

Art for Activism

Grades 11-12



Displacement, Tania Bruguera, 1998-9

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Introductory Information:

- November 28th, 2018
- Title: Art for Activism
- Grades 11-12
- Class: Advanced or Intermediate Painting
- Class size: 20-25 students
- Length of Class Period: 1 hour
- Lesson Topic/Description: In this lesson, students will evaluate how visual art can help fight social justice. The students will study how artists from a variety of backgrounds and cultures comment on contemporary social issues within their community. Students will then consider the issues they deem important and create a piece that makes a statement, considering its impact as a public piece.



Harlem Shelter, Ai Wei Wei, 2017

STAGE 1: DESIRED RESULTS

A. ENDURING UNDERSTANDINGS:

- Students will understand that art making can communicate the commonalities among cultures.
- Students will understand the significance of participating in social activism, and the ways art making can contribute to social change.
- Students will understand that the context in which a work of art is created provides a window into the purposes it serves and the reasons it is valued.

B. ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:

- What is an artist's responsibility within their own community?
- In what ways do artists act as agents of change, and what kinds of aesthetic choices do they make to express it?
- How can the visual arts help in fighting for social justice?

C. STATE STANDARDS ADDRESSED:

- **Critical Response.** Students will describe and analyze their own work and the work of others using appropriate visual arts vocabulary. When appropriate, students will connect their analysis to interpretation and evaluation.
- **Purposes and Meanings in the Arts.** Students will describe the purposes for which works of dance, music, theatre, visual arts, and architecture were and are created, and, when appropriate, interpret their meanings.
- **Roles of Artists in Communities.** Students will describe the roles of artists, patrons, cultural organizations, and arts institutions in societies of the past and present.
- **Concepts of Style, Stylistic Influence, and Stylistic Change.** Students will demonstrate their understanding of styles, stylistic influence, and stylistic change by identifying when and where art works were created, and by analyzing characteristic features of art works from various historical periods, cultures, and genres.

D. ACQUISITION/ LEARNING OBJECTIVES:

- The students will critically evaluate the world around them.
- The students will consider what social issues are relevant to their community or other communities students care about.

- The students will engage in dialogue about the various social and political issues other cultures are tackling.
- The students will develop empathy by engaging in conversation about others' experiences.
- The students will evaluate the role of artists in activism.
- The students will interpret the impact of images in the world.
- The students will cultivate a point of view and work to develop an argument and express it visually.
- The students will create an image that reflects a social issue that they are affected by or one that they have observed in our world.
- The students will contemplate how their work as an artist is in dialogue with the community around them.

STAGE 2: ASSESSMENT EVIDENCE

A. PERFORMANCE TASK OR FINAL PRODUCT:

The final product will convey a point of view, represented visually. A clear argument for justice will be exemplified, through symbolism and artistic components. The piece will include elements of painting, and display the ability to render the material. A successful product will engage the viewer to question the context the piece exists in and provoke emotion. The final product will be presented in a space that aligns with the message conveyed.

B. CONTINUUM OF ASSESSMENTS:

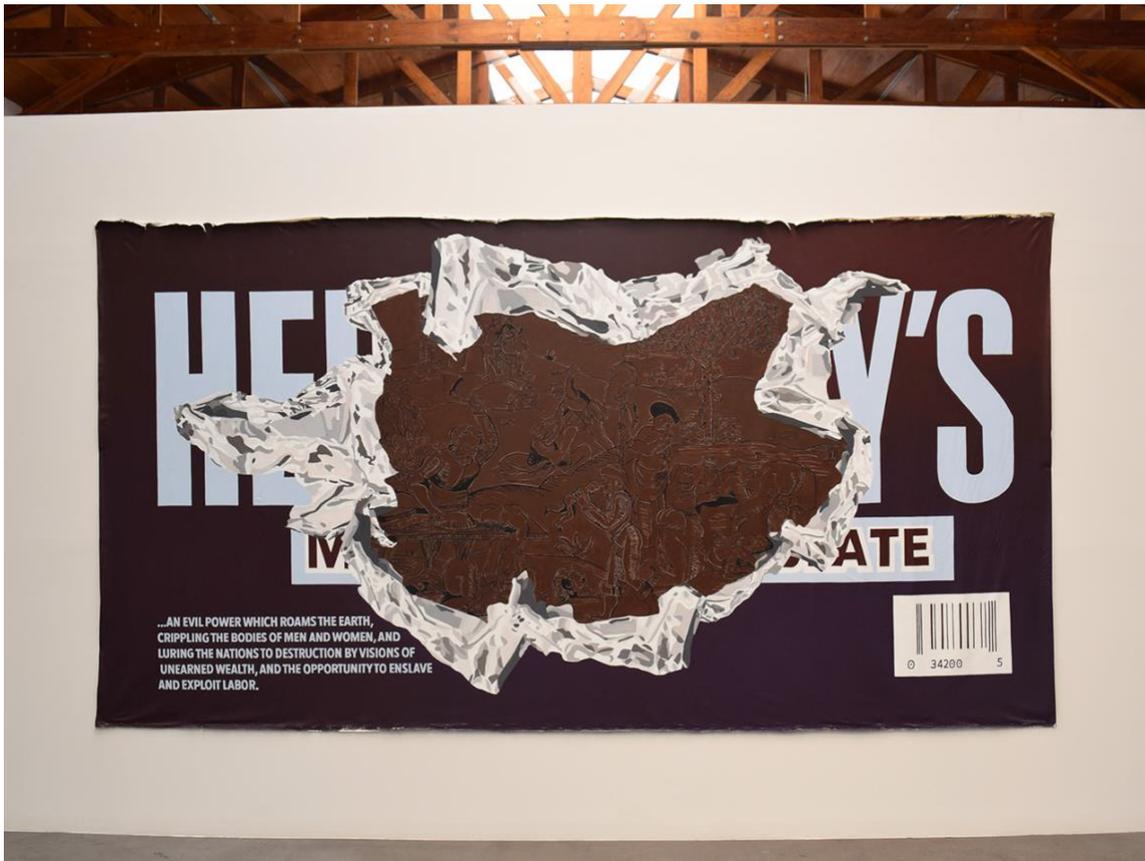
- As a class, students will view and discuss artists who use art as activism. Students will participate in questioning of artists' messages and opinions. They will exhibit understanding by critically evaluating the impact of artworks.
- Students will help brainstorm activist Big Ideas or topics of investigation.
- Students will choose a topic that interests them, research it and present their investigations to the instructor. The instructor and student will have a conversation of how the student intends to represent their social issue. The student will demonstrate their preparation with sketches, further questions, and cited research they found interesting.
- The students will participate in small group discussions as the project progresses. Students will reflect on how their work is in dialogue with their peers. Students will offer suggestions to each other for further growth.
- At the end of the project, students will be broken up into groups of about 5 or 6. The groups will first individually write a "tweet," or a statement of 140 characters or less, that sums up the activist

argument of each of the pieces. In doing so, each individual takes on the perspective of the art piece, and succinctly delivers the opinion in a form that contemporary culture uses to share opinions. After the tweets are labeled for each of the pieces, the group discusses if the tweets align with artist intention, what is successful within the piece, and what needs greater clarification. They will also discuss how its presentation would influence the public.

STAGE 3: LEARNING PLAN

A. MATERIALS AND EQUIPMENT:

- Paint (acrylic, watercolor, gouache, oil, spray, fabric)
- Surfaces (canvas, canvas board, wood, walls, fabric, found materials, etc.)
- Paint Brushes
- Water proofing Spray or clear acrylic finish
- Other materials as deemed fit, in alliance with students' individual plan



Minerva Cuevas, "Bittersweet - Hershey's" (2015), acrylic on canvas (click to enlarge)

B. RESOURCES: VISUALS, TEXT, MEDIA AND WEB

Gates, T. (2011) Civil Tapestry 4. Retrieved from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gates-civil-tapestry-4-l03666>.

Hendren, S. (2016, February). An Icon is a Verb: About the Project. Retrieved from <http://accessibleicon.org/#notes-on-design-activism>.

Kozak, N. (2018, March 23). Communicating en Masse: The Art of Activism. *Art 21: Winter 2018 Issue "Whose Public?"* Retrieved from http://magazine.art21.org/2018/03/23/communicating-en-masse-the-art-of-activism/#.W_1xgmV3g69.

Sutton, B. (2015, October 23). Considering Chocolate's Colonial History. *Hyperallergic*. Retrieved from <https://hyperallergic.com/246178/considering-cocoas-colonial-history/>.

Tate. Art Term: Activist. Retrieved from <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/a/activist-art>.

Tate Shots. (2008, August 6). Tanie Bruguera – Tatlin's Whisper #5. *Youtube*. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x7L1s_GWn3o.

Watson, J. (2016, November 11). Art + Action: Creating a Platform for Social Justice. *Art 21: Teaching with Contemporary Art*. Retrieved from: http://magazine.art21.org/2016/11/11/art-action-creating-a-platform-for-social-justice/#.W_1x72V3g6-.

Wei Wei, A. About the Exhibition. Good Fences Make Good Neighbors. Retrieved from https://www.publicartfund.org/ai_weiwei_good_fences_make_good_neighbors/about.

C. VOCABULARY WITH DEFINITIONS:

Social justice: A concept of fair relations and equal access for all individuals within a society.

Activism: Efforts to promote change in order to create fair social, political, economic and environmental communities or spaces.

Art Activism: Art that takes a stand against or for political and social norms. Artists actively address power structures and represent them visually.

Activist art tends to generally be on public display to engage the public.

Community: A group of people that have something in common, whether that be geographically, interests, or attitudes.



Minerva Cuevas, Civil Tapestry, 2011

D. TEACHER INSTRUCTION:

- The teacher will start the class by writing on the board “activism” and “social justice.”
- The teacher will ask the class, “What do you think of when I say “activism” or “social justice?”
- The teacher will lead a discussion about the students’ thoughts and experiences with social justice and activism. She will ensure that the students understand the terms, offering a definition, if they do not get there on their own.
- The teacher will pose the question of if students, or individuals under 21, can make an impact on society?
- He or she will follow up with asking if the students believe art can be a form of activism.
- The teacher will then lead into an art observation activity. Within the powerpoint the questions will be sectioned into before context and after context. The students will first look at a piece of art with only the title, artist and date. Then after answering the first few questions, “What are your initial thoughts? What questions do you have? and What statement do you think the artist is making?” a bit more information will be given about the artist’s background and intent. The teacher will then ask students to discuss What argument is the artist portraying? And What evidence do you have to support that?
- While these questions will be worked through with partners or groups in the class, the teacher will pull the students together to discuss as a group to ensure students are understanding, and fostering critical thinking and empathetic discussions.
- The work introduced will include:

- The Accessible Icon Project by Sara Hendren: This Boston based project reimagines the stiff handicapped logo and makes a statement by placing a transparent graphic icon onto of the existing icon. The intent of Hendren is to illuminate the primacy of personhood.
 - Civil Tapestry 4 by Theaster Gates: Gates, an American Artist, interprets an event in 1963 during the Civil Rights Movement, where black students were sprayed by police using fire hoses to spray the crowd. Gates hopes to describe the power struggle and disruption of peace.
 - Good Fences Make Good Neighbors Exhibition by Ai Wei Wei: Coming from personal experience, the Chinese artist, presents powerful fences to comment on global migration and the division of people.
 - Bittersweet Chocolate by Minerva Cuevas: The Mexican artist presents a revealed cannibal scene behind a chocolate wrapper to illuminate the history of cocoa trade, European colonization in Latin America and the continued ways the region is exploited by the west.
 - Tatlin's Whisper #5 by Tania Bruguera: The Cuban artist describes this performance piece as an exhibition of power. The live event is a transformation of what she sees on the news, one that viewers question as art or not.
- After a discussion of the work, the teacher will ask what other social, political, or environmental issues they can think of.
 - The teacher will mention the ability to find differences and similarities across cultural groups, referencing the variety of artists they looked at.
 - As the students brainstorm ideas, the teacher will record their responses on the board.
 - For the next class, students will pick a contemporary or past issue they want to investigate. The teacher will suggest for students to pick something that is interesting to them so they can develop passion.
 - The second class, students can continue to research their topics and each will meet with the instructor to present their idea and start developing a plan.
 - Because the opportunities for presentation of subject is somewhat open, along the way, the teacher will check in with students to troubleshoot, propose new ideas, or help with material rendering.
 - The teacher will pair students every so often that she or he believes have work in dialogue with each other. By connecting students, they can learn from each other, about each other's backgrounds and interests, and develop empathy.
 - The teacher will also pose questions of presentation, as students near the end of their projects. Questions like How does the scale of your work

change its meaning? What about the vehicle of application, i.e. canvas, wall, mirror, etc.? will be asked.

- At the end of the assignment the teacher will divide the class into groups, and explain the summative assessment activity, as described above and repeated below.
 - At the end of the project, students will be broken up into groups of about 5 or 6. The groups will first individually write a “tweet,” or a statement of 140 characters or less, that sums up the activist argument of each of the pieces. In doing so, each individual takes on the perspective of the art piece, and succinctly delivers the opinion in a form that contemporary culture uses to share opinions. After the tweets are labeled for each of the pieces, the group discusses if the tweets align with artist intention, what is successful within the piece, and what needs greater clarification. They will also discuss how its presentation would influence the public.

E. QUESTIONS TO GENERATE DISCUSSION:

- Can people under 21 make an impact on society?
- What do professional artists do to make a statement?
- What is the impact of art being in a public space?
- How does visual culture or common symbolism influence activist art or help influence the viewer’s opinion?
- What issues are most relevant to you? To your family? To your ancestors? To this school? To this city? To this state?
- What do you think of when I say activism or social justice?
- How does the scale of your work change its meaning? What about the vehicle of application, i.e. canvas, wall, mirror, etc.?
- How can color and composition create an in your face, pay attention style?
- What is the social impact of your piece?
- What might the public think after seeing it?
- What questions would a viewer have after seeing your piece?
- How would those who oppose your opinion have to say?



The Accessible Icon Project, Sara Hendren, 2010

F. LEARNING ACTIVITY:

- Students will participate in teacher led discussions about activism, professional art activists and social issues that the students are interested in.
- Students will pose questions, and converse with their peers about what it means to be a high school art activist.
- When generating a brainstorm list of topics, students will reflect on which ones interest them or connect to their own lives.
- After the introduction of the lesson, the students will choose one to focus on and research online for homework in order to understand the complexities of their topic and ways that they can go about presenting an argument visually.
- Students will sketch and write down important quotes or facts that will influence their work. At the second class, the students will discuss with the teacher their plans, and share their research.
- As students work through their idea, they can choose to add a variety of materials, but will focus on painting as a way of working.
- Students will participate in conversations with peers and the instructor to progress their work.
- At the end of the project, students will participate in a small group critique.

G. . DIFFERENTIATION:

The teacher will provide handouts of the introduced slides for English Language Learners, so that the students can reference them alongside the presentation. The teacher can adapt the above chosen artists to represent the students he or she has in class. Perhaps, an artist, engaged in art activism and of similar decent to a particular student, has a video in their own native language, which can be shared with the class with English subtitles. As students research their desired topic, ELL's research and notes can be in their own language, to be represented visually. Native language words can even be introduced into their piece.

Autistic students may need individual attention to talk through a concept that they can understand or access. The teacher can adapt to what the autistic student is interested in, and portray the importance of sharing their opinion, rather than a political, or social sophisticated message. Scaffolded questions can help the student progress. The teacher can provide reference images, or focus on one artist that the student can work to replicate in their own way. In regards to materials, simplified questions of "do you want this" or "do you want that" can help students with ASD the broadness of choice. Children can also be given a premade paint palette. Children will be provided the opportunity to take sensory breaks.