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## Discussing Global Issues Through Contemporary Art

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### ABSTRACT

Contemporary global issues can be examined through the lens of modern photographic art. In an effort to prepare global-ready graduates, this article explores the pressing problems of environmental degradation, urbanization, and homelessness through the work of three contemporary artists. Illustrative works, suggested approaches, and curriculum resources are provided.

### KEYWORDS

Arts education; arts integration; global issues; teaching methods

Students in a high school sociology class lean forward in their seats as they view a piece of contemporary photographic art entitled “Grandma Ruby’s Refrigerator” by LaToya Ruby Frazier (2007). The teacher closely watches her students as they search for meaning, a personal connection, a way to respond to the piece of artwork. She prompts them to share their thoughts. Eagerly, one student responds, “The room looks cramped, everything is close together. Maybe the house is in a city.” Another student replies, “My grandmother has dolls just like that! It reminds me of being in Mexico.” A third student adds her own inference, “I noticed the rug on the floor. Most people don’t have rugs like that in the kitchen... Maybe this is a Middle Eastern home?” The discussion turns to the type of community that might surround the home in the photograph. Students continue to speculate and reveal the reasoning behind the many conclusions they are drawing from the photograph.

As part of a lesson on the realities of life in America’s “Rust Belt,” Frazier’s contemporary photography tells a story often untold in a traditional social studies textbook or in mainstream media—an engaging story of a woman and her family and the consequences of deindustrialization on communities and individuals and socioeconomic injustice.

### Importance of global issues for today’s students

Students today are more connected, more visual, and perhaps more “global” than any other prior generation (Taylor & Keeter, 2010). The accessibility provided by technologies, such as the smartphone and personal computers, has made nearly every person an eyewitness

reporter, travel blogger, and social critic. Ninety-two percent of teens access the Internet daily, and more than half of teens use photo-sharing platforms, such as Instagram or Snapchat (Lenhart, 2015). In both their personal and academic lives, students are immersed in visually rich environments. Therefore, it is imperative for the global-ready graduate to learn the skills necessary to be able to read, analyze, and make meaning of visually rich data.

Today’s students are also more aware of issues that transcend national borders (Taylor & Keeter, 2010). Global issues such as poverty, hunger, human rights, and socioeconomic inequality are part of young people’s consciousness as they interact with others around the world. The opportunities to experience artistic expression that address global issues in the classroom foster student interest in examining the causes of real-world problems and thus further develop student civic engagement.

### Incorporating contemporary art in instruction

Many teachers avoid using contemporary art in their teaching; instead, they focus on the art they understand best, such as pieces they learned about in history or art classes during high school or college. Beyond familiarity, many teachers are averse to incorporating contemporary art into their instruction because of the belief that this type of art can be easily produced or their own lack of understanding of the meaning behind contemporary pieces (Marshall & Donahue,

2014). It is precisely this belief and lack of understanding, however, that make the use of contemporary art in instruction meaningful and necessary. Contemporary art, while it can be challenging and complex, allows students to think and engage in conversations about the artwork free from potential preexisting ideas when examining more traditional or well-known works, regardless of how difficult it is to interpret (Marshall & Donahue, 2014).

### Exploring global issues through contemporary art: The *Inside Art* project

Now in its sixth year, *Inside Art* is a university-school partnership that offers engaging learning experiences using contemporary art on a variety of topics that are relevant to students' lives and the world at large. These topics include global problems of environmental degradation, urbanization, social justice, and homelessness. Utilizing exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum at the University of South Florida (USF-CAM), *Inside Art* is a project developed in collaboration with curriculum developers, museum curators and educators, schoolteachers, and artists. It provides professional development and curricular materials centered around current contemporary art exhibitions (for detailed lesson plans, learning activities, and other teaching resources see <http://ira.usf.edu/InsideART/index.html>).

Lesson plans on the *Inside Art* website are self-contained; that is, they include all the teacher and student resources needed to conduct an in-depth exploration of the given issue or topic. Background readings and material embedded in the “notes view” of PowerPoint slides provide teachers with contextual information that round out their knowledge of the artists, their countries of origin, and topics addressed in the art. Student assignments and projects are presented with descriptions, detailed instructions, and rubrics that encourage creativity and successful completion. Two recent *Inside Art* programs that directly spoke to issues of global significance, *A Family Affair* and *Histórias/Histories*, are described below, along with select artists and discussion-based approaches for exploring global issues that highlight their work from each exhibition.

In *A Family Affair* (Fall 2015), seven contemporary artists explored personal identity and family relationships. Using photography, video, performance, and animation, the works represented a range of approaches,

articulating interpersonal and historical family contexts as well as the broader social frameworks of race, class, and gender. As described in the opening vignette, LaToya Ruby Frazier, one artist highlighted in this exhibition, combines self-portrait and documentary style photographs to tell a unique story of socioeconomic inequality and environmental degradation in deindustrialized America. The Rust Belt—a term used to refer to the northeastern region in the United States that has been experiencing economic decline following the downturn of America's steel industry—is more than an American issue; it is the result of global expansion and competition in business. Frazier's work centers on both her familial experience and the conditions of Braddock, Pennsylvania, her hometown.

In *Histórias/Histories* (Spring, 2016) five Brazilian contemporary artists addressed the varied histories of their country, rooted in its complicated past and present and reflected in its vast geographical, racial, and cultural wealth and diversity. One artist, Virginia de Medeiros, strives to understand those who live in marginalized worlds. To appreciate these realities, she engages in “intense contact,” often living and experiencing these worlds firsthand. In the series *Fábula do olhar* (2013), de Medeiros questions the line between the real and the imagined, presenting painted photographic portraits and verbal testimonies from people she met when she set up a photographic studio in two cafeterias for the homeless in the northeastern city of Fortaleza, Brazil. The first-person testimonies shed light on the global issue of homelessness, hunger, and social marginalization.

Another contemporary Brazilian artist in this exhibition, Jonathas de Andrade, addresses multiple socio-political issues in his work, especially issues of urbanization and the manipulation of law found in this hometown of Recife, Brazil. In his 2012–2013 work, *The Uprising*, de Andrade highlights these issues by video recording “carters,” those who live outside city limits and rely on horse-drawn carts as their mode of transportation, as they participate in a horse-drawn cart race throughout the streets of Recife. Although the city government has banned carters within city limits because of continued gentrification initiatives, de Andrade was given a permit for this one-day cart race to take place because it was classified as a film shoot. His work brings to life the effects urbanization and gentrification have on citizens of Recife and the surrounding areas as their sole mode of

transportation, the animal-drawn cart, is no longer a legal form of transportation within city limits, limiting their ability to come into the city to sell their goods. Furthermore, his work highlights how the same law that prohibits the carters from entrance into the city can be temporarily suspended (e.g., for a film shoot), suggesting that laws can be and are often manipulated.

### Discussion-based approaches for exploring global issues

The three contemporary artists described above produce art that speaks to global issues, including environmental degradation, homelessness, and urbanization.

The discussion-based approaches below introduce students to contemporary artists while opening up classroom dialogue to include various perspectives on global problems.

### *Environmental degradation*

*Grandma Ruby's Refrigerator* (2007) serves as an ideal introduction to Frazier's work due to the ordinary objects and settings that combine to create a relatable representation of her hometown (Figure 1). When introducing this lesson, begin by asking students to list the objects that they see in the image. Then, ask students to provide details describing the various



**Figure 1.** LaToya Ruby Frazier, *Grandma Ruby's Refrigerator*, 2007. The Notion of Family. Courtesy of the artist and Michel Rein, Paris/Brussels.

objects. For instance, what kinds of labels do they see on the food items? Or what kinds of images are displayed on the refrigerator? The following prompts serve to engage students in a discussion of inferences based upon details from the photograph:

- How would you describe the family that lives in this home?
- How would you describe the neighborhood?
- Could you describe the surrounding city?

Probe student thinking after each question to encourage evidence-based claims about the artwork. Student discussion may quickly relate back to lived experiences, including cultural, ethnic, and possible socioeconomic elements of student identity. The sharing of such personal details allows students to build connections with the artist and sustain open dialogue with classmates.

The setting of *Grandma Ruby's Refrigerator* is the Frazier home in Braddock, Pennsylvania—a town experiencing economic decline and urban decay as a result of deindustrialization. The personal history of the Frazier family as it intersects with larger historical narratives plays a central role in the artist's work. The relationship between industry and environment is prevalent in Frazier's *The Notion of Family* photo collection (<http://aperture.org/shop/latoya-ruby-frazier-the-notion-of-family-books>). The economic decline of Braddock parallels the environmental degradation that is characteristic of the town and of industrial regions worldwide. Students should consider the relationship between industry and environment and examine the impact of industry on global public health. As an extension, students can investigate the history of local industries and the effects of those industries in their respective region.

Overall, Frazier's work prompts the viewer to reflect on the interconnection between family and community histories within larger state and national histories and the ways in which such histories might coincide or conflict. Accompanying accounts of economic prosperity and progress with individual experiences of industrial decline and environmental consequences forms a clearer picture of global issues confronting current and future generations.

### Homelessness

During the photographing of her subjects for *Fábula do olhar* (2013), Virginia de Medeiros asked them how they would like to be seen by society, inviting

them to be coauthors in the invention of an alternative vision of themselves. In recognition of the painted portrait traditions of the Nordeste region, the black-and-white photographs were then digitally painted, reflecting the subjects' wishes. The images are lush and provocative, prompting the viewer to consider the liminal, that is, how representation is often tenuous at the boundaries of reality. *Fábula do olhar* roughly translates as “Fable of Looking.”

When introducing students to de Virginia de Medeiros' *Fábula do olhar* (2013), begin by having them view and reflect on one of the images in the work, such as “Meiriele” (Figure 2). Without telling students anything about the subject or the work, guide their visual analysis and discussion by asking:

- Describe the person in the picture (clothing, demeanor, expression, etc.).
- What gender is the person? What do you see that makes you say that?
- How old do you think the person in the image is?
- Where do you think the person in the image lives?



**Figure 2.** *Meiriele*, 2013, “Virginia de Medeiros” Courtesy of Galeria Nara Roesler, São Paulo, Brazil.

- What kind of life do you think the person in the image has?
- What do you think “Meiriele” refers to?

Ask students to consider how we make assumptions about people based on observable characteristics, such as how they look and what they wear. Probe and relate to students’ lives by asking if someone has ever made inaccurate assumptions about them based on their outward appearance.

Explain to students that the image of “Meiriele” comes from a series by Brazilian artist Virginia de Medeiros where she explores the lives of the homeless. Over the course of six weeks, de Medeiros set up a photographic studio at two cafeterias for homeless people in the city of Fortaleza, Brazil. She took black-and-white photographs of 20 homeless people, recorded video statements of their personal histories, and asked a key question that directs and identifies the nature of each work: *How would you like to see yourself or be seen by society?*

Reviving the traditional art of *fotopintura* (photo-painting) from northeastern Brazil, the images were then digitally retouched, adding accessories (e.g., clothing, jewelry, makeup) to align the visual images with the mental images of the subjects. The artist explained that “these new details granted some prestige to the character being portrayed” (de Medeiros, 2014). She also asserts that individuals in the portraits “fabulated their own conditions, making themselves co-authors of the work” (de Medeiros, 2014). Students can also consider that the artist decided to remove and add information to the portraits. In what ways does this disrupt reality? In what ways does this process reflect a more “true self” of the individuals?

In exploring the global issue of homelessness, students should consider how the artist’s work explores social stigma and stereotyping. How does *Fábula do olhar* reflect this? Students can also investigate homelessness in their own communities, identifying the unique challenges their community faces in addressing the issue. Making connections between the global and the local is one of the cognitive and affective skills of the global-ready graduate.

### Urbanization

When introducing students to de Andrade’s *The Uprising*, begin by engaging students in a Think-Pair-Share centered on the question, “What is the

purpose of a law?” After sufficient time has been allotted for the “Think” and “Pair” portions of the activity, have each group share their responses with the entire class and write down all responses on the board. Have students examine all responses and engage in a whole class conversation on the topic. Additional discussion questions include the following: “Who creates laws?” “For whom are laws created?” “In what ways may laws favor and/or limit certain groups of people?” “How does something become a law in the United States?” “Do you think laws are created in the same manner in Brazil as they are in the United States?” Next, engage students in a gallery walk using still images from de Andrade’s video (Figure 3) and quotes from de Andrade explaining the intent and process of this work (<http://cargocollective.com/jonathasdeandrade-eng/uprising>). Students are to write their responses to the images and the artist’s words. Possible prompts to guide student responses include:

- What feelings does the image evoke?
- What feelings does the artist’s words evoke?
- What message is the artist trying to convey in the image?
- What message is the artist trying to convey through his words?

Once all groups have previewed and written their response to each image and the artist’s words, reconvene the class and go through the gallery walk together, sharing group responses and engaging in a class discussion on the manipulation of laws and the effects urbanization are having on the people highlighted in de Andrade’s work.



**Figure 3.** Still from *O Levante (The Uprising)*, 2012–2013. Jonathas de Andrade. Courtesy of the artist and Galeria Vermelha, Recife, Brazil.

## Students and teachers respond to contemporary art

Empirical studies on the implementation of *Inside Art* are currently in the planning phases. In the meantime, students and teachers have already begun the work of examining global issues through the lens of contemporary art. Because the work is contemporary, the artists showcased often focus on current and relevant issues that are as much at home in the social studies classroom as in the art classroom. Ongoing program evaluation allows for teacher-participants to anonymously provide feedback on the art exhibitions, workshops, and curriculum. When asked how the *Inside Art* materials have facilitated the presentation of global issues in her secondary classroom, one teacher responded, “We have had some wonderful class discussions that have brought about incredible awareness of issues and conditions... I think it has also caused a level of understanding and tolerance between the students.” Another commented:

It [*Inside Art*] gives me the confidence to tackle these issues in my lessons; teachers are so busy, that research and discovering connections to build a themed lesson is sometimes time-consuming and rushed. It’s so helpful to not only have ideas for concept, but to already have artists to reference.

Finally, with reference to social and geographic themes, one teacher stated, “With the materials provided through *Inside Art*, my students are given real world examples of development disparities as well as exposure to different cultures through various art forms.”

Students report thoroughly enjoying exposure to the contemporary art of professional artists who are living and working in different places and environments. For example, after participating in the lesson surrounding the work of Virginia de Medeiros, one student shared with her teacher:

Being able to see the juxtaposition between their personas portrayed through the art and what we were told of their lives opened my eyes to how what we see of a person isn’t necessarily who they are and is hardly ever who they want to be.

In this instance, contemporary art is a vehicle for relevant classroom discussion that allows students to connect with new perspectives in a novel way. Teachers report that students often ask when they will get a chance to look at contemporary art again, and

teachers report that students are enthusiastic participants in the *Inside Art* lessons.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It is our intent to encourage teachers to make use of contemporary art as a medium for the exploration of topics of global significance in an effort to prepare global-ready graduates. The *Inside Art* Web initiative is designed to support teachers in this quest. To this aim, the *Inside Art* website includes complete lesson plans, learning activities, and other teaching resources that can be downloaded by educators *gratis* to use in their classrooms along with the necessary visual images (<http://ira.usf.edu/InsideART/index.html>). Global issues are relevant to students’ lives and, when taught through contemporary art, this genre of art has the potential to make a powerful and impression on students with results that may make a true and long-lasting positive difference in this world.

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