

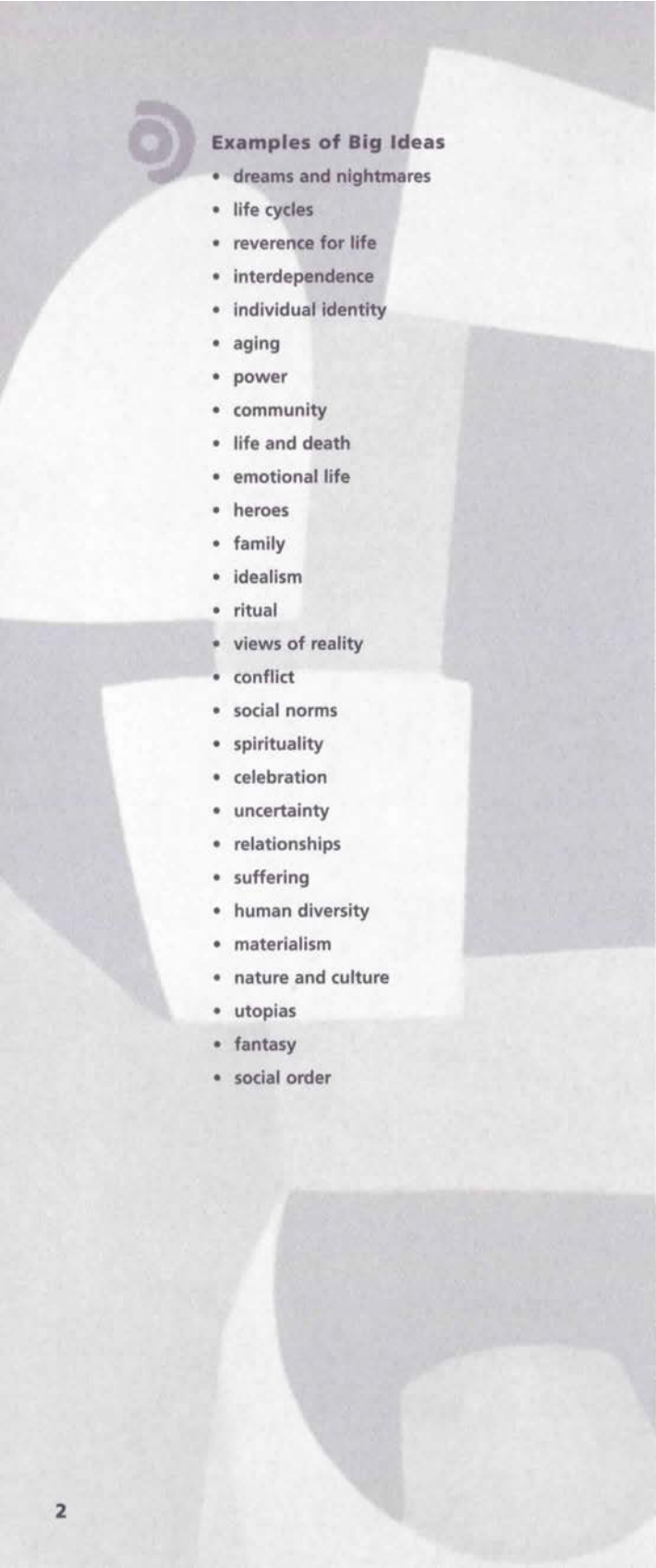
## Big Ideas and Artmaking

*"I think that painting or the kind of painting I prefer to explore, is about unknowns or looking for questions more than answers."*

—artist Brice Marden<sup>1</sup>

Big ideas—broad, important human issues—are characterized by complexity, ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity. Whether stated as single terms, phrases, or complete statements, big ideas do not completely explicate an idea, but represent a host of concepts that form the idea. For example, the term conflict may represent a number of concepts, such as power, personal and social values, justice and injustice, and winners and losers.

Because they provide artmaking with significance, big ideas are important to the work of professional artists—and of students if student artmaking is to be a meaning-making endeavor rather than simply the crafting of a product. Big ideas are what can expand student artmaking concerns beyond technical skills, formal choices, and media manipulation to human issues and conceptual concerns. Big ideas can engage students in deeper levels of thinking.



## Examples of Big Ideas

- dreams and nightmares
- life cycles
- reverence for life
- interdependence
- individual identity
- aging
- power
- community
- life and death
- emotional life
- heroes
- family
- idealism
- ritual
- views of reality
- conflict
- social norms
- spirituality
- celebration
- uncertainty
- relationships
- suffering
- human diversity
- materialism
- nature and culture
- utopias
- fantasy
- social order

## Developing Big Ideas

Artists generally experiment with several directions before settling on a big idea that will sustain their attention over an extended period. Students too need opportunities to learn about an idea, build an adequate knowledge base for working with it, examine the idea in the work of other artists, and find personal connections to the idea.

Personal interest plays a significant role in directing the artist's choice of ideas. Becoming personally connected to a big idea is highly important for artmaking; otherwise, artmaking can become merely an exercise in problem solving.

## From Big Ideas to Artmaking

Big ideas drive an artist's artmaking over time. They extend beyond individual artworks and encompass large portions, if not all, of an artist's body of work. Big ideas represent the artist's overall purposes for artmaking, and they tell—in broad conceptual terms—what the artist is about.

### *Theme or Big Idea?*

An artist's theme may or may not be the same thing as his or her big idea. If a theme persists throughout an artist's body of work, then it is the same as the artist's big idea. For example, alienation consistently inhabits the tableau installations of sculptor George Segal. Whether Segal depicted a street corner, a diner, or a bedroom, his work is about human alienation in the urban environment. Thus, Segal's theme and big idea are the same.

On the other hand, Abstract Expressionist Robert Motherwell pursued the theme of death in over 100 paintings in his series *Elegy to the Spanish Republic* (1948–97), but this theme is not characteristic of his entire body of work; it does not encompass his overall big idea. Rather, Motherwell's overall purpose and

big idea is the exploration of human emotions; the human emotions in response to death is only one part of a wider range of human feeling that Motherwell investigated.

### *Subject Matter or Big Idea?*

Subject matter is the artist's topic, whereas big ideas are the artist's concepts. Consider the work of three artists. Van Gogh's subject matter included landscapes, portraits, and still lifes. His big idea was the portrayal of human emotions. Pop Artist Andy Warhol created silkscreened images of Campbell's soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles, dollar bills, and Marilyn Monroe and other famous people. These were Warhol's subject matter, but his big idea was the denouncement of the sacred values and ideals of high art, which accepted only certain topics as appropriate subject matter. Henri Matisse painted interiors, still lifes, and female models, but his big idea was the depiction of an ideal world untroubled by the imperfections of the real world.

Distinguishing between an artist's subject matter and big idea is often difficult, but the designer of classroom artmaking needs to clearly understand the distinction between them. By answering "What is the artist's work about?" we can say, for instance, that van Gogh's paintings are about landscapes, portraits, and sunflowers; but they also are about human emotion.

We can answer the same question about student artmaking, by saying that it is about certain subject matter, but also about big ideas that extend beyond the subject matter. The big idea assumes primary importance, whether in a professional artist's work or in student artmaking. The big idea provides the conceptual ground for artmaking; the subject matter serves as the context for examining the big idea.



### **A Starter List of Big Ideas and Artists**

Can your students name three artists who work with the big idea of identity? A good way to enable understanding of big ideas is to look at examples of artists and their big ideas. A starter list of artists who work with several big ideas is on page 140. Encourage students to make their own lists, or work on a class list collaboratively.



### **Fascinating Facts**

After Jennifer Bartlett spent six years and \$100,000 of her own money to create a proposal for a three-acre garden in Battery Park City, at the lower end of Manhattan where she lived at the time, the plan was canceled by Governor Cuomo. As a response, Bartlett moved to Greenwich Village and built her own three-level, all-season series of garden "rooms" on the roof and terraces of her new house.