WHAT IS CONTEMPORARY ART?

A Guide for Kids

Jacky Klein and Suzy Klein

MoMA
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**A SPLASH OF COLOR**

**SOMETHING BLUE HAS SMEARED ITSELF ACROSS THIS PIECE OF PAPER. WHAT COULD IT HAVE BEEN?**

The artist Yves Klein was obsessed with just one color: blue. He worked with a chemist to develop his own brand of paint, which he called International Klein Blue. It had a particularly bright and intense color. He applied the paint to his pictures using rollers, sponges, and even people! This work is part of a series in which Klein used naked female models as “living paintbrushes.” The women were covered in blue paint and lay down on large sheets of paper, rolling around or dragging each other as directed by the artist. The body prints created by these “performances” made surprising shapes and patterns.

Omafur Eliaason likes to use the widest variety of colors he can find for his artworks. In the past he has created a giant orange indoor sun, made a real rainbow in a gallery, and dyed a river green. This block of “prints” shows us the complete range of colors the human eye can see, from deep violet at the top left corner to dark red at the bottom right. Eliaason wants us to think about how each one of us sees colors differently. Our understanding or perception of color depends on our memories and emotions, even our family background and which country we come from. When you look at the grid, which green seems most like an apple to you, and which is most like broccoli? Do your friends choose the same colors as you?

**Yves Klein, Anthropometry: Princess Helena, 1961**

**A WORLD OF COLOR**

Throughout history, colors have always had particular associations. Red can mean love or danger, blue often symbolizes loyalty, wisdom, or truth. Olive green is traditionally the color of peace, while dark green is associated with greed and jealousy. Imagine your favorite color: what does it make you think of, and how does it make you feel?

**Olafur Eliaason, The colour spectrum series, 2005**
SOMETIMES SIMPLE, EVERYDAY MATERIALS CAN CREATE DAZZLING WORKS OF ART.

This light sculpture was made by the artist Dan Flavin using fluorescent tubes that he attached to the wall. Flavin liked to work with standard light bulbs that he could buy in a regular hardware store. The bulbs offered him a new material for his art, and a fixed system of shapes and colors that he found he could adapt into countless different arrangements. This sculpture gives off a bright white light, but if you look closely, the wall around it also seems to shine. Can you spot the delicate halo all around the edge? What effect do you think this has on the artwork?

FIVE SHAPES, TEN COLORS

Dan Flavin used a very limited range of bulbs in his work, even though many more were available. He chose just five shapes (a circular bulb and four straight ones of varying lengths) and only ten colors (red, blue, green, pink, yellow, ultraviolet, and four different shades of white).

This work by Bruce Nauman is like a poem written in light. Nauman makes letters out of glass neon tubes, which can be bent into any shape he wants. Neon is bright and eye-catching, and is often used to advertise places such as beauty parlors or fast-food restaurants. But Nauman isn’t trying to sell us a product. Instead, he uses flashing neon to create words that ask us to look deep inside ourselves. What do you desire, need, or hope for?
BIZARRE BEASTS

TAKE A LOOK AT THESE STRANGE CREATURES. WHAT DO YOU THINK THEY COULD BE?

Nicolas Lampert’s hybrid beast is part animal, part machine. His chameleon on a tank is one of a series of fantasy photographs that also includes a stag fused with a train, and a praying mantis combined with a crane. Lampert pairs natural and mechanical forms to show the uncanny similarities between them. Here, both the chameleon and the tank are armor-plated, slow, and predatory.

Have you ever seen one of these before? It’s unlikely—because Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera have dreamed up another imaginary creature. They have photographically manipulated images to create animals that might be mistaken for specimens from a natural history museum. They call this beast Alopex Stultus, which translates as stupid wolf or fox, and they imagine it having the ability to camouflage itself as a shrub!

MACHINE ANIMALS
Nicolas Lampert selects images from his own library of photocopies, then cuts and pastes them together by hand to make his machine–animal “collages.” He wants his images to look like they might be “a relic from the past, a lost scientific manual, or... a design for the future.” Lampert loves animals and his art is a reaction to the destructive impact of both humans and machines on nature.

“The heart [of my work]... remains the questioning of photographic truth. Be careful, be critical, doubt.... This would be my advice.”

Joan Fontcuberta

Nicolas Lampert, Very Slow, Very Tired, 2006

Joan Fontcuberta and Pere Formiguera, Alopex Stultus, 1985–88
**LINE UP**

**DO YOU THINK THESE COLORFUL LINES ARE LEAPING UP OR FLOWING DOWN?**

To make this painting, the artist Morris Louis leaned the canvas against a wall and poured down streams of color. He made sure the lines didn’t smudge or blur into each other, but he was famously secretive about his painting technique and nobody knows quite how he did it. Louis left a lot of his canvas bare on purpose, so that the bright colors really jump out. It’s the white space, as much as the lines, that make this painting so dramatic.

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**THE “UNFURLED”**

Louis made more than one hundred line paintings like this. They were huge—so big that it was impossible for him to completely unfurl the canvases in his dining room, which doubled as his studio. At the time, there weren’t many art galleries big enough for them either, so only two were seen in public during the artist’s lifetime. Louis called these paintings the “Unfurleds.”

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**The Spanish artist Eduardo Chillida also played with the relationship between lines and the space around them. In this drawing, he used black ink, which he applied to paper with a brush to create a group of chunky lines. Chillida is best known for his massive sculptures made from iron, steel, wood, or granite, and the black lines here are similar to the thick interlocking shapes he used in his sculpture. Chillida loved to experiment with solid shapes and empty voids. As he said, “my whole work is a journey of discovery in space.” The power of this drawing comes from the interplay between the “positive” space of the black lines and the “negative” space of the blank paper.**

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**Daniel Buren started making striped artworks in 1966. Almost all of his work features vertical lines of exactly the same width: three-and-a-half inches, or about as wide as an adult’s hand. This painting on white-and-gray-striped cloth sits directly on the gallery floor. But Buren wants his distinctive lines to appear all over the place, not just in art galleries. He has planted striped rows of tulips, designed striped sails for boats, and even put his stripes on the outside of famous buildings, such as the Palais Royal in Paris. What’s the most unusual thing you could imagine covering with stripes?**
SEEING DOUBLE

CLAES OLDENBURG’S DOUBLE
CHEESEBURGER SEEMS GOOD ENOUGH TO EAT—BUT LOOK TWICE!

These juicy burgers might appear to be real, but they’re made of thick cloth covered in hard painted plaster. They were created by Claes Oldenburg, who loves to make soft things in hard materials and hard things in soft materials. Oldenburg is a “Pop artist” who is inspired by popular and commercial culture. Here, he celebrates America’s favorite food with two burgers at nearly double their normal size. Does this doubling make them more or less appealing?

REMAKING THE EVERYDAY

Oldenburg has made lots of sculptures based on real objects, including lipsticks and tubes of toothpaste. He often experiments with size and materials, once even sticking a giant melting ice cream made of steel on top of a German shopping mall. Rather than copying everyday things exactly, he transforms and re-imagine them.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres chose another everyday item to double up. He took two matching battery-operated clocks and started them at exactly the same time. No two batteries are identical, however, so one of the clocks will slow down first and fall out of time with the other. Gonzalez-Torres made this work when he found out that his close friend Ross was seriously ill. He knew that, like the clocks, he and Ross would eventually fall out of sync. His clocks make us think about the strong bonds that exist between people who love each other, and about how the seconds and minutes of all our lives pass by.

This portrait might make you do a double-take: it’s a photograph of identical twins. Judith Joy Ross took the picture as part of a project she carried out at her old school in Pennsylvania. Going back there reminded her of her own childhood, and made her think about how we all change as we grow up. These two sisters may look alike, but there are already many differences between them. How many can you spot?

“When I look at somebody I think about their past and what their future could be, as well as what I’m seeing right now.”

Judith Joy Ross

Claes Oldenburg, Two Cheeseburgers, with Everything (Dual Hamburgers), 1962

Felix Gonzalez-Torres, “Untitled” (Perfect Lovers), 1991

PLAYING GAMES

JEFF KOONS HAS SUSPENDED THREE BASKETBALLS IN A GLASS CASE HALF FILLED WITH WATER. WHAT’S HE PLAYING AT?

This is one of a series of tanks Jeff Koons made for an exhibition he called “Equilibrium,” meaning balance. Exactly half of each ball is under water, and Koons worked with several scientists to achieve this effect. He has taken a popular, ordinary object—a basketball—and turned it into something extraordinary and worthy of our attention in a museum.

This pair of “abstract” prints was created by the German artist Blinky Palermo. Called Flöpper, it takes its name from the German word for pinball, which Palermo loved to play. The red, white, and blue geometric pattern copies the design on the pinball machine at his local café. In the left-hand panel, the blue lines have been removed. What effect does this have on the artwork as a whole?

RULE-BREAKING

What’s your favorite game? The artists here were all inspired by a sport or a hobby. In each case they have either changed the game or broken its rules to create their artworks.

Gabriel Orozco has made an art out of re-imagining games, inventing a billiard table without pockets and a ping-pong game featuring a lily pond. Here, he has created his own version of chess. His board is four times the normal size and uses four colors instead of just black and white. Orozco has also left out all of the pieces except for the knights, or horses, so the usual rules of the game have disappeared. His chessboard is no longer a competitive battlefield but a landscape of the imagination.
**ARTISTS’ BIOGRAPHIES**

**VITO ACCONCI** (American, born 1940)  
Famous for: Sculpture, video, and performance art, especially an early performance piece in which he followed strangers through the streets of New York  
Fascinating fact: Accocci’s father made bathtubs for a living.

**FRANCIS ALYS** (Belgian, born 1959)  
Famous for: Conceptual and performance art, which often revolves around walking  
Fascinating fact: Aliss once got five hundred volunteers to move an entire sand dune by just a few inches, in the desert outside Lima, Peru.

**JANINE ANTONI** (Bahamian, born 1964)  
Famous for: Performances that involve her own body, including sculpting portraits of herself from chocolate and soap  
Fascinating fact: Antoni spent her childhood in Freeport in the Bahamas where she loved to make sandcastles on the beach.

**MARTÍN AZUÁ (Spanish, born 1965)**  
Famous for: Ingenious environmental designs  
Fascinating fact: Arzúa designed the medals for the 2003 World Swimming Championships, including a transparent, bubble-filled swimming medal.

**JOSEPH BEUYS** (German, 1921–86)  
Famous for: Installations using fat and felt  
Fascinating fact: Beuys almost always wore the same outfit: jeans, a felt hat, and a fishing vest.

**LEE BONTECOU** (American, born 1931)  
Famous for: Wall-mounted sculptures made from welded steel frames and found objects  
Fascinating fact: Bontecou’s father and uncle invented the world’s first aluminum canoe.

**LOUISE BOURGEOIS** (American, born France, 1911–2010)  
Famous for: Sculptures and installations, especially her giant spider sculptures  
Fascinating fact: Bourgeois loved cooking, and one of her favorite foods was oxtail stew.

**MARCEL BROODTHAERS** (Belgian, 1924–76)  
Famous for: Artworks made using eggs and mussel shells  
Fascinating fact: Broodthaers once interviewed a cat about its views on contemporary art.

**CHRIS BURDEN** (American, born 1946)  
Famous for: Performance art, especially his early work that placed him in extreme physical danger  
Fascinating fact: Burden created a performance piece while in college which involved him spending five days and nights inside a gym locker.

**DANIEL BUREN** (French, born 1938)  
Famous for: Stripped artworks  
Fascinating fact: Buren has designed striped scarves for the French fashion house Hermès.

**JAMES LEE BYARS** (American, 1922–97)  
Famous for: Mysterious performances, installations, and objects made from gold, glass, and stone  
Fascinating fact: Byars often dressed in a gold suit and top hat.

**VIIJA CEMINS** (American, born Latvia 1938)  
Famous for: Detailed paintings and drawings of the night sky, the sea, and spiders’ webs  
Fascinating fact: When Celmins was young, her mother drew a picture of a pantry for her. Today, Celmins surrounds herself with the flowers to remind her of her mother.

**JOHN CHAMBERLAIN** (American, 1927–2011)  
Famous for: Sculptures made from crushed cars  
Fascinating fact: Chamberlain trained as a hairdresser and makeup artist before becoming a sculptor.

**EDUARDO CHILLIDA** (Spanish, 1924–2002)  
Famous for: Large abstract sculptures made from steel or iron  
Fascinating fact: As a young man, Chillida was the goalkeeper for the Spanish soccer team Real Sociedad, but had to retire because of a knee injury.

**CHUCK CLOSE** (American, born 1940)  
Famous for: Large-scale portraits based on photographs  
Fascinating fact: Close has a condition known as “face blindness,” or prosopagnosia, where he finds it impossible to recognize people’s faces.

**JOHN COPLANS** (British, 1920–2003)  
Famous for: Black-and-white photographs of his own naked body  
Fascinating fact: Coplans was a fighter pilot during the Second World War.

**OLAFUR ELIASSON** (Danish, born 1967)  
Famous for: Artworks that re-create natural phenomena such as rainbows, ice, steam, and waterfalls  
Fascinating fact: As a teenager, Eliasson was in a broadcasting crew that won the Scandinavian championships two years in a row.

**PETER FISCHL AND DAVID WEISS** (Swiss, born 1952 and Swiss, 1946–2012)  
Famous for: Adapting everyday objects to create witty artworks known especially for their film The Way Things Go  
Fascinating fact: The artists’ first collaboration was a series of photographs called Wurstverein (Sausage Series), featuring small scenes made with various kinds of sausages and meat.

**DAN FLAVIN** (American, 1933–96)  
Famous for: Fluorescent light sculptures and installations  
Fascinating fact: As a young man, Flavin was a guard and elevator operator at The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

**LUCIO FONTANA** (Italian, 1899–1968)  
Famous for: slashing or punctured canvases  
Fascinating fact: Fontana would often spend days or even weeks looking at a painting before deciding where to make a cut in its surface.

**JOAN FONTCUBERTA** (Spanish, born 1955)  
Famous for: Photographs that question the nature of truth and illusion, especially his images of fictitious hybrid animals  
Fascinating fact: Fontcuberta has no formal training as an artist and started his career in advertising.

**JEFF KUNIS** (American, born 1965)  
Famous for: Sculptures featuring animals in glass tanks suspended in formaldehyde, especially his pickled tiger shark  
Fascinating fact: Hirst is a compulsive collector—alongside a huge number of contemporary artworks, he has also bought totem poles, skulls, a cow with six legs, and hundreds of fake Picasso paintings.

**PERE FORMIGUERA** (Spanish, born 1952)  
Famous for: Photographs of his family and friends  
Fascinating fact: One of Formiguera’s projects involved taking photographs of more than thirty people once a month for ten years, to see how they changed as they grew older.

**JEFF KOONS** (American, born 1955)  
Famous for: Highly polished steel sculptures of inflatable rabbits and balloon dogs  
Fascinating fact: Koons worked as a banker on Wall Street while he was establishing himself as an artist.

**JOHNNY MINTER** (American, born 1960)  
Famous for: Collages that combine animals with machines  
Fascinating fact: Lamphere has made a series of artworks called “Mizutamines,” featuring enormous pieces of meat placed in a variety of locations, from the pyramids in Egypt to the American Wild West.

**ROY Lichtenstein** (American, 1923–97)  
Famous for: Pop art paintings that reproduce comic book images using small dots of paint  
Fascinating fact: Lichtenstein was a gifted musician—he played piano, clarinet, and jazz flute, and started a high school jazz band.

**RICHARD LICHTENSTEIN** (British, born 1945)  
Famous for: Turning his walks into art by leaving traces in the landscape or creating texts and sculptures  
Fascinating fact: Long’s teacher let him paint and draw during assembly, when the other students had to sing hymns.

**YVES KLEIN** (French, 1928–62)  
Famous for: Paintings made with his trademark blue paint called international Klein Blue  
Fascinating fact: Klein had a black belt in judo and wrote a book about the martial art. After spending two years in Japan, he even set up his own judo club in Paris.

**ANDREAS GURSKY** (German, born 1955)  
Famous for: Large-scale, highly detailed photographs of supermarkets, stock exchanges, and apartment buildings  
Fascinating fact: Gurksy’s parents were both professional photographers and taught him the basics of photography when he was a young boy.

**DAIMEN HIRST** (British, born 1965)  
Famous for: Sculptures featuring animals in glass tanks suspended in formaldehyde, especially his pickled tiger shark  
Fascinating fact: Hirst is a compulsive collector—alongside a huge number of contemporary artworks, he has also bought totem poles, skulls, a cow with six legs, and hundreds of fake Picasso paintings.

**DONALD JUDD** (American, 1928–94)  
Famous for: Minimalist sculptures in metal, plywood, concrete, and Plexiglas, often in the shape of cubes or rectangles  
Fascinating fact: Judd was obsessed with cacti and every time he moved apartment his desert plants came with him.

**MARK KAPPENBERGER** (German, 1953–97)  
Famous for: A rebellious attitude and provocative artworks, particularly his self-portraits  
Fascinating fact: Kappenberg’s favorite food was noodles and he included them in lots of his paintings and drawings.
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