

How can everyday objects and living beings become art?

Secondary: (ages 11 – 14)

Visual arts

What makes art art? Students explore the frontiers of art, reflecting on how and why to trace a distinction between art and everyday objects/beings, and produce artwork that experiments with these boundaries. The lesson uses ‘ready-mades’ and/or scientific photos as provocations for students. Ready-mades exemplify how ordinary objects can be turned into artwork when isolated from their functional context. Scientific photos can be considered from an artistic perspective, taking living beings or natural phenomena as art subjects.

Time allocation 2 or 3 lesson periods

Subject content Art theory (theory of representation)
Photography techniques (framing, editing)
Interpreting and using visual arts elements

Creativity and critical thinking This unit has a **creativity** and **critical thinking** focus:

- Identify/question convention and consider different perspectives on art and everyday objects
- Play with radical ideas and create visual art that shows different perspectives on the nature of art
- Reflect on expressive choices and novelty of a visual arts piece

Other skills Collaboration

Key words photography; ready-mades; theory of representation; framing; photo editing

Products and processes to assess

Student work produced in this activity includes photographic collages or edited photos in which students display their imagination, propose a personal and novel view of an everyday object, and take risks in their use of visual arts techniques to present the object in a new light.

Another visible product is an interpretative written or audio commentary about the work, in which students justify the choice of the object and how it was transformed using ethical or aesthetic criteria. The learning and production process in this activity leads students to question traditional definitions of artistic objects, to experiment with several unusual ideas, and to make and justify choices after they consider different options about how to make an artistic representation of an everyday object or living being.

Teaching and Learning plan

This plan suggests potential steps for implementing the activity. Teachers can introduce as many modifications as they see fit to adapt the activity to their teaching context.

Step	Duration	Teacher and student roles	Subject content	Creativity and critical thinking
1	Lesson period 1	<p>Teacher introduces topic of the distinction between art, everyday objects, and living creatures. For example, what are the criteria to consider a given product as artwork? Can anything become an artistic subject? Does the “artistic quality” emanate from the object or from the way it is treated? Can scientific images of living beings (e.g. plants, cells, microbes) be considered artistic? Students can be introduced to examples of ‘ready-mades’ (e.g. Duchamp’s porcelain urinal), examples of artistic photography (e.g. works by Chema Madoz) and/or scientific images revealing dimensions invisible to the naked eye (e.g. microscope photos by Martin Oeggerli).</p> <p>Students split into small groups and to discuss and then present to the class their views (both for and against) about whether these examples can be considered art or not. The teacher moderates the discussion.</p> <p>As homework assignment, students take photographs (with their personal devices or with equipment provided by the school) that reflect the boundaries between art and everyday objects or the natural world – either of the blurring of these boundaries, or making them visible. Students may for instance be asked to take two or more photographs of the same object or natural being, some within an artistic frame, others from a non-artistic perspective. Give notice to students that during the next lesson they will be asked to present their own photos and explain their choices and what it is that the photos reflect.</p>	<p>Demonstrating knowledge of artistic movements, their historical contexts</p> <p>Using subject-relevant vocabulary to express views and interpretations</p> <p>Demonstrating knowledge of theories about representation in art</p> <p>Presenting their views on the nature of art</p>	<p>Questioning assumptions (e.g. do traditional definitions of artistic objects hold in view of these examples? Why or why not?)</p> <p>Finding several perspectives on the problem (e.g. different reasons for and against considering everyday objects and images of living creatures as art)</p>
2	Lesson period 2	<p>Students make rapid-fire (1-minute) presentations of their photos.</p> <p>If time allows, a class discussion follows to identify collectively emerging themes, commonalities and differences across the different choices made by students.</p> <p>Students are then paired/grouped (either at random, or through another mechanism such as affinity or contrast between their individual photos). The new assignment is to work in pairs/groups and produce a new series of photos that combine elements, themes or techniques previously chosen/used by each student individually. The artwork to be produced together should provide a different perspective on these objects or beings, by virtue of their combination.</p>	<p>Using digital media for artistic purposes</p> <p>Understanding and applying different elements and principles of composition in photography</p> <p>Identifying and framing questions in subject-relevant vocabulary</p>	<p>Proposing own product/opinion justified on logical, ethical or aesthetic criteria</p> <p>Playing with unusual and radical ideas + generating ideas and making connections (e.g. richness and quality of ideas for combining objects/themes)</p>

Optionally, depending on alignment with curriculum and available resources, students may be asked to experiment with digital photo editing and play with visual arts elements (e.g. colours, shapes, textures, light and dark) in photography.

The product of this assignment may thus be a collage using elements from different photos by different students, or the digital editing of one of the previous photos, or a new photo combining ideas previously used by different students.

Tell students that during the next lesson each pair/group will again be expected to present their work and describe the evolution of the object/living being from its normal context to the new artistic frame.

7 Lesson period 3

Students present their collective work and their reflections on the activity.

Depending on alignment with curriculum, the discussion may be steered towards the use and qualities of different visual art elements (e.g. how changing light and shade may alter the representation of the same object), or towards questions about art and representation.

The final assignment, either individual or in groups, is to prepare a short technical and interpretative written or audio commentary on each photo as if the text was to appear in an art catalogue or media presentation.

Students may be asked to comment on their own photo(s) and also on the photo(s) of other students/groups, so that at least two commentaries exist for each piece in the collection.

Teacher closes lesson with a reflective discussion, asking students what they learned about what makes art art

Using digital media for artistic purposes

Understanding and applying different elements and principles of composition in photography

Using subject-relevant vocabulary to express views and interpretations

Reflecting on the expressive elements of a visual arts piece (e.g. how this piece plays with the boundaries between art and everyday objects)

Acknowledging uncertainty/limits of chosen solution/position (e.g. how one's choices or position may be considered differently)

Resources and examples for inspiration

Web and print

- Gallery of Duchamp's ready-mades: http://www.dada-companion.com/duchamp/readymades_catalogue.php
- Gallery of pictures or artwork by Chema Madoz - <http://www.chemamadoz.com>
- Scientific microscopy pictures by Swiss photographer Martin Oeggerli: <http://www.micronaut.ch/>

Other

- Projector or interactive whiteboard for visual display of examples of artwork
- Photographic cameras (either students' own devices or supplied by school)
- Computers and software for photo editing, and a printer

**Creativity and critical thinking
rubric for visual arts**

• Mapping of the different steps of the lesson plan against the OECD rubric to identify the creative and/or critical thinking skills the different parts of the lesson aim to develop

	CREATIVITY Coming up with new ideas and solutions	Steps	CRITICAL THINKING Questioning and evaluating ideas and solutions	Steps
INQUIRING	Make connections to other visual arts concepts and media or to conceptual ideas in other disciplines	1	Identify and question assumptions and conventional rules in a piece of visual art (content, style, technique, colour, composition, etc.)	1
IMAGINING	Play with unusual and radical visual arts ideas when preparing or creating a piece of visual art	2	Consider several perspectives on the content, technique or expression of a piece of visual arts	1-3
DOING	Create visual art that shows expressive qualities or personally novel ways to engage a subject matter	2	Explain both strengths and limitations of a piece of visual arts justified by aesthetic, logical and possibly other criteria	1
REFLECTING	Reflect on steps taken in creating a piece of visual art and on its novelty compared to conventions	1-3	Reflect on the chosen expressive choices of a visual arts piece relative to possible alternatives	1-3