

TEXT: BUT IS IT ART?

SEMINAR ESSAY DEVELOPMENT GUIDE

This guide is intended to provide some thoughts, questions, and examples to help you to develop your thesis statement and essay about the seminar text. No matter which idea you use to develop your essay, be attentive to the “key concepts” from the syllabus that correlate to the text (even if we don’t seem to cover it in seminar!) Remember that you may also connect your thoughts on the text to other program activities. Though the ideas in this guide are by no means meant to limit you, there is such a thing as missing the mark.

THOUGHTS

Learn how artists relate history and place in creating works of art with a social message.

Pursue this concept by comparing and contrasting the work of different artists/groups (or the different tactics used over the course of a group’s history). Be certain to include in your thesis a conclusive statement defining the artist’s methods and assessing their effectiveness (evaluation theses would work well - “X is a good method of....” or a proposal: “Activists artists should do X...”)

or you might use a causal argument to make a claim about the effects of activist art: Effective activist art causes X....”))

Identify and critique patterns across time, culture, and texts

What historical/aesthetic/conceptual patterns do you see emerging in these essays? Your thesis might make a claim about the evolution of group projects, the nature of resistance through art, or the patterns of behavior/thought that make activist art succeed/fail. You might also draw connections between the work of these artists and Lucy Lippard’s theories. You might wonder if the tactics discussed in these examples would be as effective today. You might examine what motivates these authors and compare that to Howard Zinn’s motives.

Question what in history is worth telling, valuable enough to preserve, and to understand the struggle that occurs in the attempts to preserve alternative versions.

Most of the artists in these essays are struggling to preserve something, a history, a neighborhood, an idea, a social program, a moral. You might create a thesis addressing the kinds of issues that attract artists and the philosophical and practical problems that artists encounter when they become activists and historians.

Critically evaluate, analyze, and interpret various sources of information around a particular topic.

As we have learned all year, perspective is everything when it comes to understanding history. The essays in *But Is It Art?* tell the history of a variety of activist art groups. Choose a group that is profiled in one of the essays and do some research on additional writing about that group. Evaluate the additional sources against the text, and develop a thesis that affirms or contradicts the information presented in the book.

KEY CONCEPTS

- learn how artists relate history and place in creating works of art with a social message.
- Identify and critique patterns across time, culture, and texts
- Question what in history is worth telling, valuable enough to preserve, and to understand the struggle that occurs in the attempts to preserve alternative versions.
- Critically evaluate, analyze, and interpret various sources of information around a particular topic.

General QUESTIONS

What makes activist art successful?

Considering the range of artistic practices that can be characterized as “political,” which are the most effective as political action?

What is the ideal relationship of the artist to the institutions of art and society?

To what extent does being an activist artist mean giving up your artistic identity?

Should activist art always serve the needs of local people?

Would a radical transformation of culture require a radical transformation of the art world/the definition of art?

Is activist art just a trend that will die as soon as galleries and museums lose interest?

How do you reconcile the seeming urgency of bringing art “to the people” with the apparent apathy of “the people” towards art?

Who or which group of artists discussed in the text is the most successful, the best model for young artists, and why?

