Why Combining Interactive Installations With Social Justice Art is an Effective Way to Engage Viewers and Make Space for Student Voice and Learning

By

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Abstract

Interactive installation art coupled with social justice art and messaging can tell the stories of marginalized populations in cultures in a way that engages the viewers and participants minds, emotions, and bodies. Interactivity aids in memory and demonstrates an embodied movement toward change, while installation immerses the participant in an emotional and physical context devised by the artist. The creators of this art can also benefit from having agency over their stories and control over the way their narratives are being presented to others. Each viewer/participant brings their own experiences to the art, but may have their perspectives challenged through the process of engagement with the work.

In education this type of art can be used to promote critical thinking and cross-curricular learning for students, by creating opportunities for students to research social issues that affect them, and subsequently create visual projects about those issues through investigating art mediums and messaging. Through preparation for installation students can explore new locations for artworks to be presented, beyond schools and connecting to larger communities.

Teaching social justice art and creating artworks like these must be tempered with an understanding of power and privilege, of accessibility to and ownership of art, and of the need to question the long-term effect of such work for the participants and the creators.

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1. Introduction

Art has always been, and will continue to be, not only a documentation of beautiful imagery but also a historical account of events and cultural values. Visual and performing arts are consistently at the centre of cultural revolutions. The impact of visual images engages people at the moment of change and can become icons of an era of shifting ideologies. The impact of an artful image like the black fist in the air, or the pop-art picture of Barack Obama during his election campaign, can be like a banner for gathering like-minded people. Art can also challenge current messaging, particularly when addressing an oppressive dominant cultural idea. For example, Chico Sierra, a Kansas City painter, paints watercolour pieces that speak to the ineptitude of the current American President (figure 1). Kent Monkman confronts systemic injustice in Canada with his provocative paintings and his performance work as Miss Chief Eagle Testickle (figure 2). These types of art have a major impact on society, both for those who experience them directly and tangibly, and as provoking ideas when they are brought to the attention of the public and create dialogue. Through them the public is introduced to critical ways of thinking about the world. Stephen Duncombe (2016) describes the work of activist artists in part this way: they invite participation, reveal the current reality, and alter perception of the public on issues of justice (pp. 121-122). My intention is to follow in the footsteps of these artist activists and create art that pushes against the dominant narratives of our culture in Canada, and through interactive, installation artwork, challenge people to see new perspectives on social issues. This can start in the classrooms of schools,

Figure 1. *Video Games*. Sierra, C. S. (2019).

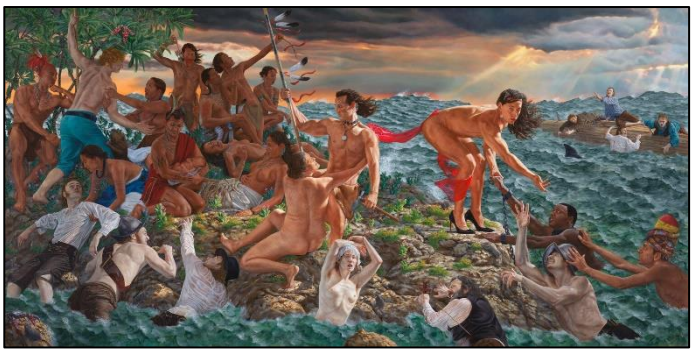

Figure 2. *Welcoming the Newcomers*. Monkman, K. (2019)

introducing students to critical examination of issues that affect them and how these can be explored through art, and then move into the public sphere.

In the process of studying social justice art that involves installation and interactivity, I found that there were very few artists who were creating work that encompassed all three of these veins. It presented me with the difficult task of critiquing literature on the subject since the research that I found dealt with only one or sometimes two of the three components of my work. Often public art or collaborative art was discussed in articles about installation work, or participatory work that considered the co-creators as participants rather than the viewers. Much has been written on social justice art, but not on the interactive or installation aspect of it and how that affects the viewer or audience. The process I chose, in light of this, is to define each of the three components and separately review the literature on those. Once I define them and discuss their contribution to art, I combine them to look at their various roles in education, then critique the role of social justice art and the role of the educator in the process.

2. What is it and Why do it?

There are three major aspects at play in my artworks: interactivity, installation, and social justice narratives. Although the imperative of my art is social justice, I find the most impactful way to engage the viewer or audience with the ideas behind issues is by utilizing the emotional power of an installation and the physical dynamic of interactive art to explore a story. Each of these terms necessitates a definition and explanation in relation to my work.

A. Interactive art

The first is the notion of interactive art. I seek to create pieces that instigate a physical interaction between the viewer and the art in order to fully experience the work, ultimately making the viewer a participant in the art. Participatory art is not a new idea, but there are myriad ways that

participation can be defined and varying degrees of participation from complete co-creation with others at the very outset of a project idea, to having participants experience the art in a specific way that is pre-determined by the artist after completion of a project, and everything in between. The purpose of the project largely determines how an artist goes about defining the level of participation in the work. Often the artist will propose a structure or theme and then participants become the creators of the material for that project. This is common in community-based work and social justice spheres, such as Applied Theatre, where participants become "spect-actors", crossing over from viewing or spectating to physically acting out interventions to oppression (Giesler, 2017, pp. 349-350).

Figure 3. *Separation* (2019) Loszchuk

For the purposes of my work, the interaction of the viewer/participant (I will use those two words interchangeably in this paper) happens after the completion of the physical piece of art. However, the participation is critical for the work to have meaning beyond what I have created. For example, in my previous work, *Separation* (figure 3), 5 wood carved panels were placed together, depicting various stages of a mother and child being separated. This was based on the U.S./Mexico border situation in 2019 and the number of families that were being separated and sent to detention centres when they entered the United States. Viewers were encouraged to move the panels into different sequences that changed the visual story that was being told. If the viewer chose not to physically move the artwork, but only view it as a finished work, they only saw one version of the story instead of experiencing how a narrative can be altered by each individual person and that person's perspective. As Josee Drouin-Brisebois (2008) suggests in reference to work by the artists BGL, Kent Monkman, and others in the exhibition detailed in the book *Caught in the Act: The*

Viewer as Performer, "In these sculptures and installations there is an emphatic declaration of the role of the participant, which becomes as, or even more important than the authorial role of the artist, and indeed, as significant as the very art object itself" (p. 26). As in my Separation work, the interactive portion of the art was what generated multiple viewpoints and brought a deeper sense of connection to the stories being told through that art. The participant's interplay is what gives the story the most significance. It is their embodied and reflective experiences of meanings that become the seeds that then leave the gallery with those participants with the potential to grow and become part of the human ecosystem that can change institutionalized injustice.

Often during the printing and cleaning stages of the plates used to create *Separation*, my own handprints and fingerprints appeared in many places (figure 4), an unanticipated reaction created between my skin's oil, the cleaner, and the oil-based ink. My hope was that this chemical reaction would continue with each person who interacted with the art and each time someone touched the *Separation* pieces, that the ink left on the panels was affected in some way by the oil on the participant's hands, creating prints and smudges. This way they would not only be affected by the art and the meaning they had created in it, but the art piece itself would be affected by them.

Figure 4. *Separation – hand* (2019) Loszchuk

Diana Boros (2012) says it this way:

> . . . public creation can be…in the form of an idea expressed through dialogue or an interactive process. It is not necessarily its beauty or its physicality that makes the difference but, rather, its

ability to disrupt, to engage, and to invert or to subvert everyday perceptions and limitations. (p. 101)

By engaging through participation, then, we are making space for dialogue, activating different perspectives, and even affecting the artwork itself.

Not only is it important to the participant to see varying narratives, but the kinesthetic act of changing or physically engaging the artwork imprints the imagery on a person's memory. The physical act of hands-on work, creating, role playing, and experiential learning is referred to as implicit learning (Jensen, 2001, p. 74), and implicit learning is ". . . much more reliable than the old-style classroom education that emphasizes reading textbooks and memorizing facts" (Reber, 1993, as cited in Jenson, 2001, p. 74). If I want viewers to remember the issues that I am presenting to them, and I do, then it is imperative that the important social justice perceptions that they experience through this art can be embedded at a muscular and neural level, making this an event that will be remembered more clearly than a list of data they might read in a newspaper. Physical engagement with a task creates lasting memories that the participant can draw on long after the initial experience with the artwork is over. This is what I trust will happen through interaction with my work.

Interactive work caters to our curiosity, and our curiosity drives learning. As Pamela Geiger Stephens (2006), who works in community-based participatory art forms, says, "community-based learning has the power to encourage and sustain the intellectual curiosity of learners" (p. 40). We are drawn to experiences, and when art becomes something that can be touched or held or changed, we can become like children at a playground again and use our tactile exploration to discover new things. This can help viewers reconnect with art in a personal but non-threatening way. When an artist has set up a project that encourages interaction, it gives permission to the viewers to examine and participate in something rather than simply view it from the outside. Then the participant has an opportunity to ask questions and search for answers within the artwork. Developmental psychologist, Howard Gardner

(1999) states this case in his book, *The Disciplined Mind,* when he says "The brain learns best and retains most when the organism is actively involved in exploring physical sites and materials and asking questions to which it actually craves answers. Merely passive experiences tend to attenuate and have little lasting impact" (p. 82). This applies as easily to science labs in school as it does to interactive public art projects on the street corner.

B. Installation art

Installation artwork has become more prevalent in the last few decades as artists incorporate larger formats and levels of immersion into art that extends far beyond viewing a painting on a gallery wall. They are usually site-specific and often involve the existing environment in some way to create a sensory and emotional experience (Pelowski et al., 2020, p. 4). An example of this is Olafur Eliasson's *The Weather Project* that exhibited at the Tate Gallery in London, England in 2003 (figure 5). Eliasson's installation was described this way:

> In this installation, *The Weather Project*, representations of the sun and sky dominate the expanse of the Turbine Hall. A fine mist permeates the space, as if creeping in from the environment outside. Throughout the day, the mist accumulates into faint, cloud-like formations, before dissipating across the space. A glance overhead, to see where the mist might escape, reveals that the ceiling of the Turbine Hall has disappeared, replaced by a reflection of the space below. At the far end of the hall is a giant semi-circular form made up of hundreds of mono-frequency lamps. The arc repeated in the mirror overhead produces a sphere of dazzling radiance linking the real space with the reflection. Generally used in street lighting, mono-frequency lamps emit light at such a narrow frequency that colours other than yellow and black are invisible, thus transforming the visual field around the sun into a vast duotone landscape. (Tate, n.d.)

Eliasson's *The Weather Project* was a completely immersive experience. In Jason Zeldes' documentary, *Abstract*, Eliasson talks about how people who visited the gallery spent significant amounts of time in this exhibit, often laying on the ground, dancing, doing yoga, or simply being still. (Zeldes, 2019, 14:50) (figure 6). Eliasson is not the only artist to embark on this large-scale type of installation. The artist Christo famously covered enormous spaces with fabrics, from his projects *Surrounded Islands* to *The Floating Piers*, and the works were so huge that an observer could not help but be encompassed by and immersed in the projects. Although each installation is different as they are dependent on the space in which they occur, and the artists vision, the definition that Matthew Pelowski et al. (2018) use in their article in Frontiers in Psychology, is clear for my purposes: installation art is "…defined by a process whereby an artist takes an existing space, often in public areas, in nature, or a room/gallery, and designs the entire environment to create conditions for a cohesive, unique, interactive experience" (p. 2). Interactive in this case is not indicating that the work is dependent on something the viewer does, but that their presence in the exhibit is a part of them interacting with it or experiencing it.

Figure 5. The Weather Project. Eliasson, O. (2003)

Figure 6. The Weather Project. Eliasson, O. (2003)

The appreciation I have for installation I believe stems from my stage background and a theatrical sense of being immersed in a story, as one would be if taking in a live theatre show. As soon as

a person steps into the theatre space, or once the curtain rises, the sound and lights and set design takes them into a visual and aural world that has been built to tell a story. This is the same paradigm on which installation art operates: every part of the space is designed to move an audience through a series of emotions and discoveries. The viewer is dropped into a space that has been wholly curated for their experience, essentially putting the viewer in the frame (Drouin-Brisebois, 2008, p. 37). As Townsend and Thomson (2015) describe it, the installation "…is physically entered by a viewer who 'animates' it; the work is incomplete without the viewer it addresses. An installation generally aims to elicit a direct embodied response from a viewer who is immersed in it as an experience" (p. 39). In this context, it is as if participants become actors in the midst of the art, as if they have stepped onto the stage and become a part of the story. Each viewer, however, brings with them their own personal experiences which will compel them to think a certain way, but when they enter this other realm, it gives them a chance to rethink, to empathize, to tell a different story from the one they brought in with them. Natalie LeBlanc talks about this idea through the lens of a "dream scene", a large art installation style work that envelops the participant into a dream-like environment affecting their psychological state (LeBlanc, 2019). She says:

> One of the predominant characteristics of 'a dream scene' is the first-hand experience that it provokes. Staged as a theatrical, immersive and experiential form of engagement, it is capable of heightening viewers' awareness to how objects or other components are positioned in space and time and it asks them to engage in a bodily response that may even trigger personal fantasies, individual memories or cultural associations. In this context, the viewer does not encounter a character on scene; rather, they become positioned in the scene as the protagonist of the story. As such, the viewer is faced with the uncertainties and challenges that a physical, social, cultural, emotional and even political situation may bring forth. (p. 565)

As an actor embodies a character and that character's ideas and traits, so the viewer/participant can enter the installation and have the freedom to think differently and experiment with a role they may not have considered before.

Drouin-Brisebois (2008) explains that "Installation art…opens out who we (think we) are" (p. 59) It gives the participant the opportunity to challenge their norms, to be confronted by other ideas. "It is not accident, then, that many younger artists following the impetus of the rights movements have drawn on the phenomenological effects of installation to explore the body/self in its ethnic, class, racial, sexual and other particularities" (p. 59). This can have a type of therapeutic effect in some cases. For example, the artist David Best was commissioned by a public art organization in the U.K. called Artichoke (Artichoke, n.d.), to create an art installation in the town of Derry/Londonderry in Ireland called *Temple* (figures 7 – 8). The piece was a 72-foot tall temple that was built out of 3D printed wood pieces that were in part designed and built by unemployed youth in the town. The temple was erected in a "no-man's land" area of the city between two rival areas, a place that had been unsafe before, and was chosen specifically to mark this issue of generational conflict. The public was invited to come and see the temple, leave messages or write on the wood walls, as a way of leaving something behind, and of moving on. After the seven days it was open, and over 60,000 people had visited, many leaving very

Figure 7. *Temple*. Inside View. David Best (2015).

Figure 8. *Temple*. Outside View. David Best (2015).

personal messages of forgiveness and farewell, the town gathered to light the temple on fire. In the short documentary (Aritchoke trust, 2015) about this project that Artichoke created, people described their contributions to the temple not as forgetting the pain of what had happened, but as letting go. This installation was not only a stunningly beautiful piece of architecture, but the interactivity that people had with it brought meaning, and they were able to be immersed in the experience physically and emotionally. Art has always been a form of self-expression, but artists are also finding ways to discuss and engage and explore the difficult issues of our day through art.

Installation art, like other money-generating art pieces, is often shown in large galleries like TATE in London, but unlike paintings or photographs or fragile sculptural works, installations can reach far beyond the walls of the gallery and into surprising places. Christo and Jeanne-Claude (Doss, 2017, p. 201) have used their installations this way, using their own money to present works, and not charging admission to visit these very public places that show their art. Of course, it would be somewhat impossible to charge money to see Rideau de Fer, a wall built of 89 oil barrels on a Paris street in 1962 (p. 199). This brings art to the masses, breaks down the barriers between the artist and the layperson, the elite and the common, and gives everyone an opportunity to share in artistic creation.

Other public installations are less imposing in size, but also allow people to interact with them outside of the gallery walls. In Montreal in 2011, a project called *21 Balancoires* (figure 9) was created in a public area beside a busy street. It was essentially a swing set that made music when people were swinging on it. The *Green Pedestrian Crossing* in China (2012) is another example of an art work in and for the public. In this case the people interacted with the art piece at times without even realizing they were doing so. In this project, a leafless tree was painted onto a canvas which was then laid across a pedestrian walkway. People unknowingly stepped through green eco-friendly paint that was on either side of the crossing, and their footsteps painted leaves onto the surface of the canvas (Prisco, 2016)

(figure 10). These are not only accessible installations, but an excellent example of the combination of interactive art with installation work .

Figure 9. *21 Balancoires*. Daily tous les jours (2011 – present).

Figure 10. *Green Pedestrian Crossing*. China Environmental Protection Foundation (2010).

There are many examples of artists who have interactive works, and many who do primarily installation work, but the work I intend to do is a combination of both of these things. There are few artists that are examples of this, but the work of Ai Weiwei certainly falls into this realm. He has done installations that do not require any specific interaction from the public, but others have been purposefully geared toward participation. He also combines interactivity, installation, and social justice art together in his work *@large*, an installation he did on Alcatraz Island in 2014 – 2015 (figure 11). The *@large* exhibit encompassed 4 sections of the former prison and used varying art forms in each area. One room had a giant Chinese dragon kite made from smaller kites on which were written quotes from people who had been exiled or imprisoned for their political beliefs, while another had large portraits of political exiles.

Figure 11. *Trace*. Part of @large. Weiwei (2014-2015).

Figure 12. *Refraction*. Part of @large. Weiwei (2014-2015).

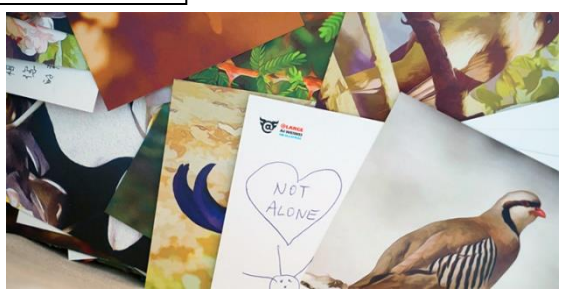

Figure 13. *Yours Truly*. Part of @large. Weiwei (2014-2015).

Other rooms had soundscapes, porcelain sculptures and there was one very large metal sculpture. Each installation spoke about incarceration and the tension between power, freedom, and imprisonment (Doss, 2017, p. 196). The most interactive part of the installation was the work titled *Yours Truly* (figure 12), in which visitors were invited to write letters to inmates that were political prisoners on cards that had been provided by the artist (For-site, n.d.). This marriage of multiple artistic ideas was highly successful in that:

- it raised awareness of political incarceration around the world by through viewing images and sculptures.
- it placed people inside an actual prison, giving the sense of being incarcerated and therefore somewhat playing the part or experience imprisonment for themselves.
- it offered visitors an opportunity for action that could be done in response to what they were feeling after going through the installation.

The *@large* exhibit shows that social justice or activist art can not only be compelling to view but can provide a space for movement toward change.

C. Social Justice art

To consider social justice art, we must define social justice. Misco & Shiveley (2016) state it succinctly in their discussion on social justice in the social studies classroom. They define it thus: "Social justice is about privilege and disadvantage as they are connected to racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of systematic oppression whereby differences serve to bring about inequality in access and normative ideas about the world" (p. 186). This is a weighty topic for anyone to look at, but social justice and art are not strangers to one another. Many artists have shown that art can be extremely effective in examining issues that are difficult to talk about and can bring things to light in a unique and impactful visual way that invites reflection. The artist JR does this through enormous photographs of faces,

Figure 14. *Giants*. JR. (2019)

Figure 15. *Graffiti*. Hassani. (n.d.)

Figure 16. *Miss Chief.* Monkman. (2019)

Figure 17. *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother*. Belmore. (1991)

Figure 18. *Go To Hell or Atlanta, Whichever Comes First.* Walker. (2015)

Shamsia Hassani through feminist street art, Kent Monkman through performance art, Rebecca Belmore through interactive sculpture, Kara Walker through silhouetted images, to name a few (figures 14 - 18). Right now, we are at a time of major flux in the world with the Covid-19 pandemic, and the impact it has on mental and physical health. We are also experiencing a historical time of protest, of the rising voices of the communities of Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC), and of (hopefully) reshaping our world into a fairer and more equitable place for all. Art can and is making statements right now. It can cross language barriers, gender barriers, and racial barriers. As Lee Anne Bell (2009) says, "we all have stories, and we are tuned to be listeners" (p. 108), and art can be a visual narrative that not only tells those stories, but can invoke empathy, and give imagery to emotions that have yet to find words.

Social justice art does two major things: it draws attention to the voices of people who have not been heard and gives them agency over their stories (Bell, 2009, p. 114); and it presents important social issues to the public, and therefore moves people toward change (Geiger Stephens, 2017, p. 40).

i. Voice & Agency

The act of storytelling through art can become an act of activism. The breakdown of barriers between people that lead toward socially just changes often come from one group hearing the personal narratives of the other. As researchers Oliveira and Vearey (2018) tell

us, “The mimetic retelling of life stories in a visual form can validate the experiences of participants, and the artefacts produced (such as photographs, exhibitions, and narratives) can inform, educate, remind, challenge, and empower all involved, including future public audiences” (p. 267). It is through this relationship to the artefacts that beliefs about others change, and those stories can be told through art.

The African American painter, Titus Kaphar (2020) says, “I believe there is beauty in hearing the voices of people who haven’t been heard” (00:04). Kaphar’s latest body of work depicts black women and their children and deals with trauma that they suffer, how their children are disappearing, and the struggle of those women to raise children in America (figure 19). His work tells his story and the story of the African American experience through portraits and paintings. His art is giving his story a way to be heard over the data and the misconstrued so-called facts about justice in America. Certainly there are many artists who have painted recent murals of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and others who have lost their lives at the hands of police in the United States. Even though these murals are often simply paintings of their faces, the context in which we live tells the viewer the larger story of which they are a part.

Figure 19. From series *From a Tropical Space*. Kaphar. (2019)

Holly Lesko and Thenmozhi Soundararajan (2015) talk about their work that involved holding digital storytelling workshops with members of their community in Appalachia who had experienced poor healthcare treatment, in order to share the stories with healthcare workers. The workshops gave the affected group a chance to express stories of their own encounters and be heard in an authentic way, rather than as told to healthcare workers through a set of data that had no personal connection

(pp. 102-103), since “we make sense of our world less through reasoned deliberation of facts and more through stories and symbols that frame the information we receive” (Duncombe, 2016, p. 119). Lesko and Soundararajan confirm “the key to building community and to facing and fostering change is to honor personal narratives and to provide context and space for individuals to come and share and know one another” (p. 106). The researchers took a group of people who would not have had a chance to explain their difficulties with the healthcare system to the perceived people in power over that system without the digital art workshops. This type of work can have a great impact as an installation piece for healthcare workers, since it can place the viewers into the world of the disadvantaged populations, demonstrating the victims’ perspective in a clear way that the workers would not otherwise see.

Oliveira & Vearey, (2018) describe the South African research group MoVE (Method: Visual: Explore), which worked on a photography project that enabled migrant sex workers to document their concerns about their safety in Johannesburg. Through public display of their work, they enabled a critical discussion to take place between viewers and participants (p. 269). The exhibit lasted a month and represented the lives of the sex workers who were involved in taking the photographs. In the end, the personal representations of these women had a strong impact:

> Through reflections, stories, and images, the participants in these projects not only challenge stereotypes and normative depictions of sex work and migration, they provide us with a new set of representations that widen and deepen our understanding of the diverse experiences of people who are migrants and who sell sex in South Africa. (Oliveira & Vearey, 2018, p. 284)

These participants were able to take control over how their story was told and have it publicly accessed in order to change the perception of others in the city. Kirakosyan and Stephenson (2015) claim that: “Overall, research has suggested that the arts can be a powerful tool in affecting relational changes among individuals in society, including memories, attitudes, beliefs and behaviours” (p. 212). Through a

project like this, the individuals influence these relational changes by owning their story and presenting in their own voices. They are in essence the curators of their story, and by placing this in a public installation context rather than a traditional gallery, the audience is not the art critic, but instead is the passer-by, the pedestrian who may then be influenced by the images to see their own world from the perspective of another.

For these artist participants, there is the hope that through public viewership of their stories, a safer world may be built for all.

ii. Social Justice: moving toward change

JR (2011), in his TED talk, asks, "Can art change the world?" (1:10). It can change the perspectives of people, and people can change the world. Duncombe (2016) describes the connection between art and world change this way:

> Activism moves the material world, while art moves a person's heart, body, and soul. The scope of the former is social, while the latter is individual. In fact, however, they are complimentary. The social is not some mere abstraction; society is composed of people, and change does not just happen. It happens because people make change. As such, the individual and the social are intertwined. (p. 118)

Art can nudge people toward an understanding in a way that a speech cannot do. Although there are many great orators in the world, art moves us beyond words and affects our emotions and engages our brains, not by surpassing analytical thought, but by complementing it. At times people can be surprised by what comes from seeing a piece of art that is both beautiful and challenging at the same time. "There's the aesthetic beauty of the work that . . . allows one to open their hearts to difficult conversations. Maybe you feel attracted to the beauty, and while compelled by the technique, the color, the form or composition, maybe the difficult conversation sneaks up" (Kaphar, 2020).

The difficult conversations that are prompted from art are valuable in moving towards a more just culture. Through dialogue we can be introduced to people beyond the stereotypes, and art like that of Titus Kaphar shows the stories of the people in the culture in which he was raised that are not often portrayed in the media or politics or education. The value of that, though not easily measured, is in the way that it shows us new perspectives from which to see the world around us (Duncombe, 2016, p. 118). Perception is truth, and if a new perspective about an issue can be seen by a viewer through a piece of artwork, by moving us emotionally and altering our perception (p. 118) then truth and justice become nearer to us. Without new knowledge society is not moved to act. If we do not understand how a system is broken, we will not look for reasons to fix it.

> Standpoint theory talks about the vantage point of being on the periphery and looking at the center, of recognizing the things that can be seen from the margins that cannot be seen from the center. (Bell, 2009, p. 122)

These peripheral stories need to be told, because once we see something in a new light, we cannot unsee it. Knowledge changes the very lens we use to view our world.

Social justice art is not only a way for people to perceive and understand new ideas and perspectives but also a way for artists to band together and organize in a safe way. The artists Aja Monet and Phillip Agnew from Miami, who run a community art space there, talk about art and organizing being a way to respond to their anger about what they were seeing in their community. Monet says that “art was an anchor, not an accessory to movement” (Monet & Agnew, 2018, 4:43). They provided a space and built a community of artists from many artistic disciplines that thrived on expression of truth of the experiences of marginalized communities, organizing through artistic means to speak about injustice. In a way this is a continual interactive art installation, a constant evolution of art and justice. For Monet and Agnew’s community, art gave them an outlet to express their frustration

and to encourage others to become a part of something that was making a difference in the world. Social justice art can be a banner under which people can gather.

When we are confronted with the non-dominant narratives of others through art, we may be uncomfortable, even upset by what is being presented. In my own experience, art that challenges my view often elicits strong emotions, unearthing fear or anger or sadness or shock. The new knowledge that confronts me compels me to question my perceptions and even if I do not immediately act on the information I learn, my response is sometimes simply to stay with the discomfort, to think, to dig deeper. After all, "It is the function of art to disturb, in the productive sense, to provide a counter story to the dominant story, to gnaw away at the foundations of the status quo" (Somers, 2001, as cited in Dewhurst 2008, p. 367). Art can be an opposing force to injustice.

3. Why are Interactive Social Justice Installations Good for Education?

Social justice education has become more commonplace in schools in recent years, in classroom study and leadership courses, and students' clubs such as the Gay Straight Alliance (https://gsanetwork.org). Teachers have been encouraged in their pedagogical practice to begin "guiding students toward critically discussing, examining, and actively exploring the reasons behind social inequalities and how unjust institutional practices maintain and reproduce power and privilege that have a direct impact on students' lives" (King and Kasun, 2013, as cited in Misco and Shiveley, 2016, p. 187). Since the art room is a place that caters to self-expression, it is the perfect place for students to research not only the issues that are affecting them and society at large, but also learn how to address them in a way that the medium they use purposefully reflects the message. Installation and interactive art that reflects these issues will give students opportunity to find new areas to display and break down the gallery/public barrier that is often in place. Students often ask if the work they are doing in the classroom will actually be useful in the world outside the classroom, since it can seem that an artwork can only be valuable in the world as a 'product', a thing to have, to see, to put on a wall or in a gallery. By engaging students

and audiences in active ways, installation and interactive art are well-suited to activism that goes beyond slogans and theories and discussion in a classroom to actually impacting people where they live. Ultimately, as educators a part of our role is to create space for student voices to be heard and these large works give them a way to express their ideas beyond the art studio and into the greater spaces beyond.

A. Social Justice Art Encourages Good Research Practices

In a world where people can access information online at any time, it is surprising how much false or simply one-sided information is shared and believed by the public. It is crucial that students learn to discern truthful information from false, and train themselves to see all sides of a story before making a judgement. In a recent redesign of British Columbia's curriculum, high-quality education includes "developing citizens who . . . are able to learn and think critically, and can communicate information from a broad base" (Curriculum Overview, n.d.). When asking students to take on a social justice project, whether it is about racial, gender, identity or environmental studies, as educators we must ensure that they are not simply making a project that depicts their own initial opinion about these issues. Eda Birsa (2018), an art educator, discusses the role of the teacher in cross-curricular art projects in her research. She says "[teachers] are encouraged to help students to develop critical thinking skills, foresight, and the ability to effectively search and acquire quality information, and hence knowledge" (p. 189). Students need to research as many aspects of their topic as possible in order to create art that speaks with integrity. Students of Marit Dewhurst (2011), an educator who was conducting a 14-week social justice art project with students in New York, "mined the Internet, popular media, and interactions with friends, classmates, and the public for "data" about their issues of injustice, a process that expanded their understanding of the common associations, contributing factors, and multiple perspectives about inequality and injustice" (p. 371). This research, combined with their own personal experiences and perspectives, gave those students a much more "nuanced view of the multiple factors

contributing to their topic of injustice – a view that often altered the choice of artistic materials and methods" (p. 372). Dewhurst understood that to create a strong work that addresses an issue of importance that has many sides, artists must look at as many perspectives on the issue as possible. The nature of artistic work, that it can be photographed and widely shared, makes this all the more important. When shared online, it can stay there indefinitely, so we must be aware of the impact of creating imagery regarding such potentially divisive issues.

In art, an important part of the research can focus on symbolism and the role it plays in artworks that are addressing cultural norms. Activist art can make use of the symbolism that exists, or subvert it in some way. A part of researching information about social issues and groups is understanding the importance of that group's symbols. When the artist Carey Newman (2019) put together a massive sculptural project consisting of Indigenous articles that were reminiscent or a part of the Residential School experience for many indigenous people, he called it Witness Blanket. He later wrote about the symbolism of the blanket:

> It evolved from my desire to both honour my father and tell the whole story. I wanted it to be a blanket for multiple reasons, but especially because blankets have particular significance in both of my Indigenous cultures— I needed to think of something I could make that wasn't just big in scale but was also a big- enough idea to contain such an enormous story. Kwakw a k a 'wakw and Salish. Blankets are used in different ways across cultures and traditions. In my Kwakw a k a 'wakw culture, blankets represent who we are. We stitch our symbols on them—our totems and family crests. We wear them in ceremony; they are part of our identity and they identify our lineage. In my Salish tradition, we use blankets to honour, uplift and protect people. If somebody has achieved something wonderful for themselves or the community, we acknowledge that by putting a blanket around them as a sign of honour or gratitude. If someone has gone through

> trauma or falls on hard times, we do the same thing as a gesture of protection. Expanding that to include the rest of the world, I think about how we wrap our babies in blankets when they're born, and how we often wrap our loved ones in blankets when they die. The blanket carries symbolic importance in almost every culture. Ultimately, I chose to make this work in the image of a blanket because it is a strong universal symbol. (Newman, 2019, p. 7)

Newman used a symbol that was an integral part of his cultural, but also part of a universal experience. His choice to use this symbol connected his story, his art, and the viewer of the work. Symbols can also be very distinct to a group of people, and students must be aware of the implications of using symbology that may offend rather than uplift certain groups. This is part of social justice education as well.

Figure 20. *The Witness Blanket*. Newman (2019)

A large part of research instruction is teaching students to give proper credit to their sources. While teaching in the art room, I have often seen students use photos or other artwork they have found on the internet as resource material for their own projects. While I agree that finding inspiration from other artists is valuable, most students I have spoken to about this are unaware of where the images came from or who initially created them. This

brings up questions of ownership over works, the ability to find the original source, and whether an artwork that is inspired by another or one that is copied is indeed plagiarizing or is a creative re-telling. The line between inspiration and appropriation is a necessary discussion in the classroom, though it may not have a distinct answer. In a more clear case, I recently had a conversation with a friend who applied for a job as a city planner, and when she looked over the city's website, many of the photographs they used on their site were photos that she had taken in the process of previous jobs, artistic and otherwise, and had documented them as her own work. She was never given credit for them on the city site and not asked permission for their use. The internet is rampant with such infringements and as educators, part of what we must teach is to honour the first artist when using their work. Crediting sources will not only benefit artists, but also keep students from breaking copyright laws or plagiarizing visual work. Visual plagiarizing has massive monetary costs to artists who are selling their work (Academy of Art University, n.d.) and can also have a cost to students who may be accused of plagiarism in school or university work, or in their future professional lives. Aside from the legal impact, if students keep documentation of the artists who are inspiring them, they can go back to those images continuously for further inspiration and follow any new works by the artists. This is an excellent practice for artists and students alike, requiring commitment to documentation that can also help in the development of ideas over time. In terms of social justice art research, it is even more important to cite sources, as artists who are from marginalized groups must be represented by bringing their work to the forefront and acknowledging their contributions to the field.

B. Social Justice Installation Art Cultivates Cross-curricular Integrations of Learning

In a school setting, there is much opportunity for students who study social justice art to embrace a cross-curricular study of the issue they wish to portray. Schools, at least in British Columbia, have worked to align our education system with the history and values of Indigenous peoples (Indigenous Knowledge and Perspectives in K-12 Curriculum, n.d.), and promote inclusive ideologies

through SOGI 123 (sogieducation.org, n.d.) that support our LGBTQ+ students and others. Our curriculum has incorporated Indigenous ways of learning and knowing, and First People's History, which examines history from the Indigenous people's perspective (Studio Arts 3D 11, n.d.). Many schools also have an Aboriginal Education Co-ordinator who can assist students with finding information that has not previously been taught in school, or put them in touch with Indigenous role models from the local area. Indigenous history classes, SOGI resources, English and Social Studies classes specifically during Black History Month, and even Theatre, are all resources in the school that are outside of the art room but coincide with social justice narratives and histories. Research shows that the "cross-curricular approach lends itself to building relationships between the learned content or topics themselves within various disciplinary realms" (Scott & Twyman, 2018, p. 18) making the content more memorable by placing it in a broad context, and more relevant for problem solving and connecting information. For example, if a student is considering a project about modern slavery, they may begin with the history of African slaves in Canada, and the history teacher can be a resource to help them find information and research on this topic. This may uncover a correlation between slavery of African people and the enslavement of Indigenous peoples, leading them to speak with the Indigenous co-ordinator for more resources. The political climate in Canada and around the world at the time is also part of this narrative, which could bring the student to study government and colonization through Social Studies and also lead to a look at current affairs and the high number of Indigenous people being victimized in this way. The English teacher could offer help with written pieces on this subject from novels to memoirs to journals, and the film or theatre teacher could offer resources such as documentaries and play productions that deal with the same subject matter. Art imagery is also found in every historical period and the student could research imagery about slaves and slavery and look at images created by enslaved people to help give context to their study. Through this type of study, cross-curricular learning benefits the art of the student by giving a more rounded perspective of an issue. It also can assist learning in the other classes

from which information is being gained because students are now creating imagery related to the information.

Typically, installations involve a variety of materials (not just one, like a painting), so installations are, in a way, cross-curricular just inside the studio, therefore, the other type of research that students may need if they are developing interactive installation work is instruction and information on materials that are not always found in the art classroom. In the art world and larger community, often installation work requires the cooperation of construction builders, scientists, and engineers. In Christo and Jeanne Claude's work, *Floating Piers* (MacGregor, 2016) (figure 21 and 22), they constructed a bridge made of 100,000 metres of cloth, attached to 220,000 interlocking high-density polythene cubes, and 160 anchors. The creation of this installation necessitated the hiring of a project manager, operations manager, diver, cinematographer, security, and the fabric needed to be sewn together, the cubes made and screwed together on site, the anchors put into place by divers, and the budget determined and followed by Christo. I would not anticipate a student in a classroom to work at this scale, but a smaller installation may require the use of textiles, structural pieces like wood or metal, lighting or sound design, and the like. These elements require research and possibly cooperation of other students and teachers, such as metal and woodshop teachers for a project to be realized. This is how tactile cross-

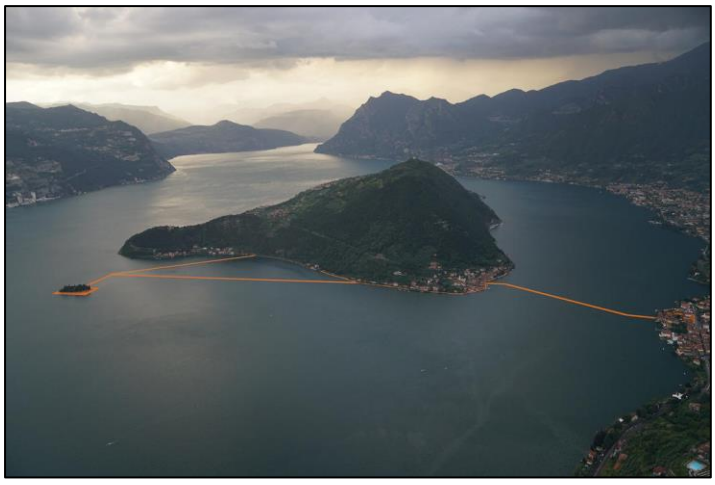

Figure 21. *The Floating Piers* – Island and walkway view. Christo and Jeanne Claude. (2016)

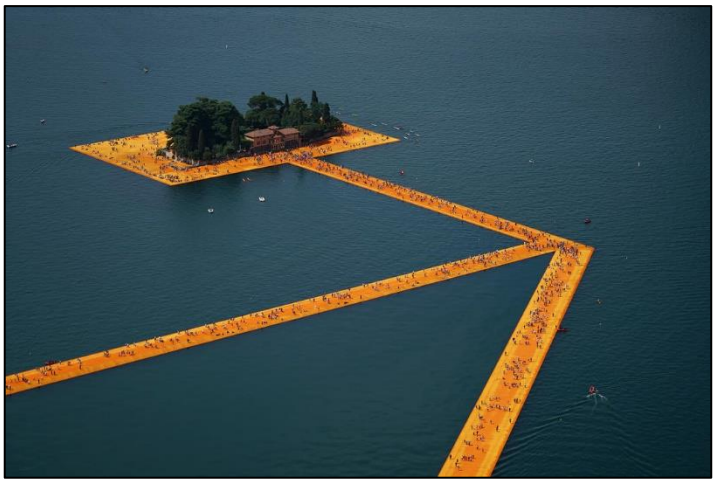

Figure 22. *The Floating Piers* – Closer view of walkway. Christo and Jeanne Claude. (2016)

curricular learning can be achieved through art projects and has the potential to lead educators to look at collaborative methods of teaching in order to assist student learning.

C. Medium as the Message

i. Connecting the Medium to Messaging

Throughout history, art has gone through, and continues to go through, many stages of meaning making. Art has "inform[ed] the way human experiences and events have shaped our world through the evolution of science, mathematics, philosophy, and sociocultural and political climates" (Scott & Twyman, 2018, p. 16). Art can also be experienced purely for art's sake – that is, without messaging and simply for enjoyment. However, social justice art works inherently have some type of message, whether it is a call to action or only a commentary on a social ill. Much of the school classroom is guided by modernism, which prioritizes the exploration of the medium over any messaging (Gude, 2004, p. 6), but as street artists like Banksy (figure 23) show us, messaging is happening outside the classroom already and finding its way back into galleries as well. There is a challenge presented to students who create social justice artworks to include not only the story or message they want to express, but the inclusion of a medium that will aid in that expression. Those boundaries can force artists to think outside of their known comfortable media and find more creative solutions to artistic problems. When there is a message in the work, the artist must consider how that work will be presented; How it will have the strongest impact and how the medium can serve the message? As Dewhurst (2011) says,

Figure 23. Graffiti art of girl patting down soldier. Banksy. (n.d.)

> As a process of learning, translating requires activist artists to critically reflect on the intentions of their artwork and match those with the appropriate artistic tools and techniques that have emerged from a deeper understanding of the issue at hand. (p. 372)

After having done the aforementioned research, students then must merge the ideas with the materials. Meaning making in art requires communication between the artist and the viewer, and attention to this communication is a developed skill. In Ai Weiwei's 2014-2015 @Large exhibit, in one room he filled bathtubs, toilets and sinks with tiny porcelain flowers that he had made by hand (figure 24). By the juxtaposition of this delicate work in a corroding prison environment, he "intimated the possibilities of resistance and survival under intolerable conditions" (Doss, 2017, p. 218). Had the flowers been created in metal, or material equally damaged by the environment surrounding it, the effect would have been quite different. In that part of the installation, he chose to highlight survival with tiny, intricate pieces of porcelain. In the same way, "to translate an idea into an image or object, learners must reflect on what aspects of the idea they will convey and determine what symbols, colors, and forms might best communicate that idea to another person" (Dewhurst, 2011, p. 372). This requires students to understand elements and principles of art and to dive into artistic expression using the most effective tools. The art teacher can approach this by first teaching design principals and applying them to the artworks, or by looking first at the themes that students are working with, and allow that content to dictate which medium is used and how to use it. Scaffolding design information at the beginning of a class term will help the students later to incorporate varying techniques and materials. This way they are not only are they furthering their understanding of how art and messaging can work cooperatively, but their knowledge of art processes increases because it must if they want to get the most compelling work possible.

Figure 24. *Blossom* part of @large. Weiwei (2014 - 2015)

ii. Understanding Manipulation of Materials and Messaging

Thus, when creating art with a message, artists must also be conscious not only of how it is received but also the material used in creating it. If an artist is creating a textile piece on greed in the corporate clothing industry and then finds that the materials they are using came from sweat shops, then the message is lost, and the artist loses credibility. This serves to educate students on the manipulation of advertising in the marketplace as well as in art. When they begin to look more objectively at what we use as products in the world, it becomes part of a greater education about the environment, fairness in business, and the sustainability of our current economic climate. When these contentions are uncovered it can lead to an understanding of how marketing can capitalize on selling a product with imagery that contradicts the message it is promoting. Many women's clothing companies, for example, have written messages in their stores or online about how women should love and accept their bodies, but their promotional material only has models of one size that is nowhere near the average size of a woman. Education like this is invaluable as students are constantly bombarded by these types of images. Once they are aware of this pretense, they have an opportunity to apply their values to what they are learning. Can they live with the hypocrisy they see, or feel the need to change? Either way they will likely recognize it more readily and avoid doing the same thing in their own art, or at least be aware of the dichotomy.

iii. Understanding Manipulation of Spaces and Messaging

The manipulation of the public through art is done not only through materials, but also in the creation of public spaces. When creating an installation work, space is paramount, as it is what invites and choreographs viewer engagement and invests the exhibited materials with meaning through the context that links them with the rest of the world. If art is to have messaging then that must take the design of space into account. For example:

> Staging *The Floating Piers* in an exceptionally beautiful landscape, Christo directed visitors to think about mobility, freedom and the enticing transcendence of walking on water. The project's specific siting in Lake Iseo was aimed at redirecting their visual gaze to new, or expanded, views of space and place; the floating walkways were intended as conduits that, quite literally, encouraged feelings of awe. (Doss, 2009, p. 209)

Christo built an installation that inspired an expansive view by choosing a place to house this exhibit that would encourage that perspective. The same could be done in the opposite direction, creating an enclosed area to cause a feeling of oppression. For example, I designed, but did not yet build, an installation to work alongside my Separation project that would require the participant to walk through a narrow series of hallways and turnstiles in order to separate people before reaching the end of the installation space. The corresponding artwork would depict fences and families being separated, and I hoped to instil some of that same apprehension in the participants that would have been felt by the families to whom this was actually happening at the border. When we are conscious of how space can affect our mental state, we become more aware of how the style of a building can impact us, the light in a space, the colour that determines an emotional state for the viewer, and we can think of design as a social construct. Pelowski et al. (2018) say of installation design: "by foregrounding certain features, installations may serve to force an awareness or deeper consideration … individuals may even come to deeper appreciation by juxtaposing visual and proprioceptive sensations" (p. 3). Marina Abramovic used this technique in her work, troubling the divide between gallery viewer and participant, offering a personal experience with an artist rather than viewing their work from the outside. She often did very vulnerable performance art within the gallery space that had very clear boundaries, crossing over that line and causing the participant to question the purpose of the space. She speaks of her work in The Artist is Present by saying "So you can observe this as a kind of stage for experience. Or you can really enter that space and take active participation, which actually bring you much closer to the artist,

and this presence, and to your own experience" (MOMA, n.d.). She uses the space to examine the very idea of observation or participation.

Using this tactic in social justice art, students can design elements to move the participant towards their objective. If students are working within the school walls, they can recognize the institutional quality of space, the need to house many people in one area and how that prompts directionality of rooms for learning and also consideration for safety. However, schools can also be a place where students can find their own space within or around those walls to carve out a sense of identity and at times, resistance. A student, for instance, could paint a mural about freedom in an oppressive feeling hallway, or create an installation of two rows of lockers that get closer together as a person walks between them, and exhibit this in a public area where people outside the student body could experience this tension. Space can be used to clarify a message, then, by showing the art in an environment that is congruent to the messaging, or by placing it in a place that is in opposition to the message, which highlights it in a different way, through juxtaposition.

iv. Knowing Your Audience

The choices that the artists make when creating installation and interactive art is somewhat dependant on the consideration that they need others to interact with it for it to be fully activated as a living artwork, because of the "designed enveloping nature of the medium, which coincides with an expectation for the presence of a perceiver who, by engaging within the space and interacting with all senses, in a way completes the artwork" (Pelowski et al., 2018, p.3). A student must think with cross-disciplinary creativity to determine how to present a potentially difficult topic through art, but also make it inviting enough that a stranger would want to interact with it. Pelowski et al. (2020), in reference to installation work, say "…the better one's ability to feel into an object, the deeper, the more sincere, and the more pleasurable one's engagement" (p. 1). By pleasurable, it does not necessarily mean enjoyment, but that the participant desires to continue to take part in the installation. It is necessary

then, to know who the audience is for which the work is being created. That way it can be directed towards that person or group of people.

The key concept is that space is meaningful, and any one viewer will come into an installation space with their lifetime of experiences that will merge with the artist's installation to become the meaning of their understanding of the art. As an installation artist, a student must be able to recognize their own sense of the installation space, and then, use their research to step back and understand it from the perspective of others. An installation that will be seen by one class group may look different from one that will be shown in public and be open to anyone. Different considerations need to be made to prompt engagement with the intended audience. Though this participation can never be guaranteed, there is a line that the artist must tread that does not water down their message but makes it palatable in some sense so that the viewer will choose to interact with it. The artist may need to use the element of surprise in their work to draw in the spectator to become a participant, and they may need to make compromises determined by the audience or space. Pelowski, et al. (2018) explain this in an article about Eliasson's work on *Baroque, Baroque*:

> For example, a space may be designed to slowly reveal new features. Artworks may also require some acclimation or dawning awareness of different senses. Artists may also anticipate juxtapositions which could lead to mixed (positive and negative) or changed response. One might feel an initial discomfort or oppression, say an overly bright light as in Eliasson, or disgust from being confronted by an embalmed animal (Hirst), followed by relief, interest, or aesthetic appreciation. (p. 3)

Adapting to space and audience challenges student artists to narrow down what it is the pivotal part of their art, which lines up with BC curriculum learning standards to have students "intentionally select and combine materials, processes, and technologies to convey ideas" (Studio Arts 3D 11, n.d.). Through this

they can recognize their limitations, but also determine where the boundaries around social justice must push those fenceposts out.

D. Considering New Avenues for Art

As students look outside of the classroom walls, and traditional gallery or exhibition spaces for display, art takes on a new dimension. Installations can take place anywhere and are generally site-specific and move students' work to a public sphere. If instead of only displaying art in and around the school, students are given the choice to expand to locations beyond the school grounds, they can create atypical art pieces, not commonly found in a gallery, but carve out their own style. Installation art is large and encompassing and can give the student the prospect of moving out of the institution of the school and into a public space, potentially creating a space for dialogue with the community at large, rather than being limited to the school community. Rebecca Belmore's work, *Ayumee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking To Their Mother* (Hill, 2008, pp. 164-171) (figure 25), is a stunning vocal amplifier, which is 256 x 206 cm in size, made of plywood, fibreglass, resin, leather and plastic. Her sculptural piece became a participatory installation, travelling to sites across Canada. As a "site and purpose-specific, sculptural work, it was created to mobilize, activate and engage a broader community of artists and activists to address to address the Earth, and to speak up for ,and to, the land" (Hill, 2008, p. 152). As an installation work, Belmore's piece is materially beautiful with carefully designed patterns and thoughtfully crafted fabrication that can be experienced playfully. But the object's scale and its installation are is also meant to humble the user by making her aware of her scale in relation to

Figure 25. *Ayum-ee-aawach Oomama-mowan: Speaking to Their Mother.* Belmore (2014)

the immenseness of nature. Belmore shows that displaying work does not have to be limited to the classroom, but can be moved into the world and even, in the case of this megaphone, travel.

Interactive installation work does not exist at the expense of traditional art forms. These types of projects often have the elements of art that are traditionally taught in the classroom. For example, in Kent Monkman's *Boudoir de Berdashe* (Drouin-Brisebois, 2008, pp. 172-179) (figure 26), the work itself is a life-size installation of a tipi with furniture, rugs, and video footage playing on screens. It may seem that this does not look like an art piece, but Monkman uses the elements of art in its design. His fabric tipi shows artistic choices in colour, texture, and pattern, and inside the piece he uses space, balance, and symmetry in his work. Both Belmore and Monkman's works also exist not only in a visual sense, but also in particular space and time. Belmore's travels through different places and spaces, and Monkman's exists in the world of a tipi, but both are reaching back in time to connect with the land and history that has come before, while simultaneously holding the hand of the current moment. Students can examine their own work through all of these elements. As we teach them art elements and principles, we can also encourage them to think beyond a two-dimensional painting, and discover how these ideas can work in sculptural pieces that push the limits of space, time, size and imagination.

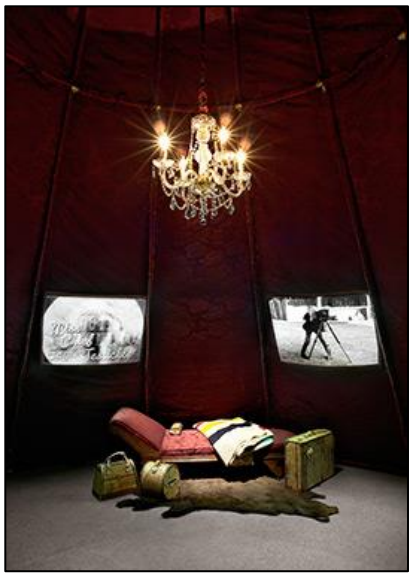

Figure 26. *Boudoir de Berdashe*. Monkman (2008).

Pushing the boundaries of artworks and gallery spaces is one way to begin to break down the barrier between those who have access to galleries and those who do not. Even in participatory artworks, if they are housed in non-public spaces or cater to an elite gallery spectatorship, then the divide between those who are included and excluded, whether artists or participants, is still present (Beech, 2010, p.25). To create installations that are site specific can mean moving outside of these walls

and inviting viewers to a more level ground so that anyone from any socioeconomic background can engage with the art. Diana Boros (2012) defends this idea when she says “art, I have been arguing, continues, and should be actively supported in this, to move out of its assigned spaced in museums, galleries, symphony halls, and theatres in order to inject its knowledge into the public spaces of our everyday lives” (p. 100). Students come from every type of social grouping, and for them to have access to art, especially art that addresses their issues, is pertinent for their engagement with the work and their learning about the impacts possible through art. If teachers look to present student work in public, but only in gallery spaces, that choice, too, limits the number of people who will see it and engage with it. The placement of the work in public can not only give a boost to the students, but also present art to new audiences around the world.

E. The Role of Educators as Facilitators of Student Discourse

Social issues are not new, but ideas about racism, sexism, gender bias and more are passed down through society, whether that education comes formally or informally through parenting, schooling, or media. In our increasingly mobile world community, our schools house students from all walks of life and backgrounds, a microcosm of multiculturalism. As difficult as it can be to talk about taboo issues in school, it is a place where discussion can be curated to include dissent and agreement, and if the educator is careful to consider the climate of the classroom, then it can even help students pursue the “revaluation of values, laws, or policies resulting in a more justice-oriented and democratic local, national, and global context” (Misco & Shiveley, 2016, p. 189). Teachers can demonstrate democracy and critical thinking in the classroom (Freire, 1970, p. 79), and due to the diversity in our classes, we can carefully introduce the hard topics, create space for discussion and reflection, hear the stories of our student community that may not be typically heard in education or society. Educators have an opportunity to move students to greater understanding of one another and ultimately “. . . seek[s] to dismantle systems of inequality to create a more humane society” (Dewhurst, 2011, p. 365).

i. Providing a Safe Space to Hear Student Voices

By its nature, art is personal and to share art can require great risk. Educators must be cautious to develop a sense of safety in the classroom before approaching the task of open discussion. However, if that can be done through careful consideration of topic choices, and a prior scaffolding through the experience and discussion of work that prepares students for critical reflection, then they will be able to approach potentially controversial subjects with respect for each other.

The opportunity for students to share what is important to them and then discuss the stories that affect them personally ". . . can encourage agency and empowerment among those engaged in [the storytelling] . . ."(Lesko and Soundararajin, 2015, p. 100). Youth hear themselves referred to by adults in the media and from lecterns, but to have their own voice heard gives them a chance to speak a truth that adults may not be privy to otherwise. Dewhurst (2011) addresses this in speaking about the context in which social justice art is made. She says, "Artists creating work form a social location in which they are systematically silenced or ignored may experience the very act of making art as an act of counter-hegemonic action" (p. 373). Discussions in the classroom about issues related to social justice, and their impact on artworks can be one step in students' advocating for themselves. These class discussions pave the way for ". . . arts hav[ing] the capacity to evoke sympathetic awareness, awakening a dialogue" (Bresler, 2006, p. 61) that can move outside of the classroom and into their lives.

Students hearing each others' stories in the context of a safe, collaborative classroom can create space for empathy to build and a camaraderie to be established. Jeff Karabanow and Ted Naylor (2015), researchers who worked with homeless teens in Canada and Guatemala to make a documentary, say of the collaborative experience: "through this process of creating art, there emerged a sense of belonging, a 'symbolic space' or 'culture of hope' environment" (p. 71). Karabanow and Naylor had the participants share their stories, and work together to find similarities and differences, and document them in film. This opened a door for each person to empathize with others, to find that safe space together. Through

the sharing of stories with one another, trusting the group, and helping each other work through problems relating to their stories "[they] could see how the project enabled the creation of a community space that proved to be empowering by increasing participants' individual and collective sense of their own capacities" (p. 76). The understanding that comes from open dialogue can create a collective sense of safety, and a desire to make art that increases the agency of all involved.

ii. Opening Dialogue for Students to Question the Status Quo

Critical thinking involves questioning. As we teach students to think critically, we must also teach them to question their place (and ours) in the world around them. As Dewhurst (2011) points out, ". . . [the student's] social location will inevitably dictate her very ability to create work" (p. 374). Before we tackle social justice in our community, we must first comprehend our social situation within the community, whether that is the classroom, the school, or the public. Art educator Alexandria W. Zettler (2010) explains it this way:

> …I am interested in placing art into the socio-cultural and political context of my own experience. What fascinates me is how critical analysis and authentic problem solving relate to the here and now…I encouraged my students to consider specific problems related to their personal socio-cultural, political, or emotional issues…the objective was to use personal context as a source of power in their works. (p. 141)

Students can start creative exploration by looking at the issues that affect them and their lived experience, and, through research, can develop a sense of the sometimes very grey areas of politics and economics that surround social issues. This work can help them discover the societal conventions that exist, and become conscious of their own position within those norms. Once students are able to pinpoint what constitutes the status quo, they can trouble it through art.

As teachers we must also be aware of hidden curriculum and our place in the power relationship of the school and society. Awareness of our position can help us to see our role in perpetuating

injustices, however large or small. We must be willing to acknowledge this if we are to teach students how to engage with social justice art. It is also important to know that addressing these issues do not necessarily mean changing them instantly. Dewhurst (2011) says "… the practice of action and reflection is an intertwined practice of social justice education—wherein the goal is not necessarily to solve a particular problem, but to participate in a constant cycle of praxis that results in social transformation." (p. 370).

iii. Guiding Students to Critical Thinking and Communication

The educator's role goes further than teaching subject content. "In the contemporary school, teachers are expected to teach students so as to prepare them for life" (Birsa, 2018, p. 189). Social justice art is an excellent way to introduce students to the world outside of their immediate circle. We hope, as teachers, that students will leave school with more empathy for others and a more critical way of thinking about the world. Moving past only thinking about bringing awareness to and exploring solutions for social issues, and progressing into making/creating is "liberation in praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it" (Freire, 1970, p. 79). Working on a social justice art project can be an opportunity to mentally and then physically process the change they want to see.

Through the studio process of turning ideas into imagery and installation, students are moving from the intellectual to the effectual. The research gives them a starting point, but the move from there into the designing and fabricating visual and kinesthetic artwork with a space and audience in mind gives them a framework on which to establish a way for the participants to connect with the artwork. The artwork then can exist in "the unique juxtaposition of affect and cognition, caring and distance, that renders making and the viewing of art dialogic and transformative [and therefore] mobilized towards empathic understanding" (Bresler, 2006, p. 54). Since the students have gone through the process of researching, reflecting, and designing, they can demonstrate this for the viewers in such a way that the

installation will prompt those viewers towards understanding and hopefully action as well. Townsend and Thomson (2015) address this idea in their project with *Get Wet*, an art installation project that involved several students, artists, researchers, and museum workers. The project was meant to educate people about water use and conservation, and this began with each group member bringing in art objects that represented stories about water, sharing these stories, and combining the objects to create an installation. When the installation was complete the group discussed common values that arose through the process, and the questions that were raised, and those themes became the basis for the development of school-based projects about water conservation. Ultimately Townsend and Thomson (2015) said that the "artists thus expected that their provocative installation would not only provoke dialogue and political action, but would also support unknowing – and an open-ended exploration of what was important, why and what was to be done" (p. 39). It was through the stories of each person that an understanding of the issue was developed. Each person had a unique perspective to offer.

To deeply understand varying perspectives on an issue and proceed to communicate that to others is a skill that students can carry forward into their lives. As the BC curriculum states: "Communicating provides a bridge between peoples' learning, their personal and social identity, and the world in which they interact" (Communication, n.d.).

4. My Project

The project I am doing now is in response to the uprising of voices in the Black Lives Matter movement that has been happening in recent years, and in earnest since the tragic death of George Floyd. The project, *inVisible*, is a visual image of Canadian silhouettes with transcriptions of some of the narratives of BIPOC people in Canada and their experiences of racism that I have found in news articles and people's personal posts online. My goal was to interview people in person, but I found it to be problematic to ask others, especially strangers, to share difficult stories with me in the midst of what is

already an emotionally challenging time for people of colour. I chose to incorporate stories that had already been made public as to prevent further trauma to those I was endeavoring to support.

There are several ideas incorporated into this piece. The overarching idea is that racism does exist in Canada even though many people of privilege do not see it and therefore deny its existence. I want to shed light on the actual stories of racist experiences people have had to show people that we in Canada are not immune to this and we must acknowledge it in order to be a part of changing it. I believe that people are unlikely to change their minds about an issue based on data or news, but are more likely to change through relationship and through hearing stories of the people who are around them.

Figure 27. *inVisible* lit stories. Loszchuk (2020).

This project is an installation consisting of 4 – 4x8 foot sheets of maple plywood that have been whitewashed. The boards will stand vertically, leaning on a concrete wall. The plywood sheets can stand together as one long work or can be separated to create 4 distinct pieces. Each piece of plywood has 2 or 3 painted silhouettes on it, and 1 to 2 of those images has a written story around

Figure 28. *inVisible* – interacting. Loszchuk (2020).

it. I had planned to write the stories inside of the figures, but the black paint did not react well to the markers, so I had to adjust my plan. The stories are first person accounts of racism experienced by people of colour in Canada in recent years, and will be written in invisible ink and in a graphic design style. These stories are only visible with a black light flashlight shining on the lettering. I chose to use written stories because although they are personal narratives, they are also the narratives of many people in our country, and I am keenly aware that they are not the stories that are often heard by the majority of people. After all,

> Stories serve multiple functions. For one thing, stories are both individual and collective, especially on issues such as race. While in a way it is my voice telling my individual story, that story comes out of a context that shapes the kind of stories I can tell. This also applies to the kinds of stories that I can hear. (Bell, 2009, p. 108)

Canadians come from all different backgrounds, but in my experience, I have found white Canadians do not hear the stories of others, and therefore do not think there are any injustices happening. Not hearing these stories can come from a purposeful choice not to listen, from the absence of the stories presented in media or lack of personal experience, a deficient understanding of others, or other learned prejudices. I chose silhouettes for this reason to represent all Canadians, not any particular group, because people will sometimes say they "don't see colour", even though there is a vast difference between the way the white culture and the BIPOC cultures are treated. By ignoring colour, white people of privilege can continue pretending that there is no difference in the way others are treated.

I chose to use invisible ink for the stories because the dominant culture has often ignored these stories, whether purposefully or not, but that has not erased the experiences of people of colour. Choosing not to see or hear these stories removes them from the surface, but it does not eradicate them. As the dominant group, white people have to choose to look for these stories. We must put in the effort of listening and seeing, and that is why I have the flashlights. They are a purposeful tool. They are

needed to find what is there but not being overtly seen. They are the metaphor for people who choose to put the effort in to see what has seemed hidden. The reason stories are so important in this project is because:

> Stories invite engagement in ways that a dry presentation of statistics does not. Stories also implicate us in a way that clarifies connections, that embodies the connection to what we are studying. Story- telling, as well as any aesthetic engagement, helps bring us closer to issues that are usually seen as out there and separate from us, or that we are afraid to see as part of our lives, such as racism. (Bell, 2009, p. 109)

The maple plywood pieces were chosen specifically because the maple leaf is the emblem of our Canadian flag and Canadian imagery is so closely linked with the maple tree. Placing the silhouettes on this surface is placing them in the very fabric of Canadian society. The whitewashed background is a reference to the whitewashing of history that we are taught in Canadian schools. As the Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines it, whitewashing is**:**

> to alter (something) in a way that favors, features, or caters to white people: such as to portray (the past) in a way that increases the prominence, relevance, or impact of white people and minimizes or misrepresents that of non-white people. (n.d.)

Since history is told by the dominant culture, once the European settlers had power in Canada, their version of events was told in a way that utterly neglected the stories of Indigenous people and that whitewashed not only Indigenous history but also stories of other people of colour.

Lastly, I initially designed the plywood boards to have a visible structure. For this installation the structure will be the concrete wall of an unfinished building. The structure that holds them in place represents the systemic racism that is in Canada that allows white settlers more opportunity, less fear, and more control. However, although the boards will be placed on the very foundation of a building, like the foundation of our country, there is hope in that we are still building and there is time for change.

There is an option for participants to write their own story around one of the silhouettes. This can be a very personal experience, and certainly will change the artwork. In this way, the art becomes a community endeavor, a place for shared stories, and a gathering of truth telling for observers and participants alike. If a person is moved to respond, they have a place in which to do so, impacting the initial work and I would argue, imbuing it with more depth of understanding and experience.

Similar to these artists like Kent Monkman, I hope that "in these sculptures and installations there is an emphatic declaration of the role of the participant, which becomes as, or even more important than the authorial role of the artist, and indeed, as significant as the very art object itself" (Drouin-Brisebois, 2008, p. 26). I want to create not only space for learning and understanding, but also communicating.

I endeavor to collaborate with other artists and cultural groups in the future to install this again with more panels and stories. My desire is that the stories that are told to the public through visual imagery and the "…artifacts produced (such as photographs, exhibitions, and narratives) can inform, educate, remind, challenge, and empower all involved, including future public audiences (Leavy, 2009, as cited in Oliveria & Vearey, 2018, p. 267). I hope that, as Oliveria & Vearey (2018) say, that the use of visual and narrative tools can confront stereotypes and "encourage reflection by those participating in the visual experience" (p. 267). To have an art installation that allows people to stop and reflect on their own prejudices and can even "catalyze space for community change" (Lesko & Soundararajin, 2015, p. 100), would be my greatest wish for this piece as I imagine it would be for any artist creating social justice art.

I recognize that there is an inherent problem with a project like this, in that I am a settler, a white privileged person who has not been treated poorly because of my race. However, it is my hope that by using my platform of art creation, I can amplify the truth of the voices of others through my art, even though their stories do not reflect my own experience. I also realize I have much work to do to continue

to listen to and amplify the voices of the BIPOC community, and I want to push through the difficulty and the mistakes I am sure to make, and do my best to use art as a way forward.

5. Critique

My reservations regarding my own project have led me to look further into critiquing the role of educators and social justice artists. Since justice and oppression describe the use and abuse of power determined by positions of authority, I must look at who is holding the power in my own work. This is very uncomfortable to address but necessary if I am to understand, or help other educators to understand our inherent power, and the steps we need to take to build just classrooms, and ultimately a just world.

As a cis-gender, white, middle-class woman, I have to ask myself, "what do I really know about injustice?" Dewhurst (2011) considers the "three key attributes of social justice education [to be]: (a) it is rooted in people's experiences, (b) it is a process of reflection and action together, and (c) it seeks to dismantle systems of inequality to create a more humane society" (p. 365). As much as I want to reflect and act, I am aware that my experience is vastly different from those who have been marginalized in our society. Do I have a right to address these issues through my art? Even as I ask that question, I wonder how I am making social justice about me. It is a complicated, multi-layered issue. I would like to look at this critique in terms of asking questions, as I suspect that there are not many clear answers and this critique will simply unearth more questions.

A. Is interactive Social Justice Art Simply Reinforcing the Power Dynamic of the Culture?

As an artist and educator, I recognize that the stories I believe need to be told to further the aims of social justice, and my process of using interactive installations, are problematic for the very reason that they are not my stories. Since I, as a teacher, and in a position of power in the classroom,

and as a white person, have an assumption of privilege in society, is it moral for me to continue this type of art? Does it simply appropriate stories of others and continue to keep me in the position of power I am in? Lee Anne Bell (2009) acknowledges the difficulty of this situation when she discusses an arts-based storytelling project about racism that she was involved in that was meant to build social justice curriculum. A part of the work tackles how we look at stock stories about race, the stories that reinforce stereotypes and the status quo (p. 111), and how teachers can be complicit in supporting them. She says:

> We also look at the juxtaposition of stock stories in terms of how teachers are socially situated in relation to their students (by race, ethnicity, class, language, gender, etc.), particularly in terms of white teachers in urban schools, and in terms of socioeconomic class. We also explore how teachers can resist those stock stories that prevent them from really listening to their students' stories, as well as the history of stories by others who have fought for justice, so that they can draw on these resistance stories. (p. 115)

Bell is giving educators a way to seek the deeper stories about cultures with which white teachers may be unfamiliar. Without doing this research, the work of social justice art loses its power, which stems from the experiences of those who have been victimized. Given that "social justice education states that social change is an emergent process that begins with real life experiences" (Dewhurst, 2011, p. 376), educators without that experience must step aside and allow the participants to share their own stories. This states the case for co-operative creation of art rather than the artist/teacher working alone without the embodied knowledge of the issues. However, there is also a danger in participation that is not completely equal. David Beech (2010) addresses this in his book, *Searching for Art's New Publics*, when he states that "participation, although disguised as a generous shrinking of cultural division, can be seen as an extension of art's hegemony and . . . [an] opportunity for the artist to profit from their social privilege" (p. 25). My own project comes under fire in this argument. Though I am re-telling the stories

of others in order to bring awareness to racial issues in Canada, my project is also part of my master's degree work, at the end of which I will benefit from receiving a graduate degree. The fact that I am receiving credit for this work is problematic, and I certainly wonder about whether the extension of my privilege that this will bring me will outweigh the good I am attempting to do. If I could go about my *inVisible* project again, I would welcome collaborators who would have the opportunity to tell their own story in the way that they choose. It is only in giving that agency to people that they will be able to participate authentically in the sharing of their narratives.

There is a consideration that in stories about racism, that white people in Canada should back away from the conversation and simply listen and get out of the way so that space can made for BIPOC communities to speak. For example, at a Black Lives Matter rally I recently attended in Victoria, BC, the rally organizers made a request of the gathered public: if news media approached a white person for their opinion on this event, that the white person decline to speak, and then send the media to a person of colour to be interviewed instead. This is a valid consideration. Even as I desire to be a part of the solution, a change in the world, I see that setting up an art installation about these issues may reinforce the racial divide that I am trying to address. For anyone "to participate in an art event…is to enter the pre-established social environment that casts the participant in a very specific role" (Beech, 2010, p. 25). It would be easy to unknowingly keep the status quo even as I attempt to contradict it, simply by being the artist and setting the expectation of how people engage with the artwork. As Dewhurst (2010) clearly explains:

> Many a social reform has been launched with good intentions—yet without an explicit analysis of the structural factors of inequality, these social reforms can often end up inflicting more harm than good (i.e., a mural project that simply aims to beautify a space might serve to cover up the symptoms of poverty, rather than altering the systems behind it). Could the same be true of social justice artmaking? (p. 370)

As social justice art makers, we have to be conscious of the histories we are surrounded with and how they impact us as artists, educators, and participants in the cultural narrative. As an artist I am asking myself how I can work more collaboratively. As an educator, I am asking

> . . . how do we amplify those stories that never get heard, and how do we help those stories get received and really listened to, not just superficially but in terms of everyone engaging with what those stories mean for how we all live our lives? (Bell, 2009, p. 116)

As an artist educator, how can I use my privilege to support a bigger platform for these voices to be heard?

B. Does Social Justice Art Have to be Publicly Accessible?

Depending on where art is shown, it can create an illusion of allyship since many people do not have access to or are not welcome in galleries where these art exhibits are often shown. Even Ai Weiwei's *@large* was installed at Alcatraz prison, a publicly accessible space, but to see the exhibit, people had to purchase a ticket to Alcatraz which was $35.00 USD at the time. This may be normal for gallery standards, but not for a piece of work whose very message is about injustice and unequal treatment of people. It is entirely possible that the average person who is on a budget does not have $35 for an art exhibit, or more if they want to take their family. The cost of attending the exhibit is then prohibitive for many, which makes the case that the people with or for whom the art is done may not even be able to attend the exhibit. This shows an elitism within the art community that must be assessed. Can this be arrested by displaying more free public art? This alone raises many more questions about power and privilege. After all, who decides what art gets shown? Who is considered an "artist"? Where does the money come from to support the artists for public projects? Will the financiers of a project be willing to take a stand on social justice issues, especially when it puts their own position of power in the crosshairs?

It is not surprising to see the rising number of community murals dealing with these issues. People are taking the display and exhibiting of art into their own hands and bypassing any organization's permission or intervention. Since the death of George Floyd in the United States this year murals have sprung up on walls in cities, on houses, in public spaces of Floyd and others who have been killed by police, to commemorate, but also to remind and give a call to action. (figures 29 & 30). Where there is an immediate need to counter injustice, those affected often rally together. For example, for Chico Sierra, the community at large in Kansas City have offered him space to paint murals on abandoned buildings they own, on their own houses, and in small businesses. This is one-way Boros (2012) described art moving into the public spaces. She says "art on the streets is inherently more easily less restrained and more experimental than the often better-known work that is presented within the walls of our brick and mortar institutions of art" (p. 101), allowing a freedom of expression that may not be found if its existence is dependent on people in power.

Figure 29. *Mural of George Floyd*. Goldman, Herrera, McLain, Alexander, Hernandez (2020).

Figure 30. *Mural on house*. Sierra (2020).

C. Does Interactive Art Still Have an Impact if the Viewer Does Not Engage?

As artists install their social justice work, they must let go of the expectation that participants will engage with it, and even more so how they will engage. The location of the work will determine to some extent at least, who views it. If the only place a work about the economic system keeping people

in poverty is shown is in a gallery that caters to the wealthy, for example, the artist may not be able to activate the engagement of the participant if that art is too confrontational for them to accept. Not every gallery viewer wants to be confronted with societal ills. Similarly, an interactive installation in a public place cannot guarantee the involvement of a desired audience, or any audience at all. Greg Hill (2008), in referencing Kent Monkman and Rebecca Belmore's work, talked about the reality that people can simply choose not to engage. He says,

> Confronted with the choice to enter an iconic and historically layered architectural form or to activate a symbolic and politically-loaded sculptural device, these works require viewers to engage in a physical, intellectual, and emotional manner in order to fully comprehend their significance and benefit from what they offer. (p. 145)

I wonder how many people are willing to interact with a piece of challenging artwork on this level. If they choose to walk away, does it mean the art is not fulfilling its purpose? Will the artist be able to let go of the expectation that people will take part?

D. Is Social Justice Interactive Installation Art a Band-aid?

There is a possibility that social justice art that impacts disadvantaged groups is simply a temporary fix with little lasting consequence. Max Frieder, for example, works collaboratively with children from refugee camps to create large murals on the walls of the camps for some of his projects with the group Artolution (www.artolution.com). He found that he was frustrated with the short-term projects because they did not leave a lasting impact or change in situation for the people involved (Fields, 2016, 34:10). We need to ask the value of the work over the long term because these types of projects can mask the fact that problems still exist, and only show the short-term gain for those involved. It can be a feel-good moment for the people who are not impacted by injustice, and those who have been the perpetrators of injustice believe that something has been done, then they will not necessarily be moved to action. Consequently, this can create a greater divide between the oppressors

and the oppressed. Beech (2010) states that ". . . the participation of civilians in artworks does not fundamentally challenge the cultural distinctions that separate them from the artist and the minority community of art. In fact, participation simply re-enacts that relationship in an ethnographic fashion" (p. 26). Simply involving a community in a piece of art, or having a group interact with it, does not guarantee that anything will change. Unfortunately, it can serve instead to keep people in their current roles by convincing them that something has already changed. Alternatively, if the creative collaboration and storytelling can be connected with a continuing economic support for that community, by selling or subsidizing the artworks, then the activism can have a lasting impact. This is dependent on many factors, not least the decisions the community would be faced with regarding who they choose to partner with, and how each party would benefit. Rick Lowe, with Project Row Housing, made this precise idea work in his community (in Stern, 2013, p. 134-136). After seeing first hand the economically battered community of the Third Ward in Houston, he and a group of artists purchased homes on one of the streets in the community, painted artworks on the outside of them and created a drive-by gallery for anyone to see. After turning the homes into artists residences, Lowe established a non-profit organization that continued to purchase more properties to benefit the local area. In the homes, they began to host art classes, daycare, after school tutoring, and more. Many people who grew up using these supports have come back to serve the organization and continue its principle that "art – and the community it creates – can be the foundation for revitalizing depressed inner-city neighborhoods" (p. 132). This is one example of how these installations can serve the population, but they require a long-term commitment to projects, and a true understanding of the needs of the local people and how best to advocate for them. This is not impossible, but it can be a daunting task for artists and activists alike.

Examining our role

In Dewhurst's (2011) work with students, she considered the importance of a critical examination of the role of artist and educator in social justice art. We need to continue questioning our

processes and motives, if we are to analyze unjust structures through art, and not maintain them. Her assessment is thus:

> Without this critical analysis, the work of creating social justice art lacks the required assessment of systemic injustice necessary to dismantle structures—not just symptoms—of inequality. Furthermore, only with this critical analysis will artists be able to select the necessary aesthetic tactics that can most effectively alter those structures of injustice. (p. 370)

The work of social justice art needs to be critiqued so that it may indeed further the aims of justice, and not the desires of the artist or educator. A critical look at this type of art makes it necessary to continue to ask questions about power, participation, and ownership. Whose story is it, and in the end, who tells it?

6. Conclusion

Art can challenge perception and ignite a person's emotions, spurring them towards action. Social justice art, when combined with interactivity and the immersive quality of installation, can have a grand effect on the viewer, making them an actor and participant in their own revelatory experience. There is an opportunity to use the immensity, or even the intimacy of installation spaces to tell the stories of those who have not been heard in our culture. To make way for stories that are told not only on a canvas, but through an experiential act, can process movement into memory, educating people in a new way through new media. As the dance artist Malika Sarabhai (2009) simply states, "Art can go through where other things can't. You can't have barriers because it breaks through your barriers…when attitudes are so difficult to change, we need a language that reaches through" (4:08).

Social justice art must be tempered, however, with a critical mind and a willingness to listen. As an artist and educator, it is my responsibility to listen first, to collaborate with those whose stories need to be told, and to recognize and activate my own privilege in support of others'. The questions that arise

from this type of work should not be avoided, but answers pursued in community. This may mean stepping back from the role I am accustomed to or seeking a way to share this activist space in community with others. Interactive installation artworks with social justice messaging can be a powerful tool in the hands of artists and through them introduce the world not only to great and exciting art, but narratives that can open the minds of people to new perspectives.

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