ABOUT THIS SCREENING GUIDE

This screening guide is designed to help you plan an event using the Paradox episode of Art in the Twenty-First Century. This guide includes a detailed episode synopsis, artist biographies, discussion questions, group activities, and links to additional resources online.

ABOUT ART21 SCREENING EVENTS

Public screenings of the Art:21 series engage new audiences and deepen their appreciation and understanding of contemporary art and ideas. Organizations and individuals are welcome to host their own Art21 events year-round. Some sites plan their programs for broad public audiences, while others tailor their events for particular groups such as teachers, museum docents, youth groups, or scholars. Art21 strongly encourages partners to incorporate interactive or participatory components into their screenings, such as question-and-answer sessions, panel discussions, brown bag lunches, guest speakers, or hands-on art-making activities.

ABOUT THE ART:21 SERIES ON PBS

Art in the Twenty-First Century is the only broadcast series for national public television to focus exclusively on contemporary visual art and artists in the United States. A biennial event for television, Art21 produces four one-hour episodes featuring between 16 and 21 artists each season. The Art:21 series premieres nationwide on PBS in the United States and is distributed internationally.

The Art:21 series reflects the current landscape of visual art by featuring a dynamic range of artists who work with diverse media, materials, and subject matter. Profiled artists include painters, sculptors, printmakers, photographers, installation and video artists, and artists working with new media, environmental or public issues, and hybrid forms. These artists represent the breadth of artistic practice across the country and reveal the depth of intergenerational and multicultural talent.

ABOUT ART21, INC.

Art21, Inc. is a non-profit contemporary art organization serving students, teachers, and the general public. Art21’s mission is to increase knowledge of contemporary art, ignite discussion, and inspire creative thinking by using diverse media to present contemporary artists at work and in their own words.

Art21 introduces broad public audiences to a diverse range of contemporary visual artists working in the United States today and to the art they are producing now. By making contemporary art more accessible, Art21 affords people the opportunity to discover their own innate abilities to understand contemporary art and to explore possibilities for new viewpoints and self-expression.

The ongoing goals of Art21 are to enlarge the definitions and comprehension of contemporary art, to offer the public a straightforward experience of artists and their work without interpretive mediation, and to encourage people of all ages to participate in interactive education and outreach programs designed by Art21. In addition to the Emmy-nominated, nationally broadcast PBS series Art in the Twenty-First Century, Art21 produces companion books, a comprehensive Web site, a wide range of education materials, and outreach programs.

CREDIT LINE

Please use the following credit line in publications and publicity association with your event:

This event is produced in collaboration with Art21, Inc., a non-profit contemporary art organization serving artists, students, teachers, and the general public worldwide.

CONTACT

Please send inquiries to Art21 at: outreach@art21.org
How do contemporary artists address contradiction, ambiguity, and truth? The artists in this episode blur the boundaries between abstraction and representation, fact and fiction, order and chaos. Creating juxtapositions that are at times disorienting, playful, and unexpected, these artists engage with uncertainty and plumb the relationship between mystery and meaning in art.

“My practice is both collage and décollage at the same time,” says Mark Bradford. “Décollage, I take it away; collage, I immediately add it right back.” Using a combination of signage from the city streets, including business advertisements and merchant posters, twine, and glue, Bradford produces wall-sized paintings and installations that are a reflection of “the conditions that are going on at that particular moment at that particular location,” he says. In one installation, Bradford uses video to juxtapose two events—a celebratory Martin Luther King Day parade in Los Angeles, and a busy Muslim marketplace in Cairo. Though worlds apart, Bradford points out how both spaces simultaneously portray a celebration yet also present an undeniable political condition, as the African American and Muslim communities have become “politically charged.” Likewise, through his video Practice (2003), Bradford “wanted to create a condition, a struggle.” For the film, Bradford attempts to dribble and shoot a basketball while wearing a Los Angeles Lakers uniform to which he has added a make-shift antebellum hoop skirt. “It was about roadblocks on every level, cultural, gender, racial, regardless that they’re there,” he says. “It is important to continue. You keep going...And I made the hoop...Sometimes it takes me a little longer to get there. But I always make the shot.”

Despite a family background in the visual arts (her mother worked at the famous Los Angeles-based Gemini G.E.L. print studio), Catherine Sullivan was drawn to acting and the theater. “I was always interested in the body’s capacity for signification,” she says. “What was this kind of potential for infinite transformation?” Her interests turned to stagecraft, and eventually evolved into the merging of live theater and filmmaking. “I really enjoyed the pleasure of the eyes to look where they wanted to look,” says Sullivan. “In an installation context, there’s actually opportunity for different kinds of content to be present in different ways. At some point it’s a direct engagement with one single image. Other times, it’s an engagement with a lot of different images all competing for your attention.” Viewers follow Sullivan from a workshop with actors and students in Poland, to an exhibition space in Avignon, to a Polish-American social hall in Chicago to observe her performance-based films, many of which are influenced by popular film, real-life conflict, or ritual. The actors and performers in Sullivan’s works create behavioral and emotional states through quick transitions between gestures. As Sullivan describes, “the content itself suggests other kinds of oppressive cultural regimes that I would like the movement to be analogous to. It really is in this kind of calculation of character, action, setting, context that the work ultimately happens.”

Growing up in Nashville, Robert Ryman had a strong interest in music, particularly jazz. A bebop musician in his youth, Ryman’s musical knowledge influenced his work as a painter. His approach to learning an instrument was applied to painting, and, like music, “I thought the painting should just be about what it’s about...” He says. “In all of my paintings, I discover things. Sometimes I’m surprised at the result, but I know what I’m doing.” Ryman does not use assistants and prefers to work alone. Using white paint on square forms, he creates works such as Philadelphia Prototype (2002)—which he makes on camera—highlighting the subtle nuances of a surface and exploring the role that context and perception play in a visual experience. “I think of my painting as not really as abstract because I don’t abstract from anything,” he says. “It’s involved with real visual aspects of what you really are looking at...and how it’s put together and how it works with the wall and how it works with the light...I don’t use any illusion. It’s the real thing that you see. It’s a real experience.”

“It’s kind of an excuse to research something,” says Jennifer Allora of the work with her collaborator since 1995, Guillermo Calzadilla. “It’s this chance to learn more about something in the world and be able to formulate some kind of response.” In their segment, the pair, often arguing and questioning each other’s ideas in order to reach common ground, explain two projects that took place on the island of Vieques, previously used as a bombing range by US military forces and only recently returned to the jurisdiction of Puerto Rico. For Returning a Sound (2004), Allora and Calzadilla used a horn attached to a motorcycle exhaust pipe to create a unique “anthem” for Vieques. In Under Discussion (2005), the pair created a new meaning for the discussion table to represent the islanders’ disagreement about how the island should be run and the “re-patriated” lands used. “For us it’s very important, the idea of having a work that has all these contradictions in itself. How can you put all these things that have nothing to do with the other one?...You use an ideological glue. This frustration with absurdity, this nonsense, this paradox, all these things constitute part of the meaning of the work.”
Mark Bradford was born in Los Angeles, California in 1961. He received a BFA (1995) and MFA (1997) from the California Institute of the Arts in Valencia. Bradford transforms materials scavenged from the street into wall-sized collages and installations that respond to the impromptu networks—underground economies, migrant communities, or popular appropriation of abandoned public space—that emerge within a city. Drawing from the diverse cultural and geographic makeup of his southern Californian community, Bradford’s work is as informed by his personal background as a third-generation merchant there as it is by the tradition of abstract painting developed worldwide in the 20th Century. Bradford’s videos and map-like, multilayered paper collages refer not only to the organization of streets and buildings in downtown Los Angeles, but also to images of crowds, ranging from civil rights demonstrations of the 1960s to contemporary protests concerning immigration issues. Bradford lives and works in Los Angeles.

Catherine Sullivan was born in Los Angeles, California in 1968. She earned a BFA from the California Institute of Arts, Valencia (1992) and an MFA from the Art Center College of Design, Pasadena, California (1997). Sullivan’s anxiety inducing films and live performances reveal the degree to which everyday gestures and emotional states are scripted and performed, probing the border between innate and learned behavior. Under Sullivan’s direction, actors perform seemingly erratic, seizure-like jumps between gestures and emotional states, all while following a well-rehearsed, numerically derived script. Unsettling and disorienting, Sullivan’s work oscillates between the uncanny and camp, eliciting a profound critique of “acceptable” behavior in today’s media-saturated society. A maelstrom of references and influences—from vaudeville to film noir to modern dance—Sullivan’s appropriation of classic filming styles, period costumes, and contemporary spaces such as corporate offices draws the viewer’s attention away from traditional narratives and towards an examination of performance itself. Sullivan lives and works in Chicago, Illinois.

Robert Ryman was born in Nashville, Tennessee in 1930. Ryman studied at the Tennessee Polytechnic Institute and the George Peabody College for Teachers, Nashville, before serving in the United States Army (1950-52). Ryman’s work explodes the classical distinctions between art as object and art as surface, sculpture and painting, structure and ornament—emphasizing instead the role that perception and context play in creating an aesthetic experience. Ryman isolates the most basic of components—material, scale, and support—enforcing limitations that allow the viewer to focus on the physical presence of the work in space. Since the 1950s, Ryman has used primarily white paint on a square surface, whether canvas, paper, metal, plastic, or wood, while harnessing the nuanced effects of light and shadow to animate his work. In Ryman’s oeuvre, wall fasteners and tape serve both practical and aesthetic purposes. Neither abstract nor entirely monochromatic, Ryman’s paintings are paradoxically 'realist' in the artist's own lexicon. Ryman lives and works in New York and Pennsylvania.

Jennifer Allora was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1974. Guillermo Calzadilla was born in 1972 in Havana, Cuba. Allora received a BA from the University of Richmond in Virginia (1996) and an MS from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (2003); Calzadilla received a BFA from Escuela de Artes Plásticas, San Juan, Puerto Rico (1996) and an MFA from Bard College (2001). They have collaborated since 1995; approaching visual art as a set of experiments that test whether concepts such as authorship, nationality, borders, and democracy adequately describe today’s increasingly global and consumerist society. Believing that art can function as a catalyst for social change, the artists solicit active participation and critical responses from their viewers. The artists' emphasis on cooperation and activism have led them to develop hybrid art forms—sculptures presented solely through video documentation, digitally manipulated photographs, and public artworks generated by pedestrians. They live and work in San Juan, Puerto Rico.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Discuss and define the term “paradox” by consulting a variety of sources. What are examples of a paradox? Citing examples from current events, advertising, or popular culture, where do we see paradox at play in the world? Now that you are familiar with the artists included in this episode, how has your understanding of paradox changed?

Each of the featured artists in Paradox refers to an aspect of their creative process that involves experimentation or research. In addition, all cite specific sources as influential to their work. Is the act of research typically associated with creativity? Discuss these sources and how each artist transforms their research and analytic processes into art.

Jennifer Allora says, “the nature of making art…is to turn something upside down. Then you start to see it completely differently and new meanings come out.” In what ways do the artists in this episode disrupt expectations? How do they give objects, materials, or histories new meaning?

Consider Catherine Sullivan’s interest in paradoxical social rituals, such as the cruel/comedic games played in Ireland in the 17th and 18th centuries, along with Guillermo Calzadilla’s statement that “humor can be beautiful, can be horrific, can be political…can be poetic, can be transformative.” To what end do the artists in this episode explore contradiction and incongruity in relation to humor? What larger ideas can humor be used to address?

Initiate a conversation about public spaces and the concept of “community,” exploring your local environment for cues if possible. How do constructed spaces such as city streets, parks, and marketplaces both shape and reflect the identities of the people who live there? In what ways has technology changed our concept of public space, geography, and community? How do the artists in this episode approach these issues?

Robert Ryman says, “I think of my painting as not really abstract because I don’t abstract from anything.” Elsewhere in his segment, he explains that he chooses not to invest a narrative into his work. Discuss the implications of a work being neither abstract nor narrative. Debate Ryman’s claim that a painting exists solely “to give pleasure.”

GROUP ACTIVITIES & ACTIONS

Use a screening of Paradox to initiate a public art project in collaboration with a local art organization or museum. Have participants come up with ideas for temporarily altering spaces in ways that play against or defy expectations.

Collaborate with a local library to curate a display of books related to the Paradox theme and the various influences discussed by the featured artists, such as jazz, humor, ritual, and theater.

Many of Bradford’s paintings include nontraditional collage elements, such as hair salon end papers and billboard remnants. Bradford describes these elements as “materials that have memory.” Select a material that evokes a specific time or a place for you, or one that symbolizes an aspect of your identity. Use this material to create an abstract multimedia self-portrait.

Select an everyday object and consider how your perception of it could be altered by color, context, lighting, and framing. Paint or cover the object in a single color and display it in a neutral context. Photograph the object in several different locations, changing lighting, framing, and perspective. Create a book with your images or display them as a series. How does repetition and juxtaposition affect the impact of the individual images?

ADDITIONAL REFERENCES

Paradox  www.pbs.org/art21/series/seasonfour/paradox.html
Allora & Calzadilla  www.pbs.org/art21/artists/alloracalzadilla  www.gladstonegallery.com
Mark Bradford  www.pbs.org/art21/artists/bradford  www.sikkemajenkinsco.com
Robert Ryman  www.pbs.org/art21/artists/ryman  www.pacewildenstein.com
Catherine Sullivan  www.pbs.org/art21/artists/sullivan  www.metropicturesgallery.com