



“Art can allow us to develop a new shared understanding about the world that [...] can move the barometer of social change toward equity and justice.”

2019 *Studies in Art Education* Invited Lecture

The *Studies in Art Education* Invited Lecture is presented at the annual meeting of the National Art Education Association. Each year, the presenter is elected by the *Studies in Art Education* Editorial Board as a leading scholar in art education. In 2019, the lecture was presented in Boston by Dipti Desai, Professor of Art and Art Education and Director of the Graduate Art + Education Programs at New York University.

Educating for Social Change Through Art: A Personal Reckoning

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The state of the world keeps me up at night, questioning my role as a social justice educator. I think with, through, and around what social change means. Reflecting on my practice, I have followed Western/colonial research and educational methodologies, knowing that they need to be challenged but often being unable to do so. I make present this living in contradiction in this personal narrative, a research methodology practiced for generations by people in the global south and by marginalized people in the United States. It is a reckoning of my work as a researcher, teacher, activist, and director of programs in the academic industrial complex. My desire for a *decolonial option* in art education requires me to interrogate its classificatory lenses. I explore social optics, drawing on examples through three lenses: art as inherently progressive; the interrelationship between visibility and invisibility; and artistic activism for organizing and building solidarity.

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wrote this personal essay on the occupied land of the Lenni Lenape and presented the essay in Boston at the 2019 National Art Education Association National Convention, on the occupied land of the Mashpee Wampanoag, Aquinnah Wampanoag, Nipmuc, and Massachusetts tribal nations.¹ These tribes are the stewards of this land and I thank them for this opportunity, knowing that the struggle for justice is part of a long, painful history of genocide and forced removal from this territory for Indigenous people. As we know, settler colonialism in the United States has forced displacement and dispossession of Indigenous land, a “genocidal policy” that includes “expansion of European corporations, backed by government armies into foreign areas, with subsequent expropriation of lands and resources” (Dunbar-Ortiz, 2014, p. 6, as cited in Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p. 16), which implicates all of us and cannot be divorced from the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Grounded in what Walsh (2018) called “coloniality-capitalism” (p. 16), the relationship between indigeneity, slavery, and settler colonialism is informed by Western modernity and has profoundly shaped and managed how we have learned to see and our ways of knowing across racial, ethnic, gendered, classed, and national

boundaries from 1492 to the present. How does this politics of seeing and knowing connect to the ways art education teaches children, youth, and adults to see and know?

The discipline of art education in a Foucaultian sense—as an institutionalized field of knowledge and practice beginning with its inception in the Oswego Normal and Training School in New York in 1861 and shortly thereafter with the opening of the Massachusetts Normal Art School in 1873 in Boston,² and continuing to contemporary practices—has been framed by the colonial matrix of power, what the Peruvian scholar Quijano (2000) called *coloniality*. Coloniality is constituted by modernity and perpetuated through particular Western epistemological frames in art education, such as the notion of individual self-expression, skills, and techniques of art/design—including post-modern renditions, artistic development, aesthetics, art criticism, visual representation, multiculturalism, and social justice approaches. In these times of neoliberal racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983) and the simultaneous turn to nationalism that Trump and the far right advocate not only in the US, but also recently in Brazil and Argentina, we in art education need to take on what Mignolo (2011) called a “decolonial option” (p. 17) as a practice that interrogates the “classificatory lens and logic that put limits on how we can see, know, and act on and with respect to the local, national, global order” (Walsh & Mignolo, 2018, p. 17).

I want to pay attention to my “inner eye,” a phrase I borrow from Wynter (1994, p. 44) to interrogate the classificatory lens and logic of social justice art education, an approach I advocate. First, it is necessary to share my

understanding of social justice, which is a mash-up of my lived experience, Western epistemologies regarding art and design that were part of my colonial education in postcolonial India and the US, and family history of activism as my grandfather and mother were active in the freedom movement in India. This confluence prompts me to always keep present the ways my privilege and oppression are deeply intertwined, shaping how I have come to see and know our world in particular ways, which influence the kinds of action I am willing to take to challenge and change unequal power structures in education. The frame of social justice is not fixed and keeps shifting as I seek to make space to bear witness to and open a critical conversation about justice in my research, teaching, and the design and implementation of three social justice based art + education programs at New York University (NYU), a corporate university that is part of the academic industrial complex. To simultaneously challenge my “cognitive imperialism” (Battiste, 2013, p. 26) while also seeing emerging possibilities in social justice art education, I want to focus on the questions of justice that Tuck and Wang (2018) asked: “what justice is, or more precisely what justice wants, what it produces, whom it fails, where it operates, when it is in effect, and what it lacks” (p. 3). The term social justice, over the last 15 years or so, has become fashionable, but it also has been criticized as it encompasses a wide range of practices, views, and approaches that move from liberatory to corporate (Giridharadas, 2018; Picower, 2012; Tuck & Wang, 2018). Indeed, some Indigenous scholars (Simpson, 2016) refuse to use the term, arguing that it perpetuates settler colonialism.

I am not yet ready to abandon the term, even though our history and current practices in art education are always already shaped by the hierarchical relationship between settler colonialism, slavery, and Indigenous dispossession of land and culture. I do think that using the term social justice allows us to not only recognize, but also develop a political analysis of the

injustices constructed and represented by settler colonialism and how it operates to create and maintain oppression on multiple levels. In particular, the oppressive myth of the US as a land of immigrants that implicates me as an immigrant who is occupying and benefiting from the dispossession of native peoples’ land needs to be deconstructed in art education. This means addressing how visual representation shapes how we learn to see in racialized ways that maintain the status quo through various approaches in art education, such as multiculturalism, an area on which much of my work has focused. I am also interested in the ability of art to challenge hierarchical power relations and work toward the decolonial option in how we see, know, and live in our society. How do we understand the connection between the dual strands of the politics of visual representation in relation to social justice art education? What do we mean by social change, a term frequently used in the discourse of social justice art education? How is social change theorized in relation to art and pedagogy? Social change for what and, most importantly, for whom? Who does social change benefit and who does it fail? Those of us who believe in social justice can no longer assume that the belief is a radical position. In these neoliberal times, the call for social justice is advocated and enacted by corporate and financial institutions to maintain the status quo, as the journalist Giridharadas (2018) so incisively demonstrated in his book, *Winners Take All: The Elite Charade of Changing the World*. Similarly, Jackson (2011), among other theorists of socially engaged art, raised pertinent questions about how these radical art practices, in the name of resistance and changing social inequality, absolve our government from doing its part in changing structures of inequality and thus inadvertently maintaining the status quo.

Art Is Inherently Progressive

Social justice art education, I contend, is grounded in the desire to create awareness about sociopolitical issues, challenge common sense attitudes, mobilize civic participation, take action to shift unequal power relations in our society, and work to change policies. Social change in art education, then, is understood as a process and an effect, both of which work to positively alter unequal social conditions through artmaking and displaying of art in exhibitions and the public sphere.

Although the outcomes for social change are expansive, we often conceptualize art in social justice art education as individual political self-expression, and in so doing, we assume that representing social issues will open dialogue among people, which will in turn naturally lead to social change (Desai, 2017). Social justice art education focuses on object making, performance, or installation as the culmination of a lesson or unit, which I suggest is aligned to our understanding of art as both autonomous and simultaneously radical (Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Dewhurst, 2010, 2014; Quinn, Ploof, & Hochtritt, 2012). The radical potential inherent in art to move people to change social conditions has a long history going back to Plato's view of the arts as being dangerous because of their ability to shape people's character and behavior. Plato initially wanted to dismiss artists, musicians, poets, and playwrights from the "Republic" because they would threaten the construction of an ideal society. Yet he knew that the power of art to evoke strong emotions and shape character was important to the citizens of an ideal society, therefore he called for an education in the arts, but one that was controlled and censored, especially in the fields of music and painting. This inherent subversive power of the arts has continued to be evoked by politicians and heads of state across time, with their calling for censorship of some forms of art while at the same time advocating for those art forms that serve their political ideology. We

can recall how art in the 20th century was used as a propaganda tool by Adolf Hitler and Chairman Mao. More recently, in 2003, Colin Powell, at the time he was to give a speech justifying the war in Iraq to the United Nations, instructed that the tapestry of Picasso's *Guernica*, which was hanging on the wall near the general assembly, be covered during the sessions.

Drawing on the work of the Frankfurt School, especially Herbert Marcuse and Theodor Adorno, curator and writer Haines (2017) argued that art "as a special ontological category" (p. 189) is understood as "both inherently political and largely progressive in its politics" (p. 189). For both Marcuse and Adorno, art revealed the human condition through the aesthetic transformation of a subject or issue. For Marcuse (as cited in Becker, 1994), "art opens the established reality to another dimension: that of possible liberation" (p. 114). According to Marcuse (1972), the arts are inherently revolutionary precisely because they do not change reality, but are in themselves another reality. He goes on to say that

art and revolution are united in changing the world—liberation. But in its practice art does not abandon its own exigencies and does not quit its own dimension: it remains non-operational. In art, the political goal appears only in the transformation which is the aesthetic form. (p. 105)

Both Marcuse and Adorno strongly advocated against using art for direct action or activism; rather, they believed in the power of individual self-expression to create social change. The underlying assumptions that naturalize the connection between art and progressive politics and thus detach art from its actual context of production and reception is succinctly argued by Haines (2017): "The particular power of art, in this view, is the cultivation of an individual subjectivity that, in an indirect way, produces informed socially responsible citizens capable of critical judgment and collective social action" (p. 190). This Western

colonial/modernist understanding of aesthetics as inherently radical is how social change is conceptualized in social justice art education discourses and curricula and reproduced through the ways we teach that still focus on individual students' self, albeit political, expression. Coloniality/modernity did not end with colonization, but rather, as Maldonado-Torres (2008; as cited in Walsh & Mignolo, 2018), contended: "As modern subjects we breathe coloniality all the time and every day" (p. 23). Drawing on the work of Quijano (2000), the colonial construction of art and aesthetics of visibility is based on two interconnected axes of power that laid the foundation for the development of modernity and globality: (1) The social construction of hierarchical racial categories, and (2) The development of capitalism—new structures that controlled labor, its resources, and products. This capitalist form of labor control included slavery, serfdom, and small commodity productions. To me, what is important to remember is that social justice art education is also an epistemological frame—a way we have come to know the world that is directly connected to Europe's colonial project, which is undoubtedly racialized and classed.

In art education, the primacy of the visual has shaped how we have learned to see the world; how we judge, how we categorize, and how the world produces desire within us. One of our programs, called *Visionary Studio: Saturday Art Workshop*,³ which I developed at NYU to enact critical pedagogy, provides an entry point to explore the questions I stated earlier: What does social justice want in this context? And: Social change for whom? The *Visionary Studio: Saturday Art Workshop* is a 9-week program that allows high school students to infuse issues of social justice into an artmaking practice. This program is not media driven; rather, high school students choose a current topic to explore through any media. On Saturday mornings, teens explore current issues such as climate justice, White supremacy, the opioid crisis, immigration, and so

on, and they draw on an array of multidisciplinary approaches through which they can visually express their ideas. These classes are taught by teams of our preservice graduate students as part of a course taught by an adjunct professor. Graduate students decide the semester before on which three or four current issues to focus, and then they design a 9-week unit for the chosen issue that meets the requirements of initial certification in terms of learning to design a unit composed of several lesson plans with rationale, objectives, assessment, and so on. The unit is designed to address an essential question about the issue, moving strategically from how the issue connects to high school students personally, and how it moves toward exploring how artists have addressed the issue politically, culturally, economically, and socially through their art practices, to open the conversation and create social change. For instance, in a unit on border crossers, the high school students explored the essential question: How can artists contribute to the debate on immigration? Over the next 8 weeks, they explored different aspects of the border crisis, beginning with defining borders and drawing connections to citizenship. The next lessons focused on how the media and politicians shape the dominant narrative about immigration that perpetuates stereotypes about immigrants from the south and how artists can create counternarratives as acts of social justice by creating a sound installation based on interviews students conducted with immigrants. Based on these explorations in class, high school students think about their own artistic intervention to change the immigration debate and work toward creating political artworks for an exhibition. Together, students and teachers consider ways in which artists can and do influence society, and they experiment with a range of art techniques and media. These workshops challenge students to explore how artistic boundaries can be stretched to include what has historically been excluded, and in doing so, they can

influence politics and social change. As a culmination of the program, the high school students display their work in an exhibition at NYU.

Although the curriculum models a Freireian philosophy that moves from the personal to the political, it also remains contained within a thematic and individualized pedagogy of self-expression. Students work toward a final exhibition, which in itself frames the end product as representational. In doing so, we affirmed Marcuse (1972) and Adorno's (1997) position of the inherently radical nature of political art to affect politics. Art in its representational form can affect politics by serving as a moral witness to gross inequities and state-sanctioned atrocities. The act of making work that addresses sociopolitical issues for high school students certainly has an educational function of creating awareness regarding how inequities are shaped in our society and lived daily. This is a critical component of raising consciousness, as feminists have taught us; however, the challenge for me is not to remain at this stage of consciousness and moral witnessing, but to move students to take some action in their own community or school. Critical awareness of sociopolitical issues does not necessarily mean that we are moved to do something about it, nor does it mean that we understand our relationship to coloniality. In fact, this focus on the individual student as a site of social change, as well as our understanding of art as inherently progressive, reproduces the knowledge claims of rationality and what it means to be human that have justified slavery, genocide, and colonial occupation in the US (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2012). Thus, if art remains simply within the realm of awareness or as a way of witnessing, I suggest it can perpetuate the status quo. The question, then, is to rethink how to teach art from a decolonial position so we can harness its power toward cumulative change in consciousness and behavior that leads to social action and change in

hegemonic policies, laws, and institutions—creating a cultural shift. What this means is that it is necessary to interrogate the assumptions and knowledge produced in relation to visibility as a social optics in social justice art education that frames what can be seen and what cannot in terms of making art and displaying artworks.

Critical Art: Interrelationships Between Visibility and Invisibility

Visibility and invisibility, the purview of art education, are socially constructed practices that shape our understanding of the world and its politics. Van Veeren (2018) explained, for example, that “visibility and invisibility are mutually constitutive” (p. 196). She went on to explain that, therefore, invisibility, much like visibility “operate[s] in multiple modes that depend on different, and often competing, understandings of how knowledge and common sense are constituted” (p. 219). As Rancière (2004) reminded us, the relationship between visibility and invisibility in our society is based on the “distribution of the sensible” (p. 12), which, through various disciplines (such as art education) and cultural institutions, at different moments in history, creates arbitrary borders between what can be seen, felt, and thought, and what cannot; and in the process, this distribution of the sensible determines what is or is not politically possible. So, as art educators, we can either “frame or reframe the political... by either entrenching existing configurations of seeing, sensing, and thinking, or by challenging them” (Bleiker, 2018, p. 34). Because invisibility is political in that it is an active form of erasure, to make visible that which dominant institutions render invisible is an activist strategy that is inherently pedagogical.

Art, for historically marginalized people, as Lorde (1984) and Anzaldúa (1990) reminded us, is a form of illumination because of the epistemic violence perpetrated by the culture of invisibility (Van Veeren, 2018). Making art, particularly for

lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) women of color, is a form of social action that not only challenges their invisibility in our society, but, more importantly, changes the hegemonic frame of visibility; therein lies its power to create social change. In the words of Lorde (1984), “Poetry is the way we help give name to the nameless so it can be thought” (p. 36). It is precisely this act of making the invisible visible that allows us to envision alternatives and find solutions to the urgent issues of our time. Additionally, however, this construction of seeing and not seeing in binary opposition is itself problematic because invisibility is associated with powerlessness and visibility with power. Minh-ha (2015) cautioned that the equation of “visibility and the present with power and invisibility and the absent with subjugation... overlook[s] the complex inter-relationship between seeing and not seeing” (p. 131).

In social justice art education, the eye is still the primary organ to cultivate. To create an artwork or performance is to give form to what we see, and how we see that is always already shaped by power and Western modernist epistemology. This is true for visual culture in art education, where what we see in the image is a manifestation of how we have learned to see based on our social position and location. Drawing on the constituted and inseparable relationship between visibility and invisibility, what this means for me as a social justice art educator is that I need to continually interrogate “the ways invisibility is built into each instance of visibility, and the very forms of invisibility generated within the visible” (Minh-ha, 2015, pp. 131–132) in our curricula and classrooms. If we consider invisibility to be an active form of erasure, then we need to change the power relations of the field of visibility to create social change. It follows, then, that social change in relation to the visual arts requires us to put images to work—in both artmaking and viewing in at least a couple of ways—to be considered counter-hegemonic: (1) Making the invisible visible, so

it can be thought, and therefore addressed, and (2) Learning to see the invisible at the edge of the visible frame, which means questioning the ways images in the media, popular culture, and fine art create invisibilities. What this means is thinking through how vision as a social optic simultaneously creates visibility and invisibility and how both visibility/invisibility are mobilized in our art classrooms.

In our current technological and social media-driven culture, the notion of representation is outmoded, according to Mirzoeff (2016); instead, he borrows the term used by South African artist Zanele Muholi, *visual activism*. As Muholi (2018) stated, visual activism is about “pushing a political agenda, in very diverse ways, reaching out beyond the normal way to reach out, touching people’s hearts in different ways, and engaging deeply (para. 4). I want to draw on a capstone project by one of our students in the Art, Education and Community Practice program at NYU to think with, through, and around the strategy of making the invisible visible as one way of enacting visual activism.

Grounded in the Freireian notion of praxis, the capstone project, in general, requires students to design and implement an art activist intervention in either the public sphere, an institution, or a community. Federico Hewson’s project, *Labor of Love*,⁴ made the invisible forms of women’s labor visible to work toward changing the flower industry in New York City (NYC) to become fair trade. A common sight on street corners in NYC are the rows of brightly colored flowers that are sold at cheap prices. Through a series of strategically timed artistic interventions (Valentines Day, Mother’s day, and May Day 2016), as well as conversations with Fairtrade America and a global floral company, Hewson engaged the public to draw awareness to the fact that 70 to 80% of roses and carnations are imported to the US. These flowers are produced on farms in Colombia by women in harsh labor conditions that include cancer-causing chemicals, which these women are

exposed to on a daily basis. A performative gesture, Hewson, along with other students, passed out dozens of carnations with beautifully designed tags that said "Thinking of You" and "Know Your Flowers," which highlighted these facts, and they engaged in conversation about the labor behind flowers with people on the streets, enacting critical public pedagogy. Because the flowers we buy in NYC are wrapped in paper, Hewson decided to make the invisible visible through images and text on the flower wrapping paper. He worked with a graphic designer and persuaded the popular Manhattan chain Westside Market and a local Washington Square flower seller to replace their regular rolls of wrap with rolls of his special paper. By employing these tactics to make people aware of how everyday actions, such as buying flowers for the home or for a friend, connect us to workers in farms in Colombia, Hewson gently highlighted the web of global social relations of privilege and oppression that we partake in daily. The optics of daily routines in our capitalist society, such as buying flowers, are seen and articulated as a simple physical act. What consumer capitalism deliberately renders invisible is that this physical act is in fact a social act that connects my privilege with someone else's oppression or vice versa. Here, invisibility is constructed, mobilized, and contested for different political purposes that speak to our "politics beyond the edge of sight" (Van Veeren, 2018, p. 223).

Invisibility is not always a negative force, but one that can be productive in spurring people's imagination to envision an alternative possibility, which is the purview of art. However, despite the pedagogical power of the image, it alone cannot do all the work of moving people to create social change. In this case involving fair trade flowers, most of the work involved communicating with Fairtrade USA and convincing them to take on the flower farms in Colombia. Not one of these flower farms was, at the time of Hewson's project, certified fair trade. Convincing farm

owners in Colombia that making their farms fair trade is beneficial to them was difficult. What social change meant in relation to the *Labor of Love* project was that it was a form of visual activism, but the art in itself was neither only about representation nor was it inherently radical. Rather, the social change focal point was using the art to imagine and enact an alternative social structure. The *Labor of Love* project, then, articulated what artist Bruguera (2011) called "Arte Útil" (para. 7), or useful art. She went on to explain:

Useful art is a way of working with aesthetic experiences that focus on the implementation of art in society where art's function is no longer to be a space for "signaling" problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions. (para. 6)

For art to be useful means that it does not need to look like art. Given that social change is often a slow and long process, one needs to develop networks of solidarity that work to shift policy so useful art can transform unequal social practices. This means we need to consider the ways organizing and movement building are aesthetic, and we need to make learning collectively a foundation of our pedagogy.

Artistic Activism: Organizing and Building Networks of Solidarity

Organizing, protesting, and working to build networks of solidarity to address pressing local and global issues are now part of the art process for many artists and art collectives. As the artists Ghani and Alvarian (2017) have noted: "For art to be an important form of protest, artists have to consider what it might mean to be artists working within movements—to make and circulate work not from positions of autonomy, but from a network of positions in solidarity" (para. 2). In order for art to work toward creating social change, a culture shift needs to be sparked that moves people to embody and internalize the

new ideas, values, beliefs, and patterns of behavior. This culture shift requires organizing networks of solidarity to imagine and create alternative ways of being, a task that is inherently pedagogical—involving learning to work across social differences and to engage contradictory ideas, beliefs, and values that rub against each other. As the website for the Center for Artistic Activism (n.d.) stated: “[C]ulture lays the foundation for politics. It outlines the contours of our very notions of what is desirable and undesirable, possible and impossible. Culture makes us, as we make it, and culture is the base material of artistic activism” (para. 25). It follows that cultural analysis and cultural change ground artistic activism, a practice that draws on the arts’ ability to touch people at an emotional level, igniting their imagination to envision new ways of acting and thinking as well as subjectivity to create measurable shifts in power that are by no means monolithic.

In our highly mediated political landscape of signs, symbols, and spectacles, the element of surprise cannot be left to chance but needs to be planned in order for it to have the desired effect. This means that artistic activists need to articulate what their intentions are, what they expect to happen as a result of their art intervention, and how they are going to assess the results of their action. Generating dialogue and raising awareness or consciousness about a social/political issue is certainly part of the process of artistic activism; however, it does not stop there. Rather, art needs to do the political work to initiate change. Art then becomes the conduit to move people to take action, however small, that leads to specific concrete changes or movement building. For example, the sound art collective *Ultra-red* is invested in movement building, and it works at the intersection of art, politics, and organizing as an aesthetic–political project. As their mission statement states, “If we understand organizing as the formal practices that build relationships out of which people compose

analytic and strategic actions, how might art contribute to and challenge those very processes? How might those processes already constitute aesthetic forms?” (*Ultra-red*, 2000, para. 1). These questions provoke us to rethink aesthetics, and I would suggest that organizing is an aesthetic form, similar to other recent forms, such as dialogic aesthetics (Kester, 2004). Activist artists might use these new forms either in concert with more conventional aesthetic forms, such as painting, drawing, sculpture, photography, printmaking, and performance, or not. To borrow Amin Husain’s (as cited in Brown, 2016) words, art in this conception of artistic activism is “an aesthetic without aestheticizing” (para. 13), and it does “not represent the struggle, as art is expected to do; instead, they hang in the service of struggle” (Husain, as cited in Brown, 2016, para. 13). Therefore, artistic activism does not need to be recognized as art. This conception of art as organizing signals a radical departure from the inherently progressive nature of arts that Marcuse (1972) and Adorno (1997) advocated.

Artistic organizing is grounded in collective artmaking, which is a process of learning to work across differences to be effective in shifting the balance of power in society. As a constitutive activity in political activism and social movements, collectivity is a form of cultural production that is not about individual self-expression, or even political expression, but rather, it is about democratizing social change that requires building networks of solidarity. This work is difficult. However, if we are committed to democratization, then we need to be willing, as feminist theorist Brown (1995) suggested, to supplant the language of “I am—” with its defensive closure on identity, its insistence on the fixity of position, its equation of social with moral positioning” with “I want this for us” (p. 75). Freire (1970/2005) reminded us that liberation is a collective project that calls for dialogic participation grounded in a critical consciousness of how both oppressor and oppressed are bound together through power relations. In order for

art to work toward shifting the balance of power, we need to learn to work together across our differences, and that demands a radical shift in the way we teach art in schools, moving away from individual artmaking to collective pedagogy.

Here I share a collective project, *Passport to the Past* (2018),⁵ that I have undertaken in my Artistic Activism as Radical Research class to tease out the lessons learned about art as organizing. Although I focus on this project here, I have been doing collective projects as assignments for several years with Avram Finkelstein (cofounder of Gran Fury and Silence+Death). We have called these the *NYU Flash Collective*. In *Passport to the Past*, my students and I became an art collective for the semester to create an art intervention at NYU focused on shifting the ways entering freshmen and graduate students were oriented to our institution, which sits on the occupied territories of the Lenni Lenape, and which is surrounded by a rich history of resistance and resilience by historically marginalized people. In our research, we learned that freshman orientation runs for a week at NYU and is composed of 500 events, but not one event mentions the hidden history of Indigenous, African Americans, Latinx, LGBTQ, women, and Asian Americans that is inscribed in the buildings, streets, and parks around NYU. Our research led to designing a walking tour with a brochure that is handed out to new students who choose to take the tour, or which could be given out at freshman orientation for self-guided tours. The primary work of this art intervention has been first organizing and convincing the deans in our school and then NYU as a whole that a historical walking tour of resistance and resilience needs to be part of the experience for entering freshman and graduate students as a form of popular education that actively resists the willful forgetting of marginalized histories. The form of popular education that makes invisible histories visible, as Kelley (2002) reminded us, can “transport us to another place, compel us to relive

horrors and, more importantly, enable us to imagine a new society” (p. 9).

Contemporary art collectives work in several different ways, but we drew on Critical Art Ensemble’s (1998) notion of “solidarity through difference” (p. 66), where we focused on the assets of each student and myself for several reasons: (1) It is important to find pleasure in the process; not all of us work at the same pace, nor do we have the same skill set or assets to bring to class. So we took advantage of each of our assets and broke into affinity groups, which meant not everyone was involved with every aspect of design and production of the art intervention; (2) Consensus was shaped through a process of discussion as each affinity group worked on specific aspects of research and production; (3) Interdisciplinary knowledge within the collective meant we could work with different strategies, tactics, media, and worldviews; and (4) Respecting our differences structured our power relations horizontally, but this did not mean we were equal at all times in terms of the amount of work done by each member. As the Critical Art Ensemble (1998) stated: “The idea that everyone should do an equal amount of work is to measure a member’s value by quantity instead of quality. Rigid equality in this case can be a perverse and destructive type of Fordism” (p. 67). We created subgroups called affinity groups based on our assets to work on designing the art intervention, researching resources and information, looking at how social media can be harnessed as a site for social change. We would reconvene to share what the affinity groups had done, and as a collective, we made suggestions, edited text and images, and/or endorsed what the subgroups had come up with. Given the proclivity for working individually in art practices, tensions often arose in the classroom as some students felt that their ideas and hours of design work were not considered, opening a Pandora’s box of emotions in the class.

Collective pedagogy challenges the cultural economy of art that foregrounds the modernist/colonial ideology of individuality as autonomous and marketable. From administrative structures down to the structure of art curricula in K–12 schools and universities, the teaching and learning of art is grounded in nurturing individual artists. Training the individual artist manifests in both the physical spaces of media-specific studios, where there is no space for working across media collectively and also conceptually, in the design of curricula that cultivates particular ways of seeing and dispositions that are rewarded by the art world.

I use the term *collective pedagogy* neither as group work nor collaborative work, which tends to organize difference in the classroom in a cohesive manner to contribute to one artwork that still mimics the commodification of the individual artist and the colonial logic of modernity that is reproduced by the art world. The honoring of individuality is seen in many community-based art projects as well, where the star artist is named and has the ability to obtain funds to work within a community and create work that, although it might be touted as collaborative, is still marked by a metaphorical artist's signature—in this case, name recognition in the art world. Contrastingly, collective pedagogy for me aligns with what Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) called a “decolonizing pedagogy of solidarity” (p. 49). He continued:

A decolonizing pedagogy of solidarity must shift the focus away from either explaining or enhancing existing social arrangements, seeking instead to challenge such arrangements and their implied colonial logic.... [I]t is about imagining human relations that are premised on the relationship between difference and interdependency, rather than similarity and a rational calculation of self-interests. (p. 49)

Collective pedagogy is connected to anti-oppressive pedagogy, within which we learn to

be together and think together. It is a process fraught with tensions, contradictions, and confrontations that have to be worked through together because the basis of our relationship is fundamentally grounded in diversity and difference as central values that cannot be erased (Mohanty, 2003; Sandoval, 2000). A strong commitment to relationality in collective practice means that as Gaztambide-Fernández (2012) contended, as “individual subjects do not enter into relationships, but rather subjects are made in and through relationships” (p. 52).

Working together is a political skill that shapes our identity as artists, activists, and educators, enabling us to speak to, against, and through power grounded in what Sandoval (2000) called “revolutionary love” (p. 158). We need to trust each other, and in the process, learn about who we are in relation to the other. As a practice that foregrounds taking social action in the public sphere or within an institution, revolutionary love indicates different modes of consciousness that affect our subjectivity, which is transformative. Sandoval (2000) continued:

[Revolutionary love] is deploying an action that re-creates the agent even as the agent is creating the action—in an ongoing, chiasmic loop of transformation. The differential activist is thus made by the ideological intervention that she is also making: the only predictable final outcome is transformation itself. (p. 157)

An important aspect of collective pedagogy is learning to listen to each other, which is not only a precondition for learning collectively but a critical site for the organization of politics. As the sound collective Ultra-red (2014) stated: “[C]ollective listening is not an end in itself. Rather, it is a tool among other tools available for the long haul of struggle” (para. 7). Political action can emerge only from listening deeply to people's views, beliefs, needs, and desires, which are always contingent. Our collective pedagogical practice subsumed the “I,” or individualism, in favor of the “we,” which involved working

through the tensions and contradictions of diverse subjectivities and views of art, social change, and the world that allows us to work in solidarity across our differences. The process of collective learning is grounded in listening and dialogue with various stakeholders in the community, and in our case, with students in class, on a particular social issue that becomes the basis for thinking about what kinds of questions need to be asked that might spur us to imagine tactics or strategies that might be effective at that particular moment in time. I suggest that the construction of a communal “we” is a concrete decolonial method for mobilizing our classrooms, the academy, and perhaps larger society if we are serious about functioning as a real democracy and not our current form of representative democracy, to create an equitable and just society.

Reckoning

Art, as a symbolic order, can either maintain and perpetuate the matrix of power relations that are a part of coloniality/modernity, or it can challenge cultural hegemony, becoming a space of dissent, social action, and organizing. Yet, as Mouffe (2016) suggested: “Art can’t change the world on its own, but art can contribute to changing the world” (p. 39). As

a form of radical imagination, art can allow us to develop a new shared understanding about the world that, in concert with political, social, and cultural institutions, can move the barometer of social change toward equity and justice. Art’s capacity to imagine the unimaginable as an expression of hope, which can rupture and shift habitual ways of seeing, does not mean that this shared understanding removes dissensus. Rather, art is political when it develops dissensus. I reckon that to use aesthetics strategically to oppose the social mobilization of capital or directly challenge the social structures that shape how we learn to see means that those of us who advocate for social justice art education can no longer primarily focus on the aesthetic dimension of art and the representation of issues. We need to explore alternative forms of social organization in the art classroom in the same way that we explore art materials, skills, and techniques. This means building networks of solidarity with radical organizations of color in our community so that we can, in the words of Anzaldúa (1990), send our “voices, visuals, and visions outward into the world” (p. xv) to “alter the walls and make them a framework for new windows and doors” (p. xv).

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ I begin with an Indigenous land acknowledgment, itself an intervention, as it is not normative practice for research papers, but it is one I believe is imperative to decolonial social justice work.
- ² This is a historical account of the field of art education drawn from Efland (1990). Additional material was drawn from *A history of art education time-line*. Retrieved from www.personal.psu.edu.
- ³ <https://steinhardt.nyu.edu/programs/art-education/high-school-programs/saturday-art-workshop> and <https://arteducationatnyu.wordpress.com/visionary-studio> (not updated but gives an idea of past units).
- ⁴ <https://arteducationandcommunitypracticeatnyu.wordpress.com/2016/09/01/the-labor-of-flowers-federico-hewson>.
- ⁵ <https://arteducationandcommunitypracticeatnyu.wordpress.com/2018/12/05/passport-to-the-past>.

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