

## Learning to Look

Schools, Colleges, and Teachers' Programme

### Teachers' guide

**A guide to exploring contemporary art with children and young people designed to help teachers stimulate thought and discussion among pupils.**

firstsite's programme of exhibitions changes quarterly. Below are some universal tools and skills to enable pupils to access the content of an exhibition and explore the works on display.



### Preparing for your visit

A visit to firstsite should be a learning experience for pupils and teachers alike, and approaching your visit as a co-learning experience will encourage open dialogue. Below are some ideas for talking about your visit to the gallery with pupils. The aim is to encourage pupils to engage with and respond to the art on display, rather than expecting you to give the answers. We recommend you visit in advance and investigate the Exhibition Tools to give you an insight into the artworks on display.

#### Online resources

**Guide to the building** A guide to exploring the architecture of firstsite's building and its place in Colchester's urban landscape.

**Teachers' guide** (this document) A guide to developing pupils' skills in looking at art and questioning its meaning.

**Exhibition tools** A guide to the current exhibition, including background information about the artworks on display, information on the show, questions to prompt discussion and suggested follow-up activities.

#### firstsite resources

- Exhibition catalogue (available to buy in the firstsite shop)
- Exhibition guide
- Children and families exhibition guide
- Resource boxes (bookable in advance) aimed at specific age groups.

### Discussion areas

#### What is a gallery?

- A gallery is a space in which to experience works of art.
- You might have to look, listen or touch the art to experience it.
- Some galleries have a collection of art that belongs to them and is always on display.
- Some galleries, like firstsite, do not have a collection, but instead have a changing exhibition programme. The exhibition changes four times a year and is either a solo show or a group exhibition.
- firstsite's exhibitions will showcase contemporary art and new commissions.
- Galleries might also exhibit a mixture of contemporary and historical art.

#### What might we see on our visit?

Prior to your visit, you might want to buy an exhibition catalogue from the firstsite shop, to familiarise yourself, and your pupils, with the artworks on display. You may also wish to research some of the exhibiting artists online.

#### Capturing your visit

Before you visit, it's useful to prepare the pupils for the experience and think about how they might capture their experience to support your teaching back in the classroom.

- **Journaling** Make journals as part of your preparation in school or provide each pupil with a sketchbook in which to record their visit. Journals can be used to sketch, take notes and record responses to the exhibition, as well as other observations about their visit.
- **Sound recordings** Use a digital voice recorder to capture thoughts, observations and responses to the artworks on display.

### Visiting the exhibition

**Take it slowly** Move at your own pace. Tune in to what interests your pupils and create opportunities for discovery. Open questions and comment, ie 'What else can you find?' will elicit fuller responses from pupils, which can then be built upon. The more time you spend looking, the more you will find.

**Relate to pupils' everyday experiences** If the texture of a piece is particularly interesting, talk about texture being all around us, like a soft jumper, a hard ball, a knobbly tree, etc. Giving an everyday context, introduce new terms when looking at artworks to encourage discussion among pupils.

**Introduce complex terms with ordinary words** Don't be afraid to use new language specific to exhibitions, ie *curator* or *methods of display*. Even very young children can get to grips with new terms relating to the gallery experience when they are explained in simple language. Key words for each exhibition space are included in the Exhibition Tools section.

**Be open to pupils' responses** Art is not about right or wrong; it's about ideas. The arts teach that there is more than one solution to an answer. If a pupil's observation surprises you, ask: 'What do you see in the artwork that makes you say that?'



**Adults are learners too** A visit to the gallery is an opportunity for everyone to learn and discuss their responses to the artworks on display. Let your pupils know that this is a learning experience for teachers as well.

### During your visit

Moving round the gallery, allow pupils to explore the exhibition, and together select artworks that you'd like to look at in more detail. Choosing which artworks to focus on might be driven by links to a particular topic or theme that you are working on in school (eg sculpture or history), or it might be based simply upon artworks to which you and your pupils are drawn.

Below is a series of questions and observations as starting points. Select those that are relevant to each piece, and use them to begin your discussions and activities.

### The artwork

What kind of artwork is it? A painting, a photograph, a sculpture, a film, an installation, a performance, a sound piece?

What does the artwork show? Is it a person? A place? A shape? An object? An animal? Does it remind you of something else you have seen?

Does the artwork need you to use any of your senses other than just looking? Does it involve sound or touch?

- **Materials** What do you think the artwork is made from? Wood, stone, canvas? What does this tell us about the piece? Is the material precious? Is it natural or man made? Where might you see the material used outside of the gallery? Could the artwork be made from another material?
- **Art form** What medium has the artist used to create the artwork? Photography, paint, collage, sculpture?
- **Texture** Is the artwork smooth or rough, sharp or soft? Is texture important to the piece? If the texture changed, would you feel differently when looking at it?

- **Colour** What colours has the artist used? Are they unexpected? How do the colours add to the feel of it? Would different colours change the mood of the artwork?
- **Pattern** Does the artist use pattern? What sort of pattern have they used? How many times is it repeated? Is the pattern symmetrical or repeating?
- **Scale** How big or small is the artwork? Does its size affect the way you feel when you look at it? What would it be like if we made the artwork smaller or bigger in scale? Can you view the artwork from different angles?
- **Shape** What shapes can you see? Are they recognisable shapes like people or objects, or are they abstract? Does the shape remind you of something else?

### What do we think the artwork is about?

Can you describe how the artwork makes you feel? Happy, sad, curious, intimidated, calm, excited, confused?

What do you like about the artwork? Is there anything you don't like about the piece?

Can you describe what you think the artist is trying to tell us through the artwork? What story or statement do you think the artist is trying to convey?

How successful is the artist in creating a story, message or meaning through the piece? If you were the artist, what would you change to make the story or meaning clearer?

### After your visit

When you're back in the classroom, why not try some of these follow-up activities to reinforce the learning from your visit:

- Discussion session: what was surprising about your visit, what was your favourite artwork?
- Create your own artwork inspired by what you have seen at firstsite.
- Research project/artist profile project.
- Organise your own mini-exhibition or set up an artist's studio in school.
- Produce your own catalogue/guide to the works you have seen.
- Don't forget to access our online resources to support your follow-up work.

For more information about firstsite opportunities or your visit, contact **Sue Hogan** on **01206 713 707** or email **[schools@firstsite.uk.net](mailto:schools@firstsite.uk.net)**

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