

Jeff Mather

Site Sculpture Study Guide

Program Description

Jeff Mather's **Site Sculpture** residencies engage students in an investigation of spatial perception and environmental awareness. Jeff presents three dimensional design as an art form that is involved in many careers; architecture; interior design; landscape architecture; engineering; and public art. Student teams create a collaborative, community-based work of art that is site responsive.

Design Phase: Jeff's unique approach to coaching design collaboration begins with an introduction to perspective drawing that emphasizes muscle memory. He often uses juggling clubs to dramatize his ideas about the physicality of design. These perspective drawing skills are then transferred to the computer lab. Students import digital site photos, that they have taken themselves, into a paint program (virtually any one will suffice) and design environmental structures that alter and enhance the space in the view. They may save multiple 'frames' as they work so that these saved files may be sequenced in a slide show or animation. Samples of these altered images may also be printed and mounted for an exhibit. A working drawing for construction is made from a combination of elements from the proposal sketches.

Fabrication Phase: Students learn to measure materials and layout the construction site. They actually do every step of the building process themselves and learn to use a range of tools. (The only tools they won't be permitted to use themselves are power saws.) On an outdoor sculpture project they develop teamwork skills working together to dig footings, mix concrete, sand, drill, bolt, and paint/stain the structure. The 'unveiling' or 'ribbon cutting' presentation at the culmination of the project is an important and integral part of the process. Jeff will coach a group of student musicians to create original 'space' music to present as part of the closing ceremony.

Artist Bio

Jeff is a community-based artist and has conducted over 125 residencies in educational settings since 1990. He has a BA degree from Hobart College in Proxemics, the study of space as language. Proxemics is a branch of anthropology. Jeff is best known as a site sculptor, however many of the site generated projects that he directs involve cross-disciplinary collaborations with performing artists, too. He was commissioned to direct a public art project for Art in Freedom Park in Atlanta and was also commissioned by the Fulton County Public Art Program to direct an environmental art program for Ocee Park. Jeff is a member of Alternate Roots. He has served as a teaching artist for the Georgia Council for the Arts since 1990. He also serves on the board of directors of the Atlanta Partnership for Arts in Learning (APAL), an arts infusion program founded in 2001.

Background on Art Form

Site Sculpture is the term used to designate sculpture projects that have a clear relationship with a particular place. Sometimes also called Environmental Sculpture, this art form has its beginnings in prehistoric, pre-architectural, manmade structures and megalithic spaces such as Stonehenge. Recent art history has seen the field of sculpture move away from discrete object production and become increasingly engaged with other artforms. Site artists often work with a diverse team of collaborators, including performing artists and multi-generational community groups. Many site sculptors, (including Jeff), do not come out of a studio art tradition. Important artists in this field include: Christo & Jeanne-Claude; Maya Lin; Andy Goldsworthy; George Trakas; and Athena Tacha.

Pre/Post Activities

Warm Up Questions for engaging students:

What is sculpture?

What does the 'D' in 3D stand for?

What is collaboration and who does it?

Do space and time vary from culture to culture?

Have you seen public art nearby or when traveling?

Can drawing be used for communication —how?

Is there a particular site, or place, here at our school that 'needs' art?

Can we describe what we mean when we say 'my community'?

What is public art for?

Warm Up Questions for meeting Standards for "Listening/Speaking/Viewing":

What are some of our class rules for being good listeners?

How do we show someone we appreciate their visit to our school or classroom?

How does being part of an audience help make you a good citizen?

What are some examples of negative audience behavior or attitudes?

Reflection

Jeff's inquiry-based approach to coaching student artists in their collaborations may include time for reflection writing and guided feed-back sessions (sometimes called, 'critiques'). The reflection writing may be journal writing, but it is also used as a design phase 'R & D' (research and development) tool. Collaboration is not an easy thing to do well, so it is always important to stop and reflect, as a group, on how we are choosing to work together. Learning about *how* we make art together is just as important as

knowing *what* we are making. Sharing project documentation is also a great opportunity for reflecting on the learning that is happening.

Additional Activities

- Naming: Spend time (with no talking) walking the sculpture site and then write a poem, song lyric, or one page short story, inspired by the project. The titles of these writings may be suggestions for naming the sculpture.
- Documentation project: Make documenting the residency an integral part of the residency from the start. Have students – and some volunteer parents – take photos and shoot video of every step of the process of designing and building and dedicating the sculpture. Make a project book with drawings, photos and reflection writing.
- Buddy up and make drawings that two, or more, people get to add to. Talk about how it feels to not be in complete control of how the drawing turns out.
- Take digital photos of details of the sculpture, or views of ‘what the sculpture sees’, and print them and use them as the spur for some ‘automatic’ writing. (Automatic writing is ‘speed’ writing, done without regard for spelling, grammar, or punctuation. It can be very liberating.) Mount images and writing together.
- Use the school’s video cam to conduct ‘man-on-the-street’ (kids in the hall) interviews with both project participants and people who weren’t directly involved about their response to the new site art. Broadcast as part of morning announcements.
- Collaboratively “sculpt” your classroom space. Discuss options and then work together to rearrange the furniture and change the lighting, if possible. Does the result change more than just the space?

Vocabulary

Site generated Art – Art that responds to the unique qualities of a particular place. The ‘opposite’ of studio art.

Perspective rendering – indicating spatial movement in drawings by orienting design work towards a vanishing point.

Vanishing Point – an imaginary spot on the horizon where perspective lines converge

Fabrication – Construction of the elements of the sculpture

Collaboration – working to include many people’s ideas

Proxemics – the study of cultural difference in the perception and use of space. Proxemics looks at space as language and develops spatial literacy

Resources for Teachers & Students

The Green Museum (environmental art portal site) http://www.greenmuseum.org/links_index.php

Image Search: search term suggestions: 'Site Sculpture'; 'Environmental Sculpture'; 'Public Art'

Christo and Jeanne-Claude <http://www.christojeanneclaude.net/>

Women Environmental Artists Directory <http://www.weadartists.org/artists.html>

Community Arts Network <http://www.communityarts.net/index.php>

Jeff's artist page on facebook: www.facebook.com/mathersiteart

Books

Earthworks and Beyond by John Beardsley

Collaborating With Nature by Andy Goldsworthy

SITE: Architecture as Art by Restany and Zevi

Sculpting With the Environment by Baile Oakes

Universal Patterns by Newman and Boles

Art & Physics by Leonard Shalin

The Language of Space by Bryan Lawson

Shaping Space by Zelanski and Fisher

Sacred Geometry by Miranda Lundy

Overlay: Contemporary Art and the Art of Prehistory by Lucy Lippard

Perspective (Eyewitness Books) by Alison Cole

Time and Space (Eyewitness Books) by Mary and John Gribben

DVD's

Rivers and Tides by Andy Goldsworthy

If You Build It (documentary)