

Title

Ai Weiwei: A Closer Look

Concept/Main Idea of Lesson

In this lesson, students will engage in a deeper consideration of Chinese artist Ai Weiwei's work, noting important influences on the artist.

Intended Grade Levels

Grades 9-12

Infusion/Subject Areas

Visual Arts

Social Studies

Curriculum Standards

Visual Arts:

VA.5.C.3.3: Critique works of art to understand the content and make connections with other content areas.

VA.5.H.1.1: Examine historical and cultural influences that inspire artists and their work.

VA.68.C.3.1: Incorporate accurate art vocabulary during the analysis process to describe the structural elements of art and organizational principles of design.

VA.912.H.3.1: Synthesize knowledge and skills learned from non-art content areas to support the processes of creation, interpretation, and analysis.

Social Studies:

S.912.H.1.2: Describe how historical events, social context, and culture impact forms, techniques, and purposes of works in the arts, including the relationship between a government and its citizens.

SS.912.H.1.5: Examine artistic response to social issues and new ideas in various cultures.

SS.912.H.2.1: Identify specific characteristics of works within various art forms (architecture, dance, film, literature, music, theatre, and visual arts).

SS.912.H.2.3: Apply various types of critical analysis (contextual, formal, and intuitive criticism) to works in the arts, including the types and use of symbolism within art forms and their philosophical implications.

SS.912.H.2.4: Examine the effects that works in the arts have on groups, individuals, and cultures.

SS.912.H.2.5: Describe how historical, social, cultural, and physical settings influence an audience's aesthetic response.

Common Core:

LACC.1112.RI.1.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text, including determining where the text leaves matters uncertain.

LACC.1112.RI.2.4: Determine the meaning of words and phrases as they are used in a text, including figurative, connotative, and technical meanings.

LACC.1112.L.3.5: Demonstrate understanding of figurative language, word relationships, and nuances in word meanings.

LACC.1112.L.3.6: Acquire and use accurately general academic and domain-specific words and phrases, sufficient for reading, writing, speaking, and listening at the college and career readiness level.

LACC.1112.SL.1.3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric, assessing the stance, premises, links among ideas, word choice, points of emphasis, and tone used.

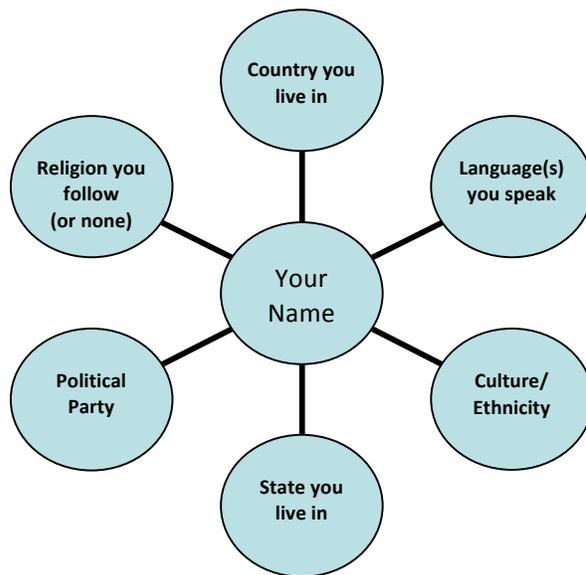
Instructional Objectives

The student will:

- examine selected works by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei;
- identify artistic influences that have had an impact in Ai's work;
- make connections between Ai's personal and cultural experiences and his work;
- create a personal identity "circle web";
- participate in a Think-Pair-Share activity;
- analyze a primary source;
- engage in a small group role-playing exercise;
- consider how the artist uses art as a platform for protest and dissidence.

Learning Activities Sequence

Set Induction/Hook: Ahead of time, prepare a Circle Web (Ellerbrock, 2014) about yourself and have it available to show students (either projected on a screen or drawn on the board). Here are the categories for the circles:



Think-Pair-Share: After sharing your example, tell students that they will now create a Circle Web about themselves. Provide the template on a handout or simply draw on the board.

After allowing students about 5 minutes to create their Circle Webs, have them share it with a classmate sitting nearby (allow an additional 5 minutes for sharing in pairs).

Then facilitate a whole-class discussion by asking:

- Which of your outside circles most reflects who you see yourself as?
- Which of your outside circles has had the most influence on you?
- Which of the outside circles influences your daily life the most?
- How do you think that these features might influence an artist's work?

Tell students that today they will learn more about Ai Weiwei, an artist from China, and the many influences that have impacted his work.

Teacher Presentation, Questioning, & Class Discussion: Using the presentation entitled, *Ai Weiwei: A Closer Look*, present students with images of the artist's selected works. Teacher Background Notes are provided in the "Notes View;" review those before you share the presentation with students.

As you make the presentation, prompt and probe students by asking questions related to Ai's work such as:

- *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995): What is Ai trying to say by dropping this ancient urn? Is the act of destroying the vase justified if it's been done to call attention to repression? There is some question about the authenticity of the urn; would you feel differently about the work if the urn was *not* an ancient vase? As a viewer, are you complicit in the destruction of the historical artifact simply by the act of viewing the work?

- *Coca-Cola Vase* (1994): Why do you think Ai chose the Coca-Cola logo for this work? Compare this work with *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*; what are the similarities and differences? In 2012, a Swiss artist dropped Ai's *Coca-Cola Vase* in the same manner as Ai did with his original work; how do you think Ai responded?
- *Colored Vases* (2006): For this work, Ai used 51 Neolithic (5000-3500BC) vases. Some have questioned Ai's "moral right" to deface historical artifacts. How do you feel about this approach? How might Ai's usage of industrial paint be an important element in this work? Why do you think Ai selected such bright, modern colors for the paint?
- *Remembering* (2009): What do you see in this artwork? This work is composed of backpacks. Why do you think Ai chose to utilize back backs in this artwork? The text of this work translated from Chinese to English is "She lived happily for seven years in this world." This was a statement by a mother who lost her daughter in the 2008 Chinese earthquake. Why do you think Ai chose to utilize these words in this artwork? What is Ai trying to say in this artwork? What are some other monuments that you have encountered in your everyday life? How does this monument compare to these other memorials?
- *Untitled* (2011): Each child killed in the 2008 earthquake is memorialized by a backpack in this work; do you think that this installation is more or less effective in this regard than *Remembering*? How is the organization and presentation of the backpacks significant? Ai titles most of his works; why do you think this one might be untitled?
- *Sunflower Seeds* (2010): Why do you think Ai chose sunflower seeds for this work? Hundreds of workers were involved in making the millions of individual seeds for this work; might that be considered at odds with Ai's tension with capitalism? As an art consumer, how might your experience be different if you were allowed to walk on and interact with this work (as opposed to viewing it from behind a rope, as in the photos)?
- *The Black Cover Book* (1994), *The White Cover Book* (1995), & *The Grey Cover Book* (1997): Examine the pages of these books; what do you notice about them? What does the design of the books tell you about them? Why do you think Ai chose to create these books? What are some examples of censorship in contemporary U.S. society? Consider other "banned" books or controversial works of art. What makes them controversial? Many of the artworks in Ai's books were not considered controversial in the U.S., but were in China. What might make something controversial or worthy of censorship?

Primary Source Analysis and Role-Playing in Small Groups: Divide students into five groups. Distribute "Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*" handouts and a student dictionary to each group (each group's handout includes three different quotations). Read aloud Mao Zedong's quotation at the top of the page, common to all groups:

"As communists we gain control with the power of the gun
and maintain control with the power of the pen."

Ask: What did Mao mean by this statement? How did the Chinese Communist Party become the governing political party? How have they maintained power since then?

Say: *In your groups, you are to imagine yourself a Chinese citizen during the Chinese Cultural Revolution. As you consider and paraphrase each of Mao's sayings taken from his Little Red Book, reflect on how these beliefs and rules might impact your life.*

After allowing sufficient time for this task to be completed in the small groups, bring the whole class back together and have each group share their work with the class.

Facilitate a discussion by asking summarizing questions such as:

- What are some general observations you can make about the sayings in Mao's book?
- What did Mao seem to feel most strongly about?
- What did Mao say about youth? Women?: Work? Art?

Closure: Share this quotation by Mao Zedong with the class:

"All our literature and art are for the masses of the people, and in the first place for the workers, peasants and soldiers; they are created for the workers, peasants and soldiers and are for their use."

What kind of artwork do you think would emerge from this position? What positive and negative impact might this belief have on art?

Evaluation

Monitor student comprehension throughout the presentation by the responses given to the questions posed. Circulate during the small group activity and ask probing questions during the whole-class discussion.

Optional Extension Activities

Allow students to select one of Ai's works and conduct more research on it: what event prompted Ai to create it? What techniques and materials were used? How did the Chinese government react? Allow students time in class to report their findings to their classmates.

Show students what Mao's *Little Red Book* looked like and all of the topics it encompassed. Several PDF versions of it are available on the web, such as: http://campbellmgold.com/archive_definitive/red_book_chairman_mao_1966.pdf

Materials and Resources

Circle Web example by the instructor

Presentation: *Ai Weiwei: Artwork Analysis*
Computer, Projector, and Screen
Handouts: Mao Zedong's *Little Red Book*, Groups 1-5
Student dictionaries

References

Bose, S. (2011). 'Whatever's happened is already not interesting at all': Ai Weiwei's blog. *Afterall Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.afterall.org/online/ai-wei-wei/2>

Camille, J J. (n.d.). At home with Ai Weiwei. *Art in America*. Retrieved from <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/features/at-home-with-ai-weiwei/2/>

Clark, G. (2011). Ai Weiwei—"Dropping the Urn"—But where is Weiwei today? *Adobe Airstream* [Web Page]. Retrieved from <http://adobeairstream.com/art/art-review-ai-weiwei-dropping-the-urn/>

Curated Object. (n.d.). *Exhibitions Williamstown. Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled" (Placebo), 1991. The Williamstown Museum of Art. The Curated Object*. Retrieved from http://www.curatedobject.us/the_curated_object_/2008/02/exhibitions-wil.html

Randian. (2010, December 25). Ai Weiwei's "Sunflower Seeds" at Tate Modern Turbine Hall. *Randian*. Retrieved from http://www.randian-online.com/np_review/ai-weiweis-sunflower-seeds-at-tate-modern-turbine-hall/

Ellerbrock, C. (2014, forthcoming). Creating caring and civil learning communities. In B. Cruz, C. Ellerbrock, A. Vásquez, & E. Howes (Eds.), *Difficult dialogues and daring discourse in teacher education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Ellsworth-Jones, W. (2013). The story behind Banksy. *Smithsonian Magazine*. Retrieved from: <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/The-Story-Behind-Banksy-187953941.html>.

Gilsdorf, B. (2010). Ai Weiwei: Dropping the urn. *Daily Serving*. Retrieved from: <http://dailyserving.com/2010/07/ai-weiwei-dropping-the-urn>

Hancox, S. (n.d.). Art, activism, and the geopolitical imagination: Ai Weiwei's 'Sunflower Seeds.' *Academia* [Web Page]. Retrieved from http://www.academia.edu/765748/Art_Activism_and_the_Geopolitical_Imagination_Ai_Weiweis_Sunflower_Seeds

Khan Academy (n.d.). Ai Weiwei's "Remembering" and the politics of dissent. Smart History. Retrieved from <http://smarthistory.khanacademy.org/ai-weiwei-and-the-politics-of-dissent.html>

Kilgannon, C. (2011). Before fame, or jail, Ai Weiwei was a 'New York' starving artist.

The New York Times. Retrieved from http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/13/before-fame-or-jail-ai-weiwei-was-a-new-york-starving-artist/?_r=0

Larson, C. (2012). Ai Weiwei on his favorite artists, living in New York and why the government is afraid of him. *Smithsonian*. Retrieved from http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/13/before-fame-or-jail-ai-weiwei-was-a-new-york-starving-artist/?_r=0

Museum of Modern Art. (n.d.). *Ai Weiwei*. Retrieved from http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/printout/category_works/ai_weiwei/

Radio Free Asia. (2011). Seeds of change? *Radio Free Asia* [Web Page]. Retrieved from <http://www.rfa.org/english/news/china/artist-01032011111244.html>

Smith, K., Obrist, H. U., Fibicher, B. and Ai, W. (2009). *Ai Weiwei: Phaidon Contemporary Artists Series*. London: Phaidon Press.

Tate Modern. (2010). *The Unilever Series: Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds* [Web Page]. Retrieved from <http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>

Tate Modern. (2010). *Ai Weiwei: Sunflower Seeds*. Retrieved from <http://www.tate.org.uk/node/237450/default.shtm>

Tate Modern. (2010). *Ai Weiwei's Sunflower Seeds at the Tate*. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7UcuYiaDJ0>

Zedong, M. (1947). Talks at the Yen-an Forum on Literature and Art (May 1942). In *Selected Works*, Vol. III. Retrieved from <http://art-bin.com/art/omao32.html>

Zedong, M. (1966). *Quotations from Mao Zedong*. China: Peking Foreign Languages Press. Retrieved from: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/works/red-book/>