



Kara Walker: Subtlety as a **Big** Idea

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Above: Crowds silhouetted in front of
A Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby.

This Instructional Resource (IR) is offered with the hope that it can provide valuable perspectives for art education in a new year. 2014 was filled with challenges to education, to arts education, and to the humanity that the Arts represent. In the early summer of 2014, artist Kara Walker was commissioned by Creative Time, an organization that “commissions, produces, and presents art that engages history, breaks new ground, challenges the status quo, and infiltrates the public realm” (Creative Time, 2014, Mission) to install a temporary 40-foot-tall, 75-foot-long, and 35-foot-wide sculpture of sugar in the Williamsburg neighborhood of Brooklyn. The sculpture was surrounded by *attendants*—boy-shaped figures made of a molasses and sugar resin. The gigantic white sculpture was produced in an old sugar factory destined for demolition and provided an iconic Instructional Resource for exploring important issues of arts education for years to come. Those issues include: standardization of education, contemporary concepts of visual art and learning, and persistent racism and inequity in our schools and the worlds that surround them.

Surrounding the installation of Walker’s work of art last summer was a context of civil injustices as the nation examined our collective actions in the shooting death of Michael Brown and many unarmed African American boys and men. We were grappling with our struggles on the anniversary of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. Appropriately, this issue of *Art Education* introduces the editorship of James H. Rolling Jr., who addresses creative literacy as contemporary code-switching that he proposes may be part of the active work of art. In his Editorial, he wrote, “the traffic of creative literacies goes far beyond teaching learners to decode and encode; creative literacy is the fluency to recode content from one symbol system or network of meanings to another...” (Rolling, 2015, p. 5). Kara Walker proposes such multiple meanings in the title of her work. She named it as follows:

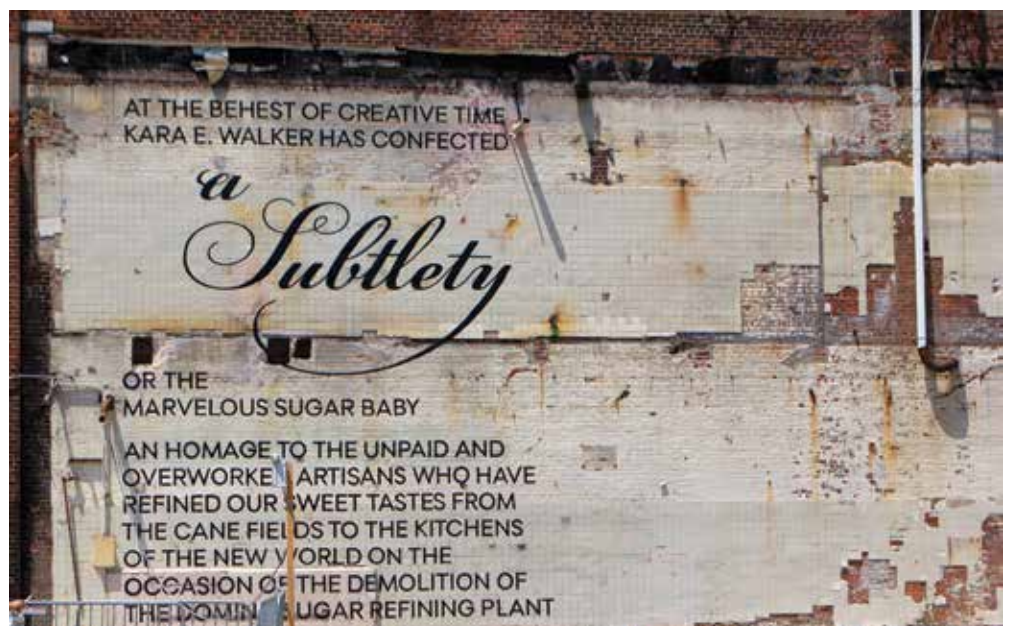
At the behest of Creative Time Kara E. Walker has confected: A Subtlety or the *Marvelous Sugar Baby* an Homage to the unpaid and overworked Artisans who have refined our Sweet tastes from the cane fields to the Kitchens of the New World on the Occasion of the demolition of the Domino Sugar Refining Plant. (2014)

By naming Creative Time as an institutional commissioner of the work, by explaining historical contexts of unpaid and overworked artisans, by mapping geographical relationships, and by finalizing her title with an institutional demolition, Walker fluently recoded physical, social, and artistic realities to be understood by diverse consumers. She made it implicit that she alone did not create the work and that the temporary nature of the work relied on powers that may be beyond any individual or group of individuals.

As the new Instructional Resources Coordinator, I offer a complex and provocative dialogue among art education professionals through the work of Kara Walker as a contribution to what it might mean to engage in creative literacies. This IR follows a layered pathway through this not-so-subtle work of art by engaging the voices of fellow art education professionals. Like *A Subtlety*, this resource is presented by many individuals who have taught in K-12 schools, out-of-school and community settings, museums and galleries, professional artist studios, and teacher preparation programs at the college level. This IR includes:

Right: Wall text and curatorial context for Walker installation.

Far right: Walker has used silhouettes in previous work. Viewers of *A Subtlety* become moving and changing silhouettes.



- A biography of artist Kara Walker
- Information about the cultural and historical contexts of *A Subtlety*
- Enduring understandings and essential questions in lieu of objectives and in alignment with the new National Visual Art Standards
- Web-based resources for further exploration of concepts from the work

About the Artist: Kara Walker

Kara Walker was born in Stockton, California, in 1969. She is an African American artist with a BFA from the Atlanta College of Art and an MFA from the Rhode Island School of Design. She is well known for confronting difficult issues of race, gender, and sexuality through large murallike installations using a traditional Victorian silhouette process. Her installations have been controversial because they create theatrical landscapes and vignettes of characters engaged in fornication and violent acts. Her characters are identifiable as participants in historical images of slavery. She has used light projections as a way to cast shadows from viewers into the vignettes. Walker's works have been exhibited at the Museum of Modern Art, New York; San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; and Whitney Museum of American Art, New York. She is a 1997 recipient of the

MacArthur Fellowship. She is a featured artist in the PBS *Art21* series and has a special video devoted to *A Subtlety*.¹ Walker's work has been removed from a gallery in Detroit, due to controversy about the content, and another was temporarily covered during a debate on decency and censorship at the Newark Public Library in New Jersey (Carter, 2013).

Cultural and Historical Contexts Surrounding *A Subtlety*

Difficult conversations about creativity and art erupted around the installation of *A Subtlety*. The timeline of events is as follows:

Early summer 2014: *A Subtlety* was commissioned by Creative Time, an organization that has a stated mission to commission, produce, and present “art that engages history, breaks new ground, challenges the status quo, and infiltrates the public realm” (Creative Time, 2014, Mission). Articles and artworks about power, artistic intentions, and racial/gender disparities began to emerge in response to the installation.

Midsummer 2014: The United States celebrated the 50th anniversary of the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 into law. In his official proclamation of the anniversary, President Barack Obama stated, “As we reflect on the Civil Rights Act and the



burst of progress that followed, we also acknowledge that our journey is not complete” (2014).

Late summer 2014: Michael Brown Jr., an unarmed, 18-year-old Black student, was shot to death by a White police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. His death was one of many that had occurred under similar circumstances that week.

End of summer 2014: As the new school year was beginning, Internet, television, radio, and print media were filled with stories of protest that highlighted startling division along racial and political lines in communities reacting to the shooting (Pew Research Center, 2014).

These were not new stories, and they were not all directly connected to *A Subtlety*, but they were timely because they did occur during a summer of change and civil unrest in the United States and in the arts education world. Educator blogs were filled with requests for ways to teach to and through racism, White privilege, civil unrest, and institutional power. For this reason, the following section uses a chorus of voices that animate the contexts that surround this work. The voices are organized within the new conceptual framework of the National Core Arts Standards, and specifically the four Artistic Processes of the National Visual Arts Standards (Creating, Presenting, Responding, and Connecting).



This format is intentionally designed to decode, encode, or recode our new standards in a contemporary world that will use them.

It is important to note that the Artistic Processes of the Standards do not promote finite objectives as standards once did. Rather, they encourage “big ideas” through use of *Enduring Understandings* as learning events that “do not happen outside of context” (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014, p. 7) and generate extensive development of *Essential Questions*, which generate multiple ways of interrogating an idea.

CREATING: Conceiving and Developing New Artistic Ideas and Work

Organize and Develop Artistic Ideas and Work

Enduring Understanding: Artists and designers balance experimentation and safety, freedom and responsibility, while developing and creating artworks.

Essential Question: What responsibilities come with the freedom to create?

Michael Schwartz: Community-Based Artist Who Teaches in Out-of-School Programs

“It got people talking, upset, it exposed many to a hidden cornerstone of structural racism. I mean, most sugar and other powders are still bleached white, most ‘White’ people still think they are ‘White,’ gentrification gets a pass in the name of progress and we artists still know how to adjust cultural indicators, or at a minimum, know how to press a few buttons.” (personal communication, 2014)

- “For the artist, what’s next, what did this work mean for the development of this artist?”
- How will the scale, publicity and new status impact her work?
- There is a huge question at play here about the power of the arts, whose responsibility is it to create interpretational materials?
- Should there be interpretational materials?
- Are the symbols and creative process understood by the viewing public?
- What is that understanding?
- What are the signs, symbols and codes employed in this work?
- How could the life of the sugar factory be used as a timeline?
- What happens if/when people misinterpret the artist’s intention?
- Was it the artist’s intention to stir up debate?
- If this work exposed racism, what is the responsibility of the artist?”

Variations of brown sugar were evident in melting “attendants” surrounding the *Marvelous Sugar Baby*.

Generate and Conceptualize Artistic Ideas and Work

Enduring Understanding: Artists and designers shape artistic investigations, following or breaking with traditions in pursuit of creative artmaking goals.

Essential Question: How does knowing the contexts, histories, and traditions of art forms help us create works of art?

Steve Locke: Artist and Art Education Professor

"I want to make certain Walker is framed as an artist in a context of other contemporary artists of color. Too often students check off a 'diverse content' box for themselves by including one artist of color and don't do the necessary work of broadening their vocabulary of [artistic] practitioners."

"[T]here is an embodied relationship between form and content. To see artists as dealing with issues of modernism and protest and claiming of public space would be the perfect preparation for seeing where Walker's work originates culturally and contextually."

"I think an intersectional focus needs to be maintained and framing issues around gender and race has become very loaded of late. With hashtags like #solidarityisforwhite-women, #yesallwomen, #bringbackourgirls, there has been an explosion of writing about privilege and activism over the current summer."

PRESENTING: Interpreting and Sharing Artistic Work

Develop and Refine Artistic Techniques and Work for Presentation

Enduring Understanding: Artists, curators, and others consider a variety of factors and methods including evolving technologies when preparing and refining artwork for display and/or when deciding if and how to preserve and protect it.

Essential Question: What criteria are considered when selecting work for presentation, a portfolio, or a collection?

Aimée Archambault: Elementary and Museum Educator, Assistant Professor of Art Education

"As I was standing behind the main nude figure, a young girl walked around the corner ahead of her family and declared loudly, 'Yep, it's a definitely a girl!' She seemed unaware of the history (both past and present) that surrounded this piece and the many layers of history, questions, challenges, and calls to action present in the room. Initially, I smiled at her innocent comment and then it made me consider, how can we make contemporary art and themes accessible to students of all ages?"

"We have the opportunity as art educators to introduce our students to art from today—their day. Many themes of contemporary art resonate and engage students more

Who are the best audiences for this work?

Viewers interact with the *attendants*.



“Dialogue brought forward by the work... can connect us to the larger discourse and the role that artists have to play in marking and provoking the social tensions of our time.”



Individual and collective perspectives of *A Subtlety*.

deeply than the skills and techniques of art making. For example, the themes of equality and power present in Walker's work can be explored with five- and 50-year-olds alike."

Convey Meaning Through the Presentation of Artistic Work

Enduring Understanding: Objects, artifacts, and artworks collected, preserved, or presented either by artists, museums, or other venues communicate meaning and a record of social, cultural, and political experiences resulting in the cultivating of appreciation and understanding.

Essential Question: How does the presenting and sharing of objects, artifacts, and artworks influence and shape ideas, beliefs, and experiences?

Jaimeson Daley: Museum Educator and PhD Student

"I say the 'impact' of the piece rather than the piece itself because for the lesson or talk I would conduct, more interesting nuance would come from talking about race, how it polarizes people, and the stories of what generates stigmas such as these. Everybody who knows of Walker's work has an opinion; it's provocative. However, individuals are much more tight-lipped to discuss the driving force and the societal reaction which stays with the visitor:

I love it!

I find it entirely offensive.

Why do I feel this way?

I'm trying to understand...

All these responses have come from me, at the same time, from any number of Walker's pieces."

"For works like *A Subtlety* to be successful in museums, in galleries, within classroom discussion, exploratory and authentic discussion needs to happen or meaning is lost and turned to fetish and sensation, and—love or hate Kara Walker as an artistic presence—no educator wants students to leave with a cheapened experience of a culture and history because that, as we know, is too often trivialized."

RESPONDING: Understanding and Evaluating How the Arts Convey Meaning

Perceive and Analyze Artistic Work

Enduring Understanding: Individual aesthetic and empathetic awareness developed through engagement with art can lead to understanding and appreciation of self, others, the natural world, and constructed environments.

Essential Question(s): What can we learn from our responses to art? How does learning about art impact how we perceive the world?

Marika Preziuso: Assistant Professor of World Literature

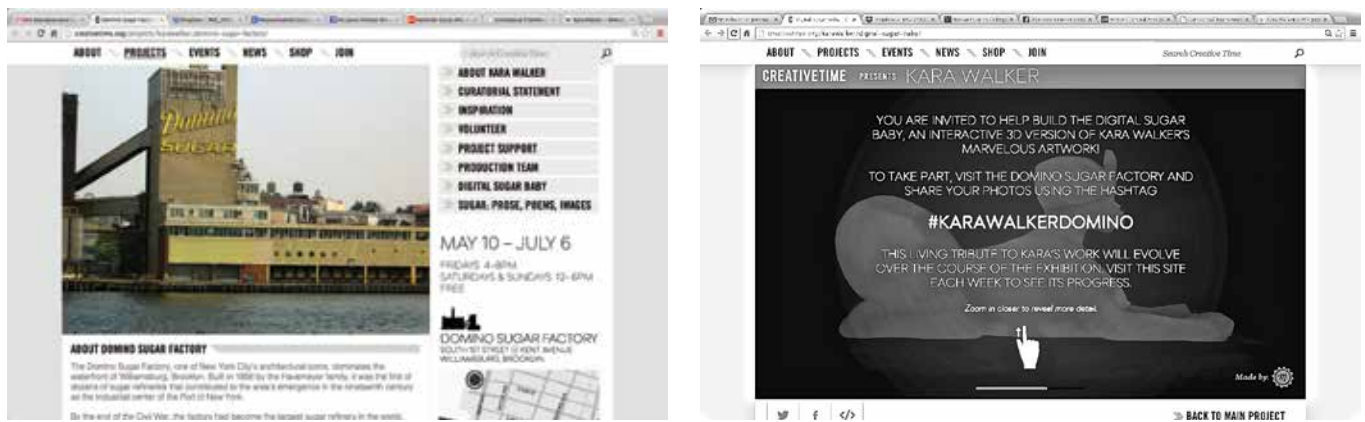
"In light of this [conversation about Kara Walker], it is likely that I will be offering a graduate course on Gender and Women's studies in the spring. It will be interdisciplinary in nature—feminist theory, literature and visual studies, and integrating discussions on gender, class, race, and sexuality in method and analysis."

Beth Balliro: Artist, High School Art Educator, Assistant Professor of Art Education

"Each teaching act is aligned with a politics, one that works to maintain hegemony or to resist it. It is the work of critical educators to insure that this reality is at the forefront of practice, and that we nourish the awareness and resistance of our students."

"We participate in a culture in which Blackness is criminalized, in which we slaughter, incarcerate or push-out of school our young men of color."

"What we do in the art room is aligned with a position and exists in a context. Dialogue brought forward by the work of select Contemporary artists, in this case Kara Walker, can connect us to the larger discourse and the role that artists have to play in marking and provoking the social tensions of our time."



Screenshots of Web content that surrounded and shaped the installation.

“Ultimately it is the action and the context sparked by the work that matters most. Our engagement with the work and the activity around the work speaks to our political alignments. Together, an investigation of these alignments allows for greater awareness and hopefully the possibility for collective change.”

Apply Criteria to Artistic Work

Enduring Understanding: People evaluate art based on various criteria.

Essential Question(s): How does one determine criteria to evaluate a work of art? How and why might criteria vary?

Adriana Katzew: Community Artist-Educator, Associate Professor of Art Education

“In teaching about [A *Subtlety*], I would also include a discussion of audience’s ‘understanding’ or lack thereof of the exhibit: For example, when I went to see the exhibit, I witnessed a lot of people taking pictures of themselves, with happy faces, in front or back of the central piece. There was minimal information that explained the intention of the artist at the site.”

“What does it mean for audience members who had not checked out the Creative Time website before going to the space?”

“Or had attended the space as ‘word of mouth’ without any deeper understanding of Walker and her work?”

“How do they understand/misunderstand the work and its context?”

“What purposeful decisions were made by the artist and/or Creative Time to have fewer explanations included in the space?”

CONNECTING: Relating Artistic Ideas and Work With Personal Meaning and External Context

Relate Artistic Ideas and Works With Societal, Cultural, and Historical Context to Deepen Understanding

Enduring Understanding: People develop ideas and understandings of society, culture, and history through their interactions with and analysis of art.

Essential Question: How does art help us to understand the lives of people of different times, places, and cultures?

Jennifer Hall: Artist Philosopher

“The recent shootings of Black boys and men around this country has brought a great deal of issues to the surface.”

“As we enter the 50th anniversary of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Kara Walker reminds us all that the need for social justice is ever present.”

“I used *A Subtlety* in my aesthetics class last spring. Walker and her team were installing the work and it was an excellent opportunity to observe her process as we discussed intentionality, ideas of otherness, and activism in art.”

Dave Ardito: Artist and K-12 Director of Visual Art, Arlington Public Schools

“I am asking that elementary and secondary art teachers bring social issues into their art rooms not because it is the trendy thing to do, but because it is the only way to authentically demonstrate to students that artists have a universal responsibility to at least be aware of the major social issues of our time; and to seriously consider addressing those issues through their art work. Even the youngest students (preschoolers and kindergartners, for example) can learn that artists make art for personal reasons and that they can and should be inspired by their personal beliefs and values.”

“I do not see an issue with the ‘offensive’ and age appropriateness issue at all. What should be seen as offensive is the idea of human slavery, sexualizing of women, and poverty.”

“The urgency of more social consciousness among students of all ages is made all the more urgent by the horrific killings of unarmed Black youth and how these events bring home the fact that we have not come as far as we think we have.”

Synthesize and Relate Knowledge and Personal Experiences to Make Art

Enduring Understanding: Through artmaking, people make meaning by investigating and developing awareness of perceptions, knowledge, and experiences.

Essential Question: How do people contribute to awareness and understanding of their lives and the lives of their communities through artmaking?

Lois Hetland: Teacher, Researcher, Artist, and Chair of Art Education at the Massachusetts College of Art and Design

“I see that artistic character (the habitual approaches to thought and behavior by artists) is the goal of art education, and that *making* coupled with encounters with contemporary art and reflection about it are the central tools in developing that over time. So this work is another example of how contemporary art deals with the living issues of our time, offering deeper perspective on what goes on around us.”

“A big theme that the work raises for me is how the market seems to become the ONLY value and permits people to disregard much of what makes life meaningful and joyful, pushing hierarchies of oppression and dehumanizing of sectors of society who are vulnerable—the identifiable (race, gender, orientation), and the poor, and the powerless (children).”



Factory line, 2014.

All photos courtesy of Laura K. Reeder.

Web-Based Resources for Further Investigation

A *Subtlety* was not only an installation of sugar and ideas: It was a collaboration of intentional producers who interpreted sketches and concepts imagined by Kara Walker. It was a communication of the beliefs and bigotries of unintentional participants who took selfies, uploaded images, and performed a range of responses in real time at the sugar factory. It is fitting, then, that this IR conclude with a series of Web resources that exist to support further investigation of Walker’s truly big idea.

Kara Walker

- Creative Time Kara Walker Project Site: <http://creativetime.org/projects/karawalker>
- Art21 Kara Walker Video: www.art21.org/videos/short-kara-walker-a-subtlety-or-the-marvelous-sugar-baby

Michael Brown

- Music artist J. Cole produced and uploaded a song, “Be Free,” in response to the killing of Michael Brown. <https://soundcloud.com/dreamvillerecords/j-cole-be-free>
- Rethinking Schools Blog: Teach about Mike Brown. But Don’t Stop There. <http://rethinkingschoolsblog.wordpress.com/2014/08/25/teach-about-mike-brown-but-dont-stop-there>

National Visual Arts Standards

- www.arteducators.org/research/national-standards

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ENDNOTE

- ¹ See the link to the video in the Web-Based Resources section at the end of this Instructional Resource.