Urban Pets as Social Practice: Constructing Pets with a Purpose

Carrie Pope

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Art that Persuades us to Think Differently and Changes Us

Artists:
John Audobon
Pablo Picasso
Mel Chin
Morgan Schwartz
Jody Boyer
MarkSearch
I developed this lesson in my fourteenth year of teaching. I had just transferred to sixth grade general art after primarily teaching pottery classes in a high school for thirteen years. I was at a low income, high poverty school and was having a difficult time engaging my students. I had seen Robert Marbury’s work about ten years earlier and had wanted to do something with it but had never had the opportunity. Recognizing the student’s need for play, I first approached this lesson with one class bringing in several garbage bags of stuffed animals my daughter had discarded.

The lesson did not begin as a study in Social Practice. It began with students simply creating a new “pet.” The first class of students began giving the pets that they had created stories and I recognized that many of the stories were personal. One young boy’s pet had just recently moved to our community and was living in an apartment, which was the exact personal experience that student was going through. Watching the students give stories and purposes to their pets that addressed their personal needs made me realize this lesson could be so much more than just making imaginary animals; we were making pets with a purpose.

Additionally, this lesson is part of a six-week unit. After this lesson, students also learn watercolor painting with the creation of a habitat for the pet. They also explore clay and make a dish to feed the pet. In one lesson we look at the Shipibo tribe and students create an embroidery work (further using the sewing skills they have developed) based on the sound of the pet. https://goo.gl/photos/w5yxQwfgcQox17er7 We also have created plaster molds of the pets “tracks”, building a body of evidence to present creating the reality of the creature.

The unit culminates with our partnership with the local humane society. We have an art show at the end of each trimester, presenting our pets and the numerous artworks and artifacts we have created along our pets. Lastly students collaborate to build a piece of pottery, a vase, or bowl and it is sold to raise funds for the shelter. We raise an average of $1000 per year for the shelter. Here are some articles from our local paper that cover the art show.
http://www.cb-schools.org/school-news/6th-grade-urban-pet-project-art-show/
Learning Objectives:

- Students will be able to demonstrate an ability to explore art materials and methods in new ways.
- Students can explain purposes for artists to create art.
- Students can write why a location selection can change the way people interpret artworks.
- Students can explain how art can influence the ideas and beliefs of society.
- I can develop an idea for a work of art based on a social problem with the purpose of influencing a specific audience.
- I can give examples of how arts meaning is dependent on society.
- I can examine a piece of artwork and compare how its influence on society has changed over time.

National Visual Arts Standards-

VA:Cr2.1.6a
- Demonstrate openness in trying new ideas, materials, methods, and approaches in making works of art and design.

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

VA:Pr6.1.1a
- Analyze and describe the impact that an exhibition or collection has on personal awareness of social, cultural, or political beliefs and understandings.

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

VA:Re8.1.6a
- Interpret art by distinguishing between relevant and non-relevant contextual information and analyzing subject matter, characteristics of form and structure, and use of media to identify ideas and mood conveyed.

VA:Cn11.1.3a
- Recognize that responses to art change depending on knowledge of the time and place in which it was made.

VA:Cn11.1.5a
- Identify how art is used to inform or change beliefs, values, or behaviors of an individual or society.
Materials-
Discarded stuffed animals, 3 per student
Hot glue guns
Sewing needles and thread

Not necessary but helpful:
velcro tabs
super glue
snaps
glow-in-the-dark paint
Whatever you can find that the kids need: The lesson is mostly about ideas and helping students problem solve. They are creating an answer for a very specific problem and as the teacher it is my duty to help them. Once I had a student who had designed a pet that needed lasers shooting out of its paws in order to stop violence. So, we problem-solved by embedding laser pointers that had been in my desk for years in the paws. For me it is a matter of saving stuff and being resourceful. Note that I tend to buy large lots of old sewing materials at garage sales and ask parents for donations of stuffed toys and sewing materials.

Day 1
(Day 1 and Day 2 of the lesson are spent building background knowledge and understanding of what art can be beyond the experiences that the students have previously had.)

Objective: I will define social practice and be able to explain the work of several social practice artists.

Anticipatory Set / Bellwork:
Have students answer this question in their sketchbooks or on a piece of paper:
How many types of artwork can you list?
Try to list at least 5 kinds of artwork.
Think about this question: What are the purposes of art? Can you name at least three?

Modeled / Focus Lesson:
Introduce students to the concept of social practice. Using the following examples of artwork discuss how contextually they have a purpose of creating change in the viewer. Begin with simple examples and work towards ideas that are more abstract. Here are the examples I used.

John J Audubon, Passenger Pigeon
http://johnjames.audubon.org/billions-none-extinction-passenger-pigeon

1. How did people keep records before photography and computers?
2. Has anyone heard of a Passenger Pigeon?
Pablo Picasso, 1937, Guernica
I show this image and discuss how the imagery made people feel about war. It may not have been created with the idea of social practice but today we can understand the power it had on people and see how it can fit in a place that changed people’s views.

1. What is going on in this image?  
2. How does it make you feel?

Mel Chin, 1991-ongoing, Revival Field
http://melchin.org/oeuvre/revival-field

1. How is this work art?  
2. What would this artist need to know in order to create this?

Morgan Schwartz, 2001, The Hope Project
http://sodacity.net/hope/hope.html

Allow students to view the image for a minute or so. Give them the date it was taken (October 11, 2001) A student will likely make the connection. We discuss the image, the project that was involved. Then we discuss how the artist continues to share the piece in museums/galleries.

This is an image of the image on display at Bemis Center, Omaha, Nebraska. The family in the image looks as if they are standing in front of the store. This image allows students to further understand how the art is presented over time and the importance of how a work is presented. In this case, scale, has an important role.  
https://www.flickr.com/photos/bancroftbaylissloop/4736135217/in/photostream/lightbox/

Jody Boyer, Bancroft Bayliss Loop, 2009 - 2011

This artist created a bike ride that connected two communities divided by a river and state lines. A local artist for our community, we talk about misconceptions we have about each other and how this experience can put a halt to those misconceptions. Omaha and Council Bluffs have many stereotypes about each other related to socio-economic status, class, and working class communities.

Again discussing how this experience is shared within a gallery space we brainstorm as a class how one might share this experience. Boyer has a stationary bicycle and video taken with a helmet cam of the route playing on a full screen in front of the cycle.

1. How is leading a bike tour a form of social practice art? Is this theater, performance or community activism?  
2. How can communities be both connected and disconnected?
3. What forms of transportation do you use, and why?
4. What types of transportation do communities need so everyone can have access?

Marksearch, Temescal Seed Swap, 2005-2010
http://www.marksearch.org/seeds-page.html

1. Do you garden?
2. What challenges have you faced while gardening?
3. How does this connect to Mel Chin’s “Revival Field”?

Lesson Summary
Almost all artwork could be framed in a context of Social Practice. These are just some of the works that I have used over the years. I try to find work that the students can understand conceptually, that connect to our community in some way. Then I can build the idea of Social Practice from that. As a teacher you may need to find works that connect to your community in a more specific way.

After presenting social practice artwork to the students, we revisit the bellwork questions at the end of class. Students write a quick summary of social practice art and add this to their sketchbook writing, or sheets from the beginning of class.

DAY 2

Objective: I will know the artwork of Robert Marbury and be able to identify the purposes of his urban beasts.

Anticipatory Set/ Bellwork:
Do you have a pet?
Why do you have a pet?
What kind of animals are usually pets?
Do you know any pets with a purpose? (Explain the purpose of therapy pets, guide dogs, diabetes dogs and other pets we have in our culture with a purpose.)

Modelled/Focus Lesson:
This artist acts as a “mentor text” for our project. In the English department in my school district the term “mentor text” is used when a student is introduced to a piece of writing and then they rework the writing into a piece that is similar, perhaps using the same rhythm, but their own. I explain to the students that we will be creating pets instead of beasts and that we will also have a purpose.

I read the description of the creature and we discuss the purpose the artist is trying to share
http://www.urbanbeast.com/beasts/eduard.html
We also break down the facts the artist shares about the creature. We discuss how the artist uses the facts to create a sense of connectedness for the viewer. The animal seems so real and alive the viewer has empathy for it.
We also discuss how the artist started making the “beasts.” I contacted him and this is the email he sent me:

"I got started with the Urban Beasts while working at the Farmer's market in NYC. It was an amazing Buddhist job, sitting in a parking lot and being everyone's "nature" outlet. Citizens in urban centers forget that they live in a fully developed ecosystem and lean towards the idea that they live in "anti-nature". But being up at 5am introduced me to the city in a way I had never seen. A bit of the behind the scenes. Plus I would drive down to rural Pennsylvania to visit the BAKery and that gave me time to think about the urban/rural balance.

I started to make the Urban Beasts because of two things coming together. One was the use of stuffed animals tied to truck, the way they decompose and the joy they seemed to bring people (even in their decay). And two the pondering about how animals adapt to different ecosystems. The hawks love NYC because it mimics the cliff and there is perpetual pigeon dinner; the pigeons, who are nocturnal, change their lifestyles to accommodate those that feed them; rats are a hidden but ever present animal concept; so what else could have adapted.

I make the beasts first, but their personalities develop as they are made. The challenge of resewing the beasts from a stuffed animal means that it might look weird, or fierce or stupid or happy. Then I like to write about places I have been or would like to be. At one point, I thought it might be fun to write travel guides based off of Google and Google maps ("when in Gleshter, make sure to drop by Madame's Pie shop, it is located next to the town sauna"). I like to frame the ridiculous with the banal, since that is kind of like life. We can appreciate storytelling from 6-60 (and beyond, i guess). I have learned that being to faux-scientific annoys real scientists, so I am aiming more toward story

I studied Anthropology in College and feel that it has affected most of my interests, including my artwork. Not all of it is appropriate for the sixth grade, but here is an example of a project I just finished where I grew all of the beards of the presidents (http://robertmarbury.com/index.php/?project/presidential-facial-hair-portraits/).

So I am most interested in what is described as Liminal Space. The area between the dichotomies. So, how does natural develop in the suburb; how does domesticity affect neighboring wild relatives, or what happens when domesticated become feral; How adaptation is affected by pop culture (which some would say has no business with actually affecting the world.
Stuffed animals are a perfect medium, as you have discovered. They are everywhere. Mostly in boxes. We, as humans, have a relationship to eyes. Plop some eyes on something and we will have feelings for it (http://ichbinkong.de/project/eyes.html) and stuffed animals are the perfect example. In fact they are so much more complex because they become totems for animals that we may never experience in the wild. Lions are noble, sheep are scared, meerkats are curious, llamas are maternal. You probably have better access to animals and know that llamas will spit at you if they could, sheep might be scared, but lions are no more noble, inherently, than chihuahuas.

I love something Mark Dion coined "Survival of the cutest".

I am not sure if these thoughts will fill in gaps or open them up. But please feel free to respond, since I feel that you probably have developed a great approach from watching the students relate to their Pets. Also, since I like this kind of stuff, I am happy to email about it more. Plus, I want to see some of these pets.

So in short, yes this project is very much about the environment. It is also about how each of us fits into their environment as a feral alter-ego. And the process of making the feral pet gives us the control to hold the changing world in our hands. Actually having them make the pets, is the best example of making art. not everyone will love your pet, but you will have created it and it is art. -- Robert

Lesson Summary
In the sketchbooks, students brainstorm issues in their lives and community that they would like to focus on. At the same time, they explore the ways to solve these problems. An example could be, my father has cancer, we need to find a way to detect it sooner or we need to find a cure. Ideas also come from our community, a river borders our community and presents the danger of flooding every spring.

I also encourage my students to think about the problem that they want to address. Many times they change their minds from initial ideas once they process the information.

DAY 3

Objective: I will know assemblage sculpture and be able to make a plan for my pet by using the guiding worksheet and gathering all my necessary materials.

Anticipatory / Bellwork:
What is a social cause?

**Modelled/ Focus Lesson:**
Students receive a piece of paper with guiding questions. [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DmTJwkPVzzR-tB4pH4nyLiaFCGKtIbyGqQoXpSCtkQs/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DmTJwkPVzzR-tB4pH4nyLiaFCGKtIbyGqQoXpSCtkQs/edit?usp=sharing)

They should be encouraged to think fluidly, we start using the sheet of the paper, **Pet Purpose**, is why they are making the pet, what is the goal, **Social Connection** is the why.

An example I use is a pet that I would create for my dad who has cancer. I model personal experiences to give students permission to do the same. Connections to personal or community purpose are encouraged.

Pet Purpose- that I want to create a pet that informs people when they have Neuroendocrine Carcinoid Cancer.

Social Connection-because when people have this type of cancer they have no warning signs until it has progressed to a difficult stage and there currently is no simple way to know you have it

Attributes- I am going to have my pet lick people and if they have the cancer they swell up, huge, on the site. Because this has been happening for so long, doctors have tested my pet and understand the link. They are currently using my pet’s saliva in a lab looking for a cure. The attribute it needs is a TONGUE

Where does it come from?- Vietnam, because the cancer may be linked to Agent Orange

Attribute- Wings, because it has traveled so far to the US my explanation is that it can fly, OR if I can’t find wings it could hop great distances.

On the back the answers need to fit, it cannot eat hot dogs if it lives in the rainforests of Vietnam, it cannot eat bananas if it comes from Antarctica.

As soon as students have a plan they will look for one pet that serves the basic needs that will become the basis for the sculpture they create. Sometimes the animals are “Real” sometimes they are models of the “real” creature, we disregard size and scale in the actual creation process but the description can be different. Students are also encouraged to draw the pet that the toy will become.

An example of a sketch a student created with her plan and the finished piece, by Abbigail Olson
DAY 4 and DAY 5

Some guidance for arranging the room: Students who know how to sew are asked to raise their hand and the classroom is rearranged so that I have at least one knowledgeable person at each table. I also have threaded needles ready. I use magnets on the whiteboard and have four needles on each one, they are labeled per table. I also have a large magnet ready if one is dropped. A hot glue gun is also available for areas that cannot be sewn by hand.

Objective: I will know the purpose of my pet and be able to complete my assemblage sculpture pet with excellent craftsmanship.

Modelled / Focused: Lesson: review procedures of making pets and the techniques and processes we have available.

Guided Practice: Students will begin disassembling and reconstructing the creatures. At least two pets per student and all pieces of previously destroyed pets should be available. Students are encouraged to help each other, yelling, “I need brown wings” and others helping them find the pieces. They can also trade parts of each other's pets.

Modelled / Focus Lesson: Students will need a quick lesson in sewing. They also need to know how to cut. If they are removing an item to use they will want to cut over the seam so as not to break it. If they are removing an item off of the base pet that they do not want, they cut above the seam so that pet they are using does not open up.

This does not work 100% because someone may need the item that was removed but it solves a great deal of problems for the students. Each kind of fabric is different and the materials used in the pets varies widely. If there are beans or plastic pellets we have a LOT of trash cans at the ready.
DAY 6

Objective: I will know why artists share their work and be able to present my pet with a short artist statement via thinglink.com and be able to respond to the work of others.

Anticipatory Set / Bellwork: Why do artists share their art? Discuss with a table partner.

Modelled / Focus Lesson: Explain the purpose of presenting artwork.

Above are all examples of Robert Marbury’s presentation of his creatures. Using photography, paying attention to scale, he creates images of habitats.

Students will go outside on to our campus and take photographs of the creatures they have made using the materials on campus to create scenes that are appropriate to the natural habitats.

This is a “Deep Sea Otter” by Ben Price.
This creature lives deep underwater filtering and cleaning the water.
This is a “Kernacoon” by Julia Kern
This creature has blue wings that rattle and glows in the dark. It helps plants grow.

This is an example of a display that students created to present the creatures they made in their natural habitats. This aligns with our 6th grade Science curriculum.

Students use the image to create a Thinglink account.

Teacher example:
https://www.thinglink.com/scene/377900640904413184

They can attach resources on the purpose of the pet as well as documentation, such as sound. This site allows them to have a presentation method that can be shared widely. The information
in the tabs can also be easily pasted into a document that can be printed and displayed with the creatures.

We have teamed with our local Humane Society and present our animals at an art exhibit held at the facility. For the clay unit students create pieces of pottery that are sold with all proceeds going to the shelter. We call it, “Pets Helping Pets”. This further establishes the social practice element of our project.

This is an example of a pet on display with other works created by the artist. The pet’s food dish and a painting of the habitat in which the pet was found.

**Lesson Summary**
Have student write a short reflection on the process of making their pet with a purpose as a summary activity.

We have teamed with our local Humane Society and present our animals at an art exhibit held at the facility. For the clay unit students create pieces of pottery that are sold with all proceeds going to the shelter.
FURTHER CONNECTIONS

This lesson is designed to be a connecting point for the rest of the middle school art course. The “pets” are kept within the classroom and the rest of the art that is created is based on the pet.

Lesson Idea 1 - Watercolor

We revisit the watercolors of Audubon and students create a painting of the habitat the animal can be found in. They are creating evidence of the existence of the pet.

Students learn eleven watercolor techniques and must use at least three in the image they create.

Lesson Idea 2 - Textiles

Students have already learned to sew through the creation of the pet. Now we look at a culture, the Shipibo Tribe. Students learn about the Shipibo culture and how they use images to communicate sounds. Students explore ways that animals use sound to communicate.

Students design an image using Shipibo traditions to illustrate the sounds that their pets make.
Lesson Idea 3- Storyteller Dolls

Students create storyteller dolls out of clay that copy the soft sculpture pet that they created. The dolls represent the story that the pets would tell about their purpose.

Lesson Idea 4- Paper Sculpture

A plate of food that represents what a persons pet would eat made from colored paper on a paper plate. The plate is decorated specifically for the pet. The foods are a strawberry, banana, fish, mouse, and neapolitan ice cream cone.
Lesson Idea 5 - Plaster Casting

What kind of footprint would your pet leave behind? We make small prints in clay that mimic what the animal would leave and capture it in plaster. Evidence that the creature exists.