

EDUCATOR GUIDE

Artist: Seyed Alavi
Discipline: Conceptual Art

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Seyed Alavi and his public art piece in San Francisco's Hayes Valley.
Still image from SPARK story, 2007.

SECTION I - OVERVIEW

SUBJECT

Seyed Alavi

GRADE RANGES

K – 12

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Visual Arts, Language Arts

OBJECTIVE

To provide a forum for students to explore the concepts behind the public art pieces of artist Seyed Alavi and facilitate an expanded understanding of conceptual art.

STORY SYNOPSIS

For Seyed Alavi, art has less to do with making objects than asking questions. For nearly two decades the Bay Area artist has been working with public institutions to create conceptual works of art to be experienced by passers by. Spark follows Alavi as he offers a guided tour of his art and working process.

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 conceptual art and its history
To illustrate the challenges and rewards of creating public art
To encourage students to analyze the use of text in contemporary artwork and to create their own conceptual art pieces

EQUIPMENT NEEDED

SPARK story on Seyed Alavi on DVD or VHS and related equipment or computer with Internet access, navigation 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
Bodily-Kinesthetic – the ability to use one's mind to control one's bodily movements



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

MEDIA MATTERS

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

Paul Kos, conceptual art pioneer
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=5425>

Felipe Dulzaides, public art on billboards
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=6760>

Joe Mangrum, temporary public installations
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=8441>

Richard Serra, public art
<http://www.kqed.org/arts/people/spark/profile.jsp?id=4803>

SECTION II – CONTENT/CONTEXT

CONTENT OVERVIEW

For Seyed Alavi, creating objects and asking questions are equally important in his art-making process. For nearly two decades the Bay Area artist has been working with public institutions to create conceptual works of art to be experienced by passers by. Spark follows Alavi as he offers a guided tour of his art and working process.

Though Alavi produces tangible objects, he thinks of himself as a conceptual artist, meaning that the ideas behind his works are centralized over the finished object. While many artists choose to master a specific medium and explore multiple subjects through it, Alavi works in several media. He develops concepts and plans works for specific locations, then out sources the actual fabrication of the piece to specialists.

In using this working method, Alavi often works in conjunction with public entities, creating some of his most penetrating works by enlisting the help of public high school students. His first such project was a series of text pieces painted under the overpasses of highway 580 in Oakland. Collaborating with a group of students from the region he helped them to develop wordplays that would cause passers by to think about the subjects they raised. Stenciled in capitalized serif fonts, the murals provocatively announce “INVISIBLE COLORS,” “INFORM(N)ATION,” and “D FFERENCE,” the last suggesting that the reader needs to include his or her “I” to make the “difference.”

Another project done in collaboration with students is a series of variations on the ubiquitous schematized human figures found on street signs. Together with a team of students, Alavi came up with seventeen surreal alterations of the figure that they then painted onto utility boxes around the town of Emeryville, CA that attempt to raise questions about the nature of human identity, interaction, and existence.

Spark trails Alavi to San Francisco’s Exploratorium, where he and four other artists have been invited to create installations in the museum’s space based on the notion of “liminality,” meaning the condition of being between states. Alavi’s concept provides the physical challenge of closing off the skylights in the Exploratorium’s massive space in order to program the illumination of lights clustered in a ball high above visitors. As museum-goers move in and around the space their relationship to the moving lights continually changes, thus making them aware of their constant state of liminal perception.

Seyed Alavi received a Bachelor of Science degree from San Jose State University and a Masters of Fine Art from the San Francisco Art Institute. He has created site-specific installations for locations in New York, Long Beach, and a number of places in the Bay Area. He has taught classes and workshops at the San Francisco Art Institute, the California College of the Arts, San Francisco State University, and the University of California, Davis.

THE BIG PICTURE

Seyed Alavi's work exists at the intersection of at least three established art practices: conceptual art, site-specific art, and public art.

Conceptual art is a term that encompasses a broad range of artistic activities sharing a common belief that the idea behind a work of art takes precedence over an art object. For conceptual artists, any material expression is merely the result of an idea, which in itself constitutes the work of art. This is not to say that conceptual artists do not make objects, as is popularly believed. In fact, a single idea may produce many objects, whether in the form of the result of a set of instructions, or in materials related to the planning and documentation of a performance or action. But for conceptual artists, these materials become less important than the ideas that produced them.

Conceptual art came to be recognized as a coherent movement in the late-1960s primarily through the work of a group of New York-based artists, including Joseph Kosuth, Sol Lewitt, and Lawrence Weiner. Lewitt, for example, began producing instructions for wall drawings, such as *Arcs in Four Directions* (below) that would then be carried out by assistants or volunteers. Lewitt argued that the instructions themselves were the real artwork, while the drawings were only a secondary result of the original creative concept. In his 1967 "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art" Lewitt claimed that "in conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. All planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes the machine that makes the art."¹



Sol Lewitt, *Arcs in Four Directions*, 1999.

http://www.sfmoma.org/exhibitions/exhib_detail/00_exhib_sol_lewitt.html

Site-specific art also emerged as a definable genre in the late 1960s with a group of artists closely aligned with the conceptualists. Artists interested in site-specificity create works for particular venues, creating art that is non-transportable, and in fact ceases to be relevant outside of its context. Like the conceptualists, site-specific artists found that the current state of the art object limited the possibilities of art's impact. The most famous case of site-specific art was Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc*, which was designed for the Federal Plaza in New York and installed in 1981. A committee led by Judge Edward Re opposed the sculpture based on aesthetic and apparently practical and even safety reasons. In a public hearing held in 1985, Serra and a group of 122 concerned people testified in favor of maintaining the work, arguing that removal of the sculpture effectively meant the destruction of it, since it may only exist within the context of the plaza. The piece was eventually removed in 1989.

¹ Sol LeWitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," *Artforum* 5, no. 10 (Summer 1967), 79-83.



Richard Serra, *Tilted Arc*, 1981 (dismantled in 1989).

http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/cultureshock/flashpoints/visualarts/images/tiltedarc_big2.jpg

Tilted Arc is also an example of public art, which is any work of art that is supported by, and created in conjunction with the participation of a public entity. Public art doesn't identify any particular style or set of artistic criteria, but rather demands an often arduous and complicated process of interaction between the artist(s) and governing organizations, committees dedicated to creation of public art, and the community at large. In some sense most art had been public until the 19th century, since the majority of art until then had been made for the church or other public institutions.

RESOURCES – TEXTS

Alberro, Alexander and Blake Stinson, eds. *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*. MIT Press, 2000.

Balkin Bach, Penny. *New Land Marks: Public Art, Community, and the Meaning of Place*. Grayson Publishing, 2000.

Finkelpearl, Tom. *Dialogues in Public Art*. MIT Press, 2001.

Kwon, Miwon. *One Place After Another: Site-Specific Art and Location Identity*. MIT Press, 2004.

Mitchell, W.J.T., ed. *Art and the Public Sphere*. University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Senie, Harriet. *The Tilted Arc Controversy: Dangerous Precedent?* University of Minnesota Press, 2001.

Weyergraf-Serra, Clara, ed. *The Destruction of Tilted Arc: Documents*. MIT Press, 1990.

RESOURCES – WEB SITES

Seyed Alavi's website:

<http://here2day.netwiz.net/>

Alavi's project at the Exploratorium in San Francisco

<http://www.exploratorium.edu/liminality/alavi.html>

Seyed Alavi's public projects supported by the Creative Work Fund:

http://www.creativeworkfund.org/pages/bios/Seyed_alavi.html

Alavi's Flying Carpet project at the Sacramento airport:

<http://www.gizmag.com/go/4219/>

Wikipedia article on conceptual art:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Conceptual_art

Wikipedia article on site-specific art:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Site_specific_art

Wikipedia article on public art:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Public_art

BAY AREA FIELD TRIPS

Exploratorium
at the Palace of Fine Arts
3601 Lyon Street

San Francisco, CA 94123

Directions to the Museum (recording):
(415) 561-0399

SECTION III – VOCABULARY

DISCIPLINE-BASED VOCABULARY AND WORDS AND CONCEPTS IN THE SPARK STORY

Ambiguity

Uncertain, doubt, having more than one meaning

Complex

Complicated, convoluted, involved, dense

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.

Continuum

Range, band, scale, gamut, field

Dialogue

Discussion, exchange of ideas, conversation, discourse

Fabricate

Put together, make, manufacture, construct

Harmonious

In accord or agreement, get along well, congruent

Infinite

Never-ending, unlimited, boundless, vast

Installation art

The combining of elements into a singular artwork that is only located specifically in one place; an artwork that only exists in the place in

which it was/is installed, and is not able to be relocated like a painting or a print.

Kaleidoscope

Continually changing set of colors

Laminate

Protective cover or shield

Liminality

State of being in between, in transition, in a state of ambiguity and disorientation. Can suggest openness to something new.

Malleable

Impressionable, compliant

Mandala

A generic term for a circular plan or sphere often with a geometric pattern which carries universal and symbolic meaning. As an art form, it merges art with Eastern and Western philosophy and spirituality and with psychology and science.

Medium

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

Outsource

An arrangement whereby one company provides services for another company, offering services which have been and could be provided in-house.

Perspective

Viewpoint, standpoint

Plexiglass

Trademark of a light, transparent, thermoplastic often used in place of glass

Potential

Possible, likely

Random

Chance accident, arbitrary, haphazard

Rudimentary

Basic, simple, undeveloped

Subtle

Restrained, delicate, faint, fine

Transition

Movement from one place or stage to another

Threshold

Doorstep, entrance, also meaning on the verge of, beginning

Unconscious

Oblivious, ignorant of, unaware of, below the conscious level in psychological terms

SECTION IV – ENGAGING WITH SPARK

STANDARDS-BASED ACTIVITIES AND DISCUSSION POINTS

Seyed Alavi and Conceptual Art

Play the SPARK episode on Seyed Alavi and ask students to focus on Alavi’s approach to art. Suggest they construct a mind map linking together the different elements in Alavi’s thinking as he reflects on his ideas about art.

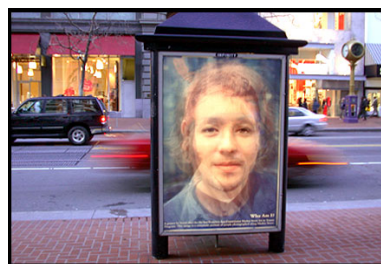
Alavi talks about his rationale for making art in terms of an exploration of ideas that are fundamental to us all, such as:

- Why are we here?
- What is life?
- How can you explain the universe?
- Where did I come from? Who am I?
- What are the things we wonder about?

Invite students to look closely at the art exhibited in the segment, and to identify the ways in which Alavi’s artwork addresses these fundamental questions. In pairs, ask students to engage in a dialogue about each of the pieces in the episode. It may help to freeze the frame on each piece as students view the segment.

Suggest each pair experiments with the exercise Alavi assigned high school students in Oakland in the *Making A Difference* project. Ask them to create a text mural on large mural paper responding to Alavi’s questions:

- What is it they would like to say?
- What is important to them?



“Who am I?” 2002

<http://here2day.netwiz.net/seyedsite/publicart/whoami/whoamiframe.html>

Display the text murals around the classroom and invite each pair to explain their mural to the class, addressing the following questions.

- What message did they want to convey?
- Why did they consider the message to be important?
- How does the mural convey the message both in form and in content?
- What are they hoping to accomplish?

Encourage the class to discuss each text mural.

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 the medium or creating 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”.

For Alavi the medium changes, depending upon the concept or idea he is working with. This offers him considerable freedom in that he is not constrained by one material or discipline, such as painting or sculpture.

Ask students to work together to choose an idea or concept they would like to work with and to assemble a mixed media collage to illustrate their idea.

Suggest that they choose their medium, using materials they feel to be most expressive of their idea. For example they could work with images and found objects to symbolize or represent peace, cultural identity, race etc. or they could choose to represent more abstract ideas such as joy, transitions or harmony incorporating text if they feel it would add an important dimension. Encourage students to think metaphorically and symbolically. Advise students to collaboratively produce an artist's statement to accompany their work, explaining the unifying thought or idea and the message they are trying to communicate. They should also talk about their choice of medium.

Showcase the collages to the whole group and invite the group to question and critique the work in a positive and supportive way.

SPARKLER:

**Art is inseparable from life.* (Seyed Alavi)
Invite students to write a 500-word essay discussing this traditional, non-Western approach to art described by Alavi.

Thinking about Public Art

Play the section of Seyed Alavi's story that focuses on the Santa Clara Medical Center. How does Alavi explain his use of mandalas as an artistic expression that resonates with the space?

Ask students to think about art in their locality. In what ways do location and site specific factors inform artwork? How does public art

work in context and reflect the local landscape? What role does it play?

Students should visit an example of public art of their choice, such as a mural, a fountain or sculptural piece, and respond to the following questions.

- What is the role of this piece?
- What message does it convey? What feelings does it evoke?
- Does it resonate with the space?
- How does it complement the environment and work in the context of the locality?
- How does it compare to art in museums, galleries, offices, and other non-public places?

Ask students to report back on their thoughts and findings



Andrea by Ruth Asawa

San Francisco, 1966-8. Cast bronze fountain.

<http://www.ruthasawa.com/visit.html>

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.

Using Text in Artwork

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 language in which art is spoken about into their work.

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

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

Students should 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 Alavi's artwork

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

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.

*Does art need to be aesthetically pleasing? Are there other objectives? What might they be? Initiate a discussion on these questions.

If it is feasible, invite outside artists and speakers and organize an event around a panel discussion. Ensure students are fully prepared

with a clear agenda and list of questions. Play the Seyed Alavi episode to open the discussion and invite him to take part in the panel.

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>.