



# WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Using Art to Activate Learning in the Classroom, Part I

Yohana Junker, *Claremont School of Theology*

Blog Series: Re/Kindling Creativity and Imagination

March 02, 2022

Tags: student learning | teaching strategies | teaching with art

It is no secret that the arts are powerful tools that can be used in any classroom to challenge, liberate, expand, complicate, and even heal aspects of our educational practices. The visual arts, in particular, not only allow us to connect in deeper ways with the content and context of our studies but can also function as a portal to what is hidden in our deepest recesses in embodied, striking, and visceral ways. From rage to grief to wonder and joy, the arts help us access emotions and educate our affections while inspiring us to resist, denounce, agitate, connect, conjure, and generate tools for speculative imagination, for integration of embodied and intellectual knowledge for the healing of all our relations.

As a site for world-making, art lends itself to dreaming, rehearsing, and choreographing new possibilities of being and acting in the world. Artists and works are poised with the capacity to enhance our understanding of how historical and cultural amalgamations circulate our bodies, shape our culture, and inform our experiences, while also offering opportunities to assess and integrate multimodal processes of learning.

What follows is a series of suggestions on how to bring the arts into the classroom to activate and enrich multimodal learning.

When I am presenting an artwork within the context of classes in art and religion, I like to begin by providing historical information based on my previous research of the work. I find the

work's curatorial files which, depending on the artist, are broadly available online. Many contemporary artists use their own websites as archives of works, exhibitions, ephemera, press clippings, etc., so be sure to check those as well. Then I consult chapters, articles, catalogues, and reference works which provide context for the creation and reception of that particular artwork.[i] I also provide the artist's full name, the work's title and date, the collection to which it now belongs, how it was acquired, and how the museum or gallery's curatorial practices participate (or don't) in "unlearning and changing the base of colonialism in the concepts of private property, Manifest Destiny,... Eurocentrism, Cartesian dualism, heteropatriarchy, capitalism, positivism, sexism, racism, individualism, extraction, classism, violence, and control," as Wanda Nanibush, the assistant curator of Canadian and Indigenous Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario, puts it. The goal is to deepen and expand the experience of engagement with the works—not so much to define, constrain, or limit the contours of interpretation. In other words, the contextual information we offer on any creative work should not limit the personal connections, emotional reverberations, and embodied experiences that teacher-learners may develop with the work.

Beyond the artist's and work's contexts, I ask teacher-learners to describe in detail what they see and what they understand. For example, if I share a painting, I ask them to describe the color, contours, textures, contrast, movement, proportion, composition, medium, size, dimensions, and how the lines appear in relationship to one another. This step reveals to us how we have been conditioned to take in a lot of images hastily, spending a very short amount of time looking, identifying, and savoring what the works are doing, and how the textures, colors, and rhythms of the composition have been carefully arranged by artists to elicit responses in us. Only after exhausting our capacities for naming what is in front of us, do I ask teacher-learners to progress in the interpretation of "what is" to "what it might mean." We often claim that artworks mean something without carefully tracing for our class participants where these meanings are visually located or where they originated within the work.

The last question I engage with is the "so what?" that Gilda Williams proposes in *How to Write About Contemporary Art*.<sup>[ii]</sup> What are the echoes for the context of our class? How does it invite us to look at our subject and discussions differently? How does it open up a space for the poetic to guide and allow us to access our deepest, sometimes hidden, recesses? Works of art are powerful in connecting us to our emotions, in helping us understand what it means to be human, to be whole, to be here. As theological educators who are laying out the blueprints for sacred, embodied, planetary change, we must remember to have the arts in our toolboxes. The arts are never far away from what matters most in life. Artistic productions participate in decolonial efforts—are capable of doing what Macarena Gómez-Barris names as "the erosion of the extractive gaze" while "affirming the diversity that resides within the matrix of coloniality."<sup>[iii]</sup> As antidotes to Empire, visual arts are sites of subversion that promote imagining and shaping into being other emergent worlds. They also require from us, as Indigenous Brazilian thinker Ailton Krenak puts it, an acknowledgement that we are co-responsible for maintaining our capacity and responsibility to keep the dreams of our ancestors alive.<sup>[iv]</sup> As apertures into worlds of the not yet, artworks also welcome wonder, openness, diversity, reciprocity. Allowing a careful looking, engaging, and sensing what the works are

activating emotionally, intellectually, and spiritually in us is generative way to amplify learning in our classrooms.

Part II of this series will provide practical examples of engagement with artworks. Available April 27, 2022.

[i] A helpful resource for helping in the design of the experience with works of art is *Teaching at the Museum: Interpretation as Experience* by Rikak Burnham and Elliott Kai-Kee, published by the J. Paul Getty Museum in 2014.

[ii] Gilda Williams, *How to Write About Contemporary Art* (New York, NY: Thames & Hudson, 2014).

[iii] Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 133.

[iv] Ailton Krenak, *Ideias pra Adiar o fim do Mundo* (São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2019), 47.

<https://www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/2022/03/using-art-to-activate-learning-in-the-classroom-part-i/>