

Learning with the MoCP: Art, Activism, Policy, Power

High School 9-12th grade

Approximately 5 hours of classroom discussion and independent art making

Description: *Art, Policy, Activism, Power* is a learning framework created by the Museum of Contemporary Photography that provides resources and opportunities for in-person engagement with artists and activists. The program is designed to address different social justice topics, using the MoCP's exhibitions, visiting artists, and collections as teaching tools. This framework aims to encourage students to uncover systemic structures that create social injustices, to discover how artists use research in their practice to give voice to pressing issues of their time, and to gain understanding of the power and relevance of the arts in advancing the work of activists. The resources here can be implemented and adapted by educators to fit a wide variety of curriculums.



Artist Andres Gonzalez meets with students in the Arts, Activism, Policy, Power program at the MoCP during the *American Epidemic: Guns in the United States* exhibition, October 2021.

The MoCP is supported by Columbia College Chicago, the MoCP Advisory Board, the Museum Council, individuals, and private and corporate foundations. The 2020-2021 exhibition season is generously sponsored by the Phillip and Edith Leonian Foundation, the Efromson Family Fund, and the Illinois Arts Council. This project is partially supported by a CityArts Grant from the City of Chicago Department of Cultural Affairs & Special Events.



Materials Required: Canon ivy Cliq+ 2 instant cameras, provided by Columbia College Chicago. Access to a smart phone to use the camera's app is preferred but not required. Access to the internet is required for virtual presentations and workshops. Access to a scanner preferred but not required.

Learning Objectives: For students to utilize the photographic medium as a tool to embrace self-authorship for telling stories within their own communities. For students to understand how to transform individual images into sequences for exhibitions.



Xyza Cruz Bacani, *We Are Like Air, Skyline*, from the series *We Are Like Air*, 2018

Introductory Questions for discussion:

- What is the power of personal narratives in art?
- How can personal stories be translated into images that have the power to transform others?

Introduction to the Topic: Expanding Views of Global Segregation

Based on the themes in the MoCP exhibition [Beautiful Diaspora/You Are Not the Lesser Part](#), this chapter of *Arts, Activism, Policy, Power* challenges students to broaden ways people are categorized or separated based on their nation, state, or cultural backgrounds. Students will engage with two artists in the exhibition who shun the label “minority,” and use photography to add visual presence to stories that fall outside of conventional representations of any one place or identity. This framework was built to encourage students to harness the power of self-authorship, while outlining ways that photography can be used as a tool to broaden preconceived notions of identity or belonging.



Installation view of *Beautiful Diaspora/You Are Not the Lesser Part*, MoCP, March 2022

About the Artists: Abena Appiah (b. 1998 United Kingdom)



Abena Appiah, *Eden & Harmonie, Skate Gal Club—Ghana*, 2020

Abena Appiah is a London-based photographer and filmmaker working primarily in commercial photography and fashion photography. *Beautiful Diaspora / You Are Not the Lesser Part* marks her first museum exhibition. Appiah's short film *From Whence You Came* (2020) blends a montage of original Super 8 film and archival family photos, for a layered recollection of her grandparents' 1965 migration journey from the West African coastal country of Ghana to their present-day home of England. Appiah brings her grandmother's actual voice into the film as a narrator who's cowritten the script. This deeply personal view of the artist's heritage and family omits her own voice and body onscreen. A quote from diasporic Black writer and orator James Baldwin ends the film and also relates to the overall title: "If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go." In an additional work, Appiah offers selections from her *Skate Gal Club* series (2020), featuring members of the eponymous all-girls skate crew in Ghana's capital city, Accra. The selections focus on two young women, Eden and Harmonie, who pose beside their skateboards before setting off to ride through city streets. The comradery Appiah felt between and among the young women, as well as with the other members of their crew, bridges a divide across time and space. Appiah herself is a London-based photographer and filmmaker whose family heritage is from Ghana.

About the Artists: Xyza Cruz Bacani (b.1987 Philippines)



Xyza Cruz Bacani, *Three Generations*, from the series *We Are Like Air*, 2018

We Are Like Air (2013–2018) by **Xyza Cruz Bacani** chronicles the migration and domestic labor experience in Hong Kong of the artist's mother, Georgia.¹⁷ This visual story spans two countries, three generations, and two families. Cruz Bacani expresses a wish for migrant laborers and domestic helpers to be regarded by their employers as *family*, as well as for laborers to remain in connected relationships with their *true* families. Georgia, with a quiet strength, features as the emotional center of many of the 150 black-and-white photographs. As the story's timeline extends, Cruz Bacani opens the viewpoint and shows wider conditions for local domestic helpers, many of whom experience exploitative, unscrupulous employers. The artist wants viewers to see migrant workers, thus her title *We Are Like Air* refers to their invisibility yet omnipresence in society. This is a community of champions of strength. Years before her opportunity to become a photographer full-time, young Cruz Bacani had moved to Hong Kong to work alongside her mother as a helper. She has said, "During the time that I have lived and worked here in Hong Kong as a domestic servant, I've always badly wanted to feel like this is my second home, but tragically I have never felt like I belong, and have recently come face to face with the reality that I've spent nearly a decade of my life here, living in complete isolation. I am nothing but a mere observer." To accompany the photos in this museum installation, she has included a cross-stitch embroidery created by migrant workers in Hong Kong, as well as a text-based video work, and a prayer altar.

[Image Sets for Download](#)

Virtual Field Trip

Artist Abena Appiah and Xyza Cruz Bacani discuss their projects on view in the exhibition, and how they build an image series.

View the recording [here](#).



Images by Abena Appiah

Photography, Memory, and Self-Authorship

People have been creating images of their own likeness throughout human history. Writer and art theorist Susan Sontag once stated: *To take a photograph is to participate in another person's mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time's relentless melt.* Consider this quote and discuss the following questions:

- Why do you think human beings are so compelled to document their own lives?
- Is the practice of making photographs effective in preserving moments of a person's life?
- What differences do you feel in photographing your own life versus photographing someone else? Which is easier for you?

Activity

Using the instant cameras provided at the beginning of the program, create ten images choosing any of the prompts listed below:

- Starting from your house, walk for as long as you wish. Make images of people, objects, or spaces only that represent the feeling of “home” to you.
- Staying in a six-foot perimeter and without moving outside of its border, photograph all that you see from as many angles as you can.
- Photograph your favorite person, your favorite place, and your favorite food, as if you were telling a story about each in a magazine.
- Make a photograph that tells a story that only you know.
- Photograph a place where you feel the most like yourself.

After making your images, arrange them in different ways and consider these questions:

- How might the sequencing of images change the story for the viewer?
- Do the images together have a beginning, middle, and end?
- Do the images change when seen together instead of separately?



Xyza Cruz Bacani, from the series *We Are Like Air*, 2018

Share Your Work!

Did you create artworks in response to the artists or themes presented in this Art, Activism, Policy, Power program? Share your projects with the MoCP for a chance to be featured in a digital exhibition on the museum's website. Click [here](#) to share your work.

Illinois Learning Standards Addressed in this Program:

VISUAL ARTS STANDARDS

VA:Re7.2.K-12 Perceive and analyze artistic work. Visual imagery influences understanding of, and responses to, the world.

VA:Re8.K-12 Construct meaningful interpretations of artistic work. People gain insights into meanings of artworks by engaging in the process of art criticism.

VA:Re9.K-12 Apply criteria to evaluate artistic work. People evaluate art based on various criteria.

VA:Cn11.K-12 Relate artistic ideas and works with social, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding. People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.