

Mark Dion's *Troubleshooting:* Empowering Students to **Create and Act**

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"Artists have tools that scientists don't have... humor, irony, metaphor... these are the bread and butter of the artist."

—Mark Dion



Artist Mark Dion at work. Photo by Amanda Dandeneau. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

Recommended for grades 6-12

Developing students' understanding and fluency of the visual arts is one of the central goals of arts education for all students, regardless of grade level (Consortium of National Arts Education Associations, 1994). Yet, as many educators and arts advocates are quick to point out (see, for example, Abdollah, 2012; Phifer, 2011; Spohn, 2008), the arts have consistently been cut from educational budgets and curricula in recent years. In 2012, the U.S. Department of Education released a report that comprehensively chronicled the changing state of arts education in the country. While there was some encouraging news in the study, the mostly dismal news included that coursework in the arts was not required for graduation at more than 40% of secondary schools. More disconcerting was the absence of arts education in economically disadvantaged public schools; that is, students in high-poverty schools do not have the same access to arts curricula and experiences that students in affluent schools enjoy (Parsad, Spiegelman, & Coopersmith, 2012). This finding is particularly troubling since a recent National Endowment for the Arts study found that at-risk students who have access to the arts (either in the curriculum or via extracurricular activities) have higher academic achievement, are more employable, and tend to be more engaged in civic life (Catterall, Dumais, & Hampden-Thompson, 2012).

These circumstances have led arts educators to come up with creative ways of infusing the arts into mainstream classes. One promising trend is the collaboration with content-area teachers resulting in learning activities that are rich with both traditional academic content as well as the creative arts. In Tampa, Florida, arts educators have come together with science and social studies teachers to produce a unique curriculum that explores artistic expression within the context of social and environmental issues.¹ The free-of-charge project not only fosters a deeper understanding of art and its role in society, but also empowers students to act in a socially responsible way. Here we describe one component of this project centering on the work of Mark Dion.

Empowering Students

Empowering students to see themselves as artists capable of creating works of art that have personal and social meaning is a goal of most arts curricula. But students—especially those in non-art classes—often report that they do not have artistic talent and are incapable of drawing, sculpting, or painting. Allowing students to examine the work of artists such as Mark Dion, who uses found objects, assembles Cabinets of Curiosity, and creates installations from items found in nature, can result in a vision of artistic possibility that is not always imaginable when studying more traditional forms of art.

Because today's students are so technologically savvy, using a variety of Web technologies and media—including video, Web-based dialogues, and social media—is one way to reach out to students who do not see themselves as artists. Contemporary art that encompasses a variety of relevant topics also can prompt students to move from the role of spectator to that of engaged viewer and then participant, and encourage them to build interpretive skills vital to success in learning. In this lesson, students will learn about the work of Mark Dion, consider the techniques he uses, and create their own work of art that focuses on a topic or issue that holds personal relevance.



Mark Dion working at the Tate Thames dig. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.



Detail from Mark Dion's *Travels of William Bartram Reconsidered (alligator cabinet)*, 2008. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

Objectives

After completing the learning activities described in this multi-day lesson, students will be able to:

- analyze works of art to understand their content and make connections with other fields of study;
- examine historical and cultural influences that inspire artists and their work;
- use art vocabulary during the analysis process to describe the structural elements of art and organizational principles of design;
- synthesize knowledge and skills learned from non-art content areas to support the processes of creation, interpretation, and analysis; and
- organize the structural elements of art to achieve artistic goals when producing personal works of art.

Dion uses found objects, assembles Cabinets of Curiosity, and creates installations from items found in nature that can result in a vision of artistic possibility that is not always imaginable when studying more traditional forms of art.

Background

For decades, Mark Dion has created drawings, prints, Cabinets of Curiosity, and sprawling installations about the discrepancy between perceived knowledge and scientific inquiry, between common perception and advanced research. He often uses “found objects” in his works and deals with important social and environmental issues. His works have addressed famous intellectuals in history, such as William Bartram, as well as important social and environmental sites, most recently the fragile Florida Everglades. *Mark Dion: Troubleshooting* is a focused survey of his most ecologically themed works, organized in 2012 by the University of South Florida Contemporary Art Museum.

Dion’s work examines the ways our understanding of history, knowledge, and the natural world are shaped. “The job of the artist,” he says, “is to go against the grain of dominant culture, to challenge perception and convention” (Dion, 2012). He has received numerous awards, including the ninth annual Larry

Aldrich Foundation Award (2001), which honors an American artist who has made a significant impact in contemporary visual culture. He has had major exhibitions at the Miami Art Museum (2006); the Museum of Modern Art, New York (2004); and the Tate Gallery, London (1999). *Neukom Vivarium* (2006), a permanent outdoor installation and learning lab for the Olympic Sculpture Park, was commissioned by the Seattle Art Museum. His work helps stretch students’ thinking about what constitutes “art,” since much of it looks like it might belong in a natural history or science museum.

In the lesson that follows, students become conversant in the vocabularies and concepts associated with Mark Dion’s work and apply this knowledge in visual, oral, and written forms. They become empowered to express their thoughts and feelings on a social issue of personal relevance and importance to them, communicating their ideas to others through their art.

Day 1:

A New Way of Thinking About Art

Overview: This lesson will orient students to the work of artist Mark Dion, introducing them to the exhibition *Troubleshooting*.

Infusion/Subject Areas: Visual Art, Science, and Social Studies

Set Induction: Bring in some old/used objects such as a light bulb, a mesh produce bag, and slivers of soap.² Ask students: *What purpose can these items serve other than their original intended purpose?* Encourage students to brainstorm and accept all reasonable answers, validating their creativity. Share with students that mesh produce bags can be saved and used as pot scrubbers when washing dishes; soap slivers can be melted in the microwave or in a saucepan and formed into a new bar of soap; old light bulbs turned upside down can be used as flower vases or candle holders (these are merely suggestions; there are many other possibilities). Tell students that they will begin studying the work of Mark Dion, an artist who uses “found objects” in new and meaningful ways to educate and make statements about the environment and other social issues.

Word Wall: Tell students that during this lesson that they will help create and maintain a Word Wall in the classroom. A word wall is a systematically organized collection of words displayed on a wall or other large display place in the classroom. Typically, they are high-frequency vocabulary words that are used in a unit of study; for secondary classrooms, brief definitions should accompany accurate spellings. Word Walls are especially helpful for English Language Learners but are of value for all students, particularly if the words are outside the regular course of study. Suggested terms and definitions for the Word Wall for this lesson include those shown in Table 1.

Some of these terms have become heavily loaded in contemporary art practice and education; teachers should feel free to modify the definitions as they see fit. Words for the Word Wall can be added as they are encountered in the unit of study or they

can be placed on the wall from the unit’s inception. Alternative strategies include simply writing the words and definitions on the board and/or having students write the words and definitions in their student journals.

Visual Presentation: Download the computer presentation of Mark Dion’s life and work at the Inside Art website.² This visual presentation includes photographs of Dion at work as well as images of his work explored in this lesson. Have students explore Mark Dion’s work, pausing to ask questions imbedded in the presentation and clarify understandings. On slide 12, define any of the following words if needed:

- humor: something that is comical (funny) in written, oral, or graphic form
- irony: the use of words or actions that mean the opposite of what they say literally
- metaphor: a figure of speech that suggests similarity between one thing and another

Closure and Evaluation: An Exit Ticket is a quick, end-of-class exercise that can be an efficient way to check for comprehension and gather feedback from students. They can provide an opportunity to determine students’:

- understanding of key concepts
- remaining questions
- attitude toward the content or instructional methodology

For this lesson, the Exit Ticket questions are: *What do you think of Mark Dion’s work so far? Which piece did you like best—why?* Give students time at the end of the lesson to complete their Exit Ticket. Have students turn in their Exit Ticket on the way out of class. Review before the next class so that any concepts can be clarified, questions answered, or suggestions can be incorporated in the following day’s lesson.



The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit: Mobile Laboratory, 2006. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.



Neukom Vivarium, 2006. Seattle, Washington. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York. Seattle Art Museum, Gift of Sally and William Neukom, American Express Company, Seattle Garden Club, Mark Torrance Foundation and Committee of 33, in honor of the 75th Anniversary of the Seattle Art Museum.

Table 1. Art Vocabulary

Word	Definition
aesthetics	Concerned with the nature and appreciation of beauty, especially in visual art and design; it is a contested term in contemporary visual art, and many of Dion's works challenge traditional ideas of what is beautiful or in good taste.
assemblage	Both an artistic process—the act of assembling a two or three-dimensional artwork from found objects—and the resulting artwork. Artists such as Marcel Duchamp and Pablo Picasso were pioneers of assemblage.
Cabinet of Curiosity	Dating to the Renaissance, a collection of all types of objects, both natural and man-made, not yet categorized according to the more scientific classification practices of the Enlightenment. Often compiled by kings, nobility and the very wealthy, these cabinets were precursors to the modern idea of the museum.
diorama	A three-dimensional life-size or scale model depiction of animals in natural habitats, landscapes, historical events, theatrical scenes or the like; these are often enclosed in glass cases in museums.
found objects	Non-art objects of any type, which an artist has designated for use as an artwork, or as part of an artwork. Dion makes extensive use of these, which are also known as "ready-mades."
installation	A large sculpture-like artwork which is site-specific, that is, made to alter the experience of a particular space. It can include painting, sculpture and photography as well as video, performance, internet and sound art among other art forms.
lithograph	A type of print (originally produced from limestones; litho=stone, graph=draw) and extensively used for scientific and artistic illustration before the discovery of photography.
mixed media	A technique that uses two or more artistic media (materials and methods).
museum	A place where objects of lasting interest or value are collected, cared for (curated), studied, and exhibited and interpreted for the public.
natural history museum	A place where objects from the natural and human-made world are collected, cared for (curated), studied, and exhibited and interpreted for the public.
naturalist	A person involved in the scientific study of (or education about) nature and the natural world.
photography	Process of recording images by a camera and reproducing them on a photosensitive surface such as paper or film.
repurpose	To use an object in a different way than the original intention.
sculpture	The art of making two- or three-dimensional representative or abstract forms, especially by carving stone, marble, or wood or by casting metal or plaster; more contemporary forms include assemblages, installations, performances, video and audio works, among others.
taxidermy	The art of preparing, stuffing, and mounting the skins of animals with lifelike effect.
technique	A method or procedure used to create a work of art.
troubleshooting	To solve problems in a logical and systematic fashion. Dion locates "symptoms" or problems—for example the loss of natural habitat in the Everglades—and proposes solutions, i.e., his installation <i>The South Florida Wildlife Rescue Unit: Mobile Laboratory</i> .
visual arts museum	A place where works of art are collected, commissioned, cared for (curated), studied, and exhibited and interpreted for the public; these can include traditional forms such as painting drawing and sculpture; and new forms such as installation, performance, video, internet and others.



Chest with artifacts from *New Bedford Digs*, 2001. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

Day 2:

How Can Trash Be Art?

Overview: Students will explore how Dion turns “trash” into art. Students will examine a particular instance of trash in the natural environment, and speculate on how repurposed objects could become 1) an opportunity for (public) art, and 2) an opportunity for action (i.e., doing something about a local pollution problem).

Infusion/Subject Areas: Visual Art, Science, and Social Studies

Set Induction: Download the PowerPoint presentation developed for this lesson (www.ira.usf.edu/InsideART), displaying photos of trash at the base of the Himalayas, without identifying where the photos were taken. As the students view the images, ask:

Slide 2: What do you see? What are the items on the ground, in the foreground of the photo? Where was this photo taken?

Slide 3: What is this person doing? What is s/he picking up? Where was this photo taken?

Explain that these images were taken at the base of Mount Everest. Trash left behind by climbers is a growing problem and the Nepalese Sherpas collect the garbage in organized cleanup efforts. As a class, discuss: Why is there so much trash at the base of Mount Everest? Does it matter? Why or why not?

Art Analysis: As a class, allow students to examine and discuss Dion’s *New England Digs* (2001) using the PowerPoint provided online. Questions for discussion as images are viewed:

- Many people would say, “This isn’t art! This is ugly. It is nothing but trash.” How would you respond to these statements?

- What is Dion trying to communicate with this work of art? What is he saying about trash? About what people can do about it?

Individual Writing/Partner Discussion: Individually, have students describe in writing (or draw an image of) a natural place that they care about. Allow approximately 5 minutes for this. Then allow students to share their images with a partner, responding to this question: How might you feel if this area and its life were “trashed”? (Alternatively, this can be done as an individual free-writing activity.)

Closure: Mark Dion has been quoted as saying: “My idea of art isn’t necessarily something that provides answers or is decorative or affirmative.” Ask students to consider and/or discuss: What *should* be the role of the artist? What functions can art have in a society?

Evaluation: Tell students that this is their opportunity to develop an “Artistic Plan of Action” to clean up a trashed environment. Just as Mark Dion uses “found objects” to turn into art, they should look at this exercise as an opportunity to both clean up a natural environment and create a work of art. Ask students to consider:

- What objects are you likely to find at your selected site?
- How would you go about classifying the objects?
- How would you go about repurposing the objects for your work?
- What message might you communicate in your work of art?

Days 3, 4, and 5:

Student-Created Art Project and Walking Gallery

Overview: The purpose of this lesson is to allow students the opportunity to design and create an original art project that illuminates a current issue. The project will be created with found objects, or what is known in art as ready-mades: non-art objects of any type, which the artist-students have designated for use as an artwork, or as part of an artwork. Dion makes extensive use of ready-mades in his installations, inspired by art-historical figures such as Marcel Duchamp and Robert Rauschenberg. The project can be completed in pairs or individually.

Infusion/Subject Areas: Visual Art, Science, and Social Studies

Set Induction: Using a Think-Pair-Share format, have students consider the following question and generate a list first individually (5 min), then share with a partner (5 min):

- What are some important issues or problems in the world that need to be solved?

Have students share their lists with the entire class, creating a class list on the board. Leave this list within view of students for reference. Recall what the word “troubleshooting” means (to solve problems, usually serious problems). Why do you think

Mark Dion titled his art show, *Troubleshooting*? What kinds of issues or problems are highlighted in Dion’s work? Tell students that they will now have the opportunity to design and create their own work of art, using some of the techniques used by Mark Dion.

Independent Research Assignment #1: Make arrangements for students to research an issue in the school library and/or on the Internet (they can refer to the list of issues generated by the class). Information gathered about the issue should inform the design and presentation of the project. Students are also to write a short report about the issue that will accompany the art project.

Set Induction: Using a Think-Pair-Share format, have students consider the following question and generate a list first individually (think: 3 min), then pair with a partner (3 min), then share in a whole-class discussion (4 min):

- What are some ways that Mark Dion has used ready-mades for his artwork? What are some ways that you can use the same techniques to make your own artwork?



Concrete Jungle, 1993. Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York.

Independent Research Assignment #2: Make arrangements for students to research other artists who have used ready-mades for their work in the school library and/or on the Internet (they can refer to the list of issues generated by the class). Information gathered about the issue should inform the design and presentation of the project. Students are also to write a short report about at least one of the artists that will accompany the art project.

Design and Create Project: Allow students with enough time to design and create their projects using ready-mades. Distribute “Art Project Evaluation Rubric” (Table 2) and explain each of the four components that will be assessed.

Walking Gallery: Students will display their projects in a “walking gallery” format in the classroom. Half the students will set up their projects first, standing next to their projects and being available for explanation and questions as the other half of the class tours the “gallery.” Viewing students will be encouraged to ask questions about the techniques used in creating the art, the found objects repurposed for the work, and the message the

artist was trying to convey. The students will then switch roles so that the other half of the students’ projects can be displayed and viewed.

Evaluation: Use the “Art Project Evaluation Rubric” (Table 2) to assess the students’ projects.

Conclusion

Collaboration between arts educators and content-area teachers results in learning activities that are rich with both traditional academic content as well as the creative arts. In the project described here, arts educators have come together with science and social studies teachers to produce a unique curriculum that explores artistic expression within the context of social and environmental issues. This type of partnership can help supplement the dearth of arts education in schools, leveling the socioeconomic inequalities that affect the teaching of art and its benefits in higher academic achievement, employability, and higher participation in civic life.

Table 2. Art Project Evaluation Rubric

Student Name: _____
 Title of Work: _____
 Technique(s) Used: _____

Art Project Evaluation Rubric

Creativity/Originality (25 points)

- Generate an original and meaningful piece of work
- Make connections to prior knowledge (i.e., Mark Dion's work and methods)

0	13	15	17	20
Poor	Need Improvement	Fair	Good	Excellent

Use of Elements/ Principles of Art & Design (25 points)

- Plan carefully
- Show an awareness of the elements and principles of design
- Choose color scheme and/or medium in an effective manner

0	13	15	17	20
Poor	Need Improvement	Fair	Good	Excellent

Accompanying Text (25 points)

- Write thorough information about the piece (including underlying meaning, artistic methods used, inspiration, etc.)
- Include accompanying report about the current issue illuminated by the art work

0	13	15	17	20
Poor	Need Improvement	Fair	Good	Excellent

Effort and Craftsmanship (25 points)

- Used time wisely and produced a complete piece of work
- The artwork is carefully and patiently crafted

0	13	15	17	20
Poor	Need Improvement	Fair	Good	Excellent

Extra Credit — Above and Beyond (5 points)

- Gave effort far beyond what was required
- Took pride in going well beyond the requirement

1	3	5		
Wow!	Incredible!	Phenomenal!!		

TOTAL GRADE:

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Inside Art* is an innovative Web-based visual literacy program that integrates social studies, science, and art education with contemporary art in an examination and discussion of critical societal issues. It presents critical issues to students and invites them to engage and connect with these issues in the context of contemporary art. This secondary school program is provided free of charge to all teachers by the Institute for Research in Art at the University of South Florida, Tampa. It is created collaboratively by faculty of the USF College of Education and the Institute for Research in Art, consulting curriculum experts and curriculum specialists in the Hillsborough County Schools.

² Alternatively, obtain the PowerPoint presentation from the Inside Art curriculum available at www.ira.usf.edu/InsideART