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Art Student Perspectives of Activist Art: A Phenomenological Study

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Art Student Perspectives of Activist Art: A Phenomenological Study

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experience of seven undergraduate art students who created an original piece of Activist Art through a class assignment.

The researcher sought to hear participants' stories and examine the artwork created to give meaning to their experience. The overwhelming response showed that undergraduate students wanted to tell their stories and looked inward to find personally powerful and relevant causes that they wanted to share with their classmates, and, in creating a lasting piece of artwork, with the world. The implications of this work suggest that art programs set up in an out-of-date Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE) curriculum that focuses on technical skills and not on visual communication with integration in social justice education are doing a disservice to their young artists. In developing a curriculum for undergraduate art majors, programs have effectively provided technique and media instruction in various courses to develop artists' skills. The program doesn't yet do enough to develop the artist's sense of themselves as individuals with something to communicate visually. Teaching activist art or teaching courses with a project or unit embedded within the course that includes an activist art component would help contribute to undergraduate artists sense of themselves as individuals with ideas to contribute through their art.

Keywords: *Activist Art, DBAE curriculum, Social Justice, Ferguson Uprising*

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move to Florida when I was nineteen, and go to art school in New York City when I was twenty-five. They are always there for me both emotionally and physically. Oh yeah, they are known for their amazing hugs!

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Throughout human history, art has been used to influence political and cultural understanding, attitudes, and behaviors. Whether it is a way to motivate people to attend religious services or as a tool for informing people about social atrocities or inequalities, art - in all of its multiple forms - has been a powerful tool for social critique and action. (Dewhurst, 2014, p. 1)

Flying over the streets of London is a balloon with the likeness of a world leader. The similarity is not the balloon's only draw for the crowd in the streets below. The balloon is a representation of the President of the United States, Donald Trump, depicting him as an orange infant wearing nothing but a diaper (see Figure 1). *Trump Baby*, as the balloon is called in the media, soars over the crowd of protesters during President Trump's scheduled meeting with the Queen of England (Handley, 2018). *Trump Baby* is credited to activist Sheila Menon, who is described as one of the organizers of the United Kingdom protest balloon. The activists made a formal request for a permit, which was initially denied by Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London. Khan changed his mind when more than 10,000 people signed a petition wanting the balloon to speak for them at the protest. Most recently, the balloon has been seen in Scotland and activists are trying to move the balloon to the United States (Handley, 2018).



Figure 1. Sheila Menon, Trump Baby, 2016

This balloon is an excellent example of the power of activist art and the current role art plays in our society. Having been raised by parents who were socially-minded activists, one of my earliest memories is accompanying my mother to a rally and making picket signs. Because of this upbringing, I have always considered myself an advocate of and for artists representing every socioeconomic group in society. Artists, in general, have long been considered on the fringes of society, or “other” no matter what socioeconomic group to which they belong. My experience teaching in K-12 classrooms before moving into higher education showed me that art class was a haven for students to create, express, and be themselves. I have taught students based on the formal elements of art. Additionally, I have implemented lessons that include at least one activity each semester that give students an opportunity to research and use visual communication to express an opinion through images alone. This is similar to the way a writing teacher would encourage students to write a persuasive essay. These practices are central to activist art pedagogy.

Background of the Study

Art has an important role to play in society and our ability to create art distinguishes us from other species. Imagine a world without any form of art, one without visual images, culture, music, cinema, dance, opera, literature, and poetry; that world would be dull and devoid of imagination. This study does not investigate the rarified art world which is a handful of artists, mostly dead white men, selling at Sotheby's auction house for millions of dollars to billionaire collectors. *Activist art* focuses on studying art which engages with overall society and with key issues that affect us all (Dewhurst, 2014). Dewhurst, a noted activist art researcher, observes that when "uniting art with contemporary concerns, young people get involved in such projects to use art to investigate, critique, and take action against the injustices that touch their lives" (p. 2).

Increasingly, artists are more inspired by reality as it presents itself than the formal and traditional Elements of Art, such as color, shape, and the never-ending search for beauty. In today's complex world, art for art's sake is insufficient. The term employs a history of art historians looking at art purely for aestheticism or beauty without context and meaning behind the work (Bell-Villada, 1986). Today socially and politically engaged artists use different media to express themselves. Their art includes a wide variety of media such as, traditional sculpture or painting, film, video, and performance art. In addition, art can include interactive building displays to address matters of democracy, civil and human rights, capitalism, the economy, migration, the environment, as well as a whole host of other issues. Speaking to this, Ploof and Hochtritt (2018) state "... educators who believe in the power and promise of socially just art and education become part of the larger community of activists, thinkers, questioners, and doers

who seek to collectively generate more democratic and socially just forms of education” (p. 43). Given this shift in priorities, educational programs must include these topics within their curriculum in order to remain relevant.

Historical American Art Education Movements

The field of art education in the United States has experienced a number of movements and paradigm shifts (Efland, 1990). The two most prominent shifts have been the Creative Self-Expression Movement, which began in the 1920s and became the dominant form of art education following World War II, and Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE), which emerged in the early 1960s and gained recognition in the 1980s (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010).

The paradigm of creative self-expression gave way to new concepts, and in the 1980s, social history content was taken out of art curriculum and replaced with the DBAE initiative to champion a new focus and give structure to art education. The DBAE curriculum was promoted by the J. Paul Getty Center (also known as the The Getty Institute for the Arts) with the purpose of improving the quality of art education by standardizing its instruction with a comprehensive curriculum consisting of four items: Art History, Art Criticism, Aesthetics, and Art Production (Bersson, 1986; Carpenter & Tavin, 2010). In a 1984 seminar, art educator, Clark (1984), for the Getty Center, noted they were “already grappling with various redefinitions for art education...” and stated there had been a need for “large scale curriculum development in art education for some time” (p. 226).

Shortly after the formalization and acceptance of DBAE within the academy, tensions had already been identified and a new direction for art education was emerging. Critics noted that DBAE shifted the focus away from the inclusion of social issues, giving little room to teach about common societal concerns and instead focusing on production (Spearman, 2014). Hedayat (2013) noted merging historical content with art production would increase students' understanding and appreciation of art. DBAE attracted critics within the field of art educators who felt it was too restrictive in content and too academic in practice (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010).

This restrictiveness led socially-minded artists and academics to begin offering various frameworks and models for tying production and art to social justice education. Personal and direct involvement with the arts enables us “to see more in our experience, to hear more on normally unheard frequencies, to become conscious of what daily routines, habits, and conventions have obscured” (Greene, 1995, p. 379). According to Carpenter and Tavin (2010), during a 1996 interview with Brent Wilson, lead evaluator of the Getty, Wilson states that DBAE “will have to respond to changing societal, artistic, and educational conditions and to the interests of new individuals” (p. 333). This implies that Brent Wilson was forward in his thinking of art education as cultural criticism. Reconceptualizing art education to include socially constructive projects and recognizing art-making as an intellectual, scholarly endeavor is still a need for art education advocates (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010).

Activist Art Education Movement

The concerns of artists about the notable separation between social commentary, artist, and artwork, increased throughout the 2000s. Carpenter and Tavin (2010) stated they see “...the

reconceptualization of art education as engaged in an ongoing attempt to shift from traditional modes of art making and art thinking towards a profoundly critical, historical, political, and self-reflective understanding of visual culture and social responsibility” (p. 329). These sentiments are echoed throughout the activist art education movement, which demands that art educators be advocates for students to express strong viewpoints in their work over the push to emphasize technical, subject-based classes in the humanities.

The public thinks of activism as the process of standing on street corners with posters or participating in marches for various causes (Dufour, 2002). While that form of protest can be a powerful thing, artists have been using images and artwork to change audience’s perceptions and experiences for a long time, most recently to bring communities together after traumatic events (March, 2013).

Activist artist Carol Klein grew up in Ferguson, Missouri and was so inspired by witnessing the spirit of hundreds of volunteers coming together to paint boarded up buildings in her town after the riots in 2014 (Branch, 2014), that she created a children’s book of the murals called, *Painting for Peace in Ferguson* (see Figure 2 & Figure 3). She quotes resident and mural painter, Reggie: “As a resident of Ferguson, I knew I had to go out and do whatever I could for my neighbors and businesses. I felt the world had seen us as monsters and thugs, but we are just like you and your community. I believe the paintings would help show the world that we were human, we wanted peace” (Klein, 2016, p. 51).



Figure 2. Carol Klein, *Ferguson Mural #1*, 2016



Figure 3. Carol Klein, *Ferguson Mural #2*, 2016

Activist artists aim to create visual images that engage with the audience and begin a conversation that changes audience engagement from enthusiasm to action (Dufour, 2002). Activist art is also about taking a position or viewpoint in the artwork (Anderson, Gussak, Hallmark, & Paul, 2010; Garber, 2004; Greene, 1995; Hanley, Noblit, Sheppard, & Barone,

2013; Quinn, Ploof, & Hochtritt, 2012). Activist artists try to provide a counterpoint to the prevailing images of power and also counter the stereotypes that are fed to people by the media. Since the Enlightenment art has had a very long history of engagement with politics. Art is, in a sense, as much a political act as it is about one person's views and the freedom to act and express those views (Ploof & Hochtritt, 2018). Activist art has an importance, significance, and merit because it cannot be judged by popular consensus and numbers alone. Art allows for something that cannot be defined (Ploof & Hochtritt).

Problem Statement

Activist art is difficult to categorize because of how it functions. That is its beauty, and also it's ungraspable value. Gregos (2014) states it is difficult to describe how art affects those who see it because of its subtle impact. You can never predict the ways art will affect people, change minds, or influence people's behavior. It has a subtle power that changes the world one viewer at a time. This is why activist art has been referred to as a weapon (Beyerbach & Davis, 2011). Desai (2010) argues that "artists can challenge linear narratives of the past and the idea of objective representations of history" (p. 49), thus reframing our understanding of history. Artists provide an image with an additional emotional component.

The difficulty for art educators is how to best understand the experience of art students who are engaged in creating activist art. These students are using the arts in ways that raise the general public's understanding of social issues and consciousness of how society can become more inclusive (Rawdon & Moxley, 2016). The art class can provide a safe and controlled environment for teachers to begin a discussion with students to promote awareness and

understanding towards social justice and contemporary issues (Lucey & Laney, 2009). Integration of these contemporary issues into the school curriculum only helps raise students' awareness of the community around them and helps them critically analyze social problems (Gorzycki, 2016). This art education pedagogy is not practiced as widely as it should be.

Artists have a long history of incorporating social content in their artwork (Naidus, 2009). Art education for social change emerged around the same time that researchers and scholars began to pay attention to the works of activist artists (Spearman, 2014). Many artists produce artwork that speaks to contemporary issues and are related to political activism and social justice causes (Dewhurst, 2011).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological research study is to reveal student perspectives after they have taken part in a classroom activity wherein the students created an original piece of activist art. Activist art integration in art education classes encourages student engagement and a sense of ownership in their community (Dewhurst, 2011). In my own teaching experience, I have found that using the arts to teach about social justice issues engages students and challenges them to think deeply. According to Barbara Beyerbach and Deborah Davis (2011) "They [students] connect to contemporary arts in ways that they do not connect to more traditional texts, and engage with issues on a deeper level. They share their own stories and examples with the issues on a deeper level" (p. 6). I have seen this to be true in my own studio classes, students personalize the learning and identify and understand issues in deeper ways than for traditional art.

Excitement and curiosity comes from a student artist's exploration of this assignment from their perspective during a time of great turmoil in American's landscape. The visual images of Figure 2 and Figure 3 are important in this study because they explore the complexities of a student's vision and close proximity to the social and political unrest of Ferguson, Missouri during the volatile riots of 2014. The riots in Ferguson, also referred to in news coverage as the Ferguson Uprising (Branch, 2014) began the day after Michael Brown was fatally shot by police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014. According to numerous media reports the peaceful protests and violent rioting and looting continued until the November 24, 2014 trial that failed to indict Officer Wilson and again on the one-year anniversary of Brown's shooting (Branch, 2014).

The study participants were creating activist art during or shortly after the Ferguson Uprising. Ferguson, Missouri is less than 200 miles from the small liberal arts college where the student participants for this study were enrolled, and that the activist art assignment was created. This study seeks to reveal how student artists visually dealt with this turmoil.

Research Question

This research study explored one main question and three sub-questions:

What are student perspectives after having taken part in a classroom activity whereby the students created an original piece of Activist Art?

- a. How do participants define the term *activist art*, and do they consider themselves activist artists?

- b. Did the Ferguson Uprising happening so close to the participants' college affect their artwork during this time?
- c. Did creating activist art as an undergraduate student assist in the student's overall growth as an artist?

Key Terms

Activist Art. “Art used to influence political and cultural understanding, attitudes, and behaviors” or used for informing people about social atrocities or inequalities and asking the audience to be moved to a call for action (Dewhurst, 2014, p.1).

Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE). DBAE began in the United States in the 1980s as an educational program designed and funded by the J. Paul Getty Trust. The objectives were to create a standardization framework for art education (Efland, 1990).

Creative Self-Expression Movement. Art Education movement from the 1940s until the 1970s based on Freud's notions of psychoanalysis and Viktor Lowenfield's theory of children's stages of artistic development (Efland, 1990).

Ferguson Uprising. The riots in Ferguson, Missouri also referred to in news coverage as the Ferguson Uprising (Branch, 2014). They began the day after Michael Brown was fatally shot by police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014.

Phenomenological Analytical Approach

The foundation of activist art revolves around social issues related to current cultural and ethnic populations, and in many cases, entices the viewer into action (Lippard, 2009). Lippard (2009) states that the Trojan Horse was the first activist artwork and that today artists use activist

art to “connect with the sources of energy in their own experience” (p. 1). A key component in phenomenological research focuses on the human experience including individuals’ stories, feelings, emotions, and events that would not normally be experienced throughout a common occurrence (Van Manen, 1990). The leading scholars in phenomenological research all agree that the basis for this qualitative approach is for participants to describe their lived experiences associated with a phenomenon (Crestwell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990, 2002, 2017). This study is unusual for most art students in that they participated in an activist art assignment during or shortly after a traumatic events occurred in the United States. The study attempted to emulate Van Manen’s (2002) principles of good phenomenological studies by doing two necessary things, “(a) provide concrete portrayals of lived experiences, and (b) offer insightful reflections on the meanings of those experiences” (p. 49). One of the data sources for this study, which can show visual artistic growth, is artwork created by students participating in an art class. Creswell and Poth (2018) referred to phenomenology as an excellent way to explore “personal growth” (p. 76), and Van Manen (1990) expresses that art is a source of lived experience from a phenomenological perspective. He said, “Because artists are involved in giving shape to their lived experience, the products of art are, in a sense, lived experiences transforming into transcended configurations” (p. 74). For these reasons, phenomenology is the definitive qualitative investigative technique to examine the individual student’s own experiences and perspectives about an activist art project.

Scope and Characterizations

The scope of this research is solely to understand what students who participated in an activist art assignment would describe as their most powerful impact, influence, or emotional affect from the assignment. Additionally, what benefits, if any, did students glean from this activist art assignment during this particular time and setting adjacent to political unrest in the United States. Students can establish their own relationships to their artwork based on subjects and create their own meanings by broadening their research of visual culture (Tavin & Housman, 2004).

Limitations

There are limitations inherent in any research design and phenomenological research embodies the main limitation to qualitative methodology, which is the results of a phenomenological analysis of the study cannot be generalized to the rest of the population. This relates to drawing conclusions from the sample data about a wider group of undergraduate art students. Underlying relationships between established perceptions about activist art and/or political art can be politically one-sided, either liberal or conservative, and therefore combine both positive and negative perceptions from readers' frames of reference (Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012). I will not be able to generalize the findings from this research just like all qualitative research, but the insights gained from this study will have merit and will inform the reader on people's perceptions of artistic creation during political and social unrest.

Delimitations

Like limitations, delimitations are part of every research project, and this one is no exception. The first delimitation of my study is the definition of the sample participants as former students and of the traditional college student age range of 18-24 years old at the time of the class, wherein the art was created. These former students participated in one of three classes: Drawing II, Printmaking, or Activist Art while enrolled fulltime as a declared art major. At the time, the majority of students in the art department were traditional college age students. Participants who had time available and that I, the researcher, had access to during my time to travel was a second delimitation. Most former students still live in Missouri and I traveled to them in order to interview the participants at their convenience. The third delimitation consisted of the setting which revolved around Ferguson, Missouri. The Ferguson Uprising that started in August 2014 after Michael Brown was shot and killed and continued until the trial, and again on the anniversary of Mr. Brown's death in 2015, has now been in each participant's history for three years (Klein, 2015). However, the memory of this event and the participants' state of mind during the creation of one piece of artwork may not have resonated for all participants.

Significance of the Study

This study's findings may contribute to the effective integration of activist art education into classrooms by art educators. In addition, student perspectives related to optimal educational experiences with activist art can be captured and shared with other art educators to improve their pedagogical practices. Quinn (2010) states that "all humans are innately artists" (p. 224), therefore deconstructing the hierarchy between the artist and the audience, and challenging

educators to educate all students in the arts. She also states, “It is vital, a social justice concern, in fact, that all youth are offered an arts education” (p. 224). She traces the view that arts stimulate cognitive development and fostering intellectual growth. Therefore, artists involved in social justice education invent visions of what the world should and might be (Quinn, 2010).

Summary

The formal Elements of Art/Principles of Design and DBAE do not sufficiently describe contemporary art practices; nor do they help lead to an understanding of symbolic political art. Through this study, I attempted to better understand how the implementation of Activist Art activities in the classroom, represented through conceptual artmaking approaches, shapes student perceptions regarding political and societal issues in their world.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature explores activist art within a variety of themes. A prominent theme in this literature review is the origin of activist art within key social movements. Topics within this theme explore what is currently known regarding activist art and its historical use to compel the viewer to action from the Reformation to Post-Contemporary eras. The first part of this review highlights individual pieces of artwork which were selected as examples of artists who conveyed political protest in response to contemporary events and social issues. The second portion of this chapter examines current available research with results that demonstrate the need to incorporate activist art in educational settings. Finally, the review offers a summary of current research with regard to social justice education.

Limitations of the Literature

The subject of activist artwork represents the interaction of social science with cultural changes. Therefore, to limit the scope of the review, articles were eliminated that discuss the healing powers of art, commonly referred to as art therapy. This research study focuses on the expression of political messages using artwork. There is a need for peer-reviewed, scholarly articles that explore the purpose and effect of activist artwork. Grindon (2011) notes the lack of scholarly writing about artwork displayed in nontraditional settings. This “lack of research presents a challenge to thoroughly explore the issues surrounding activist artwork and is due to a bias within the art historian and research community” (p. 80).

A conflict exists within academia in regard to the use of social media platforms to share research and writing. Several scholars of contemporary current events write and publish their

work on social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or a personal blog. Leonard (2014) observes that traditional scholars cast aspersions towards peers who utilize modern technology and online platforms to share their work. Unfortunately, this conflict minimizes the vast audience writers can reach when they utilize social media platforms. Leonard notes the typical peer-reviewed journal has an average of 12 readers, but online publications average 100,000 readers. Social media platforms allow work and research to be shared with a vast audience, however, this sharing of information is viewed negatively by some in academia.

Further limiting the number of available peer-reviewed articles in the literature is the turnaround and publishing time for traditional academic writing. As noted by Doucet (2012), “scholarly writings... [have] a tortoise pace, compared to the hare pace of online blogs” (p. 1). However, this slow pace is not entirely negative. As Doucet (2012) further notes, “Our research is in-depth, informed by theory, methodology, and wide reading. Our articles and chapters are the result of weeks, months, even years of work” (p. 1). While academic peer-reviewed research takes a very long time, it is more thoroughly vetted and researched than the alternatives.

Current examples of this dilemma are found in graffiti and mural projects in Ferguson, Missouri. This activist artwork was created in response to the death of Michael Brown in 2015 and the subsequent protests his death triggered. These pieces of activist artwork have yet to appear in peer-reviewed journals. However, these murals, along with current protest artwork, which appeared in online news stories and blogs, show the impact activist art can have on the public. Two examples are: *The Emperor has no Balls* by Joshua Moore (see Figure 4) and most

recently the advertisement by Pepsi Company showing protesters at a #BlackLivesMatter rally (see Figure 5).



Figure 4. Joshua Moore, The Emperor Has no Balls, 2016



Figure 5. Olivia Solon, Split Screen between Pepsi commercial and #BlackLivesMatter, 2016

Cultivating Change in Art Education

Art education takes practices from the past to sharpen an artist's skills in moving forward with potential tools for critical teaching. Art education needs to move from traditional media based classes focusing only on traditional skills into an integrated curriculum that trains young artists in visual communication through conceptual ideas. Artists trained not only in traditional art skills but also in their ability to make meaningful work helps them know that they are part of the collective conversation.

Elements of art. The Elements of Art are considered formal technical ways to evaluate artwork and break down *how* a piece of art was created. Arthur Wesley Dow, Professor of Fine Arts at Columbia University first identified the elements of composition, adding harmony

between line, value, and color. The current definitions of the elements and principles come from The National Art Education Association (Pappas, 1970). The seven Elements of Art are: a) line, defined as a moving point in space; b) shape, defined as a two-dimensional form that can be measured with height and width; c) space, defined as both a positive and negative sense of depth achieved in a work of art; d) form, defined as any three-dimensional shape that can be measured with height, width, and depth; e) texture, defined as the actual feel or implied feeling if an object might be touched; f) value, defined as the lightness or darkness of the tones or colors; and g) color, defined as the value and intensity of each hue (Pappas, 1970).

Principles of design. The Principles of Design go hand in hand with the elements breaking down *how* a piece of art was created. The seven Principles of Design are: a) balance, which combine elements to add a feeling of equilibrium in symmetrical or asymmetrical artwork; b) repetition, in careful placement of elements to cause a visual tempo; c) emphasis, which is an artist's way of combining elements to stress differences; d) variety, which concerns the diversity of shapes, sizes, and colors in a work of art; e) unity, which refers to combining similar elements to achieve a visual harmony; f) proportion, which is the relationship of certain elements to each other and the whole; and g) movement, which refers to creating the look and feeling of action, or to guide the viewer's eye throughout the artwork (Pappas, 1970).

Conceptual art. Conceptual art emerged from the Modern to the Postmodern eras in art history. The term refers simultaneously to an idea or vision the artist(s) would like to convey to the audience. In the simplest of terms, activist art places the conceptual idea at a greater value than the traditional formal qualities of the materials (Dewhurst, 2010). Put another way;

historically one evaluates and analyzes artwork for formal or technical elements. In art education, these elements are referred to as the Elements of Art (line, shape, space, form, texture, value, and color) and the Principles of Design (balance, repetition, emphasis, variety, unity, proportions, and movement) (Esaak, 2016).

Postmodern principles. The Postmodern Principles go beyond the traditional Elements of Art and Principles of Design previously discussed in that they go beyond formal analysis to explore not the *how*, but the *why* a piece of art was created. The Postmodern Principles are: a) recontextualization, which includes the position of familiar imagery or text in a new and different context; b) gaze, defined by controlling the attention; c) text and image, an interplay with words overlapping an image or used in conjunction with images; d) representing, which speaks to the artistic voice within the artist's culture including race, class, cultural identity, or national heritage; e) hybridity, multi-media collaborations; f) appropriation, defined as borrowed images or to pass images by electronic means; g) layering, the overlapping of multiple images or internet filters; h) juxtaposition, which places contrasting images next to each other to interplay; and i) obsessive, a redundant or repetitive quality (Gude, 2004).

Activist art. Activist art has also been called protest art or resistance art, and has a long history of taking art from the realm of being an artifact and placing it in a social context (Spearman, 2014). Michelle Marder Kamhi (2004) argues that artwork should be evaluated based on its “ideological messages instead of their aesthetic values” (p. 25). Activist art can take many forms, from performance pieces, to graffiti or street art, site-specific installations, music, dance, graphic design posters, or traditional media. In most cases, activist artists bypass the traditional

gallery setting to take their art to the people with the hope of expanding to larger audiences (Spearman, 2014). The bulk of activist artwork is easily accessible and available to the public, in direct opposition to the commerce-driven historical function of artwork (Kester, 2003). As Myhre (2012) notes, activist artists display their artwork in public spaces and do not intend for their artwork to be assigned a monetary value. Therefore, a bias exists among art historians and researchers regarding the longevity and artifact quality of activist artwork.

Historical movements in art education. Efland (1990) notes that the history of art education in the US has periodically changed by adding in the conversation of media and technique juxtaposed with critiques (Efland). Visual art education in America can be traced back to colonial schooling. Although there was no formal policy at the time, the arts were integrated because Puritanism saw it as an act of worship and part of a “classical education” (Efland, 1990 p. 60).

In 1749 Benjamin Franklin recommended teaching practical subjects for boys such as English, modern languages, arithmetic, navigation, and drawing in his proposal for an Academy in Philadelphia. He stated,

As to their studies, it would be well if they could be taught everything that is useful, and everything that is ornamental; but art is long, and their time is short. It is therefore proposed that they learn those things that are likely to be most useful and most ornamental. Regard being held to the several professions for which they are intended. All should be taught to write a fair hand, and swift, as that is useful to all. And with it may be learnt something of drawing, by imitation of prints, and some of the first principles of

perspective. Drawing is a kind of universal language, understood by all nations. A man may often express his ideas, even to his own countrymen, more clearly with a lead pencil, or bit of chalk, than with his tongue. And many can understand a figure, that do not comprehend a description in words, though ever so properly chosen. All boys have an early inclination to this improvement, and begin to make figures of animals, ships, machines, etc. as soon as they can use a pen, but for want of a little instruction at that time generally are discouraged, and quit the pursuit. Drawing is no less useful to a mechanic than to a gentleman. Several handicrafts seem to require it; as the carpenter, ship-Wright's, engraver's, painter's, carver's, cabinet-maker's, gardener's, and other businesses. By a little skill of this kind, the workman may perfect his own idea of the thing to be done, before he begins to work; and show a draft for the encouragement and satisfaction of his employer. (Franklin, 1749, p. 158)

Franklin's proposal was never implemented, and the practical focus of his theory of education did not come to pass until the following century (Efland, 1990). At the turn of the 18th century, the French Academy was used as a prototype for art schools throughout the country, but engagement in teaching the arts meant teaching drawing (Pappas, 1970). Pappas mentions geometric or mechanical drawing skills being taught so boys could "better meet the industrial demands of an industrial society" (p. 13). The advantages of drawing skills and the ability to hold and control a pencil directly related to the fine motor skills necessary for writing legibly. This inclusion within the curriculum grew during the 1850s and the 1860s, ultimately becoming a required subject in the Boston Public Schools in 1864 (Pappas, 1970).

The U.S. Bureau of Education followed in 1874, hiring special teachers of art at the high school level and writing the following in their bulletin:

In addition to the increased competition arising from steam-carriage, new and cheaper methods of manufacture, and increased productiveness, another element of value has rapidly pervaded all manufactures, an element in which the United States has been and is woefully deficient - the art element. The element of beauty is found to have pecuniary as well as aesthetic value. The training of the hand and the eye which is given by drawing is found to be of the greatest advantage to the worker in many occupations and is rapidly becoming indispensable. This training is of value to all the children and offers to girls as well as boys opportunity for useful and remunerative occupations, for drawing in the public schools is not to be taught as mere 'accomplishment.' The end sought is not to enable the scholar to draw a pretty picture, but to train the hand and eye that he may be better fitted to become a bread-winner. (Pappas, 1970, p. 14)

The emphasis in drawing and hand-eye coordination began to shift with the development of the concept of creativity and art appreciation of the masters was added around the turn of the twentieth century (Chapman, 1978). John Dewey, noted pioneer in education theory, influenced Creative Self- Expression's focus on children's creative development (Chapman, 1978, Dewey, 1902, Pappas, 1970). Dewey's work was influential to Viktor Lowenfeld, whose books, *Creative Activity* and *Creative and Mental Growth* are hallmarks of literature in art education. Lowenfeld was interested in the creative and mental growth of children and was the first to come up with the children's drawing stages (Dobbs, 1988, Lowenfeld, 1939, 1949). Chapman (1978) also notes

self-expression echoed in curricula after the New York Armory Show of 1913. This art show was the first large display of modern art in America, and the work demonstrated the artist's creative energy. Most notable work from the show was Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending the Staircase, No. 2* done in 1912 (see Figure 6). Duchamp's figure shows the viewer time, space and motion, and "it was soon obvious to many scholars, artists, and teachers that art could no longer be defined exclusively in terms of representational drawing" (Chapman, 1978, p. 11).



Figure 6. Marcel Duchamp, *Nude Descending the Staircase, No. 2*, 1912

Contemporary movements in art education. In 2000, when Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) began to fall out of favor with art educators; it then lost its backing and financial support from the Getty Foundation. "Evidence in scholarly backlash against DBAE that accomplished the rise of 'visual culture' in art education, while some ideas have been

repackaged with a label of ‘aesthetic education,’ the movement’s original clarity has dissipated” (Stabler, 2018, p. 378). Another scholar associated with DBAE, Stabler (2018) states that it (DBAE) focuses on art history, art criticism, studio art, and aesthetics, asserting that “. . . classroom teachers are expected to instruct children in art just as they are expected to instruct them in other subject areas” (p. 378). Art educators and scholars have been calling for a reconceptualization of art curriculum that moves away from the traditional media focus alone to one that includes big conceptual ideas, postmodern principles, and topics that help guide art instruction and visual culture pedagogy (Carpenter & Tavin, 2010; Gude, 2004, 2007; Stewart & Walker, 2006).

When a class analyzes images created by activist artists, the conversation will naturally involve the social context that influenced the creation of the artwork. Since art is not created in a vacuum, the artists are influenced by events or conditions around them. With a classroom strategy involving oral or written discussion, it fosters a safe classroom space to explore different aspects of social power structures (Spearman, 2014). Activist art raises questions and forces students to think critically. Discussions that foster connections between the issue and the image are important for students in learning to connect and then translate visual images and articulate decision-making art processes (Dewhurst, 2010). Some critics argue that art education classes taught by teachers who value visual culture will leave traditionally valued artwork to the side in favor of popular images. For instance, the *David* by Michelangelo would be cast aside for a discussion on Mattel’s *Barbie and Ken* dolls (Spearman, 2014). Visual culture opponents do not

want fine art to be treated the same as cultural artifacts and for the art class to look like a social studies class (Duncum, 2002).

The newly created *Art and Activism Studio Project* provides students opportunities to experience studio courses with interdisciplinary activist intentions (Natale, 2012). The initiative, started by Joan Giroux, presents a non-profit agency as an example for the subject of student inspiration. One semester she enlisted volunteers to discuss the plight of orphaned children with the philanthropic organization, *The Cradle Project*. The project is an art installation that promotes awareness on the financial burdens to feed, shelter, and educate these children. Empty cradles made out of found objects are displayed against a backdrop of falling sand (Natale, 2012). During her six-week course, the students wrote daily reflection journals and analyzed visual images before coming together to create five hundred and fifty cradles out of discarded materials (Hawkins & Giroux, 2016).

In teacher preparation classes that combine studio projects for upcoming future classroom assignments, various teachers need opportunities to engage in art production (Wyrick, 1998). In Wyrick's research teachers examined the professional portfolio or body of work for activist artists with the hope of being able to reinterpret new knowledge regarding the art forms to their students. Teachers in the study noted that the examined strategies activist artists used for sociopolitical change characterized the artwork (Wyrick, 1998).

The Art Student Experience in the Activist Art Movement

At its core, art is a form of communication. Art can change the way we think, crack open cemented opinions, make us look at the world with a critical eye, open up horizons, challenge

standardized views, expose that which is sometimes hidden under a rug, and testify to the power of human imagination. In addition to these contributions, activist art gives voice to the Other, highlights important ideas that are sidelined or silenced due to political or economic interests, and functions as a barometer of society. Researcher, Katerina Gregos (2014) said it best in her TED Talk when she spoke about why art is important: “Art doesn’t change the world on a macro level, it changes it on a micro level.”

Within studio art classes under BFA (Bachelor of Fine Arts) programs, classes engage in oral critiques that can foster dialogue, reconciliation, engagement, solidarity, connectivity, and understanding of those with opposing views. Social justice education within the creation of activist art would link the creative opportunity to a framework of political, socioeconomic, and cultural influences. Dewhurst’s (2014) framework for social justice education within the visual art classroom provides strategies that can be employed by professors leading class critiques. “As a pedagogical approach, social justice education seeks to engage learners in critical analysis of injustice by encouraging them to create works of art to imagine new realities and shift social interactions” (p. 2).

Historical Resistance Stories (Selected)

Activist art is the creation of social movements (Kester, 2003). Not all street art is activist art, and not all activist art is in support of aggressive liberal politics (Cozen, 2013; Dragicevic-Sesic, 2001). From the *Trojan Horse* of ancient Greece to the modern #Blacklivesmatter movement, activist art has volleyed the lines between formal elements and conceptual ideas (Lippard, 2009; Sexton, 2015). Activist artists are not naïve; they are sophisticated and able to do

work that appeals to audiences on several different levels (Aguilar, 2013; Kester, 2003; Rawdon & Moxley, 2016). These artists use their work to advance agendas as a critical component of social movements (Kester, 2003). This section of the literature review addresses the social movements in regions of war and conflict and those of marginalized communities, with a focus on the role of activist art within each social movement. Specifically, the research discusses anti-war efforts, the Arab Spring, and marginalized communities such as LGBTQIA (defined as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual), the civil rights movement, and feminism. Each of these examples offers some history of conflict and the art that emerged, illustrating the long and established history of activist art.

Regions of war and conflict. The root of conflict lies in the age-old contrast between good and evil and is found in the current political climate which often results in social revolutions and even violence and war (Dahrendorf, 1958). Social and political conflict exists throughout the world and has been documented since the beginning of recorded history (Fink, 1968). Conflict or violence can motivate social groups to new levels of innovation and creativity to resolve the conflict.

Famously, a biblical example from the book of Samuel, chapter 7, chronicles the war against Philistines and includes the story of David and Goliath (17:37, 45-47, New King James Version) which was a source of inspiration for Michelangelo's sculpture *David* (see Figure 7). The sculpture, made from 1501-1504 CE and commissioned by the Operai for the outdoor Palazzo della Signoria, which is the seat of the civic government in Florence, meant more symbolically to the people of Florence than merely a representation of a literary hero. The

sculpture's symbolism changed over time coming to represent the independent state of the city of Florence and the Medici family in a powerful battle against Rome and the leaders of the church (McHam, 2001). In the sculpture's original location in the outdoor Palazzo the eyes of *David* fixed in the direction of Rome. The sculpture has since been moved indoors to the Academia Gallery, but the direction of *David*'s glare is still facing south (McHam, 2001). *David* was not created as a piece to coerce someone to do something but instead evolved into activist art by representing the strength of the little guy and the motivation to be brave in the face of opposition.



Figure 7. Michelangelo di Lodovico Buonarroti Simoni, *David*, 1501-1504

Anti-war art. Pablo Picasso stated, "Art is an instrument in the war against the enemy" (Simonton, 2007, p. 329) Picasso's painting titled *Guernica*, done in 1937 (see Figure 8) is a powerful political statement that was painted as an artist's immediate reaction to the Nazis' devastating, but casual, bombing of the town of Guernica, a village in northern Spain. The black

and white painting that was made from traditional materials of canvas and oil painting looks like a mural because of its sheer size. Picasso made a decision about the size of the canvas to engulf the viewer in the scene. The painting is eleven feet high and twenty-five and a half feet wide, and is visually dramatic due to the use of only black, white, and grey paint, noting a lack of color. The absence of color is meant to be reminiscent of a photograph (Simonton, 2007). Picasso used the bull and the horse, important characters in Spanish culture, as symbols to represent the onslaught of fascism and the people of Guernica (Cousen, 2009).



Figure 8. Pablo Picasso, *Guernica*, 1937

Picasso knew that the relationship between art and activism was a long one and that artists have to make decisions about what to represent and how the viewer might interpret the message. Picasso made bold statements regarding the war and his feeling against the bombing of this quiet village. The original painting, *Guernica*, hangs in the Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection; additionally there is a tapestry version which hangs in the United Nations (U.N.) building in New York City. The tapestry is situated on a large wall and provides the

backdrop for diplomats as they make statements to the press. The tapestry was controversially covered with a blue tarp when in 2003 Secretary of State Colin Powell made a statement regarding the Iraq War (Cousen, 2009). This was not the first time the painting was at the center of intense political activism. In the 1960s and 1970s, the original painting was the focus of a petition and an act of vandalism (Simonton, 2007). Four hundred artists signed a petition urging Picasso to take the painting out of the United States until after the Vietnam War, and in 1974, Tony Shafrazi spray-painted the words "Kill Lies All" onto the painting to protest the United States' actions in My Lai (Simonton, 2007).

Arab Spring. The Arab Spring uprising supports the claim that activist art influences online communities. The movement began in Egypt before spreading to Libya and several other countries throughout the Middle East. The movement centers on youth calling for justice, freedom, and equality from oppressive political regimes (Passant, 2011). Members of the movement used graffiti on buildings and streets in public spaces (Myhre, 2012) as a means of expressing dissent and as a call for action. In addition to street art and graffiti by unknown members of the Arab Spring movement, the effort also gained the attention of well-known artist, Banksy (Passant, 2011). In support of Arab Spring, Banksy painted a graffiti piece in Bethlehem. The untitled artwork (see Figure 9) uses subversive and satirical imagery that Banksy is known for and shows a young girl frisking a soldier (Passant).



Figure 9. Banksy, *Untitled (Girl Frisking Soldier)*, 2011

According to Myhre (2012) many Egyptian youth create artwork in spite of the threat of arrest. “I feel street art is a good retaliation to all the billboards [the government] used to do with Mubarak’s face on them or for the Sinai Liberation. It is sort of a way to reclaim the streets,” states Nagla Samir, Professor of Art and Design at the American University in Cairo (Myhre, p. 22). Egyptian youth took to the streets, even under the threat of imprisonment, hoping that the revolution would embrace their artwork and with the new and unfamiliar mind-set of ‘the streets are ours’ (Passant, 2011). This explains the concept behind the power of graffiti and demonstrates the challenge behind the ownership of public space (Passant, 2011).

Although social media had little to do with the underlying social, political, and economic factors behind these countries’ unrest, the use of social media to organize groups and as a means of communication during riots was seen by several governments as a threat. The “April 6 Youth

Movement” Facebook group generated tens of thousands of calls to actions and led to the Egyptian government censoring and eventually shutting down Facebook and Twitter in 2011 (Stepanova, 2011). The censorship of social media sites shows the powerful influence of social communities and online activism. These included websites being blocked, wired internet cut, cell phone service cancelled, and electricity being shut off from January 27, 2011 to February 2, 2011 in not only Egypt but in Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain as well (Stepanova, 2011).

On February 16, 2011, a teenage boy named Naief Abazid spray painted “It’s your turn, Doctor” (see Figure 10) on the school in his hometown of Daraa, Syria (Hof & Simon, 2013). It was a very provocative statement suggesting that Syria’s dictator would be the next to fall in the Arab Spring revolutions, following Tunisia and Egypt. Most historians point to this graffiti as the beginning of events that would lead to the civil war in Syria (Hof & Simon, 2013; Passant, 2011).



Figure 10. Naief Abazid, *Your Turn, Doctor*, 2011

Propaganda Posters. Artists have created posters with strong visual imagery and bold text that government then used to mobilize manpower and support. During the First World War, nearly three thousand different posters were designed in the United States by artists eager to get their work out to the public. A typical printing and distribution of one hundred thousand posters were common (Lubin, 2011). Most people are familiar with the *I Want You for U.S. Army* recruiting poster created in 1917 by James Montgomery Flagg (see Figure 11). During the time that led up to the war, Flagg was a founder of a group of artists and writers that called themselves “the Vigilantes.” Their mission was to promote peace at any price and stand up with the youth of the nation in their duties in peace and war (Lubin, 2011). The poster Flagg created was reminiscent of the British poster the year before entitled *Kitchener Wants YOU* created by an anonymous designer (see Figure 12). The purpose behind the finger that points directly at the

viewer and the capitalized word ‘YOU’ is to include the viewer in its gaze and suggest that the viewer is the emphasis of this visual image (Lubin, 2011). In reference to the British version, Flagg made two important changes. First, he changed the real person in the British version to a fictional Uncle Sam to appeal to the American ideals of liberty and hyper-masculinity rather than use war celebrities. Secondly, by treating Uncle Sam mockingly in his circus-like hat with stars and stripes, Flagg played up Americans’ view of themselves, that they are unpretentious people who always enjoy a good joke, unlike the stiff-upper-lipped British (Lubin, 2011).



Figure 11. James Montgomery Flagg, I Want You for U.S. Army, 1917

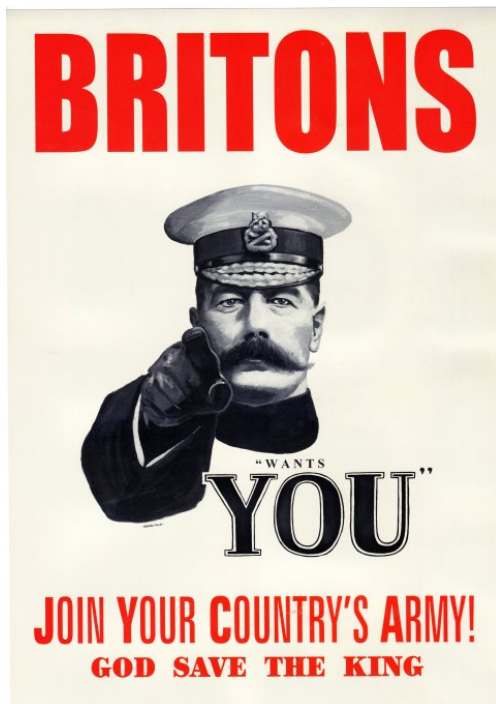


Figure 12. Unknown, *Kitchener Wants YOU*, 1914



Figure 13. John Singer Sargent, *Gassed*, 1919

American artist John Singer Sargent was urged many times to join the war efforts by his friend and author, Henry James, but he felt his job was to create art, not advertise for a conflict that he considered ridiculous and unnecessary (Lubin, 2011). However, while living in London

in 1918, he relented on his stance for substantial monetary compensation and became an official war artist, creating *Gassed* (see Figure 13) for the British Army (Lubin). The painting *Gassed* illustrates the biblical passage, “If the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into a ditch” (Matthew 15:14, New King James Version). The painting shows the side view of a line of soldiers leading to a medical tent, all of which have bandaged eyes as a result of the gas they endured. The painting shows the viewer a graphic depiction of the brutality of war (Lubin). The audience at the time was horrified by the dozens of dead and wounded soldiers in the foreground of the painting. The artist, Sargent, juxtaposed the dead soldiers with men in the background playing soccer as the scene of war is going on around them, obviously desensitized to the catastrophic horrors (Lubin).

Social movements. A person’s associations serve as important identifiers for growth and empowerment (Ortega, 2014). By definition, socially marginalized communities have experienced exclusion and discrimination, often over multiple generations (Cummins, 2015). Marginalized communities are on the edge of society. Therefore, artists identify with and represent all of these communities (Gallois, 2016). Artists often draw on their experiences to create their artwork, thus the social context is an important factor to consider when analyzing artwork (Gallois, 2016) and would be addressed in the PostModern Principle of representing (Gude, 2007). Activist art is created to challenge values, ethics, and social mores, as well as speak to what the artist considers unjust political and social realities (Myhre, 2012).

LGBTQIA art. Flags are often associated with cultural symbolism and are therefore the perfect piece of artifact and activism. Flags are created for the street, not for a gallery, and the

images on flags can identify or group individuals together. Flying a flag on a house or car is about more than cloth; it is about taking action (Gallois, 2016). The rainbow flag (see Figure 14) which represents the LGBTQIA social movement was designed by Gilbert Baker in 1978 (Barrios, 2004). Baker, who created the first iconic rainbow flag after becoming friends with Harvey Milk discussed “how action could create change” (2004). Milk challenged Baker to create a symbol of pride for the gay community because at the time, the community was using the pink triangle imposed on homosexuals by the Nazis to identify and persecute them (Baker, 2015). In 2004, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) acquired the original hand dyed rainbow flag made by Gilbert Baker for their permanent collection. The MOMA’s curator stated the flag was important to the archives as a design milestone as well as an iconic piece of activist art (Antonelli, 2015).



Figure 14. Gilbert Baker, Rainbow Flag, 1978

Another visual related to this movement and traveling the world is the ongoing activist artwork conceived by Cleve Jones. The AIDS Quilt (see Figure 15), funded by the NAMES Project Foundation in 1987, is a piece of art worthy of study along with historical examples of community-created folk art and textiles. Because of its potential to show how visual symbols can function to tell a story of peace and justice, the AIDS Quilt is an important icon for activist art. Quilts and textiles acted as a secret message for runaway slaves and have been a means of communication for other marginalized groups such as women, African Americans and the symbolic rugs of Native Americans. Currently, the AIDS Quilt has forty-eight thousand individual names on it, representing every state and 28 countries (McLaughlin, 2004).



Figure 15. Cleve Jones, *The AIDS Quilt*, 1987

African-American art. African American artists further the battle for social and political change and they embrace creative images of the universal American identity (Collins, 2006). An example of art which explores African Americans' social condition is *Aspects of Negro Life* (see

Figure 16), painted in 1934 by Aaron Douglas. The mural is broken into two sections, *The Negro in an African Setting* and *From Slavery through Reconstruction*. Douglas uses silhouettes of figures to explore the lives of black people from the Egyptian era to slavery and into the Industrial Revolution. Cotton fields dominate the foreground and middle of the mural; Douglas paints the images of men in various work poses. He used this very large mural to inform viewers of the specific conditions of African-Americans in modern American culture (Gardullo, 2007). Douglas created this work during New York's Harlem Renaissance, a time in American history when racial pride and the importance of African culture was evident in visual images (Sexton, 2015).



Figure 16. Aaron Douglas, *Aspects of Negro Life Mural* (Panel: *Songs of the Towers, From Slavery Through Reconstruction*), 1934

African-American artists during the Harlem Renaissance use art as a means of connecting with their identity, and as an expressive outlet for their frustrations in a way, they were not able to before slavery or during the Jim Crow laws of the South. Essentially self-segregated in

Harlem, the artists created a refuge for themselves and used art as a means to express their pride and culture. This historical trend is echoed in the current #BlackLivesMatter movement as it is both a call to action and a response to the ways African Americans feel that police brutality has degraded their lives (Sexton, 2015).

A contemporary example would be the artwork from Hank Willis Thomas. Mr. Thomas, a photo-conceptual artist, explores how popular cultural and mass-marketing advertisements portray African Americans. In *Priceless #1* from 2004 (see Figure 17), Thomas uses a popular MasterCard advertisement to discuss black-on-black violence and the rising death toll of young African-American men in the United States (Raji, 2013). The haunting image, from the larger collection of images displayed as the BRANDED series, looks like the traditional MasterCard advertisement. But rather than the standard phrase, “There are some things money cannot buy. For everything else, there’s MasterCard,” the photograph depicts an African-American family at a funeral. The familiar logo sits in the left corner with the following words depicted on the picture: 3-piece suit: \$250, new socks: \$2, Gold chain: \$400, 9mm pistol: \$79, bullet: ¢60, Picking the perfect casket for your son: Priceless. Thomas uses the language of mass advertising to reference familiar touchstones and includes a controversial and thought-provoking political message in the African American experience (Gardullo, 2007).



Figure 17. Hank Willis Thomas, *Priceless #1*, 2004

Feminist art. Members of the feminist art movement remind us that the aim of activist artists is to create visual images to promote change. The Guerrilla Girls, a collective group of female artists, create artwork anonymously. According to the group, they want “the focus to be on the issues, not on our personalities or our work” (Tallman, 1991, p. 21). In making this comment, the Guerrilla Girls argue their mission is to create artwork to educate the public about gender and racial equality in the art world.

The Guerrilla Girls demonstrate their mission with the poster, *Advantages of being a Woman Artist* (see Figure 18). The poster features a reclining nude female model, an image originally found in a Neoclassical Ingres painting from 1814 (see Figure 19). However, the Guerrilla Girls poster features critical changes in contrast to the original. The female model

wears a gorilla mask with the words: “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum? Less than 4% of the artists in the Modern Art Section are women, but 76% of the nudes are female.” Whereas the visual focus of the Ingres piece is the female form, Advantages art piece places emphasis on the words by using a bold easily-read font. In making this statement, the Guerrilla Girls remind the audience that their stated goal is to utilize their artwork and bring awareness to the issue with the intention of fostering change in the art world’s acceptance of female artists in the male-dominated commerce system.

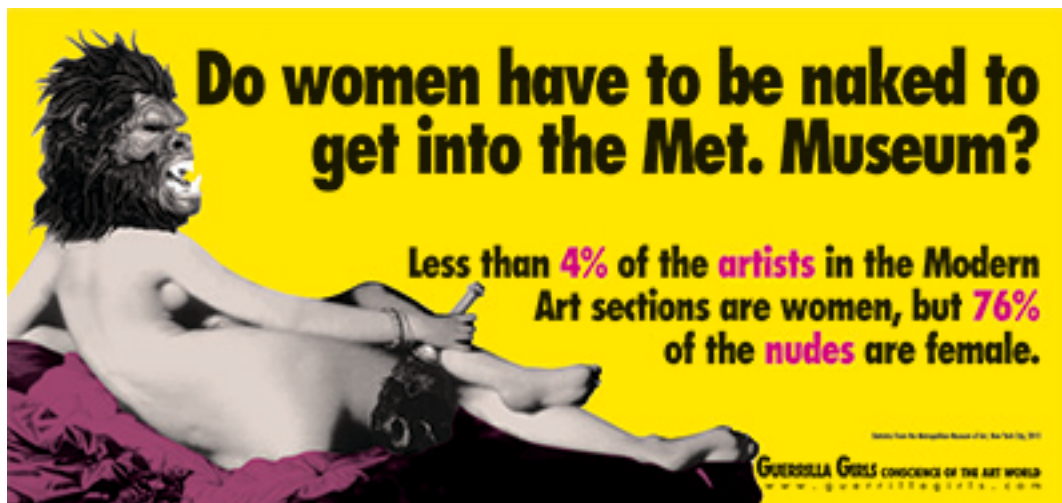


Figure 18. Guerrilla Girls, *Advantages of Being a Woman Artist*, 1988



Figure 19. Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres, *Reclining Nude (Grande Oda Lisque)*, 1814

Phenomenology as Relevant Approach to Activist Art

Phenomenology has been used to identify the range of perceptions that undergraduate art students in studio-based classes experienced in educational settings. Souleles, Savva, Watters, Annesley, and Bull (2015) bring to the forefront student perceptions of using iPads within their drawing class. Phenomenology was the research method used to investigate one semester of the lived experience of the student perceptions based on the educational potential of this new technology tool at their disposal (Souleles, 2015). Researchers note this is a “bottom-up investigation, i.e., from the perspective of the learners” (p. 131).

Lastly, this same research model (phenomenology) was used in an elementary school art class with great success to describe students’ points of views and to focus on what the individual students knew. The researchers indicate the primary objective for using this methodology can be expressed as “depicting the perceptions and experiences of participants” (Baysal, Tezcan, & Arac, 2018, p. 441). This study used student artwork, and praised the methodology as a way to

show how the approach requires being open to different meanings in the context of image interpretation.

Arts-based research has distinctive features that set it apart from other forms of qualitative studies. According to Finley (2008),

Art-based research a) makes use of emotive, affective experiences, senses, bodies, imagination, and, intellect, as ways of knowing and responding to the world; b) gives interpretive license to the researcher to create meaning from experience; c) attends the role of the artistic media in shaping meaning; and d) exists in the tensions of blurred boundaries between art and social science. (p. 72)

Summary

Art has been used as a tool for communicating ideas in a visual form. Some of the reasons to integrate social justice issues and activist art into a curriculum include the fact that activist art in the classroom helps promote critical thinking skills, understanding, empathy, and tolerance for differences while promoting unity (Eisner, 1994; Lucy & Laney, 2009).

Additionally, art is a reflection of cross-cultural society. Students making art in class are already involved in creating a visual representation of issues and ideas for which they are passionate (Lucy & Laney, 2009).

Chapter 3: Research Design and Rationale

This study utilized phenomenological research methods of data collection through in-depth interviews, visual data collection, and interpretation of the process. These methods for collecting data were used with students in Activist Art classrooms as they created visual art for classroom assignments. The data collected shed light on the impact of activist art assignments on students.

Methodology

The study was designed to elicit student perspectives with regard to having taken part in the experience of creating a piece of activist art. I wanted to know how this experience translated to inform their self-generated projects. Participant interviews were conducted to explore the artists' acts of creation and to enrich understanding of their artwork, to give a common understanding of artwork, or to raise awareness about a subject or particular issue.

Phenomenology uses sources of visual art as a way of interpreting images including those in art history, to include sociopolitical contexts (Bal, 1996; Barnard, 2001; Heywood & Sandywell, 1999). Visual images are important in this study because they explore the complexities of the students' vision and their close proximity to the social and political unrest of Ferguson, Missouri during the volatile riots. The riots in Ferguson, Missouri, also referenced in news coverage as the Ferguson Uprising (Branch, 2014), began the day after Michael Brown was fatally shot by police officer Darren Wilson on August 9, 2014. According to numerous media reports the peaceful protests and violent rioting and looting continued until the November 24, 2014 trial that did not

convict Officer Wilson and again on the one-year anniversary of Brown's shooting (Branch, 2014).

Sample and Population

There were seven participants in this research study. All participants were my students who had taken one of the three undergraduate art courses for art majors: Drawing II, Printmaking, or Activist Art. Each course was a semester long (16 week) course consisting of two class meetings per week plus additional independent studio time for the student to complete projects. All three were upper-division courses in the Bachelor of Fine Arts program with various assignments throughout the semester. The nature of these studio courses makes them small, with twelve or fewer students in each.

The courses were set up so that every two to three weeks students came together and presented their artwork to their peers for critiques. The critiques gave students a chance to discuss their particular research topics, processes, and perspectives. At least one assignment in each class was infused with activist art intentions. Each student began by selecting a current social justice topic with which they identified or felt compelled to action because of their theoretical viewpoints. Topics ranged from legalization of marijuana to gun control. Students were to submit research thumbnail sketches and meet independently with the instructor in order to articulate the research on their chosen topic and also to offer their visual images for media selection. Most projects were open media, which meant the students were allowed to use various artistic mediums.

Self-Assessment of Instructional Experience

For the final oral critique, student brought their artwork to class and displayed it for an oral critique. Each student took turns relating to the visual images and articulating their viewpoints. As the professor, I began with an acceptance dialogue present throughout the semester, to make everyone feel comfortable. I wanted students to examine their assumptions, their personal experiences with the topic, and also explain their complex visual imagery if necessary. The main objective of critique for all assignments, this one included, was communication with the audience; consequently, I asked students if they felt they had communicated their opinion in visuals alone.

Sampling Procedures and Setting

All participants were selected from a list of my former students who had participated in an activist art activity from one of three classes: Drawing II, Printmaking, or Activist Art. At the time they were enrolled in the relevant course, participants had been traditional college students between the ages of 18 and 24. They were enrolled in a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree program at a small college located in close proximity to Ferguson, Missouri. Student interest in artistic studies and student self-expression skills were not part of the criteria used for this sampling.

Participants were contacted via email from a list of 15 former students who all took one of my studio classes where an activist art-themed assignment was one of the classroom activities during the 16-week face-to-face semester. I selected seven participants to interview from those who responded to the initial email. The population was a sample of convenience rather than a purposeful one that considered race, gender, ability, or other characteristics.

After students agreed to participate and completed an informed consent form (see Appendix A), I interviewed each participant for approximately an hour, using a phenomenological approach to gain answers to open-ended questions. I carefully followed Moustakas (1994) guidance so that misconceptions were addressed as they occurred (p. 103). I transcribed each of the seven interviews verbatim. I then coded the data and further analyzed it to identify themes.

Research Question

This study was designed to answer the following research questions, which consisted of one main question and three sub-questions:

What are student perspectives after having taken part in a classroom activity whereby the students created an original piece of Activist Art?

- a. How do participants define the term *activist art*, and do they consider themselves activist artists?
- b. Did the Ferguson Uprising happening so close to the participants' college affect their artwork during this time?
- c. Did creating activist art as an undergraduate student assist in the student's overall growth as an artist?

Interview Questions

The personal face-to-face interview questions are listed in the Appendix B. The initial open-ended interviews (Moustakas, 1994) emerged as wonderings based on the fact that the researcher was a practitioner in the visual arts with a special interest in activist art.

Data Analysis

After collecting the data, I transcribed and coded them to expose possible themes. I looked for initial, focused, and thematic coding to find connections and patterns within themes and identify everything related to the original interview questions. The works of art created in class were displayed during the participant interviews so they could be examined by both the participant and me. In the processes of critiquing the art to identify phases of collective imagery that constitute the setting, my goal was to allow participants to further explore the role of Activist Art in their educational experience (Ecker, 1966).

Data Protection and Ethical Procedures

Interviews and data collection began after the research study had been reviewed and approved by the George Fox University Institutional Review Board. Participant confidentiality was of the highest priority. The student artwork was created in a studio classroom setting and for classroom activities and discussion purposes. Conversations about the art took place with other students in the class even though not all were participants in this research. Yet, these students would have seen the artwork and were present during the classroom oral critique.

During the personal transcribed interviews, participants were afforded confidentiality through the use of pseudonyms. These were used within transcribed personal interviews when, discussing the researcher's direct observation of artwork, and also in labeling the image files associated with and/or photographs of artwork I took. I will keep all data relating to this research, including images, and will dispose of it after five calendar years.

In addition, while I kept the photographic images of artwork in connection with the research, all student participants retained their own original artwork. Student participants will maintain ownership, publication, and copyright over their own artwork and have released the publication rights for use within the scope of this research as part of the confidentiality agreement. The confidentiality agreement included elements outlined by Durella (2019) of the nature of the research, the request to participate in the research, the risks and benefits, the confidentiality of data, the anonymity standard, and the use of data or artwork including copyright (p. 355).

Bracketing

As a painter, I can speak from personal experience about the role my own artwork plays in my understanding of the world. There is a powerful process in the theory and the engagement of visual images. This theory goes beyond colors, hues, and rhythms. It beckons learning of self-expression, but also an understanding of one's self and the world in a different way. I draw from my own experiences as a painter, teacher, and activist to describe how art helps me think more deeply about social issues. As a young girl wondering what the future would bring, I was surrounded by activists and thinkers who dared to protest. I was told stories of brave students at Kent State University that were gunned down for protesting, and I was reminded of my obligation to change the world, even in small ways. Art is my gift, and with it and from it I strive to make a statement in ways words do not, to empathize with strangers, and to struggle with my role in issues of social injustice.

As an art educator who has taught many students, I have cultivated relationships with students and understand the pedagogical value of implementing activist art activities within higher education. Given my own interest in activist art and my students' class conversations I was compelled to infuse this approach into class assignments. I use visual art, specifically paintings, to communicate my own feelings that I could not otherwise capture with words. I continue to engage with various art media and forms throughout my teaching experience, and plan to merge art, activism, and my research into my pedagogical approaches to teaching and learning. Many learners feel as I do that the arts are not only an outlet of self-expression, but also a vehicle to understand the world in a different way.

Summary

The arts are a vehicle for free speech, self-expression, and confrontational images. Images can challenge, and even be confrontational to the viewer. When audiences react to an image, the artist must take responsibility for how their work is interpreted by the viewer (Lucy & Laney, 2009). Perhaps most important is that art always has and will continue to challenge the norms of society. Art has always represented the subversive underground within society (Dewhurst, 2011). Although this research is not generalizable, the information obtained is intended to promote important conversations in my classes about significant themes and issues relating to social justice higher education. This research seeks, to answer the question: how might academic programs be designed to create social awareness for college students, give voice and expressive outlet, and entice the audience or viewer to reflect and question?

Chapter Four: Findings

This study examined the lived experiences of seven art students at a small liberal arts college in the Midwest. All participants were art majors earning a BFA in visual art at the time they created their artwork. The art program has several emphases so students might have been pursuing an emphasis within their degree in two-dimensional, three-dimensional, graphic design, or art education. All artwork in this study is two-dimensional artwork. Out of the seven participants interviewed, two have since graduated from college and five are still pursuing their degrees.

I interviewed each student for this phenomenological study to investigate student perspectives related to creating a piece of activist art. My research questions encompassed finding out how the students define the term *Activist Art*, whether or not they consider themselves activist artists, whether or not their piece of art influential in their growth as artists, and whether or not the current events of the time were influential to their art-making process. The current event during this time included the Ferguson Uprising which followed the death of Michael Brown in 2015. The small college attended by the participants was in close proximity to Ferguson, Missouri and the conversations that permeated America's mainstream media might have been influential in their overall body of artwork.

All the participants had taken a previous visual art class with me as their professor where I had introduced one assignment within the class structure as an Activist Art assignment. The students were given a list of "social causes" from homelessness to animal rights and asked to take a position on this cause much as they would do in a persuasive essay. Their task was to

research both sides of the argument and create one piece of art that communicated their viewpoint to the audience in clear visual communication. Many students asked to do topics that were not on the list, and they were allowed to do so. The list of topics provided a starting point to motivate the students to think about social causes around them in which they had previous knowledge or strong opinions.

Interviews

I traveled to where my participants were, doing no more than two interviews a day. The interviews were spread out over a two-weeks period and three weekends to accommodate the participants' schedules. Interviews were held in public locations such as coffee shops and restaurants. The interviews were scheduled for non-peak business hours and even then, we separated ourselves to a back corner of the restaurant or coffee shop to have a relatively private conversation and to conduct the interview. Since all of the participants were former students, some of which have since graduated from college and others I have not seen in a year or more, I scheduled additional time with each participant to visit with them before the interview. This additional time was spent catching up on their current situations that included marriages, children, and new jobs. I regard former students and graduates as my fellow art colleagues within the larger art community, therefore, that scheduled time was spent seeing their new artwork before the formal interview started.

Biographical Information

I use pseudonyms throughout my writing to identify each participant in lieu of their real name. I let each participant select their pseudonym name as long as it did not include any

identifiable elements including social media handles or know graffiti aliases. Five of the participants were Caucasian, one was Hispanic, and one was African American. Additionally, six of the participants were women, and one was male, while one participant requested they be identified in a non-gender specific manner.

Participant one: Carolina. Carolina made her piece of Activist Art in Printmaking class when she was a sophomore in college. She is still in school and will graduate in May 2019. Carolina is a woman from a small rural town in Missouri where she is an only child of two college-educated parents both working in the biomedical field. She has traveled extensively with her family all through the United States, visiting the national parks. In Printmaking class Carolina made a poster relating to the national parks. About her motivation to create the drawing she did, Caroline said,

First thing I thought of was national parks. I spent a lot of free time there. My dad and I went hiking and camping in Yosemite. We had just done the parks in Utah the summer before this class, and my grandparents live in the Smokey Mountains, so national parks are very dear to my heart. The funding to the national parks had just been cut by the government when my teacher said we were going to do an assignment about Activist Art. That's the first thing I thought of, the rangers. They put so much time and effort making sure the parks look great and are safe. We need to give more respect to the rangers and show we actually care about them. That was my initial reaction; I was excited to educate others and let my voice out about the parks and rangers.

For her project, Carolina created a 24” X 36” screen print poster with a yellow background and the words “Love Your Ranger” (see Figure 20) printed on top in a two-color process. The screen print was created in layers of each color done separately with a hand-cut stencil. This poster process was a limited edition of five prints. Carolina stated she was searching for a font for the words that would give the poster a nostalgic 1970s feel, reverting back to a time when Carolina felt the national parks were at their peak.



Figure 20. Participant Artwork- Carolina.

Participant two: Dan. Dan created his piece of Activist Art his first semester after transferring to college from a local community college. Dan is considered a junior, pursuing an emphasis in art education. He attends college part-time taking night classes while working as a special education paraprofessional for the local school district during the day. Dan is a first-generation college student, neither of his parents graduated from high school. Dan remembered how his father attempted to go back to school and get his GED but did not finish.

I had a few ideas about opioids and drug abuse after my father passed away from an opioid overdose. In class, we were talking about current issues, and I feel strongly that the drug Naloxone, which saved my father's life once before, should be carried like an EpiPen by anyone with a drug problem.

The 12' X 14" acrylic painting that Dan created is a parody of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* on the Sistine Chapel, (see Figure 21). In place of Adam in the clouds, Dan is showing a girl in a bed of poppies. Instead of Adam reaching to touch the finger of God, Dan replaced the God character with a vial of the drug Naloxone and its chemical component. Of his painting, he said,

That was the idea behind it. It was almost like a rebirth. I was thinking of artwork that symbolized rebirth and that lead me to the Renaissance and the *Creation of Adam*. I put a girl on the bed of poppies to represent both the poppy that opium is made from, but also for a lot of people who are on opioids, it's their foundation. I wanted to communicate that Naloxone could give them a second chance if they were ever to take it too far.

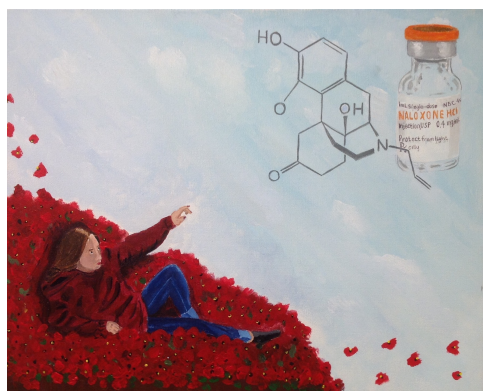


Figure 21. Participant Artwork- Dan.

Participant three: Fern. Fern created activist artwork in Drawing 2 class during her junior year in college. Fern attended a local community college a couple of semesters and then transferred and graduated from the liberal arts college in Missouri. Fern is from a college-educated upper middle-class family that lives in the same small town that houses the college. Fern has graduated from college and lives close to her family running a successful portrait photography business that specializes in weddings.

Fern said of the assignment, “I was nervous about the project when first told of it because I was worried about unintentionally offending someone with my opinions because I’ve always wanted to be a people pleaser and didn’t want to step on anybody’s toes.” Fern created a large 4’X6’ drawing (see Figure 22) using chalk pastels and vine charcoal. The theme of Fern’s artwork was animal rights; during the interview she was happy to expand on her passion for animals. “I’ve always loved animals!” Fern said with gusto. This love of animals is evident on her business webpage where she photographs cats and dogs from the local humane society in beautiful portrait settings to promote rescue adoptions. Fern commented about her drawing:

My drawing represents the torture that the animals have to go through for cosmetic testing and darkness of materialism associated with the fashion industry. I have always been into animal’s rights, including cruelty-free make-up. I was already researching this topic on my own when the professor presented this assignment. I wanted to talk about torturing rabbits and what other animals go through in order to test makeup products. I went through several sketches to try to get my point across. I finally decided on this design because it was a combination of makeup and wearing animal and fur products.



Figure 22. Participant Artwork- Fern.

Participant four: Ruby. Ruby is an art student who is currently student teaching in hopes of getting hired in her dream job as an elementary art teacher. She created her painting during Activist Art class. Ruby is the oldest of six children from a middle-class family. She is originally from the suburban area of Kansas City but admits she enjoys the rural setting of a college town and would not mind getting a job in a small school district. Ruby shared her thoughts:

When the professor first proposed the idea of creating a piece of Activist Art, I had a lot of personal things going on with my family and veterans, so that is automatically what came to my head. My significant other's grandfather had just passed away, and he was in the army. The grandfather had not been close with the family because of some addiction issues, and he wasn't quite right after he came back from his service.

Ruby created a 14" X16" acrylic painting (see Figure 23) based on her significant other's experience, and how he was distraught after going to his grandfather's apartment to clean it out. "He said there was nothing on the walls. He felt a lot of guilt because there were not a lot of

personal belongings to go through. I was thinking of homeless veterans as an unseen casualty of war and wanting to create a scene that was empty and isolated because that was the experience that this man had.” In the painting Ruby has a figure looking into a closet and the closet light is the only light in the image. The closet light shows a uniform hanging in the closet, a few boxes and an American flag folded in a triangle. The light from the closet illuminates a small table in the room where medicine bottles sit alongside what seems to be a stack of bills and papers stamped with the words, ‘Past Due.’ “I added some baggage to symbolize the emotional baggage a veteran brings home with them from war. The uniform and folded flag could be remembrance for friends and family that don’t come home from war.”



Figure 23. Participant Artwork- Ruby.

Participant five: Jake. Jake, the non-gendered specific name chosen by this participant, was born in the United States to immigrants from El Salvador. Jake is a fourth-year college student but considers themselves a junior based on credits. Jake’s piece of activist artwork was

created in Drawing 2 class. “I was really nervous about the assignment and I didn’t know what to do. I had to do it in a matter of a couple of weeks and I couldn’t think of a topic that affected me personally.” Jake was inspired by the artist Banksy, and began by watching documentaries on the street artist and noticed his work around child soldiers. “I initially thought about the connection to my dad, and thought I should ask him about his immigration story in hopes that I could create a piece based on that.” Jake called their father and had the first-ever conversation about his immigration story and his experience with the war in El Salvador. They stated:

My dad was younger when the war started, and they were taking children to become soldiers. My grandfather told him he had two choices, either become a soldier, which he didn’t want him to do, or run north on his own. An uncle in Mexico helped my father a little because he was around 13 years old at the time. He was basically on his own. He only had the clothes on his body and he had to survive that way. He crossed the US border and would work to earn a little money and then he kept walking. He was trying to get as far away from the border as possible and he heard there were other El Salvadorians in Maryland. My father made it all the way to Maryland where a group of people were established and there he met my mother.

Jake’s artwork is a simple pen and ink drawing around 8” X10” of two small children playing with a large gun (see Figure 24). The only color in the drawing is a red “Bang” sign coming from the gun which is reminiscent of childhood cartoons. In the corner is a headless teddy bear.

The whole point is that my dad lost his childhood. He didn’t have that anymore, he couldn’t be a kid and play games. He escaped being a soldier but he had to be grownup

and start working to make a life. I wanted to create a piece of art where children lost their innocence.



Figure 24. Participant Artwork-Jake.

Participant six: Brittney. Brittney is an art student and student athlete. She describes herself as a senior academically but a junior for sports illegibility. Brittney is a middle child from a small town raised by her single mother who is college educated. Brittney created a mixed media piece of art during Activist Art class. She talks about the assignment:

When I first got the assignment, I didn't know what I was going to do! My friend had just come out to me telling me she thought she was a lesbian. That evening, for fun, we decided to take an internet test to see if we were lesbians, bisexual, or transgender. This test made me think about why she needed to label herself and what the labels stood for. Brittney created a painted portrait of her friend in primarily black and white acrylic paint. The painting is 24" X 36" and the only color used is in the figure's eyes which are a lifelike hazel color (see Figure 25). Over the original painting Brittney attached foam letters and painted them to blend in as a subtle part of the overall mixed media artwork. The letters attached spell out

“Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Questioning, Queer” which spells out the commonly used LGBTQ acronym. “She became my motivation for the project and her wanting a label. Once the labels were on the picture, like part of the image, there was no way to take them off. I had to incorporate them within the painting, and I feel it turned out pretty well, I like it.”

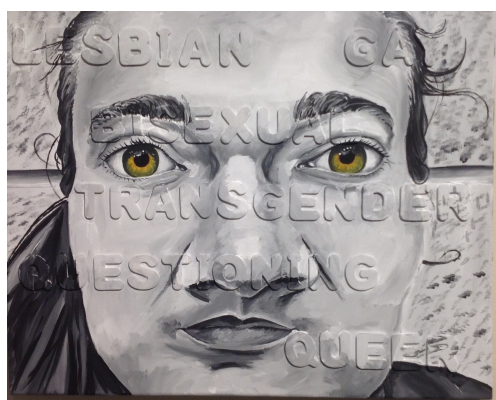


Figure 25. Participant Artwork- Brittney.

Participant seven: Dolly. Dolly made a piece of activist art in Printmaking class the last semester of her senior year. She is from the same rural town that houses the college and now lives there with her husband and small child. She is an only child from upper middle-class college educated parents but is quick to remind others that she and her husband are not upper middle class. “I was so excited about this project because Trump had just been elected and there were marches going on and I wanted to create something to be a part of it.” Dolly thought the printmaking poster project was great timing for the science march.

He had announced budgets cuts to SPA, NOVA, NASA, and a lot of environmental organizations. The National Park Service had just launched their resistance twitter campaign and I wanted to go to the marches and get some great photographs to use in my

senior show. The resist campaign from the park service was very inspirational, some people would not want to risk their job or let people know what's going on, and their courage stuck with me. Also, they have a great graphic designer and I wanted my poster to be easy to understand.

Dolly created a three-color screen printed 24" X 36" poster (see Figure 26) where each color needed its own hand-cut stencil. The assignment was to create a small edition of five prints, but Dolly created a larger edition of fifteen printed posters. Dolly later mounted one of her posters onto a dowel rod to display and she took it to a science march in Kansas City. Dolly sold the extra editions of this poster to other march participants or friends.



Figure 26. Participant Artwork- Dolly.

Findings

As a pedagogical approach, social justice causes and visual communication were embedded into studio classes. In this section, I will address and answer the research questions through the themes that emerged while interviewing the participants regarding their lived experiences. I designed my phenomenological research study to address the following main question: What are student perspectives after taking part in a classroom activity where by the students created an original piece of Activist Art? In addition to the main question, I had three sub-questions: (1a) How would the participants define the term activist art, and do they consider themselves activist artists? (1b) Did the Ferguson Uprising happening near the participants' college affect their artwork? And finally, (1c) Did creating Activist Art as an undergraduate student assist in the student's overall growth as an artist? While the student's lived experiences and their perspectives after having taken part in this classroom activity is answered in all themes, I will address the research sub-questions by making connections and further discussing what exist within each theme.

Thematic Overview

I analyzed the data collected from the participant interviews, and through the coding process, three themes emerged as central to the participant's stories. They are: (a) visual communication and the artists' expressing themselves in images only, (b) connection to the cause that each student selected, and (c) identity and personal triumphs that occurred during this assignment.

Theme One: Visual Communication. The term visual communication is a phrase used

in art-related circles that simply means making sure that you are communicating with your audience. If you are creating a painting relating to cancer but the audience looking at it thinks it is about the love of ice cream, you are not communicating effectively. The desire to communicate with the audience is a constant theme which is not specific to Activist Art. When visual artists take out all other forms of communication leaving only a visual image, everything in that picture plane including the artist's use of symbolism, must contribute to the story.

Research sub-question (1c) was: Did creating activist art as an undergraduate student assist in the student's overall growth as an artist? The answer to the question can be addressed in the student's training to visually communicate with their audience.

Brittney stated that she struggled with how to accurately portray and give voice to her friend's coming out experience. She went through several different sketches and rough drafts before focusing on a black and white portrait of her friend with the labels scrolling across the face. She had not originally intended for the eyes to be in color and the rest of the painting to be in black and white but when taking reference photos of her friend, the photos highlighted the eyes and made them look, in her words, "knowledgeable and longing." This development caused Brittney to alter her original vision for her artwork. She spoke about this evolution of her artistic process during the class critique, stating that she felt this desire to paint the eyes a color and communicate the humanistic quality of the individual. Brittney wanted the audience to have a personal connection to the person she painted, hopefully in a way that showed empathy to others' coming out experience.

Dolly's story is a little different, living in a rural community. She looked around at the trucks in her hometown proudly displaying their bumper stickers for "Trump 2016" and she felt alone in her political convictions. "There were no marches in my town, and I missed the earlier women's march, so I was excited to take my poster to the March for Science in Kansas City."

Dolly went on to state,

I was pretty happy with my end result because I took my time and let the ink dry in between layers, so it turned out well. I was proud of it, but when I took it to the March for Science I kept hearing, 'Oh my God, I love your sign!' and I met a lot of people talking about my sign and I even sold a few posters that day.

Dolly looks up to the artist Shepard Fairey and stated that many of his pieces of art have a mission, or they are trying to influence a person. "I like that, that is what I wanted to do with my activist art, I want to be saying something with it, and it validates me in my profession." said Dolly. Dolly was surprised by the reaction her artwork got and that she sold copies of her poster during the march. That realization that her artwork would connect to others and they would want her images to speak for them during the march gave her confidence in her abilities as an artist and therefore contributed to her growth as an artist.

Theme Two: Connection to the Cause. Personal connection to the social issue or cause that the student selected was something that each participant spoke about during their interview. It could have been fond memories of vacations spent at the national parks or the more traumatic event such as the death of a parent, but willingness of the participant to take that connection and turn it into a piece of art was the driving factor for all interviewed.

The second sub-question, (1b) was: Did the Ferguson Uprising happening so close to the participants' college affect their artwork during this time? This question relates to the content of contemporary concerns embedded within the class which were used to involve students so they could investigate social justice issues that touched their lives. Since the college was less than 200 miles from Ferguson Missouri, the city was covered daily on the national news during the summer of 2015, and that news coverage extended through the trial and on through the anniversary of Michael Brown's death.

The findings from my study suggest there are connections between the causes the student participants selected and their history and experience. Historians will eventually reveal whether or not the Ferguson Uprising was a stand-alone bleak moment in our nation's history or the beginning of a revolution, but for the participants interviewed, it was not a factor in their artwork. The participants I interviewed selected social issues or causes that had encompassed personal connections to their lives. It was striking as an interviewer to dive into the stories of why the participants selected the cause that they did and to hear the conviction of their desire to share that cause and education with the world. While there is certainly a risk to oversimplify the student's responses for the sake of a good story, I have tried to balance the analysis of themes that arose from our conversations. Surprisingly, no students revealed a connection between the Ferguson Uprising and their topic or cause. Some participants remembered class discussions or even traveled to Ferguson out of curiosity, but it did not seem to be a factor in their artwork.

Ruby selected a cause that was happening to her significant other at the time the assignment was introduced to the class. Ruby has no war veterans in her family so dealing with

the loss of her significant others' grandfather and his empty apartment was foreign to her. At the class critique when she showed her painting of the veteran standing by the closet she was surprised to learn that other people in the class could relate to her artwork and had similar situations. Ruby did not realize her artwork would resonate with other people as well, stating, "That was the first time another classmate said that they got my artwork and that the scene I made up was spot-on for what she had witnessed in her life." Ruby explained that she now feels more confident as an artist and in the process of challenging herself to do more meaningful pieces of art that are not only about her experiences but might also transcend to others.

Dan displayed his painting during the class critique time ready to not only talk about his father's drug habits and eventual overdose, but also about what he feels is an easy solution to people losing their lives. Dan begins by recounting the classroom critique, "I can remember a lot of people had comments about the vial of Naloxone. The students told me it was painted really well, but also asked why I chose to use symbolism in areas of the painting but not with the drug and chemical compound." Dan admitted he felt the symbolism of the bed of poppies might be a little heavy-handed but he didn't want the audience to guess about his intentions. "We ride a fine line between communicating nothing and giving the audience everything," Dan explains. "I didn't want it to be congested. I feel so strongly about this issue and the relatively simple solution, my thoughts were always on education." Dan went on to explain what he shared in class with the other students,

Our country has an issue with opioids. I think it comes from the doctors overprescribing them to people. With my dad, that's how he first got them. He had a back surgery and

that started him off, but later would go from doctor to doctor getting prescriptions. He was addicted for most of my life. I remember it got worse after my brother's murder and he kept increasing the dosages. He was saved twice with Naloxone. The first time I saw it. I came home after a concert and found him slumped over, not really breathing, or breathing but not very well. I called 911 and they took him in the ambulance and gave it to him. I saw him wake up immediately, which was shocking and really affected me.

Dan thought that during the class critique he would get more students pushing back about the drug's placement as "God" in the image. He was prepared to defend and educate his class colleagues about his conviction related to carrying Naloxone like an EpiPen. "If you are addicted to drugs you need to have your Naloxone with you at all times. It could save your life. I was prepared for more comments or push back about how it shouldn't be widespread because it's taking fate out of God's hands." During our interview Dan explained that in CPR classes they show students how to use an EpiPen but not how to administer Naloxone. "I think it is something society does not like to talk about. I think now if we talked about it more, maybe I wouldn't have grown up the way I did, maybe my dad might still be alive." Dan explained that he does not shy away from the conversation regarding his father's overdose and his belief in the drug Naloxone, and now after doing this painting feels more comfortable talking about his artwork and this part of his story.

Theme Three: Identity and Personal Triumphs. Participants remembered the personal triumphs and turning points they experienced while creating the artwork, discussing the artwork with friends, or critiquing the artwork with their peers and professor. Within the interviews were

questions relating to the participant's definition of Activist Art and if they considered themselves activist artists. Research sub-question (1a) was: How would the participants define the term *activist art*, and do they consider themselves activist artists? The answers to this question were addressed in relation to the identity of emerging artists.

Carolina is one of the participants that now considers herself an Activist Artist and has gone on to create other pieces of art around social issues to which she feels a connection. She was greatly affected and saddened by the stories of the students involved in the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida. The national news published shooting details including the text messages that students sent their loved ones, as a tribute to their last words (Greggis, Huriash, & Pesantes, 2018). "That one really hit home for me. I know there have been many school shootings, it seems like more and more. I don't want to say that it is normal, but that is the only word I can think of," states Carolina with tears in her eyes. She continues, "When we were in high school we would do shooter drills, and that was the year the school gave all the students an iPad. The school district actually told us, 'If worse comes to worst and the shooter comes into your classroom, throw your iPad at them.' Can you believe that?"

Carolina created a piece of digital art using the words she would say to her parents as her final text message if she were involved in a school shooting. "I cried when making this, thinking of the students who had to write that message for real." Carolina's second Activist Art image is one with the words for a text message, creating an outline of a gun. Carolina created the image digitally and printed several copies, one of which was on display at a local gallery. The

photograph of her artwork (see Figure 27) was taken by Carolina and sent for use in this publication.

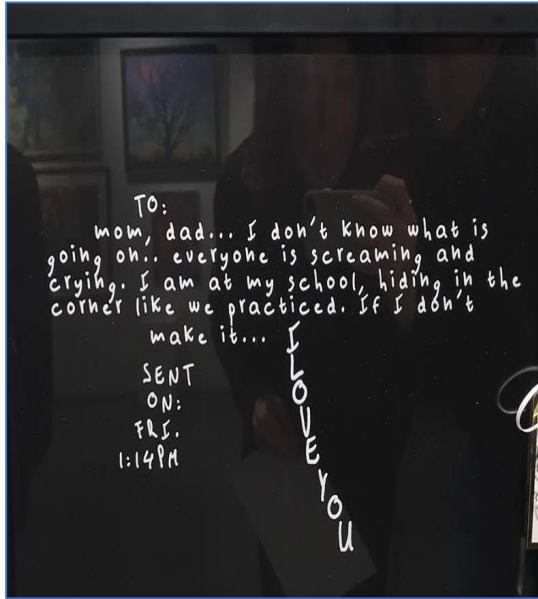


Figure 27. Participant Artwork Caroline #2

Fern is a shy woman who did not feel very confident talking about her artwork during class, or even answering my (the professor) questions in classes. The class critique process of students pinning up their artwork one by one and discussing it was frightening to her. This Activist Art assignment was not an exception to Fern's general rule of not talking in classes. She said, "I remember when I gave my presentation, I had on a faux leather jacket and a girl in the class called me out for wearing leather while doing a picture of animal rights." Fern said she was very proud of herself for standing up to the fellow classmate and stating that the jacket was in fact a faux leather jacket, and that was the point of her drawing. She didn't think the fabric had to be real and believed you could still achieve the same type of look without hurting any animals.

She went on to add, “Critiques are hard for me because I am nervous and my brain shuts down. It was hard for me when a student challenged me with a snide remark. However, I’m proud of myself for speaking up and letting the individual know my jacket was indeed fake.”

The largest personal triumph might be described in Jake’s story. Jake was excited to do an assignment on Activist Art, and defined Activist Art as “trying to express your opinion on a topic so the audience sees it and is changed.” Jake had grown up with parents who were immigrants from El Salvador, a phone call became a pivotal moment in the life of this individual.

He always tells me, ‘I did this for you. I went through so much for you.’ But as a kid, you don’t want to hear your parent’s stories. Maybe they didn’t talk about the struggles because they wanted me to go on to be an American kid...when I called he said, ‘Okay, you’re old enough for you to know what I did and what I gave up’ It was emotional, really emotional. It made me think a lot, and be really grateful for him, for my family.

Jake didn’t understand the immigration story until the family moved from Maryland to the Midwest a few years before the start of college. “In Maryland, it’s very diverse. There are a bunch of El Salvadorian people. Everyone has the same story of crossing the border, everyone snuck in. I didn’t really think about it, or think that it was significant because everyone around us went through that.” Jake explains that the parent’s immigration status had been on their mind lately. “Here in the Midwest there are fewer Hispanics and many people I met were born here so they don’t have to worry about their parents being deported,” Jake stated. As the interviewer, I could tell this was an emotional topic for Jake, as the topic was changed back to the artwork quickly. The piece of art was a favorite and it turned out better than expected.

Summary

My research in this study was intended to examine the lived experiences of undergraduate art student who have created a piece of Activist Art during their time in college. Their answers to the interview questions varied as much as the artwork created, however three themes emerged: visual communication, a connection to the cause, and identity and personal triumphs that occurred from this assignment. Students created artwork as a way of narrating and making meaning of their lived experiences in the world, and they learned to share those stories with their audience.

Chapter 5: Discussions and Conclusions

The phenomenological research study I conducted demonstrated a premise evident in the literature, that “throughout human history, art has been used to influence political and cultural understanding, attitudes, and behaviors” (Dewhurst, 2014, p. 1). Additionally, this research affirmed researchers Ploof and Hochtrictt’s (2018) notion that artists who engage in socially just art become part of the larger community by taking on the roles of “activists, thinkers, questioners, and doers” (p. 43). My research was conducted to examine art student’s perspectives on creating Activist Art. The research process included a review of the literature, gathering data in the form of interviews, and coding the data. Three themes emerged: (a) visual communication (b) connection to the cause, and (c) identity and personal triumphs experiences by the participants. Within the research process, I learned the nature of the participant’s lived experiences as they took part in a classroom activity by creating an original piece of Activist Art. This art was examined and then shared with me as the student made meaning of that experience. In this chapter, I summarize the answers to the research questions, provide insights I gained as I analyzed the data, and offer suggestions and implications for educational practice.

Discussion on the Research Questions

Each research question was answered in the previous chapter; however, additional discussion beyond the findings of each question is expanded in this section.

Main Research Question: What are student perspectives after having taken part in a classroom activity where by the student created an original piece of Activist Art?

Art has the ability to communicate ideas, where words alone might not suffice. Throughout human history people have used tools they have at their disposal to try and communicate with the world around them; for artists, those tools are paint, charcoal, and clay. This study supports the idea that pedagogical approaches of social justice education indeed engage learners in civic engagement, a corner stone of social justice pedagogy (Soep, 2003).

In this study, student perspectives varied from one participant to another but all participants held the assignment in high regards and felt that creating activist art enhanced their undergraduate educational experience. When asked if other students should participate in activist art assignments, a clear answer from the interviewed participants was “yes.”

Artwork creations, in general, are not bonuses for society. They play an essential part in reviving the human spirit and in human aspirations. Marit Dewhurst (2014), a leading theorist in activist art pedagogy, stated that with art young people get an opportunity to “investigate, critique, and take action against the injustices that touch their lives” (p.2). This quote was first used in chapter one and additionally restated here to show the alignment between the student perspectives found in this study, which ultimately confirms what was found in the literature.

Research sub-question 1a: How would the participants define the term Activist Art, and do they consider themselves activist artists?

Most participants defined activist art as educating the audience on a subject matter, or as Ruby defined the term so eloquently, “creating art for a purpose.” Participant Carolina defined

the term as, “a creative way to voice an opinion about a change that is needed. It can be subtle or in your face.” She added that activist art inspires the audience to take action on a cause. In creating activist art, artist’s intentions matter because they help focus artists, especially young artists, on addressing systems of inequality (Dewhurst, 2014). Some participants talked only about the education of the audience viewing their artwork.

Jake felt more comfortable with the role of being an activist artist in the future. Jake stated,

I see activist art on my feeds [social media], and I want to jump in and join them, but I was always scared because maybe I didn’t have all the information. After participating in this project, I feel like I could try to do that more.

Carolina also considered herself an active participant in the activist art community. She created the second image of activist art after the school shooting and believed she would do more in the future when she thinks she has something to say to the world. Carolina stated that “as an artist, this assignment showed me that I do have a voice and that I can use that voice. I think that this process helped me grow... I feel my voice is becoming louder.”

Research sub-question 1b: Did the Ferguson Uprising happening so close to the participants’ college affect their artwork during this time?

As a researcher, it is difficult to ignore the unique moment in time when the artwork was created. For me, Ferguson Uprising created a backdrop for the college setting in which this study took place. Because of this proximity in location, class conversations, and the intense news coverage at the time, my theory is that there was a connection between what the students created

in class and this community in crisis. One of the reasons I expected this event to be related to participants' artwork is historically artists have drawn on neighboring tragedies as inspiration. In chapter two, I referenced Pablo Picasso's artwork *Guernica* (see Figure 8). Picasso created *Guernica* after a Spanish village was destroyed by a Nazi bomb. I do not think of these two tragedies equally, the bombing of Guernica and the Ferguson Uprising. I see the relationship between them in setting/location and the need for artists to make sense of tragedies in a creative way.

The undergraduate college experience, in general, is a time rich in topics and conversation that can grow and challenge a student. That being said, participants in this study looked inward to find personally powerful and relevant causes as the source of inspiration for their artwork. All participants who were interviewed remembered the Ferguson Uprising as an event and how it happened so close to campus. They noted class conversations related to the Ferguson Uprising, but none of the participants interviewed had a direct connection from that event to their own artwork. Theorist and art educator, Marit Dewhurst (2014), writes at length in her research about students' need for connection. Each participant had their own identity, experiences, and ideas in relation to injustices they were interested in exploring. In addition, they each wanted to make meaning from that experience rather than be influenced by outside sources.

That said, given the small sample size, it could be that these seven participants were not personally influenced by this particular issue. There is historical evidence presented in previous chapters which indicates artists have been influenced by their environment and political events of their time. Examples of "art created with social justice aims in mind, from freedom songs of the

civil rights movement, to the AIDS Memorial Quilt...For each of these large-scale examples, there are countless smaller, local activist arts initiatives that seek to mobilized, inform, or otherwise agitate for social change” (Dewhurst, 2014, p. 2). Gregos (2014) suggests that art can highlight important ideas and themes that have been sidelined in our society due to political or economic interests. During participant interviews, Dan, who had an idea and desire from the first mention of the embedded activist art assignment, to educate his classmates about the drug Naloxone, noted that just because it is on television every night does not make it news. This statement by participant Dan, exasperated over the lack of news coverage and conversation on the drug Naloxone, shows that student artists are intersectional and their identities come from many different sources. Emerging artists cannot be limited to their social economic status, race, gender, country of origin, relationship to veterans, or in this case proximity in location to a national crisis. Issues that motivate artists are not one event or aspect of their identity but a collection of their passions.

Research sub-question 1c: Did creating activist art as an undergraduate student assist in the student’s overall growth as an artist?

All participants interviewed stated the assignment was worthwhile and believed more students should go through something similar during their undergraduate experience. Dolly, having been one participant that had recently graduated from college, reflected that the experience “added intensity” to her artwork. Dolly’s statement echoed pedagogical approaches to social justice education that seeks to engage learners in critical analysis of injustice by encouraging them to create works of art and imagine new realities and shift social interactions

(Beyerbach & Davis, 2011). Dan admitted he would not have done the activist artwork if it had not been part of the class and therefore his grade, but he was happy he had the experience in the end. “I just think hearing other people’s stories and everybody else showing their artwork helped open me up to the experience,” said Dan, shyly. The activist artists examined and referenced in the literature review were all mature artists with lengthy careers and affiliations. It should be noted that these artists have had more time to develop their craft than the participants within this study. Undergraduate artists are just beginning to see themselves as artists and to begin thinking about contemporary issues related to their artwork.

As the researcher in this study, I believe the overwhelming agreement of participants who found meaning in this assignment, speaks highly of the need for undergraduate students to tell their stories. Each participant looked inward to find personally powerful and relevant causes they wanted to share with their classmates, and in creating a lasting piece of artwork, with the world. The act of creation alone is an experience that can help build a student’s confidence and craftsmanship, but many participants noted a vulnerability in sharing their artwork and, therefore, their story with the class. This could be a reflection of their place as a new or emerging artist, or it could be a reflection of the extremely personal nature of the assignment. Art is an act of shared communication (Gregos, 2014) in the sense that it can crack open cemented opinions and challenge the given. Art makes a person reflect on things, not only as they are but also how they could or should be.

Implications

After reviewing the data I collected for this study, it is crucial to admit there is an important piece missing from BFA undergraduate education. Participants indicated that this assignment showed them their voice and encouraged them to be part of the conversation on topics or causes about which they felt passionate. Their comments speak to a larger engagement often missing from undergraduate art education. Art programs set up in an out-of-date DBAE curriculum that focuses on technical skills and not on visual communication with an integration in social justice education are doing a disservice to their young artists. In developing a curriculum for undergraduate art majors, programs have effectively provided technique and media instruction in various courses to develop artists' skills. But in some programs, they don't yet do enough to develop an artist's sense of themselves as an individual with something to communicate visually. Teaching activist art or teaching courses with an activist art component (project or unit) embedded within it would help contribute to an undergraduate artists' sense of themselves as individuals with ideas to contribute through their art. Activist Art projects gave the participants in this study an opportunity to investigate, critique, and take action against the causes and injustices that touched their lives. Through an assignment in activist art, the participants were able to tell their story.

Implications for Educational Practice

In the world of higher education, where do we look for change? In undergraduate visual art programs, there is the process or the product. The process is the DBAE inspired media-based courses that linger in higher education curriculums. It is about *how* you make art. Mastery is

rewarded to craftsmanship and expertise regarding media use. If we as educators look beyond the paint and the brush to see *why* something is made it supports the work of educating the artist to communicate through their art form. The context of social justice art, where it is created and by whom, offers a useful lens through which to understand the core nature of a piece of art and therefore understand the artist that made it. Poet, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o tells us, "The artist, to the extent that he is a member of a given society, is caught up in the contradictions of that society" (Hirschman, 2002, p. 218).

Carpenter and Tavin (2010), explain that you cannot teach art the same way you teach French. The French language exists whether you learn it or not. Art in contrast, is the center of the act of creation and therefore, the center of the artist. "Art is in yourself" (p. 327). While there are many insights an art program could gain from the participants' lived experience, the following suggestions offer some ideas for further reflection and additional research:

1. Activist art assignments as part of social justice education can help undergraduate students understand, analyze, and support the work of their media based classes. As art educators, we must better understand what making art for social justice entails, how to talk about it, and its role in education. We also do not want to leap to conclusions that the arts can transform all students. "Research that delves into decisions, processes, and activities that [students] engage in when they make art to impact injustice can provide much-needed language to describe and support this unique educational phenomenon" (Dewhurst, 2014, p. 5).

2. This study was a phenomenological effort to gain insight from participants creating Activist Art. Educators of the arts should understand what making art for social justice entails, how to talk about it in our classroom, and its role in education.

Because the setting and current political climate of this research were either not on the participants' radar or not an influencing factor in the creative process of the artwork. Additional research studies where the undergraduate art students takes on current events or polarizing political climate could foster additional reflection on cross-curricular resources. Critical civic engagement is not a new idea in education, and can be very impactful when based on social and economic factors at work within higher education settings (Freire, 1970). In implementing this theory, certain classes could be taken in tandem, including Drawing and a current events class within the general education core. Another way to extend the activist art assignment in the classroom would be for students to do two art projects, one on a topic they select and another one either assigned to them, or they draw from a hopper. This experience will give students the same opportunity to express their opinion on a topic of their choice but in addition, challenge the student to research a topic with which they are not familiar, and then create work based on new knowledge or gained insight. Even examining Activist Art images in the classroom setting would incorporate the history of the images being viewed and ideally raise questions about roles, responsibilities, and the issues represented (Beyerbach & Davis, 2011). Needless to say, plenty of space for research in activist art remains.

Conclusion

The research in this study sought to examine the lived experiences of undergraduate art students who created a piece of Activist Art during their time in college. Each participant created a unique piece of artwork based on a cause that was important to them. The significance of their creation and being actively engaged in the activist art process was undeniable. The study shows that the political unrest of a particular setting, in this case, the Ferguson Uprising, even if it is in close proximity may not affect an artist's artwork. More importantly, an artist is more inclined to draw inward to find an injustice within their frames of reference or personal story.

Although the study was based on a small group of artists, the research has provided a language to describe the process involved in making activist art. The three themes that emerged from the data the first being, visual communication, the desire for the artists to communicate their thoughts with their audience, the second was, connection to the cause, within the connection the student told their own stories, and the last was identity and personal triumphs, including when the participants experienced growth. As the professor in the classroom, while these artworks were being created, I can speak for the student's vulnerability and the challenges that some faculty members might have in taking on such a project. The participants in this study were in a small department where relationships with faculty members had been cultivated. This step alone allowed the student "buy-in" that is needed for such classroom vulnerability and that the participants were willing to share parts of themselves through their art.

Activist Art is ultimately created to affect change on the audience. In this study, undergraduate artists involved in this experience found it beneficial to others and also affected a

change in themselves. This is the dual nature of creating activist art; it is ultimately created to affect conditions of inequality. As the participants were involved in the teaching aspect of creating a visual image they experienced their learning. Participants noted they had found their voice.

Art students are deeply thinking individuals, with thoughts and opinions on the world. The participants in this study used their art to demonstrate their learning and their passions. Their intended impact was visible with the questions posed during class critiques and their desire to make sure the audience would “get it.” People have bought into society’s “starving artist” mentality or even think that it is easy to be an artist because all artists do is make pretty pictures all day. This study and the participants interviewed would whole-heartily disagree with that cliché, and their created artwork tells the stories of their lived experiences. Creating activist art with BFA students highlighted the unique learning and teaching opportunity for the connection of visual art with social justice pedagogy.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Letter of Informed Consent

George Fox University Doctoral Dissertation Research

Permission to Research Letter

November 1, 2018

Dear BFA Art Student,

I am currently completing a Doctorate in Higher Education Leadership at George Fox University. As a faculty member at Pittsburg State University who currently teaches art students in a BFA program, I am interested in examining your experiences during Drawing II, Printmaking, or Activist Art class whereby you were asked to create a piece of activist art. During the months of November and December 2018 I hope to conduct interviews of several graduates of and current students in various BFA programs. Each interviewee will participate in one sixty to ninety-minute interview at your chosen location. I will make audio recordings of each interview which will then be transcribed and analyzed for themes.

The information gathered in this study will be used to complete my dissertation and will be shared with my chair and my dissertation committee at George Fox University. During the interview, we will look back at your artwork created during that class, which you have the artistic authorship over (U.S. Copyright Code, title 17). Any data collected will be confidential and I will use pseudonyms. However, it should be noted that there is a small sample size and as such there is a slight chance your artwork will be identifiable by people that have seen your artwork published on your website, or social media accounts, or other individuals that work alongside you in studio classes. At any time, you may opt out of participation in this study.

I would be honored to have the opportunity to interview you regarding your experience creating an activist art project and if that experience informed your other artwork. Please let me know if you have any questions or concerns regarding my project. By returning this signed letter to me, you are agreeing to be interviewed and that you understand the information contained in this letter. I can be reached at charitymika@gmail.com I look forward to working with you.

Sincerely,

Charity-Mika Woodard

Appendix B – Interview Questions

History (Related to this artwork creation)

1. What class did you take- Drawing II, Printmaking, or Activist Art, and how long ago was that experience?
2. Where were you (beginning Freshmen, new transfer student, senior semester, etc.) in your BFA program when you took that class?

Assignment (Process and materials)

1. How would you define activist art?
2. What was your initial reaction to the activist art assignment?
3. Let's look at your work and you speak a little bit about the process of creating this piece.
4. What details can you remember about this experience in class?
5. What details can you remember about this experience in talking to others outside of the art department?
6. Where did you struggle during the assignment? (research, materials, execution, critique)
7. You stated that XYZ as a pivotal moment in creating your artwork, talk about the significance of that moment.
8. What was your motivation for selecting the topic or social issue that you based your artwork on, and do you have previous experience with that social issue?

Setting (Political unrest in Ferguson, MO)

1. Do you remember what was going on in Ferguson, MO?
2. Tell me what you thought about the protests in Ferguson, MO.
3. Did the Ferguson Uprising and riots of the time (connect/influence/add intensity) to your artwork, or this assignment?
4. Did the events close to our school affect and/or inform your artwork?
5. Did other political or social events influence your artwork and growth as an artist?

Meaning (How this experience left an impact on your work?)

1. You stated that XYZ was helpful, talk about the significance of that in your overall artwork.
2. Did the classroom activity of creating Activist Art inform or change your self-generated art-making process or product?
3. If you have graduated from college, describe your artistic life?
4. Is there a question I have not asked you, but you think is important?