

# **LESSON FOUR: VISITING “LEANING KEEP” AND MEETING ARTIST BRIAN DAVID DENNIS**

## **OBJECTIVES:**

Students will learn:

- To look at a piece of art in depth by keeping a looking log.
- To think critically about the art work.
- To evaluate whether the artwork meets its goals.
- To have a dialogue with an artist about his work.
- To compare different artistic responses to political events.
- To reflect on their experience, in a discussion or by writing essays.

## **PROCEDURES:**

### **1. Prepare students for their visit to the Art Alliance.**

Review students’ questions from Lesson 3 to prepare them for a discussion about “Leaning Keep” with the artist who made it. Make sure students bring their questions as well as blank paper and a pencil for taking notes.

Explain to students that, despite the Art Alliance’s homey atmosphere, they need to observe the same behavior they would in any museum or art gallery. The most important thing is to be respectful of the artwork and others who are viewing it. This means not eating, drinking, or chewing gum, and not making noise that will distract others.

### **2. At the Art Alliance, an associate will introduce students to the place.**

The Philadelphia Art Alliance is the oldest multi-disciplinary art center in the United States. It used to be the home of theater aficionado and philanthropist Christine Wetherill Stevenson (1878 - 1922), who founded the Art Alliance in 1915. The Art Alliance exhibits art work and hosts music concerts, poetry readings, lectures, and dance performances.

### **3. While touring “Leaning Keep,” students should keep a “looking log.”**

Since sculpture looks different from every direction, and since “Leaning Keep” is a sculpture you can walk through, students should tour the whole sculpture by seeing it from the bottom, seeing it as they walk up the stairs, and seeing it from the top. Students should keep a looking log as they go.

A looking log is a moment-to-moment journal of one’s experience of looking at something. Students should record all of their reactions to the piece as they go through it: thoughts, questions, ideas, things they like and don’t like, things they don’t understand, and insights. The point of a looking log is to slow down and heighten the experience of seeing, rather than to create a finished piece of writing. It’s like a stream of consciousness on a particular topic. In addition to changing students’ experience of seeing, the looking log will be a useful record for them to refer back to for future discussion and/or writing assignments.

**4. After students have had their own experience of “Leaning Keep,” they will have a chance to talk to the artist.**

Brian David Dennis will give a short presentation about his work. He will discuss how the piece expresses his position on freedom of expression, and will explain how he created the installation. Then students can ask the questions they have prepared, or new questions. They will have a chance to talk to Dennis about conceptual, political, technical, and artistic issues. Guide the discussion to make sure students have a chance to truly engage with Dennis. Respectful disagreement is as productive as positive feedback.

**5. After their visit to “Leaning Keep,” students may tour the other exhibits that are up at the Art Alliance.**

These shows include:

Tamar Hirschl: *Fragmented Memories*: Mixed media and works on paper exploring destruction and rebirth, war and recuperation, adaptation, and shifting cultural identities.

*Havanah: The Revolutionary Moment*: Photographs by Burt Glinn recording Fidel Castro’s historic entry into Havana in 1959.

Nicholas Arroyave-Portela: *Throwing Lines*: New ceramic vessels based on bowls and vases.

Samantha Simpson: *Lush Life*: A mural based on the medieval concept of the Bestiary that uses animals and insects native to Philadelphia.

Like “Leaning Keep,” *Fragmented Memories* and *Havana: The Revolutionary Moment* are artistic responses to political situations. You may want to ask your students to pay special attention to these shows, and to make them part of your post-visit reflection.

**6. After their visit to the Art Alliance, ask students to reflect on their experience with “Leaning Keep.”**

Here are some possible questions for discussion or for essay topics:

How was seeing the piece in person different than or the same as reading about it? Is there anything about it that surprised you?

What did you learn from meeting with Brian David Dennis? Did anything he said change your ideas about “Leaning Keep”?

Dennis did not use any direct references or symbols (such as the American flag) to express the concept of freedom of expression. In what other ways has he expressed ideas about freedom of expression, liberty, security, and censorship?

Do you think Dennis is trying to express his frustration with possible limits on freedom of expression? Or do you think he believes we must give up some of our liberties in order to increase our security?

How well do you think Dennis has communicated his ideas with his art installation?

Do you think “Leaning Keep” is beautiful? Do you think it matters whether it is or not?

Like “Leaning Keep,” *Fragmented Memories* and *Havana: The Revolutionary Moment* are artistic responses to political situations. How would you compare the way these artists addressed political issues with the way Brian David Dennis did?

Do you think art is an effective way to express an opinion or idea? Why or why not ?

**EVALUATION:**

This lesson is successful if:

- Students use their looking logs to look at “Leaning Keep” in depth.
- Students think critically about “Leaning Keep” and evaluate whether this work meets its goals.
- Students truly engage in a dialogue with Brian David Dennis about their thoughts, ideas, and questions about “Leaning Keep.”
- Students truly engage in a dialogue with Brian David Dennis about other things they would like to know about art and art making.
- Students thoughtfully compare “Leaning Keep” with other works at the Art Alliance which are also artistic responses to political events.
- Students synthesize their experience by reflecting on it in a discussion or by writing essays.