

## **LESSON THREE: LEARNING ABOUT SITE-SPECIFIC ART IN PREPARATION FOR VISITING “LEANING KEEP”**

### **OBJECTIVES:**

Students will learn:

- How artists use images to express ideas.
- What installation or site-specific art is.
- About “Leaning Keep,” a site-specific installation sculpture at the Philadelphia Art Alliance.
- About Brian David Dennis, the artist who created “Leaning Keep.”
- How to use the artist as a resource by designing questions for him.
- How to design their own piece of site-specific art.

### **PROCEDURES:**

#### **1. Discuss the way artists use art to express ideas.**

In Lesson 1, students discussed the concept of art as symbolic speech. Review the idea that images convey ideas just as words do. Begin by asking students to think of examples of this. They can be images from advertising, like the Nike Swoosh, images from everyday life, like crucifixes in churches, or pieces of art, like Picasso’s *Guernica*. This discussion will provide the foundation for looking at the ideas in “Leaning Keep.”

#### **2. Introduce the concept of “site-specific” or “installation” art.**

Unlike most painters, sculptors, or other visual artists, installation artists design their works for a specific place. In this way, the space, whether it is a gallery, a park, a museum, or even a hallway, becomes part of the object the artist creates. Because installation art is so dependent on the environment in which it is placed, the artwork loses meaning once it is removed and can even end up getting destroyed in the process.

Ask students to think of examples of site-specific art in Philadelphia. This could include murals, mosaics, or public sculpture. Does graffiti count as site-specific art?

#### **3. Introduce Brian David Dennis’ “Leaning Keep.”**

Show students a picture of “Leaning Keep,” and have them read the artist’s statement in the student handout at the end of this lesson plan. Discuss these questions:

Can you imagine wood, kraft paper, mylar, and metal leaf being used to express ideas about freedom of expression and liberty? How could this be done effectively?

If someone likes the sculpture but doesn’t understand the ideas the artist was trying to convey, is the piece still effective?

Does the impermanence of the piece make it more or less special?

How do you think the artist figured out the engineering for this piece?

#### **4. Ask students to generate questions for the artist.**

These questions can be about the artist's ideas, materials, techniques, history, or anything else students want to know about being an artist or the artistic process. While students should take care not to be rude, they should feel free to ask things they are genuinely curious about. Make sure students bring these questions when they visit the Art Alliance, as well as pencil and blank paper for taking notes.

#### **4. Ask students to create ideas for their own site-specific sculptures.**

Break students into small groups. Have each group create an idea for a site-specific sculpture for a place somewhere in the school, using the "Site-Specific Sculpture at Your School" handout at the end of this lesson plan. Each group should present its idea to the class in both visual and verbal format.

#### **EVALUATION:**

This lesson is successful if:

- Students are prepared to visit "Leaning Keep" and to meet the artist who created it.
- Students understand and are able to use the concept of installation art.
- Students are prepared to evaluate how well a piece of art expresses an idea.
- Students understand how they can create a piece of art to express their own ideas.

# **BRIAN DAVID DENNIS AND “LEANING KEEP”**

## **Brian David Dennis**

Brian David Dennis is an installation artist who lives and works in Philadelphia. He creates objects that become environments or rooms to walk into or around. Often, Brian David Dennis’ art installation pieces become so much part of the space they are constructed in that they must be destroyed in order to be removed.

Dennis attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and has had many solo shows of his work since graduating. He and has also won several prestigious awards and grants.

## **“Leaning Keep”**

”Leaning Keep” is a temporary installation sculpture Dennis built between the first and second floors of the Philadelphia Art Alliance building. Incorporating the stairs and the stained glass window located on the mezzanine level, Dennis erected a series of support beams that hold a thin screen of kraft paper, mylar, and metal leaf in front of the window. This screen obstructs the light that normally enters the stairwell through the stained glass, metaphorically posing the question to the viewer, "Can the light of liberty shine at all if it is shrouded in security measures?"

Inspired by his concerns about freedom of expression, Dennis addresses many issues with his installation sculpture:

- The link between personal expression and democracy
- The new politics of liberty and democracy in post-9/11 society
- The erosion of the First Amendment
- The effort to gain safety and security by constructing a temporary environment

Dennis feels these timely issues face not only artists but every citizen.

## **This is what Brian David Dennis wrote about “Leaning Keep:”**

When I began making “Leaning Keep,” it was important to me to use the space, not as a display space, but as part of the work. My initial reaction to the space was to oppose the vast amount of light streaming in through the window. The light was a force I was challenged by. I disliked its overwhelming presence, its singularity of direction, its complete command of the space. As an example of human arrogance, I chose to battle it.

Leaning Keep physically references a variety of sources: solar sails/reflectors, billboards, and most predominately, the practice of boarding up windows to protect them from bomb blasts. Leaning Keep speaks directly to the urge to protect valued objects from malicious destruction. The final reference allows me to illustrate the conflict between liberty and security. In doing so I found myself asking a lot of questions:

Could the light of liberty shine if it is at all shrouded in security measures?

Could we draw a line between personal freedoms and national security?

If so, could we do so without violating liberty as an ideal?

What becomes of art when is restricted or even removed from the public discourse?



## **SITE-SPECIFIC ARTWORK AT YOUR SCHOOL**

You have discussed site-specific art: art that is designed to go in a specific place, and may actually use that place as an integral part of the artwork. You have also discussed the way art can express ideas. In this project, you will design a work of art that does both.

### **YOUR TASK IS TO DESIGN A SITE-SPECIFIC WORK OF ART THAT:**

- Would go in a location somewhere at your school, either indoors or outdoors.
- Clearly expresses an opinion you have. It could be about a political issue, a policy at your school that you want to support or to protest, or something else.

### **YOU WILL NEED TO COMMUNICATE YOUR IDEA TO THE REST OF THE CLASS BY:**

- Explaining it.
- Making a drawing and/or a model of it.

Remember: A picture is worth a thousand words!

### **YOUR WORK OF ART SHOULD:**

- Be something someone could actually make, even though you will not make it now as part of this project.
- Be exciting to look at as a work of art.
- Communicate your idea clearly.

### **FOLLOW THESE STEPS:**

- Brainstorm ideas for what you would like your piece to communicate.
- Choose your favorite one.
- Brainstorm ideas about what your piece could be and where it could go. Remember, with site-specific art, you can't think about one of these things without considering the other.
- Choose your favorite idea.
- Develop this idea. Keep thinking of ways you can make it better and better.
- Make a VISUAL way you can communicate your idea to your classmates, through a drawing or a model.

### **YOU WILL BE EVALUATED ON:**

- How clearly your proposed artwork would communicate your idea.
- How effective your proposed artwork would be as a piece of art.

- How well you communicate what your artwork would be.

**ENJOY THIS CHANCE TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO USE ART TO  
MAKE A STATEMENT AT YOUR SCHOOL!**