VISUAL LITERACY

When we are young we are taught to read: to link words together and carefully consider the meanings, nuances, and impact of written language. Like words, photographs express human thought and emotion, record significant personal and historic events, and can influence our thoughts and actions. Though we live in a culture where we are constantly bombarded with visual information, few students are ever taught to read images.

When we slow down to carefully examine and discuss visual images, we expand our observation and reflective thinking skills, form connections to many aspects of human experience, and foster an expanded concept of literacy, one that includes close and thoughtful “readings” of works from a variety of media. This process encourages awareness that an image is the result of a series of choices made by an artist, representing one possible interpretation of a given subject rather than a single “truthful” account. It further encourages students to carefully consider and articulate the choices they make in their own development as artists and thinkers.

Looking at Photographs: Questions for Looking and Discussion

Teacher’s note: Use these questions to guide your students in examining and discussing the images they make and those in exhibitions or wherever they might encounter them. Consider how you might adapt this line of inquiry to critically consider works in other media.

Look carefully at the photograph:

• Describe what you see.
• What can you tell about how this image was made? Consider the techniques and visual strategies used by the artist such as use of light, time of day, vantage point, focus, framing and composition, etc.
• What moods or feelings are expressed in this photograph? How are they conveyed?
• What do you think this work is about? Why?
• What do you know to be true? What assumptions might you have made?

Other questions to consider:

• Are there clues in the image that suggest when and where this photograph might have been made? Describe.
• Can you tell how the photographer feels about this subject? If so, how?
• If you are looking at multiple images by one artist, consider what they have in common. How do they differ? How do they function together?
• How would you describe this artist’s style? Is there certain subject matter that the artist seems drawn to? Are there techniques or aesthetics that he or she seems to use often?
• What do you know about the maker of this image? What do you know about the cultural or historic context in which this work was made?
• What else might it be useful for you to know in understanding this image?
• Does this work connect to your life or experiences in any way?