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SPARK in Education

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Artist: Jesus Aguilar
Discipline: Visual Art (Media Art)

Screen shot from Jesus Aguilar's *No Entropy* exhibit at Steven Wirtz Gallery.
Still image from the Spark story, 2007.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

SUBJECT
Jesus Aguilar

GRADE RANGES
K-12

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS
Visual arts, Language arts

OBJECTIVE
To introduce students to the work of media artists, Jesus Aguilar, and to provide a context for the understanding of conceptual and technology-based artworks.

STORY SYNOPSIS
Bay area video artist Jesus Aguilar is exploring the intersection between language and technology. Drawing his inspiration simultaneously from video artist pioneers of the 1970s and the Internet, Aguilar is developing an artistic process that examines communication in the 21st century. Spark visits Aguilar at the Headlands Center for the Arts, as the young artist talks about some of his latest projects.

INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES
Hands-on group projects, in which students assist and support one another
Hands-on individual projects, in which students work independently
Group oral discussion and analysis, including peer review and aesthetic valuing
Teacher-guided instruction, including demonstration and guidance

INSTRUCTIONAL OBJECTIVES
To foster an understanding of media art and its history.
To illustrate the challenges of working with technology in art.
To analyze how audiences respond to media art.

EQUIPMENT NEEDED
SPARK story on Jesus Aguilar on DVD or VHS and related equipment or a computer with Internet access, navigation software, Realplayer software, speakers and a sound card.

MATERIALS NEEDED
Access to libraries with up-to-date collections of periodicals, books, and research papers
Pencils, pens, and paper

INTELLIGENCES ADDRESSED
Logical-Mathematical – the ability to detect patterns, reason deductively and think logically

Interpersonal – awareness of others' feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

Intrapersonal – awareness of one's own feelings, emotions, goals, motivations

See more information on Multiple Intelligences at www.kqed.org/spark/education.

MEDIA MATTERS
The following SPARK stories may used for compare/contrast purposes:

Kerry Laitala – Experimental Filmmaker
http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=4541

Ben Rubin – Media Artist
http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=8563

Ken Goldberg – Internet-enabled art
http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=4536

Jim Campbell – Electronic sculpture & installations
http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=4467

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

Bay area video artist Jesus Aguilar is exploring the intersection between language and technology. Drawing his inspiration simultaneously from video artist pioneers of the 1970s and the Internet, Aguilar is developing an artistic process that examines communication in the 21st century. Spark visits Aguilar at the Headlands Center for the Arts, where the young artist talks about some of his latest projects.

Much of Aguilar's work explores how we interface with information via computers and the Internet. Several pieces in "No Entropy," Aguilar's solo show at the Stephen Wirtz Gallery in San Francisco, overlay multiple modes of communication to unveil the conditions of our experience of information in the digital age.

In "Dante's Inferno in 8 Minutes 34 Seconds," the entire text of the epic poem scrolls by in just over eight-and-a-half minutes, at a rate impossible to register not only by the viewer, but also by the camera that captures the transmission. The piece, along with the similarly crafted "The Odyssey of Homer in 8 Minutes 44 Seconds," represents both the fleeting nature and the omnipresence of information in a world in which all accumulated human endeavor is subjected to the same process of coding.

In "ABC, 123," Aguilar overlays two registers of communication. The video shows Aguilar's finger carefully impressing letters and numbers on a computer screen and the liquid crystal display momentarily retaining a trace of the artist's actions. The artist's hand and the digital medium create an interaction that is all the more poignant for the tension it creates.

Even as the these experiments with digital media and the transmission of information speak of the present digital age, for Aguilar they also hearken back to the 1960s and 1970s, when artists like Joan Jonas and

Nam June Paik were wrestling with the technology of video, which held the promise of making everyone not only a consumer of televisual technology, but also a producer. As did the generation of artists that came before him, Aguilar uses his work to come to grips with a fundamental shift in the way we experience and interact with the ever-changing terms of the world around us.

Jesus Aguilar was born in San Lucas de O'Campo, Durango, Mexico, and currently lives in San Jose. In 1999, he graduated from San Jose State University with a B.F.A. and subsequently earned an M.F.A. in video, multimedia and photography from Mills College. In 2006, he received the M.F.A. Studio Residency Award from the Headlands Center for the Arts and the Herringer Prize for Excellence in Studio Art.

THE BIG PICTURE

Jesus Aguilar's video installations find historical antecedents in the work of video art pioneers like Nam June Paik, Peter Campus, Dan Graham and others whose pieces from the late 1960s and early 1970s were instrumental in establishing video as a viable artistic practice. Like the work of these artists, Aguilar's videos deal with technology that is recently developed, ubiquitous, and central to peoples' daily experiences.

The roots of video art are somewhat disputed. One claim is that Nam June Paik invented the forms when he taped Pope Paul IV's visit to New York in 1965, then screened the tapes in a coffee house in Greenwich Village later that same day. Others accounts credit Andy Warhol as the progenitor of video art. In a sense though, the first instance of video art is less important than the social and technological conditions that rendered the form relevant. The widespread sale of televisions since the early 1950s had created a generation that grew up

with the technology. The development of portable video cameras like Sony's Portapak in the 1960s held the promise that television would become an interactive medium, offering everyone the ability to produce their own shows. Artist, musician, and theorist John Cage embraced the medium for its potential for global communication.

Naim June Paik's *Global Groove* deals with exactly such a state of affairs. Made in 1973, Paik's video mixes images and sound from across the planet, interwoven with performances by Allen Ginsberg, Paik collaborator Charlotte Moorman, John Cage, and others. The tape also contains psychedelic segments made with Paik's invention for manipulating video images, the Paik-Abe Video Synthesizer. Paik said of the piece, "If we could compile a weekly TV festival made up of music and dance from every county, and distributed it free-of-charge 'round the world via the proposed common video market, it would have a phenomenal effect on education and entertainment."
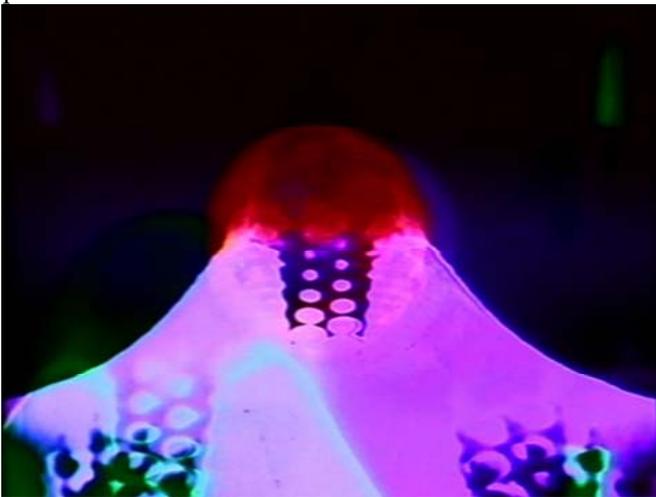
Nam June Paik, *Global Groove*, 1973 (detail).
http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/global-grove/

Other works, like Peter Campus' *Three Transitions*, also from 1973, directly investigate technical aspects of the video medium. The piece records three transformations of Campus' own image, made possible by properties specific to video itself. In one of these transformations, represented in the still below, Campus distributes green make-up on his face, essentially rendering his own image into a "green screen." His face thus serves as a screen for another image of himself, which appears to "emerge from beneath the surface of his face. This formal exercise, exploring the common video technique of "green-screening "identifies a property of the

medium itself while providing the artist a method for exploring questions of identity.

Peter Campus, *Three Transitions*, 1973 (detail).
http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/three-transitions/

RESOURCES – TEXTS

Ascott, R. *Telematic Embrace*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

Barreto, Ricardo and Paula Perissinotto. *Internet Art*. São Paulo, IMESP, 2002.

Grau, Oliver. *Virtual Art: from Illusion to Immersion*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2004.

Hall, Doug. *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art*. Aperture, 2005.

Paul, Christiane. *Digital Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2003.

Rush, Michael. *Video Art*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2007.

Weibel, Peter and Jeffrey Shaw. *Future Cinema*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 2003.

RESOURCES – WEB SITES

Jesus Aguilar's website:
http://www.jesusaguilar.us/

Intersection of art and technology links:
http://online.sfsu.edu/~infoarts/links/wilson.artlinks2.html

Media art net: A useful database of media based art projects:
http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/

Wikipedia article on video art:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Video_art

Wikipedia article on Nam June Paik:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nam_June_Paik

Headlands Center for the Arts:
http://www.headlands.org/index.asp?flashok=true

Stephen Wirtz Gallery:
http://www.wirtzgallery.com/

VIDEO/AUDIO RESOURCES

Campus, Peter. *Three Transitions*, 1973. Videorecording.

Paik, Nam June. *Global Groove*, 1973. Videorecording.

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

Headlands Center for the Arts
944 Fort Barry
Sausalito, CA 94965
ph (415) 331-2787
fx (415) 331-3857
General Information ext. 28

Stephen Wirtz Gallery, Inc.
49 Geary Street, 3rd Floor
San Francisco, CA 94108
(415) 433-6879
(415) 433-1608 fax
Hours:
Tuesday to Friday 9:30-5:30
Saturday 10:30-5:30

SECTION III – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Archaic
Ancient, out-of date, outmoded, antiquated

Binary Code
The binary code is a numeral system
that represents numeric values using two symbols -
0 and 1. This system is used as the basis of modern
computer language.

Bluescreen (known in television as chroma key)
A term for the filmmaking technique of using an
evenly-lit monochromatic background for the
purpose of replacing it with a different image or
scene. The term also refers to the visual effect
resulting from this technique as well as the colored
screen itself (although it is often not blue: for
example, with **greenscreen**).

Conceptual Art
Artwork in which the idea is primary, rather than
the object produced. The best medium is chosen to
achieve the desired effect. The term derived from an
art movement beginning in the 1960s and 70s in
which artists deliberately sought to avoid using
traditional fine art materials and approaches to art.

Dante's Inferno
Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) lived and worked in
Italy, in Florence, during a time of political turmoil.
He was exiled in 1302, for life, by the leaders of the
Black Guelphs, the political faction in power at the
time. Dante's work, *The Comedy* (later called *The
Divine Comedy*) consisted of three books: *Inferno,
Purgatorio*, and *Paradiso* and was written after his
exile. He completed *Inferno*, which depicts an
allegorical journey through Hell, around 1314, and,
as a medieval poem, it is recognized for its beauty
and intellectual range.

Enamored
Charmed, captivated

Entropy
A concept in thermodynamics - the measure of the
amount of energy that is unavailable in a system's
thermal energy to be converted into mechanical
work.

Intermediary
Mediator, go-between

Medium
Particular material or form used to create a work of
art.

Metaphor
Picture in words Not a literal description, but a
word or phrase usually applied to one thing is used
to describe another e.g. heart of stone

Naïveté
Quality of being unspoiled, raw, fresh, innocent like
a child

Ponder
To think deeply, to muse, deliberate or brood over

SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Conceptual Video

The experience of art has been dramatically changed by digital technology. In his artist statement, Jesus Aguilar talks about his interest in digital technology, art and human relationships:

"My work investigates the fundamental logic of digital technology, communication, and mark-making. I am interested in how history, heritage, and human codes exist within these realms. The digital domain has changed the way that we relate to each other, to the world, and to information at large. Information and knowledge are simultaneously omnipresent and continuously fleeting."

http://www.jesusaguilar.us/statement.htm

Play the SPARK episode on Jesus Aguilar and ask students to focus on the ways in which Aguilar explains his artwork. They should take notes as they watch, and view the segment a second time to help them absorb the key ideas.

In pairs, ask students to reflect on the following questions:

- What is Conceptual Art?
- What does Aguilar mean by Conceptual Video?
- What are some of the ideas Aguilar is trying to communicate?
- Does he succeed?

Invite students to share their reflections with the whole group and encourage them to respond to Aguilar's work, avoiding judgments or words such as "like" or "dislike", but considering the work as an intellectual exercise. What are the ideas that Aguilar is exploring? For example, what is he saying about the way humans interact with technology?

To clarify the issue, compare the way students engage with Aguilar's work in contrast to a painting by Rembrandt, for example. Ask them to cite a painter of their choice. Do they engage with the work in a different way? Why or how does this engagement differ? The intention is to explore

aesthetic response in contrast to the exploration of ideas.

SPARKLER:

* Marshall McLuhan (1911-1980), a Canadian, and Director of the Center for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto, became well known from the 1960s for his writings in the field of communications, specifically in media studies. He was an English professor, an educator and philosopher who is well-known for his claim that *"the medium is the message"* i.e. content is less important than the form or structure of the medium. In his view, technology has an overwhelming power in shaping the media messages we receive, and this technology promotes new kinds of thinking and sensory awareness.

Invite students to discuss this idea in relation to Aguilar's work.

http://www.marshallmcluhan.com/

Interactivity and Art

Aguilar's work is about *interactivity* and *mediation*. Brainstorm about these two ideas with the group. It may help to construct a simple mind or concept map on the board, charting definitions, associations and linked ideas.

To explore these concepts in a practical way, ask students to work in pairs and write down words or thoughts that come to mind as they interact with objects/people in their environment. They should reflect on how they interact with a book, a computer, a screen, an iPod, a TV, a person, the class, etc.

For example, does it feel the same to interact with a book as it does with a computer screen to access information? What is the role of the screen and how does it mediate between the viewer and the

information presented? How does that differ from reading a book?

Develop this idea by talking about Aguilar's piece *ABC123*, which invites interaction with technology "in a human way," as Aguilar describes it. He talks about feeling the screen, and touching it naively like a child.

Jesus Aguilar states on his Web site:
"The digital domain has changed the way that we relate to each other, to the world…….".
http://www.jesusaguilar.us/statement.htm

Ask students to write a 500 word essay in response to this comment.

Engaging with Conceptual Art
Introduce the ideas underpinning the Conceptual Art movement of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the premise that art should be mainly about ideas instead of objects, and that artists should focus on what they think, not on how things look. Conceptual artists usually set aside the traditional processes of art like painting or carving, and their work can confuse because it does not necessarily fit conventional definitions of "art".

Sol LeWitt, a Conceptual Artist of the 1960s, writes in his famous manifesto, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, *Artforum*, June 1967:

"In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art."

Activity 1
Ask students to specifically focus on Conceptual Video artists of the1960s and 1970s, artists who worked with the formal qualities of video as a medium. They could choose from the following artists or choose another artist to research: Peter Campus, Joan Jonas, Bruce Nauman, Martha Rosler, and in Europe, Wolf Kahlen (Germany), David Hall (UK), Lisa Steele (Canada), Colin Campbell (Canada).

Students should research ONE artist and be prepared to introduce the artist, his/her ideas and an example of their work to the group. It would be helpful to illustrate their presentations with images of the artist's work from Web pages, and through the artwork, demonstrate how the artist explored their chosen medium.

Allow sufficient time for the presentations so that students have the opportunity to engage with the artist being discussed.

Activity 2 – this can offer an alternative to *Activity 1*
"The digital domain has changed the way that we relate to each other, to the world, and to information at large. Information and knowledge are simultaneously omnipresent and continuously fleeting."(Aguilar)

At the opening of the SPARK episode, Jesus Aguilar introduces his exhibition entitled *No Entropy*. His first piece, *Artist Statement,* displays his own artist statement on the screen one character at a time. Ask students to research Conceptual Artists who have made language part of their work. For example, in the 1960s American artists such as Lawrence Weiner and Robert Barry incorporated the art-related language into their work.

Ask students to research ONE artist from the list below. All of these artists used language or text in their work.

Lawrence Weiner, Robert Barry, Mel Ramsden, Terry Atkinson, Michael Baldwin, Joseph Kosuth.

Similar to *Activity 1*, they should to be prepared to introduce the artist, his/her ideas and an example of their work to the group. It would be helpful to illustrate their presentation with images of the artist's work from Web pages.

With these artists however students should address:
- The role or power of language or text in the work
- Thoughts on literal interpretations
- Thoughts on metaphorical interpretations
- The ways in which the work is similar to or different from Aguilar's artwork

Allow sufficient time for the presentations so that students have the opportunity to engage with the artist being discussed.

Earth To Earth Ashes To Ashes Dust To Dust, by Lawrence Weiner 1970. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, Panza Collection, Gift 92.4184. © 2005 Lawrence Weiner/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York
http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_162A_4.html

SPARKLER:
*Ask students to individually devise questions they would like to put to Jesus Aguilar about his choice of medium, his ideas, and his thoughts about Conceptual Video.

In the whole group, encourage students to answer or respond to the questions, if they can.
Making Conceptual Art
Ask students to create their own work of Conceptual Art. Suggest that they work in groups to think about a concept or idea that will be expressed through their artwork. They should use everyday objects or materials that are readily available to them and if they are able to incorporate technology into their piece, they should do so. Recommend that each group give their piece a title.

Advise students to produce an artist's statement to accompany the work. It should describe:
• The unifying thought or idea
• The objects in the work and how they are positioned in relation to each other
• The way the objects work as metaphors
• If they have incorporated technology, how or what it adds to the work.
• The message they are trying to communicate.

Exhibit the work in class and invite each group to discuss their concept and process with the class. They can also choose to invite other students to view and critique the work.

SPARKLER:
To view work by Conceptual Artists, visit a gallery or museum such as the San Francisco and San Jose Museums of Modern Art, New Langton Arts, Capp Street Project, Berkeley Art Museum/Pacific Film Archive, Sonoma Museum, Luther Burbank Center, and the New Leaf Gallery. Share reports on these visits in the group.

RELATED STANDARDS - LANGUAGE ARTS
Grades 9 & 10
1.0 LISTENING AND SPEAKING STRATEGIES
1.1 Formulate judgments about the ideas under discussion and support those judgments with convincing evidence.
1.0 WRITING STRATEGIES
1.1 Establish a controlling impression or coherent thesis that conveys a clear and distinctive perspective on the subject and maintain a consistent tone and focus throughout the piece of writing.

RELATED STANDARDS - VISUAL ARTS
Grade 4
1.0 ARTISTIC PERCEPTION
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 8
Develop Perceptual Skills and Visual Arts Vocabulary
1.1 Use artistic terms when describing the intent and content of works of art.
4.0 AESTHETIC VALUING
4.1 Students analyze, assess, and derive meaning from works of art, including their own, according to the elements of art, the principles of design, and aesthetic qualities.
4.2 Develop a theory about the artist's intent in a series of works of art, using reasoned statements to support personal opinions.
4.3 Construct an interpretation of a work of art based on the form and content of the work.
Grades 9-12 Proficient
1.0 Artistic Perception 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.
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.
3.0 HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT
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.

For more information about SPARK and its educational content, including the Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the Web site at http://www.kqed.org/spark/education.

For more information about the California Visual & Performing Arts Standards, visit the CA Dept. of Education at http://www.cde.ca.gov/be/st/ss/index.asp.