

CAGE Case Study Submission 2008

Project Title: *No-Kit: An art programme in the classroom*

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Dates: Ongoing upon request, from 2001 - present.

Profile of gallery:

Oakville Galleries is a not-for-profit charitable public art gallery governed by an autonomous Board of Directors. Oakville Galleries is committed to presenting an innovative programme of exhibitions and providing services relevant to its local population. Oakville Galleries aims to make compelling exhibitions that challenge conventional artistic thinking; to present the work of artists who are making a significant contribution to contemporary art; to develop the visual and media arts as both a source and a tool for learning; to bring the many audiences of art closer together and closer to the art; and to encourage visitors to regard art as an integral part of their lives.

Project rationale:

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Brief:

No-Kit is a site-specific workshop held in the students' classrooms. This outreach model aims to engage participants in a process of thinking about art and making art in a familiar environment. In a 2 1/2 hour session, an educator raises the questions "*What is art?*" and "*Who is an artist?*" by engaging participants in a series of individual and collective games and challenges that require the resources contained in the space of the classroom. The project reviews and references different modern and contemporary works, theories of art and museum practices by using them as starting points for exercises, or draws parallels afterwards between the completed projects and artists' productions. *No-Kit* privileges process-oriented activities over excellence and final product and emphasizes the students' experience as a starting point of the learning process. Oakville Galleries received the Ontario Association of Art Galleries Educator Award in 2005 for *No-Kit*.

Outline:

No-Kit first invites children to voice their experience of the classroom: to talk about where they sit and how they move, to show the objects they use, and to identify objects and spaces that play a key role within the organization of the collective body. Then, the educator introduces games and exercises that gradually modify their understanding of the classroom, hence forgetting its function, in order to create a new perspective. The exercises play with language and challenge the participants' sense of observation: the classroom progressively becomes an abstract geometric space filled with shapes and colours. The classroom becomes a new site able to provide unexpected resources and potential. By creating this shift in perception, *No-Kit* enables children to invent ways to relate to their environment. From transforming their movements in the space to discovering different ways to manipulate objects, the programme refines their perception of volumes, space and light and questions the usual rules and habits performed in this familiar context. Students are then able to create their own individual and collective art works, exploring this new potential.

The sessions are divided into several modules that can be explored all at once or several at a time. As the educator adapts the session to the specific site and group, he/she chooses the modules that respond best to the singularity of the situation and introduces them in the appropriate order. For elementary groups, these modules are:

Module 1: **Look** at the classroom as an object.

Students are asked to move to a place in the classroom they have never been before to experience a different point of view. While children describe what they discover, the instructor records on the black board a list of objects and elements.

Module 2: **Extract the shape** from the object to **make the right link**.

Students are asked to make links between words recorded on the blackboard, according to their own logic or desire. The educator gradually leads them to shift from associating objects according to their function to considering their shapes, colours and textures.

Module 3: **Guess** the shape to **find** the object.

This module is a game in which the class is divided into teams. Each team collectively chooses an object that the other team has to guess. They then come up with a series of questions/answers following the rules that stipulate they can only refer to shapes, colours, textures and size (and not location or function). The game creates a discussion about abstraction.

Module 4: **Create** forms with objects

Using objects found in the classroom and with their own bodies, children are asked to respond to "visual proposals." In this module, words are replaced by a series of geometric and organic shapes drawn on paper or on the blackboard that children have to translate in 3D assemblage.

Module 5: **Make** art with words

This module reintroduces language. The *Do It* catalogue and artist Alison Knowles' piece *Homage to Each Red Thing* (see below) are the platform for this exercise. In groups, students use masking tape to cover the floor of their classroom in squares, then slowly fill in the squares with red objects found in the classroom.

Homage to Each Red Thing

Divide the exhibition floor into squares of any size.

Put one red thing into each square.

For example:

- A piece of fruit
- A doll with a red hat
- A shoe

Completely cover the floor in this way.

Once the activity is completed, students are shown a series of paintings by the Italian artist Arcimboldo, who painted elaborate portraits composed entirely of fruits, vegetables, flowers and other objects. In groups, students are assigned a selection of the red objects on the floor and are asked to assemble them to create a face.

Module 6: **What** is art? **Who** is an artist?

This module is a discussion inspired by a statement by Nicolas Bourriaud: *Art is an activity that consists in producing relationships to the world through signs, shapes, gestures or objects.*¹ It is discussed as an introduction or a conclusion of the session.

Throughout the session, artists' works are linked to children's activities in various ways. In some cases, the artists' work is the means to introduce an exercise. For example, Alison Knowles's *Homage to Each Red Thing* (module 5) invites participants to respond to her proposition to create their own installation of objects. With this piece, young children explore social interaction and geometry, focusing on the definition of a square and covering the floor with squares, while the older ones are encouraged to create more elaborate solutions in the way they create squares and display objects within those squares. This process leads them toward understanding notions of assemblage, installation, framing and composition. The relationship between visual art and language is also further explored with older participants within this module.

An excerpt from Michael Snow's 2001 film, *Corpus Callosum*, complements module 3. The two minute-piece, showcasing students sitting at their desks trying to resolve a visual problem, creates a sense of identification while demonstrating issues of point of view, visual language and media.

¹ Excerpt from the introduction to Bourriaud, Nicolas: *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les presses du réel, Dijon, 1998.

By combining artists working with different media and at different times in history, *No-Kit* creates bridges that allow students to understand that art from any time creates new perspectives on the surrounding world.

Audience targets:

Elementary and secondary schools in the region; special needs programmes; teachers

Learning goals:

No-Kit is a comprehensive exploration of the section **Knowledge of Elements** in the Grade 1 through 4 visual art curriculum. By identifying the elements of design within a familiar environment, students discover and describe characteristics and values related to colour, line shape, form and texture. The **Critical Thinking** aspect of the curriculum is given more emphasis among students on Grades 4 through 8, through an exploration of the way elements of design are organized in a work of art to communicate feelings and to convey ideas. Through skilled questioning, the students can reflect, interpret, analyze and evaluate. *No-Kit's* exploration of the **Creative Work** component of the visual art curriculum is unique. Students express their creativity and solve artistic problems both individually and collectively, using contemporary art practices as a source of inspiration.

No-Kit, more recently adapted to older students, creates different types of situations that challenge the participants' usual relationships to their environment. *No-Kit* for secondary students focuses more specifically on the perception of space and the interactions between people and between people and spaces. Masking tape is a simple tool used to further explore these notions by making trajectories visible and mapping movement. At this level, the educator also invites participants to explore Nicolas Bourriaud's statement in more depth.

Outcomes and evaluation/ Statistics where applicable:

In 2001 Oakville Galleries started to assess the quality of its educational programmes, and realized that the education vision needed to be redefined and integrated to the overall vision of the institution. We wanted to offer programmes that participants would enjoy, programmes that would break down the fears and misconceptions about contemporary art. On the other hand, a network of community organizations, school boards, teachers and other key players from the community needed to be created in order to increase the community's participation with the Galleries' activities and programmes.

We were aware of the difficulties in bringing participants in - especially school groups. Oakville Galleries is a gallery that focuses exclusively on contemporary art, and is located 2 km away from downtown Oakville (the Gairloch location).

The institution does not offer a permanent display of its permanent collection, and presents new exhibitions every two months. This situation represented a major barrier in increasing the number of school participants to the activities offered at the Galleries.

An outreach project in the classroom was the obvious first step for the development of school audiences. As we wanted to create a framework for multi-year youth programming, the process of designing *No-Kit* rapidly became the “motor” that drove a complete reevaluation of youth programmes. In 2001, we obtained a supplement grant from the Canada Council for the Arts that supported the first 3 years of development.

The projected objectives were realized. These objectives were:

- **To create a high quality bilingual youth programme that meets the artistic vision of Oakville Galleries.**

The artistic qualities of the project responded to our aims. In challenging conventional critical thinking, *No-Kit* explores the work of living artists. The programme presents visual arts as a source of and tool for learning. It brings young people closer to the arts and encourages them to regard art as an integral part of their lives. Finally, thanks to a bilingual team of educators, *No-Kit* is offered in English and French.

- **To assess the needs of teachers and students in order to continue to improve our programming in the future.**

During the experimental phase of the process, *No-Kit* was performed in five schools. In addition, we tested the concept with a group of teachers-in-training. Students also collaborated in this phase by participating in the pilot sessions and providing feedback. Following the session, they answered a questionnaire designed to evaluate the relevance of the exercises proposed during the workshop. Teachers contributed by establishing links between the project and the art curricula and suggesting the ideal time frame for the programme. As a result, we improved the artistic and pedagogical qualities of *No-Kit*, gradually modifying it to respond to specific needs.

Recently, we have designed a programme for at-risk students, responding to the request of a teacher from the SALEP center (Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board). *No-Kit* was very successfully performed as a first contact with the teenagers. As a result, two educators designed a 3-week programme that consisted in adapting an on-site portable structure, located in the schoolyard, into a flexible space for the production of artworks.

- **To develop a network of contacts within the school system that enables us to introduce *No-Kit* to schools and students and to inform them about future programmes.**

We succeeded in planting the roots of a strategy to communicate about the project. Since 2002, yearly bilingual School Programmes brochures have been published, proposing a new vision for the school programmes that included *No-Kit* and *Exhibition-based programmes*. A database of teachers and school directors was created and the brochures are mailed at the beginning of each school year to 450 teachers and principals from the surrounding Halton area and across Southern Ontario.

Networking within the school community has resulted in a partnership with three school boards. So far, the School Boards' Art Consultants have actively informed teachers on the project by distributing our brochures and inviting us to present *No-Kit* at teacher conferences and workshops. Ultimately, the number of school groups participating in Oakville Galleries programming has significantly increased. Close to zero in 2000, we are now up to 90 group visits per year. Some schools book a *No-Kit* every year for all classes of a chosen grade, and word of mouth has been key in allowing us to present *No-Kit* at schools we haven't had contact with in the past.

Offering an outreach programme that represents the vision of the Galleries gives the institution a higher profile in the community and the opportunity to be an active contributor to community life. It plays a valuable role in making youth an integral part of Oakville Galleries's audiences. Maintaining a qualified and trained team of bilingual Animateurs is also one of our priorities. *No-Kit* needs the input of qualified educators and artists and contributes to attracting them to work at Oakville Galleries.

So far, *No-Kit* has played a crucial role in the development of youth programmes, and will continue to foster new initiatives. But ultimately, the effectiveness of the programme is probably the most obvious when we hear from students that experienced the programme:

Alexandrine, Grade 3: *"Yesterday I learned that in everything you see there is a form."*

Michelle, Grade 4: *"What I really liked was how you told us that everybody has a connection with the world, and I did not know that!"*

Christopher, Grade 3: *"I learned that art had a relationship to the world and that you could make art with painting, sculpture and many other things."*

Morgan, Grade 4: *"I really liked doing the links. They made me look at things in a different way. It also made me see how things are different and the same."*

Maggie, grade 4: *"I learned that you can use things that aren't triangles to make a triangle."*

David, Grade 3: *"I learned that objects can be made up of different forms: in a nail, there is a cone at the bottom, a cylinder and a flattened cylinder, like a disc but thicker."*

Brent, Grade 4: *"I learned that there are more blue and red things in this class than I imagined!"*

Recent statistics:

From January to March 2008, 14 groups participated in a *No-Kit*. In 2007, 12 groups did; in 2006, 5 groups did. *No-Kit* is a hallmark programme for Oakville Galleries and the audience being reached by this programme is continually expanding.

Recommendations:

It has been invaluable having a programme that bridges the space between schools and the gallery by familiarizing students with contemporary art approaches and inviting them to reconsider traditional ideas about art. Going into the schools is a key element of the outreach approach that *No-Kit* employs, making contemporary art both physically and intellectually accessible. Using familiar objects from the classroom to create art also provides a crucial link with contemporary art practices students may encounter at the gallery, many of which employ non-traditional art materials.

Resources

The pilot programme was developed thanks to a 3-year Canada Council supplement grant, and was run with a staff of 3 in 5 schools. The programme requires very little by way of materials, using objects found in the classroom and 10-15 rolls of masking tape per group. The cost of the programme is \$5/student, as well as transportation costs for the educator to get from the gallery to the school. The administration and delivery of the programme is covered by staff members.

Bibliography:

Snow, Michael, *Corpus Callosum*. Video, 2001.

Kriegeskorte, Werner, *Arcimboldo*. Taschen, Germany, 1993.

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Obrist, curator. Independent Curators Incorporated, New York, 1997.