

# MUSINGS

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BY ROSE OLURONKE OJO

As I walked to work one beautiful day last spring, it became apparent that neither my students nor I would want to spend it stuck inside our windowless classroom. I decided that it was a perfect day for a field trip to Chelsea, where we could visit some of the exhibitions on view.

When we finally emerged from the Twenty-third Street train station, I smiled apologetically at my students. Weekend construction had not only made our trip longer but also contradicted what I had told them earlier about New York City being only thirty minutes away. "It's worth the journey, guys," I kept repeating, as we found our bodies in contorted, yoga like positions in the overcrowded train for a full two hours.

Despite the transportation, the point of the trip was clear: that in order to engage in active looking, they had to journey out of the ten-block radius surrounding their homes. I wanted them to understand the importance of getting a better sense of the world by not settling for what is immediately available. I felt that as budding artists and curators, they had to challenge the popular-culture notion that art is purely decorative and irrelevant. I tried to show them that artists, in fact, are often viewed as visionaries.

This was not the first time that my students had been to a gallery. Prior to this field trip, I had taken them to New Jersey and New York City to visit exhibitions that featured artists whose work ranged from the political to the obscure. But this excursion would prove to be one of the most thought provoking, one that grappled with the complexities and sensitivities of a show featuring the work of several feminist artists.

We entered the gallery space and our eyes were greeted by sculptural forms made out of pantyhose, a reminder of my own exploration with the material as an art student. Wanting to share my experience as a broke but passionate art student, I turned to find a confidant. I noticed one of my kids amble toward a large photograph located in the back of the gallery. I watched him as he moved closer to examine a particular part of the image.

I began to congratulate myself for choosing to venture out to Chelsea and wondered if there were awards given to high school art teachers for pedagogic ingenuity. I then recognized the image he had been scrutinizing: a reclining nude female covered with snakes, created by a well-known performance artist. The student's gaze was directed toward the center of the image where, conve-

niently, the subject's crotch was positioned in full view, her legs slightly parted.

As he turned to look at me, I saw the deer-caught-in-the-headlights expression on his face, which reminded me of the look my little cousin made when I caught him watching an X-rated movie. I glanced at the piece and tried to remember the main reason why I thought it was important for the students to see this show. Feigning confidence, I began my oft-repeated monologue about nudity in art. After seeing his beet red face, however, I momentarily forgot what I wanted to say. I looked around the exhibition space for inspiration and caught a glimpse of another student standing forlornly in the middle of the gallery.

Questions began to explode in my mind like fireworks: Should I have warned the students earlier? Why do I need to warn students about nudity when magazines and music videos bombard them with images of partially clothed women every day? And what exactly is the difference between a nude woman featured in an exhibition and one in popular media? Should I have provided a more in-depth background about feminist art prior to our visit, thereby giving the proper context in which to view the art?

During our debriefing session at lunch, I spoke with my students about the differences between the images of nude women featured in the exhibition and what is shown in magazines and on music videos. We talked about the importance of understanding the artist's intention and how its meaning could be misconstrued when seen outside of the original context.

Later, as my students and I walked toward the subway, I was sideswiped by a large designer bag that swung violently on a woman's shoulder. When I looked down at the offending parcel, I noticed the trendy Rasta colors that decorated its handle.

"Oops, sorry," she said giggling. She flicked her strawberry blond hair over her right shoulder in order to better balance the bag on her left and paraded on toward her parked BMW.

I then glanced at her male companion, who happened to be wearing a faded Che Guevara T-shirt. I winced as I heard a popular song blast from her car radio, an anthem celebrating the importance of living luxuriously.

During our train ride back, the image of the designer bag plagued my mind. Although I was satisfied with the galleries and enjoyed the debriefing session, my run-in with the Radical Chic posterchild forced me to wonder whether context—particularly for visual art in which the intention is to evoke and question the status quo—is necessary for the viewer to find value. If so, does this lessen the artwork's ability to transform and affect? More importantly, *did the woman's boyfriend even know who Che Guevara was?*

Many of the feminist artists used iconic imagery found in Western art and popular culture to highlight the disparity between the treatment of males and females in society. Although my students were shocked to find how graphic some of the images were, they understood why the artists had used them in their work. Thankfully, they knew that, regardless of the intention behind the appropriation of something, the appropriator should at least be aware of its original meaning. "Now," I thought, as I walked off the train satisfied with the day's activities, "if only I could convince some of my other students to stop calling their friends bitches, hoes, and, of course, the N-word." ❏