

# Toyin Ojih Odutola A Countervailing Theory

11 Aug 2020–24 Jan 2021



*To the Next Outpost* (2019) from *A Countervailing Theory*.  
Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

## Creative Prompts

Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning have worked with three creative partners to produce a series of prompts inspired by Toyin Ojih Odutola's *A Countervailing Theory*.

Have a go at creating your own artworks and writing inspired by the themes and ideas from the exhibition.

These tasks are designed for anybody to try. Use these prompts in your own way and remember there's no 'wrong' way of doing this.

# Drawing & mark-making

These drawing tasks are inspired by Toyin Ojih Odutola's process and distinctive way of using mark-making as a way to communicate. They have been developed by Submit to Love artist Brad Reay and Art Studio Co-ordinator Alex Brady.

## What you need:

- 2 pieces of paper.
- Pens and/or pencils in black, white or grey. You can use a range of materials or try exploring the possibilities of a single ballpoint pen.

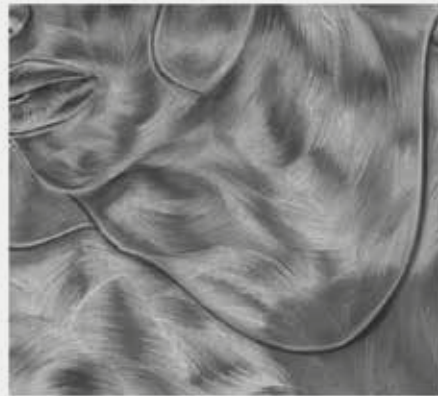


*A Parting Gift; Hers and Hers, Only (2019) from A Countervailing Theory.*  
Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

## Task 1: Mark-making sampler

Mark-making is as simple as it sounds: it's the process of making marks – lines, dots, squiggles, swirls... It can be used in an artwork to create texture and patterns. Mark-making is an important element in Ojih Odutola's work – for this new series of drawings, she allowed her mark-making to guide her, transforming the surface and adding layers of meaning. You may be inspired by some of the textures she creates in her work – see examples below:

This task invites you to experiment with your drawing tools and will serve as a handy reference guide for Task 3.



Details from various works by Toyin Ojih Odutola from *A Countervailing Theory* (2019–20).  
Images: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



## What to do:

1. Draw a 12 square grid on a piece of paper.
2. Fill in one square with a type of dot.  
Will it be big, small, uniform, unpredictable...?
3. Fill in another square with a line.  
Will it be wobbly, diagonal, overlapping, soft...?
4. Now, continue filling in each square with a different mark of your choice. Be playful and test out a range of different marks.

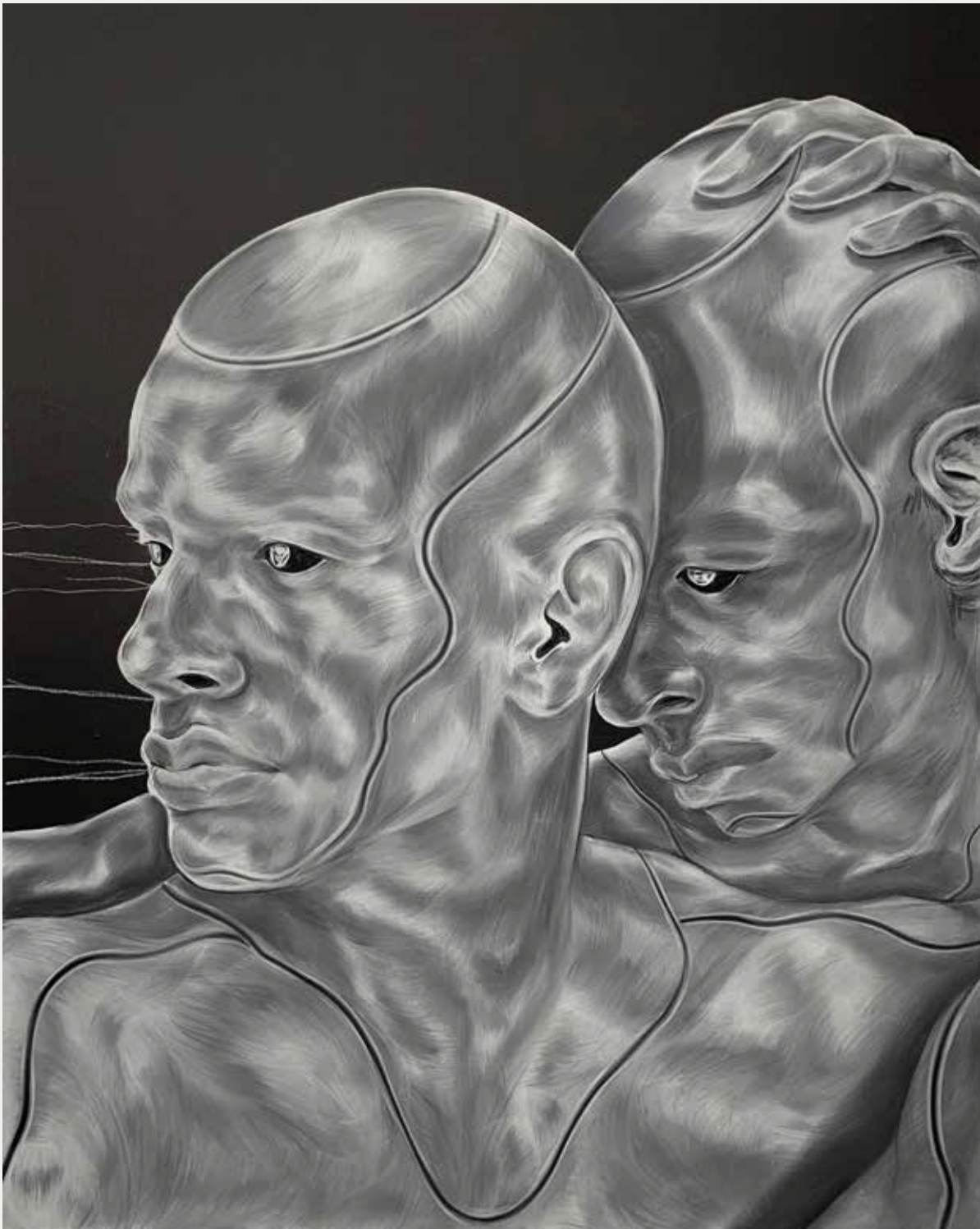
## Examples



Artwork by Brad Reay

**'Just keep going. Whatever comes into your head.  
Be a bit random!'**

Brad Reay



*Semblance of Certainty* (2019) from *A Countervailing Theory*.  
Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

## **Task 2: Continuous line drawing**

This is a quick exercise to help loosen up your fingers!

A continuous line drawing is a way of drawing without lifting your pen or pencil off the paper. It's like taking a dot for a walk.

We used Ojih Odutola's *Semblance of Certainty* as a reference for this task but you can use an artwork of your choice.

## What to do:

1. Position the image you are working from in a way you can comfortably see it whilst you draw.

2. On a blank sheet of paper draw the outline of the faces and features without taking your pen or pencil off the paper. Try and do it in one continuous flowing movement. Set yourself a two minute timer...

The end result might look quite abstract or not like the original artwork but that's ok! You are going to work into this in Task 3.

## Examples



Artwork by Brad Reay

**'My brain went a bit funny doing this so I stopped, paused and got back on track'** Brad Reay



Artwork by Alex Brady



## Task 3: Mark-making masterpiece

This task combines what you have already done in Tasks 1 & 2 to create a final piece.

### What to do:

1. Look again at your drawing from Task 2. There will be a number of different sections within your continuous line drawing, created as your pen or pencil moved around the paper.
2. Fill in each section with a different mark-making sample. Use your mark-making sampler created in Task 1 for reference ideas.
3. Add contrast in your image by varying the different materials, patterns and directions with each section you work into. You may also choose to fill in the background.

### Examples



Artwork by Alex Brady

### 'It's art – just go with it'

Brad Reay



Artwork by Brad Reay

These prompts were created by Headway East London, Barbican Guildhall Creative Learning's Community Collaborator. Find out more about them on their website.

Submit to Love studios is home to a group of mostly self-taught artists who have all survived brain injuries. Their mission is Discovery through Art.

Instagram [@submittolovestudios](https://www.instagram.com/submittolovestudios)

[www.submittolovestudios.org](http://www.submittolovestudios.org)

[www.headwayeastlondon.org](http://www.headwayeastlondon.org)

# Drawing prompts

Creative prompts from Frances Stanfield,  
Co-Founder and Tutor, London  
Drawing Group.

## What you need:

- 2 pieces of paper.
- Charcoal on white paper or chalk on black paper. And/or any pens or pencils of your choice. You can use a range of materials or try exploring the possibilities of a single ballpoint pen.



*Imitation Lesson; Her Shadowed Influence (2019) from A Countervailing Theory.*  
Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.





*Mating Ritual* (2019) from *A Countervailing Theory*.

Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

## 1.

Pick an artwork from the exhibition. As you look at the piece, note down your first impressions. For example, what stands out for you?

Are there any particular shapes, colours, figures that you are drawn to or a meaning/feeling that comes to you?

## 2.

Draw the same artwork without looking down at your paper. You might find it easier to keep your drawing material on the paper.

Lock your eye on one point in the artwork and place your drawing material at one point on your paper. As your eye moves and travels around the work, your drawing hand moves in tandem – like a call and response between your eyes and your drawing hand.

Not looking at the paper forces us to look solely at the work of art. It slows our looking process and helps us get to know the work in more detail and uncover hidden elements and meaning.

Set a timer for 5 minutes!

### 3.

As you were drawing, you may have noticed that you became more present in looking at the work or maybe your mind emptied, and drawing felt almost automatic. Your first impressions of the work might have changed or grown. Look at the piece again for a few minutes and note down anything that has changed or whether your view on something has expanded.

### 4.

Now, look away from the artwork. Time yourself for 3 minutes and draw it from memory.

### 5.

How has the composition changed in your memory drawing? Has the meaning or the story changed? Compare your drawings.



*To See and To Know; Future Lovers (2019) from A Countervailing Theory.*  
Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

These prompts were created by London Drawing Group.

[www.londondrawinggroup.com](http://www.londondrawinggroup.com)

[@londondrawinggroup](https://www.instagram.com/londondrawinggroup)

[@frances.stanfield](https://www.instagram.com/frances.stanfield)

# Writing & Poetry: How to Begin Writing inspired by Art

These creative prompts have been created by poet Rachel Long.



*A Considered Choice* (2019) from *A Countervailing Theory*.  
Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.

## **Task 1: Free writing — Free your mind, trust your gut, write what you like**

One of the best ways to fill a blank page is to forget about writing. It may sound counterproductive but it's one of the most creative things you can do; to completely let go of worrying about what to write or how, and instead being open to the possibility of not knowing what you will write.

A blank page can be intimidating, often we get 'stuck' with what we 'should write', or how a poem or story 'should sound' (there is no right or wrong way!). Or we get hung up about our audience or reader who might see or judge it. Try to forget about ALL these things.

At first draft-stage none of this matters, it only prevents us from being our most creative, our best and most open and free selves.

Free writing is key. But what is it?

Free writing is recording EVERYTHING and ANYTHING that pops into your head whilst looking or thinking about a subject.

Free writing is listening only to the thoughts you have spontaneously and instinctively.

You don't have to worry about spelling or grammar or whether it makes sense or what form it might be taking, all you must do is record your thoughts. Each and every one.

The only rule of free writing is that you are not allowed to stop writing. You must keep moving your pen across the page for the whole duration (5 minutes). If suddenly nothing comes to mind, then you simply write: nothing, nothing, nothing, as many times as you need until something else comes to mind.



## Here's how to free write:

- Place your subject in front of you, or at the front of your mind's eye. In this case, select a specific artwork from this booklet. Choose whichever one you like or are drawn to most, whichever one 'speaks' to you.
- Now, set your alarm clock/timer for five minutes
- Now, write down everything and anything that comes into your head as you look at the artwork. Don't censor yourself. There's nothing that you cannot or should not write on your page. Write whatever your mind gives you. Just don't stop writing. You have five minutes, what are you waiting for?
- Once your five minutes are up, check in with yourself: how do you feel? What did it feel like to write down entirely instinctually?
- Now, have a read back over what you recorded. What cool/strange/enlightening/surprising words, phrases, images, or thoughts do you have about the painting?

**Follow up challenge:** Underline/highlight ten of your coolest/strangest/most enlightening/surprising words/phrases/images. Transfer them onto a new page – do you see how they might fit and work together? Can you begin to see a poem or story emerging?

## Task 2: Questions for a person or object in the painting

The way we get to know other people best is by asking them questions. The first thing most of us say when meeting a new person is: Hello, what's your name?

This question is often followed by more questions. The deeper a relationship becomes, the questions often become deeper, more personal, more essential perhaps. We get to know a person through questions. We are known to other people through our responses to their questions – spoken and unspoken.

Art is similar in this way. We can get to know it by posing questions.

**Prompt:** Select an artwork from this booklet. Decide who or what you will be asking your questions to: is it a person in the drawing, or perhaps you could choose a part of their body, or the scenery.

On a fresh page, begin to ask as many questions to the person or object as you possibly can in the timeframe (5 minutes is great). In a similar way to your free write, record each and every question that comes to mind. Don't censor yourself. Ask away. Ask anything and everything you like, for once.

At the end of your five minutes, look back over what you have written. Give your piece a title (titles are great, even as placeholders, they can make our writing feel located, real). What you might find you have is a poem made up entirely of questions.

**Follow up prompt:** You might like to assess the order of your questions so that each follow on well from the next OR, you might want to exaggerate some zig-zaggy jumps between questions. You might want to add some questions, perhaps make them very specific, or you might like to edit some out so that there is a neat 'through line' or pattern of questioning from the beginning to end of your piece.

*Suspicious; Left Behind (2019) from A Countervailing Theory.*  
Image: © Toyin Ojih Odutola. Courtesy of the artist and Jack Shainman Gallery, New York.



### **Task 3:** **Imagine yourself inside the artwork**

Transporting ourselves through time and space is the superpower of being a writer. We can go anywhere, be anyone. All it takes is a first leap of imagination, or the will to move from one state into another.

**Prompt:** Choose another artwork from this booklet. You may want to choose one that appeals or scares you. One that says, 'come in', or one you feel seems to say, 'stay away.'

You can watch Toyin Ojih Odutola's narrated tour of the exhibition and pause on certain drawings that grab your attention: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bp1lReZReZ8>.

Once you've selected your composition, simply leap, jump straight into the world of the drawing. What does the new landscape look, feel, smell, taste, sound like? Who's there, what are they doing? And now that you are inside, now that you are an active part of the story of that world now, what happens? Begin with: 'And then'...

**Follow up prompt:** Once you've written for ten minutes, read back over all you have. Underline or highlight what you think is your strongest image or event or scene. Now, set a timer for another ten minutes, and begin writing from the point which you identified for yourself.

Remember to have fun! Write hard and fast and free.

## Task 4: Fragments or The Sequence

In her own practice, artist Toyin Ojih Odutola draws on an eclectic range of references, from ancient history to popular culture to contemporary politics. Toyin Ojih Odutola encourages us to piece together the fragments of the stories that she presents.

**Prompt:** Look at one of the images in this booklet. Write down the first phrases, words or sentences that comes to mind – it may be a description of the scene; the people or the feeling or action in it. It might be something in the artwork that reminds you of something else from your own life.

Record all that come to mind for one minute.

Now turn to another artwork in the booklet. Do the same writing task for this artwork.

Then do the same exercise for the third artwork, the fourth artwork and so on – do as many as you're comfortable doing!

You should have at least one or two, but up to 8 'Countervailing Lines' – a fragmented narrative poem inspired by Toyin Ojih Odutola's exhibition.

## Follow up prompt:

1. Order and arrange your written fragments.

Do what feels right for you, and/or decide on what order best fits your poem.

You might want to cut out your lines and move them around manually to see/hear what works best.

## And/or

2. Write more, deeper into each of your sentences, so that each become your own brief scenes/compositions and glimpses of a narrative, a story that you would like to tell or present.

Afterwards, arrange in a linear way, or purposefully manipulate the order to further fragment the narrative poem, or the disparate 'chapters' of your story.

These prompts were created by poet, Rachel Long.

<https://www.octaviapoetrycollective.com/octaviapoets>

[Instagram @rachelnalong](#)

Make sure to share your work by emailing it to **creative.learning@barbican.org.uk** or using the hashtag **#ToyinOjihOdutola**



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