, as Julia Cameron puts it, isn't to think things up but to get things down.

If you rightly intuit that creativity, like freedom, is a given – coming at the beginning, not at the end – yet you remain daunted in the face of the empty canvas, perhaps this series of e-books will be a helpful companion as you walk your creative path.

empty canvas : wondering mind affirms that we are creative creatures from our first cell-division. It claims that there is nothing to do and nowhere to go in order to be that which we already are: Creation, creating.

It doesn't propose to recover or heal or attain creativity. Its underlying assumption is that creativity isn't something separate from one's pulsing body and mind. The notion that creativity is something we must attain acts to *block* the naturally flowing creative spirit.

Instead, it proposes that innate creativity is fuelled by *wonder and wondering* and that it is quietly waiting for us **now**, within **this** set of circumstances, exactly right **here**.

exposé cont

The activities and projects in this series of e-books are opportunities to examine and release the notions that act to smother our natural state of creativity – the ideas, assumptions and opinions we have about it. Because these are the saboteurs that demand our work be perfect from day one, that make it hard for us to face the empty canvas with beginner's mind.

The heart of the matter lies in exploring the kind of radical creative activity that pushes the limits of perception's concrete conditioning. These workbooks present a collection of projects and activities that might help make explicit those conditioned responses to both the inner and outer 'worlds', thus, perhaps, enabling perception to unfold new ways of seeing and expressing the wonder of the world we create and inhabit. Its uniqueness lies in this underlying aim: it's not a 'how to' instruction book, it's a 'what-if?' workbook.

Yes, it's challenging. But it's also great fun, and potentially liberating. What is the self that expresses in self-expression? If you intuit that the process of making things can help us explore that question, and that our artworks are only by-products - maps of our journey - these books might interest you.

empty canvas : wondering mind invites us to relax into the wisdom of not-knowing. Of playing. Of exploring and experimenting. Of finding out for oneself what is possible when all traces of the artist or any other version of the self have taken a holiday, leaving the playground free. Just to see what might happen.

a web of wonder and wondering

This series of e-books is basically the curriculum I developed during the years I spent as a teacher of art and design within a variety of educational contexts. As an art educator I was more concerned with encouraging students to find and express their own unique creative voice rather than turn out a certain type of art product. So often this seemed the most difficult task facing those who wished to 'do art'.

In the absence of an art education of my own, I researched and experimented with the work and writings of many truly exemplary artists and educators. Their ideas and inspirations, together with my own practical experience in the classroom and studio, made up the warp and weft of a unique curriculum – a web of *wonder* and *wondering*.

The web-weavers who contributed during those decades are too many to list, but these major sources are honoured with gratitude:

Experiences in Visual Thinking, Robert
McKim

The Natural Way to Draw, Kimon Nicolaides

Experimental Drawing, Robert Kaupelis

The Zen of Seeing, Frederick Franck

Drawing on the Artist Within, Betty Edwards

Learning by Heart, Jan Steward & Corita

Kent

An Artist's Workbook, Natalie d'Arbeloff

Visual Literacy, Judith Wilde & Richard Wilde

Wherever activities are unacknowledged within the text they evolved out of my own teaching repertoire, although it's likely their roots lie deep in long-forgotten inspirations. One stands on the shoulders of innumerable teachers.

In a conventional curriculum the activities here might be seen as ways of exploring line, tone, colour, texture, movement, shape and form – the grammar of visual language. (See **notes & anecdotes** for an index of the activities.) Playing with them will certainly expand one's visual language vocabulary. However, to be included in my curriculum the activities had to explore three additional possibilities:

- the potential to take one into innocent intimacy where the gap between observer and object becomes a bridge of pure *observing*,
- the power to move one through resistance caused by conditioning regarding the creative process, the art product and the artist-person,
- the *koan* quality that might tip one into the pregnant conceptual void called beginner's mind.

a series of nine

There are nine parts to **empty canvas : wondering mind**. If it was a 'normal' book they would be chapters. The nine separate e-books are similar to the original hand-out sheets given to students, with suggestions and anecdotal musings mixed in.

The first book is the one you are now reading. It is followed by **believing is seeing**, a collection of activities and puzzles to open up understanding of the way perception is conditioned and limited. Often this understanding is all it takes to vaporise fear of the empty canvas.

The actual art activities begin with **wildsight – the innocent eye** which includes two main groups of activities. Here we are exploring the innocent, uneducated, uncultured eye. The first group is called **observer or observed?** *What is looking, and what looks back at us as we work?* The second group, called **enigmatic emptiness, magical marks**, *exploring perception's toolbox*, sets out to do just that.

inside-out & outside-in investigates our *secret senses*. We've been exploring the space 'outside' – the world – in the previous e-book. Now we take a look at the wonders of inner space, brain space, the realm of dreams and imagination.

making fun of play is the heart of the book. Play has become polluted with competition, with the need to produce product that justifies it, and with inevitable notions of seriousness. We are told that without the ability to play we will never be creative, so we turn play into a serious task! Nine groups of activities and projects included here reintroduce us to the notion of playing around just for the fun of it. This is the fastest and most effective antidote to artist's block that I know.

Cont ...

Next in the series we explore **creative constraints**. It will probably surprise those whose idea of creativity means open ended freedom to do whatever one wants, to find that we can take our creative inquiry much deeper by employing the power of limits. We study *shape, form, line and light* by creating **scaffolds**. Taking our new knowledge of those elements of visual language we then choose a relevant subject which will function as the **structure** of our work.

The seventh group takes us **outside the square**. By examining and experimenting with unfamiliar perspectives on the perception of space, time, place and persona, we find ourselves in a world of altered realities.

The final group of activities, **creating from wonder**, is concerned with synthesis – putting it all together. Fourteen projects are suggested, ranging over a wide variety of subjects – something, I hope, for everyone.

Book nine, **notes & anecdotes**, includes notes about techniques, an index of activities, a bibliography and anecdotal notes.

crucial concepts

A mini-glossary of notions you'll find popping up in this series:

play is the way

and this - right here and now - is the playground. Play is probably the most important word in the world for those who long to create. It was the hardest thing for me to do, being deeply conditioned to take everything seriously and purposefully. Unlearning seriousness isn't easy. Please don't take play seriously, even though it might turn out to be the most vital thing in your life. Make fun of play! No ability to play, no possibility of creativity. No creativity, no *union with Creation*. Dislocation is the result.

nth

is used here as an acronym for **now, this, here**. *nth* is the zero-point of beingness, the placeless point where we rest and find - we are nothing but it. Being *nth* is the only practice worth practising – and it can't be practised! Being *nth* is the antidote to all blocks to creativity. To fall into *nth* is to leap over the creative edge. How to fall? Stop. Sit. Shut up. And stay so. (Don't worry about this; when you are ripe for *nth* life will toss you into it. I had to be kneecapped before it could happen to me, but I was a hopeless case of mental and physical busyness.)

beauty

Be not afraid of beauty – in spite of what you might hear about it being beneath the concerns of the 'serious artist'. True beauty can both terrify and transform us. Fall at its feet. Celebrate its order and gorgeousness. Let it melt down your heart and open cracks in the fortress of fake, second-hand opinions. And too – be not afraid of ugliness. Remember, these are only concepts.

Cont ...

creativity by default

Human beings are, by definition, creative. Creativity is a given. It comes with a nervous-system and a beating heart. You need nothing to begin creating. You are perfectly adequate right now, and right here. Excuses cover fears, and fears need friendship, not denial.

visual-speak

Ideas and feelings can be expressed in visual language as well as verbal language – and for some people the former is easier to speak, to hear and to understand. Have you found your voice in the language of colours, shapes, lines, textures? What is the colour of a rabbit's sneeze? The shape of a throbbing ache? The texture of a flash of passion?

perilous perception

Our everyday perception of the everyday world is acquired, learned. We see what we have been trained to see, and our brains proceed, miraculously, to construct a very 'real' world. What you see and how you experience your world is largely what you expect to see and experience. (If you're anything like me, this statement will make your hair stand on end.) Expanding everyday perception and experiencing 'non-ordinary' perception changes our experience of the world. From being an observer-at-remove of the world, we are absorbed within a seamless web of dynamic existence: separation dissolves into mutuality.

the creative encounter

Making things provides an opportunity to observe all the strategies we blindly – as well as intentionally – use to avoid encountering the unknown. The unknown is the territory of the creative. Thought's impossible question is *"How can I know how to be creative?"* Impossible. You already are creative! A more useful question would be a gentle and spirited *"What if I stopped trying to become creative and just got on with playing with the things I love?"*

Cont ...



artisanship

Making things impeccably is the mark of the true artisan. The workings of our hands will always reveal the reach of our passion. Even the humble potato print can speak volumes about the attitude of the printer. Makings made well, with care, are likely to be imbued with the mysterious movement of creation.

growth and transformation

Every personal response expressed is a point of growth, not a conclusion. Success and failure are irrelevant evaluations. The only authority to be found within these books lies within the activities themselves. Honouring the task, not the outcome, is what generates transformation.

wondering mind

The art of learning feeds on wonder. Wonder *at* what is before us, and wonder *about* what is before us. Making things fuels wondering mind. Wondering mind is beginner's mind, mind unafraid to ask "What if...?" Wondering mind is mind unafraid to enter the unknown; it's in another league altogether from knowing mind or habit-full mind.

silence

Art has no need of words for it speaks its own tongue. And if it seems to speak in tongues it's probably because our hearing has become habituated to another, alphabetised, language. Work flowering at the creative edge blooms out of silence. To hear its whisper we need to listen out of silence. Which means? *Being silence.*



myth-busting

I've identified a heap of insidious myths about creativity in some 40 years of studio practice and teaching. They are like mental viruses; clearing them out of brain-space is vital. Do you unquestioningly embrace any of these major myths?

creativity can be learned in step by step lessons

Untrue. Creativity is what you are. Everything you think you know about it must be unlearned for it to flower naturally.

the creative spirit needs to be healed or restored or recovered

Why? The creative spirit has never been other than whole and has never gone away. If you are alive, it is thanks to the creative spirit. You are it.

being creative is impossible unless you've found your artist within

I say *if you meet the artist within kill it* before it assumes an identity that claims to know how your work should look and how you should feel about it. Creativity is incompatible with all artist-egos, both inner and outer

some people are more creative than others

Can we claim some people are more alive or less dead than others? Some people have more ideas and opinions about creativity than others and so are less able to allow it to express in its own unique way.

being truly, authentically creative means you'll make a certain kind of art - art that looks like so-and-so's, or like this, or that

Actually, engagement in authentic creativity means you won't have a clue what is going to show up.

Cont ...

it's crucial to find your personal 'style'

Pray for no personal style. If you have no style Creation will sing through your hollow flute.

creativity depends on the muse and she's often AWOL

Wrong. If you sit and wait for inspiration to strike, you could wait a long time. And even when it arrives chances are it'll only be a recycled idea. Sit, by all means, sit and settle. When fully silent and settled, start making, *now*. Leap over the hurdle of ideas and get something down on that empty canvas. That 'something' is what beckons the muse. Try it.

real creativity is about expressing your inner being and will bring forth all kinds of unconscious imagery

Maybe, but – is real creativity about self expression? What is the self that is expressing itself? This is a *koan* we must solve. Meanwhile, Creation simply expresses itself. Figures may appear or not. What happens will depend solely on the materials at hand, innate curiosity, and the degree of *beginner's mind* present. If you are a painter you will probably paint. If you are a sculptor you will sculpt.

Just get everything out, play, and see what happens.

creation is where you are . . .

Creation is always *exactly where you are*. Start creating anywhere. Wherever you happen to be is perfect.

Where else can one begin to live the creative life, to walk the via Creativa?

If life has happened to bring **empty canvas : wondering mind** to your notice now, and if it's given you the inclination and curiosity, browse through and start with any activity that lights up for you. Lights up? Attracts you, inexplicably, irrationally.

How you use this series of activities will depend on your personality and preferences. Try to commit yourself to fully explore the extent of each activity you undertake, but if you *must* move on simply watch the restlessness. *nth* may be calling. You may be in need of rest and relaxation.

r & r

When tired, rest. When tight, do yoga. When restless, return to *nth*. When the black dog lurks, take it for a walk.

Get into Buddha-body however you can, for unless you are grounded there this miracle-moment will always be out-of-reach. Take time to warm-up in readiness for the Dance by sinking into the womb of *nth*. Then get up and . . . stay there!

Music helps, but only certain kinds of heartbeat-blending rhythms and only if heard by the "ears of the ears awake".

A state of relaxed attention is so important for creating from wonder that several exercises are included as 'warm-ups' in **wildsight – the innocent eye**.

**this very body, the Buddha
these ears the Universe eavesdropping on Itself
these eyes the eyes of unblinking all-seeing Creation**

your X-file

The **X-file** is journal-meets-sketch book.

Why 'X'?

Think *X-plore*, *X-pose*, *X-amine*, *X-plain*, *X-cavate*, *X-press*, *X-tend* . . .

Your X-file will need to be strong - sturdy enough to take all kinds of paint-ink-glue-love, and be your constant companion. It'll need to be big enough for creative pagemaking – A4 at least. Buy one, customize one, or make one yourself.

Fill it with crazy connections, odd juxtapositions, dreams-within-dreams, wildwords, snapshots, pictures, songlines, coded messages from your secret-senses . . . Everything goes here: visual notes and written notes, poems and quotes, ideas and inspirations, questions and protests and heart-songs. This is the archive for all and everything that means something to you – and you alone.

Keeping an X-file is one of the wondrous ways to ensure that creative constipation never occurs. If all else fails, open X-file. Ideas will leap out like genies from a bottle and you'll forget that you are a blocked artist.

That's all the magic you need.

"we have no art ..."

'Art' is a mystery to the modern mind. No wonder: it lives behind a veil of words. The dictionary offers little clarity; we find that 'art' can be either a noun or a verb. A product or a process.

Art-as-noun carries the burden of the opinions of the founders of our philosophical ideas, Eastern or Western, and we are so deeply steeped in this cultural and historical conditioning that our beliefs are automatic and non-negotiable. When it comes to opinions art is a mine-field (and mine are right, of course).

Cont ...

Art-as-verb is another story altogether. It's one anyone can tell, and every story will be different. Art as action, as dynamic, as doing (and as *being*) involves both intuition and intellect, and in that order. Intuition takes us to *nth*, intellect tells us what was going on there – usually much later. Both are equally important, but unless intuition precedes intellect there will be no genuine encounter with creation.

The dance, then, is to balance and order the dialogue between these two partners. This is something we all know about. We know the way that intellect inevitably wants to take the spotlight, hog the floor. We know the insistent whisperings of intuition from off-stage, and the wonderful choreography that unfurls when it is given space to *ex-press*. When 'artist/self' melts into the moment – *nth* – and there is only the state of *being creativity*. We can learn from the words of an anonymous Balinese artisan:

**we have no 'art'
we do everything as well as we can**

Can we work with the tools and language of visual expression without the burden of all the words and ideas that cling like carbuncles to contemporary art? Is it possible to leave one's knowledge of art history, and our memory of the works that have been held up to us as outstanding examples of art, outside the studio door?

Can we enter the work/play space as though painting or drawing or sculpture was waiting there to be discovered for the very first time? As though it never existed until you picked up the brush, or pencil, or clay, this moment, today? (And the same tomorrow, and every day henceforth?) Is it possible to *be beginner's mind* in the studio every day of your life?

A timeless tradition of Zen artisans assures us that it *is* possible. What's more, it's probably the only access portal to genuine creating. Beginner's mind in the Zen tradition is mind that is relaxed in not-knowing, mind that is full of wonder and free to wonder. Unencumbered by desired or predicted outcomes of any kind, fuelled by the joy of knowing that the playful processes we explore are ours and ours alone, we are at last free to innocently explore wondering mind. We come face to face with our authenticity and we begin to understand that it is a wholly impersonal attribute. A typical Zen paradox!