Art and Activity: Interactive Strategies for Engaging with Art

Example Activities from the on-line course from MoMA

1. **Symbolic self-portraits**: see Ashley Bickerton activity sheet
2. **Alternate settings**: have students identify characters in the piece of art and imagine them in alternate settings. Ask them inquiry questions (not yes/no) about how would those characters fit in, how they would feel, how would others in the new setting would view them, etc.
3. **Before and After**: Discuss the work of art, and create a visual narrative of what is going on. Then, have the students create before and after scenes. You can have them create a comic strip with or without writing. You can explore the artist's process and apply.
4. **Thought bubbles**: Add thought bubbles to the chosen work of art. What is/art the character(s) thinking? Helps the students get inside the scene and the character's thinking.
5. **Post-it Poetry**: Using a work of art, ask the students to think about the artist's inspiration. Then have them write one word down on a sticky note. Put all of the notes on the board and have the class write a poem using those words.
6. **Point-counterpoint activity**: Divide the class into two groups. Each group will take an opposing stance about the work of art. Have the students gather research evidence and evidence from the work of art to develop argument. Students can see or infer from the work of art. Then, using a Socratic type dialogue, have the point-counterpoint session. Then, in the wrap-up, ask 1) did one side "win" or have a stronger argument? 2) did any student agree with the other team's answer rather than their own? There is room for multiple perspectives on art, and this activity draws that out.
7. **Be the Art/Tableau**: Have actors and directors and act out the piece of art. Have students share insights into their characters and actions (both as actor and director).
8. **Design as a Noun**: Use everyday objects from a culture. Document role of design in life. You can do over a span of 1-2 weeks, with a different object from that culture a day. Have students journal about the object, its design, draw it, and why it might have been made that way.
9. **Draw and describe**: break students into pairs. Have one student look at the work of art and describe to the other student who has his/her back to the piece. The student with his/her back to the artwork just draws what the viewer sees and tells the drawer to draw. This activity helps build trust and communication skills. Debrief: share the different experiences of the drawer and the viewer/instructor. You can have the kids change places and do another piece of art.
10. **Writing and Discussion about Art**: 1) Turn and talk: have open ended questions about artwork/history and have kids turn to nearest neighbor and discuss for 2-3 minutes. Then, have each group share with the whole class; 2) Whip around: students say first word that they think of when they see the art, no repeats, and keep a list. Then, discuss results in roundtable. 3) Visual inventory: have students list all the things they see and notice in the art. Only observables, no interpretation. That would come later in the discussion; 4) Memory: have students look at the work for 30 seconds. Then, have them turn their backs to the work. Ask what they remember by having them draw the piece or list what they remember. When they turn back around, have them share what they remember. As you discuss, hopefully they will realize they need all of their memories together to get the whole piece. The students should see they missed some things or remembered them incorrectly. Tell them it's okay. Then, for wrap-up, have them look at the piece again and then have them list any new details they notice.

11. **Word Association**: word association about work
12. **Compare/contrast**: Choose two works (perhaps from two different time periods but similar subjects or two different works of art covering a similar subject from two different viewpoints in the same time period). Have students compare and contract through discussion and possible writing assignments.

Ashley Bickerton
TORMENTED SELF-PORTRAIT

1987-88

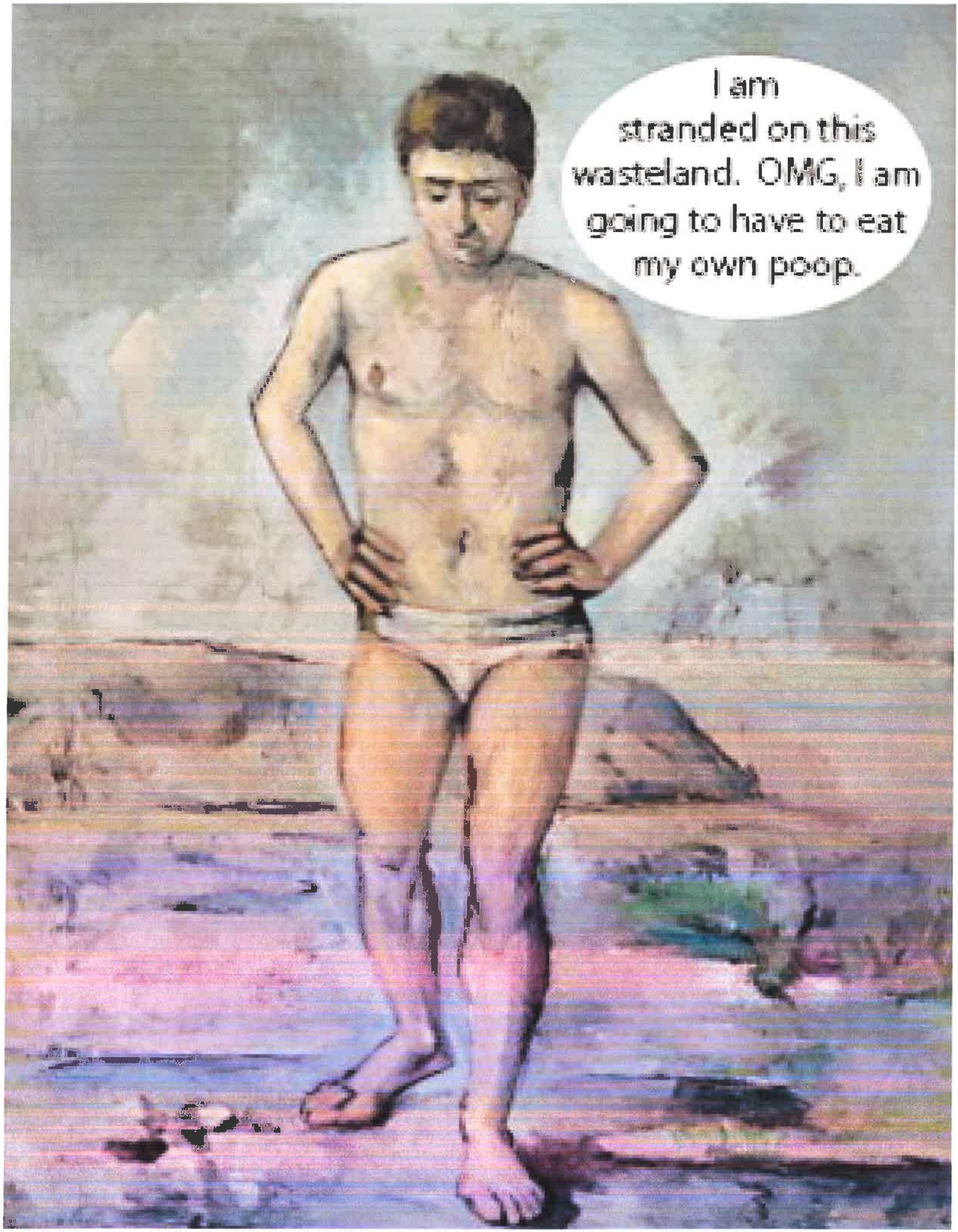
Media: Synthetic polymer paint, bronze powder and lacquer on wood, anodized aluminum, rubber, plastic, formica, leather, chrome-plated steel, and canvas

Artists use self-portraits to reveal to us (and themselves) their identities – both outward appearances as well as their inward personalities. Over time, some artists have used symbolic representations rather than realism to portray themselves.

Discussion Questions:

What symbols did you have in your portrait? How did you portray yourself? How were you influenced by Ashley Bickerton's method of using products he used in his daily life to describe his identity? Are we defined by our materialism?


This is a circle.
Why are they teaching us abou
circles and semi-circles when
we are holding spheres?
OMG!
That is a semi-circle.


I am stranded on this wasteland. OMG, I am going to have to eat my own poop.

MoMA

Worksheet: Questions About Art

1. Describe the object. Think about line, color, texture, pattern, and shape. Can you figure out what it is made of, or how it was made?

2. What do you know about this object? What is familiar? What is unfamiliar?

3. List words or ideas that come to mind when you look at this object. Why does this object make you think about those words?

4. What associations can you make from it? Why?

5. What questions would you like to ask about this object? Can you guess at the answers to any of them?

6. In one sentence, describe the most interesting thing about this object.

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Activities in the Art Museum

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A combination of teaching strategies can help make education more engaging (Benaiges, 2005). Learning in the art museum is no exception. Even within a single session, museum educators can help visitors discover meaning in artworks through different approaches. For instance, educators might complement a whole-class discussion with small-group work, partner explorations, or individual responding. Similarly, they might supplement a group conversation by inviting students to interact with an object through writing, drawing, sound, or movement.

Strategies other than group conversations have casually come to be called activities in many art museums. Museum educators are constantly inventing, sharing, and adjusting activities to address the needs of different artworks and audiences. Activities are popular because, as they change the dynamics of the interaction, they help enliven a museum visit and reach different types of learners. But beyond these general contributions, different activities add to a museum experience in different ways. Specifically, some activities frame the dialogue between a viewer and an object, others work to deepen and enrich this engagement, and yet others connect experiences with art to other realms of learning and experience.

In the outline below, I offer concrete examples of these three kinds of museum activities. My goal, however, is not to provide an exhaustive list of the activities that museum educators can use, but rather to highlight and illustrate some of the roles that these activities can play.

Activities that Frame Encounters with Artworks

1. Activities Can Introduce a Key Concept. An educator asks visitors to work with a partner—one person is to be the sculptor and the other the sculpture. The sculptor is charged with positioning her partner's body to create a human sculpture that epitomizes action. As participants begin to move the arms, legs, and torsos of their peers, it becomes apparent that the human body resists certain postures and accepts others with ease.[1] The students thus realize that the qualities of a particular material play an important part in the final shape an artwork takes (Armstrong, 2000; Burton, 1997; Eisner, n.d.). With this idea in mind, they go into the galleries where they will examine the role of materials in a variety of artworks.
2. Activities Can Act as Hooks Into a Work. An educator gives a riddle to a group of young children. The solution of the riddle points to a particular work in the gallery. The children, excited from having solved the mystery, are poised for a deeper investigation of the work.
3. Activities Can Help Record a Sequence of Encounters. At the start of a session, the educator gives visitors a piece of paper and invites them to make a booklet with one page for every work they are to see. Throughout the session, students draw or write something that captures their experience with each object. At the end, they have a record of their journey.
4. Activities Can Facilitate Reflection About a Museum Session. Before ending a session, the teacher distributes blank postcards to visitors. He invites them to make a drawing or write a note that tells a friend or family member about their experience in the museum.

Activities that Deepen and Enrich an Engagement with a Work

1. Activities can Foster Close Observation. (a) Using a viewfinder, students draw the details in an artwork. (b) Visitors bend a piece of wire to follow the lines in a picture, or they tear and arrange paper to explore its composition. (c) Visitors describe an object to someone who is not looking at it.
2. Activities Can Access Immediate Responses. (a) An educator asks visitors to write or say the first word that comes to mind upon seeing an artwork. (b) The teacher encourages viewers to draw a quick gesture that captures their first impression of a work.

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3. Activities Can Elicit Embodied Responses. (a) The teacher invites small groups of students to position their bodies so they may "become" an abstract sculpture (see Asher, 2002). (b) Visitors imagine they are inside a landscape and write a mock letter home describing what they see, hear, touch, and smell.

4. Activities Can Access the Emotional Tone of a Work. (a) Students write prose or poetry that captures what a character in a painting may be thinking and feeling. (b) Using their voices, students create a simple soundtrack for an image.

Activities that Connect Experiences with Artworks to other Realms of Learning, Creation, and Experience

1. Activities Can Take an Idea Put Forth by an Artwork to Other Areas of Learning (or of the Students' World). During a visit, a class discusses a series of artworks that portray cultural icons—Marilyn Monroe, Gertrude Stein, John F. Kennedy. Before ending the session, the educator asks each visitor to identify a cultural icon from their own world and to use words or images to describe that person's salient characteristics on paper. The students might then deepen their investigation of contemporary cultural icons in their social studies class.

2. Activities Can Help Develop Non-art Skills Related to the School Curriculum. An educator asks students to come up with particular types of words—adjectives, nouns, verbs—inspired by an artwork and to use them to construct correct sentences.

3. Activities Can Help Inspire Artistic Creation. (a) After looking at several artworks that show special places, visitors make a painting of their favorite place. (b) Students choreograph a short dance piece inspired by the narrative, form, and composition of a sculpture.

4. Activities Can Help Develop Discrete Artmaking Skills. Students draw the sculptures in a museum to hone their contour and gesture drawing skills.

Final Thoughts

The more clarity educators have about their educational goals and about the roles activities can play, the more informed their decisions . . .l be when they choose to use one strategy over another. Even in this limited outline, it has become evident that the same activity can play more than one role—visitors can draw to deepen observation or to improve their drawing skills; they can write to reflect about a museum session or to connect to the emotional tone of a work; they can use movement to foster an embodied response or to construct an artistic response to an object. Therefore, reflection about goals and roles will not only aid educators in the selection of strategies, it will also help them decide where in a particular activity to place emphasis so museum visitors will have the richest experience possible.

References

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Endnote

[1]I am grateful to Irene Suris, formerly from the Guggenheim Museum, for sharing this activity with me and my students.

WORKSHEET

ARTISTS AND THEIR TIME

Dadaists were not the only artists disillusioned by current events. Research the work of an artist (historical or contemporary) whose work responds to the politics, social mores, or significant local or international events of their time.

Need an idea? Try researching Diego Rivera, Jacob Lawrence, Harun Farocki, Martha Rosler, and Sanja Iveković.

Reflect. Consider the various ways in which artists have expressed their critiques of war, including style and subject matter. How were these works of art received?

Summarize your research and thoughts in a 500-word essay.

MOMA

The first gallery of the First International Dada Fair. This photo was taken in the room of fine art dealer Dr. Otto Burchard. Berlin, Germany, June 30-August 25, 1920.

MoMA Dada Theme

Share this information with your students:

Dada emerged during World War I (1914-1918)-- a conflict that claimed the lives of eight million soldiers and an estimated equal number of civilians. For the disillusioned artists of Dada, the war merely confirmed the bankruptcy of social, political, and economic structures that permitted and supported such violence. From 1916 until the mid 1920s, a loose network of Dada artists in Zurich, New York, Cologne, Hanover, and Paris declared an all-out assault against not only conventional definitions of art but rational thought itself. "The beginnings of Dada," poet Tristan Tzara recalled, "were not the beginnings of art, but of disgust."

Dada affiliates did not share a common style or practice so much as the wish, as expressed by French artist Jean (Hans) Arp, "to destroy the hoaxes of reason and to discover an unreasoned order."

In Dada, visual art was considered secondary-- useful as a means of communication, but of less importance than the ideas they communicated. "For us, art is not an end in itself," wrote Dada poet Hugo Ball, "but it is an opportunity for the true perception and criticism of the times we live in." Artists affiliated with Dada were nevertheless experimental in the ways they made art, provocatively re-imagining what art and art-making could be. They used unorthodox materials and chance procedures, infusing their

work with spontaneity and irreverence.

The climax of Berlin Dada was the International Dada Fair of 1920, the central symbol of which was a dummy of a German officer with the head of a pig that hung from the ceiling of the main gallery.

This photo was taken in the room of the fine art dealer, Dr. Burchard, Berlin, June 5, 1920. From left to right: Hausmann, Hanna Höch, Dr Burchard, Baader, W. Hetzfelde, the wife, Dr. Oz, George Grosz, John Heartfield. Reproduction opposite page 128 from the book, "Dada Almanach; im Auftrag des Zentralamts der Deutschen Dada-Bewegung," by Richard Huelsenbeck.