

Art & Activities / Brillo: But Is It Art? Taste & Bias Activity



Overview:

This lesson is a good icebreaker and introduction to critical response. Students think about a sometimes-difficult and controversial work of art like Andy Warhol's Brillo Box, in order to determine their own judgments about what constitutes good art. Students use higher level thinking skills to differentiate between tastes and biases and to listen to diverse ideas even if they personally do not like a work of art in question.

Grades 6 to 12

Subjects: Art, Aesthetics, Philosophy, Psychology, Cultural Studies

Pennsylvania State Standards:

Arts and Humanities:

9.3.8 D Evaluate works in the arts and humanities using a complex vocabulary of critical response.

Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening:

1.6.11 D Contribute to discussions.

Objectives:

- Students will create brainstorming webs
- Students will list personal tastes and biases
- Students will compare and contrast personal tastes and biases
- Students will classify data
- Students will examine cause and effect
- Students will form aesthetic responses to artworks

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Andy Warhol, Brillo Soap Pads Box, 1964
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh; Founding Collection, Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.
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About the Art:

In the mid-1960s Warhol carried his consumer-product imagery into the realm of sculpture. Calling to mind a factory assembly line, Warhol employed carpenters to construct numerous plywood boxes identical in size and shape to super-market cartons. Then, with assistance from Gerard Malanga and Billy Linich, he painted and silkscreened the boxes with logos of the different consumer products: Kellogg's corn flakes, Brillo soap pads, Mott's apple juice, Del Monte peaches, and Heinz ketchup. The finished sculptures were virtually indistinguishable from their cardboard supermarket counter-parts. Warhol first exhibited these at the Stable Gallery in 1964, cramming the space with piled-high boxes that recalled a cramped grocery warehouse. He invited collectors to buy them by the stack, and though they did not sell well, the boxes caused much controversy. In reference to his boxes, Warhol later said that he "wanted something ordinary," and it was this mundane, commercial subject matter that infuriated the critics. The perfectly blank, "machine-made" look of Warhol's boxes contrasted sharply with the gestural brushstrokes of Abstract Expressionist paintings.

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Points of View:

“[The boxes] were very difficult to sell. He thought that everyone was going to buy them on sight, he really and truly did. We all had visions of people walking down Madison Avenue with these boxes under their arms, but we never saw them.”

Eleanor Ward, art dealer: Stable Gallery, in Warhol
by David Bourdon, Harry N. Abrams, Inc. (New York,
1995) p.186.

We were having a fairly heady discussion about art, religion, and culture by the time we climbed onto the fifth floor and breathlessly approached the Brillo Boxes. There my thoughts wandered from connections between religious icons and pop culture to a small closet in my kitchen where I have a similar box, crumpled and rusty, stuffed between the Windex and the Comet cleanser.

In all my years of scrubbing with sponges, mops, steel wool, I have rarely stopped to notice the packaging. I just ripped the boxes open and started my work. But these elevated Brillo Boxes show me that we are surrounded by art. It lines the aisles of our supermarkets. It decorates our homes. It festoons our trash bins: pungent red, flashing yellow, telltale white.

My pantry is now a gallery and my chores interactive art.

Reverend Gail Ransom, East-Liberty Presbyterian Church
quoted for The Point of View Label Project,
The Andy Warhol Museum, 1999.

“A few days after the move to our [Gerard Malanga and Andy Warhol] workspace, January 28th, a truckload of wood boxes arrived, individually wrapped and taped in clear plastic sheeting. And so would begin the arduous task of taping the floor with rolls of brown paper and setting out each box in a grid like pattern of eight rows lengthwise... Billy Name and I would take turns painting with Liquitex all six sides of each box - which numbered nearly 80 - the Campbell's tomato juice for starters, by turning each box around on its side. We waited until the paint dried. Andy and I repeated this process silkscreening all five sides again down the line. The sixth side - the bottom side - remained blank... Completing the work took nearly six weeks, from early February well into mid-April.”

Gerard Malanga, Warhol's studio assistant. Archiving
Warhol: Writings and Photographs by Gerard Malanga, 2002
(GMW147-8)

Discussion Questions:

1. Would you buy this artwork? Why or why not?
2. What does it remind you of?
3. Is the association pleasant or important; is it unpleasant or banal?

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Identifying Art Tastes and Biases: Word Web

Materials:

Pencils
Taste and Bias Activity Handout (page 7 of this PDF)
Reproductions of Heinz Box

Introduction and Set Up:

Before class prepare reproductions of Warhol's Heinz Box to hand out to students or enlarge one to hang in the front of the class.



Project Procedure:

Review with students the following vocabulary:

Critic n. One who forms and expresses judgments of the merits, faults, value, or truth of a matter.

Opinion n. 1. A belief or conclusion held with confidence but not substantiated by positive knowledge or proof: "The world is not run by thought, nor by imagination, but by opinion." (Elizabeth Drew) 2. A judgment based on special knowledge and given by an expert: a medical opinion.

Bias n. a. A preference or an inclination, especially one that inhibits impartial judgment. b. An unfair act or policy stemming from prejudice.

Taste n. A personal preference or liking.

Discuss:

What do critics do in popular culture?

What is the difference between an informed and uninformed opinion?

How are taste and bias different?

How do we judge something to be good or bad?

Pass out paper and pencils. Have students create a web, writing out all of the things they know or think about the Heinz Box, their likes/dislikes, & their assumptions.

Help students explain their answers more fully when they are unclear. (See the bubbles on attached example for questions that teachers might ask students.)

After the discussion, instruct students to identify which phrases on their webs are tastes and which are biases. Separate these into a taste list and a bias list.

Extension: This exercise can be repeated with a piece of music. Students create webs and then musical taste and bias lists.

Assessment and Wrap-up:

As a class, discuss when we are critics in our everyday life and how we make critical judgments about things, such as music, fashion, and movies. In their journals, students should discuss the following:

- The similarities between personal tastes and biases.
- How tastes and biases, as well as informed and uninformed opinions, might affect a critic's response.
- How they distinguish between good and bad art.



Andy Warhol, Brillo Soap Pads Box, 1964
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Andy Warhol, Installation of Boxes at The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh
The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh Founding Collection.
Contribution The Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts, Inc.
Pop Gallery installation at The Andy Warhol Museum, Pittsburgh, 1994, photo by Paul Rocheleau

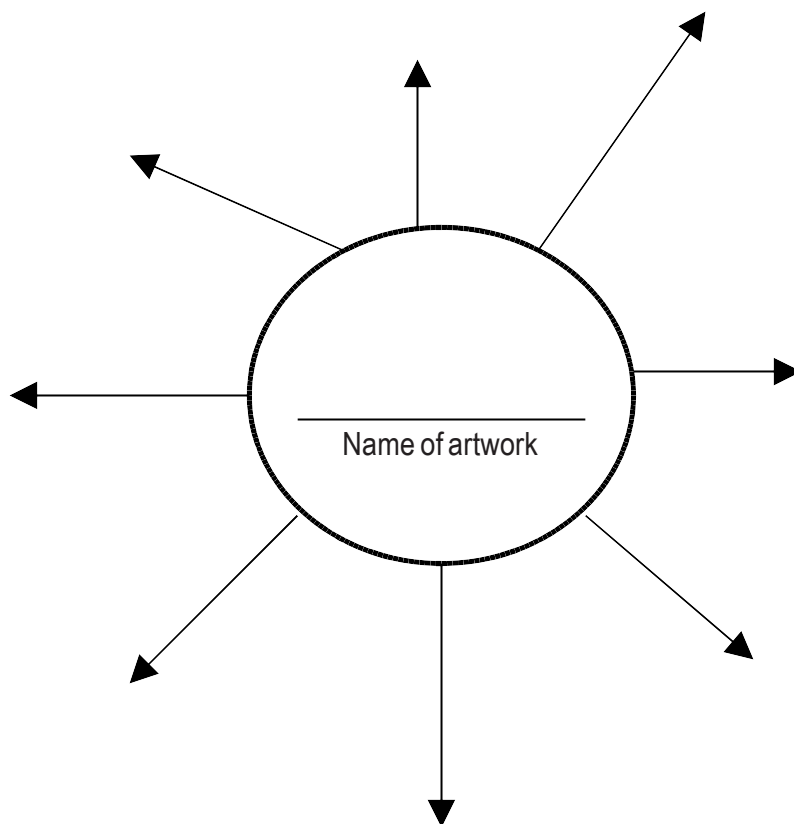
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Tastes & Biases Web

Fill in the name of the artwork you are viewing. At each arrow point on this chart record any thoughts, feelings and associations that come to mind as you look at the artwork. Draw more arrows if needed.

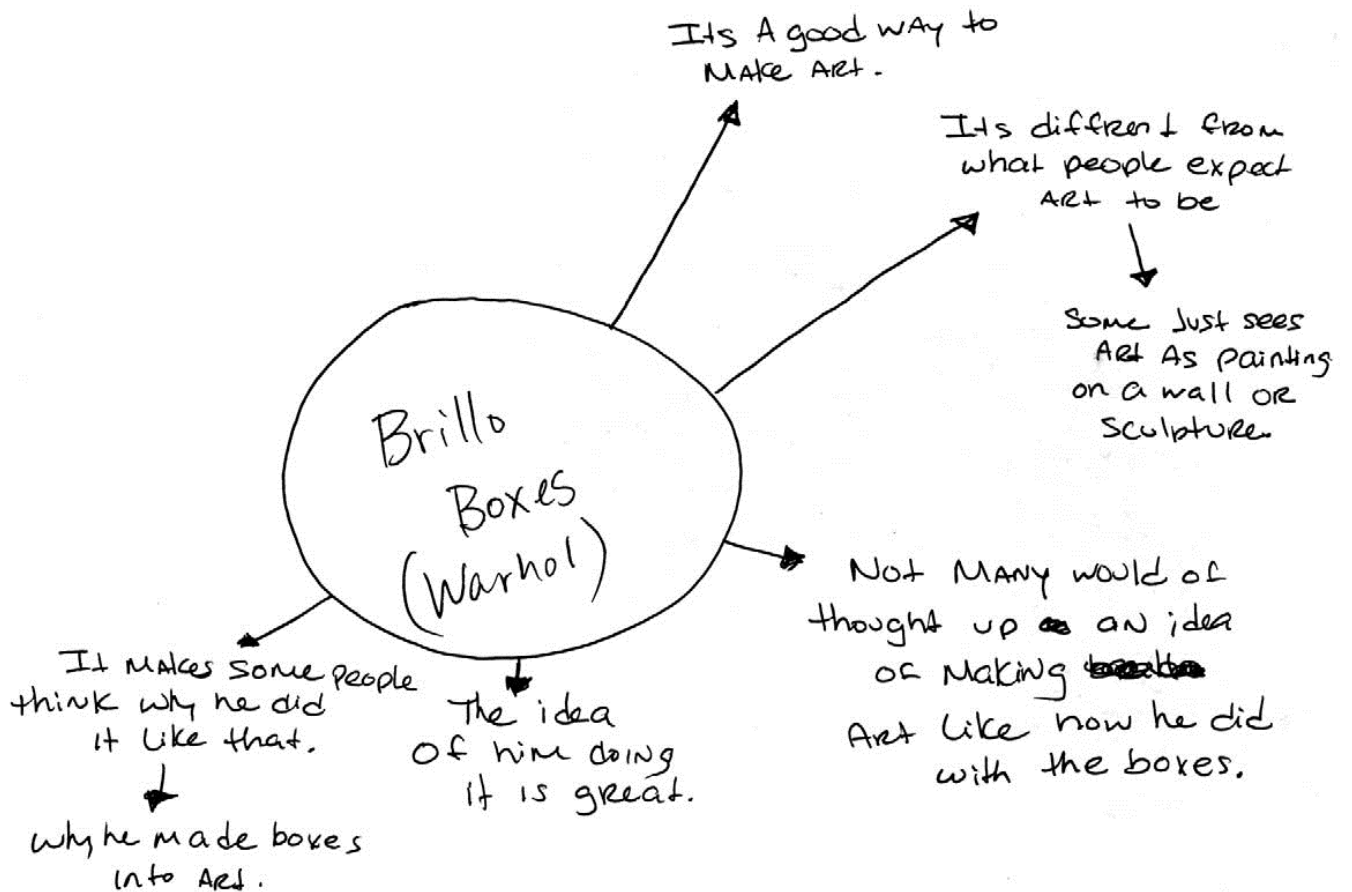


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Student Example

Teacher asks:

- Explain what is good about Andy Warhol's process.
- Would you use the same process? Why or why not?



Michael's Art Taste and Bias List:

1. I am okay with abstract art.
2. I like realistic art for myself.
3. I like how artists are using different ways of making art.
4. I like art that is not expected; the idea is new. Not just traditional painting and sculpture.
5. Color affects the way you see art and the way it is drawn.

In Michael's art list, he pretty clearly states what he likes, but he does not explain fully what his dislikes. Encourage your students to describe their opinions, both positive and negative, about the art in this exercise.