

Traffic: ***Conceptual Art in Canada***



Gerald Ferguson
1,000,000 Pennies, 1980
azo dye print

TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE
Fall 2012

Vancouver
Artgallery

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Vancouver Art Gallery

Teacher's Guide for School Programs

Conceptualism has been called the most transformative art movement of the late twentieth century. The list of the ninety-plus artists represented in *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965–1980* reads like a who's who of the Canadian art world from the sixties right into the present. Challenging the perception that art is about craft and skill, conceptual artists were only concerned with the idea—the execution of the works became secondary, even unnecessary, leaving some viewers unsure as to whether they are viewing art or information. *Traffic* presents the art of Canadian and international artists working in Canada between 1965 and 1980, in a cohesive exhibition that provides a unique opportunity to see the work unfold within its historical and geographical context.

DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the Art Gallery. It also provides follow-up activities to facilitate discussion after your Gallery visit. Engaging in the suggested activities before and after your visit will reinforce ideas generated by the tour and build continuity between the Gallery experience and your ongoing work in the classroom. Most activities require few materials and can be adapted easily to the age, grade level and needs of your students. Underlined words in this guide are defined in the Vocabulary section.

The tour *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada* has three main goals:

- To introduce students to the ideas and materials of conceptual art,
- To explore the work of Canadian and international artists working in Canada during the sixties and seventies,
- To examine artworks by individual conceptual artists within their particular contexts.

Background to the Exhibition

Conceptual art is widely considered to be the most influential art movement of the late twentieth century. Until now, no major exhibition has explored the role that Canadian artists played in the development of conceptual art both nationally and internationally. *Traffic: Conceptual Art in Canada 1965–1980*, an ambitious and far-reaching exhibition of more than ninety Canadian and international artists producing work across the country, attempts to set the record straight. Vancouver is the final Canadian venue of the exhibition's cross-country tour before it opens in Germany.

Conceptualism emphasized art as idea, questioning the accumulation of more objects (including paintings, sculptures and monuments) in a world already too full of “things.” Artists began to question the need to learn specific art-making skills and, for the first time, began using language- and photo-based works, shocking an art world used to the large, colourful, abstract paintings of the Abstract Expressionists (think of Jackson Pollock and his huge, energetic paint-splattered canvases). Everyday materials easily accessible in the new age of mass media—index cards, photographs, books, scraps of paper, charts, diagrams, maps, slides—became art materials. Conceptual artists declared that art could be almost anything: a walk, a set of instructions, a line placed on the gallery floor, even a thought. Some artists suggested that a work no longer even needed to be produced in order to exist, and many decided that they did not need to produce their own artwork—anyone could do it.

Traffic is divided into five sections: Atlantic, Central Canada, Montreal, Ontario and Vancouver. Although the exhibition is organized along regional lines, it emphasizes the connections between the geographic areas—the lines of traffic—between them. Significant works by individuals, collectives and art communities show the diversity and complexity of work exploring conceptual ideas from local, national and international perspectives. Many artists' works appear in more than one section, giving credence to the flow of the cross-country artistic exchanges.

Vancouver has come to be closely associated with conceptual art. During the late sixties and early seventies, forward-thinking galleries and artist-run centres proliferated, giving rise to a culture that encouraged artistic exploration. One of the most important and influential exhibitions to be mounted during this era was curated at the Vancouver Art Gallery by the American critic and theorist Lucy Lippard and exhibited work by more than sixty European and North American conceptual artists. Exhibitions in the city by Vancouver artists such as the N.E. Thing Co. and Roy Kiyooka, as well as Robert Smithson and other American artists, received international attention. Canadian and American artists such as Joyce Wieland, Greg Curnoe, Sol LeWitt and Suzy Lake, whose works appear in various sections of this exhibition, created a buzz through their work that continues to resonate in contemporary art.

The exhibition is curated by Grant Arnold, Catherine Crowston, Barbara Fischer, Michèle Thériault with Vincent Bonin, and Jayne Wark. It was organized by the Art Gallery of Alberta, the Justina M. Barnicke Gallery and the Vancouver Art Gallery, in partnership with the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery, and with the support of the University of Toronto Art Centre, Blackwood Gallery and Doris McCarthy Gallery.

Conceptualism 101

Conceptual art is an art which questions the very nature of what is understood as art.
—Art historian Tony Godfrey

Conceptual artists consider the idea behind the art to be more important than either the execution or the craftsmanship of the work. Many conceptual artists don't even create their own work; rather, they leave a set of instructions for someone else to construct the actual piece. Conceptual art rejects the idea that talent or craft is necessary to create an artwork, which should be primarily concerned with ideas, knowledge and thought processes. Conceptual art asks questions about the nature of art and creates an opportunity to engage the viewer in a conversation.

In 1967, the conceptual artist Sol LeWitt wrote an enormously important and influential essay titled "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art." In it, he states:

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art.

For many conceptual artists, this meant that there was no longer a need for artists to make their own work. LeWitt stated: "An architect doesn't go off with a shovel and dig his foundation and lay every brick. He's still an artist." That is, he saw his ideas as blueprints that could be used by others who participate in the creative process, becoming artists themselves. He also used the analogy of composers, who write music to be played by other people—musicians—who are also artists.

The emergence of conceptual art frequently left viewers confused and uncomfortable as to how to approach the art. In a PBS interview, Katy Siegal, writer, professor and art historian, discusses the role of the viewer. She says that role is one of the most significant departures brought about by conceptual art. The viewer has to work at understanding the art.

She says:

There is less and less of an emphasis on the expression of the individual artist and his or her originality. There is more and more of an emphasis on the viewer's role in interpreting and questioning, in being critical of art, and really getting in there and duking it out with the art.

You go into the conceptual art show, and you're reading, for one thing. You can't just sort of walk by things; you have to read the text, look at the photographs and try to figure out what they're of, read the wall labels, and it may not make immediate sense; you may have to spend more time thinking about it, and in fact you may have to read a little bit before you go into the gallery. Conceptual art comes at the time more and more when art takes place in art schools in the universities and is more and more dependent on knowing something about the artist, what he or she is trying to do, what conceptual art is, why it might be art; you have to do a little bit more work.

PREPARING YOUR STUDENTS: Nudes in Art

While the tour will not be focusing on images containing nudity, students may see a number of images of the nude body as they walk through this exhibition. It may be helpful to talk with students beforehand about images of the nude in art, and encourage them to examine their own responses to the work and to think about why an artist might choose to include a nude body in a work of art.

Hilarious

A good place to begin is in simply informing students that some of the works of art they will see when they visit the Gallery will contain images of nude bodies. When people come to the Gallery they have all kinds of different responses to artworks showing nudes. Some people laugh, others feel embarrassed or uncomfortable. All of these responses are normal. But why? Why is the body so humorous and/or embarrassing? Ask the students whether they fall into hysterical laughter when they are in the shower or bath. Probably not. Part of the shock of seeing a nude figure in a museum is just that: we are accustomed to our nude bodies only in private. To see one in public is a shock.

Meaning and Context

In showing the nude body, artists remind us that the human body can have a variety of meanings, and nudity can be used to explore many things, such as:

- **Privacy:** The artist observes a very private moment when the person in the artwork is alone or with someone he or she loves.
- **Innocence:** Christian religious images over the last 500 years often include images of angels figured as nude babies, and the Christ child is often depicted nude. Like all babies, these figures are innocent, unaware of their nudity.
- **Bravery:** When Michelangelo sculpted the famous statue of David, he spoke of David's nudity as a symbol of bravery. David faced a giant without any protection on his body, relying on his faith and his skill to protect him.
- **Vulnerability:** Nudity can be a symbol of lack of defences—a person who has nothing and has nowhere to hide.

What are you wearing?

Another way to approach this topic is to think about clothing instead of nudity. What do clothes tell us about a person? Clothing can send messages about:

- the time in history,
- age and culture,
- wealth and style,
- the wearer's profession,
- stereotypes and expectations.

Some artists and art historians suggest that the nude figure is set free from all of this “distracting” information that is provided by what we wear, and becomes just a human being, from any time, place or background.

Contemporary art's relationship with the nude body

In the sixties and seventies, artists began to use the nude body to challenge traditional thinking. Some wanted to make visible hidden secrets, some were challenging the unquestioned influence of the media on constructions of identity, and some simply wanted to shock viewers out of their complacent acceptance of gender stereotyping. The reasons were many and the results were often shocking—they changed what was permissible both in and outside the art world.

ARTISTS' BACKGROUND

The following background information highlights some of the artists whose work we may explore in the school tour.

Sol LeWitt (1928–2007)

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair.

A groundbreaking American artist, Sol LeWitt helped change the face of the art world by stressing idea over execution as the focus of art. Born in Connecticut to Jewish Russian immigrants, he completed his Bachelor of Fine Arts at Syracuse before travelling to Europe to immerse himself in the art of the Old Masters. After serving in the Korean War, he moved to New York and studied art, working by day as a graphic designer and at night as a receptionist at MOMA, encountering many of the up-and-coming artists of the day. He went on to teach at New York University and other prestigious institutions, but eventually left America to live in Italy. In the late eighties, he returned to Connecticut, where he lived until his death in 2007. Although he became internationally renowned for his art, he was known to turn down awards and he was reluctant to grant interviews. He was camera-shy and particularly disliked the having his photograph in the newspaper.

LeWitt is regarded as one of the leading exponents of minimalism and conceptual art, and is known primarily for his deceptively simple geometric structures and architecturally scaled wall drawings. He said that he wanted to reduce art to its essentials, “to recreate art, to start from square one.” He liked the impermanence of conceptual art; when he started making wall drawings for exhibitions in the sixties, he embraced the fact that they could be painted over afterwards. He wasn’t making precious one-of-a-kind objects for posterity, he said. “Objects are perishable. But ideas need not be.”

In 1968, LeWitt began to create sets of guidelines for his two-dimensional works drawn directly on the wall. The wall drawings could be executed by anyone who could follow the exacting set of guidelines. Teams of assistants have been used by museums to create the works they have acquired. By the time of his death in 2007, more than 1,270 on-site wall drawings were executed, generally existing only for the duration of an exhibition, then destroyed. But they may be re-created in a different location according to the same exacting specifications.

Using a Black, Hard Crayon, draw ..., 1971, is a black-and-white lithograph. The long title contains specific instructions on how to create the work using a series of lines arranged and created in a specific order and direction. LeWitt participated in David Askevold’s groundbreaking Nova Scotia College of Art and Design Projects Class in 1969. LeWitt’s art consisted of a set of instructions students could choose from to construct an artwork. The original cards containing the submissions of twelve renowned conceptual artists are exhibited in *Traffic*.

Greg Curnoe (1936–1992)

Greg Curnoe is best known as an artist deeply committed to the idea of regionalism in his art. His attachment to London, Ontario, the place of his birth, is evident in his work through symbols and imagery connected to his daily life as it unfolded in that specific place. He studied art in London and Toronto, then returned to London to pursue a career as an artist. An avid cyclist who frequently portrayed oversize bicycle images, he was tragically killed while out riding with his cycling club.

In the 1960s, Curnoe was influenced by Pop and comic book art and is often typecast as a Pop Artist. His art is not easily categorized, but given his explorations into the world of ideas, his work

often sits more comfortably alongside conceptual art. He made extensive use of text, diaries and lists, and for subject matter he frequently focused on his family, friends, political beliefs and geographical surroundings. His Canadian identity recurs as a subject in his art; at one point, expressing an anti-American sentiment, he advocated (tongue-in-cheek) closing the Canada/US border even to birds, insects and germs. He used many diverse and unexpected surfaces and media for his artworks, which included paintings on plywood, silkscreen on Plexiglas, watercolours, collages and drawings. His interest in colour perception led him to explore colour theory; he became known for using colours that enhanced and bounced off one another.

His work *List of Names of Boys I Grew Up With*, 1962, consists of a list of names made with ink stamps and graphite on paper, mounted between Plexiglas. *Map of North America*, 1972, made in ink on paper, is a humorous rendition of North America with a large chunk of geography—the United States—completely missing.

Roy Kiyooka (1926–1994)

The dilemma that I've come to in terms of art is simply that I no longer know the form of anything.

An influential and innovative artist and teacher, Roy Kiyooka was born in Saskatchewan, a second-generation Japanese Canadian. In 1942, following the bombing of Pearl Harbor, his family was one of many who were forced to relocate. They moved to a small town in rural Alberta. Unable to finish high school, Kiyooka nonetheless managed to study at what is now the Southern Alberta Institute of Technology and Art, and later studied in Mexico. He became a key figure in the Emma Lake Workshops at the University of Saskatchewan, working with many of the foremost artists of the time. He taught at Regina College before moving to Vancouver to teach at the Vancouver School of Art and the University of British Columbia. He also taught at NSCAD and what is now Concordia University in Montreal.

A respected painter, Kiyooka challenged local artists to look beyond regional influences to international art currents for inspiration. During the 1960s, he became known for his work in performance, film, photography and music. He said: *"I love the quickness of photography, how it enables one to move through the world 'alert' to its poignancies."* Moving into conceptual art was, for Kiyooka, an opportunity to break down boundaries between art and life. He took on subjects important to Canadian art, such as the landscape, approaching it in new ways.

His later photographic projects explored his Japanese heritage, and documented the activities of the art community of which he was a part. He became an internationally respected artist who was given many awards during his life, including the Order of Canada for his achievements as a painter and his success as a teacher.

Long Beach to Peggy's Cove, 1971, consists of panels composed of small black-and-white images, arranged as large photographic grids documenting his cross-country journey from British Columbia to Nova Scotia. For Kiyooka, conveying the richness of everyday life through his photographic record of everyday activities offered confirmation of his belief that life and art were inseparable.

Suzy Lake (born 1947)

I know that I am a feminist, but I can see that my politics originated in human rights issues, civil rights, the [FLQ](#) in Quebec and race issues in the States.

An American who moved to Canada for political reasons in the late sixties, Suzy Lake has made significant contributions in the arena of conceptual and feminist art in Canada. Lake was born in Detroit, Michigan, where she studied fine art. After the Detroit riots of 1967, she immigrated to Canada and lived first in Montreal, where she taught at the Montreal Museum School. She soon

became active in the early conceptual art scene and was co-founder of the artist-run gallery Véhicule Art Inc. She later moved to Toronto and now teaches at the University of Guelph.

Lake's earliest work emerged from her political consciousness, and she has continued to explore questions of gender and the construction of identity. Combining photography, performance, film and video, and using costumes, make-up and props, Lake has created new identities for herself. Her work has been described as combining conceptual approaches with politically charged subject matter. She continues to produce conceptually driven work that challenges accepted notions of femininity, photography, perceptions of body and, most recently, aging.

Suzy Lake as Gilles Gheerbrant is one of several works she made by transposing her colleagues' facial features onto photographic images of herself, documenting the process through a sequence of black-and-white photographs. The resulting images are a fascinating look at the artist's facial features being transformed as she becomes someone else entirely.

N.E. Thing Co. (1966 to 1978)

Anything's a masterpiece.

N.E. Thing Co. was an art collective founded by Iain and Ingrid Baxter as a vehicle for conceptual art. Iain Baxter was born in England in 1936, and studied art in Canada, the United States and Japan. He taught at UBC and SFU, and now lives and works in Windsor, Ontario. In 2005 he legally changed his name to Iain Baxter & he has given many conflicting explanations for this, but his fascination with the symbol & and the perceived flow of ideas between himself as artist and the viewer seem to play a part. Ingrid Baxter was born in Spokane, Washington. After the dissolution of N.E. Thing Co. she studied at UBC for a Master of Fine Arts. She lives in Deep Cove, BC, near Vancouver, where she runs a canoe and kayaking company.

N.E. Thing Co. was established as a business whose purpose was to make collaborative artworks using the structures and technologies used by corporations (e.g., telex and fax machines). They worked with a wide array of media, frequently making art out of everyday materials, combined and presented in unexpected ways. Materials used in creating their conceptual artworks included the written word, photography, site-specific performances and installation. Their work often focused on ideas having to do with the modern-day landscape, urban geography and the consumer environment.

In 1969, N.E. Thing Co. mounted a major exhibition at the National Gallery of Canada, transforming the ground floor of the gallery into a suite of offices, departments and showrooms. In obscuring the distinction between art and the corporate world, the artworks left many viewers confused as to whether they had inadvertently wandered into an office building instead of the National Gallery.

In 1977, N.E. Thing Co. opened the restaurant Eye Scream on West 4th Avenue in Vancouver. Part Gallery, part restaurant, it was a visual feast—with mirrored siding and neon lights, artist-designed tables, custom-made dishes, frequent performances and entertaining food—that blurred the lines between functional objects and art. Unfortunately it was also financially and emotionally draining, and by the following year, the Baxter collaboration—and marriage—dissolved.

You are now in the middle of an N.E. Thing Landscape is one of a series of photographs/lithographs in which they placed signs in the middle of arbitrary landscapes as part of a practice of "aesthetic claiming." Many of the works in the exhibition appear to be documents rather than artworks; e.g., *Eye Scream Restaurant/Gallery letterhead, 1977, Eye Scream Restaurant/Gallery cheques, 1977.*

Robert Smithson (1938–1973)

A work of art when placed in a gallery loses its charge, and becomes a portable object or surface disengaged from the outside world.

Robert Smithson was one of the leading figures in a generation of artists who radically challenged existing conceptions of art and its role within the broader culture. Born in Passaic, New Jersey, he was an only child, always interested in art and natural history, although he found school—including art teaching—repressive and limiting. He pursued art studies independently, befriending artists, drawing in their studios, reading extensively and visiting museums. After a six-month stint in the army, he hitchhiked across the US, travelled in Europe and lived in Rome for three months. He then returned to New York, where he began working with natural materials. Eventually he became internationally recognized for his land art (or earthworks)—essentially a new genre that he created. He wrote extensively, and both his art and his writings have had international impact on sculpture and art theory, despite the fact that relatively few major works survived him. His short but extremely influential life ended in 1973, when he died in a plane crash while surveying sites for a new work.

Smithson utilized non-traditional materials in his art—language, mirrors, maps, dump trucks, abandoned quarries, hotels, contractors, earth—to produce his radical sculptures, photographs, films and earthworks. Embodied in all of Smithson's endeavours was his interest in entropy, mapping, paradox, language, landscape, popular culture, anthropology, and natural history. He often made drawings as the conceptual basis for his projects; for some, the drawings remain the final work. He is perhaps best known for his monumental earthwork *Spiral Jetty*, 1970, located in the Great Salt Lake, Utah. *Spiral Jetty* exemplified one of his major goals, which was to place work in the land itself, changing and redefining the landscape.

Drawing for Glue Pour, 1969, is one of several drawings Smithson made during a visit to Vancouver in preparation for the work titled *Glue Pour*, part of an exhibition curated by Lucy Lippard at the Vancouver Art Gallery. With the assistance of several young Vancouver artists, a 45-gallon drum of bright orange glue was poured down a rocky slope. The water-soluble glue vanished after a few rainy days; photographs documenting the project were featured in the exhibition.

Joyce Wieland (1931–1998)

I think of Canada as female.

Joyce Wieland was an experimental filmmaker and artist whose work bridged boundaries between the concerns and processes of avant-garde filmmakers and feminist artists of the time. She was born in Toronto, where she studied commercial art at Central Technical School. She had her first solo exhibition in 1960 at the Isaacs Gallery, gaining instant attention as the only contemporary female artist represented by a commercial gallery in Canada.

Wieland's early work came out of the continuum of Abstract Expressionism, but she soon began moving in the direction of Pop, often dealing with female imagery. In 1963 she moved to New York, where she found the acceptance and acclaim as an artist that she had not received from her peers in Canada. She also became aware of herself as quintessentially Canadian, which had a profound and lasting effect on her subject matter. She challenged the traditional materials of high art, such as oil painting and bronze sculpture, and worked in many media from printmaking to soft sculpture to collage, consciously employing more female handicrafts such as knitting and quilting. In the late 1960s and 1970s she devoted herself to her work in experimental film, for which she received critical acclaim. In her latter years she returned to painting and to more figurative imagery.

Oh Canada (animation) is a lithograph, one in a series of printed and embroidered works that depict row upon row of brightly painted lips that mouth each syllable of the national anthem.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: The Artists (intermediate/senior)

Objective:

Students explore the lives of some of the artists: their work, influences, interests and points of connection.

Materials:

- the Internet; some useful websites:
 - www.wikipedia.com
 - http://www.ccca.ca/traffic/traffic_artists.html
 - www.vancouverartinthesixties.com
- Artist Information Sheet and Student Worksheet (following pages)
- writing materials

Process:

1. Divide the class into seven groups. Give each group the information on one of the artists (see Artist Information Sheet, next page).
2. In their groups, have the students read and make sure they understand the information.
3. Either at school or at home, have students use the internet to research the artists further.
4. Have students share the collected information with their group and organize it.
5. Have each group talk about their artist, while the rest of the class fills in the Student Worksheet (page 13).

Conclusion:

- Discuss similarities and differences between the artists and their artwork.
- What do the artists have—materials, techniques, ideas, styles, etc.—in common?
- Which artists or kinds of artwork made the students curious about seeing the work in the exhibition?
- Are there any artists, ways of working or ideas that the students would like to find out more about?
- What were some of the most interesting things that students learned or discovered?

Artist Information Sheet

Roy Kiyooka (1926–1994) http://esask.uregina.ca/entry/kiyooka_roy_1926-94.html

- Born in Saskatchewan; his Japanese Canadian family were forced from their home during the World War II years
- Became known as a painter, also worked in performance, film, photography and music
- Was awarded the Order of Canada for his work as an artist and a teacher
- *Long Beach to Peggy's Cove*: photograph made up of many small images showing everyday details of his trip across Canada

Greg Curnoe (1936–1992) http://www.artsask.ca/en/artists/greg_curnoe

- Born and died in London, Ontario; his art often focused on details from this place Worked with plywood, silkscreen on Plexiglas, watercolours, collages and drawings
- Used text, diaries and lists; his art was about the people and places important to him
- *Map of North America*: shows North America with the United States missing

Joyce Wieland (1931–1998) <http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/women/030001-1173-e.html>

- Born in Toronto, she became known as an artist when she lived in New York
- Worked in experimental film, painting, printmaking, collage and sculpture
- Liked to use soft materials, knitting and quilting—bringing attention to women's crafts
- *Oh Canada*: print with rows of bright lips mouthing each syllable of the national anthem

Sol LeWitt (1928–2007) <http://www.massmoca.org/lewitt/>

- Important American artist known for huge, colourful murals of geometrically inspired shapes
- Stressed that the idea was more important than the artwork itself
- His works exist as a set of strict guidelines to be used by others in making paintings directly onto walls
- *Using a Black, Hard Crayon, draw ...*: the long title gives instructions on how to create the drawing by making specific lines with a crayon

N.E. Thing Co. (1966 to 1978) <http://vancouverartinthesixties.com/interviews/ingrid-baxter>

- Company founded by Iain and Ingrid Baxter for the purpose of making collaborative artworks
- Made art out of everyday materials and technologies usually used by businesses
- Designed and ran Eye Scream in Vancouver, as both gallery and restaurant
- *You are now in the middle of an N.E. Thing Co. Landscape*: photograph of a sign in the landscape

Suzy Lake (born 1947) www.suzylake.ca

- Born in Detroit and moved to Canada, living first in Montreal and later in Toronto
- Uses photography, performance, film and video, and costumes, make-up and props
- Challenges accepted ideas of femininity, photography, aging and how we look at bodies
- *Suzy Lake as Gilles Gheerbrant*: photographs of her face changing to become someone else

Robert Smithson (1938–1973) www.robertsmithson.com

- From New Jersey, he found school dull, so he learned about art from artist friends, drawing in their studios, reading and visiting museums
- Developed a new way of making art: outside, and using the natural environment
- Best-known work, *Spiral Jetty*, built in Great Salt Lake, Utah, changes the landscape
- *Drawing for Glue Pour*: made for a work in Vancouver in which bright orange glue was poured down a rocky slope, and disappeared after a few days of rain

Student Worksheet

	Background & Personal details	Type of art & Description of one work	Influences and interests	Connections between artists' works
Robert Smithson				
Roy Kiyooka				
Suzy Lake				
Joyce Wieland				
N.E. Thing Co.				
Sol LeWitt				
Greg Curnoe				

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: New Materials, New Art (all grades)

Objective:

Students explore work by the land artist Robert Smithson and plan a temporary work using non-traditional materials.

Discussion:

Glue Pour was a piece Robert Smithson made in Vancouver in 1969. A group of young Vancouver artists helped Smithson pour 45 gallons of bright orange water-soluble glue down a rocky slope. After a few days of rain, all traces of the glue had vanished. Black-and-white photographs documenting the project were featured in the exhibition. *Drawing for Glue Pour* (exhibited in *Traffic*) is one of several preparatory drawings Smithson made prior to the execution of the work.

Materials:

- Art-making materials: everyday materials such as cotton balls, stir sticks, recycled tetra packs or plastic containers, Q-tips and other things you can find in quantity
- Websites, including <http://www.robertsmithson.com/earthworks/glue.htm>
- Cameras (cellphone cameras are fine)

Process:

1. Discuss Smithson's *Glue Pour*. The work exists in three parts:
 - a drawing, a sketch prior to the event
 - the short-lived physical event (the pouring of the glue and its disappearance)
 - the photographic documentation of the eventWhich part is the actual work? Why?
2. Would it be art if the class went off and did the same thing? Why or why not?
3. Show the class the art-making materials (e.g., cotton balls) and discuss ideas for making temporary artworks out of them. Discuss different environments: outside, in a desk, on a desk, on the floor, on a piece of paper, etc.
4. Choose a format, place and number of pieces of the given material for making an artwork.
5. Divide the class into small groups and have them collaborate on a work made with the materials. First they will make a sketch planning the work, then they will construct the piece in the chosen location.
6. Have each group photograph their work, then dismantle it.
7. Display the photographs of the work. These could be printed, shown on a computer monitor or simply by having the students flip open their phones and share the images.
8. Ask students which is the "real" work: the sketch, the temporary piece or the documentation (the photograph)?

Conclusion:

Discussion:

- What makes these works of art?
- What makes these works conceptual pieces? That is, what is the artwork here—the idea, or the physical piece?
- Smithson's work is recognized as an artwork but the students' works might not be. Why?
- Is this any more or any less a work of art than a drawing or a painting? Why or why not?

POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Rules Are Art (all grades)

Objective:

Students explore the idea as the final artwork.

Discussion:

- In The Projects Class of 1969 at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, David Askevold, artist and educator, invited twelve international participants—conceptual artists—to submit proposals, by mail or telephone, for art projects that he and his students would then carry out. The class became infamous and ignited the debate on many of the central issues raised by conceptual art that continue into the present.
- Many conceptual artists felt that an artwork need not be constructed in order to exist. They argued that it was the idea that was the substance: there were already too many objects cluttering up the world.
- The artist Lawrence Weiner famously wrote of his art:
The artist may construct the piece
The piece may be fabricated
The piece need not be built
- Use page 4, Conceptualism 101, to provide background information.

Materials:

- Project class proposals (see next page)
- Index cards
- Paper and writing/drawing materials

Process:

1. Explain the Project Class of 1969 to the students.
2. Discuss conceptualism (see page 4) with the class.
3. Divide the class into seven groups and give each group one of the projects as outlined on the next page. Ask each group to consider the project, and either do it or give an explanation of how they would do it.
4. Have each group perform their project for the class or explain how they would do it. Have them share the instructions with the whole class., but not until afterwards.
5. What makes these projects art? How? Why or why not?
6. Ask students to work in pairs to make up rules for an artwork to be made by someone else. It could include several criteria or a single rule. Have them write the rules on index cards.
7. Shuffle the index cards and redistribute them among the students.
8. Have students interpret and design the work on paper.
9. Display works alongside criteria/rules.

Conclusion:

Discuss:

- What makes these works of art?
- Why is the work of well-known artists accepted as art, and the students' work may or may not be?
- Do the written instructions stand alone as an artwork? Why or why not?
- Does it matter who makes the artwork from the instructions? Is the original work more authentic than one made by someone different?
- Documentation is a big part of conceptual art, often the only way for it to exist in the real world. How could these works be documented?

Project Class Proposals

Proposals from the Nova Scotia College of Art & Design Project Class of 1969:

1. Sol LeWitt

1. A work that uses the idea of error.
2. A work that uses the idea of incompleteness.
3. A work that uses the idea of infinity.
4. A work that uses the idea of completeness.
5. A work that uses the idea of stupidity.
6. A work that is subversive.
7. A work that is not original.

These can be done in any form chosen by the student. Please ask your students not to do more than two of the above works.

2. Mel Bochner

Have the students measure/consider (subjectively also) the classroom in every possible way they can think of, i.e., height, length, volume (walls, doors, floor, windows, etc.), temperature, humidity, thickness of walls, amount of illumination, number of objects, how it feels to be there, etc.

It doesn't matter to me what the specific details are or how they are presented.

3. Robert Barry

The students will gather together in a group and decide on a single common idea. The idea can be of any nature, simple or complex. This idea will be known only to the members of the group. You or I will not know it. The piece will remain in existence as long as the idea remains in the confines of the group. If just one student, unknown to anyone else at any time, informs someone outside the group, the piece will cease to exist. It may exist for a few seconds or it may go on indefinitely, depending on the human nature of the participating students. We may never know when or if the piece comes to an end.

Proposals for Your Project Class:

4. A student reads from a textbook out loud while the rest of the students yawn, touch their toes and roll their eyes. The work exists until the reader stops, at which point the students freeze for 10 seconds.
5. How to tell a secret:
 - Put your hand next to your mouth.
 - Move to the person on your left and stand close to their ear.
 - Make *shw shw shw* sounds while moving your face and mouth in an exaggerated movement.
 - Giggle.Perform the above as a class, repeating the actions several times.
6. On a large piece of paper, one class member draws a line and passes a writing instrument of their choice to a student, who draws another line and hands a writing instrument of their choice to a student, who draws another line, and so on...
The drawing is finished when a student who has drawn a line decides not to pass it on and declares it is finished.
7. Stand on one leg.
Decide on any other rules as a group.

PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Conceptualism: Idea as Art (secondary students)

Objective:

Students analyze and discuss key issues in conceptual art.

Discussion:

How does conceptual art defy expectations? Should an artist have to learn art-making skills? Must a work of art be beautiful? Permanent? One of a kind?

The parameters for conceptual art are very different from those of traditional art. The language, structures and framework for talking about it, along with the standards for critiquing it, must also fit contemporary art criteria.

Materials:

- quotes (see next page)

Process:

1. Ask students how they would define “conceptual art.” Write their ideas on the board. If students are struggling to respond, have them start by looking up the word *conceptual* in the dictionary and begin to make inferences.
2. Divide the class into small groups and give each group a different quote (see next page). Sol LeWitt’s “Sentences” can be separated and distributed among several groups. Ask students to discuss the quotes and draw some conclusions—agree, disagree, why, how, etc.
3. Use the following questions to guide a class discussion. Ask students to support their responses with their quotes.
 - What makes a work of art a work of art? Is conceptual art defined by particular boundaries?
 - Who decides what an artwork means—the artist, the viewer, the critic, the gallery, history?
 - What are the most important skills an artist can have? Why? Do conceptual artists need different skills than those needed by traditional artists?
 - The Vancouver artist Jeff Wall has said: “Good art must be beautiful to hold a viewer’s attention.” Must a work of art be beautiful? Why or why not?
 - Can a work of art be considered successful if it makes viewers uncomfortable or angry? How/why?
 - Does conceptual art have a purpose, a role or responsibility? How/for what/to whom?
 - In conceptual art, is the process or the product more important? What effect does this have on the work, on the viewer?
 - What is the role of the viewer in conceptual art? How is it different from the viewer’s role in traditional art?

Conclusion:

Go back to the board, and the definitions students gave earlier.

- Would they change some of these now?
- Do they have a clearer idea of what constitutes conceptual art?
- Do they feel they are better equipped to approach conceptual art?
- Are there any unclear or confusing issues they would like to investigate further?

Artist Quotes

Sol LeWitt: Excerpts from Sentences on Conceptual Art

- When words such as painting and sculpture are used, they connote a whole tradition and imply a consequent acceptance of this tradition, thus placing limitations on the artist who would be reluctant to make art that goes beyond the limitations.
- Ideas can be works of art; they are in a chain of development that may eventually find some form. All ideas need not be made physical.
- A work of art may be understood as a conductor from the artist's mind to the viewer's. But it may never reach the viewer, or it may never leave the artist's mind.
- If words are used, and they proceed from ideas about art, then they are art and not literature; numbers are not mathematics.
- All ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the conventions of art.
- One usually understands the art of the past by applying the convention of the present, thus misunderstanding the art of the past.
- Perception is subjective.
- The artist may not necessarily understand his own art. His perception is neither better nor worse than that of others.
- Banal ideas cannot be rescued by beautiful execution.
- When an artist learns his craft too well he makes slick art.

Robert Smithson:

- Deliverance from the confines of the studio frees the artist to a degree from the snares of craft and the bondage of creativity. Such a condition exists without any appeal to "nature."
- For too long the artist has been estranged from his own "time." Critics, by focusing on the "art object," deprive the artist of any existence in the world of both mind and matter.
- I am for an art that takes into account the direct effect of the elements as they exist from day to day apart from representation.
- Nobody wants to go on a vacation to a garbage dump.

Suzy Lake:

- I always liked making things, and if you actually are entrenched with ideas that strongly, you have to figure out how to say those ideas so that someone else can hear them. I felt that my materials could do that and, if carefully orchestrated, could become content or attitude that would develop a conceptual narrative or position in the piece. All of that made my work a little bit different than what was being promoted at the time.

Katy Siegal: Writer, professor, art historian:

- There is less and less of an emphasis on the expression of the individual artist and his or her originality. There is more and more of an emphasis on the viewer's role in interpreting and questioning, in being critical of art, and really getting in there and duking it out with the art.
- You go into the conceptual art show, and you're reading, for one thing. You can't just sort of walk by things; you have to read the text, look at the photographs and try to figure out what they're of, read the wall labels, and it may not make immediate sense; you may have to spend more time thinking about it, and in fact you may have to read a little bit before you go into the gallery. Conceptual art comes at the time more and more when art takes place in art schools in the universities and is more and more dependent on knowing something about the artist, what he or she is trying to do, what conceptual art is, why it might be art; you have to do a little bit more work.

Vocabulary

abstract: a style of art that can be thought of in two ways:

- a. the artist begins with a recognizable subject and alters, distorts, manipulates or simplifies elements of it;
- b. the artist creates purely abstract forms that are unrecognizable and have no direct reference to external reality (also called non-representational art).

Abstract Expressionism: post-World War II American art movement known for its expressive and loose brushwork. It is also described as action painting because of the practice of Jackson Pollock, a prominent painter, of placing large canvases on the ground to pour, drip and splatter paint across their surfaces using sweeping arm movements. This gestural painting technique emphasized spontaneous, energetic, subconscious artistic expression.

conceptual art: art in which the ideas behind the creation of the work are more significant than the end product. During the 1960s and '70s, conceptual artists rejected the idea of the unique, precious art object and the necessity of talent or craft in creating an artwork.

contemporary: created in the last thirty years. Most contemporary artists are living artists.

installation: art that is created from a wide range of materials and installed in a specific environment. An installation may be temporary or permanent. The term came into wide use in the 1970s, and many installation works were conceptual.

Minimalism: 1960s art movement that emphasized extreme simplification of form and repetition of shapes, bringing abstraction to its logical conclusion: that art should not refer to or imitate anything outside of itself. Minimalist artists sought to remove the presence of the artist's hand and frequently used high-tech materials.

mural: a painting or other work of art executed directly on a wall.

performance art: a work in any of a variety of media that is performed before a live audience. The performance itself, rather than a specific object, constitutes the artwork. Documentation is often an important part of the performance.

Pop art: The term "Pop" was first used in the late 1950s to refer to the work of artists who took both their art forms and their subjects from popular consumer culture. Using photography, printmaking and found objects, Pop artists explored advertising, comic strips, movie stardom and product packaging, to take art out of the museum and into everyday life.

Regionalism: American Regionalists were a group of artists in the 1930s who were committed to depicting scenes of daily life in rural and urban areas. Regionalism has been applied to artists—including Greg Curnoe—who have taken up this idea to show everyday events particular to their own time and place.

site-specific: created for a specific site or venue; usually a site-specific work is destroyed by the process of dismantling it.

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www.robertsmithson.com

<http://www.massmoca.org/lewitt/>

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