NSEADcreate – case study #4

Changing times, changing artists

Tess Hitchcock teaches Visual Arts at the International School of Florence (ISF), a non-profit, co-educational international school (PS-Grade 12) with an innovative academic program for 520 students from 38 different countries. Here she shares how, in response to the pandemic and working remotely, her classes adapted, changed and learned new skills and ideas.

Due to the Covid-19 outbreak, ISF closed their campus to all students and teachers on 4 March 2020. After testing out virtual learning that Friday afternoon, ISF launched an entirely virtual curriculum the following Monday. In this article, Tess focuses specifically on an art history project, and shares her insights into the first month of teaching visual arts online, for two Grades (8 & 9, ages 13-15).

What were we trying to achieve through this unit?

Due to the sudden school closure, most students were unable to bring art supplies home with them – as I began planning the first few weeks of lessons, this left an interesting challenge. I surveyed students, asking what materials they had access to. Most students only had pencils, pens, and paper. It was also important that this first unit would be a new and exciting transition to a virtual format, so I envisioned students using few materials and accessible technology, a combination that we might not have used in the regular classroom setting.

Despite the limitations of equipment and materials, we needed students to keep progressing with the ISF Visual Arts curriculum, and that any project assigned would provide the opportunity to meet the set standards. At ISF, we aspire to build communities of makers and doers by cultivating growth through meaningful and inspiring learning experiences. In order to support that vision in the art 'room', I wanted students to understand the significance of art while simultaneously tapping into their interests and skill-base.

Lady with an Ermine
1489–1490
Painting by Leonardo da Vinci

Eva

COMPOSITION, 1959
Mark Rothko
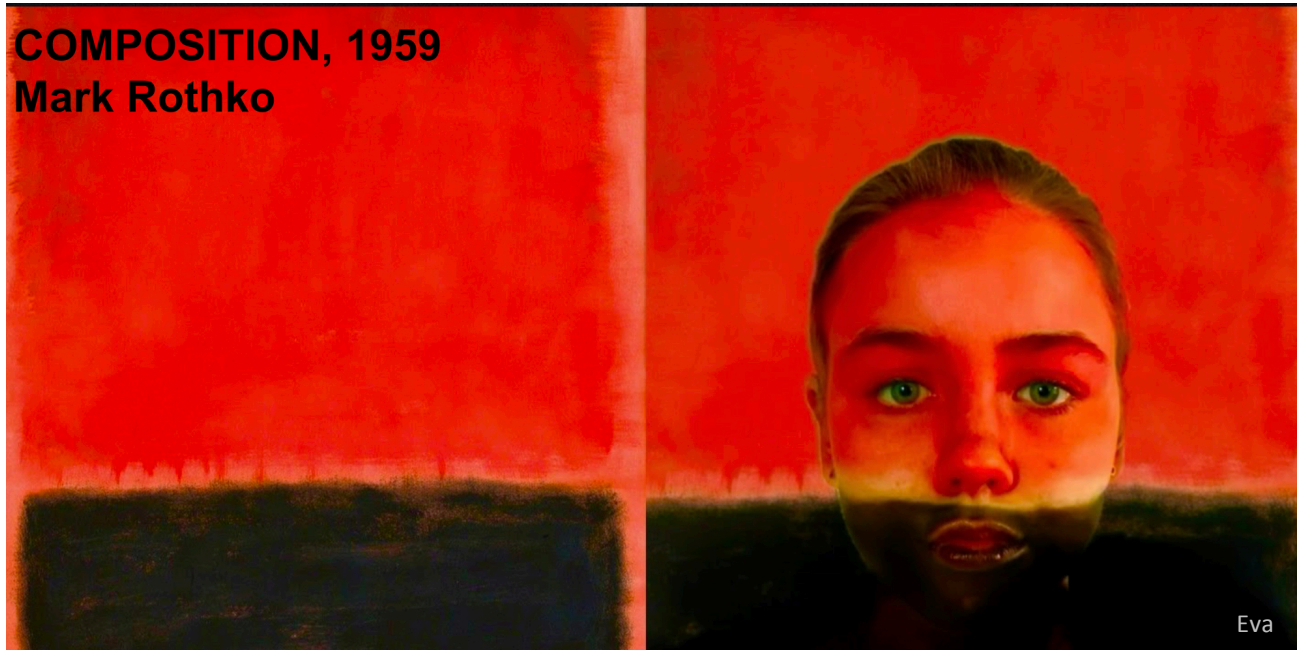
Eva

How did we achieve this online?

The project was initially inspired by @caseylanderkin, who posts art history videos on Tik Tok. Students reacted positively to being asked to create a short Tik Tok-style video in which they reviewed an aspect of art history of their choice. Students were encouraged to survey a wide range of artists, art movements and styles before choosing one to research. After researching their topic, they created short videos to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding. I recorded a Screencastify video for instructions and project overview and shared this in the Google Classroom. Examples were also posted at the start of the assignment, and students were required to 'turn in' their research two days before the video was due, as a checkpoint for understanding. Adjustments were made if a student did not have access to the social-media application, such as using Screencastify or simply filming a one-take video.

The second instalment of the unit was for students to recreate famous works of art at home. I've seen this particular project gain momentum over the last few weeks, and it was a fun and creative follow-up to the research. Examples were posted in the Google classroom and students were encouraged to be as accurate, creative, or humorous as possible.

I noticed that most students had chosen to research and recreate quite historic artists and artworks, none of who are living today. This inspired the extension of the unit to include a Visual Consumers of Art project. Lasting four class periods, students reviewed and reflected on a variety of contemporary artwork practices, news articles, and events that I'd posted in the Classroom. Students responded with their reflections in a private comment.

I made myself available every class period on Google Hangouts and Google Meet for students who needed to ask questions or get feedback in real time. Feedback on work was given in these formats as well as written comments on assignments.

What were the outcomes?

The projects were as open as possible – allowing for more student choice and engagement and ensuring that students were interacting with art that resonated. The tasks were accessible for all levels of ability, although for students needing more support in real time, the optional Google Meets were immensely helpful, providing opportunities to clarifying information. Students were already familiar and excited about the technology, so I found that there were less technical questions than I anticipated.

-A Young Woman Seated at the Virginals-
Johannes Vermeer

Alisiya

Student reflection:
"I found these articles and videos very interesting. [They] opened my eyes to the usefulness of art in the world – it's important for our society. It brings the most powerful joy to people, people who are terminally ill, who simply want to enjoy life, and it will possibly provide a future for our growing population. I think that art is so very ambiguous and has so many different interpretations for each person and so many different possibilities. I found each and every one of these sources to be fascinating and eye opening, each in their own unique way and it made me realise that art has a different meaning for each and every person."

Thoughts as a reflective practitioner:

I struggled with the switch to virtual learning, not because of the difference in delivery, but because it challenged my perception of my role and what I am here to do. My initial reaction was, 'How am I going to teach students these specific skills and techniques if I am not there to show them and if they don't have the materials?' After some reflection and deep breathing, it occurred to me that my job is to excite children about art and this experience can help show my students art's possibilities and purposes. They can always learn how to use a brayer or how to pour resin later; right now I need to ensure that they *want* to learn that skill later.

Alisiya

-Portrait of a Lady with a Rabbit-
Ridolfo Ghirlandaio

Invitation to share:
Please use these ideas! It would be lovely to tag:
@isf_florence
#art_at_isf
#isfvirtuallearning.