2019

Exploring Public Space: Interventionist Artworks and the Creative Disruption of the Everyday

Jack Watson

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cstae_resource_high_school

Part of the Art Education Commons

Downloaded from
https://scholarscompass.vcu.edu/cstae_resource_high_school/2
EXPLORING PUBLIC SPACE
Interventionist Artworks and the Creative Disruption of the Everyday
PUBLIC SPACE INTERVENTIONS

UNIT PLAN

Jack Watson

BIG IDEA: Public Space and the Creative Disruption of the Everyday

SCHOOL/CLASS CONTEXT: Art III (11th-12th grade), but could be modified for other contexts

CENTRAL QUESTIONS

• What is public space? What are the habits, patterns and rules that govern public spaces? How does the physical structure of the space reinforce these rules?
• How do artists create actions in public spaces that disrupt the everyday in creative and productive ways?
• What role does the spectator play in creating and generating meaning in socially-engaged artworks?

OVERVIEW / RATIONALE

Attempting to bridge a gap between artist and spectator while also challenging the elitism and preciousness associated with art, artists have long sought ways to blend the art experience into the everyday. From the ephemeral performances and “social sculptures” of 20th century conceptual art to the culture-jamming interventions of contemporary street art, there is a rich historical context for engaging directly with the spectator in public spaces. Taking artwork into public spaces in the form of actions rather than objects – actions which involve the participation of the spectator – bypasses the negotiations and mediations that take place when a viewer experiences something presented as “art”, and opens generative (and unexpected) spaces of dialog and meaning-making.

In this unit, high school students will collaboratively plan and implement public space interventions of their own design. This unit challenges traditional, formalist modes of art education which emphasize media manipulation and craftsmanship, instead favoring concept development, risk, experimentation and collaboration while engaging with contemporary artistic practices. By addressing issues that arise in public spaces, it is dealing with issues that are relevant to the everyday lives of student-artists. It is broken into 3 (roughly) week-long segments: Thinking & Brainstorming, Planning & Strategizing, and Implementing & Documenting.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

• To explore the physical and social structures of public space and the habitual patterns of social organization
• To research, discuss and apply nontraditional, contemporary artmaking practices, and to explore the potential of public space as compositional tool
• To brainstorm ideas and develop concepts in small and large groups culminating in a series of creative, socially-engaged works in a public space
RESOURCES

Books:
- *Escultura Social: A New Generation of Art from Mexico City*, Julie Rodrigues Widholm, editor
- *Games for Actors and Non-Actors*, Augusto Boal
- *The Interventionists: Users’ Manual for the Creative Disruption of Everyday Life*, Gregor Sholette and Nato Thompson, editors
- *Living as Form*, Nato Thompson, editor
- *What We Want Is Free: Generosity and Exchange in Recent Art*, Ted Purves

Suggested Artists:
- Alex Villar, “Temporary Occupations”
- Allora and Calzadilla, "Chalk"
- Barbie Liberation Organization
- Gustavo Artigas, “Ball Game”
- Improv Everywhere
- Institute for Applied Autonomy, “Graffiti Writer”
- Jason Eppink, “Pixelator”
- Ji Lee, “The Bubble Project” & “Abstractor”
- Joe DeLappe, “deadiniraq”
- Joseph Beuys
- Krzysztof Wodiczko, “Homeless Vehicle”
- Liz Magic Laser, “Guerilla Theater”
- Maria Alos, “Resistencia”
- Michael Rakowitz, “ParaSITE”
- Oliver Herring
- Rebar, “PARK(ing) Day”
- Rirkrit Tiravanija
- Sarah Ross, “Archisuit”
- Stephen Colbert, “The Colbert Report”
- The Reverend Billy
- The Surveillance Camera Players
- The Yes Men

PROCEDURE
The sequence below lasts 3 weeks in hour-long class periods that meet every day, but the sequence can easily be modified for different schedules and contexts

WEEK 1:
Thinking & Brainstorming

Day 1: Warm-Up / Space exercises
To introduce the unit, use theater games in an unfamiliar space as a way to get students moving, interacting with each other and transforming spaces. Augusto Boal’s “Theater of the Oppressed” exercises create an effective model for some of the concepts at the heart of the unit (such as creative resistance and collaboration). After the exercises, debrief about the ways in which these actions transformed the space by creating new and memorable experiences and subverting the function of the space.

Day 2: Introduction / Transforming public spaces
Introduce the unit in overview by outlining the sequence, and ask the central questions. Discuss the nature of public space, and the rules and habits that govern it by having students share their own experience in public spaces. Present the work of Improv Everywhere (especially “Frozen Grand Central” and “High Five Escalator”) as demonstration of socially-engaged artmaking in public spaces. Ask students to discuss why these
spaces were chosen, and how these actions transformed those spaces. Then, have students brainstorm a list of the public and pseudo-public spaces that they encounter in their own lives.

**Day 3: Theory / Exploring spaces**
Introduce the theoretical framework and art historical context of socially-engaged artmaking, especially The Situationists and the concept of the “Spectacle”. Ask students to read some of Guy Debord’s texts, and discuss psychogeography and the concept of the dérive. Then, take students on a directionless walk through campus to explore and discover unfamiliar spaces on campus.

**Day 4: Artist examples / Reclaiming public space**
View and discuss a variety of contemporary artists, especially the culture-jammers and interventionists who create actions that reclaim or repurpose public space (including Rebar, Jason Eppink, Michael Rakowitz, Sarah Ross, Krzysztof Wodizcko, and others). Begin brainstorming ideas for projects in groups or as a whole class, letting ideas surface organically, without concern for logistics.

**Day 5: Artist examples / Other forms of public space**
View and discuss contemporary artists who create interventions in other types of “public space”, such as online spaces, print, television, and other media. Continue brainstorming, moving towards developing project ideas. Students may participate in multiple groups, if so inclined. Once student groups settle on a project idea, ask them to write a Project Proposal: Who (students participating), Where (the space), What (describe the action), Why (discuss the rationale), When (select a specific time), and Resources.

**WEEK 2:**
Planning & Strategizing

**Day 6-10: Planning, strategizing and preparing for actions**
Each day this week, begin class with additional project examples to continue the conversation about the nature of public spaces, and the artist’s role as creative agent within those spaces. Most of the class time this week will be used for large and small group project planning: Students will finish and submit their project proposals, then present them to the class for an in-process critique, in which other students in the class offer suggestions or ask questions of the group. Once a project idea is fully developed, and the students and teachers verify that it is without major areas of concern, the groups may proceed with preparing supplies and resources for their actions.

(Depending on the unique characteristics of any particular class, the level of structure to this week may need to be modified. Some flexibility of typical classroom rules for student interaction is important given the collaborative and social nature of the project, but some students may struggle with the challenge of open studio time and freedom to interact with peers. Then again, many students may defy teacher expectations and thrive under the trust and agency afforded them in this unit!)
WEEK 3: Implementing & Documenting

Day 11-15: Implement Public Space Interventions
During this week, student groups will implement their public space interventions. It is important that students assign roles to various people in their group and to plan for contingencies, including potential response from spectators and legal issues. One of the roles should be documentarian – each group should have someone who is in charge of documenting the action in pictures or videos. Encourage students to view/participate in the other groups’ projects.

Some notes:
• Throughout this unit, it is natural to have periods of lull. There is typically an arc from initial inspiration and excitement during the first week, to lower energy or occasional off-task behavior in the second week, and then high energy and excitement again in the final week.
• Depending on the level of risk in any particular project idea, it may be wise to send home letters to parents explaining the relevance of the unit and asking for permission to participate (if it requires an action off-campus during non-school hours, for example).

Presentation & Reflection
After the conclusion of all public space interventions, students will present documents of their actions to the rest of the class in a large group critique, sharing anecdotes, interpreting the actions, discussing the spectator’s response, and evaluating the outcome. To conclude the unit, students will complete a written response, evaluating their own work, and connecting it back to the discussions that started the unit.
ASSESSMENT

CENTRAL QUESTIONS:
• What is public space, and what are the physical and social structures that govern it?
• Why do some contemporary artists make actions rather than objects?
• What meanings are generated when the artwork engages with the spectator?

VOCABULARY:
Social Sculpture  Artist as Agent
Social Engagement  Dérive  Viewer as Participant
The Spectacle  Détournement  Situation
The Everyday  Culture Jam  Intervention

1. PROCESS
6 5 4 3 0
6 = Fully engaged: Completed all tasks with effort and energy, willing to experiment and take risks
5 = Engaged: Completed tasks with some effort and energy, little experimentation and few risks taken
4 = Superficially engaged: Completed tasks with some distraction or limited effort, no risks taken
3 = Not engaged: Tasks not completed or done with much distraction or resistance, no risks taken

2. COLLABORATION
6 5 4 3 0
6 = Effectively planned and prepared for action as a group, shared all conceptual and technical tasks
5 = Planned and prepared for action mostly as a group, shared some conceptual and technical tasks
4 = Planning and preparation were unbalanced, many tasks were done independently
3 = Did not fully plan and prepare for action, many tasks left incomplete or completed individually

3. ACTION
6 5 4 3 0
6 = Action is well executed, implemented as planned, with full participation of group members
5 = Action is sufficiently executed, implemented mostly as planned, with some participation from each member
4 = Action is executed but needs work, not implemented as planned, or some members did not participate
3 = Action is not executed, or did not finish as planned, or many group members did not participate

4. INTERACTION
6 5 4 3 0
6 = Work effectively engages with audience, spectator becomes active participant in work
5 = Work engages with audience, but participation is limited - spectator mostly observes or reacts to work
4 = Work attempts to engage with audience, but there is no participation - spectator only observes or reacts
3 = Work does not attempt to engage with audience, spectator does not participate in work

5. CONTENT
6 5 4 3 0
6 = Work meaningfully explores public space, allows participants to generate personally-relevant & varied meaning
5 = Work draws attention to public space, meaning is varied but is unclear or underdeveloped
4 = Work attempts to draw attention to public space, meaning is limited or singular
3 = Work does not attempt to explore public space, participants cannot generate meaning

TOTAL PROJECT GRADE:  _____ / 30 points

Grade may be lowered for being LATE or UNFINISHED
SAMPLES OF STUDENT WORK

Monthly Meeting Marathon

These students chose the space between two buildings on campus during class change before an assembly as their site for intervention. These monthly assemblies are met with a high degree of cynicism by most students, and are viewed as one of the occasions when the oppressiveness of school is most challenging to bear. They staged a mock marathon in the 50-foot walkway between buildings complete with a sign-in table where students could pick up runner’s numbers, to a hydration station a few paces down the path, to a finish line with steamers and applauding onlookers. Every 9th and 10th grader who passed through this space became an unwitting marathon runner.

Leash Children

Inspired by the unsettling sight of toddlers wearing harness leashes, these students decided to walk around a large shopping mall in groups of two where one student was leading the other around on a leash. They did not act conspicuously, but just went about their way as they shopped in the mall. Onlookers felt inclined to approach them and ask them what they were doing, but they would reply with cryptic responses such as “It’s a really big mall” or “You can never be too safe”.

Colorful Shopping

The stressed-out hustle & bustle of the late-afternoon grocery store became the site to explore for this group of students, who wished to create a subtle intervention into the routine of the everyday. Each student dressed in a single color of clothing, and pushed around a cart shopping only for items of that color – the girl wearing white filled up her cart with toilet paper and milk, the girl wearing yellow picked out bananas and lemonade.