

ABSTRACT

On a trip to Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art, fourth-grade students discover new and surprising ways to approach the work of artist Dan Flavin.

Following the Light



Marina Lopez

As I prepared for a field trip to the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Chicago, I found myself coming up short on ideas and images to present to the fourth-grade students. I had overlooked that my confirmation to the museum did not include the work we would view during our time there. I assumed that it would not be a problem since the MCA has such a variety of work; I could easily discuss contemporary art in general terms. My main concern was that my students were prepared. As their teacher, I needed to give my students as much information as possible, prior to their visit, about the art they would see. I came away from this field trip questioning how much we as teachers overlook the possibility for surprise and wonder when we prepare our students to venture out into a new setting.

It is important for my students to have exposure to Chicago's cultural institutions. Our Chicago public school has a population that is 99% Latino; more than half of the students are second-language learners. A large percentage of our students rarely visit the city's museums outside of the school setting. Many of my students have never visited the MCA and therefore did not have any preconceived idea about what they would see.

I assumed that we would view some of the permanent collection—artists such as Jenny Holzer, Andy Warhol, and possibly a few works from Dan Flavin's "Retrospective." I had hoped that I could prepare the students for this field trip by showing

them a few images of the work they would see. This would enable them to identify work as they walked through the museum, and it would serve as a reference when we discussed other work.

In discussing the trip with the students, I spoke in broad terms and explained that what we would see at MCA would not be traditional art in the sense of many paintings or drawings hanging on the walls. I told them that the work might be sculptural and might use unconventional materials. We also spoke about general museum etiquette and how we would have someone guide us while we were there. They could ask questions, and the guide would ask them questions as well.

The bus came late the day of the trip. Our tour was for one hour at 10:00 a.m. sharp. On our way to the museum I continued to wonder about how the students would respond to the work inside the museum. We arrived at the MCA with one minute to spare. We waited outside while another school entered; the students stood at the steep steps going up to main entrance and looked around. On the lower left roof stood a group of pliable bright yellow figures, very cartoon like. I asked the students a few questions about them to keep them focused and to keep their minds off of the Chicago “hawk” that whipped between the museum and the Water Tower. As we prepared to walk into the lower entrance, a fleeting question came to my mind: What would we see today? As we entered the museum, we were greeted by three knowledgeable guides who would help us to understand the artists’ works.

We split into groups, took off our jackets, and were told that we would walk upstairs to the fourth floor. We took the staircase that spirals around, in an eye shape, and looks down into the pool of Koi—gold fish to the students. We could hear the sounds of movement and the look of construction on the other floors. We happened to be there the week a new show was being hung.

As we got to the west end of the fourth floor, we came upon the first installation of the Dan Flavin Retrospective. The students stood gazing at the gate-like work with green fluorescent lights glowing into large windows overlooking the entrance of the museum. Our guide, Matt, gave the students a bit of the background and history of the piece and then encouraged them to notice the color change outside the windows—a violet hue.

As we turned into the next gallery, my eyes squinted as a variety of colored florescent light jumped out at us. The security guard stood still in the foyer with dark sunglasses covering his eyes. It was then that it hit me: all these rooms with light, the construction, and not one piece of art that looked familiar. I had not realized that we would not be seeing work from the permanent collection; the only work we could see was Dan Flavin’s Retrospective. Later that week, I would find out that all of the permanent Collection was in Italy.

Questions quickly began to surface in my head: Will the students be able to grasp Flavin’s work? Will they accept this work as art? Do they have enough prior knowledge to understand the concepts of color theory that Flavin was working with?

As a teaching artist, I believe I am working in some fashion to help my students understand this highly complicated and vast world of the arts. Yet, I have to admit I do not understand all works of art and all processes; I could not pretend that I had a great wealth of knowledge about the artist Dan Flavin or his work. Of course, I had heard of his work,

I had seen images in books, and I may have even seen one or two of his installations before. I had no prior interest in his work and never had a conversation with other artists about the value of his work or the artist himself. That is where things ended—or began.

Questions quickly began to surface in my head: Will the students be able to grasp Flavin's work? Will they accept this work as art? Do they have enough prior knowledge to understand the concepts of color theory that Flavin was working with? How do they come to a deeper understanding of the art when I have not given them the vocabulary of contemporary art, minimalism, conceptual art, and the like? How do I help them to appreciate the work if I have not pondered it fully?

Moving into another area I could see that the students were impressed by the spaces filled with light. We came upon another work: *Pink Out of the Corner, 1963*. The students began to notice how the light washed the floor and how the walls changed colors up to a point. When they were asked about why the artist would put a light in the corner, they were not sure. Our guide Matt simply explained that Flavin wanted to lighten up areas that were usually dark, and

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the students immediately nodded as if they fully understood the concept.

We continued walking through rooms with colored lights that blended one into the next, some mixing, creating secondary colors, and others that created lined shapes using two, four, six, and eight foot lights. Each room became more complex both in color theory and in installation. At one point in the tour, the students were asked questions about simple color mixing. They quickly began to notice that some of the installations created new colors based on the colors the artist had placed next to each other.

We moved to view a work dedicated to Jan and Ron Greenberg, 1972–73, which was untitled and simply referred to as *Yellow and Green Fluorescent Light*. As we walked through the tunneled hall with lights lining the floor, we could see a green glow around the corner. We made a sharp right turn; the hallway ended, and it became a room full of emerald light. The students sat on the floor before Matt began to speak. We were in a small intimate space sitting on the floor as the rest of the world was outside somewhere. Matt asked the students to notice what the color did to the people in the room. They suggested that it makes everyone look the same; each person had a green glow.

Before it was time to move onto the next room, one of the girls sitting next to me was holding her hand up to her eye creating a telescope of sorts. As soon as I looked at her, she said, "Ms. Lopez hold your hand like this, and you will see purple." I did as she told me, and she was right: In the palm of my hand, there was a light shade of purple glowing.

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I suggested she share this with the rest of the students sitting on the floor. One by one each student put their rounded fingers to their eyes, and a collective sound of amazement broke out.



Jessica, who suggested a new way of looking at Dan Flavin's work.

We sat in the green light looking into the palms of our hands and staring at the color we captured. It was something we did not expect. The switch went on in my head, and all my questions about what they would grasp from this field trip stopped. I realized then that the students didn't need to have prior knowledge of Flavin's art work, they didn't need to understand the terms of the movement he became connected with, they didn't need me to be the teacher with a wealth of knowledge.

The students got exactly what they needed. My students needed to know that they can connect with a world they are unfamiliar with. Each and every experience does not need to

be spoon fed to them. Sometimes art cannot be explained; it has to be experienced. Through one student's simple childhood gesture and inquiry, they understood the work of Dan Flavin more than what I could have given them by reading and looking at images of his work.

We moved out to the hall where the white light now looked a light shade of red, and then into the yellow room. The room was connected to the main corridor of the retrospective and did not have the same intimacy. The students again sat down inside the area and quickly curled their fingers to find the color in their palms. A voice called out: "It's orange."

We looked at a few more installations until we moved to the area of the last installation we would see. It was marked as *Untitled, 1989, Daylight, Blue and Red Fluorescent Light*. We walked into a space filled with lights, lined up along one wall, positioned up toward the ceiling and jutting out from the center of the wall. As the students filled the space, I saw one of the girls stop to face the work; she opened the palms of her hands to the ceiling and said without hesitation, "Now this is art!"

Marina Lopez has an MA in Interdisciplinary Arts from Columbia College and a BFA from Loyola University. She teaches visual art at Spry School. She is a veteran teacher for Chicago Arts Partnership in Education, facilitates professional development in arts integration, and is on the Teacher Advisory Committee at the MCA.