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Building a Just and Sustainable World

EDUCATION CONNECTION | VISUAL LITERACY

Images, photos, and pictures stimulate the mind. For the viewer, they offer a chance to connect and question. They also offer potential for play and imagination, and pulling the observer into purposeful messages.

Most often, newspaper and magazine readers quickly glance at photos and their captions. With this YES! lesson plan, you and your students can luxuriate—and pause—to truly understand an image, its message, and why it's interesting (or not).



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Step One: What do you notice? (before the facts)

Ask your students to make sense of the photograph by trusting their instincts of observation and inference. In doing so, the photograph offers possibilities and interpretations beyond a typical reading where the reader glances at the picture to reinforce their interpretation of the picture's title or caption. Do not introduce any facts, captions, or other written words outside of the image. You may hear: sculpture, strange house, red mushroom, brown hills, tent.

Step Two: What are you wondering? (thinking about the facts)

After you've heard what your students are noticing, you'll probably hear the peppering of questions (Does someone live in it? Does it move? What's that stuff on top? What is this?!). That's curiosity or wonder—the intermixing of observations and questions. This is a good time to reveal the photo's caption, and facts about the actual situation. Watch how the conversation shifts from what they believe to be true to discerning the facts about the photo.

Photo caption:

One of the art cars seen at Burning Man. There are many, many art cars, ranging from big to small, which ferry Burners around the Playa. Some run on bio diesel, or other renewable fuels. Other forms of transportation include the bicycle and the good old-fashioned foot. Photo by Catherine Bailey.

Photo facts:

Burning Man, founded in 1986 by Larry Harvey has grown from a simple gathering of 20 in San Francisco to an annual festival where 40,000 people flock to the Black Rock Desert of Nevada in search of community and an outlet for radical self-expression. The location shift was necessary when the city of San Francisco banned Burning Man as a fire hazard.

Black Rock City, Nevada, home of Burning Man, exists only for one week out of the year. The city has a temporary population of around 50,000 and includes a post office, volunteer police department, restaurants, and hundreds of art installations. When the week of Burning Man is over, the city is abandoned. Most of the structures are burned, and the city returns to its natural state as a bare desert.

Cooling Man, a nonprofit based out of San Francisco works to offset the carbon emissions of art and cultural related events, such as Burning Man. This year Cooling Man hopes to encourage 70% of Burning Man participants to offset 1 ton each, making Black Rock City the first “carbon negative city” in the world.

It would take the average driver less than 12,000 miles to fill an Olympic sized swimming pool with green house gas emissions.

Trees can absorb about one ton of CO₂ during their lifetime.

Step Three: What next? (jumping off the facts)

Learning more about a photo leads to bigger questions and an opportunity to discuss broader issues and perspectives.

Knowing that this year's Burning Man theme is “evolution,” what kind of art cars can you imagine being there? What would you create and how would it run?

Outside of buying a more fuel-efficient car, one of the easiest ways to reduce travel emissions is carpooling. How often do you carpool? What are obstacles to carpooling? What would make it easier?

You've probably heard someone say “I can do whatever I want—it's a free country!” Where do you think the line should be drawn between having the “freedom” to express oneself and impacting the environment that is shared by others? Is it fair, for example, that plastic bags be banned or that a fee be imposed for their use? Should Burning Man be allowed in the Black Rock Desert?

More resources around the image

More art from Burning Man:

www.yesmagazine.org/burning-man

Read more about the event:

www.yesmagazine.org/issues/liberate-your-space/hot-for-burning-man

Calculate your carbon footprint and more at

www.coolingman.org

Thank you to educator Barry Hoonan for contributing to and shaping this lesson.