

Overcoming Censorship through Art

Length: Four 50-minute class periods

Grades: high school World History Studies, World Geography Studies, U.S. Government, or AP Comparative Government and Politics

Overview: Americans have the right to voice opinions about social and political issues, but some countries do not afford their citizens the same freedom of expression. In the past and present, many governments censor lectures, literature, music, and art. Using works from the Blanton's collection, students discuss the effect of restrictive governments on the work of artists. Students will then exercise two methods, one direct and one discreet, of expressing personal opinions about world issues.

Note: References in this lesson are made to students doing parts of the lesson online. If computers are not available for student use, alternate options are given.

Connections to high school World History Studies, World Geography Studies, and U.S. Government TEKS for social studies:

- Student identifies examples of art, music, and literature that have transcended the boundaries of societies and convey universal themes. (113.33.c.20C)
- Student defines and gives examples of different political systems, past and present. (113.33.c.15B)
- Student identifies examples of political, economic, and social oppression and violations of human rights through history. (113.33.c.18C)
- Student analyzes example of how art, architecture, literature, music, and drama reflect the history of cultures in which they are produced. (113.33.c.20B)
- Student transfers information from one medium to another, including written to visual. (113.33.c.26D)
- Student analyzes how the character of a place is related to its political, economic, social, and cultural characteristics. (113.34.c.5A)
- Student compares life in a variety of cities and nations in the world to evaluate the relationships involved in political, economic, social, and environmental changes. (113.34.c.16C)
- Student uses problem-solving and decision-making skills, working independently and with others, in a variety of settings. (113.34.c.23, 113.35.c.23)
- Student identifies the characteristics of classic forms of government such as absolute monarchy, authoritarianism, classic republic, despotism, feudalism, liberal democracy, and totalitarianism. (113.35.c.1B)
- Student analyzes and evaluates the consequences of a government policy that affects the human characteristics of a place or region. (113.35.c.5B)
- Student compares the U.S. system of government with other political systems. (113.35.c.13A)
- Student analyzes the importance of free speech and press in a democratic society. (113.35.c.17B)
- Student expresses and defends a point of view on an issue of contemporary interest in the United States. (113.35.c.17C)

Materials:

A world map with South America, Chile, and Brazil clearly labeled

Copies of [Latin American Artists Information](#)

Slide projector

Slides of Cildo Meireles, *Zero Dollar* and Eugenio Dittborn, *Sin rastros (No tracks)*, and [\(Click here to order slides.\)](#)

Books, newspapers, and news magazines like *Time* and *Newsweek*

Computers with internet access

Selection of art materials such as various papers, paints, crayons, glue, and cardboard

Objectives:

- Students will discuss government-imposed censorship of art and the artists' methods for counteracting censorship.
- Students will observe and discuss examples of contemporary Latin American art created under restrictive governments.
- Students will write a persuasive essay in reaction to an international current event.
- Students will create an art piece that expresses their opinions while circumventing hypothetical government restrictions.

Procedure:

1. First introduce students to the concepts of limited and unlimited governments and give examples of each. Explain to students that throughout history there are periods when certain countries have been under the rule of unlimited governments that exercised extreme control over the citizens' actions. Because artists are also citizens, many have endured harsh censorship under these governments.

- Example one: Hitler organized an art exhibition of "degenerate art" and destroyed 650 works of modern art.
- Example two: Stalin believed art should be a means of political education and did not allow any the creation of art, music, or literature that did not fit his definition.

From the 1960s to 1980s military governments in some South American countries, such as Chile and Brazil, strictly monitored all forms of communication including artwork. Show students a map of South America and ask them to identify Chile and Brazil. Artists and other activists were denied the right to free speech due to harsh censorship. Those who dared to speak out against the government were often kidnapped, tortured, or even killed. Artists were forced to find alternative methods to make statements through their art. Some examples of Latin American art in which the artists used creative approaches to veil their messages or to bypass government control are in the Blanton's collection:

Cildo Meireles, *Zero Dollar*, 1978-84 and *Zero Centavo*, 1974-78
Eugenio Dittborn, *Sin rastros (No tracks)*, 1983

2. Ask students to discuss these questions as a group in order to review the differences between limited and unlimited types of governments:

- What is the difference between a limited and an unlimited government?
- What rights do citizens have in a limited government (democracy) that they may not enjoy in an unlimited government (dictatorship or totalitarian government)?
- Are citizens allowed to voice their opinions or to express opposition to policies in an unlimited government?
- In a limited government how might citizens express their opinions or make statements about current issues? (rallies, newspaper editorials, voting, etc.)
- How do artists respond to current events and social issues in a limited government?
- What effect does an unlimited government have on artists?
- What choices do artists have when they are faced with unreasonable censorship? (follow the rules, outright opposition to rules no matter what the risk, or find ways skirt the rules)

3. After discussing the challenges artists face under an unlimited government, such as the military governments of Chile and Brazil in the 60s, 70s, and 80s, introduce students to works of art by two artists who found ways to circumvent their restrictive governments. Show slides or computer images of the two works of art and use Latin American Artists Information for information on artists, works of art, and questions for discussion with students. Begin by having them describe each work and use the questions to encourage a deeper discussion.

4. Explain to students that in this activity they first will act as citizens in a democratic society and will voice their opinions. Ask students to find a current world issue that interests them by surveying newspapers and magazines. Have each student write a 750-800 word persuasive essay in the form of a newspaper article or a persuasive speech expressing his/her viewpoint about the issue and supporting his/her opinion with facts.

5. Explain to students that in the second part of the lesson they should imagine that they are operating under an unlimited government without the ability to freely express their opinions. Tell students that they must use artwork to address the same ideas illustrated in their essays; however, because censorship is an issue, they must find alternative ways to make or to show potentially controversial artwork. For ideas, have students to consider some of the methods used by the artists that were observed. Students might use metaphors and symbols or use unusual methods for distributing art. Tell students to think about ways to make interesting and thoughtful art in a covert way. Almost any art materials and everyday objects can be used. The emphasis is less on the artistic merit of the work and more on resourcefulness and the message.

Conclusion

6. Display student artwork and stage a gallery opening. Have students explain their artworks in an informal gallery discussion with their peers. After all students have shared their work, ask them to reflect on the experience by answering these questions:

- How did the experience of writing an opinion differ from expressing the same opinion in an artwork?
- What challenges were faced in making the artwork in an unconventional way?
- Did the limitation on your artistic freedom force you to be more or less creative?

Related Resources:

<http://fcit.coedu.usf.edu/holocaust/ARTS/ARTDEGEN.HTM#MOVIE>

An explanation of Hitler's censorship of modern art through the *Degenerate Art Exhibition* of 1937

<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/1109861.stm>

BBC news article about people who have disappeared in Chile under the military government of Pinochet

<http://www.desaparecidos.org/chile/eng.html>

What Pinochet and his followers have done to cause over 1,000 people in Chile to disappear

Latin American Artists' Information

Cildo Meireles (Brazil)

Meireles uses a unique method of expression that he calls "insertions" to circumvent the Brazilian government. In one work he silkscreened messages onto Coca-Cola bottles and returned them to the factory to be disinfected, refilled, and redistributed. The artist's message only showed when the bottle was full. He also created fake money with political messages and spent the money so it would be in circulation. He calls the Coke bottles and the fake money "insertions" because they were inserted into society using economic systems like currency and consumer products. Meireles said, "The insertions are not industrial objects replacing art, but art objects behaving like industrial objects".

- What did he mean by this statement?

Eugenio Dittborn (Chile):

Dittborn, like Meireles, uses an unusual manner to circulate his art in society. This work is part of his *Airmail Paintings* where he creates images on paper that is folded and mailed several times. The paper is flexible, lightweight, and inexpensive, making it possible to send the art images anywhere. The postmarks show the history of the artwork's travel and become part of the work itself. By sending art through the postal system, Dittborn is able to easily and cheaply send art out of Chile without being noticed and is actually using "the system" that would normally work against him to express himself.

The photographs are of people who have disappeared in Chile under the military government. The printed image of Jose Guadalupe Posada's hanged man dates back to the Mexican Revolution. The artist is drawing a connection between both victims in history. Dittborn says that he hoped to "salvage memory within a political climate that attempted to erase virtually every trace of it."

- How does this information change your reaction to the artwork?
- Do you think the artist succeeds in salvaging history even though it is recorded on something as fragile as paper?