



EduTrend Contents

P4C · AESTHETICS AND ART · HIGH SCHOOL

What Is Art?

Testing theories of art from Tolstoy to Duchamp

Ages 15–18

Level: Advanced

60 minutes

Circle and pairs · up to
30

Activity 05

Inside: activity at a glance · step-by-step session plan · facilitator notes · 3 student worksheets · assessment checklist

ACTIVITY 05 · AT A GLANCE

What Is Art?

Students compare three theories. Imitation theory says art copies reality. Leo Tolstoy argued in *What Is Art?* (1897) that art passes feelings from the artist to the audience. The institutional theory, developed by George Dickie, says art is what the art world presents as art. Students test these with hard cases, such as Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), a shop-bought urinal signed and submitted for an exhibition, and enquire into whether art can be defined.

Learning outcomes

By the end of the session students can:

- explain three theories of art;
- apply them to hard cases;
- evaluate definitions;
- construct a reasoned position.

KEY WORDS

imitation · expression · institution · Tolstoy · Duchamp · definition

CURRICULUM LINKS

Philosophy: aesthetics. Art history: modern art. English: argument writing.

1

STIMULUS

Share something to think about

2

THINK

Quiet thinking time

3

QUESTION

Create and choose a question

4

ENQUIRE

Reason together

5

BUILD

Agree, disagree, add

6

REFLECT

Last words

Materials (per class)

- Theory cards
- Hard case cards
- Question and thinking-move cards
- Worksheets 1, 2 and 3

Before the session

- Read the stimulus and note possible concepts.
- Prepare question and thinking-move cards.
- Set out a circle so everyone can see each other.
- Print the worksheets.

SAFETY

Everyone may pass. Discuss ideas, not people, and use the story or invented examples rather than personal situations.

ACTIVITY 05 · SESSION PLAN

Step by step

Stay neutral: ask for reasons, examples and counter-examples rather than giving your own view.

Time	What happens	Say or ask
0–10 min Stimulus	Present the three theories and the hard case cards.	<i>"What did you notice?"</i>
10–22 min Questions	Students create questions in pairs and vote on one.	<i>"Which question is most interesting to talk about?"</i>
22–52 min Enquiry	Enquire into the chosen question, building on each other's ideas.	<i>"What is art?"</i>
52–60 min Last words	Each person says one last thought or passes.	<i>"Has your thinking changed?"</i>

CHALLENGE CARD (print or copy onto the board)

Defend a theory of art against a hard case.

ACTIVITY 05 · FACILITATOR NOTES

The philosophy in brief

Duchamp's Fountain challenged the idea that art must be made by hand or be beautiful.

Some philosophers argue that art cannot be defined by one feature, linking to Wittgenstein's idea of family resemblance.

Common ideas to listen for

- "Modern art is just a joke." Many works make serious points.
- "Tolstoy meant any emotion is art." He described the passing of feeling.
- "The institutional theory means anything goes." It still needs an art world.

Adapting the activity

Support

Test one theory.

Stretch

Propose your own definition and test it.

WORKSHEET 1

Our questions

Name: _____

Class: _____ Date: _____

Write questions the stimulus makes you wonder about.

Our questions

Question	Who asked	Votes

WORKSHEET 2

Test the theories

Apply.

Test the theories

Case	Imitation	Expression	Institutional

WORKSHEET 3

Last words

Before and after.

**Can anything be art if the art world says so? Before the enquiry I thought...
Now I think... because...**

FOR THE TEACHER

Assessment checklist

Use during the session. One sheet covers up to eight students; copy as needed.

Student	Asks a philosophical question	Gives reasons and examples	Listens and builds on others

Suggested codes: W = working towards · E = expected · G = greater depth

ABOUT THIS ACTIVITY

What Is Art? is a sample activity from the EduTrend Contents P4C Aesthetics and Art programme (high school, level: advanced). Every activity in the programme follows the same format: a practical challenge, a clear session plan, facilitator notes and ready-to-print worksheets, so that teachers, club leaders and parents can run it without extra preparation.

Full 15-, 20- and 32-week programmes are available from EduStore at edutrend.org.

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