

## Object[ed]

### *Where is the Art?*

#### Personal Found Object Sculptures

Grades 9-12



#### **Summary**

This lesson outlines an interactive approach to exploring theoretical questions posed by found object sculpture. Students learn about found objects by selecting meaningful objects from their lives and presenting them to the class as representations of their experiences. Following the presentations, students discuss the relationship between art objects and the language we use to describe them, forming their own interpretation of the idea of “objecthood.”

## Curriculum Ties

Fine Arts: L1-3.V.P, L1-3.V.R

## Time Frame

90 minutes

## Materials

Objects that students find and bring from home

## Intended Learning Outcomes

1. Students understand the meaning of a “found object” in art.
2. Students explore possibilities for found objects as representations of ideas.
3. Students develop an understanding of the relationship between language and art.

## Resources

Belin- and Amsterdam-based artist Olga Balema creates sculptural works that are “at once abstract and representational.”<sup>1</sup> Her sculptures relate to the human body and its functions in literal and conceptual ways. Balema sometimes casts familiar objects, such as gloves, while at other times suggesting skins and skeletons through compositions of metal, plastic and liquid. While these sculptures evoke empathy in the viewer, they also complicate notions of object and subject. She says, “I am interested in how other things can become part of our bodies/selves through being ingested.”<sup>2</sup> Balema’s artworks ask: what does it mean to be human, versus what it means to be an object or sculpture?

An artwork in UMOCA’s *Object[ed]* exhibition, Balema’s installation, *Series of Painted Troughs*, is made up of six feeding troughs layered in bright green and yellow paint.<sup>3</sup> Oddly anthropomorphic and individual, the objects are leaned against the walls and placed on the floor, extending from a corner of the gallery in a loosely designated rectangle. The troughs recall systems of food production and consumption, and yet are themselves empty, reflecting ambiguous but hollow processes of ingestion and assimilation.



*Series of Painted Troughs*

View *Object[ed]*: [www.utahmoca.org/porfolio/objected](http://www.utahmoca.org/porfolio/objected)

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/artist/olga-balema>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-olga-balema-s-new-work-cannibalizes-her-old-at-liste>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.utahmoca.org/portfolio/objected>

### **Students Should Understand the Following Vocabulary**

*Sculpture* - A 3D artwork. Traditional sculptural materials include stone, clay, metal and wood. However, contemporary sculptures are made from found materials, paper, fabric and much more.

*Found Object* - A non-art object that is scavenged or bought by an artist to be presented in an art context. Found objects can be treated as works of art in themselves, or simply serve as inspiration for a larger piece. Artists often modify found objects by physically altering them or placing them in new contexts. Marcel Duchamp is arguably most famous for his 'readymade' (or ordinary, manufactured object) entitled *Fountain*, a urinal placed on its side and signed by the artist. Found object sculptures challenge viewers' ideas of what can be called 'art,' but they also provide contemporary artists access to interesting modes of representation through which to explore contemporary life.

## Instructional Procedures

As homework, students should find at home an object that contains special significance to them, and then prepare a two-to-three minute presentation for the class that contextualizes the object in terms of their lived experience. In other words, their object will represent themselves as the subject of the artwork. For added structure, teachers can select a theme for the objects that is familiar to your students. Broad themes could include memory, humor, or identity, while more specific themes could include items of clothing or objects found outside.

At the beginning of class, discuss the idea of found object sculpture with your students. *Is an object different from a sculpture? What makes a non-art object into an art object? What is the role of the artist in selecting and contextualizing these objects? Why might an artist choose to use a non-art object to make an artwork?*

Before students share their presentations, have them carefully place their objects in the room as if displaying a valuable sculpture, such as on an uncluttered shelf or spaced out on a central table. After each student takes a turn verbally presenting the idea behind their chosen object, guide a discussion that examines the relationship between the objects and their verbal descriptions. *Has our understanding of these objects changed since learning about their significance to the artist? What was added to our understanding? How do the object and its conceptual meaning relate to one another? Without using language to describe it, is the object an artwork? Without the object to visually represent the idea, is the concept an artwork?* Not all of these questions have right-or-wrong answers.

Considering the given definition of the term in this lesson, found objects were first used in Western art in the 1900s. In addition to challenging the idea of what could be called art, these first found object sculptures more importantly mark a moment when artists began to place more importance on concept than the use of material. In this way, art became more about the presentation of an idea rather than craftsmanship. In some ways, found objects rely on the context in which they are presented and the language with which they are described in order to justify them as art, while traditional art objects that are developed through an artist's manipulation of material maintain an ingrained sense of the artwork as an object.

For homework, students should choose one of the following questions to inspire a short reflection essay, based on the class discussion:

- *What makes a found object "art"?*
- *What is "objecthood"? Can some objects have more or less "objecthood" than others?*
- *How does the presentation of an artwork influence its meaning? In what ways can an artist change the meaning of an object by manipulating it?*
- *How do artists translate personal meaning behind an object into meaning that is relatable and understood by the viewer?*
- *How can the ideas of contextualizing a found object to find meaning be applied to other forms of art-making?*