

Isamu Noguchi & Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya

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Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic threatened the lives, health, and livelihood of people across the world, the United States experienced marked increases in hate crimes. In particular, people of Asian and Pacific Islander descent were verbally and physically attacked for their supposed culpability in bringing the virus into the country. As each racist incident provoked outrage among the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) community and their allies, many in the community responded by commanding public discourse about AAPI history and presence in the United States. These incidents of racism and the responses of the affected communities raised questions of belonging: How does one gain belonging in a place or in a community? Who can give or take away the right to belong?

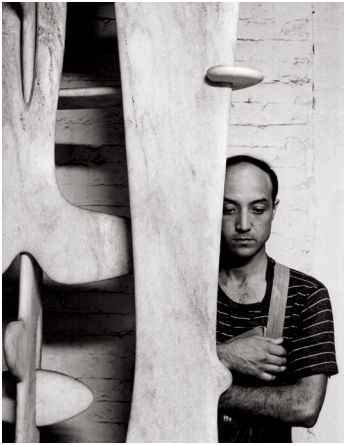
As contemporary representatives of Isamu Noguchi’s vision and legacy, The Noguchi Museum reflects on the subject of belonging through the lens of Noguchi’s life experiences and creative output. Moreover, the Museum is committed to raising the profiles of AAPI artists, thinkers, and institutions, both past and present. In this curriculum guide, we offer a comparison of two artists—Noguchi and Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya—focusing on the ways in which both artists have addressed the subjects of belonging and have effectively created spaces of belonging in their geographic communities. They are/were both multicultural artists who incorporated their cultural backgrounds in their artworks. Their social awareness led them to numerous projects for the community and they fought for social justice using art in different ways. **Through the conversations and activities suggested throughout this guide, art becomes a powerful tool for teaching anti-racism.**

This guide is recommended for students in grades 1–12. We have kept the content as open as possible, in order to encourage teachers to adapt the materials to meet the needs of their students. For each artwork or document, we have included a large image for use in the classroom, information about the piece, and a suggested writing, art, or discussion activity. The information in the “About” section is intended for teacher reference, although it may certainly be shared with students during or after the activity. Quotations from Isamu Noguchi are incorporated to offer educators connections with, and insights into, the artist’s thought process.

“My longing for affiliation has been the source of my creativity.”

Isamu Noguchi

About the Artists



Isamu Noguchi with his sculpture *Kouros* in New York, 1947. Photo © Arnold Newman Collection / Getty / INFGM / ARS

Isamu Noguchi (pronounced ee-sa-mu no-gu-chi) (1904–1988) was a biracial sculptor who lived through the 20th century. Noguchi was born in Los Angeles, California, to a white mother from the United States and an East Asian father from Japan. He grew up in the two countries and was subjected to racism during his lifetime. When he lived in Japan, the people around him treated him as an American, a half-white foreigner, an outsider. When he was in the United States, people regarded him as Japanese and he was often discriminated against on that basis, an injustice he found highly motivating. Feeling that there was no country where he belonged, he became determined to forge a sense of belonging within, so that he would feel at home no matter where he was. During the Second World War Noguchi became more aware of his identity when fellow Japanese Americans who lived in the west coast were forcefully imprisoned in concentration camps. (Refer to the curriculum guide [Self-Interned, 1942](#) for more details and lessons.) Noguchi became a loner and traveled voraciously, investigating new cultures and realms for sculpture. His sense of homelessness became part of his art; as he once stated, “My longing for affiliation has been the source of my creativity.” His sculptures and public projects often reflect social and racial issues of his time, and his yearning for belonging.



Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya.
Courtesy of the artist

Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya (pronounced uh-man-duh ping-bodee-bak-ee-ah) (b. 1992) is a multidisciplinary artist who was born and raised in the United States. She is a second generation Asian American whose parents immigrated from Thailand and Indonesia. She studied neuroscience at Columbia University prior to becoming an artist. Her works explore a junction between art and science, feminism and socio-political issues. Namely, many of her works highlight racism against the AAPI community. With the surge of COVID-19, violent incidents against the AAPI community increased. Hate crimes and incidents happened often on public transit. Phingbodhipakkiya started public campaigns to fight against racism in response to the rising anti-Asian sentiment. She calls out stereotyping of Asian Americans and demands equal rights for the community. In her words, her works “make the invisible visible.”

1. *Fudo* and a Poster (*Proud to be Asian*) from *We Are More*



Isamu Noguchi, *Fudo*, 1966-67.
Granite, stainless steel. The Isamu
Noguchi Foundation and Garden
Museum, New York



Amanda Phingbodhibakkiya, Poster
(*Proud to be Asian*) from *We Are More*,
2020-ongoing. Courtesy of the artist.

1. *Fudo* and a Poster (*Proud to be Asian*) from *We Are More*



Isamu Noguchi, *Fudo*, 1966-67.
Granite, stainless steel.
The Isamu Noguchi Foundation
and Garden Museum, New York

About *Fudo*

Fudo is an abstract sculpture made by Isamu Noguchi in 1966–67. Abstract art often depicts internal realities such as ideas, feelings, or sensations. *Fudo* has a granite top and the bottom is made out of stainless steel. Noguchi often paid special attention to the bases of his sculptures. Here, Noguchi made a base that is a part of the sculpture. He said, “How to make a base which is not separately a base intrigued me. The piece has a dual history—Japan (Mannari), where I carved the sculpture, and America (New York), where the base was made. The conception is as indivisible as I am.” Noguchi often thought about stone and metal as opposites, and returned to both materials throughout his career. In his passage about *Fudo*, he suggests the two materials come together to represent his identity.

Suggested Activities with *Fudo*

Discuss what you notice about the artworks before sharing information.

Discuss: *Fudo* means “immovable” in Japanese. What about this sculpture looks immovable?

Look: Look closely at where the two materials come together. What do you notice about how they are combined?

Reflect: Noguchi talked about his two different cultural backgrounds and how inseparable they are. What two materials might you use to tell about who you are? (You may provide a variety of materials and have students pick two.)



Isamu Noguchi, *Fudo*, 1966-67.
Granite, stainless steel. The Isamu
Noguchi Foundation and Garden
Museum, New York



Amanda Phingbodhibakkiya,
Poster (*Proud to be Asian*) from
We Are More, 2020–ongoing.
Courtesy of the artist.

1. Fudo and a Poster (*Proud to be Asian*) from *We Are More*



Amanda Phingbodhibakkiya,
Poster (*Proud to be Asian*) from
We Are More, 2020–ongoing.
Courtesy of the artist.

About *We Are More*

We Are More is a series of installations and activations that Phingbodhipakkiya created in partnership with Times Square Arts, the City of Boston and PAO Arts Center. The work includes a website morethan.art where personal stories of discrimination are shared. The series was made to celebrate the resilience and range of the AAPI community. In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic started, Asian Americans were used as a scapegoat for the disease. Fueled by frustrations and desperations due to the pandemic, racism and violence against the Asian American community increased. The rise in hate crimes shook the AAPI community, even in a metropolitan area like New York City where diversity is celebrated. It frightened many Asian Americans leaving them feeling unsafe and unprotected. Phingbodhipakkiya's work addresses the AAPI communities' struggles and the stereotypes they are often restricted to.

Suggested Activities with *We Are More*

Write: Spend time looking at the poster. Complete the blank in this sentence "I am proud to be ____"

Movement: Copy the pose you see in the poster with your body. The person in this artwork is Asian, and she has been treated with hatred. How do you think she feels?

Discuss: Phingbodhipakkiya says that "My work makes the invisible visible." Racism suggests some characteristics and groups of people are less important than others. Sometimes those messages are invisible because they are internalized or systemic, and that's why it's important to deny those messages and be proud of who we are. What are some invisible messages you notice?



Amanda Phingbodhibakkiya,
Poster (*Proud to be Asian*) from
We Are More, 2020–ongoing.
Courtesy of the artist.

Research: Phingbodhipakkiya also wrote a few poems for the project. Here is one of them. The poem lists typical stereotyping of Asian people. Stereotyping is when we assume someone’s behavior based on a group they belong to, such as race. Phingbodhipakkiya collected stories from the AAPI community about their experience of stereotyping. Read some of them here and discuss the issues: morethan.art/stories. Which story resonates with you?

WE ARE MORE THAN
Your Asian sidekick
The confused foreigner
The future doctor
Your submissive plaything
The helpless refugee
The dragon lady
The straight A student
The computer hacker
The martial arts master
The spunky girl with dyed hair
The quiet kid
The dependable worker
The nail lady
The Tiger mom

Write: What are some of the stereotypes that you or your community have experienced? Based on the discussion, write a poem that follows “I am more than...”

Suggested Activities Connecting *Fudo* and *We Are More*

Reflect: Noguchi’s sculptures show two contrasting materials. Phingbodhipakkiya’s poem tells us that we all have many sides. What are two contrasting sides (duality) you have? (A duality can be your cultural background but also more. You can have two sides of your personality, for example you can be strong but weak, kind but stern.) Noguchi talked about combining stone and metal and how “opposites come together” but are not in conflict. How does your duality come together?

2. Creating a Space for the Community: The Noguchi Museum and *I Still Believe in Our City*



The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Area 2, Long Island City, Queens, New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight. ©INFGM/ARS



Amanda Phingbodhibakkiya, *I Still Believe in Our City*, 2020–ongoing.
Photos: alonglastname.com and istillbelieve.nyc/gallery

2. Creating a Space for the Community: The Noguchi Museum and *I Still Believe in Our City*

About The Noguchi Museum



The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Area 2, Long Island City, Queens, New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight. ©INFGM/ARS

Isamu Noguchi opened the Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum in 1985 to show his life's work in a context essential to his vision. In addition to renovating the space, and installing his sculptures, Noguchi selected the plantings for the space, each of which are native to Japan, the United States, or both. Noguchi wanted to make a space for the community where anyone could feel welcome. He worked on numerous public projects as well as making sculptures for the public (see the curriculum guide [Akari Light Sculpture](#)).

When Noguchi opened the museum and asked about what visitors can take away, he said, "This is their place. They can come here whenever they want to; this is a place to reflect and to see an alternative existence to the one they have now." Noguchi also talked about the need for belonging at a lecture:

"I think my madness in wanting to make gardens and so forth lies in this usefulness; it's a kind of humanizing of space, humanizing of sculpture. It's not merely sculpture for aesthetic purposes. Rather, it is something that is actually very useful, and very much a part of people's lives. If I might say so, I think this probably comes from my own background; the need for belonging...the need to feel that there is someplace on earth which an artist can affect in such a way that the art in that place makes for a better life and a better possibility of survival. If through art the world can be made more friendly, more accessible to people, more understandable, more meaningful, then even art has some reason. When I went to Paris and then to Peking and then to Japan and all over the place, I was always on a voyage looking for someplace where I would feel at home, where I would feel that I could be of some use."



The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Area 2, Long Island City, Queens, New York.
Photo: Nicholas Knight. ©INFGM/ARS



Suggested Activities with The Noguchi Museum

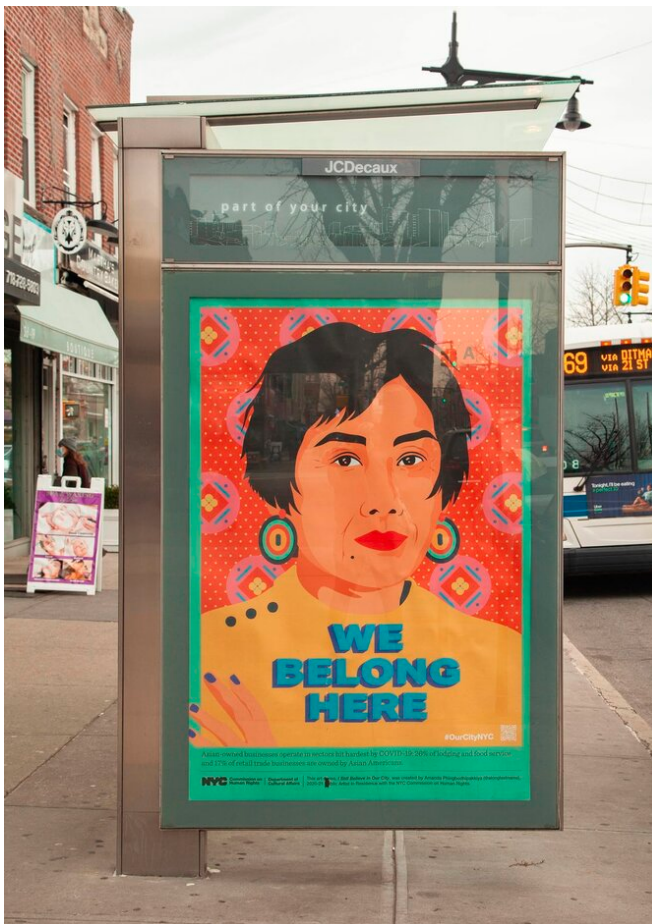
Look: This is the garden at the Noguchi Museum. Noguchi wanted it to be a place where everyone felt welcome. What are some details that make it a welcoming place?

Respond: How might the museum be useful and be a part of people's lives?

Connect: What public art do you have in your community? How might that relate to your daily life?

Reflect: Noguchi talked about searching for a place where he could feel at home. What makes you feel most at home when you're visiting somewhere new?

The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum,
Area 2, Long Island City, Queens,
New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight.
©INFGM/ARS



Amanda Phingbodhibakkiya, *I Still Believe in Our City*, 2020–ongoing. Photos: alonglastname.com and istillbelieve.nyc/gallery

2. Creating a Space for the Community: The Noguchi Museum and *I Still Believe in Our City*

I Still Believe in Our City



Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, *I Still Believe in Our City*, 2020–ongoing.
Photos: alonglastname.com and istillbelieve.nyc/gallery

I Still Believe is a public art series created in partnership with NYC Commission on Human Rights to address the anti-Asian bias and hate crimes in recent years. A large billboard poster was put up on the advertisement space in Atlantic Terminal, Brooklyn, and many posters were displayed at bus shelters, LinkNYC kiosks, and the subway. The locations of the posters are important because these are the public places where anti-Asian bias attacks occurred. The posters are placed in such highly trafficked areas where they speak to an international audience, not just New Yorkers. Matched with the phrase “We Belong Here,” the posters send the message that the AAPI community is a part of mainstream American culture and they have a place in the world. The portraits are made through a hybrid illustration of people that Phingbodhipakkiya came in contact with—the eyes from a friend, the mouth of a store clerk. Thus many viewers can easily identify with the people by seeing a little bit of themselves in them. She used vibrant colors that scientifically spark joy and derive from Thai and Indonesian culture, both part of her heritage.



Suggested Activities with *I Still Believe in Our City*:

Discuss: Phingbodhipakkiya said that the people in the portraits are like guardian angels protecting the community. How might they provide a sense of security?

Debate: How does one gain belonging in a place or in a community? Who can give or take away the right to belong?

Create: Draw a picture of yourself above the sentence “I belong here.”

Suggested Activities Connecting The Noguchi Museum and *I Still Believe in Our City*

Discuss: Noguchi and Phingbodhipakkiya both mentioned how art can be a tool to remind us how to be human.

Noguchi said, “I tend to believe in the space between or around an object, or in non-material things. There is beauty everywhere in the world. If you open your eyes there is beauty everywhere. So rather than the thing itself as object, what I think is important is how an object in a certain place can teach us to see the beauty of the world. Art for me is something which teaches human beings how to become more human.”

Phingbodhipakkiya said, “It’s like all the collective microaggressions and the racism that I experienced in the course of my life were dammed up inside of me,” she says. “And in the creation of this work, the dam just broke—waves of anger and grief and pain. I think this experience is very much shared by many Asian Americans, where we kept it inside to survive but now we are being given permission to feel. To be fully human.” How is finding a right to belong important to being human?

Create: Draw a place for your local community where everyone feels welcome.

Reflect: Phingbodhipakkiya and Noguchi both changed a community space to make the world a better place. What are ways you can improve the world? What do you want to change about the classroom around you?



The Isamu Noguchi Garden Museum, Area 2, Long Island City, Queens, New York. Photo: Nicholas Knight. ©INFGM/ARS



Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya, *I Still Believe in Our City*, 2020–ongoing. Photos: alonglastname.com and istillbelieve.nyc/gallery

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Website

Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya: alonglastname.com

We Are More: morethan.art/stories

I Still Believe In Our City: istillbelieve.nyc

Amanda Phingbodhipakkiya's interview:
<https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=1052085181865172>