

PREPARATORY ACTIVITIES

Inform students that they are going to discover a range of artworks that are connected in some way to the scream. Explain that, in some works, the scream has been sublimated. Begin by inviting them to explore the notion of sublimation to make it easier to identify and analyze the “scream” in each piece.

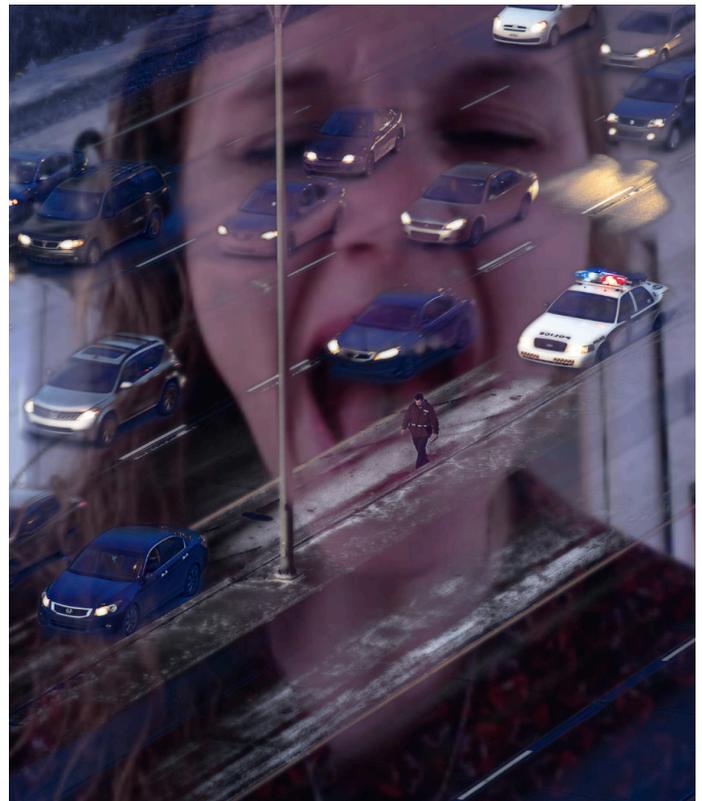
SUBLIMIS AND SUBLIMARE

Over time, countless artists have wanted to sublimate strong feelings through art. First, though, let’s examine the difference between “sublimate” and “sublime.” The Latin root of “sublime” is *sublimis*, which means “high, elevated.” When we say that a work is sublime, we’re referring to a quality that transcends aesthetics. A work is sublime when it makes us think, fascinates us or surpasses our understanding. “Sublime” denotes high achievement and, by extension, something approaching perfection.

The word “sublimate,” from the Latin *sublimare*, “to raise up,” was coined by medieval alchemists, whose practice was a mixture of chemistry and mysticism. For the alchemist, sublimation was synonymous with transformation. Alchemists were very keen to discover the secret of transforming base metals into gold. And, while no one has yet come up with a way to do so (nor found the fabled Philosopher’s Stone, another great alchemical quest!), the concept of sublimation has endured. Psychology has borrowed it to refer to basic impulses that are transposed or transformed. For example, you could say that someone consciously or unconsciously sublimates their aggressive impulses through gestures, sports or the arts.

In the arts, sublimation refers to the ability to give concrete form (painting, sculpture, performance, choreography, etc.) to emotions, ideas or states of mind. Each viewer is free to discover and interpret the work of art, whose meaning can be shocking, is often amazing and is never the same. French philosopher Alain wrote: “It is only the sublime that can get us through the humdrum of day-to-day life.”¹

- △ What does Alain’s quote mean to you?
- △ Should a work of art necessarily be “beautiful”? Can you give examples of works that you consider ugly or disturbing but that carry a strong message?
- △ Have you ever felt that a work “helped you” (e.g., by inspiring you or helping you to understand a situation or gain insights into yourself)?
- △ How can the scream be sublimated through the arts? Can you sublimate a scream without making direct reference to it?
- △ Do you know of any works whose subject is the scream?



¹ “Il n’y a guère que le sublime qui puisse nous aider dans l’ordinaire de la vie.” Alain (Émile-Auguste Chartier), *Préliminaires à l’esthétique*, Gallimard, taken from the *Dictionnaire Larousse des citations françaises*.

THE SCREAM IN ART: AN INTRODUCTION

Invite students to explore the artworks listed below. Have them first experience the work, then find out about its history and significance. Finally, using the feedback-stimulating questions included after the description of each work, ask them to assess the work's relevance and identify how the scream is manifested.

THE SCREAM (1893), EDVARD MUNCH

en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Scream#mediaviewer/File:The_Scream.jpg

Edvard Munch [1863–1944]

Edvard Munch was a Norwegian expressionist painter. At a very young age, he was forced to cope with harsh realities: the illness and death of loved ones. Witness to the agony of his sister, the death of his mother and, later, that of his father, Munch began to use painting to express the suffering he experienced due to his grief and loneliness. While his earlier works were rendered in a highly realistic style, he gradually became more expressive and evocative. In 1893, he began a cycle of works known as *The Frieze of Life*, which he summarized as “a poem about life, love and death.”

The Scream (1893) is his best-known work. Frozen in terror, a figure stares out beyond the viewer, hands held up to his face. Separated by the diagonal of a railing, the work's right half depicts a tumultuous landscape. To the left, two distant characters accentuate the isolation of the foreground figure. Why does he scream? The source of this scream remains an enigma. And what if the work were to be seen as a kind of mirror-like projection of the viewer's image? This notion raises the question: who are you and why are you afraid?

- △ If this work were emitting a sound, what would it be?
- △ In your opinion, what feelings does it sublimate?
- △ Can you describe the nature represented in this painting? What do you feel when you look at it?
- △ If this character were transposed to another setting (e.g., a city, a room), would the scream have the same meaning? Give examples of how different environments could give other meanings to the scream.
- △ In your opinion, why is this painting so famous?

KNIGI (1924), ALEXANDER RODCHENKO

arttattler.com/Images/Europe/Netherlands/Amsterdam/FOAM/Alexander%20Rodchenko/Lily-Brik-Poster.jpg

Alexander Rodchenko [1891–1956]

Alexander Rodchenko was one of the founders of Constructivism, a Russian avant-garde art movement. Wishing to break with classical and traditional forms of art and inspired by the rise of industrialization and urban development, constructivists emphasized geometric forms and harmonious composition. Multidisciplinary artist Alexander Rodchenko expressed himself through various disciplines, including sculpture, painting, photography and graphic design.

Rodchenko's poster *Knigi* (1924) had a considerable influence on the development of modern graphic design. It was one of the first times that a poster had merged a number of separate artistic techniques (photography, geometric forms and typography). The result is so striking in part because the voice of the woman—Lily Brik, Rodchenko's companion—seems to take shape in the letters, forming a rallying cry that resounds through the city. *Knigi* means “books.” The poster sets out to fight obscurantism (opposition to the spread of knowledge) by encouraging citizens to become informed and to inform others.

- △ If this work were to emit a sound, what would it be?
- △ What are the differences between the “screams” of Rodchenko and Munch?
- △ How is a shouted message different from a scream?
- △ What kind of message could be conveyed today by a similar poster? Would the poster have the same impact as in 1924? What would it say?

HEADS (1948–1949), FRANCIS BACON

mediation.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-tracesdusacre/popup11.html

Francis Bacon [1909–1992]

The works of painter Francis Bacon are said to reveal the brutality, violence and convulsive beauty of life. Bacon painted anthropomorphic figures verging on abstraction that evoke the instinctive, irrational human unconscious. Bacon lived in London during the Blitz, when the city was bombed day and night by the Nazis. He later commented on what it meant to live with the constant sound of isolated explosions, each of which signalled that a number of people had been killed.² His characters with their sinuous contours are reminiscent of the figure in Munch's *The Scream*.

Bacon painted his *Heads* series in 1948 and 1949. The “heads” are somewhat amorphous and indistinct, as if someone had begun to erase them. This is perhaps the source of their terrifying power: their features keep dissolving into matter and shade. Inspired by Surrealism, Bacon sought to illustrate our animal instincts. In so doing, he provides an eloquent representation of the primal scream. It is as if we were witnessing an embodiment of the darkest human feelings, a vision straight out of a nightmare.

- △ If this work were to emit a sound, what would it be?
- △ Based on what you know of the primal scream, how do you read these works?
- △ What is the mood of these works? What do they make you think of?
- △ What non-human elements can you see in these works? What about animal elements?

VOICE PIECE FOR SOPRANO (1961), YOKO ONO

Instructions:
homepage1.nifty.com/iberia/score_gallery_ono.htm

Performance:
moma.org/explore/multimedia/videos/114/653

Yoko Ono [1933–]

Yoko Ono is a Japanese-born American multidisciplinary artist who was part of the Fluxus conceptual art movement. Like Constructivism, Fluxus was a vanguard movement that set out to break with the past, rejecting the idea of an inaccessible, elitist “high art” that was mummified in museums. Fluxus artists, who wanted to bring art into everyday life, encouraged the public to interact with and take part in their works. It was in this context in the early 1960s that Ono created her famous “instructions.” These playful directions, though sometimes impossible to follow in concrete terms, invite the participant to rethink (sublimate) various everyday tasks.

Ono's work *Voice Piece for Soprano* (1961) offers three different ways to scream: 1) facing into the wind; 2) facing a wall; and 3) looking skyward. These simple instructions evoke rich and distinctive images. Wouldn't you say there was a significant difference between screaming with your face to a wall and screaming as you look up into the sky? This is the strength of her piece, which, through its simple suggestions, awakens different sensory capabilities. The manual also offers very simple solutions to some of life's impasses, inviting the spectator to join in.

- △ How would you feel if you screamed into the wind? Facing a wall? Looking up toward the sky?
- △ Which of these options do you think you would find the most satisfying? Most therapeutic?
- △ Can you think of other instructions you could use to get people to scream or shout?
- △ If the figure in the Munch painting were facing a wall or the sky, would the cry have the same significance?

² Cited by Francis Bacon in *Bacon*, Rudy Chiappini, Skira, 2008.

AAA-AAA (1978), MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ

[youtube.com/watch?v=iAlfLnQ26JY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iAlfLnQ26JY)

Marina Abramović [1946-]

Through performance and body art, Marina Abramović explores endurance and the physical limitations of the body, employing techniques, contexts and images that point up the relationship between the artist, his or her body, and the viewer. One of her recent performances, *The Artist Is Present* (2010), lasted 736 hours! Sitting at a table in a room at New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), Abramović shared a moment of silence with each visitor who sat across from her during the piece's two-month run.

Conversely, the performance piece *AAA-AAA* (1978) explores the scream with intensity and brilliance. In a kind of face-to-face duel, this collaborative work with fellow artist Ulay consists of a performance piece whose aim is to produce a sustained sound. The exercise gradually intensifies to the point where both artists are shouting at the top of their lungs, inches from each other's face. The performance stops when one or the other becomes exhausted or runs out of vocal power, though it's not a contest. *AAA-AAA* is a refined work, since it uses only two materials: the human being and the human voice. Yet despite its apparent simplicity of means, the work communicates complex feelings. It might at first seem amusing, but a deep unease develops as the performers give free rein to their impulses. Moreover, the symbolism of two shouting humans standing face to face invites us to reflect on our relationships with others—our communication difficulties as well as the animal instincts inside of us that seek to come out in some way.

- △ How did you feel while viewing the archival document?
- △ What does this collaborative work express about each performer's identity?
- △ Can you describe situations or contexts where conflicts could be solved like this?
- △ In your opinion, if these two people had spoken instead of yelled, what would they be saying?

ISRAEL WEST BANK BARRIER (2005), BANKSY

[theguardian.com/arts/pictures/0,,1543331,00.html](https://www.theguardian.com/arts/pictures/0,,1543331,00.html)

Banksy [1974?-]

Cloaked in anonymity, Banksy is a multidisciplinary artist known for his street art. He has executed numerous graffiti in cities worldwide. His use of stencilling allows him to work quickly and avoid getting caught by the authorities. His themes are varied: the reappropriation of space; architectural puns; criticism of consumer society, fashions and the media; questioning the art market; and so on. His main strength is being able to address these issues with intelligence and finesse, through clear and powerful messages.

Banksy's untitled works made in 2005 on Israel's West Bank barrier are powerfully symbolic. The works constitute an act of resistance and an appeal to hope, while implicitly pointing up injustice and the political impasse. Ask students to relate the notion of the scream with the artist's works on the Israeli separation wall.

- △ Based on the discussions you've had about the scream, how do you think Banksy sublimates the scream's strength through these images?
- △ If you choose to interpret each work as a heartfelt cry, what types of screams do you see?
- △ How does Banksy integrate his works into the architecture? What would their impact be if they were replicated elsewhere?
- △ Do they have a market value? How do they constitute an act of resistance?

REMEMBERING (2009), AI WEIWEI

the-art-minute.com/take-five-ai-weiwei-is-still-free-sort-of/remembering/

Ai Weiwei [1957-]

Ai Weiwei is a Chinese multidisciplinary artist. As an architect, sculptor, ceramicist, poet and blogger, he takes a very critical view of Chinese politics and the modern world. His blog and international recognition have caused him to be increasingly monitored by the Chinese authorities. Since 2011, his freedom of speech has been greatly curtailed, prompting him to address issues of censorship and surveillance through his works and performances.

Remembering (2009) is an installation consisting of 9,000 backpacks, representing the number of children killed due to poorly constructed school buildings in underprivileged areas of China's Sichuan province. In May 2008, a powerful earthquake had catastrophic consequences, reducing entire villages to dust and killing at least 69,000 people. The artist, devastated by the tragedy, made the work to critique the corruption, bad urban planning and lack of transparency of the authorities, who initially tried to stop having the victims' names revealed. The installation reproduces a line uttered by one of the mothers: "She lived happily for seven years in this world." The assemblage may at first seem curious or funny to the onlooker who doesn't know what it signifies. However, when the viewer learns that each backpack symbolizes a tomb and that each child who wore such a backpack was subject to terrible suffering, the work takes on its full power, leaving viewers speechless. Though inaudible, the scream resonates 9,000 times in this astonishing work that at first glance appears so colourful and cheerful.

- △ Without the benefit of an explanation, how would you interpret this work?
- △ Why do you think the artist chose not to use photos of the 9,000 children?
- △ Could a similar work be achieved in response to other tragedies? Which tragedies would you choose? How would you represent the scream?
- △ What does this work of destruction and reconstruction reveal?
- △ Does memory have a duty? What is it?

HENRI MICHAUX: MOUVEMENTS (2011), MARIE CHOUINARD

youtube.com/watch?v=sk1SaImXnCo

Marie Chouinard [1955-]

Quebec dancer and choreographer Marie Chouinard has become an icon of new dance in both the province and internationally. Among other topics, her work explores the animal body. Over the years she has incorporated various wild figures into her choreography, from dog to man-goat and lizard to butterfly. Breath is also integral to her approach, with the rattle, roar and cry intensifying the visceral impact of her works. "Get into the studio, not knowing, only being. Breath, body, spatial organization: everything starts from there," she wrote.³

Henri Michaux: Mouvements (2011) is a choreography inspired by *Mouvements* (1951), a book by poet and painter Henri Michaux consisting of poems and abstract ink drawings. Chouinard chose to interpret the work as a score, literally transposing the anthropomorphic drawings into dance moves. Projected on a backdrop, the drawings echo the movements of the dancers who, garbed in black, appear to be drawn on the white page themselves. Their gestures are interspersed with silent screams synchronized with the soundtrack. For this work, Michaux's quote "On crie pour taire ce qui crie"⁴ ("We scream to silence that which screams") could no doubt be rephrased to say, "We dance to silence that which screams."

- △ In your opinion, what does Michaux's quote mean? How does it resonate when put in perspective by Chouinard's choreography?
- △ What does the video of Chouinard's choreography say to you?
- △ When the scream is associated with music and dance, does that extend its reach?
- △ What feelings are sublimated in this excerpt?
- △ Can you create links between the choreography and other works in this list?

³ Translation. Quote from Marie Chouinard in *Compagnie_Marie_Chouinard_Company*, Les éditions du passage, 2010, p. 6.

⁴ Henri Michaux, quoted in the *Dictionnaire Larousse des citations françaises*.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- △ Which work had the most impact on you?
- △ Does everyone interpret works of art differently?
- △ Can we understand the nature of the artist's feelings when he or she created the work, simply by taking a quick look?
- △ Can you think of other works of art that express the scream?
- △ Does the scream feature in film? Music? Popular culture? What does it mean in these contexts?

REVIEW

Invite students to search for other works that sublimate the scream. Students can present a work of their choice and prepare a few questions to get the class to respond and identify the scream.

