

Art and Society

A. Overview

In this lesson, students will consider the different roles that art can play in society. They'll view work by and watch interviews with two important contemporary artists who create work for very different reasons. The lesson culminates in a classroom debate in which students will discuss whether it is more important for art to be socially responsible or entertaining.



B. Objectives

Students will...

- Consider two different approaches to creating art and the merits of each approach.
- Work collaboratively to construct an argument about the primary function of art and participate in a classroom debate.

HOW TO USE THIS LESSON

This is a lesson plan for the classroom. If you are bringing your students to the Walker, we highly recommend the Walker Art Center Field Trip Preparation Lesson as well.

The accompanying PowerPoint presentation includes simple instructions for this lesson in the presenter notes.

Teachers know their own classrooms best, so please adapt the activities to fit your students' ages, needs, and interests.

Artwork Experts

Classroom Lesson

9th and 10th Grade

English Language Arts

9.12.1.1 Cite specific textual visual or physical evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, attending to such features as the date and origin of the information.

9.14.7.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize ideas from multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

Social Studies Standards

9.1.1.1.1 Demonstrate skills that enable people to monitor and influence state, local and national affairs. (For example: Working with others; conducting civil conversations; articulating ideas and interests; negotiating differences and managing conflict with people or groups who have different perspectives; using parliamentary procedures; building consensus.)

Social Awareness Learning Goals Benchmarks

Express understanding of those who hold different opinions.

Ask questions of others to deepen understanding of the perspective of others.

Compare multiple perspectives on an issue.

Differentiate between the factual and emotional content of what a person says.

Visual Arts Standards

5.9.4.7.1 Construct multiple interpretations of an artwork.

5.9.4.8.1 Evaluate the impact of an artwork to influence ideas, feelings and behaviors of specific audiences.

5.9.4.8.2 When encountering artwork(s), synthesize one's own evaluation of artwork(s) with a different evaluation of the same artwork(s).

Connections to Minnesota

State Standards

11th and 12th Grade

English Language Arts

11.12.1.1 Cite specific textual visual or physical evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.

11.14.7.7 Conduct short as well as more sustained research projects to answer a question (including a self-generated question) or solve a problem; narrow or broaden the inquiry when appropriate; synthesize ideas from multiple sources on the subject, demonstrating understanding of the subject under investigation.

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Art and Society Classroom Lesson

1

Observe and Discuss

(10 minutes)

Starting on [Slide 3](#), explain to students that these images are still images from a video work called *Soliloquy* by the artist, Shirin Neshat. It's a two-channel video, meaning that there are actually two different films that make up the artwork. Each film follows a veiled woman (the artist herself) dressed in black as she navigates two very different landscapes, one ancient and Middle Eastern, the other modern and Western. Both films play on two different screens at the same time and are the same length.

Discuss:

- How would you describe the setting in each of these scenes?
- What do these scenes have in common? How are they different?
- Imagine you're in the place of the veiled woman. How would it feel to be in each of these spaces? Why? Discuss.
- Consider the title of this work: *Soliloquy*. Does anyone know what this word means? A soliloquy is a speech in a play in which the character speaks to themselves rather than to other characters. How does this title relate to what's happening in these images?

Move to [Slide 4](#). Now, provide students with some background information about *Soliloquy* and Neshat. Try to make this conversational and invite students to ask questions and contribute ideas:

About Shirin Neshat and *Soliloquy*

Artist Shirin Neshat (b. 1957) primarily creates photographs and video works. She grew up in Iran but moved to the United States for school in 1974 at the age of 17. She thought her move to America would be temporary and had no idea that she would never be able to live in Iran again.

In 1979, the government of Iran was overturned in a revolution and Neshat's family told her to stay in the United States because the situation in Iran was unsafe. Essentially exiled in America, Neshat did not return to Iran until the early 1990s and found the country led by a regime that enforced a strict ideology had changed the country beyond recognition. Things had especially changed for women, who now had to be fully covered when in public, and lost other freedoms they had been afforded before the revolution.

Neshat was able to visit Iran several times in the 1990s, but it eventually became unsafe for her to continue returning and she has not been back since 1996. She has now lived in the United States for over 40 years.

Soliloquy explores Neshat's experience as an exile. She refers to herself as a "nomadic artist," because she creates work in many different countries, but never the one where she was born. Not only does she feel disconnected from her country, she also finds herself at odds with many aspects of American culture. In the *Soliloquy* films, her character is literally alone in both settings, and she must navigate the landscapes by herself. Devoid of people, both landscapes feel empty and unsettling.

Ask students:

- How does knowing this background information change your understanding of *Soliloquy*?
- What feelings or ideas does Neshat communicate through this artwork?
- Why do you think Neshat chose to wear the same clothing in both films despite the different locations?

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2

Watch and Discuss

(10–15 minutes)

Now students will hear directly from Neshat about being an artist in exile. Students should pay close attention to how she talks about her role as artist. Transcripts of the talk are also available in several different languages on the [TED webpage](#).

Move to [Slide 6](#) and play Shirin Neshat's TED Talk (stop the video at the 3 minutes 24 seconds mark).

Discuss students' thoughts on the TED talk using the following prompts to guide the conversation.

- Neshat says, "Every Iranian artist in one form or another is political." What does she mean by this?
- According to Neshat, "Art is our weapon. Culture is a form of resistance." In what ways can art be used as a weapon?
- (Move to [Slide 7](#), showing images of *Soliloquy*) Based on what you know about this artwork, and what Neshat said in her TED talk, do you believe that this artwork is political? Why or why not?

Explain that Neshat says that all Iranian artists, whether they are in Iran or exiled, have a social responsibility when making their work—that is, they have an obligation to try to benefit society with their art. She is worried about Western artists, though, because she argues that art is at risk of becoming simply a form of entertainment.

Move to [Slide 9](#) and explain to students that they're now going to learn about a popular art experience that primarily functions as a form of entertainment. This art experience is created by a group of artists who call themselves, "Meow Wolf." They are based in Santa Fe, but have created experiences like the one you're about to see in a few other cities too. As they watch the video, ask students to pay attention to the reasons that the artists give for creating this experience.

After watching, ask students:

- Why did the Meow Wolf artists create this art experience? What are their primary goals?
- According to the video, Meow Wolf now brings in millions of dollars each year. Why do you think the Meow Wolf experience has become so popular?

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3

Debate (20–25 minutes)

Students have now heard about two different types of art: Art that is political or socially responsive, and art that is fun and entertaining. In Shirin Neshat's view, art that is created solely for entertainment is worrisome. On the other hand, artists and art collectives like Meow Wolf believe that art should be fun for people.

Choosing a Side

Designate one side of the room as SIDE A: Art should better society, and SIDE B: Art should entertain. There are two ways to divide students into debate teams: Option 1 is to assign students to a side. Option 2 is to let them choose their side. If you opt for Option 2, instruct students to position themselves somewhere between these two sides to indicate their view of art's role (so, if a student believes that an artwork should be completely focused on bettering society, they should stand as close to the SIDE A wall as possible; if a student thinks that art should mostly focus on entertaining but should have some social responsibility, they should stand somewhere between the center of the room and the SIDE B wall).

Once students have positioned themselves, draw an imaginary line down the center of the room, and create two debate teams: SIDE A and SIDE B. NOTE: If most students end up on the same side, you should divide teams in such a way that the team sizes are roughly even. This may mean that one of the teams is putting forward a less extreme argument ("It's important that artists strive for some entertainment when creating their work," for example), and that's ok!

Preparing the Arguments

Each team should talk amongst themselves for a few minutes, determining a defense for their stance. They should identify their strongest lines of reasoning and come up with examples to support their argument.

Debating

Now it's time to debate! The two teams should face each other in order to have a discussion (If possible, form two semi-circles with chairs/desks). OPTION: If holding an all-class debate is too logistically challenging, you may opt to form small groups made up of 2–3 students from each team.

To begin, invite SIDE A to present their opening argument. SIDE B needs to listen carefully during this time, waiting to speak until it is their turn. Once SIDE A has presented their argument, it's SIDE B's turn to state their argument and why they disagree with SIDE A. Once they are finished, a member of SIDE A can propose a counter argument. From there, members from each team may contribute to the conversation, but only one person can speak at a time (you should help facilitate this by calling on students). Students should be respectful of one another, and follow good debate etiquette by listening, stating "I agree," or "I disagree," and providing reasoning to support their statements.

You may interject at any time, or pose questions during the debate that encourage students to think more deeply about the arguments that they are making.

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4

Reflect

(5 minutes)

Thank students for participating in this debate. Come back together as a class and wrap up by discussing students' thoughts on these questions (move to [Slide 15](#) so that they can read the questions):

- Imagine a world where all art was created for political reasons. What would that be like? What would the negative impacts be?
- Now, imagine a world where all the art was created for entertainment purposes. What would that be like? What would the negative impacts be?

Explain that during their visit to the Walker, they will see examples of political art, entertaining art, and art that serves many other functions. The one thing that all of these artworks will have in common, is that they all reflect society in some way – our job as viewers is to try to learn something from our experience of these artworks in order to understand how we can relate to them.
