



# MEMORY MUSEUM

*Art teacher, Mathias “Spider” Schergen developed this project, with his students at Jenner Elementary School. The project was developed through work with the UIC Contemporary Community Curriculum Initiative 2000 and Chicago Arts Partnerships in Education (CAPE).*



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Change is an inevitable part of the human condition. Whether it takes place within an individual or as a collective experience, change holds the past, present and future to the light of reflective consciousness. How does the individual's experience of change effect the collective experience?

What qualities of installation art provide a vehicle for collaboration, personal and collective interpretation, and conceptual content?

Is the concept of “installation” a viable art form for consideration in the middle school curriculum?

Since the “dematerialization” of the art object in the 1970’s, many serious artists have chosen to work in temporary forms such as “installations” in which everyday objects and materials are arranged to create a sensory experience through which the viewer literally enters into the artwork. Despite this dramatic shift in how much art is made and understood, most school art projects are created by individual students working alone to make static, (semi) permanent, individually conceived and executed artworks.

In his essay, “The Relation of the Environment to the Anti-Environment,” Marshall McLuhan writes, “Only the small child and the artist have that immediacy of approach that permits perception of the environmental. The artist provides us with anti-environments that enable us to see the environment.”

This project encourages students and art teachers to work together as artistic collaborators, using found materials in the school and community to create an “artistic space” to investigate some aspect of school and community life. In such projects, the art teacher steps out of the role of the “dispenser of art knowledge,” instead becoming a community artist who leads students and other members of the school community in exploring a vital issue in their lives. The installation



site opens up a “discursive space” where people come together to witness and discuss “what’s happening” at this time and place. This enables people to look and look critically at the culture in which they live and to consider what role they might play in shaping its future.

## Beginning Lesson On Installations

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**COMPILE** a list of interior spaces that serve a familiar or specific purpose, i.e., restaurant, church, video arcade, a particular type of store, courtroom, doctor’s office, hospital room, classroom, kitchen, office building lobby, CTA bus, elevator, airport terminal, gymnasium, grandmother’s living room, etc.

**IDENTIFY** the characteristics that make these spaces unique in appearance, purpose, and efficiency. For example: **SCALE/SIZE**: cramped, spacious, vast, confined, overwhelmed, gives one the feeling of insignificance. **LIGHTING**: artificial, bright, dim, natural, fluorescent, candles, lamps, spot lights, neon, strobe, colored, indirect. **FURNITURE**: tables, chairs, benches, desks, appliances, booths, bookcases, cabinets. **OBJECTS**: ash trays, books, cups, baskets, magazines, dishes, figurines, lanterns, computers, beautiful things, broken things, trash. **VISUAL ORGANIZATION**: rows, aisles, cubicles, railings, hallways, doorways, displays. **AMBIANCE**: sacred, hostile, austere, hospitable, efficient, cold, chaotic, boring, warm, comfortable, busy, interesting, non-descript.

**DISCUSS** How do the characteristics of an interior space contribute to its meaning and purpose? What role does memory play in our experience of a space when we no longer occupy it? Why do people experience the same space differently? How do you organize your personal space (i.e., bedroom, locker, desk, or closet)? Why do we attempt to replicate our memory or experience of a particular space? (I.e., museums, dollhouses, historic dioramas, household shrines, shadowbox, miniature rooms).

**INTRODUCE** the concept that some artists use interior spaces as a medium. These spaces are called *installations*. This medium invites the viewer to actively participate in the work. The artist’s intentions are expressed through references to other interior spaces, the visual relationship of objects and an understanding of common experience. A well-designed installation work provides the viewer with enough selected sensory stimulus to engage the viewer in a personal process of exploration, observation and interpretation. Through this process the viewer finds purpose and meaning in the installation.



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## Making An Installation

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### ESTABLISH A SPACE

Whether an installation occupies an entire room or a corner, a closet, cabinet, drawer, an appliance box, or a shoebox, the space needs to be visually altered or **decontextualized** to separate it from its expected use.

*Memory Museum* was established at the beginning of the school year in a vacant classroom. Because the school was going to be torn down we were allowed to whitewash the room from floor to ceiling including chalkboards, bulletin boards, cabinet fronts, windowsills and doorframe. After two coats of paint, new muslin curtains and the replacement of torn window shades, Room 307's pristine appearance was a stark contrast to the poorly maintained, deteriorated classrooms throughout the school. This clean, empty and visually neutral space became decontextualized with the potential to add significance to any object placed within it.

Many strategies could be used to decontextualize space: painting just the walls an unusual color, using colored gels on windows or lights to tint the light in the room, darkening the space and using spots of light and luminous strips to emphasize objects and forms, or filling the room with an unusual sound. The means of the decontextualization is an intrinsic part of the meaning generated by the piece.

### FILL THE SPACE

Like any work of art, an installation conveys its meaning through the selection and manipulation of the elements of which it is comprised. Sound, scent, color, light, images and objects are a sampling of installation art elements.

The first object placed in *Memory Museum* was a letter, signed by Coretta Scott King and each of her children, expressing gratitude for the condolences sent from Jenner students at the passing of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. The framed letter was anchored to a bulletin board and sur-

rounded by portrait photos of past and present students of Jenner School. Then a teacher's desk and chair, student chairs and a small wastebasket were brought in and whitewashed to blend with the walls. Students were also invited to draw on the whitened chalkboards with ebony pencils.

Levels of interest with regard to the installation varied as the school year unfolded. At one point, the *Memory Museum* served as a meeting place for an artist-in-residency program focused on video documentation.

In March we took a field trip to Gallery 312 in Chicago to view an exhibition of installation work by local artists. This experience gave us a common conceptual springboard from which we could discuss ideas for *Memory Museum*.

The following week students roamed the school with Polaroid cameras documenting objects and spaces they want to remember from the "old" Jenner School. Then we began scavenging through vacant classrooms for "artifacts" such as vintage educational materials, old textbooks, science activity kits, maps, bookcases, forgotten graduation gowns and anything else that wasn't bolted down. In time, we realized the need to create special divisions within the installation so we began collecting cabinet and closet doors, unscrewing them from their frames with the hinges attached. This mismatched collection of doors was reassembled as a wall, filled with recessed areas for displays and small-scale installations.

The installation took shape as we worked collaboratively in small groups or individually in areas that personally interested us most. Eventually every nook and cranny, every wall surface, cabinet, closet and drawer, was filled with the potential for visual exploration. What was once an empty whitewashed shell of a room was now a highly embellished, deeply expressive, student-centered collaborative installation dedicated to a school community in transition.



The *Memory Museum* commemorated an important transition in the school's history. Using the concept of generative themes (see the Words section in The Power of Advertising project), any installation project needs to identify an important issue to investigate in the school and community. Such varied issues as nutrition and junk food in the school, youth violence, recycling, or community attitudes toward standardized testing could become the basis for visually and intellectually stimulating installation art works that could deeply engage students and community members.

Teachers might wish to compare installation art with contemporary and traditional ofrendas, commemorative altars made by Mexicans and Mexican Americans for Dia de los Muertos, Day of the Dead.