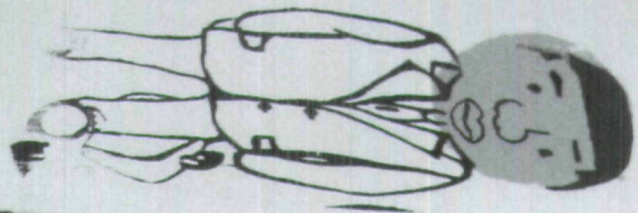


figure 1  
This series of prints aims to draw attention  
to racial stereotypes in our society.





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# AN INEVITABLE QUESTION:

Exploring the Defining Features  
of Social Justice Art Education

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By: Marit Dewhurst

“What do you really mean by social justice art education?” It is an inevitable question. In fact, I would be shocked if no one tentatively raised his or her hand in any of my art and social justice education professional development workshops in museums or graduate-level education classes to earnestly ask, “Sorry, but just what do you really *mean* by social justice art education?”

I am not surprised because this question constantly causes confusion among not only the students, but also the educators, researchers, and artists working at the intersection of art, education, and social justice. The labels for this work come in many shapes, among them, activist art (Felshin, 1995), community-based arts (Knight & Schwarzman, 2005), new public art (Lacy, 1995), art for social change (O'Brien & Little, 1990), and community cultural development (Adams & Goldbard, 2001). Despite these various names, this work often shares a commitment to create art that draws attention to, mobilizes action towards, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice. And yet, in a field with growing numbers of social justice arts organizations

and the accompanying conferences, special journal issues, and edited books, the very definition of what is meant by social justice art education remains elusive. Some variation in nomenclature can be attributed to the multiple disciplinary lenses—from art history and anthropology to community development and public policy—that have been used to analyze this work. However, hidden in this tenuous terminology are competing visions about the very nature of social justice art education. Such differences appear to hinge on three main debates: (1) how strategic the artistic and activist decisions are in relation to their potential to effectively change policy; (2) what constitutes activism or social change; and (3) if emphasis is placed on the process or the product of artmaking. These big, often philosophical debates require us to unpack the purposes, expectations, and perspectives that compel us to mix art and social justice work.

And so I am not startled each time a student hesitantly asks, with a hint of frustration or even exasperation, “What do you really mean by social justice art education?” In responding to this inevitable question, those of us engaged in this work must parse out exactly what it means to do *social justice art education*. If we fail to rise to this challenge we risk losing the clarity required to advocate for our work, to train future educators, and perhaps most importantly, to separate out art practices that truly impact injustice and those that may

figure 2  
Paulina's "Homeless in New York"  
postcards sought to change audience  
perspectives about the prevalence of poverty.



If critical pedagogy is about learning to critically examine the world around us—to pull apart the structural factors that lead to injustice—then why stop at the obvious examples of inequality?



inadvertently perpetuate inequality under the name of good intentions. If everything can be contained under the term *social justice art education*, then we lose the opportunity to further research and develop the unique possibilities of this particular approach to learning in the arts.

Observing, interviewing, and working alongside young people as they create works of art that critique, contest, and strive to affect conditions of injustice, I have witnessed the ways in which social justice artmaking begins to take on a certain shape. To explore that shape, I recently conducted a qualitative study that examined the educational processes that occur when young people create works of art to impact injustice (Dewhurst, 2009). Through interviews and observations of 14 teenagers participating in a free after-school activist art class, I investigated how they experienced and described the act of making a work of art to impact injustice. In analyzing the ways in which these young people approached their own social justice-driven artmaking, I noticed three main pedagogical activities—connecting, questioning, and translating—that comprised the practice of making a work of activist art. As I integrated these observations and experiences with the theoretical literature on

critical pedagogy, a pedagogy of its own emerged. While this pedagogy of activist art<sup>1</sup> is by no means conclusive, it raises several distinctions that hone our understanding of what really is social justice art education.

### A Particular Practice

Social justice education in the arts is a practice—an evolving, iterative process. As critical pedagogy scholars write, social justice education is a way of teaching that seeks liberation for all people (Horton, Kohl, & Kohl, 1998; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). As such, the means—as much as the end product—are integral to make a work of art “activist” or “social justice” in nature. While people often assume that social justice art education must be based on controversial or overtly political issues (i.e. race, violence, discrimination, etc.), this is not always the case. Rather, as long as the *process* of making art offers participants a way to construct knowledge, critically analyze an idea, and take action in the world, then they are engaged in a practice of social justice artmaking.





Christian,<sup>2</sup> a young artist in a social justice photography class I taught, was adamantly committed to fashion photography. While other students gravitated to the topics I had anticipated—school reform, gender inequality, domestic violence—Christian's choice of fashion seemed a far cry from the activist topics I had expected. Frustrated, I sat down as he arranged his photos in lines. I asked him questions about the choices he had made, about his love of fashion, about why it felt compelling. And then, why did it matter? To whom did it matter? What purpose did it fulfill? And as I asked these questions—drawing out some of the cultural, social, psychological, and economic factors embedded in the idea of fashion—our conversation grew more animated. We soon found ourselves questioning some of the murky cultural and economic significance of fashion. Suddenly, Christian was connecting fashion to a social pressure to conform to different class standards. And suddenly, I began to understand that perhaps the "social justice-ness" is not tied to specific subject matter. If critical pedagogy is about learning to critically examine the world around us—to pull apart the structural factors that lead to injustice—then why stop at the obvious examples of inequality? Why not engage in such a critical examination of technology, science, or, for that matter, fashion?

Christian's experience offers a glimpse into the key pedagogical activities of a social justice art practice. A closer look at the processes and examples that emerged from the young artists participating in my research suggests that this practice has a particular shape. The following dimensions constitute a pedagogy of activist artmaking that sheds light on the educational significance of creating art for social justice.

**Connecting.** Pulling from the language of social justice education, activist artists "start where they are." To identify these connections, activist artists engage in critical reflection and attentive exploration of the ways injustice plays out in the world and in relation to the artist's own life. These acts of naming and articulating are ways of learning about the nature of injustice. As 16-year-old Paulina described, seeing the issue of homelessness take on a life within her own everyday experiences grounded her even more within the issue: "And everywhere I went I actually became noticing homeless people [sic].... starting to do the project it opened my eyes again and I was able to see them."

**Questioning.** Activist artists embark on a quest for a deeper understanding of the issues of injustice about which they will create art. These investigative and analytic questions lead to



**figure 3**  
Estela's final project balanced  
activist intentions and aesthetic aims.

an unfolding and critical inquiry into the multiple social, cultural, political, and economic factors that contribute to their selected issue. In conducting research on their issue, artists experience varying levels of an increased critical consciousness about the meaning of their issue within the world. Through both posing and pursuing questions, activist artists are simultaneously learning and teaching about social issues in ways evocative of critical pedagogy's collaborative problem-posing education (Freire, 1970). Seventeen-year-old Alejandra described her critical realization of the number of unrealistic images of women that exist in the magazines she often reads after examining them in light of her project on body image: "So just learning the statistics... you don't realize, like how many bad images there are in magazines, so... it really helped me to look at, you know, magazines differently."

**Translating.** Activist art is created with an express intention to challenge and change conditions of inequality or injustice. This requires artists to move beyond surface illustrations of injustice to make tactical decisions about how best to affect structures of oppression—not just the symptoms. Art

made for social justice is not simply a meandering inquiry into the play of light or color across a page, but an inquiry motivated by a specific, purposeful desire to impact structures of injustice. In the act of translating, activist artists negotiate the concurrent goals of creating an aesthetic object and achieving their intended activist aims. Translating requires activist artists to critically reflect on the purposes of their artwork and to match those with appropriate artistic tools, materials, and techniques. Watching students negotiate the balance between intended impacts and aesthetic aims reveals the unique challenges of making art for social justice.

Estela, a teen participant in a mixed media activist art class, was nearly finished with her final sculpture when she ran up against a problem. Estela began her project with a vision to use a singed American flag. "But," she described, "I thought about it and I felt that, that it was too manufactured." Estela worried that the inclusion of the American flag would not only be overpowering, but it would also hide the intricate collage of newspaper clippings she had carefully constructed. To cover these clippings would diminish her intention





to educate viewers about current civic rights violations. And yet, without the flag, the connection to American policies faded, weakening her desired impact to have viewers reflect on their rights as U.S. citizens. To add the vibrantly colored flag over the somber blacks and grays of her piece could impede the aesthetic success; to leave it out might render her intended impact invisible. At last, Estela reached a solution: she thinned the red and blue paint, resulting in a translucent veil of color over her collage—enough to convey the idea of a flag without losing the aesthetic appeal of the subdued colors or the critical details in the collaged clippings. Holding both aims throughout her process, Estela thoughtfully negotiated the balancing act between the drive for an aesthetically engaging work of art and one that would still result in her intended impact.

### Doing Social Justice Art Education

Despite the warning that social justice art education must be responsive to the specific people and place in which it takes place, the question remains: "How does one really *do* social justice art education?"

For educators interested in the intersection of artmaking and social justice education, the challenge of teaching in a way that encourages learners to identify, critique, and take action to dismantle unjust structures of power can be overwhelming and filled with uncertainty. However, the key pedagogical features articulated above suggest a series of strategies for initiating social justice art education projects.

**Collaborative, Reciprocal, and Contextual Planning** | Before proceeding with any set of practical tools, it is imperative that we understand that social justice art education involves teachers and learners building understanding and action together. Therefore, this approach to art education requires a fundamental shift in the relationship between students and teachers. Such co-constructed learning, what Lissa Soep (2006) refers to as "collegial pedagogy" is core to critical pedagogy and empowers all participants to act

as agents, not subjects of their own practice. A commitment to collaboration and reciprocity allows participants to both *direct* the development of their intended artistic and social justice impacts towards their audience while also *experiencing* some of those impacts (increased awareness, critical consciousness) themselves. This shift in attitude has dramatic implications on curriculum planning. There is no formulaic script, no universal step-by-step curriculum. What works with one group of participants, in one community, in one particular institution may or may not work with another group. The practice must be iterative and evolving based on the people and contexts—in school, out-of-school, in a particular community, etc.—at play. Given this challenge, educators interested in planning for social justice art education may find the following practical characteristics useful in scaffolding their teaching.

**Student-Driven Projects** | Educators striving to encourage learners to direct their own projects should leave room for learners to identify and define their own artmaking. Prompts and assignments should offer multiple opportunities for interpretation and experimentation so students have control over the direction of the project. There should be many ways in which a student *can make decisions* to create their own version of the assignment. Students should be encouraged to articulate their intentions for their artwork and to share those with others. To this end, educators should allow learners to select their own topics for exploration and respond with activities and lessons that move students into a deeper analysis of their topics. Educators must trust that the processes of connecting, questioning, and translating will allow students to create final works of art that successfully achieve both their activist and aesthetic aims.

**Relevant Reflection** | To encourage the process of connecting, educators should develop lesson plans and activities that encourage learners to reflect on their own identities, experiences, and interests to help them identify project topics that are meaningful and rooted in students' own lives. They can then help students locate topic ideas within students' own daily interactions, environments, and relationships by motivating them to attend to the ways in which their topic appears in their lives.

Art made for social justice is not simply a meandering inquiry into the play of light or color across a page, but an inquiry motivated by a specific, purposeful desire to impact structures of injustice.



**Critical Questions** | Building on the web of connections laid out through the process of connecting, educators can shift to questioning as a tool to prompt learners to delve into a study of their topics. This process enables learners to gather the information and multiple perspectives necessary to create works of art that strategically aim to impact social justice. Through activities ranging from one-on-one questioning and collaborative information-gathering projects, to more conventional research techniques such as interviewing, literature analyses, and basic statistics, educators can support the unfolding inquiry that will result in richer understandings of the various structural (i.e. cultural, political, economic, etc.) factors contributing to injustice. Educators should encourage both investigative (What's happening?) and analytic (Why is it happening?) questions that help students identify the possible tactics and tools to effect change.

**A Tactical Balance** | Once students narrow in on the specific strategies they will use to create their works of art, they begin the process of translating their ideas into objects or actions that will affect injustice. In this phase, students should be encouraged to balance both their activist intentions and their aesthetic aims—sacrificing neither one for the other. This process requires both individual and group critiques that facilitate discussion about the possible reactions of the audience to help learners revise their work. Ideally, students would be encouraged to explore a range of media to select what materials and methods are most appropriate to alter the systems of injustice they identify.

**Public Audience** | Art that is created to challenge or change injustices must be allowed to leave the confines of the room in which it was made in order to reach the intended impacts of the artist. While this step can open up students and educators to criticism and censorship, to lock it up is to prevent the work from actually influencing inequality and therefore really becoming activist art.

## Conclusion

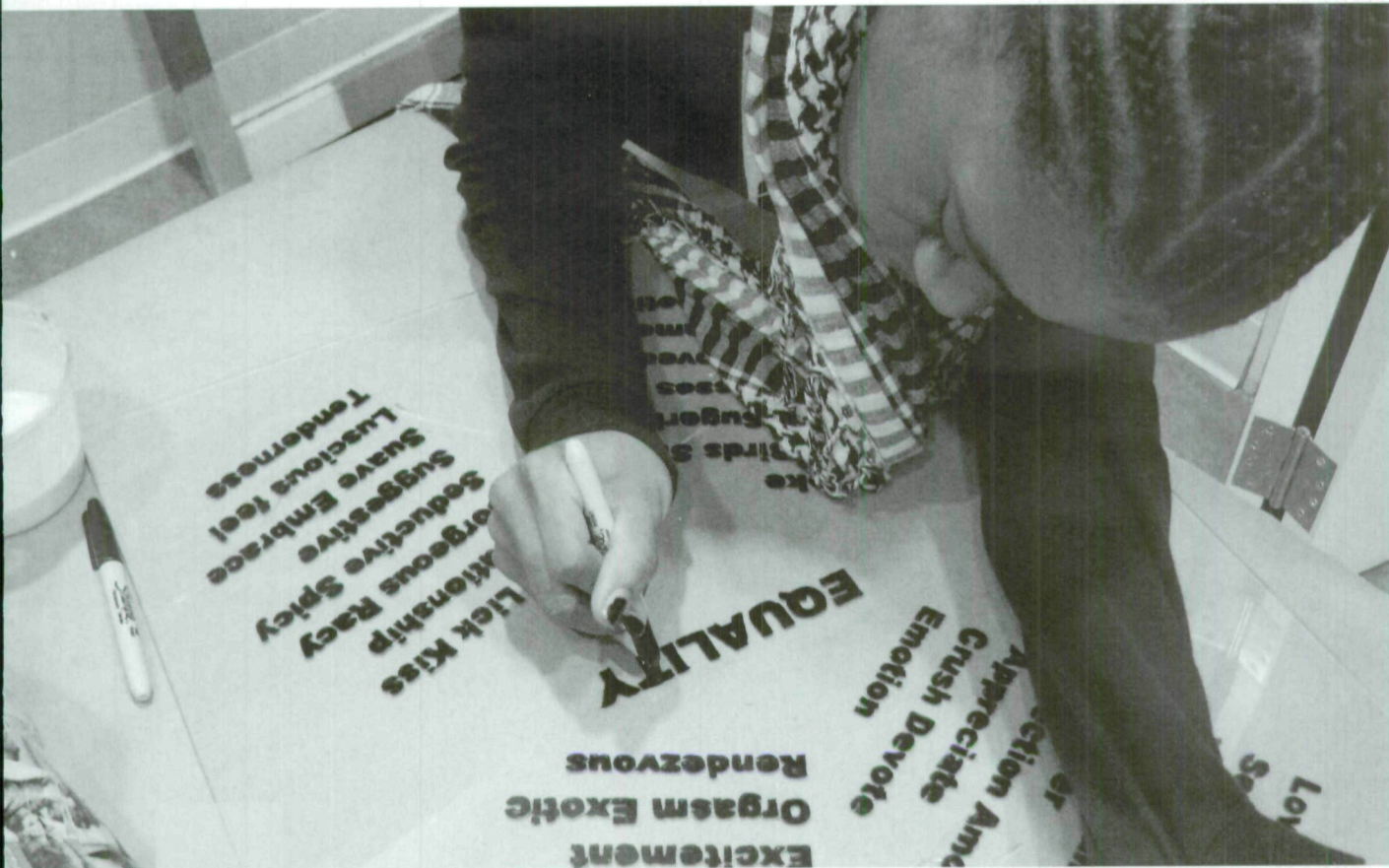
In classrooms, community centers, museums, and alternative learning sites across the country, large numbers of young people are creating works of art—from murals and plays, to photographs and poetry—that question, challenge, and at times, impact existing conditions of inequality and injustice. As educators, researchers, and artists interested in understanding and supporting this work, we must continue to try to define the work we do, even if our answers are not quite complete. If the growing number of youth arts organizations and schools claiming to offer social justice art education is any indication, this field will continue to expand. With this expansion will come more complicated questions about the nature of social justice art education. Questions regarding an educator's insider or outsider status within a community, or who is responsible when a project "fails" or whether or not the young people creating work should be paid may soon become the next critical questions we ask each other. As intriguing and necessary as these next questions are, we are ill-equipped to debate them until we have come to a stronger understanding of what we actually mean when we call something social justice art education. Only then, when we can answer the inevitable question about the very definition of social justice art education will we be able to truly advance the powerful possibilities of this work.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Throughout this work, while I usually refer to *social justice artmaking* I also occasionally employ the term *activist art* synonymously. I use the term *social justice art* not only because The National Art Education Association framed the 2010 Annual Convention and this issue of *Art Education* around this term, but also because many youth arts organizations employ the term in their program literature. I also use *activist art*, as it similarly captures the artist's explicit desire to bend dominant systems of power towards justice and equality.

<sup>2</sup> Names of youth participants have been changed for confidentiality.





**Figure 4**  
A student in an activist art class adds the finishing touches to his project.

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