

Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing

Teacher's Notes

B1 **B2**

The “Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing” exhibition to be held at the Jeu de Paume museum in Paris (Oct 2018 – Jan 2019), originally organized by the Oakland Museum of California, encompasses Lange’s major works including (of course) the iconic “Migrant Mother” and well known documentary photographs taken during the Great Depression for the Farm Security Administration, but it will also enable visitors to discover earlier and later pictures, some of which have never been exhibited in Europe.

In this B1-B2 sequence, students view a short slideshow and react to some photographs by Dorothea Lange. Then, they read two complementary biographical presentations in groups before pairing up to share what they discovered. An individual piece of writing is suggested at this stage, encouraging students to reflect on Lange’s intentions and feelings. Finally, they work in groups and reinvest what they have learnt to orally deal with the “Power, types and sites” notion of the curriculum.

Culture, language and structures

- Dorothea Lange
- The Great Depression and the 1930s in the U.S.A.
- Making and defending hypotheses
- Expressing the past
- Expressing cause, means, goal and consequence
- *make someone V – result in...*
- *enable / allow...*
- *wish + V-ed*

Introducing the topic – Speaking

- Project the slideshow showing Dorothea

Lange’s photographs and have students react freely. Encourage them to develop their points and help them gradually produce longer utterances. To do so, you may write on the board: Context (When? Where?) – Subject? (Who? What?) – Feeling? (How do(es) the picture(s) make you feel? Explain!) and point at any of those prompts to elicit further and more precise comments. Encourage discussion and press students to defend their views, and develop further whenever they disagree.

- In small groups, have them focus on one picture they selected and get ready to present it orally. See **Activity 1**. Listen to three or four presentations and encourage interactions, especially with other groups who worked on the same pictures.

“Dorothea Lange: Politics of Seeing” – Reading and Exchanging – Groupwork and Pairwork

- Tell the class they are now about to learn some more about Dorothea Lange, the photographer who took all these pictures.
- Divide the class into two groups. Each group reads a different biographical presentation about Lange and her work.

(The first part of each text is identical.)

Activity 2 helps students taking notes and focusing on relevant information.

■ Pair up students (one from each group).

They share what they have learnt and get ready for a short oral presentation about

Dorothea Lange and her work. **Activity 3** Ask two or three pairs to make their presentation before the class. Other students may react to comments and complete what has been said.

Writing a page of Dorothea Lange's diary – Writing

■ Explain that Dorothea Lange wrote a diary and also left many notebooks covered with notes and references about her work. With these, she would record and comment on the photographs she was taking.

Students select a photograph and write the corresponding page in Lange's diary.

Activity 4

■ The objective of this activity is to have pupils use their imagination. It isn't meant to be a disguised "exposé" to the class. Discourage them from doing too much research into Lange's own comments about the photos (which would only lead to cut-and-paste texts anyway.) They can make up information and details as long as they make sense in terms of the photo and what they know about Lange.

Getting ready for the oral examination – Interaction

■ Ask the class what notion(s) from the syllabus they could deal with using Dorothea Lange's photographs and what they have learnt about her. Have them justify their choices and elicit discussion if and whenever possible.

■ Students work in groups and prepare a short presentation fitting the oral examination demands. See **Activity 5**.

Solutions

Activity 2 – Group A

B.1. born in 1895 in New Jersey, U.S.A. – married Paul Schuster Taylor, sociology professor at the University of California, in 1935.

2. documentary photos – started her career as a fashionable portrait photographer in San Francisco, California – was working for the government in 1936.

3. the Great Depression – the early 1930s were a terribly difficult period in the U.S.A. – financial crisis caused by the 1929 Stock Market crash – natural disasters: horrific droughts in the central states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Texas and New Mexico: more than two million small farmers could no longer produce food for their families and became migrant workers.

4. one of the most influential photographers of the twentieth century - brought the plight of ordinary Americans into public view - her philosophy: "Politics of Seeing" – moved by poverty-stricken migrant farmers – worked to draw attention to the crisis – in 1936 she was so moved by the situation in a migrant workers camp that she took her photos to the editor of the *San Francisco News* newspaper. He ran the story that migrant workers were literally starving to death in the richest state in the nation. The government sent 10,000kg of food aid to the camp.

C. White Angel Breadline, San Francisco, 1933: One of her first photos has become iconic: it shows men lining up to receive bread from a charity distribution.

- Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California, 1936:

"In 1936, as part of that government work, Lange took one of the most iconic photos in American history, "Migrant Mother".

- A migrant workers' camp in California.

- The workers had come to pick peas. - The plants froze and the pea crop was lost. - The migrants had no work and were camping in the freezing cold. - Living on frozen vegetables and birds that the children killed. The Migrant Mother had sold the tires from her car to buy food.

Activity 2 – Group B

B. 1. born in 1895 in New Jersey, U.S.A. – contracted polio as a child – believed her disability helped her approach her subjects: “To be a crippled person, or a disabled person, gives an immense advantage” – worked less intensely after WWII because she was plagued with ill-health.

2. documentary photos – started her career as a fashionable portrait photographer in San Francisco, California – employed by the government to document the New Deal – WWII, continued to work for the government: pictures of relocation camps for Asian-Americans – also documented workers at a shipyard building ships for the war effort.

3. the Great Depression – the early 1930s were a terribly difficult period in the U.S.A. – financial crisis caused by the 1929 Stock Market crash – natural disasters: horrific droughts in the central states of Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, Texas and New Mexico: more than two million small farmers could no longer produce food for their families and became migrant workers - in response to the Great Depression, the newly elected president Franklin D. Roosevelt launched The New Deal: a programme of government works – relocation camps and women workers in industry during WWII.

4. one of the most influential photographers of the twentieth century - brought the plight of ordinary Americans into public view - her philosophy: “Politics of Seeing” – documented the relocation camps for Asian Americans during WWII, a reality many Americans didn’t want to witness

– documented workers in a shipyard with a mixed workforce, men, women, Whites, Blacks and other ethnicities working together – her images of women workers helped build a story in the national psyche of proud, competent women wielding industrial tools to help the nation.

C. Manzanar Relocation Center, Manzanar, California, July 3, 1942: “photos of the Japanese American community, who were sent to internment camps for the duration of the war. Many of her photos were unpublished during the war, as they showed a reality many Americans weren’t happy to witness: American citizens, some of whom had been in the U.S.A. for generations, parked in camps.”

Black woman shipyard worker Oakland 1943: “Her images of women workers in particular helped build a story in the national psyche of proud, competent women wielding industrial tools to help the nation.”

Activity 3

C. It suggests she was a committed artist willing to draw attention to social injustice. She used her art to draw attention to the downtrodden, minorities, people who usually can’t position themselves or protest: migrant workers, people in a breadline, Asian-Americans during WWII, black people, women...

It shows that art can draw attention to social and political injustices and may even result in concrete action: the iconic “Migrant Mother” photograph had such an impact that the government sent 10,000kg of food aid to the camp.

Being a woman, Dorothea Lange was already part of a “minority”. Her health problems also made her more sensitive and prone to pay attention to suffering and injustice. She said that she believed this disability helped her approach her subjects.