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# Michael Letts: Art as Energy!

[Heather Vaughan-Southard](#) [arts assessment](#), [arts education](#), [creative process](#), [creativity](#), [energy](#), [Harvard Project Zero](#), [MAEIA](#), [Michael Letts](#), [Oliver Herring](#), [performance events](#), [performance tasks](#), [process-based learning](#), [Thomas Hirschhorn](#), [time-based](#)

One integral aspect of many MAEIA assessment items is time limits. Sometimes this may seem unnatural, high pressure, or “test-oriented.” But in the arts, limiting time can often be good, can even be liberating, and can spur creativity.

Creativity is not just coming up with new ideas. In fact, there few if any truly new ideas. Usually creative concepts are changes to existing ideas. We can invert an idea, or synthesize it with another idea, or magnify it, apply it to a different purpose. Creativity is change.

Time limits are part of many art forms. Music, drama, and dance are all time based. In visual arts, time limits may seem less

appropriate. But, a common question from new art teachers is “what do I do with students who finish early?” That can be a real concern, until we learn to structure visual arts lessons in terms of process, to consider that time is of the essence.

### **Creative Process as Time and Energy**

It is often said the first idea is the worst idea. It is the first thing that comes to mind. It may even be a cliché. It is first because it is the idea we already know. But, it does have some value: it is a start.

So, we change it, we modify, combine, repurpose, transform, extend, or oppose (flip) it. Creative ideas don't come to us like magic, fully formed. Creativity is what we do with ideas, how we edit, transcend, and develop them. Creativity is really about process. Great works of art come from artists so committed to process that they cannot stop processing ideas until something fresh emerges.

Therefore, we need be sure to teach process, not just product. A product goal is a goal already conceived. Creativity is also finding a new goal. We don't always just want to get to a product, we want to create a process that leaves artifacts as evidence of a unique trail of thought. Then we arrive at creativity that can flow without a beginning or end.

The great artist/educator [Thomas Hirschorn](#) took the idea of a monument and redefined it. Traditional monuments are permanent structures that create and honor memories. Hirschorn flipped the “permanent” part of monuments and came up with the idea of a temporary monument. And he didn't design it himself. He designed a process and let the people of the community create their monument. The idea was “monument”, but also was “temporary”; it had a time limit. A time limit can be a very

empowering idea: we know when it is over. It eliminates the pressure of judgement of the “final product”. It is done when it fills the time, when the energy has been applied and sustained, and the artifact or outcome is the experience: the power of process, the real memory, not the object.

Hirschorn also came up with a great concept to define art: “Quality no, Energy yes!” He says quality is a characteristic of a product, but art is about energy. This is true when we consider that art is communication of ideas and emotion, empathy and expression; the true completion of art lies in also presenting (one of the process categories of the National Arts Standards), not only creating. The impact art makes in experience and ideas is the ultimate value. We make art to communicate and express. Energy can take the form of time spent. The real goal of most artists is to spend their time making their art. When one piece is done, they don’t quit with relief, they start another. The value for the artist is in the creative thought, the time spent. The goal is to be creative, not to be done being creative. And more and more, for contemporary artists, the real creation is of a process which produces an artifact.

[Oliver Herring](#), in his Art 21 episodes, says he doesn’t care about “the medium or the object...I really care about the process.” His “Task Party” process is one of play; “Play- it’s a thing we put on hold because we get distracted by so many things.” As educators, we know play is a primary learning process. Daniel Pink has identified play as one of the “Six Senses” of right brain creative thought. Picasso famously said “Every child is an artist...”. Herring says “everyone is a creative agent.” Children love play time. Tell a child to go play for an hour, and give them something to play with, and they will fill the hour with energy. Herring simply provides time and materials in his Task Parties and people bring the energy and infectious play.

Time is a major component of systems to structure energy. Ask any musician. Time in the art studio also is identified in [Harvard Project Zero](#) as a key benefit of visual arts education, one of the “studio habits of mind”: “engage and persist”. Inspire to play, to explore ideas, we engage and persist. The process of art is often playful search and research, an exploration. Exploring is grounded in play. It doesn’t end when you have a product, it ends when you run out of time.

How can we structure a visual arts lesson to target that as an objective?

Some of my most successful visual arts lessons use structured systems of time and energy as objectives. I think of them as creative systems and as “art problems”: play with a purpose, a structured exploration rather than an “assignment.” Assignment sounds like something you do for work, not play. I like the word “problem.” In math, a problem is about learning a process as much as finding a solution. The successful math answer is evidence that the student knows the process. Why not think of an art project of the evidence of engaging and persisting in a process? Energy, yes! Many less than successful art pieces look like they just lack real engagement or involvement by the artist, for whatever reason.

Time limits can force us to be more creative. If we have all the time in the world, we will search our mind for that next decision, that next best move, the right answer. But the answer is not there. In our mind is only what we already know. With a time limit, we must go back to our play state, make a random decision, go with it, play with it, and then decide what it means and see how it works: the process of discovery. Limits of time and of materials will force new analogies.

As my young son once told me when I asked him what he would do if he wasn't so lucky to have all his cool toys- he didn't miss a beat: "It's okay dad, I'd just go outside and play with sticks." Play was the experience, not the object, the process not the toy or artifact.

Time limits also give your students freedom and deniability. They do what they can with the time given, the goal is to make it through the process and have something to show for it, and to describe the decision-making process. The art from each student can be unique and surprising, not a replica of something that some other artist already did better than they can. It will be their voice.

In one of my recent MAEIA presentations, I had a group of teachers do a timed collage, based on a MAEIA visual arts performance event. At the end, much of the group discussion was around the feelings and outcomes we encountered because of the time limit. The teachers were interested and surprised by the effect of a timed project. The project was loosely based on the collage-based [Performance Event "Communicating an Idea"](#). If art is about communicating, then this item gets right to the core of our purpose! Don't be afraid of timed projects and assessments, and take a look at the MAEIA assessments to inspire your own use of time systems to inspire your teaching and students.

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