

Instinctual Momentum

Lesson Plan

Middle to High School



vanessa german is a citizen artist working at the intersection of sculpture, performance, and photography. Completely self-taught, german reinvents non-traditional materials from her neighborhood, Homewood, Pittsburgh, to create assemblage sculptures she calls “Power Figures.” In the tradition of African retention, the works call upon [Gullah/Geechee](#) power objects and [nkisi nkondi](#) figures from the Kongo peoples (Democratic Republic of the Congo), activating what german refers to as the “technology of the soul.”

vanessa german (b. 1976)
Reality Check: To Call Police Use This Phone, 2013

In the 2013 sculpture *Reality Check: To Call Police Use This Phone*, german evokes the violence that exists in the spaces between communities of color and authority. In an interview on the podcast *Museum Way*, german says, “Institutional racism, which is active every day of the week, twenty-four hours a day, and white privilege, which looks like, every day calling the police for help, and the police turning on you. It looks like me watching the police handcuff eight-year-olds to light poles in my neighborhood.”

The work encourages viewers to confront their assumptions around safety and privilege, and challenges us to question our roles in shaping societal attitudes around the racial disparity of policing.

Objective

Create an assemblage that explores the transformational process of intention and power.

Guiding Prompts

How can art illuminate the importance of caring for our communities and our lives?

How might we use the symbolism found in objects to explore and reflect the change we want to see in the world?

Materials

Several sheets of paper

Writing tool

Yarn

Small scraps of fabric at least 4 in × 4 in

Found objects

Hot glue or similar adhesive

Scissors

Preparation

Engage in a visual inquiry of vanessa german's *Reality Check: To Call Police Use This Phone*

1. On a sheet of paper, make two columns.
2. Label one column "Unbuild" and the other "Build."
3. Under the Unbuild column, write down five things you believe the artist is trying to unbuild in society.
4. Under the Build column, write down five things you believe the artist is trying to build in society.

Now consider all the details of the work and compare with the lists you made. What might each of the elements mean and how does it fit into the whole? Describe how the artist's arrangement of the objects adds to your interpretation of the work.

german considers the title an extension of the work itself. How does the title add to the sculpture's meaning?

What more can be interpreted and understood about the artwork and its elements after engaging with its title?

Vocabulary

Assemblage

A three-dimensional sculpture made from found objects and/or mixed media

Citizen artist

An artist who contributes to society through their art-making practice, at times involving education and social practice

Intention

An aim or purpose

Intuition

The ability to understand instinctively (or feeling in the gut rather than thinking with the brain)

Power object

A vessel through which to influence everyday life

Sculpture

A three-dimensional work of art that can be experienced from all sides

Symbol

A shape, object, mark, or sign that represents or stands in for a word, idea, or concept

Method

Central to German's practice is the guidance of intuition or what the artist calls "the technology of the soul." Intuition can be described as the knowledge stored deep in our bodies that we access both consciously and unconsciously. Can you think of a time when intuition guided you? How did it feel to trust in this form of knowledge?

Begin the process of creating a living work of art that will hold the power of your intentions with the following steps:

1. Cut a sheet of 8 ½ × 11 paper into five strips.
2. On each of the strips, write down one thing you would like to build in this world.
3. Collect objects for your sculpture. Allow the intention of the things you would like to build guide your selections. If you feel stuck, pick an object in your favorite color.
4. Choose a central object for your assemblage. This object will act as a base for the others.
5. Consider the relationships between the intentions you wrote down and your objects. How are they in conversation with one another?
6. Place the remaining objects on or around the central object. Feel your intuition signaling when they are in the right place.
7. When you are ready, glue the objects where they belong on the central object.
8. Take one of the intention strips and fold it into a smaller size.
9. Place a piece of fabric on the palm of your hand and put the folded strip in the middle.
10. Tightly wrap the fabric around the folded strip to create a bundle.
11. Using yarn, swaddle the fabric until it is secure and tie a knot; leave enough yarn to hang the swaddle bead on your sculpture.
12. Repeat steps 8–11 for all your intention strips; you should be left with five swaddle beads.
13. Lastly, hang the intention swaddle beads on your assemblage sculpture.

"I believe in the power of art and I believe in the power of love and I don't always distinguish between the two."
–vanessa german

Reflection

In what ways does this sculpture hold the power of the intention you are trying to build?

How did it feel to trust yourself through the process of making?

vanessa german went from making individual power figures to making entire communities; how might you add figures to increase the awareness of your intentions?

What would your community look like?

How can creating works of art lead us to a more just future?

Additional information on German's practice

["vanessa german, A Force of LOVE," *Museum Way Podcast*, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, 2019.](#)

[vanessa german, "Why I Believe in the Healing Power of Art," *Connection*, 2017.](#)



vanessa german (b. 1976)
Reality Check: To Call Police Use This Phone, 2013
Mixed-media assemblage
46 × 24 × 14 in.
The Studio Museum in Harlem; bequest of Peggy Cooper Cafritz
(1947–2018), Washington, DC collector, educator, and activist
2018.40.98