

Art in the Mail

Time Allotment

Three to five one-hour sessions

Overview

Art in the Mail is an interdisciplinary lesson that invites students to make and trade works of “mail art” with an international community of artists. The term “mail art” refers to pieces of art sent through the mail rather than displayed or sold in traditional venues. Mail artists often use inexpensive and recycled media including postcards, collage, rubber stamps, and images made on photocopying machines. Mail artists sometimes include poetry and other forms of art with their mailings.

Through this lesson, students are challenged to question traditional beliefs and values about art as they explore the twentieth century movements of Dada and Fluxus. Through mail art, students may experience art as an easily accessible, non-threatening, universal means of self-expression.

Subject Matter

Visual Art, Social Studies, Language Arts

Learning Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Create a personal definition of art
- Create works of art for an authentic audience
- Participate in an international barter economy
- Identify art as a participatory exchange, accessible to all regardless of technical skill

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- Address and send letters through the mail (both domestic and international)

Standards

From the Ohio Department of Education

http://www.ode.state.oh.us/academic_content_standards/

Art Standards:

- Explain how and why visual art forms develop in the contexts in which they were made (e.g. cultural, social, historical, and political).
- Discuss the roles of visual art forms within their social contexts.
- Research and describe the cultural values in various traditions that influence contemporary art media.
- Analyze a work of art and explain how it reflects the heritages, traditions, attitudes and beliefs of the artist.
- Summarize and explain the impact of a historical event or movement (e.g. realism, feminism, modernism or postmodernism) on the development of art.
- Identify the philosophical beliefs, social systems and movements that influence the function and role of art in people's lives.
- Compare and contrast universal themes and sociopolitical issues in a variety of artworks from different cultural contents.
- Formulate and solve a visual art problem using strategies and perspectives from other disciplines.

Language Arts Standards:

- Prepare for publication (e.g., for display or sharing with others) writing that follows a manuscript form appropriate for the purpose, which could include such techniques as electronic resources, principles of design and graphics to enhance the final product.

Media Components:

Web sites:

<http://www.artencyclopedia.com/history/dada.html>,

This online art encyclopedia describes the context of the Dada movement with pictures of works by major Dada artists in chronological sequence.

<http://www.safekids.com> This online source provides guidelines for kids and Internet safety.

<http://www.artlex.com/ArtLex/f/fluxus.html>

Describes the history of the Fluxus movement including performance artists, installation art, and avant guard music.

<http://www.artnotart.com/fluxus/> Describes Fluxus as non-art in its almost cryptic but telling “fluxmanifesto.”

<http://www.fluxus.org/> Includes Fluxus and mail art links.

http://dir.yahoo.com/Arts/Art_History/Periods_and_Movements/Fluxus/ Provides a context for Fluxus within a comprehensive history of art.

<http://www.artnotart.com/fluxus/dhiggins-childshistory.html> A child’s history of Fluxus. Simple “once upon a time” story of a complex movement.

Mail Art

<http://home.planet.nl/~tineds/page12.html>

This includes a list of international mail artists with addresses.

http://pages.map.com/rclark/tabloid_trash/asjartcl.htm Description of the philosophy of one mail artist and her collection of mail art and links.

<http://www.sztuka-fabryka.be/> Mail art archive. Includes an “encyclopedia of mail art.”

<http://www.art.net/~kiyotei/mailart/> Extensive collection of mail art, addresses, and links. Includes an up-to-date and comprehensive collection of Thematic “mail art calls.”

Language Arts

<http://switch.sjsu.edu/switch/sound/articles/wendt/ng1.htm>

Concrete poetry is described with links to examples.

<http://www.wisc.edu/writing/Handbook/BusinessLetter.html>

Example of business letter.

Other Technology

Mail artists often reproduce works through various media, then assemble the works as part of their creations. Technology that is optional, though not necessary, for this lesson includes: scanners and printers, desktop media (i.e. Adobe Photoshop), photocopiers.

Materials

Per Class:

- Computers with Internet access
- Collection of two dimensional materials for collage
- "Land mail" addresses of mail artists

Per student:

- #10 (business size) envelopes, at least two for each student
- Scissors
- Glue
- Markers
- Variety of pencils, pens, crayons
- Postage, for both U.S. and international mail

Optional:

- Rubber stamp supplies

Prep for Teachers

Much of the appeal of mail art is the physical presence of the piece of art itself. Rarely do students have the opportunity to hold and examine a piece of original art created by an artist in another country or city. While students may gain a partial appreciation for mail art by looking at images on the Web, the full impact comes best by examining actual pieces of mail art. If time allows, teachers may start their own collection by sending their own pieces of mail art to other artists several weeks before the class. There is no guarantee that any particular mail artist will send work back; sending several pieces is recommended.

Gather materials for collage. Create a template of an envelope. (Unglue an envelope, unfold and trace.)

The teacher should also create examples of his/ her own mail art envelopes for students to examine.

Introductory Activity

DAY 1:

Start by asking students: What makes a work of art valuable in our society? What makes an artist successful? Record student responses on board or overhead, and make a copy of student responses for later reference. Often students will suggest that

money, fame, and gallery exhibitions constitute value and success. Then direct students to Web sites that show Fluxus and Dada artists.

<http://www.artnotart.com/fluxus/dhiggins-childshistory.html>.

<http://www.artcyclopedia.com/history/dada.html>,

<http://www.fluxus.org/>

Learning Activity

Following the introduction, inform students that Dada (of the 1920's) and Fluxus artists (of the 1960's), rebelled against traditional notions. These movements challenged the meaning, value, and ownership of art.

Invite students to locate artists within the site for more examples of Fluxus art.

Open a discussion. Invite the students to describe what is common among the artists. Compare student's description to the definition given by Dick Higgins in *A Child's History of Fluxus*.

Next, introduce pieces of mail art. If examples from a personal collection are available, pass these among the students. Allow students to discuss what they enjoy about the pieces. Ask students to note the various techniques and media used in creating the envelopes and the contents. If a personal collection of mail art is not available, direct students to mail art Web sites to find examples.

Inform students that mail art is an international free exchange of art through the mail. Started in the 1960's by artist Ray Johnson and others, mail art continues to expand worldwide. The envelope becomes both the museum and the piece of art. Mail artists use any and all media, but often use rubber stamps, collage, and scanned images. Some mail art includes original trading cards and artist-made, faux postage stamps.

By the end of day one, students can start planning their pieces of art to send in the mail. They may also look for addresses of people to whom they can send their art. Some students may choose to send their mail art to someone they know. Others are encouraged to join the international mail art community by sending works to other artists. Addresses of mail artists are available online on most of the

aforementioned Web sites. Due to security issues, students should be cautioned against emailing artists directly or sharing their email addresses with strangers via the Internet.

DAY 2: (and subsequent days)

Allow students to create their envelopes as works of art. Options include collage, rubber stamping, drawing, painting, photocopying, and scanning images. Encourage students to return to and browse through mail art Web sites for additional ideas. In the spirit of Fluxus, encourage students to experiment with found objects as well.

Envelopes may be made from other works of art by tracing from a template.

Students may include within the envelope any of the following:

- Artist trading cards (3” x 2” works of art created on cardstock, see Web sites for more information on artist trading cards)
- A letter to the recipient
- Another piece of art
- Poetry
- Nothing (Many mail artists consider the envelope itself the work of art)

Art students who have materials and skills for engraving may wish to carve their own rubber stamps from erasers.

Students looking for other ideas may find inspiration by looking for “mail art calls” on the Internet. Often mail artists will ask for others to send works based on a theme and then will post the works on their Web sites.

When envelopes are complete, the students will address the envelopes. Due to privacy issues, students may use the school’s return address in place of their own. Students are again cautioned not to share personal email addresses with persons they do not already know over the Internet.

Culminating Activity

Display works of mail art as a temporary exhibition. On the last day of class allow students to discuss their creations. Review student responses to the questions raised in the introduction. Discuss which, if any, of their assumptions about art have changed. How might a Dada or Fluxus artist answer these questions? Ceremoniously seal, stamp, and mail the works of art.

Cross-Curricular Extensions

Language Arts:

Invite students to write friendly or formal letters introducing themselves and their art to the recipients of their art. (Mail artists do not often include letters with their art.) When students include letters with their art, the mailings create more of a personal impact, and are more likely to receive a response.

Students may also be asked to include a poem in their mail art. Many Fluxus artists wrote “concrete” poetry and included it in their work.

See <http://switch.sjsu.edu/switch/sound/articles/wendt/ng1.htm> for examples and links to concrete poems.

Social Studies:

Chart mail art contacts on a map of the world. Challenge students to find mail artists in as many countries as possible. Ask why some countries are more active in mail art than others.

Community Connections

Mail art is all about community: the international community of artists. In addition, students may contact artists within their community and invite their artistic responses.

Student Materials

- Glue
- Scissors
- Envelopes
- Variety of pens, pencils, markers, crayons etc.
- Collage materials (pictures from magazines, photocopies, scanned images, etc.)
- Postage