Teaching Resource: Special Exhibition

Agitprop!

December 11, 2015–August 7, 2016

Brooklyn Museum
**Agitprop!**

**About this Teaching Resource**

This packet focuses on five works of art from the special exhibition *Agitprop!* It is intended as a tool to help classroom teachers, community-based educators, and youth development workers discuss social justice topics and art created to influence political and social change. This packet is aimed at engaging middle and high school students with questions for viewing and background information on the artwork, artists, and related historical context. However, we advise educators to preview the exhibition.

**About the Exhibition**

*Agitprop!* connects contemporary art devoted to social change with historic moments in creative activism from the first half of the twentieth century. The exhibition is uniquely designed to expand twice during its eight-month run, with additional artists’ projects added in two waves. The exhibition opens with five historical case studies presented alongside projects by twenty contemporary artists committed to making work that effects political transformation today. The case studies explore the various ways achievement of political goals took creative form, including Soviet propaganda made by and for women, Tina Modotti’s socialist photographs taken in Mexico, the cultural campaigns for women’s suffrage and against lynching in the United States, and the government-sponsored Living Newspaper productions of the Federal Theatre Project. In February, and then again in April, new projects by artists nominated by participants in the earlier waves added to the increasingly dense installation. Collectively, the contemporary projects address a range of social justice struggles during the second half of the twentieth century, from antiwar demonstrations, AIDS activism, and environmental advocacy to multipronged demands for human rights and protests against mass incarceration and economic inequality.

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**About Agitprop**

At key moments in history, artists have reached beyond galleries and museums, using their work as a call to action to create political and social change. Emerging from the Russian Revolution almost 100 years ago, the term “agitprop” combines the words agitation and propaganda to describe art practices intended to encourage social and political transformation. Since that time, artists around the world have used different media that can be widely reproduced and distributed—photography and film, prints and banners, street actions and songs, and now digital files and web platforms—to motivate a broad and diverse public.
Description

In the left foreground of this color poster is a hand-drawn close-up figure with a red head wrap and blue shirt. The figure's facial expression is serious, with head tilted toward the right side of the poster, gazing out. The poster is divided by a diagonal line running through the figure's left shoulder. On the right of the diagonal is a montage of black-and-white photos of women: from the top, a woman in military dress, a woman operating a tractor, a woman working in a factory, and three women workers smiling. In the bottom right is a photo of a central female figure in white modern dress who is being apprehended by police, and a crowd with women demonstrating in the background. The Russian text across the top of the poster reads “International Women’s Workers Day Is the Fighting of the Proletariat.”

Background

Valentina Kulagina (Russian, 1902–1987) was a leading figure in postrevolutionary poster design. She was able to easily combine both avant-garde style, such as photo montage and abstraction (the celebrated style during the 1920s in the Bolshevik-era Soviet Union) and fine art techniques, such as hand-drawn figures.

Shortly after the Russian Revolution of 1917, in which the imperial Romanov dynasty was overthrown, the Bolshevik party (later renamed the Communist Party of the Soviet Union) seized authority of Soviet Russia, calling for the transference of power to the working class, or proletariat. Immediately identifying the need to spread their political agenda to a largely rural and illiterate nation, the Bolsheviks established a unified visual vocabulary that they distributed widely through a range of media, including posters, film, monuments, and theater.

On March 8, 1917, thousands of women in Petrograd (current-day Saint Petersburg) celebrated International Women’s Workers Day by marching in protest of poor wages and inadequate living conditions. The demonstrations became the catalyst for the Russian Revolution, fortifying women’s crucial role in the insurrection. Produced fourteen years after the Revolution, this poster reflects women’s continuing struggle for labor equity as they entered the workforce in greater numbers without relief from traditional domestic duties. Posters like these were printed in the thousands and posted all around the city.
Questions for Viewing

*International Women’s Workers Day Is the Fighting of the Proletariat*

Look closely at this poster. What do you see?

Take a closer look at the large figure on the left. How would you describe her facial expression? Her pose?

Looking at the photographs on the right side of the poster, what different actions and activities do you see depicted? How do these photographs differ from the hand-drawn figure on the left?

Based on your observations, what do these actions and activities tell us about how women were being encouraged to behave and think about themselves at this moment?

This poster was created in 1931 in the Soviet Union, what is now Russia and a number of other Eastern European and Central Asian countries. The title across the bottom, translated from Russian, is “International Women’s Workers Day Is the Fighting of the Proletariat.” What does this title tell us about the intention of the poster?

Many government-sponsored posters during this time in the Soviet Union were pasted all around cities, on everything from factory walls to telephone poles. Based on that information, who do you think was the target audience for these posters?

Agitprop and other political art is often described as issuing a call to action. What action do you think this poster is trying to call into being?

What do you think is meant by the phrase social change? What are some ways society can change?

What are some of the issues we face day to day in society? Think about the people in your communities (family, neighborhood, school, borough, and city). Are there issues that your communities face as a whole? What are some issues that women might face? That working-class communities might face? How might the issues you face in your community now be different from the issues that might have been faced in that same community 100 years ago?

If you were to change any issue affecting your community, what would it be? What are some ways you could call society into action to change that situation?
**Description**

First performed in 2012, *Walk the Talk* is a biennial parade that includes music, dance, storytelling, and banners with portraits honoring Skid Row (a neighborhood in Los Angeles) community members. At stops along the route, individuals tell their stories in their own words, making connections between poverty and larger social and political structures. The short video documents a few moments from the parade and a glimpse of people viewing LAPD’s mobile exhibition of Skid Row’s history.

**Background**

Skid Row is a small area of Downtown Los Angeles that is the poorest neighborhood in the city and that has one of the highest concentrations of homeless people in the United States.

Founded in 1985 by director-performer-activist John Malpede, Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) is a performance and activist group comprised of people living, working, and making art on Skid Row, Los Angeles. LAPD was the first performance group in the nation made up principally of homeless people. LAPD describes its mission and vision as:

**MISSION:** Los Angeles Poverty Department (LAPD) creates performances and multidisciplinary artworks that connect the experience of people living in poverty to the social forces that shape their lives and communities. LAPD’s works express the realities, hopes, dreams and rights of people who live and work in L.A.’s Skid Row.

**VISION:** LAPD makes artistic work to change the narrative about Skid Row and people living in poverty. In doing so, LAPD aims to create a community of compassion, change individual lives and inspire the next generation of artists.

**Background**

Sahmat, meaning “in agreement” in Hindi, is an arts organization in India, which was formed after the deadly beating of Safdar Hashmi during a political performance in 1989. In response, the collective “has consciously decided to act in, and for the defense of cultural space.” The Sahmat Collective endeavors to create and present performances, curatorial projects, and publications that promote artistic freedom and mutual respect among the diverse communities within India.

*Slogans for Communal Harmony* began in January 1992, when the Sahmat Collective invited auto–rickshaw drivers in Delhi, India, to participate in a competition to create original or select existing poems about brotherhood and communal harmony, and paint the poems on the back of their vehicles, to be judged on content and design. This competition resulted in one of the largest public art projects in India to date. One of the winning poems was “Slogan shouting and politicking cannot give any happiness. This comes from brotherhood, by Ramnivas.” The poems remained visible for years after the competition—not only on the vehicles, but also painted on fences and projected as slides in movie theaters. Sahmat repeated the project with taxis and taxi drivers in Mumbai in March 1992.
Questions for Viewing
*Walk the Talk* and *Slogans for Communal Harmony*

After watching LAPD’s video on *Walk the Talk* (https://vimeo.com/108687883) (2 min.) and Smart Museum of Art’s video on Sahmat’s *Slogans for Communal Harmony* (https://vimeo.com/59551812) (3:34 min.), take a moment to describe the settings for the art interventions:

Where are they? What are the specific place(s) in which the actions are taking place? Who are the people involved?

In what ways are the two settings similar? In what ways are they different? What are the unique contexts of these specific locations?

What medium is each group working in, and why do you think the organizers chose that form for the message they are conveying?

Which social issues are each of the interventions responding to?

The artist group LAPD is intentionally made up principally of residents of Skid Row, the community they are performing in and about. How do you think their involvement in the community has an impact on the work they are making? If they were not from Skid Row, how might the work or its impact change?

How do both of these art interventions differ from art objects?

Have you seen or heard of any protests happening in your communities? How has art been involved in those demonstrations?

Can you think of any examples of art that you encounter in public spaces in your daily life? When you have encountered this art, how does it affect you? How does placing an object like an auto-rickshaw in a museum affect your experience of it?

Women Don’t Get AIDS, They Just Die from It, 1991

Bus shelter sign, ink on acetate
70 x 47 in. (1.8 x 1.2 m)
Public Art Fund, New York and The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles

Description

The large bus poster has a purple background image of Miss America contestants overlaid with large white and yellow text. In large white letters, the text reads “Women Don’t Get AIDS They Just Die from It.” In smaller yellow letters is a paragraph explaining the prevalence of women who are HIV positive and calling into question the Centers for Disease Control’s definition of AIDS.

Background

Gran Fury was a New York–based artists’ collective that came together in 1988 in response to the urgency of the AIDS crisis, which had reached critical levels by the late 1980s. Gran Fury adopted advertising techniques, humor, and a sensational tone aimed at pressuring the general public and politicians to take action. The collective, which grew out of the activist group ACT UP/NY (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, New York), largely launched their graphic campaigns and demonstrations in public spaces where they would reach broad portions of the population.

In 1991, Women Don’t Get AIDS, They Just Die from It was installed in 100 bus shelters in both Spanish and English, confronting New Yorkers and the Centers for Disease Control with a demand for more inclusive AIDS/HIV healthcare.

Flag, announcing lynching, flown from the window of the NAACP headquarters on 69 Fifth Ave., New York City, 1936

Photograph, 13 7/16 x 10 7/16 in. (34.1 x 26.5 cm)

Description

In the center of this black and white photograph, a black flag with white text hangs from a window above a busy avenue framed by tall city buildings. The text on the flag reads “A man was lynched yesterday.” The street is visible behind the flag, with cars and pedestrians below.

Background

It is now believed that as many as 4,000 African Americans were lynched in the United States between 1877 and 1950.8 When the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People)9 was founded in 1909, ending the terrorism of these unprosecuted mob-driven, race-based murders was one of its immediate goals. Over the past century, the NAACP has become the nation’s oldest and largest civil rights organization. Its mission is “to ensure the political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights of all persons and to eliminate race-based discrimination.”

Realizing that ending the horrific practice of lynching would depend on creating sympathy across racial lines, the NAACP made a cultural campaign for hearts and minds an important part of its strategy. From 1920 through 1938, the NAACP used the strong visual symbol of a black flag flying from the windows of its headquarters on Fifth Avenue in New York City to mark whenever a lynching occurred. Through their simultaneous focus on art, popular culture, and thoughtful artistic interventions, alongside direct political activism, the NAACP helped to shift the national consciousness and make lynching rare by the 1950s.
Questions for Viewing

*Women Don't Get AIDS, They Just Die from It and Flag, announcing lynching, flown from the window of the NAACP headquarters on 69 Fifth Ave.*

Take a moment to look closely at these two images. What do you think the political goals are for each project? What are they trying to change?

What mediums are being used by each group? In what ways are they similar? How are they different?

English and Spanish versions of the Gran Fury poster were pasted at bus stops all over New York City in 1991. The NAACP flag was hung at their Fifth Avenue headquarters from 1920 to 1938, whenever a lynching occurred. Why do you think these groups chose to display these objects in these places? Who was their audience?

How does the NAACP flag compare to other flags you might see flying from buildings?

How does the Gran Fury poster compare to other posters you might see at bus stops?

Gran Fury’s intervention occurred in multiple neighborhoods during one year, whereas the NAACP’s intervention occurred in a single location over the course of eighteen years. How do you think these differences affected the impact of each work of art?

Both groups are responding to specific urgent social and political issues. How is that urgency reflected in their art?

Both of these works had text that was very deliberate and meant to agitate—or elicit—responses on an emotional level. How do these words agitate? How do they make you feel? Why?

Follow Up

Conduct research: Were Gran Fury and the NAACP successful in their political goals? How do the issues they raised continue to resonate in recent events or political concerns of our day? How has the public response differed, if at all?
Scaffolding a Lesson for Middle School Students

Each example of agitprop presented here is meant to propagate an idea or message (be mass-circulated), and is meant to agitate its audience, as a direct call to action. This type of art can also depict or recall images or realities that reflect a painful past and present. We encourage you to talk with your students about justice and emotional triggers before starting a conversation with them about the art.

Suggested Discussion Questions

What does justice mean to you? What do you think of when you hear this? What events, movements, or issues come to mind? How would you define injustice?

Many of these artists and collectives are working on specific issues, trying to achieve justice for their communities. Can you think of an issue or event affecting your communities for which you want to see justice achieved?

When we talk about political events or actions, or social conditions, that are unjust, it can trigger strong and often negative emotions or reactions in individuals that may be unpredictable. What does trigger mean to you? Can you think of a time that something you saw or heard triggered a response in you? Ask for examples.

If we talk about a painful event or history, there may be a greater chance of triggering painful emotions. Have you ever heard of a “trigger-warning”? This is sometimes used to indicate to an audience that the material might be traumatic or trigger emotions/reactions. If we are talking about events or social conditions that might trigger us, what are some things that we, as a group, can do to be mindful of each other’s triggers?
Classroom Activities

**Poster Parade**
Identify an issue that interests you. Possible topics include racial profiling, immigration, housing, climate change, gun control, access to health care, or abortion rights. Find at least three resources. For useful links to articles and campaigns, look here http://civilrights.org/issues/. Use the following questions to guide your research:

What conflict is at the center of your social issue? Define the multiple political positions around this issue. What laws or systems are in place in connection with this issue? Who is affected by these laws/systems?

What is your position on this issue? What change would you like to see, both politically and socially? How might this change impact your life? Write a statement summarizing your research and your perspective.

Think about the message you want to share and what visual approach will best motivate others to join your way of thinking, or act alongside you. Create a poster that clearly makes your argument with carefully considered images, text, color, and composition.

Consider some of the ways the artists and activists included in this packet have presented or disseminated their art. What are ways to share your art and its message to motivate others?

**Lyrical Justice**
Think of a social injustice that you feel personally impacted by. For example, you might have experienced street harassment, poor living conditions in your neighborhood, or discrimination based on your age. What are some of the tools you can use to channel or share your feelings about this experience? Write a song or poem responding to that social injustice. Have a classmate illustrate your words.

**Agitprop in Use**
While researching a social movement, find art created during that campaign and create a portfolio presentation to the class. Art can be protest signs, banners, murals, posters, leaflets, performances, songs, or other similar mediums. Create a collection of art created and used during a social movement to agitate. Discuss how you think it was useful, and how it may have had an impact on the political issue.
Additional Resources

Art/Artists Resources

This article is an overview of the early Bolshevik party and women’s role in its mass propaganda.

Los Angeles Poverty Department: http://lapovertydept.org/
The LAPD website includes documentation of additional projects and a history of Skid Row. More about Skid Row: http://documentarystorm.com/skid-row/

This catalogue of the major exhibition at the Smart Museum of Art in 2013 features work from the Sahmat Collective and situates it within the political context of India and contemporary art trends around the world.

Gran Fury: http://digitalcollections.nypl.org/collections/gran-fury-collection
All of their works are considered to be in the public domain, and many can be viewed through the NYPL’s Digital Library.

Unicef Fact Sheet on Girls, HIV/AIDS and Education: http://www.unicef.org/lifeskills/index_8657.html

National Endowment for the Humanities Curriculum Unit on NAACP’s Anti-Lynching Campaign, for grades 9–12

Actipedia: http://actipedia.org/
Actipedia, a joint project of the Center for Artistic Activism (http://artisticactivism.org/) and the Yes Lab (http://yeslab.org/) is a comprehensive, user-generated, user-ranked, and searchable database of creative activist projects.

Social Justice Teaching

Teaching Tolerance: http://www.tolerance.org/
Teaching Tolerance is an extensive online resource and blog for educators that includes classroom activities, professional development, and publications supporting diversity, equity, and justice in the classroom.

Teaching for Change: http://www.teachingforchange.org/
Teaching for Change is an online resource for teachers and parents. It includes lessons for teaching social justice topics, professional development, and publications in support of preparing young people to become active global citizens.

Rethinking Schools: http://www.rethinkingschools.org/
Rethinking Schools is a nonprofit publisher and advocacy organization dedicated to sustaining and strengthening public education through social justice teaching and education activism. They have a range of online, print, and subscription publications aimed at promoting equity and racial justice in the classroom.

Morningside Center: http://www.morningsidecenter.org/
Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility works with educators to help young people develop the values, personal qualities, and skills they need to thrive and contribute to their communities. Their website has an ongoing list of lesson plans and classroom resources related to addressing current events and social and emotional learning.

#FergusonSyllabus is a crowdsourced syllabus about race, African American history, civil rights, and policing that was put together in response to the killing of Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, and surrounding events of 2014.
This packet was written by Lindsay C. Harris, Senior Museum Educator/Astor Teen Programs Coordinator, with assistance from Monica Marino, School Programs Manager, Radiah Harper, Vice Director for Education and Program Development, and the staff of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Saisha Grayson, Assistant Curator; Catherine Morris, Sackler Family Curator; Stephanie Weissberg, Curatorial Assistant; and Jess Wilcox, former Programs Coordinator.

Agitprop! is organized by the staff of the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art: Saisha Grayson, Assistant Curator; Catherine J. Morris, Sackler Family Curator; Stephanie Weissberg, Curatorial Assistant; and Jess Wilcox, former Programs Coordinator.

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Notes

6. Ibid.


Pages 5 (bottom) and 8: SAHMAT [Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust] (founded 1989). Slogans for Communal Harmony (Auto-rickshaw project) (detail), 1992/2013. Rickshaw, steel with vinyl top; documentary photographs and video; rickshaw: 65 1/2 x 50 1/2 x 108 in. (166.4 x 128.3 x 274.3 cm), cover: 30 1/2 x 48 x 60 1/2 in. (77.5 x 114.3 x 153.7 cm). The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago. (Photo: © 2015 courtesy of The David and Alfred Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago)


Мы будем готовы к отражению военного нападения на СССР.

Международный день женщин - это деньוכיםой день пролетариата.
WOMEN DON'T GET AIDS

65% OF HIV POSITIVE WOMEN GET SICK AND DIE FROM CHRONIC INFECTIONS THAT DON'T FIT THE CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL'S DEFINITION OF AIDS. WITHOUT THAT RECOGNITION WOMEN ARE DENIED ACCESS TO WHAT LITTLE HEALTHCARE EXISTS. THE CDC MUST EXPAND THE DEFINITION OF AIDS.

THEY JUST DIE FROM IT

Gran Fury

PHOTO: MICHAEL RAYTOFF AND BLACKSTAR
SPONSORED BY THE PUBLIC ART FUND INC., NEW YORK AND THE MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART, LOS ANGELES