

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Story Theme: Fame
Subject: Chris Johanson
Discipline: Visual Arts

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Two fellow artist friends help Chris Johanson on his installation at Deitch Projects in New York City. Still image from SPARK story, January 2003.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

EPISODE THEME

Fame

SUBJECT

Chris Johanson

GRADE RANGES

K-12 & Post-secondary

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts & Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

To introduce viewers to the work of Chris Johanson, a Mission District-based visual artist who has recently gained international art world fame.

STORY SYNOPSIS

Mission-based visual artist Chris Johanson dodges the spotlight while his colorful, kinetic installations attract audiences around the world. Johanson was jettisoned to international art-stardom when his site-specific installation was included in the 2002 Whitney Biennial and his work became in high demand. Having received a 2002 SECA award for emerging artists from the SF Museum of Modern Art, SPARK explores the impact this good fortune and its accompanying fame on the artists' gritty, street-based works.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES

Group oral discussion, review and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing
Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance
Hands-on individual projects in which students work independently
Hands-on group projects in which students assist and support one another
Critical reflection on personal expressions and how they are seen and received by others

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES

To help students...

- Understand the development of personal works of art and their relationship to broader social themes and ideas, concepts, and art history.
- Learn basic drawing and/or painting skills.
- Expand visual, written, listening and speaking skills through looking at, creating and talking about visual artworks.
- Develop an expressive visual vocabulary with which to address personal and/or social themes and ideas.
- Acquire observational and representational skills by looking at and reproducing images of people, places and things accurately and thoughtfully.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

TV and copy of SPARK story "The Messenger" on Chris Johanson on VHS or DVD (available at <http://www.kqed.org/spark>)
Computer with Internet access

MATERIALS NEEDED

Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
Pencils, pens, and paper
Samples of visual artworks

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED

Linguistic - syntax, phonology, semantics, pragmatics
Interpersonal - awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
Intrapersonal - awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations
Visual-Spatial - the ability to manipulate and create mental images to solve problems



For more information on [Multiple Intelligences](http://www.kqed.org/spark/education) visit www.kqed.org/spark/education.

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

Chris Johanson is a visual artist based in San Francisco's Mission district who makes paintings and installations that combine images with personal written commentary. His candid depictions of people, places, and objects are painted from observation, and as such, they represent the dominant issues of the varied social and economic realities of life in urban San Francisco. In recent years, Johanson's work has received a great deal of acclaim from the art establishment, culminating in his invitation to participate in the 2002 Whitney Biennial. For Johanson, fame is not entirely desirable, as his work moves away from the context in which it was produced and into the center of the professional art world. The Spark story "Chris Johanson: The Messenger" follows Johanson to New York's trendy Soho district for the installation and opening of his recent exhibit at Deitch Projects.

Johanson creates social documents of his world, including street life, homeless people, professionals commuting to work, street performers and the operations of local commerce, as well as his own thoughts about our contemporary culture. Johanson's works address social themes by virtue of the fact that in selecting moments and issues around which to create his imagery and artwork, Johanson highlights common everyday experiences, making them exceptional. In being raised in our vision, they become more meaningful and significant in the larger culture in which we live as responses and documents of our shared experiences.

Since the Whitney Biennial, Johanson has been offered a seemingly endless string of exhibitions, and as a result his schedule has become nothing short of grueling. He has traveled nationally and internationally to install exhibitions of his work, showing all over the United States and Canada and in places as far as Vienna, Rotterdam, and Tel Aviv.

Though Johanson is thankful for his invitation to the Whitney Biennial, which is one of the greatest honors that the New York art world can bestow upon a young and upcoming artist, he is also very aware of the cost of his fame. A private, community-based person, Johanson is uncomfortable with members of the art establishment who have no primary connection with his work courting his favor for financial gain.



Chris Johanson at work on a painting in his Mission District studio in San Francisco.
Still image from SPARK story, January 2004.

Johanson's show at Deitch Projects is apparently about this very phenomenon. Comprised of both paintings and sculptural pieces, the show's centerpiece is a large installation filling an entire gallery room. The piece, a brightly colored, mechanized diorama is Johanson's attempt to bring one of his paintings into three-dimensions. On a large wooden grey base, Johanson has constructed a colonial ship that runs in circles, chasing a bag of money. In the background is a bright, whimsical swirl of candy-colored painted planks, that upon closer inspection is revealed to be an alteration of a swastika. The work, which Johanson believes to be about the abuses of capitalism, is typical of his oeuvre, which deals with often very troubling subject matter in a manner that on the surface appears light and playful.

CONTENT OVERVIEW (continued)

For Johanson, though, even a successful solo show in the central city of the art world remains a community based project. To help with the installation of his work, Johanson has invited with him a group of friends and fellow Mission-based artists. For Johanson, this is the real benefit of fame – the ability to expand his community and take its hopes, dreams, and messages along with him.

THE BIG PICTURE

Chris Johanson's art can be fitted loosely into the Western European art tradition of Social Realism, a term that describes both a specific stylistic approach and an overall attitude toward its subject. Social Realist artists seek to represent social issues and/or ideas in a reasonably realistic and/or recognizable way. The artists often focus on a specific social problems and/or hardships, representing people, places, and situations in a manner that resembles how they actually appear. As a style, the goal of Social Realism is to reveal the evils of poverty, unethical behavior, war, and other social dilemmas. Rather than simply delight their audiences with pleasant scenes, Social Realists in general maintain that paintings should describe and express the people, and the hardships of everyday life in the themes and subjects they represented.

The roots of Social Realism lie in the 18th century with the works of William Hogarth in Britain and Francisco de Goya in Spain. Both artists contrasted the extravagance and decadence of the aristocratic or bourgeois class with the plight and suffering of the poor. Hogarth completed many didactic series of engravings in the mid-1700s that attacked the drunkenness and foolish extravagance of the English ruling class, while Goya depicted unnecessary horrors of war in his [Disasters of War](#) etchings.

The 19th century saw the rise of Social Realism in France, with artists such as Honoré Daumier and Jean François Millet. Both artists used a realist style to depict the realities of the urban and rural poor in paintings and satirical lithographs.

THE BIG PICTURE (continued)

Daumier, whose work was often published in newspapers, exaggerated certain features of his subjects to create almost caricature-like effects that were at once poignant and comical.

In the US, the term Social Realism usually refers to the urban American scene artists of the 1930s Depression era who were living and working in and around New York City. Ben Shahn, Jacob Lawrence, and Jack Levine are the best-known American Social Realists. Shahn in particular showed laborers and other victims of the Depression as well as scenes of controversial political issues, such as the trial and death of Sacco and Vanzetti. In [The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti](#) Shahn represented a scene from the funerals for the men following their execution for alleged robbery. Two sharply dressed men and a university scholar in full dress robes visit the open caskets.



Ben Shahn,
[The Passion of Sacco and Vanzetti](#),
1931-2.
Tempera on paper on masonite.
Whitney Museum of American Art,
New York.

Other artist, like Ivan Albright and Edward Hopper, focused on the isolation of individual people in urban centers, often depicting figures that appeared aimless and alone, wandering America's cities at night. Johanson shares this use of sole figures, often lining up multiple people in profile extracted from their routines or activities that symbolize the anonymity and overcrowding of contemporary urban life as in this painting called [Untitled](#) from 2001 (below).



Chris Johanson, [Untitled](#), 2001.
Paint on canvas. Image reprinted from Jack Hanley
Gallery Web site -<http://jackhanley.com>.

SECTION III – RESOURCES

TEXTS

Artforms: An Introduction to the Visual Arts, Duane Preble et al., New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 2001.

Ben Shahn: New Deal Artist in a Cold War Climate 1947-1954. Frances K. Pohl, Austin: University of Texas, 1989.

Drawing: Space, Form and Expression, Wayne Enstice, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1995.

Fairbrother, Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1993.

Framing America: A Social History of American Art, Frances K. Pohl, New York: Thames & Hudson, 2002.

In and Out of Place: Contemporary Art and the American Social Landscape, Trevor Fairbrother & Kathryn Potts, Museum of Art, Boston, 1999.

New American Street Art, Bob Edelson Woodstock, New York: SoHo Books, 1999.

Open City: Street Photographs Since 1950, Kerry Brougher and Russel Ferguson, Oxford, England: MOMA Oxford, 2001.

Street Gallery, Robin Dunitz, Los Angeles: RJD Enterprises, 1993.

The History of Photography From 1839 to the Present Day, Beaumont Newhall, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1988.

The Story of Modern Art, Norbert Lynton, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc., 1989.

WEB SITES

Whitney Museum of American Art Biennial Overview, including Chris Johanson – <http://www.whitney.org/2002biennial/>

Artcyclopedia – On-line encyclopedia of artist biographies, works, and movements – <http://www.artcyclopedia.com>, including Social Realism – <http://www.artcyclopedia.com/history/social-realism.html>

Galaxia Web site featuring images of Chris Johanson's work – <http://www.galaxia-platform.com/flash/index.html>

Institute of Social Ecology Web site including sections on art and social activism – http://www.social-ecology.org/staticpages/index.php?page=summer-programs&topic=summer_programs

Jack Hanley Gallery (San Francisco) – <http://www.jackhanley.com/>

Kavi Gupta Gallery featuring images of Chris Johanson's work -- http://www.kavigupta.com/artists/johanson/cj_images.html

California Department of Education – Visual and Performing Arts Standards and Framework – <http://www.cde.ca.gov/ci/vp/>

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

Artist's Television Access

992 Valencia Street (@21st Street)

415/824.3890

<http://www.atasite.org>

Build

483 Guerrero Street (@17th Street)

415/863.3041

The Back Room in the Adobe Bookshop

3166 16th Street (@Valencia Street)

415/864.3936

Creativity Explored

3245 16th Street (@ Dolores Street)

415/863.2108

<http://www.creativityexplored.org>

Culture Cache

1800 Bryant Street #104 (@ 17th Street)

San Francisco, CA 94110

415/626.7776

Jack Hanley Gallery

395 Valencia Street (@ 15th Street)

415/522.1623

<http://www.jackhanley.com>

The Lab

2948 16th Street

415/864.8855

<http://www.thelab.org/>

Mission Cultural Center

2868 Mission Street (@ 24th Street)

415/821.1155

<http://www.missionculturalcenter.org>

ODC Theater

3153 17th Street (@ Shotwell Street)

415/863.9834

<http://www.odctheater.org/v5/pages/gallery.html>

Pond

214 Valencia Street @ Duboce Street

415/437.9151

<http://www.mucketymuck.org>

SECTION IV – VOCABULARY

Biennial

An exhibition or event occurring every two years

Capitalism

Economic system characterized by private/corporate ownership of capital goods, investments determined by private decision, and prices, production and distribution of goods determined by free market competition

Chaos

A state of things in which chance is supreme

Community

A unified body of individuals; an interacting population of various kinds of individuals (as species) in a common location

Community

A group of people with a common characteristic or interest living together within a larger society

Credible

Offers reasonable grounds for being believed

Documentary

Of or relating to documents of an experience or event

Draw

Produce a likeness or representation using line

Entourage

One's attendants or associates

Geodesic

Made of light straight structural elements mostly in tension

Imperialism

The policy, practice or advocacy of extending the dominion of a nation by territorial acquisitions or

gaining control over the political or economic life; the imposition of power, authority, or influence

Installation

To establish a work of art in a specific place

Intaglio

An engraving or incised figure in stone or other hard material depressed below the surface so that an impression from the design yields an image in relief

Medium

The material used in a work of art

Neighborhood

The people living near one another

Painting

To apply color, pigment or paint

Scenic

Representing an action, event or episode graphically

School

In art and art history, a term referring to a group of artists or particular style of art

Series

A number of things or events of the same class coming one after another in spatial or temporal succession

Sleight-of-hand

A conjuring trick requiring manual dexterity; a cleverly executed trick or deception

Three-dimensional

Of, or relating to three dimensions; having or giving the illusion of depth or varying distances into physical space

SECTION V – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Exploring Social Realist Art

Screen the SPARK story on Chris Johanson asking students to take notes as they watch. Ask student to record:

- the vocabulary used to describe his work in the narration
- the social themes he explores
- the ideas expressed by Chris Johanson talking about his work
- his stylistic or aesthetic approach
- the questions raised by his work
- a personal response to the work.

Discuss students' responses to these questions and introduce the term Social Realism, the Western European art tradition that describes both a specific stylistic approach and an overall attitude toward its subject. Students may be familiar with the term, but explore with the group the ways in which Chris Johanson's art can be identified with Social Realism.

Screen the opening segment of the SPARK story and pause the tape or DVD on the artwork. Invite students to look carefully at each piece and describe what they see and feel as they observe each canvas. Ensure the discussion engages with the key themes at the heart of Johanson's world - the social and economic realities of life in urban San Francisco.

To develop this activity, invite students to work in small groups to research ONE Social Realist artist, and prepare a short illustrated presentation on the artist of their choice. Artists like Robert Lowry in the UK, Ivan Albright or Edward Hopper would offer interesting comparisons with Johanson, but students should choose freely from the artists listed in the Big Picture section of this guide or choose any other artist they would like to research.

RELATED STANDARDS VISUAL ARTS

Kindergarten

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

Students perceive and respond to works of art, objects in nature, events, and the environment. They also use the vocabulary of the visual arts to express their observations.

Develop Perceptual Skills and Visual Arts Vocabulary

1.1 Recognize and describe simple patterns found in the environment and works of art.

Grade 4

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

Analyze Art Elements and Principles of Design

1.5 Describe and analyze the elements of art (color, shape/form, line, texture, space and value), emphasizing form, as they are used in works of art and found in the environment.

Grade 9-12 Proficient

1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION

Analyze Art Elements and Principles of Design

1.3 Research and analyze the work of an artist and write about the artist's distinctive style and its contribution to the meaning of the work.

Impact of Media Choice

1.5 Analyze the material used by a given artist and describe how its use influences the meaning of the work.

Grades 9-12 – Advanced

HISTORICAL & CULTURAL CONTEXTS

Role and Development of the Visual Arts

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.

Promoting an Artist

“For Johanson, fame is not entirely desirable, as his work moves away from the context in which it was produced and into the center of the professional art world” (see Content Overview). Johanson's work has received a great deal of acclaim from the art establishment, culminating in his invitation to participate in the 2002 Whitney Biennial.

Promoting an Artist (continued)

Invite students to consider the ways in which celebrity works in terms of the art establishment. How does an artist attain credibility and become collectible? How does the media create celebrity status? What part does it play?

Explore these ideas in discussion and then divide students into small groups to role-play an artist's agent who is working to promote and raise the visibility of a chosen artist, for example Chris Johanson.

Have each group devise its promotional strategy to present to the class. Strategies should include:

- compile an portfolio
- draw up a media contact list
- identify local and national art world contacts
- identify museums and galleries to exhibit work
- research promotional avenues – magazines, television programs, news coverage, etc.
- brand an image

Invite the class to give feedback, and encourage the groups to review their strategy in light of the comments and suggestions that emerge from the discussion.

If students are interested in this line of enquiry, suggest that they contact an artist agent and invite the agent to speak to the group. This career path may be of interest to individual students.

SPARKLER:

- * Students who aspire to a career in journalism, can interview Chris Johanson or another Mission School artist and write a newspaper or radio feature.

Making Art as Social Document

Johanson uses ideas and subjects from his environment to create what he calls "documentary" paintings, sculptures, drawings and prints. He includes text (writing) in his work to express important ideas and concepts related to the images. Invite students to work together or individually to make a piece of art that expresses a response to an aspect of their surrounding environment – an aspect that resonates with them in some way. Students can choose any composition, form, or style and employ materials, objects, photographs, text, drawings or electronic media to document their world.

Allow students at least three weeks to work on their pieces and then convene a critique session. Invite them to present their work and to introduce and explain what they chose to represent in their image, how and why.

Encourage the class to constructively critique the work focusing on what the student artist intended, what is represented, how it communicates, and its overall impact. How does it speak to the viewer?

NOTE: Request that students to avoid words such as "good" and "bad," using instead words that describe what they think using supporting details.

SPARKLERS:

- * Invite Chris Johanson or another Mission School artist to the critique session or an open studio of the work.

RELATED STANDARDS VISUAL ARTS

Kindergarten

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Students apply artistic processes and skills, using a variety of media to communicate meaning and intent in original works of art.

Skills, Processes, Materials, and Tools

2.1 Use lines, shapes/forms, and colors to make patterns

Grade 6

2.0 CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Skills, Processes, Materials, and Tools

2.1 Use various observational drawing skills to depict a variety of subject matter.

Grade 5

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXTS - ROLE AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE VISUAL ARTS

3.1 Describe how local and national art galleries and museums contribute to the conservation of art.

Grades 9-12 Proficient

3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

Diversity of the Visual Arts

3.3 Identify and describe trends in the visual arts and discuss how the issues of time, place, and cultural influence are reflected in selected works of art.