

Ahimsa Center K-12 Teacher Institute Lesson

Title: *The Collective Garden: For the Good of All*

Lesson By: *Eusebio Travis Sevilla, High Tech High North County, San Marcos CA*

Grade Level/ Subject Areas: *9th – 12th Grade Art and Advisory/Homeroom*

Duration of Lesson: *Approximately 2 weeks to execute with indefinite end date.*

Content Standards:

State of California Standards for Visual and Performing Arts.

5.0 CONNECTIONS, RELATIONSHIPS, APPLICATIONS

5.2 Create a work of art that communicates a cross-cultural or universal theme taken from literature or history.

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

3.2 Identify contemporary artists worldwide who have achieved regional, national, or international recognition and discuss ways in which their work reflects, plays a role in, and influences present-day culture.

Lesson Abstract:

Looking at the work of Hans Haacke, students will look into theories of nonviolence and social justice from the practices of Gandhi and Cesar Chavez. Students will create a representational art exhibition (garden) that addresses the population of their school, community, and society as a whole in the guise of “Der Bevölkerung” (For the Population) an installation at the Reichstag in Germany.

Guiding Questions:

How is art a form of nonviolent action? How is Hans Haacke’s work a critique of social norms and social justice in Germany? How is Haacke’s work a form of nonviolent action vis a vis Gandhi and Chavez? And can we find similarities in today’s contemporary American landscape?

Content Essay:

A Collective Garden: For the Good of All People: Art and Social Justice

Introduction

For this particular lesson, I envision a long-term commitment from the students. But, more specifically, I envision a long-term commitment from not only the teacher of this lesson, but also the community within which the final product will remain.

One of the main teachings of Gandhi and likewise Cesar Chavez was the notion of a social justice for everyone; all work, production, and life would be in service of, and recognize the greater good in, what Gandhi called Sarvodaya (welfare of all). This is not to say that either of these icons of nonviolence and social justice were against wealth for the individual (Communism), nor were they in favor of capital at all costs to humanity

and the environment (Capitalism). Rather, Gandhi and Cesar Chavez looked at society and society's worst off individuals and started to create alternative ideas of how these people, all people, could have some agency and determination of their well being.

With this lesson, I would like to look at the notion of Sarvodaya and how it pertains to Gandhi and Cesar Chavez while simultaneously looking at the artwork of Hans Haacke, specifically his work at the Reichstag in Germany entitled "Der Bevölkerung".

Der Bevölkerung

Der Bevölkerung¹ or "for the population" is a site-specific art work located in the atrium of the German Reichstag building by the artist Hans Haacke².



Figure 1 "For the German People" vs. "For the Population"

Haacke is a preeminent artist working in the field of institutional critique, a field that seeks to shed light on the institutions in contemporary society, their effects on culture, and how history works within the larger context of both institutions and culture. The artist working in institutional critique uses an aesthetic or experiential means by which to raise questions and open public discourse on the institution or society in question. The work *Der Bevölkerung* is a strong example of a nonviolent, cooperative, and encompassing gesture that can serve to draw attention to racism ingrained within the German Culture. In his article "Volk as Myth", Johan Ahr gets at the impetus behind *Der Bevölkerung*.

To cheers and jeers, *Der Bevölkerung* ('To the Population') was inaugurated On 12 September 2000. What caused controversy – apart from Haacke himself, By reputation a contrarian – is its thesis that racism in Germany remains a huge,

¹ *Der Bevölkerung* is a large planter box garden in which soil from all the regions of Germany was brought. Each representative of government was required to bring soil from the region they represent in order to create the work. And the title itself is in response to the inscription on the Reichstag, which translates to "For the German People".

² For a lesson on Haacke's work, the instructor should perhaps prepare a small slideshow of Haacke's work and prepare questions for thought about the practice of institutional critique.

ugly social and political problem. Plenty of Germans, he posits and regrets, still think of themselves as a distinct and superior people. The garden is a corrective to this delusion. (Ahr 53-54)

Institutional Critique, Gandhi, and Chavez

In reading Gandhi and Cesar Chavez among others, something that resonates as a continuous thread in their work is the seeking of truth in order to achieve freedom from oppression and injustice, both individual and institutional. Art itself is a type of truth seeking and as such the practices of artists are important to note in speaking of Hind Swaraj and institutional critique for that matter. Gandhi himself is attributed the status of artist by many as this quote shows,

Nandalal Bose, an artist of Santiniketan, perfectly expressed the key of inspiration of the artists from the life of Mahatma Gandhi. He wrote: "Mahatmaji may not be an artist in the same sense that we professional artists are, nevertheless I cannot but consider him to be a true artist. All his life he has spent in creating his own personality and in fashioning others after his high ideals. His mission is to make Gods out of men of clay. I am sure his ideal will inspire the artists of the world. (Bandyopadhyay)

In Gandhi's Hind Swaraj, it is modernity itself and its institutions that Gandhi feels are the root cause of India's problems, as well as the problems in the larger world. Gandhi wrote extensively on how modernization and contemporary culture were causing the disconnectedness of people from their beings, that industrialization was causing the oppression and alienation of entire classes of people. Gandhi spoke specifically to this in Hind Swaraj when he addressed the institutions of Law and Medicine. With regard to medicine and doctors, Gandhi posited the argument that, in essence, doctors are by default supporting the ills of society because, according to Gandhi, the doctors treat the symptoms but not the disease. He sums this up in Hind Swaraj:

Let us consider: the business of a doctor is to take care of the body, or, properly speaking, not even that. Their business is really to rid the body of diseases that may afflict it. How do these diseases arise? Surely by our negligence or indulgence. I overeat, I have indigestion, I go to a doctor, he gives me medicine, I am cured, I over-eat again, and I take his pills again. Had I not taken the pills in the first instance, I would have suffered the punishment deserved by me, and I would not have over-eaten again. (Parel 61)

It is in this quote and others like it in Hind Swaraj whereby Gandhi made his points about civilization and the institutions that make it up. Similarly, Cesar Chavez looked at the power dynamic and corruption within the institutions of agriculture and organized what would become the United Farm Workers to address and bring to light the failings of modern agricultural practices, capitalism, and the larger themes of social justice to the public discourse.

Born in Yuma, Arizona, the son of Mexican immigrants, Cesar Chavez has become an icon of nonviolent action, and community organizing. Chavez was instrumental in bringing to the national discourse the plight of migrant workers not only

in California, but also throughout the United States. Armed with an 8th grade education and a seemingly unquenchable thirst for knowledge, Chavez managed to organize multiple races of farmworkers and unite them in protest against unfair working conditions. Within the framework of institutional critique, it is important to look at Chavez as someone who was astute at critically engaging his world, a person who could look at institutions and attempt to treat the disease not the symptom.

Moreover, Chavez and Gandhi, (Bandyopadhyay) managed to engage in this dialogue and direct action in a nonviolent way. While Gandhi himself was not a proponent of coercion, Chavez used benevolent coercion at times as a tool to bring about the ends his movement or “La Causa” were seeking. An interesting example of this is Chavez’s “Good Friday Letter”. The letter, written to E. L. Barr Jr., the President of the California Grape and Tree Fruit League, was a way to air grievances while at the same time appealing to the good in humanity, all the while making clear the deadly seriousness in the movement. Chavez began the letter redressing the growers’ use of violence in breaking strikes and then moves into the coercive part of the argument. Chavez says the following,

“If for any reason you fail to come forth to substantiate your charges then you must be held responsible for committing violence against us, albeit violence of tongue.” (Chavez) He then follows with an appeal to Barr’s humanity by stating, “I am convinced that you as a human being did not mean what you said but rather acted hastily under pressure from the public relations firm that has been hired to try to counteract the tremendous moral force of our movement.” (Chavez)

In looking at Haacke’s work at the Reichstag we see a similar tendency to gently coerce the heads of state to agree to take part in his project, as well. “In a letter of 3 July 2000 the artist asked each and every MP to help prepare the garden; he invited them to collect two hefty bags of soil (or similar organic material) from their respective home constituencies. Literally raising *Der Bevölkerung*, over the years some 275 MPs have contributed to the project. ‘I neither can nor wish to force anyone to participate’.” (Ahr 56)



Figure 2 Wolfgang Thierse, and Hans Haacke planting soil in 2000

Additionally, the longitudinal approach to the project itself, the fact that it is a permanent installation, it is alive, that it changes, and grows are all aspects similar to the types of institutional change Gandhi and Chavez were seeking. It is important to note and to emphasize the importance of artistic production in any political and historical movement. The importance of art in relationship to Gandhi and the production of art for the Indian National Movement is described as such,

These artists felt that it was a kind of service to “Swadeshi” and national movement. On the other hand, some of the national leaders, such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, also took help from traditional Indian art as an expression of patriotism. To some extent, these national leaders also understood the growing popularity and sincerity of these artists. Not only Indian artists but also some international artists worked in this respect and conveyed their faithfulness to and regard for the Indian National Movement.
(Bandyopadhyay)

Much like Gandhi’s Hind Swaraj, and Cesar Chavez’s organizing and campaigns, artists like Hans Haacke work to shed light on the truth and reality of

institutions that affect us on a daily basis, and do so in a thoughtful, active, and nonviolent way.

Bibliography

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Chavez, Cesar. US.History.Wisconsin. 2011 4-August
<http://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/pdocs/chavez_delano.pdf>.

Gandhi, Mohandas K. "Excerpt from "Ahimsa In Practice"." Gandhi, Mohandas K. Ahimsa in Practice. Harijan, 1940.

Iyer, Raghavan. "Truth and Nonviolence." Hermes (1988): 8.

Orosco, Jose-Antonio. Cesar Chavez and the Common Sense of Nonviolence. University of New Mexico Press, 2008.

Parel, Anthony J. Gandhi: Hind Swaraj and Other Writings. Ed. Anthony J. Parel. Centenary. Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Sethia, Tara. Gandhi: Pioneer of Nonviolent Social Change. New York: Pearson Education, 2011

US.History.Wisconsinhttp://us.history.wisc.edu/hist102/pdocs/chavez_delano.pdf

Teaching Activities/ Materials Needed:

- Introductory slide show, power point, or the like. Include not only the images and information on Gandhi, but also on contemporary artists working in the field of institutional critique. Google and Bing image searches will yield good results. Or, check to see if your school has a Jstor membership for photos etc.
- Permission from school for permanent installation location
- Hardware, Lumber, Tools, Etc.
- KWL (Know, Want to Know, and Learned) exercise day one. In small groups have students construct a sheet of paper with three columns with labels K, W, L. Have prepared a projection or PowerPoint that has images of Gandhi, quotes, important information etc. Use the first 10 minutes to have the students in their groups writing down everything they know in the column K, and everything they want to know in the W column, followed by what they are learning from their peers in column L.

- Guided research questions for small groups of students. It will be important to allow the students time to learn, research, and reflect on the teachings of Gandhi and Chavez
- Create and build installation over the course of the week and follow up by having students bring soil/organic matter from their homes, communities, etc.
- Develop maintenance standards for the work once it is installed.
- Organize a public opening or annual event around installation to keep community engagement.

Additional Resources:

<http://mitpress.mit.edu/catalog/item/default.asp?ttype=2&tid=11854>

http://www.image-identity.eu/artists_images_folder/germany/hans-haacke