

Content Warning: The content within this collection of lesson plans engages in themes of police brutality, racism, and gun violence.

Overview

This collection of lesson plans investigates ways artists address political and social issues through their practice. By carefully examining three works of art from the Chazen’s collection, students will be able to consider what activism is and how it relates to them and their community. The artwork used in the curriculum ranges from photographs of schoolchildren exploring their use of language (Ewald) to a silhouette narrative examining our nation’s fraught history with racism (Walker). The artwork is diverse in medium, subject, tone, and message. However, several universal themes are present.

The artwork in this collection connects to activism through:

- Addressing histories of oppression
- Considering issues of representation
- Bringing awareness to social and political issues

Discussion Questions

1. What does the word “activism” mean to you? When you hear the word “activist,” what do you think it means? What types of images do you associate with these words?
2. Who or what determines the need for activism? How does that play a role in predicting the success of activism?
3. How does activism relate to building communities?
4. Have you done anything considered “activist” in your life? What did you do and what obstacles or challenges did you face during the process?
5. Can artwork (or music, or a film, or a piece of writing) be considered “activist” if activism was not the artist’s intent?

Resources

Art and Social Justice Resources

Karen Frances Eng, “Can politics make great art? Meet 12 young artists who say yes,” Ted, January 18, 2017, <https://ideas.ted.com/can-politics-make-great-art-meet-12-young-artists-who-say-yes/>

Katherine Schulten, “The Power to Change the World: A Teaching Unit on Student Activism in History and Today,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/03/07/learning/lesson-plans/the-power-to-change-the-world-a-teaching-unit-on-student-activism-in-history-and-today.html>

KQED Education, “Art and Social

Justice,” https://wisconsin.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/art_socialjustice/

Local Youth Activism Resources

Amber C. Walker, “Enough is enough Madison student activists stage march for our lives calling for stricter gun laws,” *The Capital Times* (March 24, 2018):

https://madison.com/ct/news/local/education/enough-is-enough-madison-student-activists-stage-march-for-our-lives-calling-for-stricter-gun/article_8450bf1e-124b-5f87-b487-3fce79b94b87.html

Lila Sczyj, “Madison-based youth organization pushes for legislative change,” *The Badger Herald* (August 18, 2020): <https://badgerherald.com/news/2020/08/18/madison-based-youth-organization-pushes-for-legislative-change/>

Pamela Cotant, “Painting murals gives students empowering role in protest movement,” *Wisconsin State Journal* (June 29, 2020): https://madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local_schools/painting-murals-gives-students-empowering-role-in-protest-movement/article_1e903f8e-a4d4-5d6b-9356-7c49369b350f.html

Scott Girard, “More than 1,000 walk out at west in support of fired security guard,” *The Capital Times* (October 19, 2019): https://madison.com/ct/news/local/education/more-than-1-000-walk-out-at-west-in-support-of-fired-security-guard/article_5fe71313-f612-50a3-9096-16be11df2d0e.html

Close-Looking Prompts

1. See, Think, Wonder: To encourage students to make careful observations and thoughtful observations, ask them the following questions: What do you see? What do you think about that? What does it make you wonder? The routine works well in a group discussion but in some cases you may want to ask students to try the routine individually on paper or in their heads before sharing as a class. Student responses to the routine can be written down and recorded so that a class chart of observations, interpretations, and wonderings are listed for all to see and return to during the course of study.
2. Looking 10x2: To help students slow down their looking and find details, ask them to look at a work of art for thirty seconds and make a list of ten things they have observed, then ask them to look at the artwork again and come up with a list of ten new things. You can have pairs of students share their lists after both looking sessions to notice what their partners saw. If a list of ten observations seems too long to start with, shorten the list so students list or draw just three to five things they notice each time.

These close-looking prompts come from Project Zero’s Artful Thinking Routines. Find more information about these prompts and others at <http://www.pz.harvard.edu/projects/artful-thinking>.

Learning Activities

Activist Art: To help students consider meaning and message, ask them to select a contemporary work of art (song, poem, video, visual artwork) that they consider to be an example of activist art and critique it. How does the artwork relate to activism? What are the messages and intended audiences? Does the artwork relate to them personally?

Timeline of Local Activism: To help connect activism to their community, ask students to create a timeline of events that they consider “activist” that happened in their community. Follow up this project with reflection questions on how activism has changed or stayed the same over a specific period of time. For additional information on local activism, reference the resources listed in the “Local Youth Activism” section of this document.