ABOUT THIS GUIDE
This guide is designed as a multidisciplinary companion for high school educators bringing their students to see *In the Aftermath of Trauma: Contemporary Video Installations* at the Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, on view from January 31 through April 20, 2014. Our intent is to offer a range of learning objectives, gallery discussions, and postvisit suggestions to stimulate the learning process, encourage dialogue, and help to conceive meaning of the art presented. Teachers at the high school grade level should glean from this guide what is most relevant and useful to their students. Vocabulary words that appear in **bold** are defined at the end of the guide. Unless otherwise noted, all the content for this guide was adapted from essays published in the exhibition catalog (see Additional Resources).

ABOUT THE EXHIBITION
The history of the 20th and early 21st centuries is one that is scarred by incomprehensibly violent events with far-reaching effects. It is an era of world wars, totalitarian mass terror, social and ethnic cleansing, revolutions, civil wars, radical uprootings, and terrorism. *In the Aftermath of Trauma: Contemporary Video Installations* presents the work of five video artists from around the world who employ their medium to explore individual and collective memories of such traumatic occurrences. The themes and aesthetic forms of these videos are deeply invested in the human subject and its status in today’s world, especially as they relate to violent political histories that challenge belief in an enlightened and emancipated humanity.

The five videos included in the exhibition employ the **semidocumentary** format, provocatively hovering between fact and fiction, within cinematic projection spaces. They probe ways of addressing trauma that go beyond the dichotomy of head-on confrontation versus denial or repression to suggest a more nuanced and complex relationship between the original event and its present recollection.

INTERDISCIPLINARY CONNECTIONS
Art, Art History, Asian Studies, Comparative Literature, East European Studies, Film Studies, Germanic Studies, Gender Studies, History, Photography, Political Science, Religious Studies

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
Students will explore film in the context of **installation art** and as contemporary artistic practice. Students will discuss how aesthetics, politics, and ethics intersect in the works displayed. Students will examine memory and its relationship to traumatic events and how artists in the exhibition are addressing the past in new and unexpected ways.

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BEFORE YOU VISIT
Suggested topics to explore, research, and discuss before visiting the exhibition.

Background Information
Teachers are highly encouraged to research and provide background on the following topics for a more meaningful museum experience: trauma; Cambodia during the Vietnam War; Khmer Rouge; fall of the Berlin Wall; reunification of Germany; Communism in East Germany; Partition of 1947 of the Indian subcontinent into Pakistan and India; Holocaust in Poland; anti-Semitism in Poland; contemporary war on terror; Osama bin Laden and al Qaeda; video art; photography; installation art.

Political Art and the Museum Setting
Many contemporary artists strive to address politically charged events both past and present in their artwork. Alfredo Jaar, one of the artists presented in the exhibition, once stated that “art devoid of a political or social justice point of view wasn’t art but merely decoration.” The artists in this exhibition explore individual and collective responses to recent violent histories, but they are equally concerned with the aesthetic dimensions of their works. Why do artists keep painful histories alive through their work? Discuss with your students the meaning of Jaar’s statement.

Museums are often seen as public spaces in which historically significant but sometimes disturbing events can be examined, discussed, and debated in the context of artists’ engagement with the past. Often, the artist doesn’t portray the actual event; rather, the viewer learns of the trauma through the recollections of individuals and communities affected by it. How is this interpretation more or less powerful than depicting the event? Known as the bloodiest century in the history of mankind, the 20th century has witnessed inhumanity and atrocities on an inconceivable scale. What catastrophic events of the 20th and 21st centuries can your students name? Discuss with your students the art museum as a public sphere in which to have conversation and debate.

Documentary and Semidocumentary Film
Documentary film, an art form that grew out of film and photography in the early 1920s, is often viewed as presenting “the real” or the search for the truth. John Grierson, a British film critic who coined the term, stated, “In documentary we deal with the actual and in one sense with the real. But the really real, if I may use that phrase, is something deeper than that. The only reality which counts in the end is the interpretation which is profound.” From the art form’s inception, there has been concern and skepticism, particularly from film critics, about the actual truth-telling ability of documentaries. Today it goes without question that audiences understand that documentaries can be skewed to fit any agenda. What documentary films have your students seen? Discuss the “realness” of these films.

Contemporary artists working in video art often meld together eyewitness accounts with archival footage, documentary film, and artistic images and employ strategies such as montage and reenactment while pursuing cinematic approaches; often this is referred to as semidocumentary. The artists in this exhibition are involved in all aspects of the viewers’ experience, from carefully conceiving the screening spaces to determining levels of darkness and sound choreography. These very specific aesthetic spaces become a place in which to experience history and memory. How does the semidocumentary complicate the relationship between real and fiction? Discuss the reliability of memory, especially in the context of traumatic events.

IN THE GALLERY
Ideas to consider when viewing the exhibition.

Art Interaction: Vandy Rattana (Cambodian, b. 1980), Bomb Ponds, 2009
Vandy Rattana grew up in Cambodia but knew very little about his country’s history in relation to the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge since this information was excluded from school textbooks and national archives. What he did know he learned from English- and French-language history books and overheard adult conversations. On a photo assignment in the Cambodian countryside he was introduced to a bomb pond by local villagers. Bomb ponds are circular craters created by American bombs dropped on Cambodia during the Vietnam War that fill with toxic water during the rainy season.

2 John Grierson, as quoted in Ian Aitken, Film and Reform: John Grierson and the Documentary Film Movement (New York: Routledge, 1990), 109.
3 Vandy Rattana follows the Khmer tradition of using his family name first.
4 Ponds become radioactive from the depleted uranium left from the bomb.
The ponds both fascinated and haunted Vandy, so he set out to document this uniquely Cambodian scar, using maps and relying on memories of the generation that lived through the bombings. Vandy states, “I started just blindly going out: looking at a map, thinking, ‘There might be a bomb pond here,’ going and talking to old people. They all know. They pass by the bomb ponds every day, and it seems like they’ve forgotten that they’re there. But then you ask and they start talking, talking…” These relentless bombings in politically neutral Cambodia fueled anger and resentment that led many Cambodians to join rebel forces and increased the allure of the Khmer Rouge.

Artistically, these images of the Cambodian landscape recall the fields and agrarian society on which the Khmer Rouge regime based many of its philosophical tenets, particularly as Cambodia now is becoming increasingly urbanized. While the bomb ponds can be seen as wounds on the Cambodian countryside, they can also be viewed as metaphors for all that the Cambodian people suffered during the Vietnam War.

Discussion questions: There are cultures of silence in both America’s secrecy about the bombings and in Cambodia’s omission of its own recent history in educating its youth. How does Vandy’s exposing of this history and pervasive governmental and cultural silence affect the way Cambodians and Americans might view the work? What current issues, either political or social, are surrounded by a culture of silence? Why is confronting your country’s history, both good and bad, important? Discuss the relationship between the beauty of the landscape and the narrative of the film. Discuss what is documentary or real in the film and how it becomes fictionalized. What are the artistic means Rattana uses to penetrate the real?

Art Interaction: Alfredo Jaar (Chilean, b. 1956), May 1, 2011, 2011

Chilean-born artist, architect, and filmmaker Alfredo Jaar, who resides in New York City, is renowned for artworks that explore sociopolitical issues such as genocide, famine, and war. Jaar explores how the saturation of images in contemporary visual culture desensitizes the public to global atrocities and how art can uniquely represent or bear witness to these events.

In May 1, 2011, Jaar uses a widely disseminated image depicting President Barak Obama and his national security team watching Navy Seal Team 6’s assault on al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan. Jaar chose to display the image on a TV screen, as opposed to a framed photograph, which he juxtaposes with a companion TV that shows a blank, white screen. Like the other artists in this exhibition, Jaar references a traumatic and violent event without actually depicting it. In his image, the viewer is seeing the reactions of those witnessing the event and has to imagine what they are seeing and make interpretations without knowing the exact details or circumstances of what actually took place.

Discussion questions: What images from 9/11 and its aftermath are most memorable to you? What made those images stand out? Why does the artist choose to juxtapose this image with a white screen? How do you respond to the white screen? Do you see the event of Osama bin Laden’s death differently in the context of Alfredo Jaar’s artwork than you saw it in the news? Do contemporary artists have a duty to be political? Does engaging with politics necessarily mean critiquing media coverage of sociopolitical events?

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6 The extent of these bombings was not made public in America until 2000 when President Bill Clinton released formerly classified government reports.

7 In 2009, Cambodia finally started to educate its youth on the Vietnam War and the Khmer Rouge.
**Art Interaction: Phil Collins (British, b. 1970), *marxism today (prologue)*, 2010**

Phil Collins is known for his socially engaged, collaborative, and participatory artistic practice. This work explores the culture of contemporary Berlin and examines the disappearance of communism in East Germany following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and subsequent reunification of Germany in 1990. The film features interviews with three women who taught *Marxism* in the GDR school system. They recall their life in East Germany and how they adapted to the new democratic Germany. The women’s narratives reveal how they still mourn the loss of East Germany and the time before their lives and belief systems were turned upside down. Interspersed with archival footage, including *propaganda* footage from the former East German government, *marxism today (prologue)* simultaneously examines the social value of Marxism then and now and challenges the truth-telling ability of the documentary.

**Discussion questions:**
Do you notice any difference between documentary films you have seen outside of the exhibition and the documentary episodes present in *marxism today (prologue)*? How do the women’s accounts relate to the official East German footage? Do you see these women as victims of radical political upheaval? Why or why not? During the interview process, how important is the artist’s relationship with these women? Is there any historical event in United States history similar to the reunification of Germany? Discuss Collins’s use of montage in the film.

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**Art Interaction: Amar Kanwar (Indian, b. 1964), *The Lightning Testimonies*, 2007**

Two events early in the life of Indian artist Amar Kanwar solidified his commitment to social activism and set the course for his artistic practice: the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and a gas leak at the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India, that killed thousands. Kanwar works with some archival images as well as beautiful landscape shots and employs various editing methods in his works to address the political, economic, and cultural structures of contemporary Indian life.

*The Lightning Testimonies* is a multichannel, projected installation that examines the sexual violence perpetrated against thousands of women during and after the 1947 Partition of the Indian subcontinent into Pakistan and India. First-person accounts of horrific rape and incidents of abduction and murder are interspersed throughout this complex installation with poetic images of rural India combined with historical documents. Viewers witness the strength and resilience of women in different regions and at different times whose stories often contradict or challenge official histories. While focused on individuals, this work can also be viewed more broadly as examining India’s views on gender, the *caste system*, religion, and feudal oppression.

**Discussion questions:**
How does the reporting by international media outlets of current accounts of rape in India affect American society’s interaction with these stories? How is the retelling of these women’s stories beneficial to them and to India? Is contemporary society desensitized to these accounts? Why do you think Kanwar chooses to show simultaneously images of nature, animals, pieces of pottery, and weaving in this work? How do you interpret the title of this artwork? Why would the artist chose the word *lightning* in relation to this work? How does the artistic choice of multichannel projection affect the narrative of *The Lightning Testimonies*? How does the video installation contribute to your understanding of the traumatic experiences?

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8 Collins placed a newspaper ad for teachers willing to share their stories about the reunification of Germany. Sixty teachers responded; Collins interviewed ten and chose three for his work.

Israeli artist Yael Bartana’s film brings together Poland’s and Israel’s past, present, and future by exposing traces of the Holocaust through fictional activism that allows viewers to reenter and engage with traumatic history. Prior to World War II, Poland was home to one of the largest and most vibrant Jewish communities, with Warsaw as its cultural epicenter. During the war, most of the Nazi death camps were located in Poland, resulting in the death of ninety percent of Poland’s Jewish population along with other European Jews. Today some Polish citizens are concerned about the homogeneous nature of contemporary Polish society and still-lingering anti-Semitism.

Bartana’s work, which includes scenes that mimic Nazi propaganda films like Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will* (1935), calls into question social and political relationships between Jews and Poles in the age of globalization. In *Mary Koszmary (Nightmares)*, Sławomir Sierakowski, a well-known Polish intellectual and activist, delivers a speech in the empty and rundown former national stadium in Warsaw. Leading the semifictitious Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland, Sierakowski calls on 3.3 million Jews, the approximate number of Jews lost to Poland during the Holocaust, to return to Poland. The propagandistic language and the impossible task for which Sierakowski campaigns helps blur the line between the fictional and the real, leaving uncertain to what degree it is a literal call to return to Poland versus a work of utopian imagination.

**Discussion questions:** What conclusions can you draw about the relationship between contemporary Polish society and Poland’s role in the Holocaust? What kind of connection is there between trauma and guilt? What are some instances in contemporary politics, namely in the United States, where propaganda played a role? Explore the notion of a homeland and its importance in Jewish history post-Holocaust. How effective are the fictional and performative aspects of this film in relation to the real issues it addresses? How is trauma visualized? Are there elements in the work that we could call documentary?

IN THE CLASSROOM OR AT HOME

Follow your visit to the Museum with one or more of these suggested activities.

**The Power of Images**

Contemporary society is inundated with images on a daily basis. As a class, pick a traumatic topic (famine, war, terrorism, etc.) and see how many images students can collect in one week about that topic. Discuss the images as a class and then make a collage, incorporating words from the discussion, with the images. Discuss the role of art and language in the expression of trauma and the value of such expression.

**Film Screenings**

Consider screening *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), a recent film about America’s hunt for Osama bin Laden. Compare the film with Alfredo Jaar’s work *May 1, 2011*.

Consider screening *The Killing Fields* (1984), about the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia. Compare the film with Vandy Rattana’s *The Bomb Ponds*.

**Please note both films are rated R.**

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*The Jewish Renaissance Movement in Poland itself blurs the lines between real and fantasy. JRMIP has its own website, emblem, and even a manifesto. See http://www.jrmip.org/*.
**VOCABULARY**

1. **Agrarian society** – a society that depends on agriculture as its primary means for support and sustenance.

2. **Caste system** – a rigid class structure that is determined by birth; for example, if you are born poor, it’s very difficult to change that status in a caste system.

3. **Documentary film** – a type of film that is based on the real world and real people, depicting things as they are or telling about historical events in a supposedly truthful or objective manner.

4. **Installation art** – an artistic genre of three-dimensional works that are often site-specific and designed to transform the perception of a space or employ space as an element in the perception of art.

5. **Khmer Rouge** – a Cambodian communist guerrilla force that was active from 1970 to the late 1990s.

6. **Marxism** – the economic and political theories of Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Friedrich Engels (1820–1895) that hold that human actions and institutions are economically determined, that class struggle is needed to create historical change, and that capitalism will ultimately be superseded by communism.

7. **Montage** – the process or technique of selecting, editing, and piecing together separate sections of film to form a continuous whole.

8. **Propaganda** – ideas or statements that are spread in order to help a cause, political leader, or government and that are often false or exaggerated.

9. **Semidocumentary** – a film that uses details taken from actual events or situations but also incorporates artistic elements in a retelling or interpretation of that event.

10. **Social activism** – the use of direct, sometimes confrontational action such as demonstrations or strikes in opposition to or support of a cause.

11. **Trauma** – the response to an unexpected or overwhelming, shocking or violent event that is not fully grasped as it occurs, but is often relived later by way of flashbacks, nightmares, or other repetitive phenomena.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**Exhibition catalog:**

**Books:**

**Online:**
Yael Bartana:
*Triumph of the Will*, directed by Leni Riefenstahl, 1934. **Please note: YouTube comments will appear** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GHs2coAzLJ8

Phil Collins:

Alfredo Jaar:
http://www.alfredojaar.net/

Amar Kanwar:
http://amarkanwar.com/

Vandy Rattana:
http://vandyrattana.com/

Art-Making Ideas:

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