

Figuring out art

DURATION: 45-90 minutes

AGES: Participants aged eight and up (NOTE: Both the exercise and questions can be adapted for younger ages by simplifying language)

OBJECTIVES: To improve understanding of art and aesthetics by exploring what counts as artistic expression

MATERIALS:

- » “Squiggle Sketch” handout (next page)
- » Two sheets—one with the label “Yes/Agree” written on it, another with the label “No/Disagree”
- » Long piece of string
- » Participant name tags

STEPS:

1. Give each participant a copy of the “Squiggle Sketch” handout, inviting them to use their own unique perspective to finish the drawing however they want. They can turn the paper to whatever angle they like—there is no right side up. Encourage them to be as creative as they can. Collect the drawings once completed.
2. Sit participants in a circle around a string forming a spectrum from the labels “Agree/Yes” to “Disagree/No.”
3. Proceed through the discussion plan questions below, getting each participant to place their name tag along the spectrum, and provide reasons for their positions. They are free to change their mind and re-position their name tag whenever they want. Spend as much or as little time on each question as the momentum and enthusiasm dictate! Use the thinking prompts (examples, follow-ups) to help advance the group’s ideas.
4. Before finishing the discussion, ask participants to evaluate whether their “Squiggle Sketch” drawings count as art. Help them to compare and contrast their answers.
5. Based on the key points of their discussion, get the group to come up with a definition of art.

DISCUSSION PLAN—QUESTIONS & THINKING PROMPTS:

1. **Can anyone make art?**
(Examples: A baby with a marker, a dog with paint on its feet, etc.; Follow-up: What makes someone an artist?)
2. **Who should decide what makes something art?**
(Examples: An expert, a gallery, a spectator, etc.; Follow-up: What if people disagree on what counts as art?)
3. **Does art have to be original?**
(Counter-examples: A sculpture with found objects, a reproduced painting, a forger’s work; Follow-up: What does it mean for something to be original? Why is originality important in art?)
4. **Can you make art by mistake?**
(Examples: Drawing with your eyes closed, taking a photograph by accident, etc.; Follow-up: Can you find art? Can a part of nature be art?)
5. **Does art need an audience?**
(Follow-up: If you make a drawing and never show anyone, is it art? If you sing alone in your room, is it art?)
6. **Can art be ugly?**
(Examples: A story about a terrible person, medical photography, a dance with strange body movements, etc.; Follow-up: What makes something beautiful? Who should decide?)
7. **Is something art only if you like it?**
(Follow-up: If you make something you do not like but your friends think is beautiful, can it still be art? Is it possible to not like an art work but still be positively affected by it?)
8. **Does art need a purpose?**
(Examples: To express feelings, to challenge thinking, to create beauty, etc.; Follow-up: What might be some examples of art without purpose? Is an art work with purpose better than one without purpose?)

Squiggle Sketch

Name: _____

