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Beyond Protest: Reimagining Art as Resistance

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Introduction

Paul Robeson once stated, “Artists are the gatekeepers of truth. We are civilization’s radical voice.”¹ Throughout history, artists have not only documented the world around them but have also shaped how people understand it, resisted oppression, preserved cultural identities, and inspired social change. Robeson’s words raise an important question for educators, especially in an increasingly visual world: If artists truly are “the gatekeepers of truth,” how do students learn to recognize when art reinforces power, challenges injustice, and acts as a form of resistance? As educators, it is essential that we equip students with the visual literacy skills necessary so that they can critically analyze and interpret the messages that artists are communicating in their work. Across various cultures and historical moments, artists have responded to systems of power through countless forms of resistance. Often, art as resistance is associated with protest signs, demonstrations, or political slogans, but artistic resistance is so much more. Resistance through art extends beyond protest and includes preserving cultural identities often threatened by erasure, uniting communities through collective action, and disrupting expectations about what art is, who creates art, where it belongs, and whose voices deserve notice. This curriculum unit will invite students to expand their understanding beyond art as just protest posters and make them examine the many ways artists have used visual expression to question power, communicate truth, and inspire change. Because if artists are the “gatekeepers of truth,” as visual citizens, our students need to learn not just to look, but to truly see.

Teaching Situation & Rationale

I teach at a K-8 public school in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania within the second largest school district in the state. The school serves a diverse community, and all students qualify for free or reduced lunch. At Pittsburgh Langley K-8, 71.9% of students identify as Black/African American, 11.9% as White/Caucasian, 11.7% as Multi-racial, 2.6% as Hispanic or Latino, 1.5% as Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 0.4% as Native American/Alaska Native. ² In recent years, our English Language Development (ELD) population has also continued to grow, contributing to an increasingly diverse classroom community. As the school’s visual art teacher, I teach every student in kindergarten through eighth grade, including students with exceptionalities

from our regional special education classrooms. Working with students across all grade levels and abilities, I strive to create learning experiences that are adaptable, accessible, and encourage meaningful discussion, creativity, and expression. Although this unit is written with sixth grade visual art students in mind, its concepts and activities can be modified across grade levels and content areas. Sixth grade students have art for forty-five minutes every day for a quarter (forty-five days), allowing them to engage with complex ideas over time rather than through stand-alone lessons. I intend to weave this curriculum unit throughout the marking period alongside my district curriculum so students can revisit its central ideas through discussion, historical and contemporary artists, studio experiences, and a culminating exhibition. While designed as a cohesive unit, each section can also stand alone, allowing teachers to incorporate individual lessons or adapt activities to fit their curriculum and students' needs.

In today's world, our students are persistently inundated with visual imagery from the moment they wake up until they go to sleep. They have grown up in a world with social media, advertisements, and digital entertainment that exist in nearly every environment they encounter and usually without consciously recognizing how those images are shaping their thoughts, beliefs, and understandings of the world. For example, "one hundred hours of YouTube videos are uploaded every minute. Six billion hours of video are watched every month on the site, that is one hour for every person on Earth. Every two minutes, Americans alone take more photographs than were made in the entire nineteenth century."³ Students constantly interact with images that shape how they understand themselves and the world around them, yet they are rarely given the opportunities to critically think about what they are seeing. Without the visual literacy skills to interpret the images they encounter every day, they are far more likely to accept those messages at face value rather than recognizing how images are shaping beliefs, influencing opinions, and reinforcing particular narratives. Freedman argues that visual culture is central to contemporary life.⁴ We cannot escape it, but to understand its purpose, we must first understand what visual culture is and how it has changed rapidly in recent decades. Nicolas Mirzoeff defines visual culture as "the relation between what is visible and the names that we give to what is seen. It also involves what is invisible or kept out of sight."⁵ His definition suggests that visual culture extends beyond simply looking at images; it explores the meanings we give to them, the perspectives they give power to, and the stories they ignore or erase. In this sense, visual culture includes not only what is represented, but also what remains unseen, overlooked, or intentionally left out. As media and technology continue to change how people experience the world, visual culture has expanded beyond our traditional idea of images and artworks, encouraging students to examine diverse visual experiences and to consider what they reveal about power, identity, and society. Boylan describes visual culture as creating "a visual environment where all the little pieces we see... become (1) legible, (2) naturalized, normalized, and made obvious, and (3) mapped and accessible."⁶ She argues that "visual culture is never neutral, and thus never without value. Visual culture is power."⁷ Berger similarly reminds us that "the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe."⁸

As educators, it is not only vital that we teach our students how to think more critically about the images they encounter, but also to encourage them to question those images more deeply. If visual culture has become one of the primary ways people encounter information and develop their understanding of themselves and one another, then understanding how it functions is no longer optional. We cannot escape the visual world or its power. Now more than ever, it is essential that we teach students to become engaged viewers who can question the images they encounter, recognize the perspectives they reinforce, and understand how those images shape beliefs about themselves and the world around them. As Akiko Busch reminds us, "the entire world is shining with things we cannot see."⁹ As educators it is our responsibility to help our students move beyond just seeing with their eyes and graduate to seeing with their mind. The ACRL Visual Literacy

Competency Standards for Higher Education define visual literacy as “a set of abilities that enables an individual to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, use, and create images and visual media.”¹⁰ They further express that “a visually literate individual is both a critical consumer of visual media and a competent contributor to a body of shared knowledge and culture.”¹¹ Visual literacy goes beyond only looking at artwork. It pushes students to critically analyze the messages and meanings of the images they encounter and ultimately empowers them to create visual works that communicate their own ideas and perspectives. Art education is uniquely positioned to cultivate these skills because of its deep connection to the visual, and also because students in the art classroom are not passive recipients of information; they are actively constructing meaning through observation, discussion, interpretation, and artmaking. Artists, whether in “high art” or common imagery, do not create in a vacuum. They respond to the historical, social, cultural, and political contexts around them. In the same way, students are not simply memorizing the “correct” interpretations, they are discussing, questioning, and comparing perspectives. The goal of visual literacy, and especially of this unit, is to strengthen these skills, so much so that they become innate in our students allowing them to interpret, question, discuss, and create in response to the visual world they encounter every day.

Why Art as Resistance?

When students encounter the concept of resistance in the classroom, it is often in a civics, history, or English language arts course, where resistance is explored within the context of a specific historical event, political movement, or literary texts. While these disciplines are invaluable, they can unintentionally impress upon students that resistance exists only in extraordinary moments of history. Often, students are left viewing resistance as protests, demonstrations, and marches, and other highly visible political movements. That is not to say that resistance is not those things, it absolutely is, but it is important to impress upon students that those examples represent only a fraction of what resistance can be, especially in the realm of art. Questions of resistance have remained a recurring theme throughout history, philosophy, literature, political thought, and the arts, as thinkers and artists have wrestled with the ideas of who holds power, how it is maintained, and under what circumstances it should be challenged. C.L.R. James’s *Toussaint L’Ouverture* explores questions of liberation, leadership, and colonial power during the Haitian Revolution.¹² Those same questions become apparent when comparing portraits of Toussaint Louverture created by artists from different cultural perspectives. While both depict the same historical figure, they communicate different ideas about his identity, leadership, and legacy. These comparisons demonstrate that visual representations are never neutral, and they shape our understanding of the past just as written texts do. While these texts approach resistance from political and philosophical perspectives, the visual arts offer another lens through which students can explore these same enduring questions. Images have long reinforced systems of power, but they have also preserved cultures, challenged dominant narratives, mobilized communities, and inspired change. Artists and activists have become almost interchangeable.¹³ As Massie-Blomfield argues, artists and activists have become interchangeable because social movements need not only facts, but also the emotional impact that art provides. “Movements need storytellers.”¹⁴ At the same time, artists must remain consciously aware of the role their work plays within society. Art has often functioned as a marker of wealth, status, and legitimacy, allowing artists to inadvertently become participants in maintaining unequal systems of power.¹⁵ Artists must be aware of if their works support existing systems of power or challenge them.¹⁶ James Baldwin goes on to support Massie-Blomfield’s expectation of the artist by stating, “the artist cannot and must not take anything for granted, but must drive to the heart of every answer and expose the question the answer hides.”¹⁷

Throughout this lesson, students can explore how art is a tool for power and also how art can be powerful

itself through discussion and art analysis. Educators can ask their students: “How has art been used to communicate, legitimize, or reinforce power?” Art history has millions of examples to choose from, demonstrating how power makes itself visible in art through rules, religion, nations, public spaces, and cultural institutions.

Power Through Legitimacy (Political Authority)

To analyze how power has used art to legitimize itself, let’s first look at the Neoclassical painting by Jacques-Louis David from 1801-1805 titled *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*. All five versions were commissioned by King Charles IV of Spain after Napoleon’s victory at Marengo. The painting depicts a heroic Napoleon dramatically riding his white horse over the Alps on his way to Italy. His bright red cloak blows in the wind as he confidently points forward. His name is carved into the rocks below with others such as Hannibal and Charlemagne, placing him alongside legendary military leaders. The sky around him is clear and in the background you can see his soldier following his leadership forward. This artwork screams power. But it doesn’t necessarily scream truth. Napoleon did cross the Alps but in a much less majestic way. Napoleon did not have a white horse, he crossed with a mule, in poor weather, dressed much more practically. The artwork is specifically replacing accuracy with an idealized image of authority. David’s work is the perfect example of how art can serve power, which makes sense because it was commissioned by power, i.e. the King of Spain. David wasn’t just documenting a time in history, he was commissioned to create an image that communicated a specific message for power.²⁹

In contrast to David’s *Napoleon Crossing the Alps*, Tania Bruguera’s performance piece *Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* demonstrates how power through legitimacy can be expressed in ways that test the limits of that authority. For her performance piece, Bruguera installed a podium with a microphone in Havana, Cuba in 2009 with two actors dressed as soldiers that stood beside the speaker and a white dove that was occasionally placed on the speaker’s shoulder. Viewers were then invited to come to the podium and speak freely for one minute, something that is already testing the limits of authority because it is something that is restricted to do in Cuba. The artwork pushed the limits of authority because it created a space where people could exercise political freedom that they normally did not have. Responses were varied, where some speakers praised the government and others criticized it. All participation helped bring home the idea of the artwork revealing who has the power to speak.³⁰ Bruguera’s artwork redistributes the source of power in a way much different than David’s. While David’s *Napoleon Crossing the Alps* focuses on the idea of constructing authority around one leader who is elevated above the people in order to reinforce his and the country’s legitimacy, Bruguera’s *Tatlin’s Whisper #6 (Havana Version)* distributes the authority to ordinary citizens who become those with political power because their participation questions who controls political participation.

Religious Power

Another example of how art can be used by power to communicate and reinforce its power is in religious art. One example is Michelangelo’s *The Last Judgement*. Michelangelo painted a massive fresco that covers the altar wall of the Sistine Chapel from 1536-1541. Christ is positioned in the center judging every soul as they come to heaven. Some of the people are being saved and rising into heaven, while others are being damned and dragged into hell and tortured by demons. Michelangelo’s work was extremely important at the time of its creation because most Europeans could not read (Latin or even their own language), so instead of reading about Judgement Day they saw it. In the Christian religion, Judgement Day is used as a reminder of the consequences of not following the rules and laws of those in charge. The painting visually communicates that if you follow “the ways of God” you will be given salvation and sent to Heaven, but if you do not, you will be

punished for your sin and sent to Hell. Michelangelo's work is a perfect example of how art communicates religious authority and shapes the belief of those around it.³¹

Over three hundred years later, Wassily Kandinsky challenged many of the same assumptions about the role of art.³² Rather than using recognizable religious imagery to communicate spiritual truth like Michelangelo, Kandinsky believed that color, line, and form alone could evoke emotional and spiritual experiences. In works such as *The Last Judgement* (1912), there is no central religious figure or defining narrative for the viewers to follow. The meaning is left open to interpretation, encouraging viewers to construct their own understanding rather than receiving one from a religious institution.³³ While Michelangelo's *The Last Judgement* reinforces the authority of the Church by presenting a clear vision of salvation or doom, Kandinsky's work shifts authority away from the institutional doctrine and toward the individual experience of the viewer. Together these works demonstrate how art can both reinforce existing systems of power and challenge traditional ideas about who has the authority to define truth and meaning.

National Identity and Patriotism

Art can also be used as a tool to help cultivate a shared sense of national identity and to reinforce a country's patriotic values. These works rarely serve as neutral records of history, often they display idealized visions of a nation and its people while serving as a way to encourage the viewer to identify with specific values, heroes, and national narratives. The following two examples from different cultures explore how art has been used to promote national identity and patriotism.

Emanuel Leutze's *Washington Crossing the Delaware* is an iconic American painting. While the painting itself depicts George Washington's famous crossing of the Delaware River on December 25, 1775, it was created much later in 1851 by Leutze who was living in Germany. Leutze created this artwork in hopes to inspire some more democratic movements in Europe. Viewers will see George Washington positioned center in the artwork, appearing strong and steadfast looking forward to his conquest. He is dressed in the American colors of red, white, and blue and surrounded by the American flag and his diverse soldiers, who you can also see a line of boats following behind. The river is shown to be icy and cold with chunks of ice surrounding Washington's boat, alluding to the cold dangers around him and his soldiers. Yet, Washington confidently looks forward to what is to come. In reality, this painting is highly idealized. Washington most likely did not stand on a boat, the flag had not existed in such ways yet, but the crossing did occur at night in terrible weather. It is assumed that Leutze intentionally ignored historical accuracy to create a powerful symbol of leadership, courage, and perseverance. This painting specifically helped shape how Americans remember George Washington and the Revolutionary War. It created a heroic national image that reinforced the ideas about American identity, sacrifice, and patriotism.³⁴

Similar to Leutze's creation of art in order to build on the ideas of American identity and patriotism, Diego Rivera also created artworks to support such ideals in Mexico. After the Mexican Revolution, Mexico's government wanted to find a way to unite the country after a decade of conflict. The government ended up commissioning large public murals so that ordinary people, regardless of literacy, could view them and understand. Diego Rivera created the *History of Mexico* murals from 1929-1935. The murals cover an entire staircase in the National Palace and tell the story of Mexico, beginning with the Aztec civilization and including Spanish colonization, independence, revolution, and modern day Mexico. Unlike Leutze, Rivera portrays Mexico as a nation, not just one heroic individual. He shows how Mexico has been built through Indigenous peoples, workers, revolutionaries, and ordinary citizens. The mural celebrates history and cultural heritage while making sure to make the viewer feel like they are a part of the national story.³⁵ Both works demonstrate that

art can shape collective memory and national identity. By emphasizing specific people, events, and values, artists help define how nations remember their histories and understand themselves. Whether focused on a heroic leader or the experiences of a nation's people, these images communicate ideas about who belongs, what is valued, and how a nation's story should be remembered.

Images do not simply reflect power; they help construct, legitimize, and preserve it. If visual culture has long been used to reinforce systems of power, it is not surprising that artists have also used those same visual tools to question, challenge, and resist them. Power isn't just about telling people what to do. It's also about shaping what people think is normal, true, or important. Art can challenge those ideas, which is why it can be so powerful and why those in power have so often sought to censor it.

Censorship and Control

Throughout history, those in power have consistently understood that authority must be seen in order to be believed. If art has the power to shape how we see the world, what happens when someone tries to control what we see? This is an important question to pose to students as you begin this section of the unit. Students have just discovered that art is powerful and that it has long been used to reinforce, communicate, and advance power. At this moment, educators should ask students, "Can art be controlled?" The goal is not necessarily for students to arrive at one definitive answer by the end of this section, but rather to continually question whether art can ever truly be controlled. Is that part of the power of art? History has shown us various iterations of governments, institutions, and individuals censoring visual art because of its ability to challenge dominant narratives, expose injustice, preserve marginalized voices, and inspire collective action. Censorship remains an ongoing reality rather than a problem of the past. At this point, teachers could ask students where they have witnessed or experienced censorship, both in the past and today. This discussion will help students to recognize that censorship has long been a common tactic and strategy used by those in power to "control" their people. Students should leave this unit viewing censorship as more than the simple removal of an artwork. They should be able to recognize it is an attempt to control what people are allowed to see, discuss, and ultimately believe. Controlling images is another way of controlling knowledge. Censorship extends beyond outright bans or legal prohibitions. It includes the many ways institutions, governments, organizations, and communities restrict, suppress, or discourage artistic expression by determining what can be created, exhibited, funded, circulated, or remembered.³⁶ Censorship is not limited to the removal of artworks from museums or books from libraries. It can take many forms, including banning works from public view, restricting what artists are allowed to create, intimidating artists into censoring themselves, or destroying cultural heritage altogether.

Over the course of history, those in power have used each of these methods to control visual culture. The Nazi regime confiscated thousands of works of modern art while labeling them "Degenerate Art" and simultaneously promoting artwork that reflected its ideology.³⁷ During Mao Zedong's Cultural Revolution, artistic production was restricted, and artists were expected to create work that reinforced Communist ideology while alternative forms of expression were suppressed.³⁸ In its most extreme form, censorship has extended beyond controlling artists to the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage, as demonstrated by the Taliban's demolition of the Buddhas of Bamiyan and ISIS's destruction of irreplaceable archaeological sites throughout Iraq and Syria.³⁹ Although these examples demonstrate that censorship has been used to control visual culture, it is far from a practice of the past. Contemporary artists continue to experience censorship, surveillance, and public backlash because of the ideas their work communicates and the topics they bring attention to. Chinese artist Ai Weiwei has experienced surveillance, detention, and restrictions on his artistic

practice because his work openly criticizes the Chinese government.⁴⁰ In the United States, artist Dread Scott has similarly faced censorship and widespread controversy because his work challenges dominant narratives surrounding race, patriotism, and American identity.⁴¹

Historical Examples & Practices of Censorship

The most common understanding of censorship is the banning or removal of artworks. One of the most well-known examples of artistic censorship occurred under the Nazi regime. “When the Nazi Party assumed control in 1933, its leaders began a campaign to align German politics, society, and culture with Nazi goals” and Gleichschaltung (coordination) took over.⁴² In attempts to control and clarify what “truly German art” looked like, Hitler selected artworks to be displayed in the Great German Art Exhibition. In 1937, the Nazis confiscated thousands of modern artworks including works by Kandinsky, Klee, Picasso, Chagall, from German museums (estimated anywhere between 16,000-20,000). They displayed many in the “Degenerate Art” exhibition in Munich, in an attempt to “mock the types of art that the regime considered ‘degenerate’”. Throughout this time period, the Nazi’s destroyed several thousand confiscated works of art and sold many of the most valuable works to enrich the regime and prepare for war.⁴³ To this day, many museums are still attempting to address these injustices and return or compensate for those artworks.⁴⁴ Students should recognize that the Nazi regime targeted modern art not simply because of its style, but because it challenged the cultural identity and ideology the regime sought to promote. Comparing the art the Nazis celebrated with the art they deemed “degenerate” reveals how images shape beliefs and why those in power seek to control them.

Another widespread form of censorship is through the practice of control, as seen in the Nazis’ efforts to define “truly German art”. This includes controlling what can and cannot be seen, created, written, or produced while silencing those who refuse to conform. In 1966 the Cultural Revolution broke out in China under Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Relics of old China were destroyed and authors and artists among those most heavily persecuted.⁴⁵ It seemed as though the Cultural Revolution targeted nearly every famous painter in its path. Some of Mao’s followers, however, understood the power of art and found it essential to advancing their revolutionary messages and practices. Artists who remained were permitted to create only work that celebrated Mao, the CCP, and its revolutionary ideals, demonstrating “fervent enthusiasm” for both. Despite the immense danger created by Mao and the CCP’s control over its citizens, some artists continued creating work in secret or found quiet ways to preserve their artistic practices.

⁴⁶ Art still persisted. When discussing this historical example, encourage students to consider the difference between banning art and controlling artistic production. Ask students what messages Mao's government wanted art to communicate and what ideas or perspectives were excluded through that control.

In what may be considered its most extreme form, censorship extends beyond controlling what artists create and seeks to erase culture itself. In March 2001, the Taliban deliberately destroyed the two monumental *Buddhas of Bamiyan*, statues carved into the cliffs of central Afghanistan that had stood for nearly 1,500 years.⁴⁷ Their destruction was not simply the loss of two sculptures, but an attempt to eliminate the historical and cultural significance they represented. More than a decade later, ISIS employed similar tactics throughout Iraq and Syria, intentionally destroying museums, archaeological sites, temples, sculptures, and other cultural artifacts.⁴⁸ These acts demonstrate that censorship is not always limited to restricting artistic expression; it can also involve the deliberate destruction of cultural heritage in an effort to erase the histories, identities, and collective memories of entire communities. Yet even in the face of this destruction, efforts to preserve cultural heritage continue. Museums, archaeologists, artists, and local communities continue working to

document, recover, and restore what remains so that these histories and cultures are not erased completely.⁴⁹ This example provides an opportunity for students to consider why destroying cultural heritage is a form of censorship. Ask students what is lost when artwork, monuments, and historical sites are destroyed and why preserving culture can itself become an act of resistance.

Contemporary Connections

While many of history's most dramatic examples of censorship occurred under authoritarian regimes, students should recognize that debates surrounding censorship continue today. By examining the work of Ai Weiwei and Dread Scott, students can analyze how contemporary artists continue to challenge governmental control despite surveillance, public backlash, imprisonment, and censorship. These discussions naturally connect to contemporary debates surrounding book bans, school curricula (CRT, gender studies, racial history, etc.), museum exhibitions, public monuments, and the removal of artworks. In this lesson, students should consider questions such as: "Who decides what the public is allowed to see? Whose voices are amplified or silenced? What responsibilities do artists, institutions, and communities have when confronting controversial images? More importantly, students should leave this discussion recognizing that questions surrounding censorship rarely have simple answers. Instead, they should understand that debates over artistic freedom, public responsibility, and power, continue to shape the visual world they live in.

What happens when a government fears an artist? Ai Weiwei is one of the world's best-known contemporary artists and activists whose work openly criticizes the Chinese government's censorship, corruption, and human rights abuses. In China, Ai Weiwei describes how censorship "operates around the clock, infiltrating every channel of communication. It impacts all forms of personal expression related to the public, whether communicated through publications, art exhibitions or social networks."⁵⁰ Due to Ai Weiwei's persistent criticism of the Chinese government, authorities have attempted to silence him through surveillance, imprisonment, internet censorship, the demolition of his studio, and the confiscation of his passport, and the removal of his online presence. Yet, Ai Weiwei has taken many of these experiences and used them to become a central part of his artistic practice as he documented and responded to the very systems attempting to suppress him.⁵¹ Works such as *Remembering* (2009), created in response to the Sichuan earthquake and the government's suppression of information about the deaths of thousands of schoolchildren, show how art can preserve truths that those in power attempt to erase.⁵² Ai Weiwei's work illustrates that censorship is not only the removal of artwork, but also the control of information, memory, and public discourse. Through his continued artistic practice, he demonstrates how creating art can become an act of resistance against systems of power. While Ai Weiwei's experiences show how governments can censor artists who challenge state authority, contemporary examples within the United States remind students that questions surrounding artistic freedom and censorship are not confined to authoritarian regimes.

What happens when a work of art challenges public values? American visual artist Dread Scott has found himself at the center of controversy throughout his career because of his artwork. "I make revolutionary art to propel history forward. I look towards an era without exploitation or oppression. I don't accept the political structures, economic foundation, social relations and governing ideas of America."⁵³ Scott found himself in a particularly intense controversy over his work *What is the Proper Way to Display a US Flag?* In 1989, Dread Scott created an art installation that invited viewers to answer the question: "What is the proper way to display a U.S. flag?" in a response book. To respond, visitors had to decide whether or not to step on an American flag placed on the floor. The installation stirred national controversy and became part of a larger legal battle over flag desecration and free expression after being condemned by President George H.W. Bush and members of Congress. Scott and others later burned flags on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, leading to a

Supreme Court case.⁵⁴ Scott's work demonstrates that there are rarely simple answers when questions of artistic freedom, patriotism, and public expression interact. Instead, these moments provide meaningful opportunities for students to engage in thoughtful dialogue about the role of art in a democratic society compared to an authoritarian society. Educators could open up a discussion after exploring Dread Scott, having students question: How should society balance artistic freedom with public values? or Who should decide when a work of art crosses a line?

Critically analyzing examples from different historical periods and political systems encourages students to recognize that censorship is not a singular event confined to one country or one moment in history, but an ongoing conversation about power, values, and artistic expression. As students compare the experiences of artists such as Ai Weiwei and Dread Scott, they should investigate who makes decisions about artistic expression, why those decisions are made, who is affected by those decisions, and how they influence what the public is able to see, discuss, and remember. Guiding questions might include: Why would a government or institution fear a work of art? What makes an image dangerous? Who decides what belongs in a museum, classroom, or public space? What stories disappear when art is censored? Whose voices are amplified, and whose voices are silenced? These questions invite students to recognize that attempts to silence artists often reveal the very power of visual images and to critically examine systems of power within both history and their own communities.

Censorship is not evidence that art is powerless. In fact, it is evidence that art is powerful enough to be feared. If art is powerful enough to be feared by those in power, then it is also powerful enough to challenge them. When those in power seek not only to silence artists but also to erase the visual evidence of people's history and identity, preserving culture becomes a powerful act of resistance.

Art as Resistance

Toni Cade Bambara once said, "The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible."⁵⁵ As societies change, artists have repeatedly demonstrated that they are not only "the gatekeepers of truth,"⁵⁶ but also some of society's most persistent voices of resistance. When systems of power seek to control, silence, or erase communities, artists often respond by preserving cultural identity, uniting people around shared causes, and challenging the very structures that determine whose voices deserve to be seen. Before introducing students to examples of protest art, educators should first challenge their assumptions about what resistance looks like. Many students initially associate resistance with marches, demonstrations, or political activism. While these forms of resistance are important, artistic resistance extends far beyond those familiar examples. By exploring these diverse forms of resistance, students begin to understand that art is not simply a commentary on social change; it is often one of the forces that helps create it.

Preserving Culture

Students often associate resistance with confrontation and protest. Before examining protest movements or public demonstrations, it is important for students to recognize that resistance can also be quiet, continuous, and deeply rooted in the preservation of cultural identity. Resistance is not always loud or confrontational. It can take the form of preserving traditions, languages, stories, artistic practices, and cultural knowledge threatened by erasure. Students must realize that art is not just a reflection of culture; it is one of the primary ways that culture is preserved, shared, and defended against those that wish to erase it. Students need to understand that preservation is resistance because culture shapes how groups of people and communities understand themselves and the world around them. When those elements of culture do not align with the

ideas of those in power about what is “normal,” “healthy,” “successful,” or “acceptable,” that culture often becomes a target for suppression. Because controlling culture is another way of controlling people. History repeatedly demonstrates that those in power understand this relationship. This is shown in many examples such as in 2001 when the Taliban in Afghanistan dynamited the Buddhas of Bamiyan,⁵⁷ the Nazis’ purging over 16,000 works of art and burning books,⁵⁸ Mao’s mandates on art in support of the Communist regime,⁵⁹ and ISIS’s “performative destruction” of irreplaceable archaeological treasures in Iraq and Syria.⁶⁰ The repeated destruction of cultural heritage throughout history demonstrates that those seeking power understand something our students are only beginning to discover: art and culture are never just decorative. They carry memory, identity, and ways of knowing powerful enough to be protected and powerful enough to be feared. Rather than presenting cultural preservation as a single historical event, students should encounter examples from diverse cultures and historical periods. This helps students recognize that preserving culture has served as resistance across time and place rather than belonging to one specific group or moment in history. Along with the historical examples, educators should introduce artists who actively resist cultural erasure, including Indigenous artists whose communities have preserved traditions for centuries. Examining these artists will help students recognize that cultural preservation is not simply about protecting the past, but also about continuing traditions, reclaiming histories, and ensuring communities can continue telling their own stories.

Jaune Quick-To-See Smith

One artist who demonstrates cultural preservation as resistance is Jaune Quick-to-See Smith (Salish, Kootenai, Métis). Smith challenges stereotypical representations of Indigenous people while centering their histories, symbols, and ways of knowing that have often been left out of mainstream historical narratives.⁶¹ To understand Smith’s work, students need historical context surrounding federal assimilation policies, including reservation system, land allotment, and efforts to dismantle tribal nations and identities.⁶² ⁶³ Smith’s work often speaks on reclaiming Indigenous identity after centuries of the US government’s desire to replace it. She also focuses on preserving cultural memory by addressing the lasting impacts of the Carlisle Indian Boarding Schools, where children were separated from their families and forced to abandon their Indigenous cultures.⁶⁴ ⁶⁵ Students can analyze Smith’s *Map Series*, where she “takes back” land and Indigenous identity through imagery, symbols, and stories.⁶⁶ Her work also critiques the omission and erasure of Indigenous people from museum practices and textbooks while reminding viewers that Indigenous nations remain living, sovereign communities.⁶⁷ ⁶⁸ Students should analyze Smith’s work alongside that of other Indigenous artists and consider how these artworks challenge or expand the narratives they may have been taught or originally thought about the Indigenous people. The goal is for students to begin to question the difference between how power portrays people and how communities represent themselves.

Emily Jacir

Another example of preservation of culture through art is that of the Palestinian people. Palestinian artists preserve cultural memory not only by documenting what has been lost in conflict but also by insisting that Palestinian people, histories, and relationships to the land remain visible in the present. Palestinian people have continually fought to preserve their culture throughout history, and artists have been at the forefront in helping do so. Students will need a brief history of the conflicts that have shaped the experiences of the Palestinian people. Since the Nakba in 1948 displaced approximately 750,000 Palestinians and destroyed or depopulated hundreds of communities, many Palestinian artists have turned to art as a way of preserving cultural identity and collective memory. Symbols such as keys, olive trees, traditional embroidery (tatreez), village architecture, maps, and family photographs frequently appear in their work as reminders of home,

history, and belonging. More recently, the widespread destruction of museums, archives, universities, places of worship, and other cultural sites in Gaza has made this work of preservation even more urgent.⁶⁹ In this context, Palestinian art demonstrates that creating and preserving culture is not only an act of remembrance but also a powerful form of resistance against erasure.

Emily Jacir is one artist who works to preserve Palestinian culture. Much of her work explores memory, displacement, and preservation of Palestinian history through collective acts of remembrance. In *Memorial to 418 Palestinian Villages Which Were Destroyed, Depopulated and Occupied by Israel in 1948*, Jacir invites participants to embroider the names of the four hundred and eighteen villages destroyed onto a refugee tent, creating a collective memorial. Jacir's work preserves these communities through the traditional practice of embroidery and creates a space for storytelling, conversation, and shared remembrance.⁷⁰ Students should analyze Jacir's work, considering how her artistic choices connect to Palestinian culture. Why embroidery? Why a refugee tent? Why names?

As students examine these works, the focus should move beyond identifying subject matter or artistic style. Instead, educators should encourage students to ask questions such as: What aspects of this culture are being preserved? What forces threatened its survival? Why might preserving these traditions be considered an act of resistance? These discussions move students beyond appreciating artwork to understanding the cultural and historical significance woven within it. Students should also have opportunities to apply this understanding to their own creative practice. Rather than asking students to reproduce cultural traditions that are not their own, educators can invite them to reflect on the traditions, identities, communities, or stories they value while considering how visual expression might preserve those experiences for future generations. In doing so, students begin to understand cultural preservation as an ongoing act of resistance that they, too, can participate in, while asking themselves: What is worth preserving, and why?

Collective Action

Art doesn't just reflect movements. It helps build them. While preserving culture protects identity and memory, artists have also used visual imagery to unite people around shared causes and inspire collective action. Art serves as a common visual language capable of communicating ideas, strengthening connectedness, and encouraging communities to work together toward social change. In these moments, art becomes more than a reflection of a movement; it becomes an active participant in the path towards change. Students often associate resistance with marches, protests, or demonstrations. While these visible moments are important, they are often made possible by the images, symbols, posters, murals, and messaging that unite individuals around a shared cause. Before communities are able to rise up and act together, they must first see themselves as part of something larger than themselves. Posters, murals, newspapers, prints, banners, and other forms of visual communication make movements visible, transform individual concerns into shared experiences, and transcend barriers of literacy, age, culture, and language, allowing messages to reach broad and diverse audiences. Symbols, colors, and recognizable imagery can help to create a shared identity that helps communities to rally around a common purpose while strengthening a movement's message. When examining these forms of visual communication, students strengthen their visual literacy by analyzing how artists intentionally use composition, symbolism, and color to persuade specific audiences, as well as to inform and inspire collective action.

Art and the Civil Rights Era

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s transformed American society, particularly for African

Americans. Art gave many African Americans the “style and imagery [to] take on the cast of empowerment” during a time of profound social and political change.⁷¹ Artist Jack Whitten described creating during this period as a need, “I did all of those works out of necessity. I was getting something out of my system. The pressure was intense. I was in such a rage.... Raw hate expresses itself physically. Every time I’ve experienced physical violence, I’ve had a visual response.”⁷² As the struggle for civil rights reshaped American society, it also transformed the artworld. Jones describes this period as a “rise of alternative spaces, homegrown galleries, and community exhibitions that brought art to the people.”⁷³ Photography became a powerful tool for documenting the Civil Rights Movement, raising awareness and strengthening its message.⁷⁴ Sculptor Mark Di Suvero recalls, “I know what artists did made a difference.”⁷⁵

The Black Panther Party played a key role in both the Civil Rights Movement and the art that accompanied it. They viewed health as a fundamental human right and understood art as part of that broader vision of community well-being.⁷⁶ If health was a fundamental human right, then art was more than decoration, it became part of what allowed individuals and communities to thrive. But the Black Panther Party also recognized art’s ability to mobilize social movements, particularly through what Bobby Seale calls the “quintessential activist form,” the poster.⁷⁷ One of the most well-known Black Panther poster artists was the party’s own Minister of Culture, Emory Douglas.

Emory Douglas

Emory Douglas was born in 1943 in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He moved to San Francisco with his mother in 1951. Douglas attended a Youth Training School where he worked in the printshop and learned basic commercial art techniques.⁷⁸ Douglas continued his art education at the City College of San Francisco and became involved in the Black Arts Movement alongside Amiri Baraka.⁷⁹ Douglas became inspired by revolutionary art and soon joined the Black Panther Party in 1967.⁸⁰ Douglas’s artwork incorporated drawings, photographs, and collages that he uses to create imagery for the Black Panther Party flyers, posters, newspapers, and other publications. He soon became the Minister of Culture for the BPP, where he was in charge of the weekly newspapers that were distributed across Black communities.⁸¹ “It was largely Emory’s images that communicated and helped the average protestor and grassroots organizer define the phenomena of who and what our oppressors were.”⁸² Bobby Seale reflects on Douglas’ work, commenting “They were dangerous pictures and they were meant to change the world.”⁸³ While Douglas often downplays the impact of his artwork, he usually attributes his motivation to his “desire to preserve a history that remains largely invisible and under threat of erasure.”⁸⁴ Douglas also embodied the Black Panther Party’s value of “Each one Teach one” and mentored dozens of artists that he helped to develop their revolutionary artistic skills and passion. His work consistently reflected the party’s evolving mission throughout the Civil Rights era.

Douglas’s work is an important example of collective action as resistance because his goal was to represent his people in ways that encouraged them to participate in the resistance. Douglas was never shy about calling out injustice. Through caricature and powerful visual imagery, he exposed those in power and the policies they imposed on African Americans and other marginalized communities. Danny Glover describes Emory Douglas’s work and skills as “represent[ing] a kind of collective energy.”⁸⁵ He explains, Emory “us[ed] art in the fundamental way of bringing people to a certain place, and in bringing them there, also defining and legitimizing the space they’re in.... It was not his individual art, it was a collective art as well.”⁸⁶ Much of Douglas’s early work appeared in the Black Panther Party’s weekly newspapers and flyers. Douglas was an integral part of the Black Panther Party’s visual communication, creating imagery that informed, united, and

mobilized African American communities throughout the Civil Rights era.

Teachers should provide students with background context to understand why Emory Douglas created his work while keeping the focus on how his images helped build a movement. Educators should create opportunities for discussion by asking questions such as: Why do movements create symbols? How can one image unite thousands of people? How does visual communication create community? Why are images remembered long after speeches? How do artists transform viewers into participants?

While some artists strengthen communities through shared imagery and collective action, others resist by questioning the very boundaries of the art world itself. Instead of asking communities to rally around an image, these artists ask society to reconsider what art is, where it belongs, and who has the authority to define it.

Disrupting Artistic Boundaries

Students often enter the art classroom with assumptions about what art is, where it belongs, who creates it, and what materials are worthy of artistic recognition. Teachers should begin this lesson by asking students to define art and describe what they believe an artist looks like and what an artist does. While previous lessons on art as resistance may have already challenged some of these assumptions, many students still describe art as something displayed in museums, created by professionally trained artists, and made using traditional fine art materials. At the beginning of every school year, I remind my students that we are all artists. For students hearing that statement for the first time, their response is often confusion. Yet that simple reminder immediately challenges assumptions about who has the authority to create art and whose creativity deserves recognition. Artists have always intentionally questioned those same assumptions. Some artists have resisted political systems or social injustice, as explored in previous sections. Others have resisted the boundaries within the art world by challenging who can create art, where it belongs, and what materials or practices are considered worthy of being deemed “art”. Before introducing examples of these artworks and artists, educators should encourage students to recognize the “rules” about art and how they are not fixed truths but ideas that are created and enforced by cultural institutions, museums, and social expectations. Once students begin questioning who established those boundaries, they are better prepared to understand how disrupting them and redefining art itself can become an act of resistance.

When students recognize that ideas about art are socially constructed and not fixed, they can begin to explore artists who resisted those expectations and the movements they were a part of. Political theorist Oliver Marchart argues that artistic practice is never separate from political and social structures. Rather than viewing art as isolated from society, Marchart encourages us to recognize that artists can resist systems of power not only through the messages they communicate but also through the ways they create, exhibit, and define art itself.⁸⁷ These artists and movements are not creating art in unique and unconventional ways for the sake of originality. Instead, they are challenging long-held expectations about who has access to artistic spaces, whose work is valued, and how visual expression can interact with the audience beyond the traditional museum walls. In doing so, they demonstrate that resistance can take the form of redefining art itself.

Once students recognize that artists can challenge traditional definitions of art, they are ready to explore how artists have also questioned where art belongs. Unlike museums or galleries, public spaces are accessible to everyone, allowing artists to reach audiences beyond institutional walls. For many artists, taking art into the streets is not simply an aesthetic decision but an act of resistance. By reclaiming public space, artists challenge who has the authority to determine what is seen, whose stories are visible, and who has access to

artistic expression.

Street Art

For many Indigenous artists, street art extends cultural preservation into contemporary public spaces. Murals and public artworks allow Indigenous people to reclaim histories, languages, symbols, and identities that have often been erased or overlooked. Educators could ask students: Why might Indigenous people choose to practice street art and graffiti as a form of art as resistance? Why does location matter? Why might these stories be more powerful when they are shared in public spaces rather than inside a museum or gallery?

In Los Angeles, street artist Wild Life helped create a space for Indigenous artists now called *Indian Alley: "Property of the People."* The alley sits beside the United American Indian Involvement center, which supports Indigenous American people fighting homelessness and addiction along LA's notorious Skid Row. The space quickly filled with street art, graffiti, and murals created by Indigenous artists. One mural was created by Jaque Fragua and River Garza in 2018, which charts all the LA area's original village names. Fragua shares that making art outdoors is inherently Indigenous. He connects graffiti to the primordial art practice of mark making, arguing that both share the same spiritual tradition of visual storytelling.⁸⁸ Although the institutional art world has devoted little attention to Indigenous involvement in the street art community, its roots can be traced back to ancient tribal communities on Turtle Island (North America).⁸⁹ Indigenous people are thought to predate the Romans and Greeks by tens of thousands of years in mark making using pictographic and petroglyphic iconography.⁹⁰ Thus returning street art to perhaps its first creators, Indigenous artists continue to use street art as a way to document and "emphasize the fact that Native Americans were and still are here."⁹¹

While many Indigenous artists use public art to reclaim visibility and affirm cultural presence, other street artists challenge the institutions of the art world itself. One of the most recognizable contemporary street artists is Banksy, an anonymous British artist whose identity remains unknown. Since emerging in the 1990s, Banksy has used public space as their canvas, creating satirical stencil-based works of art that critique society's many issues. War, consumerism, capitalism, political authority, surveillance, and inequality all remain important issues that Banksy's work explores and confronts for all to see in the public sphere. By remaining anonymous and placing their work on walls, buildings, and other public surfaces without permission, Banksy intentionally rejects the traditional structures of the art world. They refuse to rely on museums to reach audiences and create work that exists in everyday spaces where it can be encountered by anyone passing by.⁹² In this sense, Banksy's artistic practice demonstrates that resistance is expressed not only through the messages contained within an artwork but also through where the artwork exists and who has access to it. While educators can share various examples of Banksy's work, *Love is in the Bin* (2018) provides a particularly compelling opportunity to discuss artistic disruption and the commercialization of art. Banksy was becoming quickly aware that their art was seen as investment pieces, luxury goods, and status symbols, all things that they reject. Upon selling an original copy of *Girl with Balloon*, the work eventually entered the secondary art market and was offered for sale through Sotheby's by a private collector. Moments after the auction of Banksy's work concluded, a shredder that was hidden in the frame partially destroyed the artwork in front of a room of collectors, dealers, and spectators. Banksy later revealed that the mechanism had been secretly built into the frame years earlier in anticipation of the work being sold at auction. Instead of allowing the artwork to become a luxury commodity for private ownership, Banksy transformed the auction into part of the artwork. The performance invites viewers to question who truly controls artwork and challenges the systems that assign value. In doing so, Banksy revealed that artistic resistance can extend

beyond the image to confront the institutions and commercial structures that shape the art world.⁹³

When teaching this unit, educators should present the Indigenous street artists and Banksy (or other street artists) in conversation with one another highlighting how they use the same medium to achieve different forms and purposes of resistance. Students should then investigate why these artists rejected traditional exhibition spaces. What statements were they trying to make in rejecting these spaces? Through discussions about audience, accessibility, and location, students can begin to recognize that where art exists can be just as meaningful as the artwork itself. Once students question where art belongs, they are prepared to ask another important question: Who decides what kinds of creative practices are worthy of being called art? Craftivism provides an opportunity to explore how artists have challenged those assumptions by transforming traditionally overlooked forms of making into acts of activism and resistance.

Craftivism

Craftivism, a term coined by Betsy Greer, combines craft and activism to demonstrate that everyday creative practices can communicate powerful social and political messages. Greer explains that instead of relying on large demonstrations or confrontational protest, craftivists use crafts such as embroidery, knitting, quilting, sewing, and crocheting to encourage dialogue, build community, and inspire reflection. She echoes the reminder that activism does not have to be loud or in your face; it can be quiet. In doing so, craftivism challenges the distinction between "fine art" and craft while demonstrating that intentional acts of making can be just as powerful as public demonstrations. Greer goes on to explain that Craftivism allows for a back-and-forth dialogue to help the world become a better place.⁹⁴ Throughout history, many forms of craft have been associated with domestic labor and women's work, causing them to be undervalued within traditional art institutions. During the Suffragette movement of the nineteenth century, women used craft as a way to protest and fight for their rights.⁹⁵ Craftivists intentionally reclaim these creative practices, arguing that the materials artists choose are just as meaningful as the messages they communicate. By elevating forms of making that have often been overlooked, craftivism encourages students to question who determines which artistic practices deserve recognition and why certain forms of creativity have historically been valued more highly than others.

Chilean arpilleristas (creators of the tapestries known as arpilleras) worked as craftivists in response to the tyrannical rule of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet during 1974-1990.⁹⁶ During this time, around "3,000 individuals were reported as murdered or "disappeared" and an estimated 28,000 suffered unwarranted incarceration and torture."⁹⁷ These women lived under a regime that relied on intimidation, manipulation, and dismantling of rival political parties to maintain power. While Pinochet and his regime were in power, many citizens were placed into extreme poverty.⁹⁸ "At first glance, the arpilleras look like bright and colorful folk art. Further inspection reveals the presence of graves, chains, blindfolds, and bloodshed."⁹⁹ The arpilleristas used arpilleras to give themselves a voice and provide "an outlet for their grief and sense of injustice."¹⁰⁰ By working around the regime's censorship, they documented the loss of loved ones and the oppression they experienced in their daily lives. Their craftivism also created an emotional support system among one another that helped each other deal with the hardships of their lives and feelings towards their unjust government. Even after Chile gained freedom from Pinochet's regime in the 1990s, the women continued to be politically active and active within their craft.

Exploring craftivism allows students to reconsider what they believe art should look like and how change can be created. Educators should lead discussions centered on the Arpilleras and other craftivists and

encourage students to ask: Who decided that craft belongs outside of the world of “fine art”? Why might an artist choose embroidery instead of paint? Why have textiles and other forms of craft often been overlooked? How can something as simple as a needle and thread become an act of resistance? Can quiet, everyday acts of making be just as powerful as public demonstrations? Why or why not? Through these discussions, students begin to recognize that resistance is not defined by the scale of the artwork or the size of a protest but by the intentional choices artists make to challenge assumptions, communicate ideas, and create change. By examining street art alongside craftivism, students recognize that artists do not simply challenge political systems. They also challenge the expectations surrounding what art is, where it belongs, and whose creativity deserves to be seen.

Content Conclusion

By the conclusion of this content, students have moved beyond viewing art as decoration, entertainment, or a historical artifact and instead recognize it as a powerful form of visual communication capable of shaping beliefs, reinforcing authority, preserving cultural memory, mobilizing communities, and challenging systems of power. More importantly, they begin asking questions about the images they encounter every day: *Who created this? Whose perspectives are represented? Whose voices are missing? What message is being communicated, and why?* These questions encourage students to engage with visual culture not as passive consumers, but as thoughtful interpreters who recognize the relationship between images, power, and society. Equipped with this understanding, students are prepared to move beyond analysis and into creation, using their own artistic voices to communicate ideas they believe deserve to be seen. Students begin to recognize that art is never simply about aesthetics. Every artistic choice has the potential to communicate ideas, preserve histories, question authority, or inspire change. As students develop these understandings, they begin to see themselves differently, not only as viewers and interpreters of visual culture, but as artists capable of contributing to it. The culminating project challenges students to apply these understandings by creating an original artwork that communicates a message they believe deserves to be seen and thoughtfully curating a mini exhibition that situates their own voice within the larger history of artists who have used visual expression to shape the world around them.

Teaching Strategies

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)

Visual Thinking Strategies are used throughout the unit to develop students’ visual literacy and encourage close observation before interpretation. Students will be beginning many lessons by closely examining works of art using open-ended prompts such as: “What do you see in this image?”, “What do you think is being communicated or happening in this image?”, and “What do you see in these images that make you say that?” This way, instead of students immediately receiving historical context or the “correct” interpretation, they are able to construct meaning through evidence-based discussion, learning to support their ideas with visual evidence and also continuing to consider multiple perspectives.

Case Study Analysis

Students will be deepening their understanding of each unit theme through the examination of historical and contemporary artists whose work reflects the complexities of power, censorship, and resistance. Students will

be moving beyond learning concepts in isolation and will be investigating artists such as Jaune Quick-to-See Smith, Emily Jacir, Ai Weiwei, Dread Scott, Emory Douglas, Banksy, and many more to examine the historical context, intended audience, artistic choices, and broader social impact of each work. These case studies provide authentic examples that help students connect non-representational concepts to real-world events and artistic practice.

Studio Practice with Student Choice & Reflection

In this unit, students will be applying the concepts explored throughout by creating original artworks that communicate ideas rather than simply demonstrating technical skill. While each lesson establishes common learning goals, students are encouraged to make meaningful choices about subject matter, symbolism, materials, and artistic processes that reflect their own interests and perspectives. Whether designing resistance artwork, preserving cultural traditions through art, or creating work that addresses contemporary issues, the goal is for students to be using art as a deliberate form of visual communication. Reflection is embedded throughout this unit to encourage students to make connections between the themes they are learning about and exploring, the artworks they are studying, and the artworks they are creating. Students should be regularly responding to prompts that ask them to analyze artistic choices, consider multiple/other perspectives, and evaluate how visual elements are communicating messages and meanings.

Curatorial Practice

Students assume the role of curators by considering how artworks are selected, organized, interpreted, and presented to audiences. Throughout the unit, students will be examining how museums, memorials, institutions, and public spaces influence meaning by elevating specific voices and excluding others. In culminating activities, students are curating collections of artwork, developing exhibition themes, writing interpretive labels, and justifying their curatorial decisions. This process reinforces the understanding that meaning is shaped not only by the artwork itself, but also by the context in which it is displayed and presented to an audience.

Classroom Activities

Unit Launch/Wrap up- Art Brain Dump Activity

To begin the unit, have the students do a class discussion and brain dump where students can share and create an understanding of what they already think art is. The teacher should have students focus on questions such as: “What is art?”, “Who is/ can be an artist?”, “What is art for?”, “Where does art belong?”, and “Who gets to decide what is art?”. As a class, create a visual representation of the “brain dump” so that students can refer back to it throughout the unit and continue to question and push their understandings of what they originally thought about art, and perhaps add to their descriptions as it develops throughout the unit.

At the end of the unit, refer back to the brain dump and hold a class discussion about how the students’ understandings of art have developed and changed throughout the unit. Students can then complete a writing assignment sharing a specific understanding of art that has changed the most for them from the beginning to the end of the unit.

“Who Has the Power?” Artwork Investigation

Students will examine historical and contemporary artworks to identify who holds power, how that power is communicated visually, and who benefits or is excluded from the narrative. Teachers can ask or provide students with questions such as: “Who holds power?”, “How is power being communicated in the image?”, “Who commissioned the artwork?”, “Who was the intended audience?”, “Who benefits from the message communicated by this image?”, “Who is represented in the artwork?”, “Who is absent from the artwork?”, and “What symbols are being used to communicate power/authority in the image?” Students can work in groups or individually to complete the questions and reflections on the artworks. Teachers can choose from the list of suggested artworks provided in the unit plan to have students analyze.

Censorship Case Study Gallery Walk

Students should begin this activity by being asked to continue to think about, “Who decides what people are allowed to see, and why does it matter?” Creating several stations within the classroom (i.e. Nazi Germany “Degenerate Art”, Mao’s China, Taliban, ISIS, Ai Weiwei, Dread Scott, etc.) have students spend several minutes exploring the relationship between censorship and art by analyzing primary images and short descriptions/readings. Students will also respond to essential questions at each station such as: “When does protecting people become controlling them?”, “Can hiding an image change history?”, “Is removing art ever justified?”, “Is destroying art ever justified?”, “Who has the power to decide what is ‘appropriate’?”, and “What happens when certain voices disappear?” The centers should contain artworks, short context paragraphs or writings, three to four discussion questions, and can even include QR codes or technology devices with additional information (depending on the time being provided). Students should take notes and document information from each station. After the rotation has been completed, the class should discuss what they have learned and observed from the centers. Students should be encouraged to look for patterns or similarities between the examples, as well as differences.

Artwork on Trial

Students will work in small groups taking on the role of a museum ethics committee tasked with a recommendation about a specific artwork (it is suggested that the teacher picks artworks that have been in similar situations historically or in the present day) that has generated public controversy. Some people want the artwork displayed, while others feel that it should be removed. Each group should be assigned a specific artwork, where they will be provided with background information about the artwork and evidence about the artwork (perhaps including publications, artist remarks, government responses, public reactions, etc.) to help them work to decide the status of the artwork in question. They will then have to describe the controversy around their artwork, why it is being challenged (political, religious, social, moral, or economic), who holds the power surrounding the artwork (government, museum, institutions, corporations, public), what values are being protected if the artwork is kept or removed, what values are being limited, and what should happen with the artwork (display it, remove it, display it with a warning/context, move to another location, etc) along with students’ justification using evidence. Each group will then present their artwork to the class in the format of a “hearing”. The rest of the class will act as cross-examiners, questioning the teams’ decisions. The class will then “deliberate” by voting on what they think should happen to the artwork. Only after the class has voted, should the teacher reveal what originally happened in the situation in reality. At the end of the activity, the class can hold discussion or personal reflection on their thoughts and opinions of how the situations played out and how these situations happen in everyday life.

What is Worth Preserving? (Gallery Rotation & Studio Project)

Students begin the activity being asked, “What parts of our identity, culture, and history are worth preserving and who decides?” Teachers should present students with an empty box and ask them to imagine they must leave their home forever with only five items that fit inside. The items students choose should not be needed for survival but should tell the story of who they are and where they come from. Have students reflect and share their choices with one another or the class. Then ask students to imagine that these items, traditions, and memories are considered unimportant, illegal, or should be forgotten, and have them reflect on how that loss would affect their identity. Students then examine historical examples of communities that have been forced to lose or abandon their homes, languages, traditions, religious practices, names, clothing, and cultural identities through war, colonization, or government policies. This activity can continue with a gallery walk rotation exploring artists who preserve their cultures with their artwork (Jaune Quick-to See Smith, Emily Jacir, Ai Weiwei, Bisa Butler, Yinka Shonibare, etc.) During the rotation, students can document what each artist is working on preserving and why. If technology is available, students may also explore the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s *ENCODED: Change the Story. Change the Future*. Digital exhibition, where contemporary Indigenous artists reinterpret works of art from the museum’s American Wing using augmented reality to reclaim Indigenous perspectives and challenge historical narrative. Students will then conclude the activity by creating an artwork that preserves something meaningful to them. They can choose a medium that best represents their intention and complete an artist statement reflecting on what they chose to preserve, why it matters, what would happen if it disappeared, and what they hope future people will understand about them. Students should also reflect on how their artwork resists a power concept or message.

Mural Proposal

Students will investigate how murals and other forms of public art communicate community values, preserve cultural memory, celebrate identity, and inspire social change. Through the study of historical and contemporary artists such as Diego Rivera, Judy Baca, Banksy, Shepard Fairey, and the Guerrilla Girls, students will examine how the location of an artwork influences its meaning, audience, accessibility, and impact. Throughout the project, students will consider the question, “Who and what deserves to be represented in our shared public spaces?” Using a planning sheet, students will identify the story, person, community, issue, or idea they wish to highlight, their intended audience, the proposed location for their mural, the message they hope viewers will take away, and the visual symbols they will use to communicate that message. They will also justify why their work belongs in a public space versus a museum, recognizing that where art is displayed can be just as meaningful as the artwork itself. Students will then create a scaled mural project proposal that thoughtfully considers the relationship between artwork, audience, and place. If time allows, students can present their proposals to a mock Community Arts Commission, defending their choice of location, explaining how their visual decisions support their message, and discussing the impact they hope their mural would have on the surrounding community.

Culminating Project: Curate a Resistance Exhibition

As a culminating project, students will apply their understanding of art as a form of communication, power, and resistance by creating an original artwork that conveys a message, perspective, or story they believe deserves to be seen. Drawing upon the artists, themes, and concepts explored throughout this unit, students will develop a work that communicates their ideas through intentional artistic choices. Students will then curate a mini exhibition by placing their final artwork in conversation with historical and contemporary works studied throughout the unit, selecting pieces that strengthen, challenge, or extend their idea. The exhibition

will include museum labels, a curator statement that explains the connections between the selected works, and an artist statement reflecting on how their artwork contributes to the larger conversation surrounding art, power, censorship, and resistance.

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

Standards-- National Core Art Standards for Visual Arts-- 6th Grade. These standards can be easily cross-referenced to other standards. Additional supporting standards from the National Core Art Standards are incorporated throughout the unit as students engage in collaborative inquiry, critique, exhibition design, and reflective artmaking.

VA:Cr1.2.6a Formulate an artistic investigation of personally relevant content for creating art.

Students investigate issues, identities, and causes that are personally meaningful before developing artwork that communicates a message they believe deserves to be seen. This standard is most evident in the culminating project and throughout planning activities.

VA:Pr5.1.6a Individually or collaboratively, develop a visual plan for displaying works of art, analyzing exhibit space, the needs of the viewer, and the layout of the exhibit.

Students curate a mini exhibition by selecting, organizing, and displaying artworks around a common theme of resistance. They create labels and curator statements that explain the connections between the works.

VA:Pr6.1.6a Assess, explain, and provide evidence of how museums or other venues reflect the history and values of a community.

Students investigate how museums, monuments, and public spaces shape historical narratives and determine whose stories are represented. They also consider how artists challenge these institutional spaces through alternative forms of exhibition.

VA:Re7.2.6a Analyze ways that visual components and cultural associations suggested by images influence ideas, emotions, and actions.

Students develop visual literacy by analyzing how artists use color, symbolism, composition, scale, and imagery to communicate meaning. They explore how visual choices can persuade audiences, shape beliefs, and inspire collective action.

VA:Cn11.1.6a Analyze how art reflects changing times, traditions, resources, and cultural uses.

Students investigate how artists across cultures and historical periods have responded to power, censorship, and social change. They recognize that art both reflects society and has the power to shape it.

Resources

Artworks List & Art Related Resources

In addition to the artworks discussed throughout this unit, the following works represent a small selection of additional artworks educators can use to expand upon the themes and concepts explored with students. These examples are part of a larger, ever-growing collection that includes artworks referenced throughout this unit, as well as additional suggested artworks organized by unit section and available through the digital resources link below. As new artists, artworks, and connections emerge, this collection can continue to grow alongside the unit.

Additional works of art for each section can be found at the following resource:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1vhlPtbhdrnC3ZF24f7LKR2m-xVb4GhBbXzK37seUkg/edit?usp=sharing>

Representations of Toussaint Louverture: Comparative Study:

Maurin, Nicolas Eustache. *Toussaint Louverture*. 1832. Lithograph.

Rigaud, Louis. *Toussaint L'Ouverture*. 19th century. Oil on canvas. Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History, New Haven, CT.

Lawrence, Jacob. *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*. 1936–1938. Series of 41 tempera paintings on paper.

Students should compare representations of Toussaint Louverture by French, Haitian, and Black American artists to examine how race, culture, power, and perspective influence how historical figures are represented and remembered. The comparison encourages students to question who has the authority to construct historical narratives and how artists can challenge or reclaim earlier representations.

Butler, Bisa. *I Go to Prepare a Place for You*. 2021. Cotton, silk, and velvet. Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, Washington, DC.

Students can examine Butler's quilted portrait of Harriet Tubman to explore how artists can preserve and reclaim histories through contemporary art. The work encourages students to consider how materials, symbols, and cultural traditions can honor historical figures while connecting past acts of resistance to the present.

Ringgold, Faith. *The American People Series #18: The Flag Is Bleeding*. 1967. Oil on canvas. Collection of the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC.

Students should analyze *The Flag Is Bleeding* to examine how artists use national symbols to address inequality and social conflict. The painting encourages discussion about patriotism, justice, and the role of art in advancing conversations about social change.

Guerrilla Girls. *Do Women Have to Be Naked to Get into the Met. Museum?* 1989. Poster.

Students can examine the Guerrilla Girls' poster to investigate how artists challenge exclusion and inequality within cultural institutions. The work encourages students to question who decides which artists are represented, valued, and remembered in museums.

The NAMES Project Foundation. *The AIDS Memorial Quilt*. 1987–present. Community memorial quilt.

Students can examine the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* to explore how collaborative craft can preserve memory, honor lives lost, and advocate for social change. The quilt demonstrates how individual acts of remembrance can unite to create one of the largest examples of collective artistic activism in history.

Teacher Bibliography

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A wonderful resource about the "start" and history of craftivism as well as various and multiple craftivism project ideas and directions.

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