

How Soon Is Now

Contemporary Art from Here



Kristi Malakoff
Target, 2005/8
crepe paper party streamers
Photo: courtesy of the artist

TEACHER'S STUDY GUIDE
WINTER 2009

Vancouver
Artgallery

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Vancouver Art Gallery

Teacher's Guide for School Programs

The exhibition *How Soon Is Now* features new work by more than thirty of British Columbia's most compelling contemporary artists. They present a diverse and exciting array of work in non-traditional media, providing students with an opportunity to look, experience, touch, perform, move and interact with the artworks. Many of the artists are recent art school graduates; some have been practising art for many years but are emerging into new forms of their practice, which include video, music, painting, sculpture, installation and performance. Each artist is challenging viewers to engage in different ways—and question the old ways—with the work that confronts them.

DEAR TEACHER:

This guide will assist you in preparing for your tour of the exhibition *How Soon Is Now*. 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 of *How Soon Is Now* has three main goals:

- to introduce students to a wide range of local contemporary artworks in diverse media
- to explore a body of work that places value on process over product, event over object and interaction over contemplation
- to examine the work of individual artists and consider how they are challenging traditional art practice

THE EXHIBITION: *How Soon Is Now*

How Soon Is Now showcases work by more than thirty contemporary artists working in British Columbia. The work spans a wide range of media, from painting and sculpture to video, music, installation and performance. The focus of the exhibition is on process rather than product, on the art-making event over the final object, and on interaction over contemplation. Students will be provided with a broad range of interactive possibilities by artists who frequently challenge traditional art practice, work collaboratively and activate public space.

Although the exhibition takes place on the second floor of the Vancouver Art Gallery, it is not confined to that space. Events and projects spill over into different parts of the building and, indeed, way beyond it. One such work is Samuel Roy-Bois' sound studio, which transmits sounds made by visitors from within a construction in the exhibition space to the lobby. Another work, which is completely off-site, is Kevin Schmidt's boat journey down the Fraser River while he watches an epic Hollywood movie, *Lord of the Rings*.

Students will engage with work that moves—as in Holly Ward's mobile pile of earth, which will traverse the length and breadth of the gallery space for the duration of the exhibition. They will encounter the transient and transformed nature of the materials of art as they walk atop Kristi Malakoff's large star made of actor's tape. They will enter social spaces created by the collaborative group Instant Coffee to conduct their own social interactions. They will confront humour and absurdity in works like Christian Kliegel's fake elevator, and consider the political and environmental implications of Sonny Assu's copper "disposable" coffee cups.

In short, students will be asked to rethink the idea of art as the precious object on the gallery wall. They will encounter the Gallery space as a venue for a wide range of critical, social and transformative experiences and gain insight into some of the strategies, methodologies and interests that inform contemporary artists in our province.

The exhibition is organized according to shared connections between works. It is curated by Kathleen Ritter, Assistant Curator of the Vancouver Art Gallery.

Contemporary Art 101: A Short Overview

Galleries and Museums frequently use the term “contemporary art” to define work produced since the Second World War. For the purposes of this exhibition, we will use the commonly used definition, which refers to artwork being produced by artists living today.

Artists are currently working in a multi-faceted environment that is globally influenced, culturally diverse and technologically advancing. Challenging traditional boundaries, contemporary artists use a limitless range of materials and ideas to reflect, explore and comment on today’s world. Contemporary art defies easy categorization in its refusal to accept traditional organizing principles of art. Contemporary artists often reject historical definitions of what constitutes art, while simultaneously challenging and engaging in a debate with prior styles and movements.

Contemporary art engages viewers who bring their own responses, experiences and opinions to the artwork. The viewer is expected to play a significant role in constructing meaning in contemporary art. Viewers are expected to engage with the artwork not by asking “Is it good?” or “Is it beautifully crafted?” but rather, by considering whether the work is challenging, raises interesting ideas or is even relevant.

Contemporary art frequently engages the viewer in the following ways:

- by creating dialogue around personal and cultural identity, family, community and nationality,
- by inviting open-ended methodology and an inquiry-based approach; by asking questions that stimulate discussion,
- by being deliberately provocative, making viewers feel uncomfortable, confused, even angry,
- by addressing controversial, ambiguous or contradictory topics, and/or
- by placing work in alternative contexts in the community as well as in galleries and museums.

Two forms that have risen to prominence in contemporary art practice, installation and performance art, bear some added consideration.

Installation Art

The term installation was first used in the seventies to describe an art environment that took into consideration the viewer’s entire sensory experience, rather than the purely visual response demanded by a precious object on a “neutral” wall. Installations were usually mixed-media constructions that the spectator was often able to enter or otherwise engage with. Installations were often—and still are—designed to be site-specific, and might be constructed in an art museum or gallery environment, or in any other public space, depending on the artist’s intention.

Documentation is often an integral part of the installation as it is frequently the only means of preserving the work once the installation comes down. Non-traditional art materials have remained crucial and purposeful in the construction of contemporary installations. Sound and new technologies are frequently incorporated into installations. Installation art has been absorbed into the mainstream art world and no longer has the subversive undercurrents of

the past, although it frequently still challenges and confronts the viewer and mainstream values and practices.

Performance Art

Performance art (as opposed to performing arts such as dance and theatre) grew out of the visual arts in the sixties and seventies. It began as a radical art form where artists used their bodies to engage an audience at a specific time and place. The event, ephemeral as it was, quickly became associated with documentation—through video and photography—as the only means of the performance reaching a wider public, although the performance itself, rather than any specific object, still constitutes the work of art.

Performance art was initially closely allied with conceptual art and is still seen as a non-traditional art form that challenges mainstream conventions of the scripted, narrative, theatrical performance. Performance art continues to be viewed as somewhat unorthodox, and is often held in alternative spaces rather than formal museum or theatre settings.

ARTISTS' BACKGROUND

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

Sonny Assu

Sonny Assu was born in British Columbia in 1975. A member of the Laich-kwil-tach Nation of the Wei Wai Kai (Cape Mudge) band, he has lived most of his life in Vancouver. Assu studied art at UBC and the Emily Carr Institute of Art + Design, and his work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions both locally and internationally.

Assu writes: “My work comes from *challenging the notion tradition*. My tradition/identity is not only made up of Indianness but is also made up of TV, comic books, pop culture and the effect of mass media/advertising: By using the images I use now, I begin to empower the Indian culture by appropriating from the appropriator. By melding my pop past with the exploration of the Laich-kwil-tach culture, I am breathing new life into an art form that has become a commodity.”

Sixty Seven Copper Cups comprises stacked disposable-type cups and lids, meticulously crafted out of copper. Assu sets up an uneasy association by using this semi-precious metal for objects usually so mindlessly discarded in contemporary throwaway culture. The number of cups is a reference to the number of years that the potlatch was banned.

Cedric, Nathan and Jim Bomford

Cedric and Nathan Bomford are brothers born in the seventies on Vancouver Island. Nathan studied art in Victoria and Halifax, and currently lives in Victoria. Cedric studied art in Vancouver and Sweden, and divides his time between Vancouver and Europe. They have both exhibited their work—mainly photographic—locally and internationally. Their father Jim, an engineer, lives on Vancouver Island.

Recently Cedric and Nathan have been working together on large-scale site-specific installations, collaborating with their father. This process of collaborative architectural constructions has grown out of their shared interest in architecture, which was previously expressed through their individual photographic work. In a recent project they collaborated with relatives and neighbours who provided salvaged wood from their yards.

The Bomfords are collaborating on a new site-specific piece for *How Soon Is Now*, which will be constructed in the Vancouver Art Gallery. Their work is based on shared family stories, which they relive through the creation of their large architectural structure.

Instant Coffee

Instant Coffee is an artists' collective based in Vancouver and Toronto. One of the collective's major objectives is to blur the lines between the studio and the exhibition space. Artists in the collective have exhibited work, promoted artists' projects and participated in art events world-wide.

Instant Coffee defines itself as “a service oriented artist collective.” The artists create both formal installations and event-based activities or performances that often include a space where social interaction takes place and ideas are exchanged. They are committed to thinking outside the confines of traditional exhibition structures, and their work frequently contains a site-specific architectural element.

Nook has had several incarnations. It began as a twenty-four-hour social space, a real kitchen nook in which all the usual social and domestic activities took place. In the Vancouver Art Gallery it will consist of four separate spaces into which the viewer is invited to sit, share the space and engage in informal conversation.

Kristi Malakoff

Kristi Malakoff was born in Canada in 1974. She graduated from the Emily Carr Institute in Vancouver in 2005, winning many awards and scholarships. She has exhibited in group and solo shows across North America and Europe.

Her detailed, labour-intensive artwork has been called obsessive. She painstakingly crafts brightly coloured installations and sculptures cut out of paper, photographs, crepe paper streamers and masking tape. The pieces might hang on a wall or from the ceiling, or be constructed directly on the floor for viewers to walk on. Many of her works are created for a specific exhibition and are destroyed by being dismantled when the exhibition ends. The transient nature of her work, the disposable nature of many of the materials and her work's relationship to craft are some of the core ideas that open up a dialogue within the context of contemporary popular culture.

Malakoff's massive work *Skull* (10 x 9 feet)—made out of 12,000 digital photographs of flowers—exuberantly references the Mexican holiday Day of the Dead. *Target* is made entirely out of crepe paper party streamers, laid out on the floor in concentric coloured circles.

Luanne Martineau

Luanne Martineau was born in Saskatoon in 1971. She studied art in Nova Scotia, Alberta and BC. She lives in Victoria, where she is professor of theory and curatorial studies at the University of Victoria. She has exhibited her art widely, both locally and nationally.

Martineau has become known for her hand-spun felted wool hanging sculptures that have been described as being cuddly and fierce at the same time. She layers imagery densely, simultaneously referencing cartoon characters, pop culture and Modern artists. Her labour-intensive work includes elements that can be seen as satirical, crafty, feminist, figurative and abstract. She also creates complex, intimate, animated drawings that form a strong counterpart to her increasingly complicated mixed-media hybrid sculptural forms.

Her work in *How Soon Is Now* will include a selection of these felt-based sculptural forms made out of yarn, wool and felt.

Samuel Roy-Bois

Samuel Roy-Bois was born in Montreal in 1973. He attended both Laval and Concordia universities, and currently lives in Vancouver. His work has been shown in solo and group exhibitions in Quebec, Paris, Lausanne and Mexico City.

Roy-Bois began working in sculpture before turning to large architectural installations. He creates environments using domestic and industrial materials, including wood, paint, Plexiglas, household objects and furniture. Lines between his artwork and the exhibition space become blurred as he plays with ideas of public and private spaces. He has become known as a multi-disciplinary artist, working as a musician and a performer.

In *At the Moment We Met Again*, Roy-Bois creates a soundproof recording booth within the exhibition space, using wood, carpet, musical instruments, electric lighting, microphones and speakers. Viewers are invited into the space to create sounds and music, which are then broadcast into a separate area. At the Vancouver Art Gallery the sounds will be transmitted into the lobby.

Brendan Tang

Brendan Tang was born in the seventies in Dublin, Ireland, to Trinidadian parents of Asian descent; he is now a citizen of Canada. He received his art education in the US and Canada and currently resides in Kamloops where he teaches ceramics at Thompson Rivers University. He has exhibited his work extensively across North America, and sees the Internet as an important tool that connects him with his audience.

Tang creates non-functional ceramic objects that incorporate a variety of non-traditional materials, including sound and video technology, vinyl and electrical wiring. He combines these with surface treatments like hand painting, gold lustre, airbrushing, hand-modelled filigree and photo-based decals. He writes: "At once, my works exhibit the paradoxical tendency to be irreverent, frivolous, and playful, as well as being thoroughly engaged in critical reflection." In his work he is continually exploring issues of race, class and culture.

His interest in cultural appropriation is immediately apparent in his Manga Ormolu series, some of which will be seen in this exhibition. These are ceramic/mixed media works that use traditional Chinese ceramic design and form along with playful contemporary manga overlays.

Holly Ward

Holly Ward was born in the seventies and studied art in Nova Scotia and Ontario. She currently lives in Vancouver and her work has been exhibited in group and solo exhibitions across North America and Europe.

Ward is an interdisciplinary artist, who works with drawings, sculpture and multimedia installation. In her work, she is constantly questioning accepted notions, whether they are concerned with social progress and political power, or the transformational aspects of materials.

Island (2005) consists of a mound of dirt heaped on the floor of the Gallery. This mound is moved around by staff and volunteers on a regular basis, leaving a trail of dirt in its wake. Ward is challenging the conventional notion of an art object as static and contained. Her drifting pile of dirt is constantly seen in relation to new works of art, and the viewer is asked to consider this ever-changing set of visual relationships.

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Artists in Context (Intermediate and secondary students)

Objective:

Students research some of the artists in this exhibition, focusing on some of the major ideas and trends in contemporary art

Background:

Art 21, the PBS Documentary Series on Contemporary Art, offers the following explanation of the world that contemporary artists find themselves in:

“Contemporary artists work in a globally influenced, culturally diverse and technologically advanced world. Their art is a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts and subjects that challenge traditional boundaries and defy easy definition. Diverse, eclectic contemporary artists are distinguished by the very lack of a uniform, organizing principle, ideology or ‘ism’.”

Materials:

- ❑ the Internet; some useful websites are:
 - www.artcyclopedia.com
 - www.wikipedia.com
 - www.tate.org.uk/collections/glossary/
- ❑ individual artists’ websites
- ❑ art books
- ❑ Artist Information Sheet (following page)

Process:

1. Ask students what they expect to see in a traditional work of art. And in a contemporary work of art? Divide the board into sections and elicit the students’ responses. It could end up looking something like this:

	Traditional Art	Contemporary Art
Subject	Landscape, portrait, still life	Personal, social, political
Art Process	Painting, drawing, sculpture	Video, photography, collage, performance, installation
Style	More realistic	Abstract
Materials	Paint, bronze, wood	Plastic, sand, fabric, text, wire, clay, electronics...

(Students might need some terms defined; e.g. installation, performance, abstract. See Vocabulary and introductory sections.)

2. Give students the following definition: “Contemporary artists work in a globally influenced, culturally diverse and technologically advanced world.” Break down the statement into digestible bits and discuss what each phrase means to students in their immediate world. Discuss how students think these ideas might affect artists in their work: e.g., an artist’s ethnic background might be reflected in the work.
3. Divide the students into small groups. Assign each group one of the artists and give them the information on the Artist Information Sheet (following page).
4. Ask students to use the Internet to do some research on their artist, looking for both personal background information and details about some of their artwork. Ask them to think about the work in terms of Subject Matter, Art Process and Materials.

5. Have each group find an image of a work they feel is significant to this artist and make a sketch of it.
6. Have each group present their artist and explain that artist's work using the sketch they have made, while the rest of the class fills in the Student Worksheet (page following the Artist Information Sheet).

Conclusion:

Discuss with the class:

- Did the artists have anything in common? What?
- Think back to the statement: "Contemporary artists work in a globally influenced, culturally diverse and technologically advanced world." Does this apply to these artists? How?
- Did the artists have any elements or perspectives that might be described as particularly British Columbian? Or Canadian? If not, why? If so, how?

Artist Information Sheet

Sonny Assu

- Mixed racial background; First Nations heritage important to him and in his work
- Influenced by and immersed in pop culture and developing technologies
- Makes objects, mixing new technology with traditional forms and materials

Cedric, Nathan and Jim Bomford

- Cedric and Nathan are brothers; Jim, their dad, is an engineer
- Both artists worked in photography until they began working together on collaborative projects, which provide a space for old family stories
- Together they construct large-scale site-specific installations

Instant Coffee

- Artists' collective, functions in both Toronto and Vancouver
- Artists collaborate, create installations, use mixed media, give performances
- Are concerned with the idea of public/private space and social interaction

Kristi Malakoff

- Makes detailed, labour-intensive, time-consuming artworks
- Work might hang on wall or fill room as a large installation
- Uses everyday paper or fibre-based materials that are often disposable

Luanne Martineau

- Makes incredibly detailed drawings and mixed-media soft sculptures
- Often creates felted objects that are neither completely abstract nor figurative
- Her work often crosses the lines or bridges the gap between contradictions such as art and craft, serious and ironic, Pop culture and Modern art

Samuel Roy-Bois

- He is an artist, musician and performer; now makes large architectural installations
- Uses mixed media including building materials, technology and sound
- He is interested in art being experienced rather than just observed; often blurs the line between the work of art and the exhibition space

Brendan Tang

- Mixed background (Irish, Trinidadian, Asian, Canadian)—cultural concerns reflected in his artwork
- Creates ceramic objects which incorporate mixed media and intricate surface decoration
- Pop culture, manga, technology and fine detailed ceramic work all claiming attention

Holly Ward

- Works with drawings, sculpture and multimedia installations
- Through her work she tackles big ideas like social progress, political power and the nature of the art materials themselves
- Makes movable installations out of non-traditional materials like dirt

Student Worksheet

	Personal Information	Subject	Art Process	Materials
Sonny Assu				
The Bomfords				
Instant Coffee				
Kristi Malakoff				
Luanne Martineau				
Samuel Roy-Bois				
Brendan Tang				
Holly Ward				

PRE-VISIT ACTIVITY: Con/Temporary Art (Primary students)

Objective:

Students look at Kristi Malakoff's work – *Target*, *Skull* and *Star* and make an artwork out of everyday, reusable materials that they then document before taking apart

Background:

- Many of the works in this exhibition of contemporary British Columbia art are site-specific, meaning that the work is created within this space and time and will be dismantled once the exhibition is over. Often site-specific installations are documented through video or photographs, which then become an important part of the work's process/public access/longevity.
- Students might need a review of some formal elements and principles of design prior to commencing the activity. The following can be reviewed in its entirety or in part.
- The British artist Andy Goldsworthy has made numerous site-specific installations out of transitory materials from nature like snow and leaves. Although his work is not in this exhibition, it might be a useful point of departure for students to look at some of his work. It is well documented and easily available on the Internet.

It all starts with a dot!

Line: the path of a moving dot.

Shape: what happens when lines meet to enclose an area.

Form: the part of the painting that looks like a sculpture.

Texture: describes the way an object feels.

Colour: a wavelength of light that can be described with words.

Tone: the lightness or darkness of a colour.

Intensity: the brightness of a colour.

Balance: about how things are ordered.

Contrast: about opposites, when things are unlike one another.

Emphasis: what you look at first.

Movement: motion and action.

Pattern: repetition.

Unity: how everything works together.

Materials:

- Kristi Malakoff's website:
www.kristimalakoff.com (find images of flower cutouts and *Target*, *Skull* and *Star*)
- art materials that are easily available in fairly large quantities; e.g., fabric *OR* coloured paper *OR* twigs, leaves and other outside found objects
- scissors
- camera

Process:

1. Show students some of Malakoff's work; e.g., *Target*, *Skull*, *Star* and some of her flower cutout works. (These are easy to find and can be printed from her website.) Tell students that this is site-specific work (installation) and after the exhibition is over, the work is destroyed by being dismantled. Show students some images of Andy Goldsworthy's transient, site-specific installations.

2. Select some materials and tell the students that they are going to make an artwork by arranging the materials on a surface to create a design or shape. (You can also select a theme or subject; e.g., geometric shapes, or a face, or a specific object like a chair or a flower.)
3. Have students cut, tear, fold or bunch and arrange their materials onto a cleared surface (their desk or the floor) to create their artwork, *without* gluing it down.
4. Establish some parameters about line, colour, shape, texture—depending which ones they have reviewed; e.g., you might suggest they work with complementary colours, or alternating textures, or varying shapes.
5. When they are done, have them look at each other's work.
6. Take photographs of their work, and then have them clear it away.
7. Display—or project—the photographs of the work.

Conclusion:

Discuss the project:

- What was easy/difficult/interesting about making the artwork?
- What did you notice about your classmates' artwork?
- How was it to create a work that is not permanent?
- How was it to have to destroy the work?
- How is the work different in the photograph from the actual piece?

PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Materials That Have Memory (All grades)

Objective:

Students discuss and make a collaborative installation using non-traditional materials that evoke a specific time or place, or that represent a particular aspect of their identity.

Discussion:

- The use of **non-traditional materials** has become one of the defining elements of contemporary art. The American artist Mark Bradford, who uses items such as hair salon end papers and billboard remnants in his work, describes these elements as “materials that have memory.”
- **Installation art** appeared in the sixties as a significant art form to challenge the conservative practice of art as restricted to the precious object hanging on a “neutral” wall. By now, installations have become part of mainstream art practice and are no longer viewed as subversive or contrary.
- The **role of the viewer** has become crucial in assessing contemporary art. It has been said that viewers complete the artwork by bringing their own personal responses, experiences and opinions. The Spanish-born artist Inigo Manglano-Ovalle has said: “Art does not reside in the object. It resides in what is said about the object.”
- Traditional notions of **beauty** have been challenged in much contemporary art. Rather than asking questions that focus on formal and aesthetic concerns, viewers are asked to consider how the artwork might be interesting, relevant or challenging.
- **Collaborative** work has entered the mainstream of contemporary art practice, rather than being the exception it once was, when it aggressively challenged the idea of authorship, ownership and artistic identity. Artists are working together in collectives, communities and partnerships for any number of purposes. The idea of process over product is often an important aspect of collaborative work.

Materials:

- sheets of white or coloured paper
- materials that students will collect to create installations: clothes, lamps, books, paper clips, ornaments, writing, scraps of fabric, etc.

Process:

1. Give students some background to installation art and introduce them to the idea that “materials have memory” (see above in discussion sections, and in the introduction to this guide).
2. Have students work in pairs, and have each pair put two personal objects on a desk. These could include a hair band, a pencil or an apple. Arrange these items touching each other on a sheet of clean paper.
 - How do these objects interact together?
 - Do meanings or connections arise? If so, what?
 - Have students look at their classmates’ items. Do they all see the same meanings in the arrangement of objects?
 - These personal objects essentially form a mini-installation that can be given meaning by the “artists” who create it or by the viewers who see it.
3. Tell students they are going to create a larger, collaborative installation using non-traditional materials. Keeping in mind the idea that “materials have memory,”

- students will think about materials that, for them, evoke a specific time or place, or that represent a particular aspect of their identity.
4. Have the students work in groups and decide what materials they would like to use, how they would like to assemble the materials, and what ideas and responses they want to evoke through their use of these materials.
 5. Ask students to think about the importance of location or context in an artwork. Very different meanings or responses would arise from work installed in a museum to artwork in a school hallway. Where would they want to assemble their installation—in the classroom, outside the school, in the cafeteria? Where would they be allowed to install their work on the school grounds? What kinds of reactions to their work do they want?
 6. Have students collect their materials (at home or school) and assemble their installation, preferably on site. Remind them to take into account any tools and equipment they might require—wood, nails, tape, paint, brushes, etc.
 7. Discuss the work. What kind of response did the works receive? Did intended meanings correspond with the viewers' responses? What was the effect of specific materials on the class or school population?

Conclusion:

- Discuss the process of creating a collaborative artwork. Much of contemporary artwork addresses the idea of process over product. Is this idea evident in the work that they created?
- What did viewers bring to the work that was unexpected?
- Were the ideas about the work, the meaning and materials interpreted as expected?
- How would they want to do it differently if they did it again?

PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: The Art of Performance Art (Intermediate and secondary students)

Objective:

Students look at the characteristics of performance art and collaboratively develop and perform such a work

Discussion:

(Additional information can be found in introductory section, under Contemporary Art 101)

- Performance art rose to popularity in the sixties and became firmly established as an art form in the seventies.
- Performance art emphasizes process rather than product, and although performances are often documented through video and photography, the work remains the transitory performance itself.
- The performance may be scripted or improvisational
- It may be performed in front of a selected audience, a random audience or a participatory audience.
- A performance may be created as an art intervention, where the performance will disrupt a public event or space. The objective could be to protest, to draw attention, to identify, to entertain, to interrupt, to provide commentary, to knit community—the objectives are as numerous as there are interventions.

Materials:

- any materials or props the students want to bring in, adapt or make for their performance
- technology to support their performance
- camera and/or video equipment to document their performance

Process:

1. Find out what, if anything, students know about performance art. Define and explain as much as required using above discussion as basis.
2. Ask each student to think of a gesture they can easily repeat. It could be pulling their ear, patting their head or raising a hand.
 - Ask five students to come up to the front of the class and, facing the class, perform their gesture together ten times.
 - Ask five more to come up and perform it in sequential order ten times.
 - Ask five more to come up and sit on a chair in front of the class, then stand, do the gesture, sit, stand, do it again—ten times.
 - Ask five more to stand with their backs to the class and perform their gesture ten times.
 - Ask five more to stand in a circle and perform their gesture ten times while looking at each other.
3. Ask students how the effect and meaning of the group performance of a simple gesture changed each time. What could such a performance be used to say? How could it be staged or presented differently to change the impact or meaning? What if someone came and covered a performer's head with a blanket? How could such a disruption be viewed? What if music were added?
4. Divide the class into small groups, and give each group a copy of The Characteristics of Performance Art (following page). Have them read and discuss. Tell them they are going to create and perform a performance art piece. They need to decide:

- what shape their performance will take,
 - how and where they will perform it,
 - what materials/props/accessories/objects they will need to perform it, and
 - how—and by whom—they would like it documented (video or photographs).
5. Have the students write out the objectives, criteria and description of their performance (lending weight to the idea that although performance might be an innovative art form, it is still taken seriously).
 6. Have students perform their work. If they choose to perform it outside class, they must bring in the documentation to share with the class. (If older students warm to the idea of an intervention, they will need to perform it in a specific venue, which could range from the local mall to the school cafeteria.)
 7. Students might like to take their performances further, show them elsewhere or put more work into the documentation for exhibition purposes.

Conclusion:

Discuss the process. Helpful questions could include:

- Were the performances successful as artworks? Why or why not?
- Did the works have clear meaning? What gave the performance its meaning?
- Do they feel performance art has legitimacy as an art form? Why or why not?
- Would students consider doing other performances or staging interventions? Why? What? How?

Follow-up:

Have students write an artist's justification for their piece. It could be written as a magazine-type article or as an expository essay. Or they could write a critical analysis on another group's performance piece.

The Characteristics of Performance Art

- Performance Art is live.
- Performance Art has no rules or guidelines. It is art because the artist says it is art. It is experimental.
- Performance Art is not for sale. It may, however, sell admission tickets and film rights.
- Performance Art may be comprised of painting or sculpture (or both), dialogue, poetry, music, dance, opera, film footage, turned on television sets, laser lights, live animals and fire. Or all of the above. There are as many variables as there are artists.
- Performance Art is a legitimate artistic movement. It has longevity (some performance artists, in fact, have rather large bodies of work) and is a degreed course of study in many post-secondary institutions.
- Prior art movements inspired and helped pave the way for Performance Art.
- Performance Art is closely related to Conceptual Art.
- Performance Art may be entertaining, amusing, shocking or horrifying. No matter which adjective applies, it is meant to be memorable.

[Source: Rosalee Goldberg: "Performance Art: Developments from the 1960s," The Grove Dictionary of Art Online (Oxford University Press, Accessed 01/17/04) <http://www.groveart.com>]

PRE- or POST-VISIT ACTIVITY: Contemporary Art Matters (Secondary students)

Objective:

Students analyze and discuss key issues in contemporary art.

Discussion:

How does contemporary art defy expectations? Can a successful work of art make you feel uncomfortable? Must a work of art be beautiful? The parameters for contemporary 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.

The following definition—which was included in the first activity of this study guide—might be useful at any point in the following discussions. It is from *Art 21*, the PBS Documentary Series on Contemporary Art.

“Contemporary artists work in a globally influenced, culturally diverse and technologically advanced world. Their art is a dynamic combination of materials, methods, concepts and subjects that challenge traditional boundaries and defy easy definition. Diverse, eclectic contemporary artists are distinguished by the very lack of a uniform, organizing principle, ideology or ‘ism’.”

Materials:

- quotes and questions included in the Process (below) can be copied for the students to read.

Process:

1. Ask students how they would define contemporary art. Write their ideas on the board.
2. Divide the class into small groups. Assign each group one of the following questions for discussion:
 - What makes a work of art a work of art? Is contemporary 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 contemporary 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? Are standards for viewing contemporary art different than those for traditional art? How?
 - Can a work of art be considered successful if it makes viewers uncomfortable or angry? How/why?
 - Does contemporary art have a purpose, a role or responsibility? How/for what/to whom?
 - In contemporary 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 contemporary art? How is it different from the viewer’s role in traditional art?

3. Have each group report to the whole class on their discussion. Invite the other students to comment.
4. Give the students the following quote from the art historian Claire Bishop: “There can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond. While I am broadly sympathetic to that ambition, I would argue that it is also crucial to discuss, analyze, and compare such work critically as art.”
Either discuss as a class, or have students write individual responses for a later class discussion.

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 contemporary art?
- Do they feel they have better tools to approach contemporary art?
- Are there any unresolved issues they would like to investigate further?

VOCABULARY

abstract: a style of art that can be practised 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).

conceptual: art in which the ideas behind the creation of the work are seen as more significant than the end product. During the 1960s and '70s, conceptual artists rejected the idea of the unique, precious art object and focused on the importance of ideas to artistic practice.

figurative: art that represents, however altered or distorted, objects from the real world, especially the human figure.

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.

multi-disciplinary: working with numerous artistic disciplines; for example: painting, photography and performance. Many contemporary artists are multi-disciplinary.

performance art: works in any of a variety of media that are 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.

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

RESOURCES

Print:

Cahan and Kocur, eds. *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*. New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art, Routledge, 1996.

Cartwright and Sturken. *Practices of Looking*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

De Oliveira, Oxley and Petry. *Installation Art in the New Millennium: The Empire of the Senses*. London:Thames & Hudson. 2004.

Golden, Herbert, Sollins and Storr. *Art: 21: Art in the Twenty-First Century*. New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2001.

Guerrilla Girls. *The Guerrilla Girls' Bedside Companion to the History of Western Art*. New York: Penguin Books. 1998.

Stallabrass, Julian. *Contemporary Art: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.

Weintraub, Linda. *In the Making: Creative Options for Contemporary Art*. New York: Distributed Art Publishers Inc., 2004.

Online:

www.artcyclopedia.com

Online art encyclopedia listing international artists, and museums and galleries with collections of their work.

www.wikipedia.com

Online dictionary and encyclopedia, created collaboratively by laypeople.