

Video Transcript for Photography workshop: Collections

Siena Art Institute

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This workshop uses photography as a way to think about the activity of collecting and to find new ways of exploring our surroundings.

Through this activity, students gain skills in creativity and critical thinking.

Our group discussions help students gain skills in communication.

The activity also has opportunities for collaboration between participants.

Our template workshop takes place in an art museum, but it could also take place in other locations where multiple images, items or objects can be found.

A museum can be an ideal location because it embodies the notion of collecting: a museum has been created by amassing a collection designed to be shared with others.

Rather than passively viewing this collection as the curator or exhibition designer has chosen to display it, we encourage participants to engage with what is on display by creating their own collection-within-a-collection.

To help focus students' attention, the workshop is designed to approach collecting around thematic topics which become increasingly complex as the activity progresses.

It can be conducted with students working individually but may function especially well with students collaboratively working together in pairs or small groups of 3.

This complicates the task, but also helps students gain skills and experience in communication and collaboration as well as creativity and critical thinking as they consider what themes can be explored through amassing and curating a collection.

Here in Siena, we led this workshop at the Pinacoteca Nazionale, the superb national museum of Sienese painting.

We began by briefly orienting students to the museum: this particular museum, its collection, and how it has been organized and curated.

I then led a brief discussion on the concept of collecting and here we could give a brief summary of the history of museums, to encourage participants to not take for granted the way collections are displayed.

I then presented an overview of the workshop activity: of exploring the museum collection to create our own collections, beginning with prompts of more focused topics, then branching out to broader themes around which a collection can be formed.

In Phase 1: I gave the students a very “foundational” prompt, such as a color, and then gave them 10 minutes to search for details in which this color is present, creating photographs which focus on this element.

The students then shared these photos with each other: depending on the technology available, the photos can be viewed on a computer screen, projected or simply shared on cell phones by participants.

I then led a brief discussion on the elements which the participants had gathered.

In Phase 2: I gave the students prompts that were very “elemental” such as “round things”, “animals”, “eyes” “plants” “patterns” for example.

I chose those prompts to fit the location, with the intention to get participants to consider the collection from a new perspective.

For example, if the collection is a botanical garden, maybe don't have “green things” as a topic because that is too general and does not prompt participants to change their perspective.

Perhaps “rough or smooth surfaces” or “patterns” could be a fitting initial theme in a botanical garden.

At this phase of the workshop, I gave the students 10 minutes to search around the displays in the museum to find and photograph things that connect to the prompt they were given.

This activity can also work well dividing students into collaborative pairs.

After 10 minutes, the group then met back together and shared a selection of their favorite images they had created.

I then led a group discussion about the selected images: what was interesting about them, and what the similarities and differences of the examples gathered in the collection reveal about the chosen theme.

At this point the instructor may also wish to give more technical suggestions about the photographic process

(maybe how could images could be adjusted to be more impactful, in terms of composition, framing / cropping, scale, exposure, etc)

but the primary objective of this workshop is not to gain photographic skills but to use photography as a means to explore the theme of collecting, and to gain skills in creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration.

In Phase 3: I now gave students a more complex topic, such as “intersection” or “open space” “contrast” “peace” “geometry” “complexity” “drama” or “atmosphere”.

I gave them another 10 minutes to search the museum to create a collection of photographs connecting now to this theme.

This activity can work well in small groups of three or 4, allowing participants the opportunity to discuss together the meaning of this topic to find the images together and then to decide together which images could be suitable to include in their collection.

As before, after 10 minutes the whole group met back together and shared a selection of their favorite images they had created.

And then again we discussed the selected images: what was interesting about them and what they revealed about the chosen topic. I encouraged the students here if they wanted to comment on their pictures or others' images, and we discussed how a series of images can start to work together as a collection.

Time permitting, we can also have a phase 4 the group can decide together upon a shared theme, and this could then take another 10 minutes to create a selection of images on this theme.

The workshop then concludes with looking together at the collected images (ideally we would look at them on a computer for a small group or a large group could use a large screen or projection.)

So this activity allows the participants to reflect on the act of collecting, and viewing the collection of images they create as their own artistic body of work which holds its own conceptual meaning, rather than simply functioning as documentation of existing subjects.

Participants are encouraged to use this collecting activity in the future, if they visit a museum or other collection, as a way to personally engage with the subjects, and to critically think about how we collect, organize, and present things and knowledge.