

Artists for Humanity's Sake: An Ameliorative Project Concerning Artists and the
Existentialist Struggle Against the Dominant Narrative

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ABSTRACT

Existentialist ethics tell us that we as individuals cannot be truly liberated until all are. This means that we *must* pursue a more just world for all. Interestingly enough, as we look at the evidences of the ways in which cultural violence have been used historically and today as a means to withhold power from the people, we find that participating in the arts grants a great deal of power *to* the people. Thus, accessibility to participating in artistic acts or the creative process become fundamental to activism for social justice. This work lays out five fundamental aspects of the creative process that help us move towards liberation—confrontation of ideas, vulnerability, choice making, truth or world building, and authentic identity formation. In order to realize the full potential of positive impact the creative process can have in the realm of social justice, however, we must reframe our understanding of artists and the creative process in our society. This is a call to action both to artists and audience to recognize and wield the power of the arts to liberate all within our society.

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GENERAL AUDIENCE ABSTRACT

We have all heard the disparaging stereotypes surrounding the arts--the arts aren't a viable career choice, they aren't important, they're just meant for hobbies, or they're for folks who aren't smart enough to do something "useful" with their lives. If you have been a practicing artist for any number of years you have surely been offered payment in "exposure" at least half a dozen times by now. And yet, creating art is perhaps one of the most powerful and political acts we may undertake as humans. With each creative act we make claim to our own identities and have the opportunity to support the unique identities of others. In a world plagued by injustice perhaps artists are just the heroes we need. In this work I outline the connection between the artistic act and liberation. It is a call to action both to artists and audience to recognize the great potential that artists have to shape the world for better or worse. It asks you, the reader, to support social justice by supporting accessibility to confrontational, vulnerable, and deliberate artistic acts both by others and yourself.

DEDICATION

To all the art students who have heard the sentiment, “I’ve never met a smart art student before,” ...you are brilliant, your ideas matter, and they might just change the world.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction: The Relationship Between Artists, Existentialism, and the Dominant Narrative

Introduction to the Project as Ameliorative Conceptual Ethics.

This research explores the gap between the artist's process and audience appreciation in a way that aims to be socially constructive. Most people would agree a world without art, and therefore artists, would be a less passionate and engaging place. Art adds something to our experience of the world. It is part of what makes us human and arguably an important contributing factor in "the good life". Yet, we are not taught how to properly live alongside and appreciate what artists *do* as humans. We are often so caught up in the product that we miss out on that the *way* artists think, create, *exist* is significant. There is something to be learned here that can benefit humanity.

To start, we might consider how artists and viewers are taught, respectively, to interact with art by different methods. Why is this education different? I will propose a method that unites these two kinds of participants, but, unlike other appreciation methods, I aim to do so through ameliorative processes. When I first started this project, I was trying to gather data on how artists currently view their work to determine what the definition and interpretation of art practices are currently in the 21st century. However, I quickly found I am far less interested in documentation than I am in *potential*... So, what are the possibilities exactly?

There are a lot of different roles artists can, and have, played over the centuries. But what roles *should* artists be taking on in order to contribute positively to the world and this "good life" (as is our moral responsibility as humans)? Today we find we are at the beginning of what is expected to be a long and uphill fight to dismantle systemic isms and phobias in our world (racism, colorism, xenophobia, sexism, genderism, homophobia, transphobia, ablism, neurotypicalism, classism, etc.) Based on the strengths that artists maintain in their processes I propose that they already are active players in social justice, and with the right framing could be even more impactful. Specifically, the emphasis that artists place on identity and world making could help to tackle the marginalization of so many identities not represented in the dominant narrative. Currently, scholars and activists are stepping up to dismantle the continuing systemic problems of marginalizations. They bring to the table incredible insight and proposals for positive change. I would like to explore how artists fit into this developing story. So how do we redefine and socially reframe artists--and their ethical duties--so as to benefit these social goals? And, as a result, how do we implement this new framing into society—how do we market and educate the public to further this conception?

Methodology.

For this project I will be turning to methods commonly used in conceptual ethics or conceptual engineering. Though the methods are not necessarily new, giving name and category to them as "conceptual ethics" or "conceptual engineering" is. Conceptual ethics notes that whereas a "descriptive" project is typically focused on the way that things are *actually* used (emphasizing empirical research), this kind of method prefers "prescriptive" projects. These projects suggest how we *ought* to think and speak on topics. Specifically, in projects employing conceptual *activism*, that "ought" also implies *can*.¹ This

¹ A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics. Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett. July 30, 2018. <https://philpapers.org/archive/CAPAGT.pdf>

sets conceptual ethics apart from theoretical projects. In that sense, this project becomes very pragmatic. Not only will we be thinking about what end results we would *like* to see, but which ones are possible. What are the *possible* understandings of “art” and “artist” that can help get us to that desired outcome? What can we expect the public to take on as a usage of these terms effectively? To determine this, we will need to weigh different conceptualizations against one another based on their practicality.

The *ought* that I am interested in, much like Sally Haslanger²—one of the better-known users of this ameliorative technique for her research in race and gender—is social justice. Due to the extent to which the arts are intertwined in our lives and experiences as humans, I believe that the conceptualization of art and artist have great potential for adjusting the norms of the society in which we live and the way in which we recognize different identities. The thing that stood out about Haslanger’s research was that she did not present the terms of race and gender as they should be in a *perfect* world. Rather she laid out definitions, that, given the way the world *currently* is, could be best used to reach her presented goals.³ For my project this translates to laying out a schema of:

Given that the world is x we should be conceptualizing the role of artists as y in order to create ends z.

Another important aspect of my design, I find, is pairing ameliorative work with empirical. The ideas for the proposed conception of art and artist that I will argue for come from an amalgamation of suggestions from artists themselves. So, it is not as though the conceptualization I will propose is unheard of, but rather that it has never been given the proper conditions to flourish to its full potential. Hence, why the conclusion of this proposal will focus on the implementation of said concept.

Surely, there will be opposition to my strategy=. In a paper by Cappelen and Plunkett, it is brought up that some who oppose conceptual engineering in general worry that there are some things that are simply done better without self-reflection.⁴ In this instance, some may argue we should not be trying to over conceptualize anything related to the arts as this would merely stunt their progress. With this I could not disagree more. I do not believe my proposal will inhibit artists in any way, if anything it will provide them more freedom. My proposal is to impact how society is thinking about artists and as a result increase the impact artists can create. Not only does the way we think, and therefore conceptualize, have the ability to create vast positive impacts, but *not* conceptualizing in a *purposeful* way can have a lot of negative impacts.⁵ This binary, though many may disagree with me, plays an important role in our existential responsibility or ethics (which will be discussed further in the next chapter). Not making a choice is still a choice—we are “condemned to freedom,” as Sartre would say, and thus we must take responsibility both for the actions we choose to take and those we choose not to.⁶ Pretending that problems aren’t there doesn’t make them go away. It just lets them fester.

Since this is a paper about conceptualizing art, I will make a comparison to an artwork: We are told, in art classes, everything needs to be purposeful. Sure, you might make some “happy accidents” here or there that look pretty good, if you are lucky you might even make a lot of them. But it does not really mean much unless you can make them happen on purpose. If you set out to accomplish them, and can do so,

² Gender and race: (What) are they? (What) do we want them to be? Sally Haslanger. *Resisting Reality: Social Construction and Social Critique*. Sally Haslanger.

³ Ibid

⁴ A Guided Tour of Conceptual Engineering and Conceptual Ethics. Herman Cappelen and David Plunkett. July 30, 2018. <https://philpapers.org/archive/CAPAGT.pdf>

⁵ Conceptual Ethics I. Alexis Burgess & David Plunkett - 2013 - *Philosophy Compass* 8 (12):1091-1101.

⁶ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. 23.

then that means you can do it again. The ability to repeat (or *purposefully* not repeat) successful actions is the backbone of, not only a strong composition, but a strong concentration.⁷

So far, we have established, that, to make this into an ameliorative project we need to identify:

1. What is the state of the world x
2. What are our specific *ought* goals (aka the problems we aim to address) — in this case a more just social order (one that promotes and approves of the vast array of identities rather than privileging some over others who are marginalized)
3. What factors are standing in the way of that *ought* goal — in this case the dominant narrative — that can be influenced positively by our topic at hand
4. Why/how can our topic have impact on this goal
5. What are the defects with the current conceptualization of our topic
6. The proposed new conceptualization of our topic and the impact it can have
7. How to pragmatically implement said conceptualization in an effective/meaningful way

State of the World X.

Now, what is the state of the world x that we currently live in, and what is it that we *ought* to change? Currently, the overall global trend (though the extent of this varies greatly from location to location and culture to culture) is one of increased technology and, on average, an increase in the availability of resources needed for increasing standards of life in terms of access to *physiological needs*. Though there are still many people living without the resources they need for a good life, we know it is not because the resources are not available in the world, but rather because the resources are not available to *them*. Enough resources exist and are harvestable in the world to provide a good standard of living for everyone, but the distribution of these resources is highly problematic (in fact, in many cases we do harvest the resources, but, rather than distribute them to those in need, discard the resources, instead, in order to drive economics for the wealthy).

For one of the most impactful visual representations of our current inequitable wealth distribution in the United States alone, follow this link: https://mkorostoff.github.io/1-pixel-wealth/?fbclid=IwAR3VyPY83U__KxaHrCEcRFVEWNfswBF9zNY11aaP4xdPvqPwIV93yMfseJU

There is an extreme correlation between social/political marginalization and lack of accessibility to resources. In many cases, the lack of dignity employed in relation to various marginalized identities is directly tied to lower physical standards of life. This is because historic discriminatory conditions, which continue to prevail through our systems today, lead to a lack of accessibility to education, jobs, and political power, which in turn leads directly to an ability of those in power to ignore their needs in relation to housing, food and other resources, environmental justice etc.⁸ (Problems such as the school to prison

⁷ A portfolio of a set of works meant to be displayed together or as part of a theme.

⁸ Association For The Advancement-Sustainability In Higher Education Conference 2015-2016
Edwards, Marc. *Opening Keynote*. 2016 AASHE Conference & Expo in Baltimore, Maryland.
Tickner, J. Ann. *Gender in International Relations*.
Women's Environment & Development Organization. WEDO.org

pipeline, and injustice in our criminal “justice” system feed into this negative feedback loop.⁹ Additionally, redlining and other “legal” tactics are used as means to place marginalized individuals in a holding pattern with no access to upward mobility, and, thereby, no escape from at risk environments.¹⁰

Studies have shown if proper human rights were employed in relation to identity, then physiological needs, in many cases, would have an easier time resolving themselves because the individuals in need would have the voice, and thus the power, to demand the resources they deserve.¹¹

Consider, for instance, the deep entanglement of women’s rights and environmental concerns particularly in less developed nations. In many nations, the woman is still commonly the head of the household and as such the sole individual (or individuals) expected to produce and cook the food, among other household tasks. One key factor in these jobs is access to clean water for growing, cleaning, and cooking. In areas where access to clean water has been greatly reduced, due commonly either to pollution, rerouting of resources to wealthier areas, or climate change induced drought, this increases the time and effort that need be exerted to achieve said tasks. Imagine the difference between having clean water readily available via your faucet at home or even a nearby well to having to walk miles to the closest water source and back multiple times a day. The extra efforts required, in turn, greatly reduce the amount of time that could be spent on other pursuits.

While women, being on the frontlines of agriculture, often have the most knowledge of ways to increase efficiency and reduce environmental impacts they commonly are not included in community decision making processes that take place through politics. Part of the reason for this is that with limited time to care for necessary tasks, things like education often fall to the wayside. While there is no actual correlation between intelligence and school, without attending educational institutions, women are often framed as not intelligent enough to make these decisions and so they experience an additional barrier to leadership positions in business or politics. This is part of why we see such a struggle for women to gain positions of power in spaces where survival depends on homesteading.

Likewise, historic taboos and continued prejudice in health care continue to lead female bodied individuals to additional barriers to these positions. Consider how difficult it is for women around the world to access something as simple as menstrual products (let alone to have doctors believe them about other ailments). Once the female body reaches puberty the average female bodied person menstruates for 5 out of every 28 days. Imagine trying to go to school without access to menstrual products and thus having to stay home every time you were on your period. If your school year is 180 days long that is 32 absences.

All of this is seemingly a catch twenty-two. These examples of inaccessibilities to resources allotted to women are caused by an inaccessibility of women to prominent positions in society, and yet the inaccessibility to prominent positions is caused by inaccessibility to resources. And these are only two small examples of inaccessibilities presented to one of many marginalized groups, let alone considerations of intersectional marginalizations that often increase barriers exponentially.

I believe these circumstances lend themselves to demanding an existentialist philosophy, in our society. This philosophy emphasizes the value of the individual’s authentic self. While it may seem, at first, to be

⁹ Morris, Monique W. *Pushout*.

¹⁰ Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law*.

Adam Ruins Everything: The Disturbing History of the Suburbs. <https://youtu.be/ETR9qrVS17g>

¹¹ Association For The Advancement-Sustainability In Higher Education Conference 2015-2016
Women’s Environment & Development Organization. Wedo.org

counterproductive many race and gender scholars and activists have emphasized the need to establish valuing individual personhood as a necessary component in addressing group marginalizations. Historically, assimilationist culture has often led marginalized groups and individuals into “uplift suasion” as a strategy for progress. Unfortunately, history has also shown that uplift suasion does not solve the problem of racism, sexism, and other marginalizations. Instead, it reinforces them. Rather than placing the responsibility on those who are producing and living the prejudices, uplift suasion proposes that it is the job of marginalized individuals to *prove* they are exceptional enough to even be considered human. Standards for marginalized individuals are placed higher than those on the average individual belonging to the dominant narrative and results in both serious repercussions for the individual and the group, in addition to not solving the marginalizations problem.¹²

Ibram X. Kendi, who speaks specifically about uplift suasion in relation to anti-black racism, puts it perfectly in his work *Stamped From the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*:

Uplift suasion, as a strategy for racial progress, has failed. Black individuals must dispose of it as a strategy and stop worrying about what other people may think about the way they act, the way they speak, the way they look, the way they dress, the way they are portrayed in the media, and the way they think and love and laugh. Individual Blacks are not race representatives. They are not responsible for those Americans who hold racist ideas. Black people need to be their imperfect selves around White people, around each other, around all people. Black is beautiful *and* ugly, intelligent *and* unintelligent, law-abiding *and* law-breaking, industrious *and* lazy—and it is those imperfections that make Black people human, make Black people equal to all other imperfectly human groups.¹³

To establish a personal identity that one can both cherish themselves, *as well as* have accepted by others when broadcast, is beyond important. Establishing an identity is empowering. Of all people, philosophers, understand the natural human desire to know who we are. We want to exist as *beings-for-themselves* rather than *beings-in-themselves*. To be our authentic, imperfect, and invulnerable selves is the call of existentialism as well as artists. And I believe through a reframing of our social understanding of artists and what they *do* we can help further the anti-marginalization call. The primary obstacle this reframing can help tackle is the dominant narrative.

The Problem of the Dominant Narrative.

The problem society is plagued by is the dominant narrative, which is not inclusive of all identities—therefore, stifling the ability of individuals to establish themselves as Being-For-Oneself. Historically, society enforced, in often brutal ways, an audience of white, upper-class, heteronormative, able-bodied, neurotypical, cis males. And, while we are, in many ways, making strides towards dismantling aspects of legal systems all around the world that emphasize this identity as the only one of importance, including attempting to (if, unfortunately, not often successfully) punishing those who act in purposefully discriminatory ways, this narrative has become so ingrained in society that there is no simple fix. One need not desire to participate in marginalizations in order to do so, we participate with or without our own consent every day. We need a social solution in addition to a legal one.

¹² Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2017.

¹³ Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2017. 505.

The systemic nature of these problems creates a scenario where even those with the best intentions unwittingly participate in any number of marginalizations of others on a daily basis, in seemingly small but infinitely impactful ways. The real danger has become that, though we have put a name to problems such as racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, xenophobia, transphobia, etc., those with privilege are raised not to be able to see their microaggressions and other contributions to these isms and phobias. They are trained not to analyze their own actions for fear of realizing they are a “bad” person, as we have often linked this character trait to those who participate in these isms and phobias.¹⁴

This is a huge part of hermeneutical injustice, a term recently popularized by feminist philosophy.¹⁵ The subaltern is an individual that cannot speak out when faced with injustice. There is an unfortunately prevalent thought in society that if something is “wrong” then the individual(s) being wronged will say something. However, this is not always possible. There are several reasons that individual(s) who, even if aware that their authenticity is being blocked by outside forces, may not be able to “say” anything.¹⁶ A few of which, I will explore below.

One such reason includes our society not having the proper vocabulary to express anything but the dominant narrative. Or specifically that the perpetrators do not have the vocabulary to *understand* what they are being told when a non-dominant narrative is expressed.¹⁷ They may not, as noted above, even know that someone is trying to share their concerns or that they themselves are accidentally participating in marginalizing practices. For instance, microaggressions are common even daily instances of our participation in marginalizing others. These could even include well intended situations where the perpetrator believes they are presenting a compliment but in reality, are actually perpetuating a stereotype and reinforcing the dominant narrative.

One example that seems like a compliment is the stereotype that all Asian individuals are good at math. Not only does this stereotype come from a pretty heinous past (these stereotypes were created as part of a program to prove to Asian countries that the US was not racist shortly after banning immigration from Asian nations, and only done so because the US was at risk of losing out on trade deals to Russia), but it has a negative impact on other marginalized identities with the creation of the Model Minority Myth (suggesting that these particular immigrants have done well in the US so any who are suffering must be doing so because they are either lazy, stupid, or both, not because of racism) as well as on Asian individuals. Consider that if all Asian students are assumed to be good at math, then those who are struggling are assumed to simply be lazy and not trying. Instead of receiving the assistance in school they may need, they are left behind.

In a more heinous version, this injustice becomes willful ignorance on the part of the perpetrator. This includes problems of “conceptual competence injustice,” which Anderson explains relates to the subaltern not being accepted as a competent speaker by those in power.¹⁸ Fanon would extend this to include the subaltern not recognizing *themselves* due to a heroes-belong-on-pedestals syndrome.¹⁹

All of us partake unwittingly in these isms and phobias every day, and so cannot be “bad” unless we act with purposeful menace. However, our fear of being *seen* as “bad” stops us from improving the

¹⁴ Di Angelo, Robin. *White Fragility*.

¹⁵ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-language/>

¹⁶ Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

¹⁷ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-language/>

¹⁸ <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/feminism-language/>
Anderson, Derek E. *Conceptual Competence Injustice*.

¹⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Wretched of the Earth*.

conditions of the world around us. And this willful ignorance can in fact make us “bad” according to existential ethics as we are responsible for not making the choice to improve and work on positive habit formation.

And let us not forget that the dominant narrative also teaches marginalized individuals to collude in the very phobias/isms that they face. These individuals are taught not only to not say anything but to laugh along at marginalizing jokes, agree with the aggressions they face, blame themselves and blame others in their group for not being exceptional (this is part of the problem with the aforementioned uplift suasion). The thought surfaces that, “if only they had been more exceptional, that would make the dominant group less racist, sexist, homophobic, etc.” There are feelings that it is their own fault for not proving that they as individuals and their group are deserving of the basic human dignity and respect that the dominant narrative receives.²⁰

Furthermore, one group of marginalized individuals is turned against other groups of marginalized individuals in a very effective strategy to have them fight with one another, rather than against the oppression of the dominant narrative.²¹ While different marginalized groups shouldn’t claim they can completely understand/empathize with the experiences of other groups, in many ways they face the same enemy of victim blaming and the “model minority” myth.²² Often the individuals most at risk are those whose lives lay at the intersection of multiple marginalized identities. Each group assumes the other identity group will fight to protect this individual, but ultimately the individual becomes left behind by either group and becomes the most invisible of all.

This is particularly common at the intersection of race and gender or race and orientation. In the case of racial discrimination, women are often utilized as a stepping stool for their man counterparts to attempt to rise to being seen equal to the dominant narrative. In the case of orientation and non-binary gender individuals, even more radical backlash may arise where racial injustices occur because racism is often accompanied by the notion of detraction of “manhood” or “womanhood”. The already existing notion of LGBTQ+ individuals not being “man enough” or “woman enough” combine with this racialized notion to create an even higher situation of tension. Within a racially marginalized group LGBTQ+ individuals are often rejected at a higher rate to try to avoid these racist notions as much as possible.

The systemic nature of this societal disease makes it nearly impossible to speak out against the wrongs that are done to you. And, so, marginalized individuals are plagued with the loss of their voices at the same time the privileged are plagued with the inability to understand. All these scenarios are, unfortunately, ones that cannot resolve themselves. When left alone they simply become cyclical and more strongly engrained in society.

There are far too many ways in which marginalized groups and individuals face disadvantage and discrimination in the world that lessens their opportunity for quality of life significantly compared to privileged individuals of the dominant narrative. But I would note that those who maintain privileges should not see this as simply their duty to save those lacking privilege—there is something very

²⁰ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*.

Di Angelo, Robin. *White Fragility*.

Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*.

Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*.

Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*.

²¹ Fanon, Frantz. *Wretched of the Earth*.

Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*.

²² Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*.

Adam Ruins Everything: “How America Created the “Model Minority” Myth” <https://youtu.be/Pg1X1KkVxN4>

derogatory in that sentiment. Instead, I prefer Robin Di Angelo's suggestion that those with privilege should aim to recognize where they participate in isms and phobias so that they *themselves* can grow into the best person *they* can be.²³ James Baldwin explains in his essay "My Dungeon Shook: Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation" that until white people can understand the racism they partake in, as individuals and as a group, their moral souls are at risk (in addition to the lives of people of color).²⁴ Likewise, this character ethics strategy can be applied to the privileged in all cases of marginalization.

This is not about a savior and a victim. The dominant narrative not being inclusive of all identities hurts everyone, including those who happen to be the identity which matches the dominant narrative. So, even if privileged individuals do not care about the marginalized, they might note that breaking down the dominant narrative is still in their own favor. Even those who find themselves in some categories of privilege may find, when we really look into the facts, that discrimination against people other than themselves has often been used to also discriminate against them.

For instance, Kendi brings up in *Stamped from the Beginning* a conversation about blockbusting. Elite whites used racism to scare middle class whites into poverty by convincing them to sell their houses at significantly lower than market value before Black families moved into their neighborhoods and "crashed the house values completely". Then those elite whites sold the houses they bought for dirt cheap for *significantly* more than market value to Black families forcing them into incredible debt. White elites wanting to make themselves richer, blamed people of color in order to thrust both white and Black families into poverty.²⁵ In the epilogue Kendi explains:

...a society of equal opportunity, without a top 1 percent hoarding the wealth and power, would actually benefit the vast majority of White people much more than racism does. It is not coincidental that slavery kept the vast majority of southern Whites poor. It is not coincidental that more White Americans thrived during the antiracist movements from the 1930's to the early 1970's than ever before... Altruism is wanted, not required. Antiracists do not have to be altruistic. Antiracists do not have to be selfless. Antiracists merely have to have *intelligent self interest* and to stop consuming those racist ideas that have engendered so much unintelligent self interest over the years... Supporting these prevailing bigotries is only in the intelligent self interest of a tiny group of super rich, Protestant, heterosexual, non-immigrant, White, Anglo-Saxon males. Those are the only people who need to be altruistic in order to be antiracist.²⁶

And this "intelligent self interest" does not limit itself to anti-racism, either. Even for those with a mindset of "it doesn't affect me, so it's not my problem" will, with some intelligent self-interest, find that systemic marginalizations of any kind negatively impact their own livelihoods.

Beyond physical repercussions we also find those of the dominant narrative are harmed metaphysically by continuing marginalizations. The dominantly shown identity is diminished by being flattened and disallowed from developing. The individuals within that identity are stopped, by this dominant narrative, from being allowed to grow into better versions of themselves by recognizing and respecting the differences in the world and the possibilities that come with them. As Kendi notes *all* people (with the exception of the ultra-wealthy who fit the dominant narrative) benefit from all narratives being given a

²³ Di Angelo, Robin. *White Fragility*.

²⁴ Baldwin, James. *The Fire next Fire*. Vintage International, 1993. 8-10.

²⁵ Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2017. 504.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

voice. For instance, intelligent self interest shows us that stronger education systems put in place to ensure that students of color are not left behind also tend to benefit poor white students. It tells us that empowering women to have a voice in politics often lends itself to better solutions to problems where women have been the front line of defense for generations (for instance environmental issues that have caused food scarcity in many lesser developed nations). It even tells us that raising a minimum wage to a living wage not only directly benefits the lowest socioeconomic class but all classes by a. increasing money available in the market b. increasing the value of non hourly wage jobs and c. reducing the need for federal funding for emergency aid programs. These are just three small connections of the intersectionality of our world that shows it is one's own self interest to pursue a more just world for all. Furthermore, these are just examples of physical impacts. In chapter 2, we will discuss the positive metaphysical impacts on all from fighting for this cause. Therefore, we must aim to bring all narratives to equal recognition, not just this dominant one. Considering the monumental difficulty of this task, however, it can easily send one into existential dread.

Marginalizations aside, it can often seem impossible to have a unique voice even within the dominant narrative. It often bleakly appears that humans are destined to seek approval and acceptance by others—our *bad faith* rears its ugly head as we try to fit the expectations of those around us and give excuses for our actions or non-actions.²⁷ We live in a simulation, spurred on to new depths by social media.²⁸ There we must pretend to be happy, while sinking in our feelings of imposter syndrome as we watch the “truly” happy people around us. But, the existentialist would note that following convention is simply hiding.

We should still believe in the ability to reach authenticity if for no better reason than it serves pragmatic purpose to continue to strive for authenticity. There are things, according to Kierkegaard, that we cannot help but feel even when we have given ourselves over to the masses. (“The crowd is untruth;” the individual is truth, as the crowd provides us with an excuse.)²⁹ That proves there is still authenticity to be had. Even if it does not feel good, things like our anxieties and despair are important realities that we cannot run or hide from. And we should not. They help to cement us in our *own* truths. Truth can only ever be subjectively universal, not objectively.³⁰ My understanding of the world and my place in it is not something that another could every fully understand in every way. Likewise, your understanding of the world and your place in it cannot be fully understood by me. We may make assumptions but there is not an objective universality to the world that we can prove about the way people live and interact with the world. This is both a frustrating and good thing, because it means we get to make our own truths and infuse them into the subjectively universal experience of the world to be interpreted by all.

We get to create meaning, create relationships, create *truth*. As luck would have it, Heidegger would have us believe that creating truth is specifically one of the things that *art* excels at allowing us to do.³¹ Through art we create a plane that the audience can teleport to metaphysically and experience a world as it could or even should be. Furthermore, if we are to believe Sartre, we are “*condemned to freedom*” or *truth making* if we want to consider ourselves truly human. We have freedom and so we have responsibility. The reality around us is what we, ourselves, create and so we are responsible for the outcome. We are responsible both for the things we choose to do and for those we choose not to do.³²

²⁷ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*.

²⁸ Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*.

²⁹ Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy, 8th Edition. Samuel Stumpf, McGraw-Hill, 2008.

³⁰ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*.

³¹ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

³² Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. 23.

So, the way we decide to define the world around us—including conceptualizations of things that might have positive impact on the world, like art and artists—is very important to our personal integrity... it becomes our duty to fight the dominant narrative.

How Can Artists Help?

Art acts as a language, and thus the same hermeneutical rules apply. It has the ability to silence the subaltern, *however*, it *also* has the ability to give voice to the subaltern. Given our “condemnation” to freedom we are responsible for the way in which we view, define, and promote things in our world. It is, therefore, time to frame art and artists in a way that promotes hermeneutical justice.

Artists have the ability, if framed correctly in society, to help all of us enhance our identity formation and projection. They can give voice to those marginalized groups and individuals, or subalterns, that are frequently silenced; and encourage us to do the same. They *can* change the dominant narrative and help people reach towards their authentic selves. But what exactly does that framing need to look like? And what kinds of barriers do we face to achieving that framing? To start, one of the big problems is that artists have often been defined as a secondary notion to the definition of art. Again, the emphasis has often been on the product (or the idea) rather than the artists and what they do.

Below is a bullet point list of just a handful of ideas around which art has been previously defined and qualifications on which it has been judged throughout the ages³³:

- Art has been seen as a representation or mimesis of the world... or as an expression of a particular culture or history...
- as aesthetic value or technical skill...

³³ Cross referenced texts in compilation of list:

Arnheim, Rudolf. *Visual Thinking*.

Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*.

Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*.

Blok, Anderson. *The Decline of Humanism*

Booth, Eric. *The Everyday Work of Art: How Artistic Experience Can Transform Your Life*.

Breton, Andre, Rivera, Diego, and Leon Trotsky. *Towards a Free Revolutionary Art*.

Cohen, Ted. *What's Special About Photography?*

Davies, Stephen. *Definitions of Art*.

Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*.

Feyerabend, Paul. *The Tyranny of Science*.

Feyerabend, Paul. *Science as Art: A Discussion of Riegl's Theory of Art and an Attempt to Apply It to the Sciences*.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*.

Greene, Majorie. *People and Other Animals*.

Hofmann, Hans. *On the Aims of Art*.

Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*.

Lamarque, Peter, Stein Olsen. *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art: The Analytic Tradition*.

Lassaw, Ibram. *On Inventing Our Own Art*.

Margolis, Joseph. *The Arts and Definition of the Human*.

Newman, Barnett. *The First Man Was an Artist*.

Nieuwenhuys, Constant. *Our Own Desires Build the Revolution*.

Ranciere, Jacques. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*

Rivera, Diego. *The Revolutionary Spirit of Modern Art*

- as strictly form or “art for art’s sake”—the idea that it is an exploration of what are often defined as the ‘principle’s of art and design’ such as color, line, harmony, value etc....
- as a communicator of knowledge (this could include emotional knowledge)...
- as therapy, enjoyment, craft, or hobby...
- as an expression of emotional content... or of individualism...
- as revolution—that art is at its purest conception rebellion and so its content must speak to political or social goals...

While these definitions all have their pros and cons and surely maintained utility at the height of their respective uses, they are not all effective for changing the dominant narrative. The first three listed I see, especially, as counterproductive to giving voice to unheard identities. By definition art as a representation or imitation of the world is not effective for creating change (especially when what is going to show up in a “representation” is simply what people already *believe* to be important to reality even if it silences other voices). The idea of art as simply about aesthetic appreciation, technical skill, or even “art for art’s sake” fails to emphasize anything about the artist, merely taking the art object at face value. These definitions aim towards a de-politicalization of art, of which in further chapters I will explain the problematic nature.

The remaining four, I believe certainly have value to the goal of changing the dominant narrative, however, they, too, are not perfect. Being a communicator of knowledge is a positive trait because it suggests there is some form of connection between artist and viewer if knowledge is transferred from one to the other. However, it perhaps suggests the end goal is benefiting the audience by giving them something. Our primary goal will be to benefit the voice of the artist, which, *then*, by default, will *also* positively benefit the audience/society.

Therapy, enjoyment, etc. brings us back to concern over the artist, but in a way that minimizes the meaning of art. It brings a sense of something that you do in your free time rather than a way of *living*. An expression of emotional content or individualism seems better but still not quite there, as it suggests that art is an outlet for who the artist already *is*. Continued development is going to be key as stagnation of identities is another form of marginalization. Even in cases where continued development is emphasized this alone is not enough without some further stipulations to have the widespread effect desired.

The last of the list, as revolution, speaks very clearly to the goal of giving voice to marginalized individuals. However, it is limiting in that it requests *content* that directly speaks to freeing the marginalized. I believe there is more to art and what artists do, than just having content strictly and overtly about political freedom, which can aide in changing the dominant narrative.

If we want to engineer a world that values human dignity and the identities of all individuals, not just the dominant narrative, we should be conceptualizing and appreciating what artists do in a way that promotes *all* of these existentialist values: freedom, vulnerability, choice, commitment, and integrity.

One of the overarching problems I see with this bullet point list is that these definitions focus on two schools of thought for appreciation and understanding of artworks: intentionalism or anti-intentionalism. Intentionalism, of course, being that the intent of the artist is most important in understanding and appreciating the work. Respectively, anti-intentionalism suggests that the art object itself is most important in understanding and appreciating the work. What is lost in framing things around the art object, but can be gained by emphasizing the artist is the *process*.

The same way existentialism, in general, suggests a methodology for living life, we might suggest specifically that the ameliorative art process this project designs may be viewed as a methodology to achieve authenticity.

If we focus on the artist's process we can frame art as a way of *Being-For-Oneself* while also *Being-in-Oneself*. To also be-in-oneself is important because we still need to be aware of the world, which we inhabit, if we wish to dismantle the dominant narrative (not being aware is simply flexing our privilege). But the Being-for-Oneself is going to be the primary concern. From here we can create a set of guidelines for reaching this existentialist goal. Or, in other words, being an artist becomes understood and appreciated for being *a style in which to live*, rather than a societal focus on an art object or a particular action that one may undertake from time to time with more or less frequency, depending on if it is merely hobby or profession.

To solve for the guidelines that would make up this methodology, we first need to note what things block authenticity and Being-for-Oneself. Things like the self through bad faith, other humans, society at large, politics, economics, etc. There are two primary levels of inaccessibility in art that we will discuss. The ways in which we have historically conceptualized art (rather than focusing on artists) contain defects that contribute to these problems. The first level is an inaccessibility due to lack of resources. These resources include, but are not limited to financial stability, education in “the arts”, the “talent barrier” and other stereotypes of who can and cannot be an “artist”.

The second level of inaccessibility is that, even for those deemed “artists” by society, there are obstacles in place to stop these individuals from partaking in projects that work toward authentic ends. A lot of this kind of inaccessibility has to do with how we define and market what art is. Both types of inaccessibility contribute directly to maintaining the dominant narrative, and, therefore, need to be dismantled. (We will discuss these inaccessibilities more in depth in chapter 3.)

None of this is to say that some artists are not already using art to dismantle the dominant narrative. Of course, they are. In fact, I will be using many examples from artists themselves over the course of this work. Based on the original research prompt I was using, I found that there are many artists today that are already considering their creative process in ways that optimize these same existentialist principles that lead to authenticity.

However, this process could be significantly more effective if we were ALL on the same page in terms of conceptualizing and, therefore, appreciating artists. Just because some artists are viewing their processes in this way does not mean that the narrative that society uses to explore art agrees. Currently, there is a great divide between the way in which artists and art viewers are educated on how to interact with art and likewise artists.

This is a problem because this disagreement maintains many of the barriers to accessibility at both levels described. Thus, this division will become the focus of the pragmatic part of this research—exploring how to effectively implement the proposed conceptualization in a meaningful way (Chapter 6). Words, and therefore definitions, are powerful. With a universal purpose and framing of artists, accessibility to social impactful way could increase dramatically.

Over the next few chapters I will first lay out some more details about the existential responsibility we face, the problems with our current art education narrative, and the potential of artists to impact the dominant narrative. This will be paired with a more in-depth exploration of the moral and political defects I believe current and previous conceptualizations of art have turned into obstacles for our social justice related *ought* goals. Then, I will present a list of guidelines for best practices to reach this Being-For-

Oneself through art. These guidelines are compiled from a combination of existentialist principles and artists' commentary about their processes. Following this, I will expand on how these guidelines *specifically* can be useful to liberate individuals and society from the dominant narrative. Finally, I will leave you with practical guidelines for implementation.

Chapter 2 – Existential Responsibility

Existentialism and ethics.

Jean-Paul Sartre has defined what has become a very well-known version of existentialism and the moral responsibility, which, he believes, goes along with it. However, as Simone De Beauvoir and Frantz Fanon would point out, there is much to his ethics that requires clarification... Most of the calls to action he proclaims truly should/could only apply to the individual belonging to the dominant narrative. Requiring the marginalized individual to follow this same call would potentially leave them in an even more vulnerable and dangerous scenario if held to the same standards. Thus, below we will explore, separately, how each relevant party is meant to interact with their existential responsibility.

Existential responsibility of the individual belonging to the dominant narrative.

To begin, one of the primary tenants of existentialism is the fact that existence precedes the essence—meaning that humans exist first, and afterwards define themselves. To Sartre, this clearly points to the moral reality that we must take full responsibility for ourselves. “Man is condemned to be free... condemned every moment to invent man.”³⁴ We are our actions and thus existentialism becomes an ethics of action and involvement. He uses the example that a coward is not born a coward but made into one by his own doing. Likewise, a heroine is not born a heroine, but made into one by her own actions. Each of these individuals can shift from one identity to the other depending on their actions...³⁵ meaning we have both the ability and responsibility to be the best individuals that we can.

This is a requirement because our identity is formed primarily from two sources. First our own reflection on ourselves. Second the projection of ourselves we send out into the world to be judged/perceived by others. We are lost within the “collectivity”, but it is also within that collectivity that we find ourselves.³⁶ In some sense we come into existence thanks to our nonexistence. But, of course, this is something that we shy away from:

*As long as there have been men and they have lived, they have all felt this tragic ambiguity of their condition, but as long as there have been philosophers and they have thought, most of them have tried to mask it.*³⁷

It is uncomfortable, to say the least, to find ourselves simultaneously dependent on others for our existence and, yet, with nowhere to place the “blame” but on ourselves when we err. We try to mask this thing we see as strange and irreconcilable because it makes us feel uncomfortable... yet the discomfort is what brings us into our full being. Therefore, we cannot shy away from it, but should rather seek to understand and draw from it our ethics.

For Sartre, we cannot blame those around us, nor our circumstances for the decisions we make. This is critical to Sartre as a means to force bystanders to take responsibility for their inaction as they witness atrocities. Indecision is still a decision to Sartre. If existentialism is based on man becoming aware of

³⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. 23

³⁵ Ibid

³⁶ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 7.

³⁷ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 6.

himself and projecting himself into the world then he cannot blame “human nature” for his misdoings—as there is no such thing as “human nature” if essence is defined by man himself.³⁸

A practical application of this might come from Robin Di Angelo, who, in *White Fragility*, points out a critical flaw in our dealings with racism—that we claim it, and our reaction to it, is human nature. She notes that we blame our reactions of shame to (and therefore shunning of) criticism when we participate in micro aggressions and other forms of discrimination on human nature. However, she says there is nothing natural about that feeling of shame. It is socially constructed as a means to continue the vicious cycle of racism.

There is nothing stopping us from, instead, having, for instance, reactions of gratitude for being made aware that we could and should change our actions to be less racist.³⁹ With an existentialist ethics, which throws away the concept of human nature, we have the power to change the way we interface with criticism. And, as it turns out, positive reactions to criticism are absolutely necessary to dismantle the oppressive aspects of the dominant narrative. It becomes the case that, “Racist power is not godly. Racist policies are not indestructible. Racist inequities are not inevitable. Racist ideas are NOT NATURAL TO THE HUMAN MIND,” as Kendi reminds us in *How to be an Anti-Racist*.⁴⁰ The same applies to all other phobias and isms.

Furthermore, following Sartre’s ethics, we find that humans are not just defining themselves when they project their image into the world—they are defining *all* humans. In a move not dissimilar to Kantian ethics,⁴¹ we are, effectively, setting the example of the standard for other humans when we project ourselves. He says we have a responsibility to ourselves (as we try to be the best version of ourselves) to choose the “good” but clarifies that there is no such thing as “good” that isn’t good for *all*.⁴² Existentialism requires us to be aware of ourselves but also to realize we need others to recognize us too... and likewise they need us to recognize them. We *need* each other and the intersubjectivity that connection provides.⁴³ If we are not promoting what is good for the recognition of others then how could we possibly hope to gain the recognition we ourselves require?

In order for men to become indignant or to admire, they must be conscious of their own freedom AND the freedom of others. Thus, everything occurs within each man and in the collective tactics as if men were free.⁴⁴

Willing oneself moral and free are the same thing; the immoral man is not free.⁴⁵ “It is only by prolonging itself through the freedom of others that [freedom of the self] manages to surpass death itself and to realize itself as an indefinite unity.”⁴⁶ Basically, we must want freedom for others in order to obtain true infinite freedom for ourselves.

Even those who belong to the dominant narrative, thus appearing to be free, will find that they have yet to achieve freedom truly until the marginalized are also set free. This is, first, because even the individuals of the dominant narrative will remain as an Other to the marginalized and in this way lose some level of

³⁸ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 89.

³⁹ Di Angelo, Robin. *White Fragility*.

⁴⁰ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 238.

⁴¹ In so far as the idea that: in order to determine what one should do when faced with an ethical dilemma, reason leads us to ask what would we want all others to choose if faced with this same scenario?

⁴² Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. 16-17.

⁴³ Ibid

⁴⁴ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 21.

⁴⁵ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

⁴⁶ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 33.

personhood. Secondly, this individual cannot reach their own personhood without taking full responsibility for both their actions and non-actions. Not doing anything in the face of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism etc. is still a choice. And that choice is to collude with these isms and phobias, thus diminishing the accessibility of freedom to others and themselves. Pretending that it is not their job to act, is hiding from the very freedom that makes them people.

But one of the reasons that we run from our freedom and responsibility is because not running requires that we admit our failures, that we be vulnerable. However, there can be no ethics without failure. As Beauvoir says, “One does not offer an ethics to a God”.⁴⁷ Man is not naturally good (for there is no human nature in existentialism):

We do not see man as essentially a positive will. On the contrary, he is first defined as a negativity. He is first at a distance from himself. He can coincide with himself only by agreeing never to rejoin himself. There is within him a perpetual playing with the negative, and he thereby escapes himself, he escapes his freedom. and it is precisely because an evil will is here possible that the words “to will oneself free” have a meaning. Therefore, not only do we assert that the existentialist doctrine permits the elaboration of an ethics, but it even appears to us as the only philosophy in which an ethics has its place. ...it is because man has something to lose and because he can lose that he can also win.⁴⁸

It is because we can fail that we can also succeed. Because we can run from our freedom, that we must face it and our responsibility. Sartre’s theory proclaims—no more excuses! —(and De Beauvoir and Fanon will clarify—no more excuses, for those belonging to the dominant narrative!) we must will ourselves to be free by willing all people to be free. As we will see in the next section, those parts of the dominant narrative ignoring this responsibility result in dire consequences for those individuals not belonging to the dominant narrative.

How the marginalized individual suffers from the individual of the dominant narrative not upholding their existential responsibility.

Have you ever done a google search for women’s hair styles? Have you ever typed the word “teachers” into a google image search and then tried the word “professors”? If you have not, go ahead and try it now. For women’s hair styles you will likely receive pages and pages of white women. To see hair styles for anything but white (Caucasian) hair you will need to clarify a race. When you google “teachers” you get pages and pages of women standing in front of a group of students. But “professors” results in almost exclusively men. You can adjust your search to “couple” or “relationship” if you want to find images of almost exclusively heterosexual pairings.

Now, search engines do eventually learn from what you personally click on in your own computer browser, so perhaps after hundreds of searches where you only click on images related to the non-dominant narrative, your search results may begin to change. However, the default is exclusively the dominant narrative. Discrimination is so encoded into our society that we *literally* coded it into our search engines. (Not necessarily purposefully, but coded into it nonetheless.)

In *Weapons of Math Destruction*, Cathy O’Neil explores the relationship between data collection and the persistence of inequality. Some of the things she talks about, for example, include job applications (the *Color of Law* also speaks to how data is similarly used to discriminate for home loans and housing

⁴⁷ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 9.

⁴⁸ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 34-35.

applications⁴⁹) are coded to assume things associated with the dominant narrative are the standard and those associated with the non-dominant narrative are not good traits.⁵⁰ Again, this isn't necessarily menacingly done, but the algorithms are made both by people and by "historical" record. So, when the history is racist, sexist, homophobic, ableist etc. then the modern algorithms that are based off that history will also become as such.⁵¹ It is a toxic feedback loop; a simulation presented as the truth, which results in the hyper real becomes the reality.⁵²

A computer says to itself, well, previously, applicants with a name sounding a particular way or who attended a particular school, for example, had a higher rate of being offered a job. So, when it goes through the thousands of applications it may be looking for similar qualities in order to narrow down the search. Only, the problem is, that historically, of course, male and white sounding names were hired more often (because racism and sexism) and of course the schools that were most hired from were also likely ones that funneled specifically wealthy high class students through them—generational wealth as privilege. This puts everyone from marginalized backgrounds at a disadvantage so long as computers are doing the processing.

Some effective advice college students with non-white sounding names have utilized is to insert their name as an image on their resumes so that the algorithm cannot pick it up as text. Another piece of advice for students who have foreign sounding names, but who look white, is to, despite it being an abnormal thing to see on a resume, include a photo of themselves—so that when a real human does look at their resume they see someone who fits the narrative they have been subconsciously taught to look for in applicants.

Furthermore, statistically speaking, the privileged are processed by people, but the masses by programs.⁵³ If you have enough social clout or wealth, then you probably know someone who knows someone that can get you an interview. If you do not, then you are left to the whims of the application process, which first includes rounds of algorithms trained to work against you should you happen to be marginalized in a way that you cannot "pass" as part of the dominant narrative.

From this constant bombardment and normalization of discrimination in all aspects of life comes the internalization and collusion with the isms and phobias by the marginalized groups themselves. To quote Claudia Rankine from her work "Citizen": "You take in things you don't want all the time... then the voice in your head silently tells you to take your foot off your throat because just getting along shouldn't be an ambition."⁵⁴ Colluding with the isms and phobias becomes, simply, second nature for the marginalized individual.

Over the course of her work, Rankine explores some of the times when those around her have enacted micro aggressions against her, yet she felt it was somehow her responsibility or her fault for these aggressions. She felt this instinctually because society had trained her to react in this way. She provides examples of everything from "friends" calling her the wrong name because they switched her name with their Black housekeeper, to appropriation of perceived language, from a man stopping her in a store to tell her his wife is Black too and beautiful like her, to another man expressing he literally had not seen her in

⁴⁹ Rothstein, Richard. *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*.

⁵⁰ O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction*.

⁵¹ Ibid

⁵² Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*.

⁵³ O'Neil, Cathy. *Weapons of Math Destruction*.

⁵⁴ Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*.

line—just looked right past her—as though this was a reasonable excuse for his cutting in front of her. She says of these transgressions, they are “disguised as little things, but it is still raining on you,” (9;10).⁵⁵

Ibram X. Kendi, in his work “How to Be an Anti-Racist” explores his own internalization with racism against himself and his race. He was trained through the dominant narrative to preach racist ideas about his own people, and notes “internalized racism is the real black on black crime”.⁵⁶ There are so many psychological and self-esteem impacts on marginalized individuals which set them up to think less of themselves and their marginalized group.

Even now I wonder if it was my poor sense of self that first generated my poor sense of my people. Or was it my poor sense of my people that inflamed a poor sense of myself? ...racist ideas make people of color think less of themselves, which makes them more vulnerable to racist ideas. Racist ideas make white people think more of themselves which further attracts them to racist ideas.⁵⁷

This leads to individuals turning on other individuals within their group, as Fanon predicted in *Wretched of the Earth*.⁵⁸ Trying to separate themselves as not the problem, one claims it isn't me it is those other individuals within this group. Ibram talks about the sensation of thinking it was laziness that kept other black people down, which comes with uplift suasion, and feeling the need to shame them for not striving for extraordinary lives.⁵⁹ And what an impressive pressure, to constantly have to be a representative of a group and always have to be on your “best behavior;” always trying to be extraordinary... (while also not receiving the same accessibility to resources).⁶⁰

There is in fact a term for the physical health disparities seen in marginalized groups related to the coping strategies they must take on while combating prolonged exposure to discrimination. John Henryism was a term coined by African American epidemiologist, Sherman James, both in reference to the folk hero John Henry⁶¹ and James' patient John Henry Martin in the 1970's. “James' hypothesis was that African Americans sometimes attempted to control their environment through attempts at superhuman performance.” Having been taught that if they only worked harder and were more determined they would be achieving, many individuals face both negative psychological and physiological outcomes due to overworking themselves just trying to be seen on par with the average individual from the dominant narrative.⁶²

Ibram, armed similarly with this notion that it was just laziness holding African Americans back enacted racism against himself and against his own people. Rather than striving for liberation of Black people, Kendi's crusade, just as the crusade of so many others, unwittingly turned from liberating Black people into a goal of “civilizing” them.⁶³ Which, in reality, simply meant taking on the culture of the dominant

⁵⁵ Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. 9-10.

⁵⁶ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 8.

⁵⁷ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 6.

⁵⁸ Fanon, Frantz. *Wretched of the Earth*.

⁵⁹ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 26-27.

⁶⁰ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 93, 101-106.

⁶¹ As railroads were being laid John Henry was said to be the fastest steel driving man of all. In successful attempts to beat the speed of a steam train, he drove the stakes of the railroad ties in ahead of the train so fast that ultimately at the end of the story he fell down and died after his great accomplishment.

⁶² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Henryism

Fisher, Richard. BBC. “John Henryism: the Hidden Health Impact of Race Inequality”

<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20200821-john-henryism-the-hidden-health-impact-of-race-inequality?ocid=uxbndlbing>

⁶³ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 28.

narrative since nothing else was seen as acceptable. Fanon,⁶⁴ Kendi,⁶⁵ Coates,⁶⁶ and Rankine⁶⁷ all express the common problem of back handed, racist, “compliments” from white individuals claiming they are not *really* Black, because they act so white. There is this very strange notion that “behaving well” will surely make the dominant group less racist, sexist, homophobic etc. but in reality it reinforces those ideas.⁶⁸

According to Fanon, “the black man who strives to whiten his race is as wretched as the one who preaches hatred of the white man.”⁶⁹ One should not be attempting to be something else just to please others, cries the existentialist. However, that is exactly the scenario in which individuals and groups from the non-dominant narrative have been placed. Fanon notes, “there is one destiny for the black man—white.” He postulates that economic inferiority, thanks to historic oppression that continues today, leads to that internalization of racism and, therefore, desire to become like the very person that oppresses him, just to fit in.⁷⁰ But to echo Rankine again “just getting along shouldn't be an ambition.”⁷¹

We see in portrayals of these systems other examples of how marginalized people are taught that they must follow certain rules or narratives in order to help improve conditions for the future, for instance in Brooklyn Nine-Nine's season 4 episode 16 titled “Moo Moo.”⁷² Brooklyn Nine-Nine is a sitcom revolving around a police force, so it may come as surprise that it would tackle some heavy issues. After already handling LGBTQ matters, sexism, and immigration issues in other episodes, the episode “Moo Moo” takes on racial profiling. Sergeant Terry Jeffers is walking in his own neighborhood one evening after learning his daughter accidentally dropped her stuffed “Moo Moo” out the window of the vehicle on the way home, when he is stopped from an officer from a different precinct. The “problem” is that Sergeant Jeffers is a Black man and apparently this is a pretty affluent neighborhood. The officer has pulled his gun and refuses to back down until Jeffers provides him with his own badge number. Later the officer would “apologize” for not knowing Jeffers was a cop. Jeffers points out that he shouldn't have been treated that way regardless of whether he was a cop and the racist response comes, “Ok, but you and I both know that you don't exactly look like you belong in that neighborhood.” He then proceeds to blame Jeffers claiming they wouldn't have had this problem if he had just been carrying his badge.

True to comedic form, the show will add some humor to the events. The team is chatting when Jeffers walks in angry. He explains he got stopped by a cop last night. Rosa asks, “stopped for what?” “Stopped for walking.” “That makes no sense—oh crap, I see what happened.” After acknowledgements from other team members, one older white man, Hitchcock, notes he has no idea what is going on and his partner, another older white man (both of whom we typically are meant to laugh at for being seemingly inept at their jobs) says, “he got stopped for being Black, Scully, get woke!” We then proceed to see flashbacks as Peralta and Charles, two younger white men on the force, discuss the kinds of crazy things they have done and never gotten stopped by a cop for. Including wearing a ski mask and climbing into an apartment through an open window in broad daylight to which a passing cop acknowledged this as a prank.

Jeffers is, as one might expect, outraged. What would have happened if he wasn't a police officer? What could have happened to his little girls? As expected, he heads to Captain Holt the next day to file a complaint. But unexpectedly, Captain Holt says “I'm not going to submit this.” “What, why not?”

⁶⁴ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁶⁵ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*.

⁶⁶ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*.

⁶⁷ Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*.

⁶⁸ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 204.

⁶⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Xii.

⁷⁰ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁷¹ Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*.

⁷² Brooklyn Nine-Nine. Created by Michael Schur and Dan Goor., 2013-present.

“Because I think it’s a mistake.” Holt points out how well Terry is doing in his career and how much progress has been made. No one in their precinct would ever do this. Sure, Jeffers, agrees that no one here would, but someone did just one precinct over.

Holt asks Jeffers to consider Holt’s career as a Black and gay man in the police force. He notes that he certainly faced these things too, but knew that if he filed complaints that he would miss out on opportunities to rise through the ranks so he bit his tongue promising himself that it would be worth it to obtain more power on the force and be able to make bigger change—Jeffers should do the same. Eventually, however, when Jeffers stands up to Holt and says he will report the offense whether he has Holt’s support or not Holt’s mind is changed. He later approaches Jeffers and explains that when these things happened to him when he was younger he felt very alone, and that he realizes now if he does not help Jeffers stand up to this offense he would be betraying the very reason he promised himself he would rise through the ranks. These scenes between Holt and Jeffers explore the balance of decisions that are often made between seeking justice now and seeking more justice later. Often it is rationalized that we must play the game to win and eventually change the rules of said game but when exactly is the right time to try to change the rules? Holt had been coerced, by the idea that playing by the rules would eventually create change, into actually playing into the very systemic problem.

Code switching in another unintentional continuation of the system that occurs for the marginalized individual in the presence of the dominant narrative. Speaking and acting differently in order to try to take on the dominant culture, again, in order to be accepted, gives momentary power by allowing the marginalized individual into the dominant realm.⁷³ However, after a while, one must be weary of forgetting their own language and culture—own identity.⁷⁴ Changing oneself even if only in certain scenarios eventually bleeds over into the rest of one’s life. This is one of Fanon’s biggest fears and why he titled his text “Black Skin, White Masks.”

He points out the woes of individuals extending this not just to approval but to a twisted form of “love.” He worries over individuals who are not truly in love with their partners, but instead in love with the idea of being with someone who will make they themselves more “white”.⁷⁵ It seems like these individuals are “wanting to convince others that [they] are worth but really [they’re] trying to convince [themselves],” he says.⁷⁶ Clearly this is not the case for all partnerships, but he observes that in many instances it is the case that this partnership ends with the Black individual then looking down on other Blacks.

But it is not just turning against others within one’s same group that stems from the internalization of the dominant narrative. Turning against other marginalized groups also occurs. Take for instances the racism found in the women’s rights movement, and likewise the sexism found in the civil rights movement. Both groups were unwittingly pitted against one another, claiming remarkably similar arguments as to why one group deserved rights over the other, when all this only actually served the aim of white men to maintain their own power. White women ended up claiming that while they deserved the right to vote, Black individuals, set back by slavery causing them to be used to positions of serving, were not independent enough to vote. Meanwhile, Black men pointed out that while they deserved the vote, women were, by nature of holding the position of serving men, not independent enough to vote.⁷⁷

⁷³ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 1-2.

“What Happened Was | Episode 2: Code Switching | Netflix”
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5iQuATmEbVw&t=23s>

⁷⁴ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 7

⁷⁵ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*.

⁷⁶ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*.48.

⁷⁷ Kendi, Ibram X. *Stamped from the Beginning: the Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*. Bold Type Books, 2017. 245-247.

The model minority myth is another example that stems from this issue as one marginalized group tries to fit into the dominant narrative by showing just how much they align with the narrative ...and possibly by pointing out how other groups do not. Even when one group doesn't purposefully throw another group under the metaphorical bus, it is still wielded as a weapon by the dominant narrative to point out, "Look how this group is flourishing, why can't you do that too? It must be due to some inadequacies."⁷⁸

The white public often points out how successful Black migrants are when they come to the US and use this as a way to claim that there is no racism issue, instead the African Americans claiming this is an issue simply must be lazy and/or dumb to not be able to succeed. However, there is an aspect of immigrant self-selection or "migrant advantage" that we do not consider which feeds into this, again, model minority myth.⁷⁹ Those individuals who are successful in actually making the immigration trip are often those who already have enough money and resources to immigrate in the first place. They also often have a certain level of university education due to strict immigration laws in the US. There is a filter created where only those who already had the best statistical chance of succeeding when living in the United States would even be able to get here.

Colorism, sexism, and homophobia also go hand in hand with racism, and it is incredibly common for individuals in one marginalized group to have been brought up to think less of those in other marginalized groups, firstly, because that is what the dominant narrative is already teaching and, secondly, because it is a defense mechanism to not be the "worst" group. Ta-Nehisi Coates in "Between the World and Me" discusses the power of hate defining us as humans, how it gives us identity, as he explores his own experiences realizing his homophobia despite having been aware of the racism he faced all his life⁸⁰ and generally how the victim is trained to blame the victim.⁸¹

While it initially may not seem logical, it is not uncommon for marginalized individuals to carry other isms and phobias with them. And, again, it need not be malicious. Many times, these things come out as a group trying to climb the social ladder. With this, sexism very commonly comes into play as the women of a group are often expected to be the social step stool, or sacrifice, such that the men of the marginalized group can rise to the standing of the dominant group. Women are commonly expected to be the de facto support.⁸²

But, perhaps, worst of all is the sense of self-doubt and feeling that there can be no change. Coates recalls, at the beginning of his book, an interview he had partaken in:

...at the end of the segment, the host flashed a widely shared picture of an eleven-year-old black boy tearfully hugging a white police officer. Then she asked me about "hope." And I knew then that I had failed. And I remembered that I had expected to fail. And I wondered again at the indistinct sadness welling up in me.⁸³

The entire book is written as a letter to the innocence of his son, contrasted with the weight of his own experiences with a life of oppression and discrimination. He recalls times when they watched the news together to see what would happen in response to the killing of a Black man, and he notes: "It was not my

⁷⁸ Adam Ruins Everything: "How America Created the "Model Minority" Myth" <https://youtu.be/Pg1X1KkVxN4>

⁷⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 67.

⁸⁰ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 59-60.

⁸¹ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 113.

⁸² Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 200.

⁸³ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 10.

expectation that anyone would ever be punished. But you were young and still believed”.⁸⁴ Any hope or belief that may have existed in one once a child, were washed from Coates long ago, his own understandings of the dark reality in which he lived having formed from a very young age. Yet he still wanted his son to be able to have the hope that he himself did not. He explores the tear in the existence of a parent of a marginalized individual—wanting for their child to be protected from bodily harm, yet also wanting them to be free to be themselves despite oppression.⁸⁵

Another unintentional problem that arises in working to procure justice after specific acts of racism (or other isms and phobias) is the conflict that arises between what the survivor of the trauma needs in order to process said trauma and what is good for the group seeking justice. A particularly illuminating example appearing on the tv screen includes Chapter V (or episode 5) of Netflix’s 2017 adaptation of the 2014 film *Dear White People*⁸⁶ which explores the topic of police brutality up close and personal.

Reggie Green, a muscular young black man, is attending a college party when he ends up in an altercation with a white student who was using the N word. Reggie merely confronted the other young man verbally telling him it was unacceptable behavior, however, just as the police would arrive on the Reggie was shoved forward by other students (Note: it is unclear as to whether this was purposeful or not) into the other student who then shoves him and begins an altercation. In seeing Reggie and this white student in an altercation the police point at Reggie asking if he is a student here (they attend an elite university and Reggie is singled out seemingly because he is Black as not belonging). Even when the white student vouches for him the police officer demands to see Reggie’s ID, again only his and not the white student’s. Reggie asks why the police officer needs to see *his* ID and not the white student’s to which the cop pulls his gun on Reggie. Thankfully no shots are fired as other students are recording the encounter on their phones and even the white students are asking the cops why they have guns and Reggie walks away from the encounter *physically* unscathed, but everyone in the room is very aware of just how differently the situation could have ended. The cop blames Reggie, claiming “if you would have just showed me your ID when I asked we could have avoided all that” as though not sharing an ID is an acceptable reason to potentially be shot. Reggie is beyond reasonably traumatized by the events.

But while he sits alone unable to process his trauma his friends call for a “clap back” against the brutality seen on their campus. The follow up episodes explore the disparity between what is good for the group and for the individual. In order to create a campus movement his friends need him to show up to events to protest the police and speak but he is in the midst of processing his PTSD from the event and unable to do so. Outraged by the events his friends don’t understand how he couldn’t want to fight back, meanwhile Reggie slips further and further into his trauma unbeknownst to his friends.

We see this kind of behavior in other areas as well. For instance, in the case of sexual assault. The individual who experienced the trauma often may not have the ability to speak about what happened. Yet those around want to use that moment to make group change. The desire for group change in terms of removing oppression is ethical but it does create an interesting dilemma when the steps necessary for that change may interact negatively with the needs of the individuals who directly experienced the trauma. The lack of ability for the traumatized individual to say anything is further preyed upon by the perpetrators and allies of the associated isms and phobias. It couldn’t have been that bad if they won’t say anything!

Coates also reflects on his own father beating him, and on the beatings of many of the children he knew—because, though the trespasses the children made would never require such consequences for a child of

⁸⁴ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 11.

⁸⁵ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*.

⁸⁶ *Dear White People*. Justin Simien, 2017-2021.

the dominant narrative, either the parents beat their children now or they waited to hear of how the police had done so later.⁸⁷ Yet even this could not save children of marginalized groups. In the final pages of this book/letter to his son Coates proclaims, “I do not believe that we can stop them, Samori, because they must ultimately stop themselves.”⁸⁸ “Powerfully afraid,” Coates shows the reader the full extent of impact of individuals from the dominant narrative choosing to ignore their existential responsibilities.

It is neither the job of the marginalized individual to save themselves from the oppression of the dominant narrative, nor is it possible for them to do alone. All individuals must take up their existential responsibility.

Existential responsibility of the individual belonging to the non-dominant narrative.

“Jean-Paul Sartre forgets that the black man suffers in his body quite differently from the white man,” Fanon points out.⁸⁹ One of the issues with Sartre’s ethical requirements when applied to the marginalized individual is that it actually can leave the marginalized individual in a place of grave disempowerment. If man is supposed to be held completely responsible for his place in the world then the fact that the marginalized individual is oppressed becomes his own fault, which we know is not the case.

As per the promise of existentialism, Fanon exclaims, “I came into this world anxious to uncover the meaning of things, my soul desirous to be at the origin of the world,” and yet these would not be an option for the marginalized individual as, “...here I am an object among other objects... for not only must the black man be black he must be black in relation to the white man.”⁹⁰ But it is interesting because we often talk about the marginalized individual as becoming unseen when in reality perhaps it is a hyper visibility that occurs instead as Rankine suggests, rather than a disappearing.⁹¹

Rather than not existing the marginalized individual becomes responsible not only for their own body but for their entire group and ancestors.⁹² And as Kendi points out marginalized people are what people see them as regardless of whether that is the reality or not⁹³ and so it becomes the case for example that:

Black people are apparently responsible for calming the fears of violent cops in the way women are supposedly responsible for calming the sexual desires of male rapists. If we don’t then we are blamed for our own assaults, our own deaths.⁹⁴

Beauvoir points out that this comes from the aim of the path of least resistance in politics. It is far easier to throw innocents in prison than to search for the actual culprit, and far easier for the police to disregard the individual for the sake of the police’s love of violence.⁹⁵ This is the laziness of the system. And, while

⁸⁷ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 15, 82.

⁸⁸ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 151.

⁸⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 117.

⁹⁰ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 89.

⁹¹ Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. 49.

⁹² Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 92.

⁹³ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 37.

⁹⁴ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 78.

See also from Coates to his son: “But you are a black boy, and you must be responsible for your body in a way that other boys cannot know. Indeed, you must be responsibility for the worst actions of other black bodies, which, somehow, will always be assigned to you. And you must be responsible for the bodies of the powerful—the policeman who cracks you with a nightstick will quickly find his excuse in your furtive movements.”

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 71.

⁹⁵ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 166-167.

it makes the marginalized individual hyper visible, the hyper visibility is not *as an individual*. It is *as an object*. This echoes Fanon's concern that it isn't a sense of inferiority that is felt but a feeling of not existing at all,⁹⁶ which would lead him to weep "not responsible for my acts at the crossroads between nothingness and infinity",⁹⁷ not for lack of trying, as Sartre's claims might make one feel, but because experiencing existentialism is far different for the marginalized individual than for the privileged individual from the dominant narrative.

It is not for the marginalized individual's *bad faith*⁹⁸ that they are unable to take responsibility for their own existence as with those belonging to the dominant narrative, but because the existence of the rest of their group as objects is thrust unwillingly upon them no matter how much they attempt to throw it off. And, because, no matter how much a marginalized individual attempts to project oneself into the world, there will always be the majority of the dominant narrative attempting to ignore them, refusing to recognize their existence, as is required for freedom in existentialism to work.

To support this, Beauvoir points out that when those who are oppressed and restrained from freedom are at last liberated, they are often the ones who grasp freedom and their existential responsibility the most firmly. Meanwhile, those who have had access to grasping this freedom from the beginning run from it like cowards.⁹⁹ For instance, upset by her perception of white women in her society not fighting for their rights, she contrasted Black activists, posts slavery, continuing to fight for the right to vote and political freedom, not satisfied with only "symbolic" freedom, with upper class white women who seemed satisfied with not speaking up for their rights even when they had the power to just within their grasp. She felt that many of these women were satisfied with the mediocrity of lack of freedom because it also left them seemingly with less responsibility. She explains that there are surely situations in which those who are oppressed also appear to be running from freedom, but this is because they have been "mystified" into colluding with their own oppression, and so they cannot be considered guilty for it, as it is not their own choice but the choice of those suppressing them into this scenario.¹⁰⁰ In terms of existentialism she also notes that, really, those who are capable and refuse to go after freedom are the only individuals we should really consider less than human.¹⁰¹ Those subpar humans that purposefully run from their own freedom, and also try to drag everyone else down with them, are the worst and most dangerous kinds of tyrants according to Beauvoir.¹⁰²

Because of this, Beauvoir effectively suggests that, although of course "every man needs the freedom of other men... [because] man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men," that sometimes sacrifices have to be made.¹⁰³ Though, in a perfect world, we should want freedom for all people, the tyrants, because they wish to oppress others' freedom, must be revolted against. And if that means oppressing the tyrants, then so be it.¹⁰⁴ It is both the responsibility of those of the non-dominant narrative and those of the dominant narrative to revolt against said tyrants. Unfortunately, this also leaves the marginalized individuals at risk of becoming like the tyrants who oppressed them (this is

⁹⁶ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 118.

⁹⁷ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 119.

⁹⁸ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness*.

⁹⁹ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 41.

¹⁰⁰ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 91, 93, 105.

¹⁰¹ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 52.

¹⁰² De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 48, 53.

¹⁰³ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 77-78.

¹⁰⁴ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 87-89, 104, 106.

one of Fanon's biggest worries in *Wretched of the Earth*¹⁰⁵, but this appears to be a necessary risk according to Beauvoir (and also Fanon)¹⁰⁶.

The existentialist responsibility of the individual not belonging to the dominant narrative becomes very clear to Fanon:

I find myself one day in the world, and I acknowledge one right for myself: the right to demand human behavior from the other. And one duty: the duty never to let my decisions renounce my freedom. I do not want to be the victim... In the world I am heading for, I am endlessly creating myself.¹⁰⁷

Every action taken, every choice made by the individual of the non-dominant narrative must be one that acknowledges themselves, at minimum *to* themselves, as a person, as a dynamic individual continuing to *create* themselves. Whether or not those around them acknowledge this, should not be a representation of whether they have fulfilled their existential responsibility. Whether or not those around them acknowledge this, can only show whether those around them have fulfilled their own existential responsibility.

As Kendi reflected on his past, "I believed that violence didn't define just Smurf,¹⁰⁸ but all black people around me, my school, my neighborhood. I believed it defined me—that I should fear all darkness, up to and including my own black body."¹⁰⁹ Finding ways not to fear oneself and finding ways to feel that one has power and freedom is important (which we will soon find art has the ability to help us with). While, Kendi admits, it is certainly the case that the marginalized individual faces more hurdles to power than those of the dominant narrative, it is *not* the case that they are *completely* powerless.¹¹⁰

It is important, in order to avoid inaccurate blame or claim that they are not fulfilling their existential responsibility as humans, to note that the marginalized individual does not have as much power while we operate under the dominant narrative. As Coates notes,

'It only takes one person to make a change,' you are often told. This is also a myth. Perhaps one person can make a change, but not the kind of change that would raise your body to equality with our countrymen. ...probably no people have ever liberated themselves strictly through their own efforts,¹¹¹

So, it becomes very important not to place the entirety of this weight on the marginalized individual, lest we begin to blame them for their own marginalization. (Again, we return to the existential responsibility of those belonging to the dominant narrative to play their part in securing this freedom for everyone.) However, Kendi wants to assure us that there is *some* power there and so it must be wielded responsibly.

Believing that oneself is *completely* powerless is also a way to hide from one's existential responsibility, as Beauvoir brings up, in *The Second Sex* and *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, issue with women, who now know that they have been and continue to be oppressed, as an example of running from their responsibility in.¹¹²

¹⁰⁵ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

¹⁰⁶ Fanon, Frantz. *Wretched of the Earth*.

¹⁰⁷ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 204.

¹⁰⁸ One of the recurring individuals from the neighborhood and school in Kendi's text.

¹⁰⁹ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 77.

¹¹⁰ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 140.

¹¹¹ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 96.

¹¹² De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*.

De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*.

Saying “I am powerless” provides an excuse to not try, and furthermore believing it does strip one of one’s power to make choices. As Kendi points out, it also enables you to not only stay within your own oppression but to act in ways that help oppress others.¹¹³

Coates recalls a story of his friend, tracked down and murdered by a police officer. Throughout the tale, the reader likely assumed the officer to be white. But at the end we discover he was in fact Black.¹¹⁴ There are, as previously mentioned, many ways in which groups can create internal discrimination—within racism there is ethnic racism, colorism etc. (also race specific sexism and homophobia); within sexism we see transphobia and genderism; LGBTQ+ and neurodiverse and non-able-bodied communities surely see their fair share of internal discrimination.

One of the more common ways is when a marginalized individual has been made to feel as though they don’t belong to their marginalized group, and some small act of “kindness” is made by the dominant narrative in order to make those particular individuals feel as though discrimination against their group as a whole does not exist anymore. (For an historic example, during the time of slavery, those slaves invited into the household, would often feel a bond with the slave masters and feel as though they were treated well, that there was reason the others were sent to the fields, and that they themselves were special in some way.) These individuals proclaim that things like racism, sexism, homophobia etc. (dependent on which group they belong to) do not exist... and then these extreme outliers of experience are wielded as examples by the dominant narrative to proclaim that everything is fine and nothing needs to change... when in fact, the reality is the status is not quo. Thus the added existential responsibility of the marginalized individual becomes to ensure that all choices made do not cause the oppression of others within their group.

Kendi,¹¹⁵ Di Angelo,¹¹⁶ and Beauvoir all speak to the constant vigilance that is needed to fulfill one’s existential responsibility. “The goal is not fixed once and for all; it is defined all along the road which leads to it. Vigilance alone can keep alive the validity of the goals and the genuine assertion of freedom.”¹¹⁷ One of the best qualities of existentialism, according to Beauvoir is the very ambiguity that makes so many people shy away from it (the uncertainty scares us). She says what that ambiguity gives us is dynamicism¹¹⁸ and what we will find (as Fanon agrees in *Wretched*¹¹⁹) is that dynamicism is the very thing that lets us continue to project our personhood. So, now that we have established the existentialist responsibility of the individual from the dominant narrative and the non-dominant narrative, where exactly does art fit into all of this?

Existential ethics and the artist’s process.

To Sartre, imagining is necessary to grasp being and nothing, and, therefore, to consciousness, and thus to Being-for-Oneself. He finds that being free and to imagine are two sides of the same coin.¹²⁰ One of the things that the imagination shows us is that you are always imagining from a particular perspective. This means that you always must experience Being-in-Oneself. You must be aware of the world in which you

¹¹³ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*.

¹¹⁴ Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 83.

¹¹⁵ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*.

¹¹⁶ Di Angelo, Robin. *White Fragility*.

¹¹⁷ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 165.

¹¹⁸ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 139.

¹¹⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *Wretched of the Earth*.

¹²⁰ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Basic Writings*. 96.

are submerged if you are to imagine something growing from it or something different from it. Through this scenario, Sartre finds that imagination is not just one of the necessary components of consciousness...

As a result of producing the unreal, consciousness can appear momentarily delivered from being in the world, it is just this being in the world which is the necessary condition for the imagination... we may therefore conclude that imagination is not a contingent and superadded power of consciousness, it is the whole of consciousness as it realizes its freedom.¹²¹

Imagination is consciousness. It is freedom. And with that freedom of course we must talk about responsibility. Remember that Rankine reminds us: “because white men can’t police their imagination black people are dying.”¹²² Remember that Coates reminds us of his own “stunted imagination” that he owes to his chains of oppression.¹²³ Marginalized individuals are being hurt by the unchecked danger of the imagination of the dominant narrative. And marginalized individuals are being held in place by the oppression that takes away their *own* imagination, and, therefore, their chance at freedom.

But the arts are a place where that imagination—that freedom—*could* be obtained if we frame what artists do correctly. Beauvoir talks about artists’ efforts to surpass pure existence (into essence) as genuine because they are not trying to be something specific. “Only in the work of art the lack of being returns to the positive. Time is stopped, clear forms and finished meanings rise up. In this return existence is confirmed and establishes its own justification.”¹²⁴ She references Kant’s “finality without an end” in relation to art. I would interpret all of this to mean that because the art is not to be used as a means to an end (remembering that Kant claims art is only work *not* produced for economic or other means¹²⁵), the creation process is actually able to establish essence for the artist.

She goes on to compare art and her idea of existential ethics. The two mirror each other greatly:

What makes criticism so easy and art so difficult is the critic is always in a good position to show the limits that every artist gives himself in choosing himself; painting is not given completely either in Giotto or Titian or Cozen; it is sought through the centuries and is never finished; a painting in which all pictorial problems are resolved is really inconceivable; painting itself is this movement toward its own reality; art and science do not establish themselves despite failure but through it.... human transcendence must cope with the same problem: it has to found itself, though it is prohibited from ever fulfilling itself... there is an art only because at every moment art has willed itself absolutely; likewise there is a liberation of man only if, in aiming at itself, freedom is achieved absolutely in the very fact of aiming at itself.¹²⁶

One important aspect we see here is the idea that art (and liberation) are never finished. This echoes greatly both Kendi¹²⁷ and Di Angelo’s¹²⁸ call for constant self-criticism and reflection. These are the very

¹²¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Basic Writings*. 101.

¹²² Rankine, Claudia. *Citizen: An American Lyric*. 135.

¹²³ “I always thought I was destined to go back home after college—but not simply because I loved home but because I could not imagine much else for myself. And that stunted imagination is something I owe to my chains.” Coates, Ta-Nehisi. *Between the World and Me*. 85.

¹²⁴ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 74.

¹²⁵ Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Judgement*.

¹²⁶ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 139-141

¹²⁷ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 23.

¹²⁸ Di Angelo, Robin. *White Fragility*.

endeavors that are an artist's lifeblood and, so, it comes as no surprise that an artist may have a leg up in the existential push towards liberation. Another aspect is that success in art and liberation happens through failure. The failures are what allow for the criticism and reflection to be possible in the first place. They are what allow for us to imagine alternative outcomes. The final aspect Beauvoir brings up in this section is again this sense of not being a means to an end. Art is a movement and likewise liberation is a movement, which realizes itself in the movement not in the ends.¹²⁹ Sartre says "what art and ethics have in common is that we have creation and invention in both cases. We cannot decide a priori what there is to be done."¹³⁰ In every way we can see how artists are set up to be powerful players in existential ethics by mirroring its process.

But circling back to the purpose of this work, we must frame artists correctly for them to play a useful role in these ethical goals. Even Kendi points out in *How to Be an Anti-Racist*:

Definitions anchor us in principles. this is not a light point: if we don't do the basic work defining the kind of people we want to be in language that is stable and consistent we can't work toward stable consistent goals.¹³¹

Fanon comments on the common "clarifications" made of emphasizing "what a great BLACK poet" rather than simply what a great poet.¹³² He notes that to speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture¹³³—so when those of other nationalities are called upon to speak English they are expected to take on the culture that goes with it, presumably because that culture is superior. So, what does this mean for our visual languages? In what ways have we asked artists to appropriate the popular culture of the dominant narrative or else be ignored? How do we make room for them to present themselves rather than attempt to assimilate?

Beauvoir notes artists should be weary of becoming idols¹³⁴ which echoes Fanon's concern¹³⁵ with heroes being placed on pedestals outside the reach of the accomplishment of the average person. She also wants us to be wary of creating aesthetic images that will be appreciated only for their beauty rather than for intellectual recognition of the horror from which may have come.¹³⁶

In order for an artist to have a world to express he must first be situated in this world, oppressed or oppressing, resigned or rebellious, a man among men. ...he must first will freedom within himself and universally; he must try to conquer it,¹³⁷

They cannot cherry pick what will be expressed, hiding from the actual world instead of disclosing it. Ultimately, Beauvoir claims that the artist should "reveal existence as a reason for existing," "perpetuate this never-to-be-finished revelation,"¹³⁸ and be ok with the finiteness of art and the self.¹³⁹ This last one comes from the rationale that the place where we established infinity is through freeing others. We know that this work that is started, is not, and cannot, be completed, for it is part of a movement, and it is only in that movement of freedom for all that we can extend our individual finiteness into collective infinity.

¹²⁹ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 139-141

¹³⁰ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism and Human Emotions*. 43.

¹³¹ Kendi, Ibram X. *How to Be an Anti-Racist*. 17.

¹³² Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 22.

¹³³ Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. 21.

¹³⁴ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 75.

¹³⁵ Fanon, Frantz. *Wretched of the Earth*.

¹³⁶ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 82-83.

¹³⁷ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 84.

¹³⁸ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 86.

¹³⁹ De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Ethics of Ambiguity*. 137.

With such a parallel to the methodology of existential ethics, it feels as though art should be a place in which we can successfully achieve this goal of combating the dominant narrative to provide liberation to the marginalized. However, there are many barriers that currently infringe on our ability to access and appreciate art, and therefore artists, in such a way that would be useful. The next chapter will further explore the potential of artists, when framed correctly, to impact said dominant narrative and some of the changes we will need to make to do so.

Chapter 3 – More on the Potential Power of Artists to Impact the Dominant Narrative

Creating art is freedom/liberation.

In addition to liberation from physical restraints, complete freedom requires liberation from a great deal of metaphysical restraints including the unknown, the unexpressed, and the self—both the self that others think we are and the current self, which constrains us from changing into who we *could* be. (There is a constant “othering” of our own self-image—as we imagine the way that those around us see us as “Other”—that needs to be rectified.)

At any given moment, there are constructions of these three things that limit us to living statically rather than in dynamic possibilities. Freedom from the unexpressed, and the self, become particularly important for philosophers exploring existentialism.

There are a lot of roadblocks to an uninhibited sense of self. Some come from outside influences and others are self-inflicted. But, through art we can explore dynamic possibilities. Thus, we can project the Self and make both ourselves and everything else come into true existence. Through the allowance for future identity building, the creation of art becomes liberation. By this, I mean participation in art is not just presenting the *idea* of liberation, it *is* liberation. Many would argue that from the beginning, art existed as a searching for the Self in order to be set free.

There is a human desire for freedom (and of course an existential responsibility) and participating in art aids in this endeavor. Constant A. Nieuwenhuys claims in “Our Own Desires Build the Revolution” that:

It is impossible to know a desire other than by satisfying it, and the satisfaction of our basic desire is revolution. Therefore, any real creative activity... must have its roots in revolution... our needs impel us to discover our desires... we do not want to be ‘understood’ either, but to be freed.¹⁴⁰

Searching for/expressing ourselves and communicating is not always about being *understood* by others. It is about the act itself freeing us. I believe, this sense of art making having liberating abilities is the reason we have had so much disagreement on the framing of artists... This is because to have access to liberation means to have access to power. If creating art is power, then the dominant narrative would naturally fear people partaking in art in ways that could upset that narrative. Logic follows, that, if a person, who holds power (and, we assume, wants to maintain that power), attempts to suppress some act, it is likely that they view this act as a threat to the maintenance of their own power. They would not view this act as a threat unless they believed this act had power in it. Therefore, the fact that, regularly, the dominant narrative acts to suppress artists suggests that there *is* power within creation to upset the dominant narrative.

Rebranding of participating in art as anything less than liberation is an act which diminishes its power.

Whether done so with negative intent, or through accidental happenings, trying to define creative process in ways that do not associate it with freedom has the result of diminishing the potential power it has to upset the dominant narrative. There are many definitions that have managed to masquerade themselves as art due to the systemic nature of the dominant narrative trying to protect itself. Whether it is specific political figures, big business, a general upper class, or the system as a whole, we see problematic

¹⁴⁰ Nieuwenhuys, Constant. "Our Own Desires Build the Revolution." ART THEORY. N.p., n.d. Web. (Originally published in Cobra, no. 4, Amsterdam 1949.)

definitions being promoted. Problem definitions can be achieved unwittingly, even, in a manner that simply reaffirms an individual's class of privilege. In fact, artists themselves are often drawn into becoming coconspirators by reconfirming an unempowering definition of the artistic process as part of their everyday existence.

We may accept objects as art based on them sharing similar appearances to items that are art. We might, for instance, mistake aesthetic qualities for art. But just because there are many artworks that happen to be aesthetic, does not mean that the aesthetic nature of an object is a sufficient or even a necessary condition to have been part of the art making process. A piece of art may be aesthetic, or it may not be aesthetic. For example, the paintings of Francis Bacon¹⁴¹ are not necessarily what all people would deem "aesthetically pleasing" and yet they are art. Likewise, an aesthetic item may be a piece of art or it may not be art. For example, a beautiful painting of a flower produced mindlessly from a rehearsed pattern in order only to meet financial ends, while aesthetically pleasing, should not be considered art.

Even if both these qualities (i.e. being aesthetically pleasing and being art) commonly appear in the same object, this does not mean there is any sort of directional causation or other relation. Overall, what the product looks like should not be a factor into whether something was a result of the creative process. Yet, this has become a common requirement in the marketing of artworks and the marketing of artworks has become the way in which we frame artists.

Likewise, things such as technical skill or craftsmanship often masquerade as art. But, in reality, they are simply elements that often align themselves with art. This alignment is often present because these are factors that make it easier for an artist, and their work, to become well known. But fame should not be a determining factor in whether something is art.

At the other end of the spectrum, a sign of "utility" has often been used to degrade art, especially those works created by marginalized people and cultures, by claiming that it is not art. The term "craft" has been remodeled as a word that is separate from art, despite it belonging on the same Venn diagram, where both can overlap. The culture of "high art" has become a way to restrict access to participation in the arts to privileged classes.

To give a famous, and particularly impactful, example of rebranding we can look to Hitler's regime. His censorship of the arts in Nazi Germany is well documented. Hitler put together a show called "Degenerate Art" ("Entartete Kunst") in 1937, to share with the public works that he claimed showed corruption and madness. He spoke of the artists, who made the "degenerate" works, as "fools, liars, or criminals who belong in insane asylums or prisons." At the same time, Hitler presented a second show of "true German art" to contrast the "idiotic" works, thereby showing the public what true "art" looked like.¹⁴²

This show of "Degenerate Art" works were works by artists calling for change and reflective of inner struggles and triumphs, etc. Hitler considered these works attacks on the German aesthetic, or in other words the dominant narrative, he desired. He managed to make phrases, that should be positive statements, regarding becoming a Being-For-Oneself, sound horrible when he described the "Degenerate Art," saying:

All those catchwords: inner experience, strong state of mind, forceful will, emotions pregnant with the future, heroic attitude, meaningful empathy... all these dumb, mendacious excuses, this

¹⁴¹ <https://francis-bacon.com/artworks/paintings/1950s>

¹⁴² Hitler, Adolf. "Adolf Hitler (1889-1945) Speech Inaugurating the 'Great Exhibition of German Art'." Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. By Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 439-441. Print.

claptrap or jabbering will no longer be accepted as excuses or even recommendations for worthless, integrally unskilled products...¹⁴³

Typically, we think of heroics and empathy as positive. Likewise, a strong mind and will are typically seen as positive character traits especially for Being-For-Itself. It is incredible that Hitler was able to make thinking about the future into a *bad* thing. But he was able to do it in part by shifting the focus from the artists and their process to the art objects and framing art objects as necessarily needing to be aesthetic objects. And his declaration about *these* things being bad (as opposed to claiming some other aesthetic problem with the artworks) provides evidence that these were the elements he saw as threatening in the artistic process. This same sentiment is echoed by individuals in power from long before and long after Hitler's time. These existentialist ideals are what those in power believe need to be stopped through censorship, replacement, and stagnation to uphold the dominant narrative.

Ultimately, Hitler wanted to halt the dynamic nature of a culture and replace it with a static one of his liking. Edward Said explores this concept in *Orientalism*, in discussion of how the western world created a stagnant (and inaccurate) image of the "Orient."¹⁴⁴ Similarly, Frantz Fanon explores this halting of dynamicism in *Wretched of the Earth*,¹⁴⁵ in relation to how colonizers, even post "decolonization," inflict cultural violence on the colonized in order to keep them unempowered.

Staticism is an effective strategy to avoid potential revolutions against one's power. This is because a rebellion requires imagining a future different from the present. Alexander Blok in 'The Decline of Humanism' says:

Every movement has its birth in the spirit of music, through which it acts, but after a lapse of time it degenerates and begins to lose the musical, the primal element out of which it was born and, as a result, perishes. It ceases to be culture and becomes civilization. Thus, it was in the ancient world—thus it is with us.¹⁴⁶

Blok's complaints, here, are that of the arts becoming static. He recognizes that revolution naturally comes from the arts (in this case, he specifically cites music). But, when those arts begin to remain still, they become historical elements and memories of a society, rather than actionable elements to keep moving forward. The key to revolution is to keep the music alive, so to speak, or more specifically keep making *new* art (or new ways of thinking about old art) rather than just holding on to old views of old art. There is a difference between an art object maintaining its arthood and becoming an artifact.

Dewey writes on this topic, as well, making us question what happens when an art object becomes a "classic." What does it lose in this instance, as it becomes frozen in time, rather than remaining lively, and relevant to contemporary society? What we should be asking is what happens to the artist and our understanding of their process. Yes, the work becomes isolated, and, most importantly, so, too, does the artist.¹⁴⁷ And, so are all of the artists and people in that society, when this freezing becomes widespread.

This concept, that the artistic process is the basis of revolution, is not just a common fear among those in power. It is a common thread of hope among artists. Hans Hofmann, for example, speaks about art as the basis for "confidence of the spirit" and its ability to "create a new reality" in his work "On The Aims of

¹⁴³ Ibid

¹⁴⁴ Said, Edward. *Orientalism*.

¹⁴⁵ Fanon, Frantz. *Wretched of the Earth*.

¹⁴⁶ Blok, Alexander. "Alexander Blok (1880-1921) 'The Decline of Humanism'" *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. By Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 263-265. Print.

¹⁴⁷ Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. New York: Penguin, 2005. Print.

Art.”¹⁴⁸ Ibram Lassaw, too, as a representative of the American Abstract Artists group, spoke about not representing reality but *creating* it.¹⁴⁹ To have the ability to, essentially, create truth is an incredible idea and even more amazing in practice. This sentiment of art *creating* truth is echoed amongst philosophers like Heidegger in his work “Poetry, Language, and Thought.”¹⁵⁰

Artists know that creating art is powerful. Returning to Hitler’s attack on the arts, we see responses to this censorship from Andre Breton, Diego Rivera, and Leon Trotsky in “Towards a Free Revolution Art”

The regime of Hitler, now that it has rid Germany of all those artists whose work expressed the slightest sympathy for liberty, however superficial, has reduced those who still consent to take up pen or brush to the status of domestic servants of the regime, whose task it is to glorify it on order, according to the worst possible aesthetic conventions.¹⁵¹

So, we see, it was not just about getting rid of those who made true, and therefore powerful political, art. It was also about convincing the nation that what Hitler was claiming was “art” truly was. With the right marketing (including hiring individuals, trained in the technical skill, to produce aesthetically pleasing objects) Hitler could rebrand what it was to be art. He utilized this new definition to simultaneously create more support for his regime and squash the potential for rebellion against his narrative.

This censorship of artists is something that we see over and over again throughout history, whether related to warring religions destroying each others’ icons,¹⁵² cultural suppression during colonization, or attempts to quiet the voices of those speaking out against other human rights’ violations regarding race, gender, orientation, ability etc. In the US today, a couple obvious ones include the notion that “rap isn’t real music” and “graffiti isn’t real art,” which are clearly racial (and economic) attacks. Silencing the artist’s voice is a war tactic. It both limits the individual’s self-exploration (and, therefore, maintenance of personhood) and blocks groups from rallying for accessibility to political participation.

Some common measurements by which a false hierarchy of art is marketed to society include: the idea of being a master of the arts or a savant, authenticity (typically used to mean an art object was made by the person we believe it was made by), style/period of the work, media hierarchy (objectifying the “difficulty” level of particular media or content choices), and conversation about the principles of art and design for their own sake (as opposed to the reason these rules were employed in the work of art). This is, of course, by no means an exhaustive list...

Emphasizing these things is a distraction technique. The goal of the privileged, by shifting the framing of society to emphasize art objects and a set of arbitrary rules rather than on artists and their making process, is to market “art” that maintains standards rather than a process which allows for dynamism. The fact that someone paints, builds sculptures, or takes photos does not make them an artist. Kant tells us, in “Critique of Judgement,” about the difference between beauty and the sublime being like the difference between

¹⁴⁸ Hofmann, Hans. "Hans Hofmann (1880-1966) 'On The Aims of Art'." *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. By Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 371-374. Print.

¹⁴⁹ Lassaw, Ibram. "Ibram Lassaw (1913-2004) 'On Inventing Our Own Art'." *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. By Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 439-41. Print.

¹⁵⁰ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, and Thought*.

¹⁵¹ Breton, Andre, Rivera, Diego, and Leon Trotsky. "Andre Breton (1896-1966), Diego Rivera (1886-1957) and Leon Trotsky (1879-1940) 'Towards a Free Revolutionary Art'" *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. By Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 532-535. Print.

¹⁵² See for example Iconoclasm in Byzantium in: Brooks, Sarah. "Icons and Iconoclasm in Byzantium." *Metmuseum.org*, Aug. 2009, www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/icon/hd_icon.htm.

mechanical skill and fine art.¹⁵³ Just having the technical skill is not sufficient to make someone an artist. There has to be something deeper—some communication, cognition, and/or impact—according to Kant, or aid in Being-For-Oneself, in my own proposition.

In fact, by my premises an artist need not even have that mechanical skill to make an art object. Again, the technical skill just makes it easier for the artist to become well known. I stand by the assumption that every person is *capable* of being an artist. However, not every person is currently living up to that capacity, which is exactly why I believe a revised framing of the role of artists becomes necessary—so that more people are given the access they need to live up to that capacity. I believe that this lack of living up to this capacity is largely in part due to the, above mentioned, false marketing of ‘art.’

Artists will always be ‘political’ in a broad sense of the term.

As previously noted, we know artists could upset the dominant narrative. We have much historical precedence that shows one of the first areas that an individual or group in power will act to control, if they wish to remain in power, is culture, including artists. As mentioned previously, writers like Frantz Fanon and Edward Said explore this phenomenon of controlling the arts to control people, using [de]colonization and the birth of the idea of orientalism as examples, respectively.

But it is not just because artists have the ability to be powerful that we should recognize them as political. We need to recognize artists as political players due to the ramifications of denying they are political. We often talk about dehumanization as the opposite of liberation. There are endless ways in which dehumanization can occur but I wanted to list a few problems that can be directly linked to having a false understanding of artists: First, as we have already explored in depth, the definition of “art” by the privileged and powerful is meant to market art objects rather than artists and maintain standards rather than allowing for dynamicism. This results in dehumanization both on the group and individual level as members of society lose their personhood due to an inability to imagine their future selves.

Second the claim by privileged artists that their works are non-political, or the idea of “art for art’s sake”, is paradoxical. First, it only makes sense that artists work with content related to the political. According to Rivera:

The man who is truly a thinker, or the painter who is truly an artist, cannot, at a given historical moment, take any but a position in accordance with the revolutionary development of his own time. The social struggle is the richest, the most intense and the most plastic subject which an artist can choose.¹⁵⁴

It is easy to find inspiration in the political. But, even when the content does not seem as though it is directly political, so long as the work is broadcasting the individual’s identity the artist is partaking in a political struggle for power.

Furthermore, claiming some artworks are “art for art’s sake” and, therefore not political, creates a false hierarchy. This hierarchy says the work created by individuals privileged enough to avoid the political—for, as Tania Bruguera notes, “[Art] can only be just personal for those with privileges”—is better than

¹⁵³ Kant, Immanuel. "Analytic of the Sublime." Critique of Judgement. Ed. Nicholas Walker. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2008. 139. Print.

¹⁵⁴ Rivera, Diego. "Diego Rivera (1886-1957) ‘The Revolutionary Spirit of Modern Art’." Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas. By Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Oxford: Blackwell, 2003. 423. Print.

works by those who are not privileged enough to make nonpolitical art.¹⁵⁵ In fact, by making this claim you are making the, supposedly “nonpolitical,” work political by making the work itself privileged. Thereby the artist too is participating in the political.

In my personal experience, the only times I have ever heard another artist claim their work to be nonpolitical is when it has come from an individual whose identity already matches the dominant narrative. In speaking with artists not from this group identity, it always seems as though there is some inkling, at all times, of a sense of being a representative of their respective groups. For an individual to not feel the burden of being a representative is a place of privilege. And, it is only, because these individuals do not feel the pressure of having to represent their entire identity group, that they can be under the impression (false though it may be) that they are creating nonpolitical work. Ironically, because their work is the only work that can even try to claim to be nonpolitical it actually becomes political by nature as this drives home the point that others do not share this same privilege.

Furthermore, accessibility to being considered a “good artist” by the standards that are marketed is often limited to those in positions of privilege. This is due to accessibility to education, economics, and “knowing the right people” etc. The rebranding of art and thereby artists as nonpolitical has even created a cycle where marginalized individuals end up colluding with the notion that they are not lacking accessibility to the arts. In her article by the same name, Linda Nochlin points out that when she asks “Why have there been no great women artists?” she is usually met with a short list of counter examples.¹⁵⁶ People would list, for example, Frida Kahlo, Georgia O’Keeffe, perhaps Mary Cassatt. But, this list of counter examples misdirects the attention away from the actual question.

While it is great that we are trying to publicize the names of some important female artists, Nochlin points out that, ultimately this response is problematic. The number of women that have participated in the arts (and especially those who have been recognized for such participation) are far outnumbered by the men who have participated. These counter examples are outliers—not because women are incapable of partaking in the arts, but because they have not been afforded the accessibility to do so as commonly as men have. When giving these examples, instead of trying to answer the question and thereby point out the systemic problems in society, there is an implied insistence that women have already achieved the same level as men in the arts. But, if this is the case: “If women have in fact achieved the same status as men in the arts, then the status quo is fine as it is.”¹⁵⁷ Or, in other words, there is no inequality of accessibility that needs to be addressed.

Given that inequality of accessibility to the arts is rampant, instead, Nochlin suggests we need to be honest about answering the question and admit there are actually fewer “great women artists” so that then we may begin to address this accessibility issue. We don’t have as many great women artists for the pure reason of lack of privilege. Historically, not having access to education, time, or money for art, paired with the generally believed (albeit false) idea that women just shouldn’t or couldn’t participate in art, had, and continues to have, a real impact on who made (and makes) art.¹⁵⁸ This is a similar problem for all marginalized groups. Part of the reason for this lack of accessibility is that by branding art in this way it keeps those groups, and the individuals within them, *marginalized*.

¹⁵⁵ “Legacy.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 7. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s7/legacy/>>. November 7, 2014.

¹⁵⁶ Nochlin, Linda. “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?”

http://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Nochlin-Linda_Why-Have-There-Been-No-Great-Women-Artists.pdf. N.p.: n.p., n.d. PDF.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid

¹⁵⁸ Ibid

While it is possible that this is not the case in every art form, as I do not claim to be an expert on the history of all art forms, it is certainly so for visual arts and common in other forms as well. Consider, for example, if you asked a random passerby to name famous historical playwrights or authors. Simply due to sheer quantity of men holding those positions in society, it is likely that they will answer with the name of a man rather than woman. (Likewise, the statistical chance of them answering with the name of a white person rather than the name of a person of color is also higher.) Think even to fashion brands, which may seem as though, historically at least, would have been a more feminine filled field. How many common brands that you can name are named after men? Becoming well known in the arts is not just about the art itself but about the publicity. So, if women were not taken seriously in terms of their authority as creators, even if they managed to participate, they would not have the publicity to be remembered without working so much harder to be more memorable than their male counterparts.

Perhaps the only place that it would be more difficult to not acknowledge women would be in singing or acting, for it can be difficult to not discern a woman from a man in these roles, and, it seems, today, both sets of shoes are often necessary for the aesthetics of the sound and for the plot of the film respectively. But, even so, is there equal accessibility here to being taken *seriously* as artists? For example, over and over we see interviewers ask serious questions of male actors, about their preparation for a role, while women are asked about the dress or accessory they are wearing. In recent years, we see more and more women getting angry about being taken less seriously, but this does not signal that we have now achieved equal accessibility. It signals that we still have a ways to go.

Remember, for example, how in 2017 a brand-new Wonder Woman film came out directed by Patty Jenkins, the first female director of a super hero film in over 10 years. In fact, she apparently was only the second female director on such films to make such a movie with a budget higher than \$100 million.¹⁵⁹ Fans, particularly women, went crazy over the film. With Wonder Woman, Jenkins won “Biggest Grossing Live-Action Film Directed by a Woman, Domestic and Worldwide” that year.¹⁶⁰ In addition to finally highlighting one of DC’s most badass woman characters on screen in a very big way (Wonder Woman previously had her own films but they were never allotted such a big budget before), one of the things that women particularly took to the internet about was what a relief it was to see less scantily clad women heroes. The Amazonian women in the film wore armor that protected their midriff and didn’t appear to just be there for the male gaze. Even so, while it was noted that this was a step in the right direction, not everyone was satisfied. The apparel, though a bit more practical, was still clearly fit to show off feminine curves in other ways. But, nonetheless, a step in the correct direction, it seemed.

However, one year later Justice League came to theaters. This film starred the same actresses starring in Wonder Woman. But it had a different, male, director, who also opted for a different costume designer. Suddenly, all of these women, despite playing the same roles, in a film meant to be consistent with Wonder Woman, were seen in skintight leather that hardly covered more than a two-piece bathing suit. Many sites have displayed the images side by side to show the disparity¹⁶¹

Not surprisingly, the internet went wild. Outrage came from both men and women, while support for the scantily clad actresses came largely, and very predictably, from a male audience. Attempts were made to

¹⁵⁹ Spiegel, Josh. “Wonder Woman’ Is a Milestone, But It Shouldn’t Be.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4 June 2017, www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/wonder-woman-is-a-milestone-but-shouldnt-be-1010023.

¹⁶⁰ Anonymous. “Patty Jenkins.” *IMDb*, IMDb.com, www.imdb.com/name/nm0420941/bio?ref_=nm_ov_bio_sm.

¹⁶¹ Outmagazine. “Of Course ‘Justice League’ Tried Making the ‘Wonder Woman’ Amazon Outfits Sexy.” *OUT*, Out Magazine, 13 Nov. 2017, www.out.com/popnography/2017/11/13/course-justice-league-tried-making-wonder-woman-amazon-outfits-sexy.

explain how wearing next to nothing was logical as it would be easier for the women to move around in while fighting.¹⁶² These flimsy attempts at rationalization did not seem to sway the outrage.

Unfortunately, as we see in this experience not two years ago, the male gaze is still very much alive in the arts even when women reach “success.” It echoes the sentiments of the famous piece “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?” by the Guerrilla Girls, a group of anonymous female artists who came together starting in 1984 working “to expose sexual and racial discrimination in the art world.”¹⁶³

This isn’t, of course, a problem only women face. All marginalized individuals face similar struggles for being “other” than the dominant narrative, which is white, able bodied, neurotypical, heterosexual, cis, and male. People of color, for example, simultaneously face being sexualized as “exotic,” while also being told they cannot play the roles of *fictional* beings because certainly mermaids (which have not been racially defined in literature) logically must be white (i.e. see the internet’s outrage at Disney casting Halle Bailey, a black woman, as Ariel in the upcoming live action version of *The Little Mermaid*¹⁶⁴).

Furthermore, it seems that when a marginalized individual takes on a role that has not been held by their identity previously, they *must* be exceptional. If not they are proof of the inability of that marginalized group compared to those of the dominant narrative. Patty Jenkins *had* to do a phenomenal job with Wonder Woman or it would have looked bad for all women wanting to be directors. Yet, Zack Snyder’s frankly horrid rendition of Justice League had no impact on how we feel about male directors. Marginalized artists have not obtained equal accessibility until it is just as acceptable for them to create failing works.

Whether they have to fight to be included, or fight to be taken seriously during inclusion, we see that it is impossible for art to be non political for minorities or marginalized individuals. This fight, for these identities, never appears to end. Furthermore, just as we note a “female engineer,” but instead of a “male engineer” just “engineer”—as male is the assumed standard—or likewise a “black cop” but not a “white cop”—as white is the assumed standard—we do this sort of labeling with artists too.

This leads to my third point. Violence is done to marginalized artists by forcing these individuals into a narrative of a false universal voice. Marginalized artists are constantly labeled as “a[n] insert marginalized identity here artist.” There is social expectation that all the work that a marginalized individual makes will be utilized as representative of whatever marginalized group they are associated with. Yet, obviously, we do not casually talk about every piece a white, cis, hetero, able-bodied, man completes as representative of that group identity.

My fourth point is that the prospect of art being labeled as nonpolitical can silence all artists as non-academics and non-intellectuals. Even more dramatic interpretations of art as having no utility, whatsoever, is a misdirect. This creates the assumption that the artist merely must practice a mechanical skill, such that their work is enjoyable to look at, rather than that the artist engages in thinking.

For this problem, I bring bias from personal experience to the table. It has been a common experience, for me, to face incredulous responses to the idea of art students having the ability to be intelligent. From elementary to graduate school it is not uncommon for art students to be faced regularly with statements

¹⁶² Spiegel, Josh. “Wonder Woman’ Is a Milestone, But It Shouldn’t Be.” *The Hollywood Reporter*, 4 June 2017, www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/wonder-woman-is-a-milestone-but-shouldnt-be-1010023.

¹⁶³ Tate. “Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?,” Guerrilla Girls, 1989.” *Tate*, 1 Jan. 1989, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793.

¹⁶⁴ Alexia Fernández June 11, and Alexia Fernández. “Halle Bailey On Overcoming Racism After The Little Mermaid Casting: ‘Just Keep Pushing.’” *PEOPLE.com*, 11 June 2020, people.com/movies/halle-bailey-on-overcoming-criticism-the-little-mermaid-casting/.

degrading their interest in art as not “real academics” or “real work,” that this is something for unintelligent individuals who lack the drive to work hard. Often they are faced with being seen as incapable of being successful in “real” fields because they aren’t smart enough and just want to take the lazy or “fun” way out and enjoy themselves making art. Post school, artists are plagued with financial degradation of customers refusing to pay fair prices even after services are rendered because they don’t see why they should pay for the artist to “have fun.” I find it unlikely that there is a working artist in the world who will die without having heard the words “I’ll pay you in exposure.” Despite high demand for the arts in the world, artists themselves and their time are often not valued because they are not seen as intellectuals. Furthermore, artists are taught to be complicit in this problem.

The problem is not just that artists are being marketed as not as smart as “academics.” The problem is that, given the way our current social dynamics work, these rationalizations make pragmatic sense in terms of the individual trying to prosper. Artists are being taught to accept this negative labeling if they wish to succeed. The incessant accusation, that an artist as an intellectual is the exception to the rule (or commonly, that rather than calling them “artists who are intellectuals” we reference these individuals as “intellectuals who are *also* artists”), acts as a suppressant of artist voices. You may notice parallels here to how marginalized individuals who succeed are often seen as the exception to the rule. While I do not believe these are the same situation, I hypothesize that there is a connection here. I believe successful artists have been characterized in this same demeaning way in order to remove their power to create social change. It seems to me that the end goals of this idea of “the exception to the rule” applied both to marginalized individuals and to artists are the same—maintain the dominant narrative.

Within the art community, it is easier to forget that this happens. It is also likely that it is easier for artists, who have climbed the publicity ladder, to forget this as they obtain more privilege. But, for the young and socially malleable artist, this is hugely problematic as it is a level of oppression. And, given that participating in the arts is a path to personhood, and Being-For-Oneself, this is problematic for society as a whole. People are being steered away from the arts by not wanting to be viewed as unintelligent. But why should they be seen as intelligent and as living a lifestyle that ought to be pursued?

Chapter 4 – Guidelines for Being-For-Oneself Via Art

The Importance of the Creative Process as Critical Thinking and Purpose

Cindy Foley, the Executive Assistant Director and Director of Learning and Experience at the Columbia Museum of Art, concludes confidently in her TedTalk,¹⁶⁵ that she wants her children “to think like artists no matter what career path they choose.”¹⁶⁶ This is a bold statement to make considering the current emphasis on STEM fields. It is one thing to argue the necessity of the humanities for the ability to communicate within STEM related fields, or to even argue for keeping the arts alive in order that we round out and balance our lives. However, Foley is going so far as to proclaim that the best way to approach problem solving and critical thinking, even for STEM majors, is the manner in which artists do. So, why would this be the case? Why should a scientist, historian, doctor, or architect want to think like an artist? Foley says (echoing De Beauvoir’s thoughts):

Artists realize that ambiguity is part of the process. They take it, they identify it, and they tackle it head on. So, if artists are doing this, can’t you imagine if art education was a place where artists [and non artists] could go to prepare for lives of not knowing?¹⁶⁷

Being impressed by the products an artist produces is really a surface level claim. What really makes artists impressive is the way they think. They are the ones actively playing with fire--coming up with ideas that are revolutionary, questioning the way we see and the politics of the time. It is not as though the artists we love and remember are loved *just* for the aesthetic nature of their works. More likely, it is because these individuals were at the forefront of innovation in some style or technique, which was driven by a new philosophy on the world around them (or the world within them).

Foley suggests, in education for future artists, we need to consider whether we are teaching students art or to *think* like an artist. The latter is most important if we aim for a state of Being-For-Oneself. We need to emphasize the creative *process*, not just the intent or product. And this is something that needs to be taught both to future artists and future viewers.

Foley explains her idea of best practices for teaching:

We need to be teaching for idea generation... creativity is not the lego kit but the bucket of legos and the *potential for ideas* within... I love the person who has the *courage* to have ideas... Picture a classroom full of master builders at play--the key is play ...play is a sure fire way to kickstart ideation... transdisciplinary research--research that serves curiosity... math, art, and science being in service to *ideas*...¹⁶⁸

Courage is an important aspect of this creative process. We cannot continue to teach students to remain in the semblance of safety that is espoused by the stagnation of ideas. We must teach the courage of play and exploration that produces dynamicism both in the individual life and society. Again, this is necessary for us to implore a widespread carrying of the metaphorical torch of existential responsibility. Often times, we explore this courage as a singular trait that the individual must find within themselves and “against all odds” as though one *has* to go through hardship first in order to achieve it. But why not teach it instead?

¹⁶⁵ Titled: “Habits that are essential to creativity: Comfort with ambiguity, idea generation, transdisciplinary research.”

¹⁶⁶ “Teaching Art or Teaching to Think Like an Artist?” Cindy Foley, TEDxColumbus. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcFRfJb2ONk>>. November 26, 2014.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid.

Why not provide the foundation of discourse for even those maintaining greater privileges to be able to find their courage? Courage need not be a solo journey, but to achieve widespread use of courage we must first encourage the required traits. The thought process often employed by artists can help aid in this.

With an emphasis on the creative *process*, rather than the intent or the product, the potential for the confrontation of ideas and thinking is limitless. But one of the key factors here is having the courage, not only to come up with such ideas, but, to be *open* to them. We need to be vulnerable to doing things “wrong,” so that we can determine solutions that do work. Furthermore, we need to choose to do these things by being open to our inner child and allow ourselves to explore. Foley mentions the significance of play. It allows us to explore our curiosity and sense of childlike wonder.

To some extent art is a “happening.” Despite even the most laborious planning processes, resolving an artwork with an end product exactly as the artist planned is improbable, if not impossible. The materials, and sometimes the essence of the artwork itself, tend to loudly foil any perfectly laid plans the artist may attempt. It is as though the work has a mind of its own.

Though this may be frustrating, it is an honest reality about the creative process that artists expect. It is a strange day, indeed, for an artist to find their work turned out *exactly* as planned. I think that many would be suspicious of this kind of occurrence. It may feel as though they had not pushed the work far enough. The primary function of the art making process is a learning process. Having listened to hundreds of interviews with artists¹⁶⁹ it seems as though the common interest amongst them all (since their aesthetic interests all varied greatly) is the learning aspect. This learning occurs both in the production process as well as in the viewing of an artwork.

Through this learning process we also find that artists gain a sense of purpose--something that the artist could do that no one else could. Purpose is perhaps the original driving force of humanity. We see that it drives us both in mundane and extreme scenarios as psychologist Viktor E. Frankl describes in his text *Man’s Search for Meaning*.¹⁷⁰ He explains that during his time as a prisoner in various Nazi concentration camps including, Auschwitz, during World War II, he found that the most effective means to give other prisoners the ability to survive was to provide them with purpose. His text explores the psychological tolls that led prisoners, including himself, to accept their imminent death and give up on living but also the ways in which purpose could revitalize that drive to live. For those who had lost their will to live he helped them find something that only they could do. Whether it was a focus on their career and the medical advancements that an imprisoned doctor could contribute once freed or even the sheer importance of fatherhood and what an individual might mean to their family once returned, living, to them.

Purpose is an easy to find motivating factor within the arts. This is because the goal for an artist is never to be like someone else, but to be themselves, their own unique identity and by extension contribution to the world. In this sense participation in arts can become a survival factor for us in the worst of scenarios. However, purpose is not only necessary in these cases. We also see the toll a lack of purpose has on those in less dire situations. A lack of purpose creates within us a void that, according to Frankl, we are constantly trying to fill. In many cases individuals attempt to fill that void with things like power or money. Because of such a yearning to fill that void, Frankl proposes humans are driven even to unethical means in many situations. He saw it within the concentration camps as fellow victims were driven to become prison guards, often unnecessarily mean and cruel to other prisoners simply so that they could

¹⁶⁹ Through a combination of PBS’s Art21 series, TedTalks Art, and personal encounters. (Personal encounters might be conversations with artists and listening to artist talks in person while backed up with information from reading personal/artist statements in galleries, museums, and artist websites.)

¹⁷⁰ Frankl, Viktor E. *Man’s Search for Meaning*.

attempt to fill that void with a sense of power, which they thought could replace a purpose. And, likewise, we see this with the rise of the game of capitalism and plays for political power that will skirt any morsel of moral responsibility.

Yet money and power cannot actually fill the void. Because of this, Frankl, remarks that the individual seeking to fill the void by these means must continue to dig themselves further and further into immoral behavior in failed attempts. Imagine how different a world we might live in if we instilled from a young age a true sense of purpose in all individuals, not just those struggling to survive, but *all* individuals, by introducing them to the creative process. We need to seek this form of art education and appreciation not just for those who are marginalized but for those who themselves belong to the dominant narrative. This is an important way in which we can shift the emotional and mental focus of all individuals towards our existential ethical goals.

Returning to the content of the artist interviews, we see through art, many desired to obtain a greater understanding of the world around them, of their own identity, or even the way others think. Regardless of what specifically the artist wished to learn about, or if they felt that they truly ended with a greater understanding or simply more questions, all expressed an interest in thinking. Catherine Opie, an American photographer, put it simply when she explained to Art21 that what drives her as a photographer “is just extreme curiosity”.¹⁷¹ Similarly, Richard Serra, an American minimalist sculptor, explained that even when he was little and his father and brother would be working on the car, it wasn’t by listening to or watching the men work that he came to understand what was going on. It was by drawing the pieces that he came to understand.¹⁷²

Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla, collaborative artists based in Puerto Rico, provide an explanation of their relation of art to curiosity and learning:

What we do often with our projects is it’s an excuse to research things. It’s a chance to learn more about something in the world and be able to formulate some kind of response. More questioning. Constantly arguing. A way to control something that may seem overwhelming. And finding a way to own it and contribute something. That’s kind of the nature of making art. It’s to turn something upside down, and when you turn it upside down you see it completely differently and new meanings come out of it.¹⁷³

Overall, the artists in these interviews and presentations aren’t simply talking about a need to create, they are speaking of a need to learn that, for them, happens to be satiated via creation. And, this is a constant thread throughout the majority of the artist interviews from Art21. While it is certainly possible that this common thread is a factor due to the producers of Art21’s goals, this is a common conversation I have had with artists from a variety of backgrounds and “levels”. This can be heard from listening to artist talks at museums, from professors in art school, but, also, from back alley art studios of artists, who have not and may never make a “name” for themselves, and even from vendors at craft shows.

Allora and Calzadilla also mentioned three key ideas: arguing, control, and contribution. In terms of arguing, I would like to suggest the word “confrontation” as a replacement because I don’t believe these artists mean the kind of negative connotation that often comes along with “arguing”. Instead, what I

¹⁷¹ “Change.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 6. PBS. <<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/change/>>. April 14, 2012.

¹⁷² “Place.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 1. PBS. <<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/place/>>. September 21, 2001.

¹⁷³ “Paradox.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 4. PBS. <<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s4/paradox/>>. November 18, 2007.

interpret their meaning to be (as it aligns with commentary from other interviews) is a place where ideas come together unclearly, in the sense that there are no immediately understandable *facts*¹⁷⁴. Rather than presenting facts of that which can be known, there is an exploration and presentation of various truths that exist in conflict with one another due to the lenses of different worldviews. Yet these different ideas are not any less true due to this conflict.

The control that is mentioned speaks to authority in one's own life--making choices. Meanwhile, the mentioned contribution speaks to a more global liberation, not in the sense that it necessarily has to be widespread, but global in that it is outside of just the artists, themselves. The contribution is to give something to the viewers, presumably some kind of accessibility to the thoughts being explored in the work and, perhaps, to the kind of feelings that the artists, themselves, had while creating the works. This is part of the artist's purpose—to communicate these confrontations and experiences in a way that contributes to a new truth or world building experience. Thus, the audience is also being liberated in some way by gaining some of this control that the artists themselves had gained.

The five guidelines for art as a way of Being-For-Oneself which will be presented include: 1. confrontation of ideas, 2. vulnerability, 3. choices, 4. truth making, and 5. authentic identity building. All of which will lead us to an understanding of how Being-For-Oneself helps to liberate us from the confinement of the dominant narrative—as our existential duty requires

*I want my children to think like artists no matter what career path they choose; where ideas are king and curiosity reigns.*¹⁷⁵ --Cindy Foley

Confrontation

*The world is in a state of siege. The mind is in a state of siege. Transform it into something you can contemplate, not something you can use.*¹⁷⁶

--El Anatsui

Filmmaker John Waters opens the Art21 episode *Stories* by explaining that he first fell in love with collecting art when he realized that it had the ability to make people mad. For Waters “good art provokes and inspires” and “not everybody likes the stories I tell but if they have a strong reaction, even hate them, I guess I’m doing my job.”¹⁷⁷

As viewers of artwork, we are not meant to simply agree or disagree with an artwork. Rather, just like the artists, the viewers are meant to think. Do artists want viewers to look at their work feeling like they obtained definite facts? Or do artists want to be springboards for ideas and feelings? Not only is the latter going to be more useful to the existentialist, but it is echoed by many of the artist interviews. The

¹⁷⁴ The term “fact” of course varying from our understanding of “truth”. A fact being something that is considered to be known to be the case such as the date on which an event happened, such as the date of birth of John Lennon or the date of a terrorist attack. A truth being something that could be relative to the worldview of the particular truth teller. An easy example of this might be the reality of Jesus to a Christian may not be seen as a reality to an atheist, yet the reality of Jesus is very much true and has a real impact on Christians.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ “Change.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 6. PBS. <<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/change/>>. April 14, 2012.

¹⁷⁷ “Stories.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 2. PBS. <<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s2/stories/>>. September 9, 2003.

existentialist mindset requires that one does not simply accept what they feel they already know but to question it. This is the only way we can make a shift from the dominant narrative. To find contradictions, and poke holes in what they already “know,” to test it. Getting people to learn, not by memorizing, but by thinking and discussion is the primary form of teaching that we do in philosophy. Artists participate in a creative philosophy, and when established as a way of Being-For-Oneself, likewise, engage viewers in these same kinds of discussions.

I use the term “discussion” here in multiple ways. Obviously, discussion could be meant to infer actual conversation with another individual(s). However, it could also be a warring within one’s own mind, as one is forced to consider multiple possibilities. In both situations, a discussion brings multiple ideas into confrontation with each other.

Pepon Osorio, an installation artist from Puerto Rico and later The Bronx, explores this kind of discussion. His work, he notes, talks to his own memories. And, in the work, he reflects on and confronts himself. Likewise, he suggests, when the audience looks at the work, they too must reflect on and confront themselves. Simply presenting an idea is not enough to make someone think. It needs to be an idea that conflicts in some way with the things a person already believes. This occurs both for the artist as they make the work and for the viewer as they make observations. Without this confrontation, no real thinking occurs for either party.

Osorio says:

The work is created when I bring together where I am and where the rest of society is. What I would love is for people to confront who they are in relation to what they have just seen. Who am I? Where do I stand? I want to provide change not only socially but physically and spiritually.¹⁷⁸

Confrontation is intimately linked to change. Not only can there be no change without confrontation (for if you already completely agree and believe what you are seeing, then what is there to change?), but also the goal of confrontation should be change. Osorio says he wants all three—social, physical, and spiritual change—but, it is important to note that, while all three may not be the goal of all artists (some may choose one or another; or perhaps even a different kind of change than those Osorio has listed here), all the artists I have explored, appear to want their work to at least provide the potential for change. That change could be only a momentary shift into a new perspective, or it could be a long-lasting impact.

And, certainly, we see that this is possible. The example I would like to give of impact is a particular individual who was audience to the art of literature. At TEDGlobal, Ann Morgan, spoke about her experience of having challenged herself to read one book from every country in a year. She spoke of the project saying that: “My not knowing and being open to my limitations is what became the project’s strength. Wrestling with unfamiliar ideas can be enlightening for understanding your own thinking.”¹⁷⁹ Morgan explored the fact that the titles she ended up reading probably weren’t very good representatives of a larger picture of each of the cultures they were written in. Furthermore, that, really, she probably didn’t understand a lot of the intricacies of each work that someone who grew up in that setting would understand. However, even with these limitations, reading the works enabled her to understand better how and why she thought the way that she did, when previously she had not considered the kinds of boundaries to her own thinking in that way. Though this is an example from an individual reading books, the same is true for the confrontations that occur in all the arts, including visual.

¹⁷⁸ “Place.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 1. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/place/>. September 21, 2001.

¹⁷⁹ “My Year Reading a Book From Every Country in the World.” Ann Morgan, TEDGlobal>London..

https://www.ted.com/talks/ann_morgan_my_year_reading_a_book_from_every_country_in.

The way in which a confrontation and proposed change is implemented within an artwork also becomes important, however. Many tv shows work towards normalizing marginalized identities by addressing the awkwardness some may feel around the topic, but without hostility, sometimes without even putting a name to the identity. For instance, sitcom Schitt's Creek¹⁸⁰ eloquently explores pansexuality with character David Schitt. The story takes place in a small town, sharing the same name as the show, which at first glance appears to fulfill many of the stereotypes one might expect (though the show will eventually also teach us not to judge based on class or economics). Johnny and Moira Schitt and their two children, David and Alexis, are recently bankrupt after having led a rather extravagant and wealthy life. As it turns out the small town that Johnny had bought for David as a joke will be the only place they can now call home. Ultimately, they are forced to take up residence in the local motel which certainly clashes with the kind of lives they are used to leading, often in hilarious ways.

While the entire family is over the top to say the least, David's additionally incredibly flamboyant nature and intriguing fashion sense, lead most of the town residents to assume that David is gay. Including his new best friend, Stevie, a young woman who manages the motel. Which is unfortunate for Stevie as she develops quite the crush on David. However, one evening much to Stevie's glee but very much surprise David kisses her. The next morning they awake in the same bed and later have this interesting conversation while searching for wine at the local grocery to bring to a party:

Stevie: So, just to be clear, um, I'm a red wine drinker...

David: That's fine.

Stevie: Ok, cool, uh I only drink red wine...

David: OK.

Stevie: And... up until last night, I was under the impression that you too only drink red wine ...but I guess I was wrong?

David: Ah, I see where you're going with this. Um, I do drink red wine, but I also drink white wine ...and I've been known to sample the occasional rose. And, a couple summers back, I tried a merlot that used to be a chardonnay, which got a bit complicated...

Stevie: Yeah, so, you're just really into all wines.

David: I like the wine and not the label, does that make sense?

Stevie: Yes, it does, this is just very new to me. As long as you didn't roll over and cry yourself to sleep with regret, I'm good.

David (sarcastically): No, no I absolutely did—just wept for hours in the dark.

Over the course of this interaction the two characters express and learn about (respectively) David's pansexuality in a way that is very much in character. But what we also see is the normalization of pansexuality in light of the seemingly already normalization in Schitt's Creek of the concept of being gay. Stevie clearly knew what being gay was and was okay with it. Then she learned it could be more complicated than that. We see her process this information and accept it. (We also see that some of this conversation stems from her concern for her friend that she may have assaulted him in some way while he

¹⁸⁰ "Honeymoon." Schitt's Creek, created by Dan Levy, and Eugene Levy, season 1, episode 10.

was under the influence of alcohol if it were the case that he was gay as she formerly believed.) Furthermore, we notice that David never had to out himself or use the word pansexual he simply explained “I like the wine, not the label” and that was the end of it. No need to explain more than that, and certainly no need to explain ‘how it works.’ The choice not to use the term pansexual is especially interesting because those who are already familiar will know exactly what he is describing but those who don’t may not know where to start in order to google and figure it out. It forces the viewers to accept that it really is as simple as that.

Additionally, remakes of old films and tv shows can serve to “flip the script” on old over done narratives, presenting a new perspective other than the dominant one. Updated versions of “old classics” serve an especially important purpose of refreshing the views of older audiences who may be more inclined to remain in their comfortable views of the dominant narrative. These audiences recall a show they enjoyed in their younger years and are drawn to watch the more modern version often “in spite” of updated narratives, thus creating a platform of accessibility to the non-dominant narrative they may not have otherwise partaken in.

For instance, when the original version of tv show *One Day at a Time* aired on CBS from 1975-1984,¹⁸¹ it followed the life and misadventures of a young, white, divorced mother and her two daughters who moved to Indianapolis only to be befriended and treated like family by the white, male, superintendent of the building. In the recent (2017-present) remake¹⁸² produced, first, by Netflix, and later picked up by Pop, we receive a similar narrative of divorced mother and children, but with very prudent identity choices for these characters meant to allow the audience to delve into the lives of Hispanic families in Trump Era America. But the show does not stop at racial identities, it also delves into veteran affairs, immigration, PTSD and mental health, sexism, lgbtq+ issues, addiction, abuse, and more.

The family featured in this version of the show is Cuban-American (the grandmother, Lydia, is Cuban, having escaped to America after Castro seized power) spanning three generations. While Penelope, the mother, and her two children, Elena and Alex, are legal citizens of the United States and Penelope herself is a veteran who served in the United States Army Nurse Corps and was injured in the line of duty, the entire family faces harassment over the course of the show for their heritage. The children at one point come home from school after having been harassed, shortly after the election of Donald Trump, food thrown at them and shouted at to “go back to where you came from”. The story line explores the difficulties of the contrast between the life that a mother wants for her children and the perfect beautiful bubble they deserve to exist in with the horrors of reality and just trying to survive in a world still bubbling over with hate.

At the same time the story is paralleled with the revelation that Schneider, the incredibly wealthy (from his father’s money) owner of the apartment complex the family lives in, is living in the United States illegally. He is Canadian, but because he is a white man (it doesn’t hurt that he is wealthy) he has faced no harassment. He announces the revelation to Penelope’s family (whom he has latched onto as his own family given his own familial problems including abuse from his father growing up) that he has never once had anyone question whether he belonged there in the United States. In fact, he has casually mentioned his non citizenship on a pretty regular basis and no one has ever batted an eye.

The character Schneider and the relationship other characters have with him plays a quite unique and powerful role in the show despite that he is often used as comic relief. This is a character dripping in privilege who is quite unaware of himself. In many shows the only times we see a character make a problematic blunder is if that character is either framed as an antagonist or if the blunder is not framed as

¹⁸¹ *One Day At A Time*. Created by Whitney Blake, et al., 1975-1984.

¹⁸² *One Day At A Time*. Created by Gloria Calderon Kellett, et al., 2017-2020.

problematic as all. But in *One Day At A Time*, Schneider messes up a lot. And he would be oblivious to it if it weren't for the other characters correcting him. The relationship between Schneider and Penelope's family is a perfect example of what DiAngelo and Kendi call for our reactions to be if we are ever to be successful at rooting out isms and phobias. There is a level of trust and comfort between the characters that allows for Penelope's family, even the kids, to correct Schneider because he listens. Sometimes, his reaction is emotional—as are the members' of the family's reactions. But eventually a revelation occurs, and he corrects himself... not just by admitting he did something wrong or stopping from doing or claiming something but by reiterating and explaining back in his own words why his assumptions were problematic.

The show portrays this vulnerability as not only admirable and good, but as normal. It isn't an exceptional individual who is able to have these kinds of revelations but the normal individual. For instance, over the course of the show we see an incredibly strong willed, Catholic, Cuban, grandmother, Lydia, come to support her granddaughter when she "comes out" as a lesbian, as well as her daughter's mental health needs in relation to her PTSD from serving. We see the strength of Penelope, who finally manages to stand up for herself in terms of equal pay and treatment to her, well-meaning but oblivious boss, and very sexist, self-absorbed, male coworker. And they change. She doesn't end up having to leave for another job. She stays and they change. It isn't perfect but there is movement within these characters. We see the development of a young man in Alex, who is persuaded by his love for his sister and the strength of her feminism to tell his father and even the cool kids at school, whom he is trying to impress, that they are wrong, being sexist, being homophobic etc.

Part of how this occurs is with a balance of serious content and comedic relief. This makes it more palatable for the audience to deeply confront these topics without even realizing they are doing so. Often the viewers find themselves in tears at particularly emotionally charged moments and just a short while later laughing. Even when another character may let us down by not showing the vulnerability necessary to become a better version of themselves, things often circle back to our comic relief of Schneider. A particularly funny clip occurs for instance as Penelope is complaining about experiencing sexism at work and how her coworker is constantly mansplaining at her. Schneider turns to the kids then and tries to explain to Elena what mansplaining is, she crosses her arms and just stares him down, he pauses, and then "ohhhhhh, I see what I just did, my bad."

Again, shows like this, are powerful because rather than not talking about the problem or only classifying the problematic behavior as something that goes along with an antagonist character we see multiple important normalizations: 1. We confront the idea that even beloved characters contribute to the problem 2. Vulnerability (which we will discuss more in the next section) to admit when one has contributed to the problem and try to be better is natural. These two things allow us to address that the problems exist and to address them.

While these two shows are excellent examples of shows that help the viewer break with the dominant narrative, not every person is going to watch every show, view every painting, listen to every song etc. and that is okay too. We have to learn how to learn from the works we do view. It is even the case that we may not learn the same things from one work as another person learns from the same piece. One viewer, might observe many pieces of art. Furthermore, they may observe a lot of information within one piece of art, which means that there are any number of ideas they could take away from a particular work. It is unlikely that every individual will take away exactly the same things. Perhaps, for example, in a particular painting or song, only one little thing stands out to a particular viewer and, perhaps, it isn't the same as what another viewer finds significant... but it is something. And it spurs thinking.

Tracy Chevalier, an historical novelist best known for her work *Girl with a Pearl Earring* (after Vermeer's painting of the same name), puts this quite nicely in her TEDSalon, in London in 2012, when she discusses gallery fatigue and the guilt of being disinterested in some artworks. She says:

Someone put them there because they're good enough, but I often don't see it. I think there's something wrong with me... [But] you aren't expected to order everything on a menu or buy every item in the store. Why not be [just as] selective with your art?¹⁸³

When you put it that way, it seems absurd that every piece of art should mean something to or spur some thought in every person. Though, of course, this does not detract from the *goal* of artists being to spur thinking. It simply says that the goal may not necessitate that said thinking be spurred in *every* viewer. The key is the *potential* for thinking.

Chevalier goes on to explain what she thinks makes a masterpiece a masterpiece. She says, "the sign of a masterpiece, to me, is when there is no resolution." I believe we could amend this statement by adding "for the viewer" to the end of it. Thereby suggesting that what is a masterpiece in the eye of a particular viewer is something that is not fully resolved for them. And why should this be what defines a masterpiece, according to Chevalier? Because it makes us think.

Sarah Lewis also echoes this sentiment, as she explores what it is to be a real master of the arts in her TedTalk. She explains that the master is not the one who creates the best work, but those who value the near wins, which put us closer to our goals of understanding, rather than the perfect painting. She says, "We thrive not when we have done it all, but when there is still more left to do. The masters are the ones who realize there is no end."¹⁸⁴ The masters are those who are aware they don't know everything and continue searching, rather than assuming they have found the perfect resolution—resonating our existentialist goals. Our strives towards social justice are not something that can ever be completed, but rather something that we must continue to work at until the day we die.

Returning to our masterpieces that do not have resolution, Chevalier explains that we start looking for an answer in order to get that resolution. But, when we cannot find resolution, we make up our own story. So, we see there is a searching, not only by the artist, but by the audience.

This active engagement with the work is the very basis of stirring creativity and thinking in the viewer. Even more importantly, however, is that the viewer is never going to be fully satisfied with the story they made up because they do not know for sure if it is the reality of the situation. So, Chevalier explains, we will keep coming back again and again, looking for a more perfect story to get that resolution. Thus, we can see a lack of resolution spurs continuous thought in the minds of the viewer as they are constantly confronted with multiple possible realities behind the artwork.

A similar sentiment comes from American artist, Ida Applebroog, who says that "with art it has to be too much or not enough."¹⁸⁵ What I take from this is that the work either needs to have a lack of resolution, as Chevalier had pointed out, or the work could have so much in it that the viewer cannot possibly take in all of it. Thus, there is a sort of lack of resolution in the sense that it is unlikely any two viewers will pick out exactly the same ideas to contemplate. So, there is no sense of unity of thought. Now, we have come full circle back to this idea of confrontation since the viewers cannot come to the same conclusions.

¹⁸³ "Finding the Story Inside the Painting" Tracy Chevalier, TEDSalon London.

https://www.ted.com/talks/tracy_chevalier_finding_the_story_inside_the_painting/up-next>. Spring 2012.

¹⁸⁴ "Embrace the Near Win" Sarah Lewis, TED2014.

https://www.ted.com/talks/sarah_lewis_embrace_the_near_win/up-next>.

¹⁸⁵ "Power." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 3. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/power/>>. September 16, 2005.

Applebroog also notes that: “There’s some people [who] say I just can’t stand looking at that, it’s uncomfortable. Well, that’s good too.”¹⁸⁶ Discomfort indicates confrontation. It means that the viewer is recognizing (whether consciously or subconsciously) a change from their perfect understanding of the world. This interest in discomfort as confrontation is echoed by another American artist, Edgar Arceneaux, who says of his work:

The thing is, even if most of America had seen it I’m not convinced most people would have thought it was a good idea. That’s the reason I wanted to do it, because of that uncertainty and the power of what art is is that unruliness.¹⁸⁷

For Archeneaux the goal is to do things that others would not have approved of--to take people away from their “normal” and out of their comfort zone. But this isn’t purely for the sake of making people uncomfortable or being unruly as he mentioned above. It is because of what comes with said unruliness. He follows up by explaining:

Art is not inherently good; it’s not inherently bad; but it is inherently contradictory. Its nature is to ask new questions. Drawing for me is both a technique but it’s also a methodology. It’s a way of thinking about how we make connections between things.

Contradictions between what people assume and what they see in art is what sparks questions and, therefore, thinking. Archeneaux really gets to the heart of the matter in pointing out that creating art is a methodology for thinking. I would further the last statement of practicing art being a way to think about how we make connections, by also claiming that it is a way to think about how we *don’t* make connections. What are the things we normally connect? And what are the things we don’t? *Why* is it the case that we connect some things and not others? (What parts of others’ identities can I not fully connect with, and why? How does that knowledge inform my experience and the ways in which I can connect with others and improve our society for all identities?) These sorts of questions are what are going to really drive us to a better understanding of how truth and identity (both in terms of ourselves and others) work for artists. These are also the exact same questions a privileged person asked to ponder when considering their reactions to everyday marginalizations around them. These are the kinds of questions that can shift the dominant narrative. But before we can ask those questions, we first need to be vulnerable.

Vulnerability

*Part of the work is trying to control it, doing all I can to control it, and yet it still defies me.*¹⁸⁸

--Laylah Ali

As mentioned in the previous section, a big part of Being-For-Oneself in art is presenting a contradiction between how someone believes something to be and how it could be. But, in order to present that to an audience the artist needs to also be open to that confrontation themselves. Another way to say this is that the artist needs to be vulnerable.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ “Los Angeles.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 8. PBS.
<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s8/los-angeles/>>. September 23, 2016.

¹⁸⁸ “Power.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 3. PBS.
<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/power/>>. September 16, 2005.

Heidegger says: “He who thinks greatly must err greatly”.¹⁸⁹ This evokes the idea that if you are not willing to risk making mistakes, you cannot accomplish big things. Or, in this case, one cannot *think* about big things if they are not willing to risk being wrong. Artist, Saba Taj, during a visit to Virginia Tech and presentation for the Salaam Project,¹⁹⁰ commented on how she loved the opportunity to apologize because apologizing meant she was learning. She said:

People need to be able to make mistakes and learn from them; to me it’s like I love to say ‘I’m sorry’, I love to mess up and learn something from it; especially in art making, we have to be vulnerable; we have to realize that these things that seemed okay are now harmful; being able to listen and also shut down your ego and be able to be really publicly vulnerable...¹⁹¹

I think there are two very important threads we can pull from this quote. The first is the artist being okay with being wrong. The second is, specifically, being wrong in a public setting. Overall we want to normalize the idea that it is okay to be wrong—it doesn’t make one any less of a person—but rather it makes us a better person to be able to critically examine our own words, our own actions, and make appropriate changes to our behavior. This is the foundation that was laid out for us by DiAngelo as to how to break down the white fragility for instance the founts many of the isms and phobias in our society.

Being able to be wrong does many things for the artist. It can do great things for them in terms of their personal lives and their careers, but, perhaps most importantly for the art object, is that it allows them the flexibility to change mid-work and move in a new direction. As mentioned in the quote above, from Ali, part of the process of making art is being constantly foiled in our plans *by the art itself!* This is going to create for the artists the dynamicism in their process that Fanon is so interested in sustaining in order that the individual’s identity and by extension their culture is not forced into stagnation.

A new direction could come in terms of the work within the medium and process itself. For example, Cai Guo-Qiang, a Chinese artist (currently living in New York/New Jersey), who often works with gunpowder as his medium, experiences this on a daily basis. Gunpowder by its very nature is unpredictable, so, setting off explosions to create paintings is uncontrollable. But Guo-Qiang says:

Let it take me where it wants to go. I continuously want it to give me problems, obstacles, to overcome. Maybe everything does not have to be resolved. Sometimes you can allow that uncertainty to exist.¹⁹²

Along with unpredictability, again we hear this idea echoed of not having complete resolution. This is the way in which the artist is able to continue to grow in their skill. Therefore, the masters are the ones who understand the near perfect is better than the perfect, as Sarah Lewis had explained. If there are no obstacles to overcome there is no clear direction in which to go. And, perhaps, no purpose in going. Likewise, the same is true in terms of the content of ideas in the work.

Phil Hansen, a self-taught American artist, worked on a series for a year very relevant to this vulnerability to flux. After developing a tremor in his hand that stopped him from being able to produce the kind of art he wanted (pointillism), he eventually found his way back to creating anyways. Perhaps, in fact, his

¹⁸⁹ Heidegger, Martin. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York, NY: Harper Row, 1975. Print.

¹⁹⁰ “Salaam: Exploring Muslim Cultures.” *Moss Arts Center / Virginia Tech*, artscenter.vt.edu/salaam.html.

¹⁹¹ “Digging in the Crates. Hip Hop & Liberation,” *Digging in the Crates* Vol. 8. Newman Library, Virginia Tech. March 15, 2018.

¹⁹² “Power.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/power/>>. September 16, 2005.

inability to produce the kind of work he wanted to enabled him to make better work. He mentions that “Embracing a limitation can drive creativity. We need to first be limited in order to become limitless.”¹⁹³ Just like how embracing our own limitations in understanding of the identities of those around us and the world can allow us to more clearly empathize and fight for the livelihoods of all.

This reminds me greatly of the sentiment that creativity flourishes under constraint. If a student is told “go make whatever you want,” they are likely to freeze up. Yet, suddenly, with parameters in place, it is easier to direct the project. It is also a lot easier to get excited about a project this way, as obstacles can be very inspiring. In my experience, if you tell an artist they cannot do something, they are probably going to do it anyway, perhaps, *because* they were told they could not.¹⁹⁴ Perhaps some of that stubbornness could be put to good use on social justice issues at times when one is weighed down by the existential dread that ‘there are just too many and too big of problems in the world that how could one insignificant me actually do any good?’ Here are the strategies that aren’t working, okay then, let’s come up with some new creative ones in response and get the job done.

Another aspect of Hansen’s art-making that is relevant is that he spent a year making only artwork that would be destroyed in some manner. He said, “As I destroyed each project I learned to let go; let go of outcomes and of problems; thinking only of what’s next and coming up with more ideas than ever.” This is an incredibly vulnerable position to put one’s self in as it is human nature to hold on to the past. Yet, he seemed to only be looking to the future artworks that could come into existence. To not have something to hold onto, physically or intellectually, is uncomfortable at best. However, by taking on this vulnerability, Hansen was able to pursue his ultimate goal of continuing to think and better explore new ideas.

It is possible that some strategies in social justice aims were useful in past times to get us to where we are today, but that now those strategies are no longer useful—that we need to move past them onto apt strategies for our current location within the timeline of this dilemma. We have to be adaptable and ready to leave an old strategy behind at any moment when it ceases to be useful. For instance, for a long time people believed in the effectiveness of uplift suasion or the concept of being color blind, but we now know those things aren’t relevant or useful anymore. We need better strategies, not to hold onto old outdated ones for the sake of the comfort they provided us.

Photographer, Sally Mann, echoes the joys of obstacles, as she recognizes it is the flaws in her photography plates that makes them interesting. Therefore, she prays in her head “please don’t mess it up... but you know [mess it up] just a little bit to make it interesting.”¹⁹⁵ But, there are a lot of other types of vulnerability we can explore through her process as well.

For example, she notes that the way she chooses what to take pictures of is by whatever is in front of her. This is a kind of vulnerability to her surroundings (rather than planning every aspect of the work) and to the idea of learning in general, as she uses those photos to explore the nature of whatever is in front of her.

Also, when we listen to her daughter and her husband speak of Mann and her work, we learn about vulnerability to societal constructions and to the art. Her daughter explains, for example, that despite Mann not being religious or spiritual, she felt like the pictures were the way in which her mom spoke

¹⁹³ “Embrace the Shake.” Phil Hansen, TED2013. <https://www.ted.com/talks/phil_hansen_embrace_the_shake/up-next>.

¹⁹⁴ Perhaps “stubbornness” would have been an additionally relevant trait to recognize as a principle of artists...

¹⁹⁵ “Place.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 1. PBS. <<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/place/>>. September 21, 2001.

about and struggled with God. This is in spite of the fact that Mann never claims the work to be religious. (It is also important to note she never claims the work is *not* religious.) This is an interesting example that could be an intersection between a vulnerability to the audience's (her daughter's) understanding of her work and a vulnerability to society by being open to explore faith, while not being presently spiritual herself.

Mann's husband talks about how "you (presumably, himself, and, perhaps, their children, who all help with the photo shoots) feel like you're intimately involved in the whole process but then once that image hits the wall it's got a life of its own." Accepting that this will always be the case, and, yet, still participating in the works without being upset that one is not the star or perhaps in social justice issues the "hero" is a vulnerability to the whims of and the more important presence of the art (or movement) itself.

Perhaps most importantly to our goal of changing the dominant narrative is the fact that vulnerability is a necessary ingredient in recognizing where we marginalize others. Without the vulnerability to be okay with being wrong or accidentally doing a bad thing (knowing this does not mean that you are inherently a bad person) is a necessary condition to begin recognizing our everyday microaggressions. This type of vulnerability will also link us into why it is important for the artists to be *publicly* wrong...

The artist being okay with being publicly wrong can be incredibly beneficial to the audience and society as a whole. This becomes relevant when the artist becomes a public figure, one, who, some may look up to. The willingness to explore ideas publicly and risk being wrong is incredibly valuable. This kind of behavior can encourage the viewer to also explore and think, even at the risk of being wrong. And MOST importantly to be accepting and apologetic about times when they are wrong themselves. By being willing to apologize publicly when one is wrong, the artist sets the stage for the audience to realize that it is okay to not always have all the answers. It is okay for the audience to make mistakes and apologize. This emphasizes to the audience that they should be more open to a variety of perspectives and, thus, again, contributes to their ability to be mobile in their thinking. It reinforces the concept that being wrong or doing a bad thing does not make you a bad person. Instead, the way that you handle being wrong is what reflects on your character.

While it is a very human attribute, within present society at least, to want to be viewed as right and perfect all the time, it is also a human reality that we are all flawed. So, there is something important in allowing the artwork, itself, to be flawed as well. Artists Mcgee and Kilgallen talk about street art and how "from far away it might look perfect/straight but if you get close you can always see it waiver and that's where the beauty is."¹⁹⁶ Finding the beauty in what some may call the flaws of the art is an understanding that it is acceptable to be imperfect.

The examples I would like to use to explore this benefit to the audience of accepting the imperfect come from artists who explored the concept of perfection in their own lives and art. Andrea Zittel is an intriguing installation artist who creates living-experience experiments. Zittel has an interesting relationship with perfection that becomes important here. She spent a great deal of time trying to perfect her works until finally realizing that this was a problematic goal:

I really believed that when I made that piece and it was perfect that it would solve all of my problems. The irony was, when I did finish it, I felt very despondent and really listless and distressed.¹⁹⁷

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ "Consumption." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 1. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/consumption/>>. September 28, 2001.

I believe this is something with which most of us can identify. The goal need not be art related for this to feel familiar. When you focus so much energy on a particular idea and trying to perfect it, and just leave everything else aside, having no other goals as that ideal perfection takes over... then, when you do “complete”¹⁹⁸ that perfection, you feel a bit empty. Like: “now what?”

Zittel continued: “I had this realization that no one really wants perfection; we’re obsessed with it, but what we really want is this new and improved hope for tomorrow.” Obviously, we do want some goals for ourselves that are reachable, however, the idea of the “perfect life,” for example, is not a goal designed to ever be completed. Instead, it is a goal designed to keep us moving, to keep us striving forward. This is because, once you have checked all the boxes, crossed all the “t’s” and dotted all the “i’s,” you aren’t really left with anything, as there is nothing else to move forward for.

As Zittel continued her interview with Art21, she explained that she spent all this time searching for the ability to have absolute control over situations. This is a very human thing; we desire control in order to protect ourselves from our fears. However, what she found, through this struggle, was that the thing she really desired and perhaps even *needed* was vulnerability. The things that became worthwhile were those which were terrifying due to a lack of complete control (cue existential dread).

I think this is generally a very good lesson for people. We sit in our little houses, in our little lives, with our little families trying to perfect things. But the things are not just our physical surroundings, they are also ideas. And, so, when we decide we have perfected an idea we will not let anyone touch it, or let anyone in, lest we risk the realization that we have not actually achieved perfection. That is our safe, perfect, space and we do not want anyone to change the ideas that we have with their own.

Sometimes as a viewer we also must be vulnerable and made to feel uncomfortable with our own lack of understanding. But through that vulnerability we can come to a truer sense of understanding than we may have previously thought possible. Take for instance many of those songs written for and played in protest of Trump era immigration policies, ICE tactics, and detention campus near the US-Mexico border. We see here that sometimes the presentation of an art piece often matters just as much as the content...

Much of this music has been commonly bilingual, including both English and Spanish lyrics in the same song. For instance, *Godspeed (Dulces Suenos)* by Radney Foster.¹⁹⁹ In the music video translation are provided which certainly make it more immediately possible to understand the content, but even without the translations the listener eventually is able to piece together the bits from their own language in order to understand the emotional meaning of the parts in a language they are unfamiliar with. The emotional journey that the listener goes on here is just as important as the lyrics if not more so. At first the listener may feel overwhelmed or even frustrated by the fact that they do not understand the lyrics. Yet, this is part of the experience many immigrants are living every day when moving to the United States. It isn’t a fun experience. And yet at the same time over the course of the song the listener *is* able to connect emotionally to the feelings being expressed and we see that perhaps the difference in language is irrelevant.

Sometimes, even works produced in one language require no translation. Consider for instance *Besame Mucho* performed by David Garza and Paulina Reza.²⁰⁰ The sounds of Reza’s voice and melody moves the listener emotionally. While one who does not speak Spanish may not immediately know what the song is about, when paired with a panning image of the Mexico-American border wall at the beginning of

¹⁹⁸ I put “complete” in quotations because I do not necessarily agree that it is possible to reach any kind of perfection.

¹⁹⁹ Foster, Randy. *Godspeed (Dulces Suenos)*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=srZBxqvBxeE&t=125s>

²⁰⁰ Garza, David and Paulina Reza. *Besame Mucho*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z5RKp1hLfUc&t=17s>

the video followed by the imagery of a mother and child walking along through the hot desert we immediately understand within the context of our world what is happening. Sometimes being vulnerable means the discomfort of not using words that translate easily for our understanding, but instead reaching out with other forms of cognition.

Being safe and protected sounds great but living in an echo chamber is not really living. I think there is a difference between surviving and *living*. The latter requires thinking and perspective. Thus, vulnerability is a necessity. One of my favorite artists, Marina Abramovic, a performance artist from Yugoslavia, focuses much of her work on trust, vulnerability, and connection. She wants to inspire her audience specifically to allow themselves to become vulnerable and open. She says:

[I am] staging fears in front of the audience. And then liberating myself from these fears. If I can do this for myself then you can too. [There is a] need of people to experience something different. [There is] nowhere to escape except in themselves when you look in someone else's eyes.²⁰¹

There are two works of Abramovic's that I believe speak to this sense of vulnerability in two very different, yet similar ways. The first is called Rhythm 0, which she performed in Studio Morra in Naples, Italy in 1974. In this work Abramovic stood still for six hours, while the audience members were allowed to do whatever they wished to her with the 72 objects laid out on the table. She said, "During this period I take full responsibility," freeing the audience members from even wrongdoing towards her. And, so, the audience committed what would be crimes against her. At first the work was pretty tame, but soon the audience members began to use the objects of destruction laid out, rather than those of pleasure. Men used razor blades to cut off her clothes and even cut her skin. They made her point a gun at herself, undressed her, and groped her. Abramovic said of the work:

This work reveals something terrible about humanity. It shows how fast a person can hurt you under favorable circumstances. It shows how easy it is to dehumanize a person who does not fight, who does not defend himself. It shows that if he provides the stage, the majority of 'normal' people, apparently can become truly violent.²⁰²

Yet, through the whole process Abramovic did not relent. She remained committed to the piece. And ultimately, though there was this group of individuals acting violently against her, a group also arose to protect her when the gun was made to be pointed at her head. The audience fought with one another about this. In the end, after the 6 hours, the audience members could not look Abramovic in the face and seemed ashamed of what had occurred, pretending like they had not just been taking pleasure in hurting her.

Abramovic's vulnerability here helped her to understand humanity better. It also allowed the audience in that time to reflect on their behaviors, and the greater audience, today, some insight into human nature. The time of reflection for the audience that participated in hurting Abramovic is one of the most moving aspects of the piece. They had to come to terms with the shame that they felt, despite the fact that Abramovic agreed to take all responsibility for their actions herself. Her vulnerability set in motion events that would cause these individuals to truly face their own vulnerability through reflection.

²⁰¹ "An Art Made of Trust, Vulnerability and Connection." Marina Abramovic, TED2015.

https://www.ted.com/talks/marina_abramovic_an_art_made_of_trust_vulnerability_and_connection/up-next.

²⁰² Williams, Faye. "Performance Artist Stood Still For 6 Hours to Let People Do What They Wanted to Her Body." Elite Readers, 11 July 2018, www.elitereaders.com/performance-artist-marina-abramovic-social-experiment/?cn-reloaded=1.

The second piece I thought to share is her work titled *The Artist Is Present*.^{203 204 205 206 207} This is a work that would become an internet sensation. In this work, which was performed for 736 and a half hours during her retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in March - May 2010, Abramovic sat in a chair across from another chair, separated only by a small table. Audience members were invited to take turns sitting in this chair. During the performance nothing was said. Instead the audience member would simply sit across from Abramovic while she kept constant eye contact with them. Abramovic took no breaks from open to close in the gallery each day. The only change in her staring into the eyes of the sitter would come when she cried with a sitter who also cried and one instance in which she took the hands of a sitter.

This sitter, whose hands she took, was her former lover, Ulay, who appeared on opening night without Abramovic knowing he was coming. The piece, *The Artist Is Present*, was in fact, to some extent a solo version of the duo piece, *Nightsea Crossing*, Abramovic and Ulay had performed together multiple times from 1981 to 1987, in which the two sat facing one another for hours. Ulay's appearance that night is what would spur the internet into action around this work, hearing of their love story. The two had spent years working together as artists, living out of a van. They enacted one of their longest pieces together, each walking from one end of the Great Wall of China in order to meet in the middle where they were to be married. However, when they met, rather than marrying, they instead ended their relations and parted ways for 20 years until Ulay appeared at *The Artist is Present*. The heartfelt moment was captured on film and spread across the internet like wildfire. One particular compilation I have enjoyed can be found here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TIZjFGriLw>

For the entire performance of three months, Abramovic was so steady and disciplined. She just stared into the sitters' eyes and allowed herself to be changed by them, and they by her. Nothing but staring the whole time. The sitters often cried (she did shed tears with them though she did not move other than this), as like Abramovic said: "[There is] nowhere to escape except in themselves when you look in someone else's eyes."²⁰⁸ The interviews from the sitters after the performance said as much--that they felt they had been changed in some way, though they may not be sure how. It was such a nerve-wracking thing for many to decide to partake--where they would sit (for any period of time they wished) just gazing into her eyes, while the entirety of the rest of the museum looked on. The vulnerability that was required of those sitters was enormous, and it was only made possible by the fact that Abramovic was there being vulnerable with them.

The moment Abramovic shared with Ulay, perhaps, was even more vulnerable for her and allowed even those opting to not partake in sitting to understand the need for and gratification that can come from vulnerability. Watching that clip of their interaction, it is difficult not to be moved when you realize how such a disciplined individual, who would afterwards sit for 3 months and do nothing but stare into the

²⁰³ Cascone, Sarah. "Marina Abramović and Ulay, Whose Breakup Changed Performance Art Forever, Make Peace in a New Interview." *Artnet News*, Artnet News, 9 May 2018, news.artnet.com/art-world/marina-abramovic-ulya-relationship-interview-1045136.

²⁰⁴ Dwyer, Jim. "Marina Abramovic Faces Strangers Eye to Eye, for Art." *The New York Times*, The New York Times, 2 Apr. 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/04/04/nyregion/04about.html.

²⁰⁵ "Interactives | Exhibitions | 2010 | Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present | Portraits." MoMA, www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2010/marinaabramovic/.

²⁰⁶ sublimespectrum. "Marina Abramovic in the MoMA and Ulay." YouTube, YouTube, 6 July 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TIZjFGriLw.

²⁰⁷ "Marina Abramović." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 8 Sept. 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Marina_Abramovi%C4%87#The_Artist_Is_Present:_March_%E2%80%93_May_2010.

²⁰⁸ "An Art Made of Trust, Vulnerability and Connection." Marina Abramovic, TED2015. https://www.ted.com/talks/marina_abramovic_an_art_made_of_trust_vulnerability_and_connection/up-next.

eyes of visitors for 8 to 10 hours a day, could not help but be moved by this particular visitor. When she opened her eyes to see him there, the viewers see an immediate spark of recognition and something else come over her gaze that is not present with the other sitters. Then the tears come both to Abramovic and Ulay's eyes (Ulay, too, is an individual long-trained in these kinds of artistic tasks). The emotional vulnerability is palpable even watching second-hand through a computer screen.

When they take one another's hands, it is impossible (for this viewer at least) to not feel a twinge of desire to let one's self be that open and vulnerable with another human being, even, if only for a moment.

What we are gleaning from this section is that it seems it is an artist's job to be vulnerable to many things including, but not limited to, the truth and to human connection. This job requirement is one that is completed both for the sake of the artist and for the audience, in order that all parties involved may become more vulnerable and open to these realities. The hope is that the artist may portray to the audience too that being vulnerable is their own duty as humans participating in a just society (or at least one we aim to become just).

I thought it appropriate to end this section with a particularly moving toast/call to action that Abramovic gives at the end of her TEDTalk, which I believe quite nicely sums up the goals of vulnerability in art (and life):

*To things you don't know.
To things you fear.
To failure.
If you don't fail, you don't learn.
And people need change.
The only way is to start with yourself.
Thank you for trusting me.²⁰⁹*
--Marina Abramovic

Choices

Being an artist and choosing to put yourself in a circumstance where you don't know how it's going to turn out is very exciting and difficult.²¹⁰

--Jessica Stockholder

I chose to include this opening quote because I think it leaves us with a nice bridge between the previous section, on vulnerability, and this one, on choices. I want to emphasize the fact that the vulnerability sought for art is in fact *sought*. It is not about something that simply happens, but instead it is an opening up that is an active choice on the part of the artist. As with all humans, there are, likewise for artists, mental/emotional walls in place that are meant to "protect" us from the outside world. And these walls are things that cannot be removed without some level of consent on the part of the individual to whom they belong. Thus vulnerability, in itself, is a choice.

Of course, vulnerability is not the only choice important within an artwork. In consideration of our existentialist goals here, we should remember as Sartre claimed we are "condemned to freedom." We

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ "Play." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 3. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/play/>>. October 7, 2005.

have to make choices if we are to truly be persons. Anything less is shirking our necessary responsibility and trying to move the blame of how the world is onto others instead of ourselves.

I thought we could start with a question: Can you have an artwork without an artist? It sounds as though this answer should be “no” because it seems as though the origin of the artwork must be the artist. But what is it about what the artist does that makes the art... art? Historically, it may have seemed as though one could speak to a level of proficiency or excellency in a craft, but this creates some unnecessary confusion between what is just a craft and what has transcended into arthood. Perhaps, then art is simply something from a creative outlet. Yet this does not work either as we have recently accepted ready-mades into the world of art.

I believe, rather, what becomes apparent when we begin to consider ready-mades as art,²¹¹ such as the famous Fountain by²¹² Marcel Duchamp in 1917,²¹³ is that the art is in the choices made. Since, it is not something that the artist makes themselves but rather collects and places into the setting of being art, we see objects that would not normally be considered art become art, simply, through the choice of the artist.

Another interesting facet of this is that the items can also return to not being art. Cia Guo-Qiang, for example, used a collection of rejected deity statues in one of his artworks. He explained that as they sat in the art museum he saw the reject deity statues as artwork, but if he took one and put it in his studio his emotions would shift naturally to viewing it as a deity statue—not art—again.²¹⁴ This, being in spite of the fact that he, himself, had collected the statues for the purpose of being part of his art. Guo-Qiang references Duchamp for this understanding, saying: “It became like a symbolic thing, to be ‘an artist.’ After Duchamp, I realized that being an artist is more about a lifestyle and attitude, than producing some product.”²¹⁵

Even in the case of works that are not ready-mades, this ability to shift to become art and not art depending on the artists’ whims seems to ring true. Bruce Nauman, a contemporary artist from Indiana who works in a variety of media, for example, was building concrete stair cases at Oliver Ranch in Sonoma County, CA. A staircase is not something that we might naturally assume to be a piece of art. Yet, Nauman concluded: “It’s the intention that changes it from a stairway to a stairway as a work of art, because I said so.”²¹⁶ An important takeaway here is that the stairway is not art simply because an artist made it.²¹⁷ Nauman could have built a stairway, as a stairway, if he had wanted to. The reason the stairway is a piece of art is because he built a stairway *as* a work of art. I believe, also, that if Nauman were to later walk down the stairway and use it as a stairway instead of viewing it as art, it would be

²¹¹A term coined by Marcel Duchamp, to refer to artworks using pre-manufactured objects. This kind of art could be a collection of objects collaged together or it could be as simple as turning a single object on its head or labeling it in a manner the viewer may not be used to. In some cases it could even simply be the object.

²¹²I cannot use the terms “created,” “made,” or “produced” here as we often would to describe other artworks.

²¹³Tate. “Fountain’, Marcel Duchamp, 1917, Replica 1964.” *Tate*, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/duchamp-fountain-t07573.

²¹⁴“Power.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/power/>. September 16, 2005.

²¹⁵Collected in: Ai, Weiwei, and Larry Warsh. *Weiwei-Isms*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

From: Smith, Karen, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Bernard Fibicher, and Ai Weiwei. *Ai Weiwei*. Phaidon Contemporary Artists Series. London: Phaidon Press, 2009.

²¹⁶“Identity.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 1. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/identity/>. September 28, 2001.

²¹⁷It would be horrible to assume that anything made by an artist is automatically art—then, suddenly breakfast is a work of art, a shower is a work of art, reading a book is a work of art. Not that these things are incapable of being art, but it would be odd for them to automatically be deemed art without the artists’ consent.

transformed into simply a stairway again in that instance. The piece could, hypothetically, continue to switch back and forth for him depending on the choice that the artist makes about what it is.

A conceptual work of art, *An Oak Tree* by Michael Craig Martin,²¹⁸ an Irish-British conceptual artist, in 1973, is a great exploration of art being the choices that the artist makes. This work physically contains a glass of water sitting on a glass shelf and a text print out of a Q&A with Martin about the piece. Through the Q&A it becomes clear that the glass of water *is* an oak tree. And, by “an oak tree,” Craig Martin does not mean a metaphor for or symbol of an oak tree, but an *actual* oak tree, simply in the form of a glass of water. Martin claims to have transformed the glass of water into the oak tree with intention. With this work, the artist is referencing the transubstantiation that occurs within the Catholic religion such that the wine and bread consumed in communion actually *become* the blood and body of Christ at consecration. Though I am less interested in the religious relations this work has, I do find it to be incredibly relevant when considering what kind of transformation occurs when an artist declares something art.

Some especially significant excerpts come from the end of the transcript:

Q: But the oak tree only exists in the mind.

A: No. The actual oak tree is physically present but in the form of the glass of water. As the glass of water was a particular glass of water, the oak tree is also particular. To conceive the category ‘oak tree’ or to picture a particular oak tree is not to understand and experience what appears to be a glass of water as an oak tree. Just as it is imperceivable, it is also inconceivable.

Q: Did the particular oak tree exist somewhere else before it took the form of the glass of water?

A: No. This particular oak tree did not exist previously. I should also point out that it does not and will not ever have any other form but that of a glass of water.

Q: How long will it continue to be an oak tree?

A: Until I change it.²¹⁹

From these exchanges we see that, according to Martin, the water *is* the oak tree because Martin has decided it. And, furthermore, that the oak tree only exists *because* Martin decided it. Art is about the *choices* made, otherwise it would just *be*. This is why the urinal was art--there was an active choice in the use of the readymade, not simply the fact that the readymade existed. So, if to *be* art there is necessarily a choice in the production perhaps the choice itself is the art. This is different than the intent. The intent is the *desired outcome*, while the choice is the decision-making *process*.

Before we dive into this further, there is an important clarification that needs to be made on who exactly is allowed to make the choices. The very last exchange suggests that once Craig Martin decides it is no longer an oak tree, it shall be so. Likewise, I would assume, we could make the connection that the work as a whole is art because Craig Martin made the choice for it to be so. Thus, if, and when, Martin decides it is no longer art, it no longer would be.

I am not sure I would agree with this last statement. In terms of if the work is an oak tree (or artwork) *to* Craig Martin, I would agree that the work only remains an oak tree (or artwork) until Martin, himself, decides to change it. But I wonder if the work could not still remain an oak tree or an artwork to the audience, so long as the audience believes it to be Martin’s will.

²¹⁸ Tate. “‘An Oak Tree’, Michael Craig-Martin, 1973.” *Tate*, 1 Jan. 1973, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/craig-martin-an-oak-tree-l02262.

²¹⁹ Editors, Artspace. “Turning Water Into... An Oak Tree: Michael Craig-Martin Discusses Performing a Miraculous Act of Conceptual Art.” *Artspace*, 23 Jan. 2018, www.artspace.com/magazine/interviews_features/book_report/turning-water-into-an-oak-tree-michael-craig-martin-discusses-performing-a-miraculous-act-of-55188.

In fact, could something become art simply because the audience believes someone else intended it to be art? This reminds me of a story (though I am uncertain the origin or if it is a hypothetical) I heard once about folks walking around a gallery filled with conceptual and other modern art. One particular piece had a lot of people talking. Not unlike *An Oak Tree*, this work contained a glass of water. Only, this glass was about a quarter full and sitting on a pedestal out of the way of most of the traffic of gallery visitors. However, the gallery-goers found the work and began to gather round, discussing amongst themselves the implications of this plastic cup filled only a quarter of the way full of water and placed, seemingly, haphazardly upon this pedestal. The work became one of the favorites in the gallery and won the audience choice award on opening night.

Only, as it turned out, it was just a cup of water a visitor had put down, while looking through the gallery and had forgotten in their distraction. It was never intended to become art but was “mistaken” as such. Was it truly mistaken, or did it actually *become* art because that was the way in which it was perceived? Surely, for those who left before hearing the humorous news the cup remained a work of art when they went home. Are the viewers wrong that this is art? Could Martin Craig be wrong, and *An Oak Tree* would continue to be art so long as the viewers believed it to be so, even in the case of if Martin Craig, himself, decided it to no longer be art?

This cup of water, though never intended by a particular artist to become art, still follows our goal of the art process as a way of Being-For-Oneself because it allows the viewers to experience this type of existence. And thus, we see also that art need not always be made, but can also simply be experienced when following this definition. Part of the reason for this is that when the audience partook in conversation about the cup, they were no longer spectators but artists themselves, partaking in our proposed pillars of artists-hood. This reminds us that part of our aim is not only to provide accessibility to creating to those who label themselves as artists but also to observers to transform themselves into artists. Again we find the art object is less important than the process that led to it becoming an art object, whether by someone we deem an “artist” or an unsuspecting audience who accidentally becomes artists themselves.

Now, if we take this idea of choices and circle back to our idea of the fundamental purposes of art making being thinking, we should stipulate that the choices made should additionally provoke some kind of exploration or learning. We hear this echoed in artists like Mark Bradford,²²⁰ a scavenger artist from California, and Liz Magor,²²¹ a Canadian artist who focuses on cast making. Both artists emphasize the slowness of their practices allowing them to really get to know their works and think. They say the slowness allows them to listen to the subtleties as they make their choices in their process.

Magor puts it quite nicely explaining: “Art isn’t a material, it’s not a medium, it’s not a certain product; it is the choices I’ve been able to make.”²²² The choices are a proof of thinking in that there are no options to choose from without thinking. Without thinking there is only what the individual happens to do. As

²²⁰ “I noticed my art practice is very tedious, very deliberate, and I think that is a way of slowing myself down so I can think. So i can hear the voices a little more quiet so i can hear the decisions come through that are a little less large that quieter voice has sometimes the more interesting ideas if i can get to it.”

“Paradox.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 4. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s4/paradox/>. November 18, 2007.

²²¹ “In all the slowness of it that’s how i get to know it. So in fact the slowness of this process serves the slowness of my intellectual awareness.”

“Vancouver.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 8. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/identity/>. September 23, 2016.

²²² “Vancouver.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 8. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/identity/>. September 23, 2016.

both these artists emphasized, it is the little things that they really had to look for that are the options they end up selecting.

Given that the choices themselves are possible because of exploration, this leads us naturally into the next section on interplay between art and truth. I will finish this section by leaving you with a thought from John Baldessari, an artist from California, who says:

I'm always interested in things we don't call art and I wonder, well, why not? What can I do to it to change people's minds... so, I said it's art so people believe me. What I'm interested in, in art, is the absurdity of life. Art making is about making a choice.²²³

While above, in this section, we have explored the idea that a work *is* art because the artist says so this does not necessarily mean that the work will be *perceived* as art by the viewer. (We have also discussed that if a work is *perceived* as art by the viewer then it *is* art, regardless of if an artist has chosen the work to be art.) I believe what Baldessari is saying here explores a bridge between choices, perception, and truth. The upcoming section then will begin by exploring this idea of the multiplicity of truths of art in terms of perception and worldview.

Truth and World Making

*For me the most important part of an art piece is when people are not sure if its art or not. This is the most productive moment; As a political artist I always want my work to have real consequences.*²²⁴

--Tania Bruguera

I thought we could start this section on truth by taking a stroll into Plato's cave. Plato did not particularly have the highest regard for the arts. His problem being that, much like the shadows cast in front of the prisoners of the cave, he felt that art was merely an imitation of reality that fooled viewers into thinking it was reality.²²⁵ Thus, pushing us further and further from the reality.

Yet what we commonly call art today is far from imitation. Perhaps, this fear of Plato's made sense in his time when visual arts were used seemingly as sources of documentation. However, art in the tradition we are talking about today appears to be less about visual documentation of the accuracy of physical facts and more about exploration of emotional or metaphysical truths. Many of these also having to do with future thinkings, rather than past historical accuracies. While, maybe things like reality tv, for example, or the subversive nature of advertising might fall into the category of kinds of simulacra becoming the reality as Plato (and Baudrillard,²²⁶ from whom I borrow the term simulacra) might fear, it seems as though the visual and non visual arts, we place on a pedestal now, fall more in line with what the prisoner, who escapes to the outside world, sees.

The creative process, as we have discussed, has a goal of thinking, thus pushing us to learn more and more about the world, ourselves, and each other. And, especially, when we have an understanding of many types of art today, which begin with the premise that they are not meant to be an identical

²²³ "Systems." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 5. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/systems/>>. October 28, 2009.

²²⁴ "Legacy." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 7. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s7/legacy/>>. November 7, 2014.

²²⁵ Plato's Republic Book 7 section 514a-518c

²²⁶ See Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations. Semiotext(e)*, 1983.

representation of the physical world, I believe we avoid the fears that Plato has of the audience being fooled by the work.²²⁷

In fact, for some philosophers, like Heidegger, art actually shows us the truth.²²⁸ He calls art: “A happening of truth at work.”²²⁹ He uses for his explanation an example of a painting of peasant shoes by Van Gogh, proclaiming that the painting allows us to understand the reality of the shoes.²³⁰ But, is the truth we find in the painting that of the physical realities of the shoes? No. Rather than the image being accepted as a super accurate depiction of the physical reality, this simulation of the physical reality is more important for the communication of the *essence* of the shoes.

Heidegger explains: “In the vicinity of the work we were suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be”²³¹ be it physical or metaphysical. We are transported elsewhere, to experience this understanding of the shoes that we could not have experienced without this painting. Mary Heilmann, an abstract artist out of California, seems to agree with this sentiment explaining: “An artwork can transport a person, in a soulful rich way, without having any fear of any kind of punishment or hell or any of those good things.”²³²

In any work of art that a viewer is able to engage with they are transported in their mind either to a location related to the work (if one has ever felt as though they could imagine themselves strolling along through the scene of a painting) or, perhaps, to a different emotional scape. This, to Heidegger, is how art makes truth. Art is creating a new reality, in which the viewer comes to exist, even if only momentarily. The interesting thing is that you don’t even have to believe in the place you are being transported to--you don’t have to accept that some fantastical landscape, for example, actually exists in physical reality--you simply have to *feel* it. Just that feeling allows the work to influence you. It molds itself as part of the truth of your own reality.

Furthermore, the essence communicated is not the actual essence of the physical shoes, but rather it is a communication of a *newly* produced essence, altogether. For Heidegger “Truth does not exist in itself beforehand,”²³³ truth is a happening. Truth is beyond “correctness” and beyond “fact.” Does that mean truth is greater than correctness or fact? At minimum, it seems that truth is more relevant than fact because it is what humans fixate on. “Createdness of the work means: truth’s being fixed in place in the figure.”²³⁴ The art gives what is viewed a truth that did not exist before hand.

According to William James in his sixth lecture on pragmatism, “truth happens to an idea.”²³⁵ Facts are things that can still exist even if we do not recognize them, but truth requires recognition or interaction

²²⁷ Exceptions to avoiding this fear may include photography, super realism, trompe-l’oeil, and illusionary art. However, the last two, I believe, are actually less problematic due to the fact that it is typically understood by the audience that what they are looking at is meant to fool them. Thus, they are in a state of fourth wall breaking that makes them safe from Plato’s fears. We will, however, specifically discuss potential problems with photography and super realism a bit later in this section.

²²⁸ Note: “Truth” not “fact”.

²²⁹ Heidegger, Martin. Poetry, Language, Thought. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. New York, NY: Harper Row, 1975. Print.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² “Fantasy.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 5. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/fantasy/>. October 14, 2009.

²³³ Heidegger, Martin, and Albert Hofstadter. Poetry, Language, Thought Translations and Introduction. Harper & Row, 1975.

²³⁴ Ibid

²³⁵ James, William. Pragmatism. Lecture Six.

with an audience. So, while facts maintain themselves without our help, in order for them to be confirmed, and thereby useful to humans, they have to become truth through our recognition. Because it must be recognized first, the truth of something cannot be an inherent nor a stagnant property. Something neither starts as true, nor is it guaranteed to remain true after reaching the status of truth. This is because, even if something continues to be fact, this does not mean that it will always be practical for us, as humans, to hold something as truth in our society. (Likewise, something that is not fact can be true depending on what is useful). Something can stop being true because we stop recognizing it as true. Art is one of those ways in which we can bring recognition to, and, therefore, create truth in an idea. We can create new understandings of society and new futures that weren't possible before by creating truth in such an idea and choosing to live it.

We also find that artists can use not just their artworks but their platforms as public figures to create new truths. Take for instance the use, by artists and their audiences, of “hashtag takeovers,” on social media. K-Pop stans provide a particularly fun example of this. If you aren't familiar with a stan this is simply a term for a very enthusiastic fan of Korean Pop music. Stans are often found not just reposting imagery, video links, and memes involving their favorite artists, but also recording themselves lip syncing and dancing to the music.

When the Black Lives Matter movement was under attack from those of the “All Lives Matter” persuasion, who were posting #whitelivesmatter with racist content, stans, under the encouragement of many of their favorite singers, took to social media with the same hashtag in an attempt to derail the horrendous amount of hate that was being spewed across the world wide web.²³⁶ In a matter of hours, the call for this social media takeover managed to change the internet. Now, if one searched #whitelivesmatter you would no longer run into an immediate wall of racist hatred, but instead a wall of stans singing and dancing to their favorite K-Pop songs. The goal of the project was two-fold: 1. Depower the average racist social media user by replacing their internet presence 2. Reduce the likelihood of a racially marginalized individual running into triggering racist content on social media. Effectively this was the replacement of a previously constructed truth of negative impact with a newly constructed truth of positive impact.

This also isn't the first time or way in which these stans have made political moves. Reportedly K-Pop stans, again under the recommendation of their favorite artists, are taking credit for the sabotaging of many a Trump rally as well.²³⁷ Having purchased tickets specifically to events that were supposed to have high media coverage, and with no intention of attending, they helped to create a visual of empty stands and low attendance. These images would directly contradict Trump's statements of how widely his rallies were attended, again creating a new visual understanding of the truth of the world.

Hashtag takeovers are not exclusively an artist related area of influence. (For instance, we also saw a hashtag takeover of Trump's #proudboys by the LGBTQ+ community. Across the world gay men posted photos of themselves celebrating Pride using #proudboys and these posts were widely shared by LGBTQ+ members and allies.²³⁸) However, I think it is important to mention the influence that artists can have in encouraging fans to partake in larger movements, especially artists who manage their own social media well and have a large virtual presence. We must remember that artists as popular figures become

²³⁶ Hou, Kathleen. “The K-Pop Stans Are Radicalizing.” The Cut, The Cut, 4 June 2020, www.thecut.com/2020/06/k-pop-stans-spam-police-take-over-whitelivesmatter-hashtag.html.

²³⁷ Lorenz, Taylor, et al. “TikTok Teens and K-Pop Stans Say They Sank Trump Rally.” The New York Times, The New York Times, 21 June 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/06/21/style/tiktok-trump-rally-tulsa.html.

²³⁸ Siese, April. “Twitter Users Take over Proud Boys Hashtag with Photos of LGBTQ Love.” CBS News, CBS Interactive, 5 Oct. 2020, www.cbsnews.com/news/proud-boys-twitter-hashtag-photos-lgbtq-love/.

the heroes of society as Fanon mentions and must therefore take care with their actions and words even beyond what happens in the art making process.

Furthermore, when we recognize something as true, we are, simultaneously, recognizing what *cannot be true* if we hold that first idea as true. (In the case of the kpop stans, they tell us that there are more posters on the internet who are against the White Lives Matter movement, therefore it cannot be true that the Black Lives Matter movement is not important.) Likewise, when we point out enough examples of what is not true we may eventually be left with only one possibility for what *is* true.²³⁹ So, bringing light to both what is true and what is not true becomes important. Thinking about Plato's concern that art is not a perfect reflection of reality can become a good thing when we consider Picasso's spin on it, that: "Art is a lie that makes us realize truth." It may not be a perfect reflection, the way Plato wants, but it does not mean that art does not still bring recognition to truths in the world, that we otherwise would not have had. Consider that even works created in the eye of hopes for the future teach us what is missing from our world now.

Artist, Guo-Qiang, while he was growing up, watched his father paint miniature land, sea, and skyscapes from his father's hometown. But, Guo-Qiang noted, when he was older and visited that hometown, he found it was nothing like the images his father had made. He said: "I learned from a young age that art is not about what you say, it's about these other things that you don't say."²⁴⁰ If we just take the whole world as it is, without focusing our attention on particular aspects that stand out, then there is too much to process all at once.

When there is no way to process all of it, we just shut out what we are perceiving and do not notice anything. Everything just becomes white noise in the background of our lives. So, even when something really important is happening right under our noses we may not see it. But art creates emphasis. All the technical principles of art and design--contrast, color, eye flow, etc.--come together to create focal points. Art lets us see and feel the things we normally would not be able to due to sensory overload.

Art students are typically taught, for example, that when designing a strong composition, one wants to begin with one major focal point and two minor focal points. (Of course, once you learn the rules and hone your skills, you can then break the rules in purposeful ways.) You need one focal point to catch the viewer's attention, but you don't want to stop there because only having one point may not *hold* the viewer's attention. Only one more minor focal point creates a line of eye flow, which can, either end up leading the viewer's eye off the canvas and away from the piece, or result in a ping-pong-ing back and forth between the two points quickly causing annoyance. Three focal points is considered a great starting point for new composers because it creates triangular eye flow, such that the viewer stays looking at the page, but there are also not too many focal points to confuse the viewer. If, for example, you had dozens of focal points, then all of them would begin to mean nothing. The work would be so busy that the viewer would not know what was significant. Too much information leads the viewer to exhaustion and, ultimately, a lack of deep observation.

Furthermore, absence where one is expecting to see something can be a very powerful tool in art. There are so many things that we only recognize once they are gone. So, just like Guo-Qiang said, art is also about what is not there. If we are used to seeing something somewhere, we can become numb to its presence and, so, numb to its value. But, when it is specifically excluded in an artwork, suddenly we feel

²³⁹ Heidegger, Martin, and Albert Hofstadter. Poetry, Language, Thought Translations and Introduction. Harper & Row, 1975. 55.

²⁴⁰ "Power." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 3. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/power/>>. September 16, 2005.

that absence can give value to what it is that is missing. This is akin to Sartre's and Kierkegaard's suggestion that nothingness exists only in contrast to the expectation of being.²⁴¹

Picasso also says, "Everything you can imagine is real." Meaning, as we have suggested before, it does in fact affect us. Think, for example, how we fret over possible outcomes to situations despite them not having yet occurred. Sometimes this worrying even casts us into a self-fulfilling prophecy. By imagining the simulation, as Baudrillard would explain, and continuously exploring it as a possibility, the simulation can in fact become the hyperreal, of which we experience the symptoms, as though it were the initial physical reality.²⁴² We see this in everything from people taking on the literal symptoms of ailments, because they have convinced themselves they are sick, to election results being heavily impacted by predictions made in polls.

This is also the heart of many of the problems that we see in the dominant narrative. Negative stigmas and stereotypes that have been created about marginalized individuals can become the hyperreality as the dominant narrative creates a reality that reinforces scenarios that would lead to those stereotypes occurring. So, despite there not being any factual connection between people and the stigmas about them the assumption that the stigmas are real cause them to come into occurrence.

This means that calling for artists to have this truth making power as part of the way of Being-For-Oneself makes artists *very* dangerous. However, it also gives artists a lot of potential to do good. Power is a pendulum after all, it can swing drastically towards good or bad. So, if used in positive ways, who is to say that what one creates through their art--whether it be a sense of self and confidence, or a better world for others too--cannot be brought more quickly into existence purely by force of believing it to be so and acting as such.

At all times, when we look at an artwork, we learn both what is truth and not, but also what *could* be truth in the future. We go from concealedness to unconcealedness, as Heidegger says, which supports our earlier considerations of the requirement of confrontation of ideas (whether intellectual or emotional) within a work of art. But the truth does have to be something new to the viewer if it is to fulfill this requirement of confrontation. If it is something they already agree greatly with, it tends to just be filed in the brain like an echo chamber, as opposed to sparking critical thinking. Until something does not align with your previous beliefs you are not forced to think.

However, the truth explored also cannot be so contrary to one's beliefs that we immediately dismiss the new idea on the grounds of it being outrageous. The University of Southern California's Brain and Creativity Institute ran a study in which they found that when individuals read statements that went against their core beliefs it activated the same part of the brain that is activated when there is a physical threat to the body. The amygdala, the emotional core of the mind, experiences the "fight or flight" reaction to new information.²⁴³ Hence, a physiological proof that supports the claim many philosophers have already made for the need for incremental changes to a world view in order for a knowledge transformation to be successfully implemented.

²⁴¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: the Principle Text of Modern Existentialism*. Washington Square Press, 1992.

²⁴² Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations. Semiotext(e)*, 1983.

²⁴³ Kaplan, Jonas T., et al. "Neural Correlates of Maintaining One's Political Beliefs in the Face of Counterevidence." *Nature News*, Nature Publishing Group, 23 Dec. 2016, www.nature.com/articles/srep39589.

So, something like the HOPE²⁴⁴ poster by Shepard Fairey would potentially not be useful to viewers who only immediately agree or immediately disagree with the poster's message. But to the individual, which this poster makes confront something new, it could be very useful.

We also can look back at older artworks in new ways to still fulfill this requirement of Being-For-Onself, as John Berger brings up in his text *Ways of Seeing*:

[Historically] the inherent contradiction in perspective was that it structured all images of reality to address a single spectator who, unlike God, could only be in one place at a time. After the invention of the camera this contradiction gradually became apparent. I'm an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it.²⁴⁵

With the development of the camera artworks no longer had to be viewed only directly by the human eye. Instead we could use a mechanical eye not only to see things that we would not have the opportunity to visit in person ourselves but also to view those things in different perspectives. We could zoom in on details the human eye might not be able to pick up on. We could force the viewer to read an image in a particular order by scanning from section to another as a guide. In some cases we might even go inside of things we could not before. The change in the literal physical perspective required for art leads to a change in the metaphysical interpretation required of the work. When a piece is meant, as it was historically, to be viewed from one place by one viewer in a particular context, then, perhaps, this was reason enough to claim the work should be interpreted in a particular manner as well. But now, like with the camera, we recognize the ability to view works from multiple perspectives and, thus, result in artists creating works meant to be viewed as such.

In terms of multiple perspectives that cameras lend us, there are many ways in which cameras achieve this. This could include, simply, the fact that cameras allow us to see from physical angles the human eye would not normally look from. For example, cameras let us look up through a crevasse in the ground, down from space, or even at a microscopic level. It could also include the way in which a camera may be used in reproduction, as Berger demonstrates in the BBC tv show version of his text. Cameras allow us to change the size of an image, transport the image to places and formats it could not have previously been experienced in, and, when we are talking about film cameras, rather than still cameras, we may also pan over an image changing, in an obvious way, the direction from which a viewer reads the work (ie. left to right vs. right to left, bottom to top vs. top to bottom, etc.).²⁴⁶

Cameras show us the impact of zooming in on small details, as Ranciere explains to us, comparing theater and film. Film allows us the opportunity to cut from image to image as parts of the whole, whereas, with theater, we have the entirety of the scene in front of us.²⁴⁷ It could also include, as Cohen points out, the way in which the camera is able to trap fossils of the world, which sometimes bring to our attention things the photographer was not intending to catch on film.²⁴⁸

This was not an overnight shift either, as Berger provides some samples of changing times:

²⁴⁴ "Barack Obama 'Hope' Poster." Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, 9 Sept. 2018, en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barack_Obama_%22Hope%22_poster.

²⁴⁵ Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger. British Broadcasting Corp., 2012.

²⁴⁶ "John Berger/Ways of Seeing." *YouTube*, youtu.be/0pDE4VX_9Kk.

²⁴⁷ Rancière, Jacques. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. London: Verso, 2013. Print.

²⁴⁸ Cohen, Ted. "WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT PHOTOGRAPHY?" *The Monist*, vol. 71, no. 2, 1988, pp. 292–305. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27903083.

For the impressionists the visible no longer presented itself to man in order to be seen. On the contrary the visible, in continual flux, became fugitive. For the Cubists [and futurists] the totality of possible views taken from points all round the object (or person) being depicted [as well as multiple points in time for futurists].²⁴⁹

What Berger is pointing out are a few obvious shifts in what was important aesthetically to artists. Representational artists may have wanted to capture a good deal of what was physically seen in front of them as it was. But impressionists began to care about how it made them feel and trying to translate that. And cubists did want to see what was in front of them but they wanted to see 360 degrees on a flat surface all at once. Futurists wanted that view plus the dimension of time.

Our poor, concerned, Plato would probably have been perfectly okay with artworks like those of the cubists and futurists, since it would more accurately represent the existence of whatever was depicted than the more “static”²⁵⁰ images of his time and culture. But even this is not where art has stopped/come to today. Now, we see works created in all sorts of stylistic manners--drawing from historical styles as well as new innovative ideas. However, even the works drawing from historical eras are more focused on this sense of confronting ideas, and thus the idea of multiple, even contradictory, perspectives becomes part of the truth of the works. This is why we need a different interpretation method.

But, if different eras require different interpretation techniques based on the philosophical thought of the time, then what kind of era are we looking at now? In an era that focuses on multiple perspectives, we are looking at the multiplicity of truth. New truths are created with each viewing. Kiki Smith, a sculptor and printmaker from New Jersey, would speak of the process of art making for the artist as “Art is something that moves from your insides into the world.”²⁵¹

Smith mentions that from the perspective of the viewer “[Art is] open ended, it can have a meaning to me, but, also, somebody else can fill it up with their meaning,”²⁵² which falls in line with this idea of the multiplicity of truth. I particularly liked Guo-Qiang’s description of a triptych piece that opened and closed, which references this multiplicity as an infinity: “Once you open [the piece] it’s like opening up the universe, it’s boundless; but then it’s gone when you close it and yet its pregnant with possibilities.”²⁵³ Almost like Schrodinger’s cat, here, the work, when not visible, is everything at once because it could be anything. But the important part is that the work, even when open, is still “boundless” in terms of possibilities. It could mean any number of things to any number of viewers.

Those individual interpretations, then, tell us not only a truth about the art itself, but about the viewer. There might be some larger universal state of truth²⁵⁴ (in addition to a multitude of smaller ones) that the work provides, but it also gives an understanding of how we view and think of ourselves, which is just as valuable.

²⁴⁹ Berger, John. *Ways of Seeing*: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger. British Broadcasting Corp., 2012.

²⁵⁰ “Static” here in the sense that the images supposedly only captured split seconds in time from one perspective.

²⁵¹ “Stories.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 2. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s2/stories/>. September 9, 2003.

²⁵² “Stories.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 2. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s2/stories/>. September 9, 2003.

²⁵³ “Power.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/power/>. September 16, 2005.

²⁵⁴ This is one reason why liberation is fundamental to this discussion... we are currently in a war of/on universal human rights... the modern art era focuses more and more on ethical issues movements etc. which are viewed simultaneously as universal movements and very individually moving.

New York resident and artist, Matthew Ritchie, provides an interesting anecdote on why we should not expect, or even want, a clear and distinct “truth” from an artwork:

To sort of classify visual art alone as the one medium that shouldn't require any effort from anyone ever you should just be able to look at it and walk away with a pure sensation relegates it to the likes of a roller coaster ride... like close your eyes and enjoy the ride... I'm more likely to say open your eyes and enjoy the ride because it's much more exciting if you are thinking and questioning ...and it is full of questions and statements that you can't possibly grasp because that is a truer reflection of just how reality is than of something sort of neatly tied up in a bow and 'go--there that's it--be at peace go home.'²⁵⁵

Part of the “reality” of the situation (and life and the world) is that it is complicated. It is not nice and neat and so understanding the “truth” of the world is not going to be simple either. You must work for it, which, perhaps, is what makes it worthwhile. And, because of this, no one is going to find exactly the same truth. Everyone is going to ask different questions and bring different perspectives to the table.

It is important to note that new truths are created, not just with each new viewing experience, but with each reproduction. Berger says:

When a camera reproduces a painting, it destroys the uniqueness of its image. As a result, its meaning changes. Or, more exactly, its meaning multiples and fragments into many meanings.²⁵⁶
²⁵⁷

The destruction of the uniqueness of the images that Berger brings up is a fear of Walter Benjamin's (and others') that mechanical reproduction somehow destroys the authenticity of an art object and, so, diminishes it. But Berger follows this worry up with a statement as to how the meaning of the object is actually multiplied and made greater. The reason for this being that the accessibility of the work has now increased, and, so too, has the audience. An increased audience means more appreciation and more possible interpretations.

To some extent, each replication becomes its own entity because its context and display is changed. It is not just that there exists now a reproduction of an original, but that also, the original is no longer *just* the original. Now, it is, instead, an original of a reproduction. In the next section, we will take this idea of multiplicity of truths and look for a deeper understanding of what this means in terms of identity both for the artist and for the viewers.

²⁵⁵ “Structures.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 3. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/structures/>>. September 30, 2005.

²⁵⁶ Berger, John. Ways of Seeing: Based on the BBC Television Series with John Berger. British Broadcasting Corp., 2012. Page 20.

²⁵⁷ This is all very contrary to Benjamin Walter who wrote an important work in philosophy of art: *Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* and finds reproduction to lessen the meaning of artworks. His argument being that it dilutes the original work. Though important to note considering the weight the work has had in the philosophical community, it seems an irrelevant argument when operating under this system of the multiplicity of truths as the mode of art making today without making a judgement on whether this system is “good” or “bad”. (Benjamin's argument primarily exists because he thinks this multiplicity to be “bad” for the aura of the original intention.)

Authentic Identity Formation

*Books tell us who we've been, who we are, who we will be, too.*²⁵⁸

--Prager

Identity is our last important guideline we need to discuss. And really it is built up from the other four proposed guidelines. I'd claim that identity is found via art through a combination of confrontation of ideas, vulnerability, and choice making. But in order to recognize the contrast between identity building and having an identity placed upon us we needed to first recognize art as bringing a multiplicity of truths into the world. Once we finally are able to recognize a chosen identity apart from one given to us, we can reach that state of Being-For-Oneself.

Maya Lin, an artist, and architect from Ohio, says that it is through looking at, and reflecting on, a body of work that she is able to understand herself better:

[Art]'s everything you've ever known and everything you've ever done somehow percolating with ideas you think you might want to explore. It's taken me a body of work to see how I am developing.²⁵⁹

This resonates greatly with the idea that a painting takes a lifetime to complete. A viewer might ask an artist how long it took to paint a particular piece and there's the answer the asker likely wants--the amount of time to put the paint down—and, then, there is the more accurate answer of a lifetime. In this sense, every piece of art is a self-portrait. Realizing that, helps us to understand not just where the artist came from, but where they are now and where they could go.²⁶⁰ The same way that it takes the identity of the artist to make the work, making the work itself helps to form the artist's understanding of their own identity.

Music has been an area of particular use for intersectional identities. For instance, blues music has played a fundamental role in Black feminism. While women, and especially Black women, did not have a lot of access to publish writing in the 1920's many Black women were able to find their platform in singing.²⁶¹ One area in which these women found emancipation (as Davis has pointed out this specifically became a platform to express both the contrasts and similarities of Black life during and post slavery) in was singing about sexuality. During slavery Black people, especially women, did not have the freedom to

²⁵⁸ "Wisdom from great writers on every year of life." Joshua Prager, TED.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fhCY_8avhWM>. May 12, 2016.

²⁵⁹ "Identity." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 1. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/identity/>>. September 28, 2001.

²⁶⁰ This is one of the aspects that I think really sets art that we are considering in this current western tradition apart from other art historical periods. For example would one claim that a painting from the Renaissance period hired on commission by a patron is really an expression of the identity of the artist? Perhaps in some cases yes, as there were certainly ways in which the artists made their own desires and emotions known (e.g., a disgruntled Michelangelo painting the likeness of Biagio Martinelli, a Papal Master of Ceremonies who complained about the nudes in the sistine chapel, as Minos in the underworld with a snake twisting around his body and devouring his genitals--so the man was no longer nude! So, yes, it is not to say that artists were never outspoken or any less sassy than they are now. See: Land, Norman E. "A CONCISE HISTORY OF THE TALE OF MICHELANGELO AND BIAGIO DA CESENA." Source: Notes in the History of Art, vol. 32, no. 4, 2013, pp. 15–19. JSTOR, JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41955680).

However, on the whole it would be much more common and easy to recognize the importance of identity in artworks from the current western tradition.

²⁶¹ Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. Vintage, 1999. xii

determine their own sexual partners as they were used, particularly after importation of new slaves was outlawed, as they were used to forcibly breed a new generation of slaves, who also could be legally ripped away from their parents whenever the slaveholder felt like it. As one may imagine women were especially prone to sexual assault and rape.

Post slavery sexual freedom, thus, became incredibly important. Yet at the same time racism and sexism came together in a particularly dangerous marriage to oppress Black women. The Black woman was expected to act in certain ways to help the Black man achieve equality with the white man. She became a sacrifice. She was also contrasted with the white woman. Interestingly enough, previously women of all ethnicities had been expected to do work, however, with the “end” of slavery the idea of the woman’s “place” being the domestic sphere began to develop.²⁶² Part of this was a goal to separate white women from Black women and show that they were better in some way. Even if a Black woman wanted to only take on domestic work it was not possible in many situations to do so and still keep a family afloat. This is an interesting case of new forms of sexism invented to continue to perpetuate racism.

But the blues songs of Black women such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, rebutted this role of the housewife.²⁶³ Not only did their songs emphasize the sexual freedom of women (often why blues music was considered “the Devil’s music”) but also about strong, independent, Black women who didn’t need a man at all. Their lyrics commonly speak to leaving a man if he treats her wrong, and to supporting herself on her own without the help of any man financially or emotionally. They even spoke about taboo topics such as divorce and women with woman lovers.

Even artists who are seemingly making work about someone or something else, not themselves, find that their work really is this sort of self-portrait. Stan Douglas, a reenactment artist from Vancouver, for example, says:

I used to make artwork because I thought I could hide behind it... And then that turned out to not be the case because it was so tied up in my identity that it became impossible to not talk about myself.²⁶⁴

Douglas works, primarily, reenacting specific local histories of tension and connecting them to current, more universal, struggles. But he found that, as he was working on these particular historical events, he still could not separate himself from them. His engagement with these ideas became about his own identity and understanding.

But the identity of the artist is not just tied up in what the artists themselves put into the work, it is also related to the way in which the viewers experience and identify the artists. In her TedTalk, Sue Austin discusses her experience as an artist intertwined with her identity as an individual in a wheelchair. She says we “[see] the self through the responses that others have to us. Our identity is based on what they think.”²⁶⁵ Others have had a great deal of impact on her being labeled as a disabled person. One of the things we don’t consider often enough, is how the assumptions and stereotypes we place on others

²⁶² Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. Vintage Books, 1983. 9-13

²⁶³ Davis, Angela Y. *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday*. Vintage, 1999.

²⁶⁴ “Vancouver.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 8. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/identity/>. September 23, 2016.

²⁶⁵ Austin, Sue. “Deep Sea Diving ... in a Wheelchair.” TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/sue_austin_deep_sea_diving_in_a_wheelchair/up-next?language=en.

become part of the identity with which others are forced to live. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre explores this “othering” of ourselves through our neighbors’ eyes.²⁶⁶

There are pros and cons to this looking to the audience for confirmation of the identity of the artist. The pro is there are often subconscious identities forming for the artist that even they may not be aware of, but, by hearing the audience explore their work in a different way, the artist might learn something about their own subconscious identity. The con, of course, is that an identity may be forcibly placed upon the artist which they do not or do not wish to associate with.

But this is where participating in art becomes really important. Art can be a very effective way to *reclaim* an identity and transform preconceptions that others may have. For Austin, this resolved itself by creating art where she took her wheelchair scuba diving. She left, as she put it, “literal traces of her joy” with her wheelchair as her art. Austin found audiences thought it was the coolest thing that she was able to jet around in her chair underwater. Some even wanted to have similar experiences themselves. So, suddenly, being in a wheelchair was not such a bad thing. Not because she did not think it was a horrible thing (as this was already something she was under the impression of), but because now she stopped hearing the pity and sadness presented to her by the people around her. Through her art, Austin no longer had to live this identity that was forced upon her.

Fred Wilson, an artist from the Bronx, New York, provides an eloquent explanation of this as well:

As I got older I realized your identity is really tied to when you grew up. A lot of my project is trying to understand the visual world around me; the way that it affects me. For me that's the basis of a lot of what I do--where that pain comes from...

All these representations that I grew up with are telling me who I am whether I realize it or not so by pulling it all out and having them talk to each other is my sort of take control of who I am... and also how I understand who I am, what is me, and what is what the rest of the world said who I am. It comes from this sort of sadness, you know, I'm not a sad person but it sort of bubbles up inside me.²⁶⁷

For Wilson, it is not just about dispelling some false understandings the world has of him by providing proof that they are wrong (as in the case of Austin). It is understanding where those stereotypes are coming from. And then, through his artistic exploration, he is able to take control of those stereotypes and morph them into his own understanding and definition of himself. Art allows Wilson to form his own identity both for himself privately and to shout to the world publicly—“this is who I am.” This is who he has *chosen* to be, not who he has been told he *has* to be.

I am interested in how the process of art itself is what liberates the artist by allowing them to reclaim their identity and how, likewise, it liberates the viewer, as the viewer becomes an artist through experiencing the piece. I believe the viewer is liberated in two ways with regards to identity. First, by better understanding another individual’s identity and, second, by better understanding the significance of their own unique identity.

For the first, I have a more lighthearted example coming from Adam Savage’s TedTalk on Cosplay:

²⁶⁶ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: the Principle Text of Modern Existentialism*. Washington Square Press, 1992.

²⁶⁷ “Structures.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/structures/>>. September 30, 2005.

Comic Cons and bending costumes to your will is not just representing these characters but making them the characters we want them to be. We are connecting with something inside of us and the cosplays are how we reveal ourselves to each other.²⁶⁸

It is clear when we look at Comic Cons²⁶⁹ that part of this artistic experience is about having an audience to express this identity to. And, in Comic Cons, especially, there is this sense of rallying around the joy of not only expressing one's identity but getting to know the identities of others. People want to stop, chat, and take pictures with this expressed identity of someone else.

But, as mentioned above, it is not just about getting to know someone else's identity. There is also a sense of understanding that comes to the viewer for their own identity when they interact with and observe these artworks. For example, how many LGBTQ+ youth have grown up and continue to grow up surrounded only by heteronormative norms such that they may not even know what being part of LGBTQ+ means, only to be introduced to an understanding of their own identity through the art world of the internet? Fanfiction, webcomics, and online communities that post visual and written art like Tumbler or Patreon are often havens for youth who didn't really understand their own gender or orientation related identities. Whether those around them are actively anti LGBTQ+ or simply no one ever talked to them about it, it is a struggle to feel like you don't match with the dominant narrative but not know why. Suddenly, through platforms like these, however, they are able to see the subconscious inklings they had about their own identities not only as real and valid identities but even as something to be praised.

In the same vein consider Regis and Kahran Bethencourt of Creative Soul Photography.²⁷⁰ Their recently published book of photography, *Glory: Magical Visions of Black Beauty*, aims, in particular, to showcase to Black youth how beautiful they are and dispel the myth that Black hair is less than desirable and needs to be tamed into white hairstyles to be acceptable. The incredible images display hundreds of photos in a visual essay about natural Black hair. Considering the constant barrage of subconscious advertising we receive on a day to day basis that "the whiter the better" this project has a significant impact on identity confidence building.

Next, we get into how the artworks are relevant to identity in the bigger picture--a universal identity perhaps. Richard Tuttle, an artist from New Jersey, who refers to his own work as drawings (despite audience understanding as sculptural), points out: "the art that survives from one generation to another is the the art that says something about the self."²⁷¹ People want to know themselves. The biggest philosophical question of all time is: who am I, and why am I here? So, it would make sense that the art that helps the viewer to understand their own self and identity better is the art that would continue to intrigue audiences.

²⁶⁸ Savage, Adam. "My Love Letter to Cosplay." TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/adam_savage_my_love_letter_to_cosplay/up-next?language=en.

²⁶⁹ For readers who may not know, Comic Cons are conventions for fans of comic books (and comic to tv or movie adaptations). At the conventions artists often sell fan art or share fanfiction which are all their own renditions or explorations of characters sometimes within the same reality but sometimes in an alternate storyline from the original. So this is a time where fans take the characters they love and make them their own. Very popular at these events also is cosplay--where fans will dress up as their favorite characters. But while some aim for accuracy to the comics many fans aim to, once again, make the characters their own by making adjustments to the costuming to showcase their own added flair and love for the characters.

²⁷⁰ Bethencourt, Regis and Kahran. *Creative Soul Photography*. <http://creativesoulphoto.com/>

²⁷¹ "Structures." *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3. PBS. [<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/structures/>](https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/structures/). September 30, 2005.

When Saba Taj visited a painting class at Virginia Tech in the fall of 2017²⁷² to talk about her art as it relates to her unique identity, students asked questions concerning how to balance individual identity with the universal. They worried, that, if one is too individualistic, then the audience would not be able to relate as well to such a specific set of parameters. However, going too far in the other direction by trying to be completely universal, one's work may become too general to be influential. Saba told the students not to worry about being too specific and that, in fact, she found the more authentic to her personal perspective she was, the more the audience could relate. But, getting to that point was a journey for Saba, as her initial fears related to representing a collective identity (i.e., queer, woman, Muslim, Americans):

...there is a level of accountability necessary in general just as a person who is making; obviously I can use my identity but leaving out others' [just so as not to misrepresent] is not right either; if someone wants to take someone's work as this is what represents everything then that's their own nonsense... 'oh that's not my experience' well of course not! There's way too many experiences!²⁷³

What Saba is getting at, here, is that there is a problem where some audience members expect an artwork to show a universal experience. They take issue with it if the work does not match up with their own experience. If the work is by a marginalized identity, the audience assumes the work to be representative of the entire marginalized group. This is something that any artist, who is not part of the dominant narrative, has to consider: *What are people going to assume about the entire group, just because I happen to be part of a marginalized identity?*

But, as Saba so eloquently put it, it is in fact utter nonsense that anyone should have to make those considerations. That is because it is impossible to represent a whole group, given that every person's experiences are different. Likewise, there is a strange relationship between not having a particular identity and not being allowed to talk about that identity. To claim an experience as our own, when it is not, is falsifying. But, to say that someone else's experience, that is different than our own, is important to us and to help bring a spotlight to it through art, could potentially be useful.

Ultimately, audiences can be strange people with strange expectations that artists often spend too much time worrying about. Somehow, it is such a relief to hear that it is not okay for the audience to be ridiculous about their expectations. When you're producing artwork, it feels like such a weight on your shoulders to have to give something to others that meets their expectations. It can feel like you are at fault, as the artist, if you fail to make this connection. But, if we are being honest, a lot of people have unrealistic expectations. It is very powerful to call them out on it and not have the artist take the blame of not fulfilling those expectations. Just because art often has an audience, does not mean that it is being produced solely for that audience. If it is good art, it is being made for the artist themselves too. Which, means the work needs to be significant to that artist's experience, or as Saba put it--authentic:

Really at this point I don't care as much about audience as much as authenticity; it started with *How do I change people's minds about Muslims?*, but then I realized it doesn't really work that way... I'm not interested in seeing these people through to the end; I might be losing people along the way, but I think it is also important to have high expectations of the viewers; why are expectations so low?²⁷⁴

This constraint placed on the artist, that someone *has* to get something out of the work, is incredible. Sure, artists should make work that someone, who wants to learn, has the ability to get something out of,

²⁷² Taj, Saba. Salaam Project. 2017, Blacksburg, VA, Virginia Tech.

²⁷³ Ibid.

²⁷⁴ Ibid.

but, at the same time, they should not have to hit someone over the head with a club of knowledge and say “learn, dammit!” Expansion should be accessible to the viewer, but not a necessity. A teacher’s job (whether they come in the form of professor or artist) is never to force their audience to learn, but, rather, to make learning available, should the audience choose to engage in it. In particular, the marginalized artist is not responsible for the actions and thoughts of those who continue to participate in marginalizations, nor for the results of those actions and thoughts.

Now, we are starting to get somewhere. This realization, that it is not a failure on the artist’s part if the audience doesn’t get something out of their work, takes an enormous responsibility off the artist’s shoulders. Art should be a team sport: artists and audience together. We can think back to what Matthew Ritchie said about art not being something that people can walk away, so simply from, with “the answer.” But we still haven’t quite arrived at how this becomes relevant and good for the viewer if the experience isn’t designed to send them into an interpretation that relates easily with their own general identity. Luckily, Saba’s talk continued, she said: “It is really necessary for folks, especially those marginalized, to be able to create whatever the fuck we want rather than being confined to defending ourselves.”

Artists need accessibility to creating artwork that they want(/need) to make, rather than just what others want them to make. This is important because this process is about the artists’ individualized experiences being expressed just as much as the audience trying to connect to a generalized idea.

People from the outside are coming in and filtering everything through their own values; we’ll see people suffering a lot in National Geographic almost like pornography at how much people like to consume it... and then everyone assumes everyone that sort of looks like that is living in that situation. But who are those people actually? There’s a real incompleteness.²⁷⁵

Here Saba was explaining how, even though National Geographic is supposed to be educating us on occurrences around the world that are not in our current understanding, it actually works to create flat images of those with whom we do not share experiences. And, unfortunately, the western world tends to eat up images of others’ suffering “like pornography,” in that it is something we consume rapidly, and, with negative consequences. This is not to say the readers necessarily *want* others to be in distress, but that the way we consume this particular type of content so quickly makes it high value to the media. So, the media tends to focus on these stories of distress, and only these stories of distress. Ultimately, this causes the people reading to not have a complete understanding, as they assume this is the sad, constant, existence of all people, who look like the images they see. Saba continues:

I was asked to be a part of a National Geographic humanistic piece on Muslims in America and I was being included as this queer example; I know this is important and people need this--because it was important for me to have people to google; and yet to participate in it is so flattening and feels really shitty to become a thing instead of a person. They think your humanity is contingent on your similarity to those in power.... The issue in a lot of regards is there is not enough [artists producing]. Only a few voices are amplified to translate rather than listening to people actually from the community.²⁷⁶

Here, Saba references two types of problems marginalized individuals face. First, being judged as more human, when being more like the dominant narrative, and less human (more object, to gaze upon), when less like the dominant narrative. For example, we might consider a black person being told they talk like a white person, as though this is a compliment, and a white person being told they talk like a black person, as though this is derogatory. Second, she brings up the problem of becoming a flat representation that the

²⁷⁵ Ibid.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.

dominant culture will then use to stereotype anyone else who remotely “looks” like her. Stereotypes, even seemingly positive ones still have negative consequences. This is where we develop the problematic idea of the “model minority” which is then used to punish other marginalized individuals or groups for not upholding the aspects that the dominant narrative appreciates. If Saba is included, in the National Geographic article, in order to show an example of a queer Muslim in America, then she becomes the standard by which the audience will assume all queer Muslims in America are, whether this is true or not.

These problems need to be resolved for the sake of authenticity and not dehumanizing the artist. To achieve this resolution, Saba suggests, we need more artists, who are sharing their actual voices, rather than what they are expected to. She, for example, needs to be able to share her personal truth, rather than try to represent the truth of all queer Muslim Americans. This lends itself, also, to the humanizing of the audience. Seeing the artist share their personal truth, the audience is better able to accept that their own stories are allowed to be larger than, different from, and just as important as the variety of stories they see in the arts. Without providing the artist accessibility to authentic individuality, the audience suffers just as much as the artist, because the audience will believe, via the magical powers of the media, that the stories that are valuable are only those like what they see and read about in popular art (or other popular media).

Abramovic echoes this sentiment in her discussion of how artists need to find inspiration within themselves. She says:

An artist should look deep inside themselves for inspiration.
The deeper they look the more universal they become.
The artist is universe, the artist is universe, the artist is universe.²⁷⁷

At this point, we have established that art needs to allow space for the artist to express their own identity, for the sake of the artist and the viewer. The more authentic the artist is, the more universal the work becomes, allowing viewers to relate and confront their own identities. However, we have yet to establish how to make art that establishes the artist’s identity.

It isn’t as though an artist is able to just innately speak to their identity from day one. The artists we have been quoting already feel they are searching for their identity and are beginning to form an understanding of it. But how does one start that journey?

Yuyu Rau, a dancer born in Taiwan, but now living in the UK, suggests in a TedTalk that we learn about our own identity by imitating others and finding what works and what doesn’t:

Every time I fail to become more like my father, I become more like myself. Every time I fail to become more authentically like Bruce Lee, I become more authentically me. Authenticity is my art.²⁷⁸

Imitation and failure. Failure--a concept we discussed previously regarding vulnerability--leads to authenticity. If we think back to the concept of truth giving way to non-truths, and vice versa, similarly, failure helps us get closer to the truth by identifying what is a non-truth. To establish an identity, a lot of mistakes are necessary. Accidents²⁷⁹, mistakes, failures, etc., whatever name you want to call them by, are perhaps an artist’s best friends. They lead the artist closer to their authentic identity. But the vulnerability alone is not sufficient.

²⁷⁷ “History.” Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 6. PBS. <<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/history/>>. April 28, 2012.

²⁷⁸ Patel, Hetain. “Who Am I? Think Again.” TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/hetain_patel_who_am_i_think_again/up-next?language=en.

²⁷⁹ Whether “happy accidents” as Bob Ross would put it or not so happy ones...

Nick Cave, a performance sculpture artist from Missouri, had this to say:

[It started out that] I was building this suit of armor--something that I could shield myself from the world, from society, with... Since that I've had a different approach to art making; I realized I was an artist with a conscience. The moment I did, it turned my life upside down. [Now] it's me experimenting--you know the scientist exploring ideas. I want to not necessarily be something that is defined. ...It's all just based on one object that becomes the instigator ...and then that begins this sort of journey.²⁸⁰

It is not just about being vulnerable to possibilities, but about making the choice to be vulnerable. Cave recognized he wanted to be an artist with a conscience and do something, rather than remain hiding behind his defenses. First, he had the realization of the possibilities, if he were to make himself vulnerable, but then, he did something about it. He chose to experiment and explore. That is what made him an artist. Anyone can happen to be in a situation where they are vulnerable, but choosing to do so, and with a purpose in mind to become more authentic, is where the art, and artist, are really made.

A French sculptor (now living in the US), Louise Bourgeois', works primarily revolve around the concept of helplessness and vulnerability. She says as artists "We are not afraid of our helplessness. Helplessness can be a charm it makes you feel good to help someone who is helpless."²⁸¹ She mentions, when discussing her artworks, swinging back and forth from being a child and a grandmother. She talks about people wanting to grow up, but that artists are different. She says, "It might be true, that the artist--there is something in them that either refuses or is unable to grow up..."²⁸² There is a vulnerability in the idea of *not* growing up. This is because society pressures us, from the time that we are small, to believe that being an "adult" is optimal. *When are you going to grow up? Why don't you just grow up already?* Etc.

Young-ha Kim, a modern South Korean writer, gives an interesting TedTalk titled *Be an Artist, Right Now!* that leads us to think further on this relationship between artists and not growing up. Kim starts the TedTalk noting: "We have so many reasons why we can't be an artist right now (so many things we have to do). Why do we resist art?"²⁸³ And it is true we do seem to have this initial resistance to the arts today. There is a resistance to the arts as a career: *That's not a real job! You need to do something where you can actually support yourself! When are you going to stop drawing pictures and get a real job? etc.* And, even, as a pastime:²⁸⁴ *Why don't you do something more productive with your time?* This resistance is reflected in funding cuts to public education for the arts, low incomes of professional artists even in creative technologies, the unaccepting nature of higher education to consider MFA's as equivalent terminal degrees, etc.

Yet, as Kim points out in this humorous example: "We are all born artists. If you have kids, you know what I mean--almost everything kids do is art. Perhaps their art is something only their parents can bear... (but it is art)."²⁸⁵ But, perhaps, this is where our uneasiness comes from in respect to the arts. In a society that believes achieving "adulthood" is optimal, being considered a child's activity, art would be looked

²⁸⁰ "Chicago." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 8. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s8/chicago/>>. September 16, 2016.

²⁸¹ "Identity." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 1. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/identity/>>. September 28, 2001.

²⁸² Ibid.

²⁸³ Kim, Young-ha. "Be an Artist, Right Now!" TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/young_ha_kim_be_an_artist_right_now?language=en.

²⁸⁴ ...this despite the fact that plenty of non productive activities are seemingly perfectly acceptable including ones that cost a lot of money like drinking or going to the movies etc.

²⁸⁵ Kim, Young-ha. "Be an Artist, Right Now!" TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/young_ha_kim_be_an_artist_right_now?language=en.

down upon. Yet, the interesting thing is that it seems as though an “adult” *cannot* make art. To be an artist, one must be vulnerable and open to returning to a state of childhood.

This makes a lot of sense when thinking back to Yuyu Rau’s commentary on imitation as a way to find one’s authentic self. Gadamer, in his work *Truth and Method*,²⁸⁶ talks about the way in which children learn and explore. All of their understanding of the world, and of themselves, comes from playing pretend, which he relates, essentially, to imitation. Gadamer says children imitate what is around them in order to determine how to operate in the world and form identities. For Gadamer, this can become a negative experience in which the children automatically accept into their identities the stereotypes and stigmas surrounding them. However, by returning to this concept as an adult, who is attempting to re-experience and explore as a child, the artist is already aware of these stigmas and stereotypes. Thus, the artist is able to use this exploratory imitation as a way to navigate and define their own identity, without taking on the harmful stereotypes.

Returning to Kim’s TedTalk, he suggests a method for spurring a child into continuing their creative adventures. He says:

The moment kids start to lie is the moment story telling begins... parents should celebrate! Good parents would ask follow-up questions so that the kid becomes responsible for the first thing they said and has to continue the story... This is what a writer does they write a sentence and then follow it up with another one that doesn’t completely contradict the first one; make connections etc. justify it etc.²⁸⁷

So, these are the next steps the artist should take to reach an authentic identity. Choose a starting point and then, go with it. Continue that story and identify the details that need to be included to make sure it does not contradict itself. Then, you keep doing this from different starting points of imitation. Stop and restart somewhere new, when you find that this particular imitation does not work for you. Eventually, you find something that does not have to stop. You will find a place where you do feel this authentic identity forming. Children are much more honest with themselves than adults are. That is why they make effective artists.

I actually find that artists, children, and philosophers are all one in the same. Kids are exploring and experiencing to find their way in the world. Artists are creating work in order to find their authentic selves. And, while adults are trained to present themselves as though they already know what is “right”, the philosopher’s dialogue is meant to explore the many ways in which they, the philosopher, are “incorrect.” By exploring how one is wrong, the philosopher eventually arrives together with the audience, through conversation, with what is “truth”. The artist is a philosopher looking for truth about themselves and the only way to get there is by looking for where they are wrong.

Today, we are so afraid of being wrong, and we are so afraid of being seen as children, that we don’t want to be artists, who willingly subject themselves to both these experiences. It isn’t as though those who don’t make art *can’t*, it is just that they *won’t*. Kim says:

²⁸⁶ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2014.

²⁸⁷ Kim, Young-ha. “Be an Artist, Right Now!” TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/young_ha_kim_be_an_artist_right_now?language=en.

Our artistic side is not destroyed, but suppressed as we can see by the fact that people do karaoke or go dance at bars or dads get more excited about building legos than their kids. We also get jealous and start to criticize people's art because we don't have access to make art.²⁸⁸

While there are many ways, as we have previously discussed, that individuals are barred from accessibility of the arts in a more professional or public way, many times, in our private lives people do not have “access” because they are embarrassed. Participating in art does not have to look at all like what has been publicly marketed, it could be as simple as wandering through the woods looking at the world in a critical way. This returns us to our bigger purpose of art. The artists’ explorations allow viewers to live vicariously through them and furthermore inspires them to live their own lives as artists should. The artist provides the “physical” materials of the art, while the viewer is still able to work on the metaphysical aspects of identity by viewing the work. Again, our existentialist goal is that all identities come to full fruition in the eyes of the world because no individual can be truly liberated until we all are.

For Kim, art is not just a pastime, nor profession, “[Art] is the ultimate goal. It saves our souls and makes us live happily.”²⁸⁹ Because it allows us to find our authentic identity it frees us. Perhaps, this is why artists, understanding the freedom of childhood, spend their lives trying to return to that childhood.

²⁸⁸ Kim, Young-ha. “Be an Artist, Right Now!” TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/young_ha_kim_be_an_artist_right_now?language=en.

²⁸⁹ Ibid.

Chapter 5 – Art, Being-For-Oneself, and Liberation from the Dominant Narrative

Why Does Liberation Matter?

We have a right to create, a right to self-realization and to fulfillment.

—Nachmanovitch²⁹⁰

Why are these guidelines, which I have presented, the most useful for liberation from the dominant narrative? It is awesome when the content of art lines up with values we want to see in the world, however, we might be wrong about those values the content is expressing. Or perhaps values that are good now might be different from values that are good later. So, the process of coming to that content is way more important than the content itself.

Moreover, why should artists, even those seemingly benefitting from the dominant narrative, worry about liberation from it? Mel Chin, a first generation Chinese American artist, tells us that an artist has the ability to “take something that you think ‘what a shame’ and say, ‘no it has value.’ It has another value through art.”²⁹¹ How much more powerful an impact can one have on individuals, who may have, at some time in their life, felt the pain of being tossed aside as useless, than the ability to show that what is thrown away does in fact have value? Artists have the ability to remind people of their inherent value. And it isn’t just a spur of the moment reminder. Through art, the artist has the ability to return something to a community that can be maintained long after the artist, themselves, is gone.

El Anatsui, a sculptor from Ghana, puts the idea of revitalizing something discarded in an interesting perspective, that is perhaps not so common in the ‘western world’. He says,

In most parts of Africa, when a pot is broken, it’s not the end of its life. This idea of regeneration, you know--giving form to new life, bringing about new hope. Destruction is a prerequisite for new ideas and new growth.²⁹²

Likewise, Anatsui’s artwork reflects this sense of metamorphosis, and, therefore, hope.

In what has become such an easy-to-replace material culture, perhaps, it makes sense that this idea of discarding does not stop with things. We also so easily discard living, breathing, human beings. A worker is easily replaced by at least a dozen eager new faces, who will work for less. And, so, the concerns of the worker become irrelevant to the employer. Dates are a dime a dozen with dating apps and swipes left and right, that reduce a person to a few images and words on a piece of technology to be judged. We are fostering a sense of the replaceability of individuals for all people, let alone those already marginalized by other factors. But this is a place that art could help.

And, perhaps, it is a place in which artists *have* to help. Many artists talk about art living on beyond us. Whether it is for the goal of helping others, or just for our own self-preservation, to live on through the art (as it seems to be a common human trait to not wish to be forgotten--a fate perhaps worse than death), we want art to continue to have an impact. But, in a world that seems to be walking precariously upon a line

²⁹⁰ Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1993. Print.

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²⁹¹ “Consumption.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 1. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s1/consumption/>>. September 28, 2001.

²⁹² “Change.” *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 6. PBS. <<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s6/change/>>. April 14, 2012.

of self-destruction, how can we guarantee there will be a “beyond” for the art to live in? If we cannot guarantee this, then we cannot, pragmatically speaking, create selfishly only for ourselves. There will not be anything for us to be remembered in, if we don’t act. There seems to be a duty here, whether it be utilitarian, or some kind of ethical egoism, to try to maintain that future.

Precisely because the standing of posterity is so tenuous, art is now more relevant than it has ever been. And again, I mean not just art but artfulness: playfulness, seriousness, connectedness, structure, wholeness. And heart.²⁹³

The arts can help. Art is “the only antidote to destruction.”²⁹⁴ It is the place, as Anatsui and Chin have mentioned, that we are able to take something cast aside and find new purpose for it. This is something that needs to be done throughout society on all its levels and in each of its crevices. Hence, why, recalling the quotes from Foley in the opening, we should want our children (and ourselves) to learn to think like artists. Gadamer says we learn to live in our society through the language of play.²⁹⁵ As we play, we are taught (whether rightly, or wrongly) what is and is not possible.

In our adult lives we have been suppressed by the world around us telling us we are or are not allowed to act and think and *be* in certain ways. What outlet is more closely related to a return to childhood play than the lifestyle of an artist, who aims for Being-For-Oneself? There is a reason Picasso is quoted saying “every child is an artist, the problem is how to remain an artist when we grow up.” It is true that we cannot, and should not, attempt to live in the state of “innocence is bliss” as children are capable of. However, as artists, we do return to this state of play, constantly testing the limits, trying to redefine how we can and cannot live in society.

If we can get more people to think in terms of revitalization, then we open the door to thinking of solutions to our current problems.

There is an old Sanskrit word, *lila*, which means play. Richer than our word, it means divine play, the play of creation, destruction, and re-creation, the folding and unfolding of the cosmos. *Lila*, free and deep, is both the delight and enjoyment of this moment, and the play of God. It also means love.²⁹⁶

Play and creation, like that of an artist, are at their core love. And, because of this, they do retain power that is life changing. This is why I believe it becomes an artist’s obligation to take part in liberation from the dominant narrative. There is no particular content, nor style, nor creative process, even, etc., that artists should feel required to pursue. However, there should be a pursuit of teaching others to think like an artist--to be able to access *a* creative process. Art leads us to meet new people, explore new places, and, most importantly, think in new ways.²⁹⁷ We can not only achieve Being-For-Oneself for ourselves, but help others to do so too.

²⁹³ Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1993. Print.

²⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁵ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014. Print.

²⁹⁶ Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1993. Print.

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²⁹⁷ Binder says: “Artists are explorers who better to show us the city anew. They can take us into that building we pass everyday but never went into. Art after bombings art after tragedy etc. positive impact. Great art can show us map of the city map of the world map of ourselves.”

“The Arts Festival Revolution” David Binder, TEDTalk. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZcFRfJb2ONk>>. November 16, 2012.

The reason that art is able to have such an impact is because it is a development of courage to face fear. Nachmanovitch talks about how fear is the driving force that clogs creativity, especially in the political realm. Looking around us, the weight of everything happening in the world often makes it feel as though the only thing that could save us is a miracle. But that sounds crazy. And, so, the dread builds as we recognize the inevitable...

However, in art, miracles happen regularly, and not just for the lucky. Art *proves* the possibilities of breakthroughs. It proves we can change things. So, it gives us hope. But the key is it isn't the product that is the proof or the necessary component, but, rather, the process. So, how do we spread that? The creative process is not something that just belongs in the hands of the professionals. Though the creative process actually starts with children, the place that adults *recognize* "real" art is with professionals. We have set a bar in society, such that a professional artist can achieve things the average person cannot. Adults do not necessarily value the art of the average person or of children as much as they do the art they see presented by "professionals." This is a mindset we need to change. But, because we are already immersed in that mindset, it is the professionals, themselves, who need to lead by example and inspire us to see the capacity for art everywhere and in everyone. Professional artists need to be the catalysts for others to utilize this creative process.

Frantz Fanon, speaks about the role of artists (and intellectuals) in the process of humanization. He speaks about them as heroes, leading the way for the people. But, for Fanon, the hero should not be placed upon a pedestal, above the rest of the people. He wants heroes to be ordinary, everyday, humans.²⁹⁸ We need artists to provide accessibility to the creative process to all people. We need them to show us that each of us have purpose, as Frankl emphasizes for the sake of our survival.

Self-Liberation

We already talked some about self-liberation from the dominant narrative in the section on identity. But I wanted to share a few more examples and present my understanding of the philosophical/spiritual level of self-liberation that art can provide. It is not just about figuring out who you are. It is about facing demons, exploring who you could be, and doing what brings your personal peace.

An artist, by the name of Trenton Doyle Hancock, from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, who grew up in Texas, uses his work to tell the story of "the Mounds," which are "a group of mythical creatures that are the tragic protagonists of the artist's unfolding narrative." Hancock explores their lives, deaths, and afterlives. His mom thinks his art is about the painful pasts he has seen but couldn't change at the time. In his works he gets to take action and see how it could have turned out.²⁹⁹

Hancock tells us he even has an outfit like one of his heroes, Torpedo Boy, that he wears while painting. But, in the stories, it is not all sunshine and roses. The heroes do not always save the day. "Why didn't [Torpedo Boy] make it in time to save Mound Number One?" Hancock asks, "He arose and fell all in the same show, it's pretty pathetic."

A lot of times, the outsider looking in might think art is an escape away from the problems of life. However, if art truly were just a place for artists to escape, don't you think Torpedo Boy would always be successful? Art is not escapism; it is a facing of the dread looming over us. It is liberating because we are

²⁹⁸ Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2011.

²⁹⁹ "Stories." *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 2. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s2/stories/>>. September 9, 2003.

able to face these things head on, rather than run from them. It is not about making us feel better (in the way that hiding from our participation in micro aggressions might). But it isn't about wallowing either. It is simply about honesty.

Being honest with yourself is the only way to do as Socrates charged us, to truly know yourself. Sartre³⁰⁰ talks about "bad faith" and the implications of lying to oneself. He explains how this results in a denial of our being. If we maintain a state of bad faith, then we can never truly come to be one with our Self. This means we can never truly understand our purpose or value. Art is a place to rid ourselves of bad faith by being honest about what has happened to us, who we are, and how we feel.

The liberation, the awakening to creativity, comes when we can finally see ourselves as neither placating nor resisting the universe, but seeing our true relation to it, as part to whole.³⁰¹

It is very difficult to get to that point of honesty, but, once you do, it often works exponentially, as Hancock points out: "Asking a question you can then have an epiphany and keep going and it snowballs."³⁰² You start thinking about every aspect of yourself, and every interconnected moment of your life, until you are thinking at such a level that it no longer can be perceived as thinking. There is so much you are feeling all at once, that you do not "feel" anymore. You are just *being*.

Thinking back to Young-ha Kim's TedTalk,³⁰³ he suggested asking kids questions about their lies is how you make them into writers. He said you do this in order to make them own up to their lies and create a seamless story that does not leave contradictory ends. However, I wonder if the term "lie" is inappropriate here. To some extent, the onslaught of questioning would produce a response in the child that is a kind of truth. It is a recognition, at a subconscious level, of the way in which they believe the world works.

If every good lie has a thread of truth, this is because a good lie is one that the teller knows could be founded in reality. Art is, in a sense, about lies, perhaps, just as much as truth. Not lies in the menacing sense of the word—not ones with ill intent—but, lies in the sense that they are a glimpse at another possible reality, even, if that reality has not yet, or never will, come to fruition. It is a strange sense of the duality of being both honest and un-honest³⁰⁴ at the same time.

New York artist, Collier Schorr, confronts her fears of the "Aryan Man" in her work. "The big strong blonde boys," she notes, "every little Jewish girl's fear, her boogie man."³⁰⁵ She isn't running from the fear, nor is she attempting to attack the object of her fear, or shove it down deep inside her. Instead, she is exploring what living that identity would have meant. "I'm interested in the life I would have had if I was a boy and this is one facet of it. You're not sure what you are, you're not sure what someone else is." Rather than conquering the fear by going to battle with it, Schorr removes the mythology around the fear so that she can explore the real human. This is what personal liberation looks like: a search for understanding.

³⁰⁰ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: the Principle Text of Modern Existentialism*. Washington Square Press, 1992.

³⁰¹ Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1993. Print.

³⁰² "Stories." *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 2. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s2/stories/>>. September 9, 2003.

³⁰³ Kim, Young-ha. "Be an Artist, Right Now!" TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/young_ha_kim_be_an_artist_right_now?language=en.

³⁰⁴ I don't say "dishonest" because I believe that to have some level of malice in the sense of attempting to fool someone.

³⁰⁵ "Loss & Desire." *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 2. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s2/loss-desire/>>. September 17, 2003.

When talking about courage we note there first must be fear, otherwise you are just reckless.³⁰⁶ But what actions are taken to become courageous? You are afraid of running into a burning building, but there is someone trapped, so you go in anyway. You do the thing you are afraid of. That is courage, right? So, what do we do when we are afraid of identities in the world? Learning about them is the courageous act. And art is an excellent source of a way to explore those fears.

In my experience, art making is about this strange duality between fearing and not fearing. Honestly, I think it is spiritual almost. At least, it sounds the way I hear most folks talk about their faith in their respective Gods. Being afraid, but knowing that said God is there, and so, not being afraid, simultaneously.

I had an interesting conversation with a friend about Hinduism being a way of life, rather than a religion, which is interesting because it means you can practice Hinduism in conjunction with a separate religion if you so pleased. At the point of this conversation I had already been calling being an artist a way of life for as many years as I can remember. But there is something about that phrasing “way of life” that makes one feel like you have to make a choice--it's this way of life or another one. But that isn't the case. It is a set of guidelines to help you through, not strict rules which trump all other rules you have for yourself.

I wanted to share some of my own experiences with the creative process, in addition to the other artists we have referenced thus far. Perhaps by trade, as a philosopher, I spend a rather large amount of time frozen, sinking, in existential crises (sprinkling in some PTSD just for fun to make it even more stressful/complicated). I am sure everyone can relate to a time at which the weight of everything around them actually feels like a physical weight upon your shoulders, forcing you down, on your chest, making it hard to breathe. Or, when you can almost feel your thoughts and emotions transforming into physical claws tearing at your insides. The creative process is the only place where it does not bother me anymore. It does not go away. It is still there. It just does not *bother* me.

In my experience, making art (whether painting, dancing, singing, etc.) is like a kind of meditation. Getting lost in the work allows you to forget the self but at the same time it is only in that forgetting of the self that you, in turn, are allowed to achieve an existence as a larger, true, Self. We spend all of our other time existing as an object to others--even when we are trying to be the Self, we end up being an Other instead, because we see ourselves through the lens of what we presume to be the eyes of our constant audiences.³⁰⁷ But, in making art that isn't the case. You get lost in it—in the moment of what you are doing. And, so, it is a place where you can actually achieve Self-hood—Being-For-Oneself.

Zen master Dogen says:

To study the Buddha Way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self is to perceive oneself as all things. To realize this is to cast off the body and mind of self and others. When you have reached this stage you will be detached even from enlightenment, but will practice it continually without thinking about it.³⁰⁸

The Self is not something you can point to, but it is there so long as you don't look for, or pay attention to, it. By not recognizing it, it is there. But, as soon as you focus on it, it disappears. You only have a sense of recognition of the Self once it is already gone. Art puts you in that place where you are taken away from focusing on all of those things about yourself. They are still there, you are certainly still

³⁰⁶ Aristotle, and C. D. C. Reeve. *Nicomachean Ethics*. Hackett Publishing Co., Inc., 2014.

³⁰⁷ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: the Principle Text of Modern Existentialism*. Washington Square Press, 1992.

³⁰⁸ Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1993. Print.

conscious of all the experiences and things that make up your existence and identity, but you are not focusing on any one particular thing. Instead it is everything all at once, and, therefore, nothing in particular. By walking away from the specific parts of the self, you are able to liberate the whole Self. It is as Kierkegaard's religious stage of authenticity³⁰⁹ suggests: Getting lost within the larger compilation of experiences, helps to bring out the feelings that one *cannot help but feel*, and, thus, identifies what is authentic within that individual.

It is one of those strange dualisms we so often consider in philosophy: the duality of being empty and full at the same time; of being I and We; of being separate and unseparate; of being within and without; the duality of letting go and having everything...

It is the perfect balance of being and not being, such that for a moment there is true tranquility, even while all the pain and chaos rages around, driving the work. All that "stuff" becomes a subconscious drive, such that you do not have to *feel* the chaos in that moment, despite not running from said chaos. It is the one time you are actually free. It is not just a facade of being free, like the one we all have to carry around, pretending everyday of our lives, but really truly free.

It sounds terrifying to give yourself up to all the worries by admitting their existence. And, yet it is exactly that vulnerability that allows you to be the most in touch with You. It is a higher level of thinking-feeling. Art is a lifestyle.

A quote often attributed to Lao Tzu says:

If you are depressed you are living in the past.
If you are anxious you are living in the future.
If you are at peace you are living in the present.

I am probably taking this quote out of context since I am not fluent in Chinese, however, my guess would be "living in the present" is not suggesting we ignore everything else. There is a big difference between living in the past, living in *only* this very moment, and living in a present that is impacted by the past and future. I believe the last option is probably where we are to aim for. We shouldn't be ignorant of everything around us, nor try to just forget anything that causes us worry, but we shouldn't be letting it rule us either (hence my earlier claim that art is a way of Being-For-Oneself *while* Being-In-Itself). I think this kind of "present-ness" is exactly what the creative process evokes in us.

This is why it's the doing, not the outcome, that matters. Walter Benjamin in "Paris, Capital of the Nineteenth Century" references a work, or creative structure, as a memory of its creation not as a current product. He says that it is always ruins before it is even brought to completion, as it is already on its way to being the spur of what is to come next.³¹⁰ Our realization of the object, is the end of it. This works well with an understanding we grasp from his work "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." The commodification of art works, turning them into objects replicated and sold, reduces their impact and authenticity.³¹¹ He speaks specifically to commodification and replication. The reason artwork is significant is as a trace of its creation, not as a product itself. And, likewise, perhaps, where those traces could lead us.

³⁰⁹ Stumpf, Samuel E. and James Fieser, Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy 8th Edition, (New York, McGraw-Hill: 2008)

³¹⁰ Benjamin, Walter. Paris--Capital of the Nineteenth Century. www.no-w-here.org.uk/paris%20capital.pdf.

³¹¹ Benjamin, Walter. The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction. Prism Key Press, 2010.

Nachmanovitch points out, in *Free Play*, that, when there is a completed artwork, we are fond of it not because of the product itself, but because of the traces of the journey it presents.³¹² Personally, I have emphasized, for many years, the process over product to my students, but there's not really much I could say to substantiate my claims in terms of my own experiences when talk is cheap and actions show our true colors. Not, until I was unloading canvases from a show and my student knocked into a metal easel slicing a gaping hole through the middle of one of my favorite works. She started balling. For whatever reason, my immediate reaction was to ask why on earth she was upset. To which, she sobbed, why wasn't I? And, at that point, I realized I already had everything from the piece. It was an art object that was technically well produced, had an interesting story, won a prize at a national show, and had financial potential. But, as art, I was pretty much done with it.

The process of making this piece was significant because I explored concepts I had not before. Looking at the work sparks memories of the process and allowed me to think about where to go from there. As much as I am emphasizing the nature of how important the creative process is, reaching that meditative/creative zone can be very difficult. Looking at a work, where I was able to achieve that, helps me find the emotional center needed to access it again.

In other words, looking at this work as an audience member, interpreting it, I was allotted accessibility to the creative process to make more works. This is what is valuable. Hence, I find it to be an artist's responsibility to play the role of lighting a flame in the hearts of other to also partake in the creative process. Artists must show others they can participate too.

When we think about art as a meditation, this means everyone is capable of it. Hypothetically, it is already inside of us. As Ai Weiwei says: "Creativity is a part of human nature. It can only be untaught."³¹³ This unteaching of creativity is rampant and a common part of "growing up" (or, what I think of as socially pressured dehumanization as we are pushed to lose this natural human trait and right). But it isn't gone forever, there is simply something blocking it. So, we need the access key. Or, as Nachmanovitch puts it:

Spontaneous creation come from our deepest being and is immaculately and originally ourselves. What we have to express is already with us, *is* us, so the work of creativity is not a matter of making the material come, but of unblocking the obstacles to its natural flow.³¹⁴

Nachmanovitch mentions there is not *the* creative process, but *many* creative processes. As individuals we need *a* creative process that works for us personally. Nachmanovitch continues:

In my own life, music taught me to listen, not just to sound but to who I am... The creative process is a spiritual path. This adventure is about us, about the deep self, the composer in all of us, about originality, meaning not that which is all new, but that which is fully and originally ourselves.³¹⁵

³¹² Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1993. Print.

³¹³ Ai, Weiwei, and Larry Warsh. *Weiwei-Isms*. Princeton University Press, 2013. 24

³¹⁴ Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: J.P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1993. Print.

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³¹⁵ *Ibid.* 11, 13

There is an important nuance noted here: creation isn't something *new*, but a realization of ourselves. We make the assumption, because of the way we use the term "creation,"³¹⁶ that it is something completely new, and, more often than not, something made from nothing. But this isn't the case.

Creation does not imply there is a specified point of origin. In fact, if we value creative works for their process we would find that we would never be able to pinpoint an origin. Rather, we would infinitely regress to previous ideas, previous experiences, etc., that influenced the art in question. Likewise, we could never pinpoint a moment of finality because the art objects would spur new ideas and experiences for future art objects to be made. So, this more accurate description of creation as a recognition of the authentic self becomes crucial.

I end this section with a thought from Carrie Mae Weems, an American storyteller, photographer, and video installationist. Despite making work that is arguably incredibly important for understanding the status of Afro-Americans in the US, historically and today, she emphasizes that it doesn't matter if her work ends up being remembered or viewed as significant by others. What is important is that it was significant for her. She says: "I don't know if this work will be important but I know that it is important for me."³¹⁷

Whether or not the artworks will be important to others, artists need to make sure that the works they create are important for themselves. The in-genuineness of an artwork not important to the artist would destroy the work and its intended importance to the audience. If only subconsciously, the audience would be able to tell the artist's heart wasn't in it. Emphasizing a process of authenticity helps the artist with self liberation and by extension, as we will explore in the next section, helps with the viewer's liberation as well.

Liberation of the Viewer

*The deeper he looks inside himself, the more universal he becomes.
The artist is the universe.*

--Marina Abramovic³¹⁸

In art today, the more personal the better. Recall the earlier description of artist Saba Taj on the occasion of her visit to Virginia Tech. As artists, we might fear that being too individualistic would cause an audience to not be able to relate, as they would not have the same kinds of experiences. However, becoming too general is also problematic, as you become inauthentic and, thus, the works become ineffective. The reality is that the more specific about your own identity you get, strangely, the more universal you actually become.

The more personal the more authentic, which means the viewers will be able to connect to you as a human being rather than simply a professional. This results in multiple benefits for the individual viewer. First, it allows them to realize the significance of individuality, which flows over into their understanding of their self-worth. Second, it allows them better access to finding their Self.

³¹⁶ Perhaps because of the western world being highly influenced by multiple religions worshipping a God (or gods) who "created" the world from nothing...

³¹⁷ "Compassion." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 5. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s5/compassion/>>. October 7, 2009.

³¹⁸ Morrill, Rebecca, and Marina Abramovic. Akademie X: Lessons in Art and Life. Phaidon, 2015.

In terms of self-worth, the artist sets an important standard. As a viewer, if you are looking at artworks and see only generalized stories, but nothing personal, then it appears that only generalized stories are valuable. However, if you see the very unique and particular stories of artists as individuals, then the viewer has a sense that their own unique story is also significant. Even if the viewer belongs to the group of people whose story is being generalized, it is not the same kind of impact of viewing a work that humanizes individuals. You can support the group initiative at the same time as humanizing individuals. But, to generalize to the group initiative, you end up cutting out the individual.

Basically, as we extend our empathy to individual creators, while viewing their authentic-to-the-self artworks, we recognize it is possible for empathy to be extended to our own individual stories. That is empowering.

This is why people use the phrase “giving is the best gift.” It is difficult to have self-worth when you cannot imagine someone wanting to hear your story or wanting to empathize with you. And it can be difficult to believe, when the world is so caught up in the hustle and bustle of things, that even those who say they want to listen or empathize actually do. But, when you, yourself, feel the genuine desire to empathize and listen, then it is a reminder that other people genuinely desire to empathize with you. Seeing this trait within yourself is what allows you to know others care too. Drawing out this feeling in individuals is a major strength of the personal nature of artworks.

Jake Barton gave an interesting TEDTalk in 2013 called “The Museum of You,” discussing projects like StoryCorps³¹⁹ and the 9/11 Memorial Museum. These projects feature active participant exhibitions aiming to document the personal stories of normal individuals and make them accessible to viewers. They have been a massive success specifically in terms of connecting with viewer emotions due to their personal nature. At the beginning of the talk, Barton provided a few clips from the StoryCorps project and had this to say as the audience began to tear up:

I didn't choose those pieces specifically to make you cry...
Because really they all make you cry.
This is an act of love; which is listening in itself.³²⁰

Likewise, looking at someone's art is an act of listening. It is an act of love. The more personal, the easier to listen, and, therefore, the easier to spread love.

Furthermore, this empathy for others, evoked in the individual looking at the artwork, helps bring about a better understanding of their own Self. This happens in much the same way as we have emphasized for the artist. The meditative non-focus on the self allows for the realization of the Self. I will not repeat all that was said in the previous section as the idea is much the same, but I will summarize that: when the viewer stops focusing on themselves and instead focuses on others, that is the time at which they will most be able to *be* themSelf.

But an important question here is: How much guidance/restriction should be placed on the viewer's understanding of the artwork and, therefore, individual artist when viewing the work? How much do

³¹⁹ “StoryCorps’ mission is to preserve and share humanity’s stories in order to build connections between people and create a more just and compassionate world.

We do this to remind one another of our shared humanity, to strengthen and build the connections between people, to teach the value of listening, and to weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that everyone’s story matters. At the same time, we are creating an invaluable archive for future generations.”

“About StoryCorps.” StoryCorps, storycorps.org/about/.

³²⁰ “The Museum of You” Jake Barton, TEDSalon NY2013.

<https://www.ted.com/talks/jake_barton_the_museum_of_you>. 2013.

viewers have to actually understand, and how much can simply be left to the desire to understand? Given two of our guidelines, confrontation, and vulnerability, I believe wanting to understand is far more important than actually understanding. Especially since, if the viewer feels that they already fully understand, this will halt further thinking. Hegel's love of contradictions suggests that the best way to learn is through a coupling of thesis and antithesis, synthesized into something larger than either alone. Contradiction, furthers learning, rather than halting it.³²¹

In his TedTalk "Weaving Narratives in Museum Galleries," Thomas Campbell tells the story of a teacher he had, who was afraid of formal art history training only teaching students jargon, rather than to connect and find real meaning in it.³²² We try to learn why the work was created and how it was created in the context of when it was created. This is good, but, taken too far, drives us away from personal impact. Furthermore, it creates elitism in museums, where visitors feel as though they cannot access artworks properly without formal training.

Campbell calls for viewers to be ok with "being a little lost." He wants curation of museums to make it easier "to see the familiar within the unfamiliar," so viewers can be okay with the unknown. This way, their curiosity can expand, rather than shut down due to a feeling of inadequacy. He says, of a painting he shows to the audience, "Our scholarship can tell you this is a Bacchanal, but if we're doing it right--trust your instincts--you know it's an orgy," which is simply a fun way to say: know the relevant emotional status of the painting.

The next question would be: Does an individual viewer need to try to connect with every artwork they come across? I think the answer is an easy "no," if we think back to Tracy Chevalier's TedTalk on gallery fatigue.³²³ We should not have to find some personal attachment or understanding in every work. In fact, if we do not, then, when we do find a work that speaks to us, it will be much more meaningful. I think setting this guideline for the viewer will allow them to obtain personal liberation from the dominant narrative in a much more effective way.

Chevalier also brings up storytelling in art works. Sometimes, artists, themselves, feel comfortable changing the story they get from their artworks. If it is okay for artists to do that, with their own artworks, then why not let viewers do this too?

"When we don't know the story behind the painting we can make our own... and that's exciting," Chevalier says.³²⁴ Simply not knowing the story behind a work, the viewer achieves confrontation and vulnerability, but once they start making their own stories they also partake in choices and truth making. The audience makes choices about which art is important to them and what they will focus on in the work, itself. By building their own story behind the work, they create truth.

Coming up with a story behind the painting is participation in art as Being-For-Onself even if the viewer is not officially the original artist. This means the viewer gains all the benefits listed for the artist during self-liberation. Every person has different experiences, which lead them to think up different stories. So, in coming up with those stories, they end up learning a lot about themselves and why they make the decisions they do.

³²¹ Stumpf, Samuel E. and James Fieser, *Socrates to Sartre and Beyond: A History of Philosophy* 8th Edition, (New York, McGraw-Hill: 2008)

³²² "Weaving Narratives in Museum Galleries" Thomas P. Campbell, TED2012. <https://www.ted.com/talks/thomas_p_campbell_weaving_narratives_in_museum_galleries>. 2012.

³²³ "Finding the Story Inside the Painting" Tracy Chevalier, TEDSalon London. <https://www.ted.com/talks/tracy_chevalier_finding_the_story_inside_the_painting/up-next>. Spring 2012.

³²⁴ Ibid.

The really exciting part is, as Chevalier points out, that the stories the viewer comes up with can only satisfy them momentarily. Because they will not know its accuracy, they will have to keep coming back, again and again, to revisit the idea, wondering if they were correct. Constant revision speaks to who they are developing into, based on their new experiences. Those new processings of the work, in turn, impact the viewer. It is all part of the creative process. A viewer that is engaged in the artwork becomes an artist, themselves, reaping all the emotional and psychological benefits of it.

Collective Liberation

You always have to be aware that art is not only a self-expression but a demonstration of human rights and dignity.

--Ai Wei Wei (*Wei Wei 10*)³²⁵

If we view creativity as a link to identity and part of human nature, it is not a stretch to claim access to it as a natural human right. This claim is further supported with evidence of suppression of the arts linked to the oppression of people which we discussed earlier. We see this in censorship of all forms of art--visual, theatrical, musical etc.--in authoritative regimes. Ai Wei Wei, himself, is an example of this as he has been arrested numerous times in China for his criticism of the communist regime. We see this all around the world as negative social stigmas aggressively attached to certain forms of art, often attributed to particular marginalized groups. This is a means to perpetuate prejudice.

In *Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon explains how an attack on creativity and culture is used to oppress the colonized individuals. Colonization, he says, systematically destroys national culture through the process of stagnation. Ultimately, it freezes the culture in a picture of what the colonists believe the colonized's culture should be and keeps it that way. Without change, a culture is not really a culture, because culture suggests a regular flow of innovation and creativity, as the dynamics of the individuals living within the society adapt to changes in their environment.

This also results in the dehumanization of the individuals, not just the group, as a lack of culture leads to a lack of self-awareness. The colonists aim to remove national culture because national culture is seen as a threat to the colonizers, who want to maintain control over the colonized. The colonized hanging on to their culture is seen as a "refusal to submit." Thus, the colonists seek to destroy it. The goal is to turn the colonized into nothing more than animals, who follow orders and have no minds of their own.³²⁶ Maintaining such a state reduces the threat of revolt because, lacking cultural ties, the masses are unable to unite into an organized struggle for liberation.

The colonists seem to have found a process that is very effective:

After one or two centuries of exploitation the national cultural landscape has radically shriveled. It has become an inventory of behavioral patterns, traditional costumes, and miscellaneous customs. Little movement can be seen. There is no real creativity...³²⁷

This is what Fanon fears. A lack of creativity and a static nature is the true destruction of national culture and, in turn, the destruction of the necessary psychological stabilities needed to enact a successful revolution. As Karim Nagi would say, "If we are singing we cannot be silenced. If we are dancing we

³²⁵ Ai, Weiwei, and Larry Warsh. *Weiwei-Isms*. Princeton University Press, 2013.

³²⁶ Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2011. 6-7

³²⁷ *Ibid.* 172

cannot be stopped.” All Fanon wants for the colonized, is for them to free themselves from the grasp of the colonists once and for all (both physically and psychologically).

A national culture is the opposite of the oppression caused by colonization--it is creative, dynamic, and constantly moving forward. That is why the national culture, according to Fanon, cannot exist within the setting of colonialism. However, this also means that colonialism cannot continue to exist as a national culture is reestablished. Therefore, for Fanon, artists and intellectuals have the ability to play an important role in the decolonization process of societies. These are the individuals who have the ability to upend the rigid codes imposed by the colonists. With the production of the right kinds of arts, liberation from the colonial narrative can succeed.

Refugees create a strong continued example of this process today. Whether it is an escape from climate change or insurrection refugee camps are popping up in increasing numbers around the world. And while living conditions in these camps are far from optimal one consistent factor seems to be the drive to creativity. Music, dance, drawing, singing, etc. are not foreign in these places. These are the things that provide the life force to keep going and the foundation of maintaining one’s identity even in the worst of scenario’s. Even Viktor Frankl, a psychologist who survived the concentration camps in Nazi Germany, describes in his work *Man’s Search for Meaning*³²⁸ the purpose that the arts often provided prisoners. And a purpose was the absolute most important ingredient to survival. Purpose was something that an individual could give that no one else could. It was something that made that individual’s survival necessary to the good and to the story of the whole world. It gave them a moral responsibility not to give up on living. Creativity gives us that purpose.

In refugee camps one might surmise that resources are limited, so creativity can be witnessed not only in the works being created but in the tools being used to found that creation. While we may at first imagine this to be a limiting factor we also know that creativity flourishes under constraints. The more that one is limited the more that the soul tries to break free and call out its name, and thus we see incredible solutions in all sorts of arts. From collages and instruments made of found objects others might think of as trash, to using the dyes of foliage to draw or paint.

Interestingly enough, technology plays a surprising role in this. With *Giving Voice to Hope: Music of Liberian Refugees at the Buduburam Liberian refugee camp*³²⁹ in as an example, we see that one thing that does seem strangely available, while something like instruments may not be, are old computer parts to forage through. With a little tech savvy work Shadow, one of the musicians, was able to construct a recording studio that allowed himself and others in the camp to express themselves.³³⁰ This has had a great psychological impact on the refugees here as it allows them to reclaim some normalcy of their lives and to release some of the tensions much as Fanon suggested was possible through the arts, so as to clear their minds and be prepared for everything else that must be done to survive.

But this digital platform for creativity also serves as an educational tool for the rest of the world. While the bland stories read in the news are often lost to the millions of other possible articles to read, the arts are consumed as entertainment. So why not provide some education at the same time? Listening to the music of the artists, those not living in such situations are given some insight to a problem they may never have even imagined existed. And we know from experience also that not only is the audience likely to be larger but the creative platform is more likely to move the heart and soul of the audience. Take for instance the difference between reading a journal article about the comfort women held captive in

³²⁸ Frankl, Viktor E., et al. *Man's Search for Meaning*. Beacon Press, 2006.

³²⁹https://www.artsrn.ualberta.ca/fwa_mediawiki/index.php?title=Giving_Voice_to_Hope:_Music_of_Liberian_Refugees

³³⁰ <https://vimeo.com/19579830>

Japanese sex camps during World War II versus reading the literary piece *Comfort Woman* by Nora Okja Keller.³³¹

The first provides us with statistics and facts that are important to know but also may be difficult to imagine or perhaps easy to write off as not as bad as they sound or a product of a particular place and time that is clearly unlike ours today. However, reading Keller's work the viewer is transported into the shoes of the narrator experiences the horrors of the scenario. And even if the scenario as a whole still seems incredible, the reader finds that they see traits and commentary in the perpetrator that are not so far off from ideologies they may experience today in their own worlds. Suddenly, the reality of the comfort women feels much more relatable and much more horrific. It is easier to garner support for and to create a platform to return the voice to the subaltern in this way. Particularly in instances where people in power have gone to great lengths to hide a particularly happening from the public eye.

The power of the arts in rallies can also be especially moving. Noriko Manabe describes a particularly interesting case study in their piece *Chants of the Resistance: Flow, Memory, and Inclusivity* on chants used in rallies in Japan.³³² Apparently, it is common practice in Japan to attempt to reduce the impact of protestors by regulating them to smaller crowds. For instance, limiting the number of protestors on each city block to a hundred or so folks. While many more may still come out to the protest the feeling of the event is smaller, less powerful, when protestors are spread out so that not only does the audience perceive it as a small event but the protestors themselves do to. This leads to a feeling of the topic being protested being less significant for having seemingly garnered so little support. However, music alongside chants is increasingly being used to combat this sensibility.

What protestors have done to combat this division is to create a band or orchestra across the city blocks—for instance percussion on one block corner, brass on another, woodwinds on yet another etc. Likewise, each block is given specific chants. Thus, all together we witness the full veracity of the protestors through our ears. In fact, one might imagine this may even be more impactful than if all the protestors were playing from the same location. Imagine the eerie effect of feeling as though one is surrounded by miles of protestors all brought together in song! This is exactly the kind of creative solution we see across arts revolutions.

Another aspect of this though becomes the sharing of creative solutions and ideas. It isn't just that people are utilizing the arts to combat oppression but also that it is being documented and shared. No need to reinvent the wheel and also no need to feel as though you are the only small faction in the world attempting to combat these problems!

Databases like *Cities and Memory*³³³ which has produced a *Global Sound Map*³³⁴ and then allows artists access to remix and utilize these sounds for other projects and *Cantos Cautivos*³³⁵ which aims specifically to archive songs created during “detention and torture in Chile during the Pinochet dictatorship” are popping up to host a space where protest chants and music can be shared across the world creating a sense of community and strength in one vision. Art zines like *Reconstructed*,³³⁶ “a creative magazine and

³³¹ Keller, Nora Okja. *Comfort Woman*. 1997.

³³² Manabe, Noriko. *Chants of the Resistance: Flow, Memory, and Inclusivity*. Music & Politics. Volume 13. Issue 1. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/mp/9460447.0013.105?view=text;rgn=main>

³³³ <https://citiesandmemory.com/protest/>

³³⁴ <https://citiesandmemory.com/sound-map/>

³³⁵ <https://www.cantoscautivos.org/en/>

³³⁶ *Reconstructed*. Vol. 1 *Light Upon Light*. Center for the Study of World Religions & Harvard Divinity School Religious Literacy Project. 2019.

conversation space between all Muslims, including Muslim-heritage folks and individuals with evolving proximity to Islam, that recognizes religion to be a non-linear journey,” allow us to be witness to a non dominant narrative in visual form where previously museum visits or databases may have left us sorely lacking. This doesn’t mean that museums aren’t trying either. Many museums are taking it upon themselves to combat accessibility issues to visiting the displays by digitizing and making accessible their collections for free online! But we still have a ways to go on those collections including diversity and representation needed to combat the dominant narrative.

In some sense, simply having art automatically becomes connected to the collective liberation of all people. The availability and support of self-expression becomes a collective goal. Ai Wei Wei presents us with this thought:

If there is one who’s not free, then I am not free. If there is one who suffers, then I suffer. I have to respect my life, and free expression is part of my life. I can never really silence myself.³³⁷

Yes, he has an obligation to himself to continue to express himself freely, but it is not just an obligation to himself that he feels. He thinks that the reason he must respect himself, and, therefore, express himself, is to prevent others from suffering:

I also have to speak out for people around me who are afraid, who think it is not worth it or who have totally given up hope. So I want to set an example: you can do it and this is okay, to speak out.³³⁸

This idea of example setting is exactly the kind that Frantz Fanon has in mind in *Wretched of the Earth*.³³⁹ It is important to Fanon that we recognize there are wrong ways to use art—namely that art is often used to try to impress the upper classes, instead of being used for a goal of self and other liberation. Using art wrong has the ability, in fact, to cause stagnation instead of end it. An example of this, as Fanon explains, is when arts are made only in a historical fashion, for the monetary purpose of being sold as a relic of the past.

This simply means that there is art and there is something masquerading as art, as discussed at the beginning of this work. Ai Wei Wei puts this a bit more bluntly: “In China, they treat art as some form of decoration, a self-indulgence. It is pretending to be art. It looks like art. It sells like art. But it is really a piece of shit.”³⁴⁰ I believe there is a difference between excellent technical skill and art making. Technical skill is often useful in art making, and, it should be valued even in the absence of art making, but it does not determine when something is or is not art.

At the other end of the spectrum, I believe we also have an issue with “high art” museums. Here the focus on the skill of the artist results in talking about art in such lofty terms that it is not really about the creative process anymore. Instead, it is about the ability of the artist to spit out work like a machine that this “high art” market will eat up. Furthermore, accessibility to the public is decreased, due to the high entry level for conversational jargon, which is detrimental to the creative process. However, this is a

Reconstructed. Vol. 2 *Bodies: From the Biomedical to the Spiritual, Our Understandings of Bodies—Human, Digital, Divine, or Otherwise—are Unbounded*. Religious Literacy Project, Harvard Divinity School and the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard Divinity School. 2021.

www.reconstructedmag.com

³³⁷ Ai, Weiwei, and Larry Warsh. *Weiwei-Isms*. Princeton University Press, 2013. 15

³³⁸ *Ibid.* 13

³³⁹ Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2011.

³⁴⁰ Ai, Weiwei, and Larry Warsh. *Weiwei-Isms*. Princeton University Press, 2013. 35

situation that allows the artist themselves accessibility to creating what they consider art. Being funded, the artist will (hypothetically) have the means to create what they want. So, it is not necessarily *all* bad.

However, there are times in which high acclaim for technical skill can be *purposefully* and *maliciously* used, masquerading as art, in order to distract society from the actual power of art in liberation. Typically, this comes at the hands of a larger entity of power, such as a government or economic institution marketing the technical skill as *art* so as to discriminate against art that may be making social/political statements that would negatively impact said government or economic institution. I believe this is the kind of thing Wei Wei is speaking to.

This is why Fanon and, often, artists, Ai Wei Wei being one of many, argue for the example setting role of an artist. In order to overcome colonialism and its lasting effects beyond the removal of the colonists, Fanon believes, every individual, and the masses as a whole, should be educated and elevated.³⁴¹ To do that, we need to stop putting heroes on platforms and instead recognize the “everyday hero”. People in the public spotlight need to stop being seen as unreachable heroes to idolize, and, instead, be seen as humanized individuals alongside the masses. Rather than a public hero, first, and foremost, these individuals should be seen as people of the society, who just happen to participate in whatever they are famous for.

If artists are seen as regular people, then the things they do and achieve can be seen as things anyone can do. Fanon wants the masses to see that they, themselves, are just as important, rather than constantly having to look up to someone else. If the heroes are regular people, then all the people of the masses can be heroes in their own rights. When this happens, and their minds have been elevated, they are able to realize that “the government and the party are at their service.”³⁴² This is the point at which the people can make demands for their own sake rather than remaining quiet on the sidelines. Once you find yourself to be important you have achieved the first step in obtaining the power to demand the treatment you deserve.

The way we treat “heroes” is important because it determines a mindset of whether the individual thinks this status is accessible to themselves or not. Being able to *be* the “hero,” not just have a hero, is important. It is about self-esteem and dignity. These are necessary for people to become free:

A people worthy of esteem, i.e., conscious of their dignity, is a people who never forget this obvious fact. During the colonial occupation the people were told they had to sacrifice their lives for the sake of dignity. But the African peoples quickly realized that it was not only the occupier who threatened their dignity. The African peoples quickly realized that dignity and sovereignty were exact equivalents. In fact, a free people living in dignity is a sovereign people.³⁴³

Dignity, being your own hero, loving yourself... these are the ingredients of humanization and freedom from the dominant narrative. An example of an artist, who has certainly experienced more than her fair share of difficulties in life, and yet, still strove to produce this sense of dignity in others, is the late Whitney Houston. Her song *The Greatest Love of All* is basically a proclamation of these three concepts:

I believe that children are our future;
Teach them well and let them lead the way.
Show them all the beauty they possess inside.
Give them a sense of pride, to make it easier;
Let the children's laughter remind us how we use to be.

³⁴¹ Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2011.

³⁴² Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Grove Press, 2011. 138

³⁴³ *Ibid.* 139

Everybody's searching for a hero;
People need someone to look up to.
I never found anyone who fulfilled my need.
A lonely place to be, and so **I learned to depend on me.**

I decided long ago never to walk in anyone's shadow.
If I fail, if I succeed.
At least I lived as I believe.
No matter what they take from me,
They can't take away my dignity.

Because the greatest love of all is happening to me.
I found the greatest love of all inside of me.
The greatest love of all is easy to achieve.
Learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.³⁴⁴

This song is one that has inspired many people, both to become artists, or, simply, to keep trying to live their version of their best lives. Houston is well known and was considered to have one of the greatest voices of all times. Due to the content of her work, she was able to touch many people in a humanizing way. And, despite (or, perhaps, thanks to, as they showed Houston's humanness) her own hardships, some of which she triumphed over and others she did not, she created a legacy during her short time on Earth, which left many new artists inspired to make their own work.

The way in which artists, who are often considered cultural "heroes," are seen is important. These individuals should present themselves in such a way that their humanness shines through. This way, the masses can see these artistic heroes are just like them, no better, no worse, and not stronger or more capable of having an impact than they themselves. This is what will empower the masses. According to Fanon "No leader, whatever his worth, can replace the will of the people..."³⁴⁵ One strong leader will never be able to replace the impact of when the masses truly come together towards a common goal. But a strong leader that empowers the masses is significant because they make the people believe they, the people, can make a change.

The artists and intellectuals have the ability, through establishing a new national culture, to rehumanize, reunite, and empower the masses. This is not just about people, whose nation has been physically occupied by others, but, also, those, who become marginalized in general.

Sometimes, simply making art, expressing the necessity and accessibility of the creative process, is enough to inspire. But sometimes artists also feel a desire to spread accessibility to the creative process in other ways. This includes through teaching, participation in showcase projects for underrepresented individuals, targeted content work, or participatory work.

Listening to a talk by Omar Offendum, a Syrian-American artist of words and music, it is interesting to hear his experiences using the arts to both vent his frustrations at the stereotypes placed upon him after 9-11 and as a space to reclaim his identity as a Muslim. He felt "so long as I held my own as a rapper and an artist then I could really be able to speak to the issues that I wanted; [choose] which causes did I want to support." He spoke of the power of storytelling, "how an artist approaches something from an honest and sincere place," and that was where the change could happen, because it resonates with people. Offendum

³⁴⁴ Houston, Whitney. Greatest Love of All

³⁴⁵ Fanon, Frantz. The Wretched of the Earth. Grove Press, 2011. 144

uses his art, not only as a product for others to listen to and take inspiration from, but as a way to teach others through workshops. He participates in programs specifically meant to build bridges between underrepresented individuals and the majority, like the Salaam Project at Virginia Tech.³⁴⁶

But, even he, as an artist, needed the motivation to make and the confidence to create an impact. This is important because, even with the right tools, if one does not believe they are capable of creating an impact, they will be incapable of doing so. For Omar, he mentioned that growing up in the states he always wished there was someone like him. Once he became a father, he wanted to be the person to provide that inspiration for his son. His son motivated him to become a hero. For example, Omar suggested, that when he was younger, before he was a father, he would never do what he was about to do that night at the Salaam Project--get up in front of a whole audience of corps of cadets, while carrying "the weight of what those uniforms really meant for the people back east." But this motivation to change empowered him. That evening, he humanized a stereotyped group of people to the cadets, who were, previously, more likely to have believed those stereotypes than other students.

The beauty of all of this, whether it be in Omar's situation or another, is that once this motivation is established, with one artist proving that they can have an impact, it builds into a wave. More artists become inspired in their ability to motivate and the growth of these empowered artists (and their empowered audience) becomes exponential. It is easy to see this movement as we watch more and more videos go viral across the web. More and more underrepresented artists step forward, claiming to have done so due to seeing a story from a previous artist "like them".

One artist, Krzysztof Wodiczko, born in Poland but now living in New York and Massachusetts, creates video projections onto the sides of architecture and monuments. About 20 years ago he started turning these projections into collaborations with the communities that housed the projection sites, "giving voice to the concerns of, heretofore, marginalized and silent citizens who live in the monuments' shadows."³⁴⁷

The content of Wodiczko's work aims to publicize the grief of individuals and communities in order to create a bond between these people. Because of the way he produces the works, while the grief is being made public, the individuals still maintain some sense of the private, such that they are not completely being thrown into undesired and immobilizing vulnerability. Though I have been proposing one of the guidelines of art as a way of Being-For-Oneself is vulnerability, it is important to recognize that everything must be taken in manageable moderation. Moderation is person and time specific based on what they are currently capable of handling. Even Wodiczko talks about needing the making process to act as a moderator between him and the very personal stories shared lest it:

...trigger my own experiences or perhaps even trauma...³⁴⁸ so I have to have something in between; something in between for them [the participants] is the camera or the monument; For me perhaps it's the sketchbook.³⁴⁹

Thanks to that "something in between," Wodiczko has found the people to be able to open up and "break the code of silence" that had existed within the community. They share previously unspeakable things. He emphasizes the importance of this trust, that he is able to create, as he says he could not make his work

³⁴⁶ "Salaam: Exploring Muslim Cultures." *Moss Arts Center / Virginia Tech*, artscenter.vt.edu/salaam.html.

³⁴⁷ "Krzysztof Wodiczko." *Art21*, art21.org/artist/krzysztof-wodiczko/.

³⁴⁸ It is further interesting to consider the trauma that occurs for the artists in making the works and how they potentially sacrifice themselves to explore these things in order to allow others to have some outlet; that allow others to have some release.

³⁴⁹ "Power." *Art in the Twenty-First Century*, Season 3. PBS.

<<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/power/>>. September 16, 2005.

without it. His work simultaneously recognizes a tragic witness and inspires hope. This is similar to other projects we have discussed, like the 9-11 memorial and Story Corps.

While we often compare self-healing and healing on a larger, community, scale--implying the larger quantity is more important--Wodiczko seems to think the reverse is true. He says: "Sometimes it is easier to be honest speaking to thousands of people through the monuments than speaking to your closest person at home."³⁵⁰ The artist allows the individual to speak their piece such that it becomes an implement to empower masses of other people. But then it comes full circle, as the act of sharing with the masses allows the individual the self-confidence to share with those close to them. In other words, individual liberation leads to collective liberation, which leads to deeper individual liberation.

The last thing I wanted to address here is whether an artist has to partake in collective liberation or not. At first, I thought I would be making an argument for why we, as artists, should partake--why it is our responsibility both to ourselves and to the greater community to establish both our own and community dignity. I have provided a lot of quotes throughout this work from Abramovich and Wei Wei, both of whom I, as an artist, admire greatly, and both of whom are huge proponents of this responsibility of the artist. As Wei Wei says: "Art has to be involved with moral, philosophical, and intellectual conversations. If you call yourself an artist, this is your responsibility."³⁵¹

But I don't find myself fully agreeing with this. Not by any means because I do not believe we *should* partake (obviously, considering the entire topic of this work), but because I don't believe we have any other choice but to partake. It is not a matter of responsibility, I think we are simply automatically a part of these political conversations, whether we want to be or not. So, our responsibility, rather, is to *recognize* our participation in these conversations and to do our best to make them as effective as possible in deconstructing the dominant narrative. A quote I will completely agree with from Wei Wei is this:

Art should live in the heart of the people. Ordinary people should have the same ability to understand art as anybody else. I don't think art is elite or mysterious. I don't think anybody can separate art from politics.³⁵²

Perhaps because I am a woman, LGBTQ, and marginalized by mental health/PTSD it is not something I have ever had to think twice about. I have always known that all my art has and always will be political. If nothing else (because I can "pass" as not marginalized regarding the latter two identities) my work will always be addressed in terms of my gender.

As I mentioned towards the beginning of this paper: Out of all the artists I have ever talked to or listened to interviews from, young and old, and, no matter where they were in their career stage in the arts, the only individuals I can remember ever noting their art were those who already belonged to the dominant narrative. Now, this of course, is from the limited experience of my life, so it is in no way proof that these are the only category of individuals who claim this, nor does it mean these are the only individuals who believe this about their work. But it is an interesting pattern that I have personally witnessed.

There could be a lot of different reasons for this to be happening. It is not as though all the artists I have met, that do not fit that category, are all making very clearly political work. There is a lot of art that does not *look* political. There is content that does not scream "I am making a political stance!" but, that does

³⁵⁰ "Power." Art in the Twenty-First Century, Season 3. PBS.

<https://art21.org/watch/art-in-the-twenty-first-century/s3/power/>. September 16, 2005.

³⁵¹ Ai, Weiwei, and Larry Warsh. *Weiwei-Isms*. Princeton University Press, 2013. 94

³⁵² *Ibid.* 33

not mean it *is not* taking a stance on what ideologies and values are important. Or, on what kind of accessibility different people have to different resources.

The fact that I have never heard anyone outside of the dominant narrative say anything about their work not being political couples with the fact that I've never personally felt the need to claim that my work *is* political. I've just already assumed that it *is* and that everyone else will take it as such. Conversations with my peers confirm similar beliefs to be commonplace. This leads me to believe marginalized individuals assume their work is naturally political.

I would hypothesize, the reason for this is that same sense of worry and guilt, Saba Taj mentioned, about being a representative of an entire minority group. This sense, of the audience's constant awareness of the artist's identity, forces the artist to be concerned with what stereotypes they may perpetuate or create. The artist is also concerned with being an inspiration for others who share their marginalized identity, as Omar Offendum mentioned.

Everything that a marginalized person creates will always be connected with their identity as a marginalized individual. Therefore, the creation will always be political, whether the content is political or not.

In terms of the non-marginalized individual producing political work, as mentioned before, privilege is in itself political. This topic spurs a lot of fiery debate that isn't fully relevant to the topic at hand so I want to address the idea of privilege only very briefly, and, specifically, in the way that it does relate to art being political. There is a lot of angst over the idea of privilege not being something that someone can control (much like the marginalized identity is not something chosen). People, like Jordan Peterson, get fired up, complaining that we talk about it at all because, as he says, "what are you going to do put a tax on my privilege--where is the line, when will that ever be enough?"

The fact of the matter is that there *is* a tax that goes along with privilege. The tax is a responsibility to utilize said privilege to ensure others maintain their access to their human rights. So, the most important individuals to recognize their works are political are not those that are marginalized, but those who are privileged. This recognition aids the liberation process. This responsibility is not one of an artist, but as a human being.

A privileged person, choosing to claim their work is anything but political, is making a political statement. Namely, it shows their ability to claim no politics when others do not have this choice. And it is making a statement that this individual does not care about providing accessibility to others. Furthermore, it sets an example to others in places of privilege, that, they, too, do not need to worry themselves with the responsibility of their privilege.

Artworks, therefore, to reiterate the opening of this work, are always political. So, they are always going to play a role either in aiding or blocking the collective liberation from the dominant narrative. Our responsibility is to ensure we choose aid.

*I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else.'*³⁵³

—Toni Morrison

³⁵³ Morrison, Toni.

Chapter 6 – Implementing a Change in Education

“The Little Boy” by Helen E. Buckley³⁵⁴ tells the striking story of what is, unfortunately, the reality of an arts “education” for many, if not most, of our students today. The story centers around a little boy who started out going to school with all the enthusiasm and creativity in the world. He was excited to go to art class and create. He loved to make all kinds of pictures and he loved to use all sorts of colors! But when he went to class his enthusiasm was put on hold. The teacher told him:

“Wait! It is not time to begin!”
And she waited until everyone looked ready.
“Now,” said the teacher,
“We are going to make flowers.”

Given his love of flowers the boy was excited, yet again, and set out to start. But, again, the teacher halted him. She was going to show everyone how to make a flower. So, the little boy, as everyone else in the room did, copied her flower, “it was red with a green stem,” because she was the teacher and she knew how. Even though he wanted to make his own flowers, the little boy did as he was told.

And pretty soon
The little boy learned to wait
And to watch,
And to make things just like the teacher.
And pretty soon
He didn’t make things of his own anymore.

The unfortunate reality of overworked and underfunded teachers, especially those in the arts is that there is not time to foster the individuality of students. Imagine, a classroom of 30-40 elementary students and one art teacher. Trying to limit the inevitable chaos of providing this age group with coloring implements is nearly impossible while also aiding in the personal development of each child. By the nature of these circumstances, it is no wonder that “art” must be flattened into show and tell, step by step procedures, and technical skills.

However, the story seems to take a turn for the better when the little boy moves to a new city and a new school. The teacher there is equipped with the resources to help foster the individuality and creativity of her students. When she tells the class they are going to make a picture the boy is excited and waits for instructions. But the teacher comes up to him to ask why he hasn’t started. She explains that she will not be telling him what he has to draw, that he can make what he likes and in “any way you like” with “any color.” He is surprised, but seemingly enthralled by the idea, so, she continues:

“If everyone made the same picture,
And used the same colors,
How would I know who made what,
And which was which?”

³⁵⁴ Buckley, Helen E. *The Little Boy*.

This is the moment not only the little boy has waited for, but the audience. Finally, he will be allowed to express himself and let his creativity flourish. But the poem doesn't end here. It continues with these three short but devastating lines:

“I don't know,” said the little boy.
And he began to draw a flower.
It was red, with a green stem.

It was red, with a green stem, just like he had been instructed to create by his first teacher. The damage was already done. So, it seems the problem to fostering identity formation through the arts is not simply a problem of lack of resources, but of habits already formed in our primitive years, teaching us that in order to make “art” we have to wait, listen, and follow instruction. With some difficulty, the damage can, blessedly, be reversed to some extent, however, wouldn't it be marvelous and so much easier to simply not form those nasty habits in the first place?

At this point I have made my ameliorative case as to why we should consider art as a way of Being-For-Oneself, as well as a set of five guidelines that help one actually achieve this Being-For-Oneself through art. The pragmatic problem that remains, however, is how to create the accessibility necessary for participants to follow these five guidelines and achieve this Being-For-Oneself, when society currently has (many) other ideas for defining art.

As noted at the beginning of this work, I believe one of the main contributing factors to inaccessibility is the fact that artist and audience are often taught to appreciate art in very different ways. Since I was able to use so many examples from artists themselves to support my guidelines, we know there are already many artists that are thinking about and utilizing them. But that isn't necessarily what audiences are thinking about. Children are a constantly listening and watching audience, whether adults realize it or not. They are absorbing rules for interacting with art without us even realizing it, and this will impact them as adults.

The adult audience not thinking about these guidelines also creates a systemic economic problem that stops many artists from engaging with these guidelines even if they want to. Therefore, in this final section, I wanted to lay out some of my thoughts on what (broadly) needs to happen to see this new definition and its ameliorative goals actually create some positive impact.

This section will focus on what a useful art education could look like both in and out of school. We will compare and contrast our “perfect” world scenario, our current scenario, and some pragmatic compromises to emphasizing our five pillars of confrontation, vulnerability, choice, truth making, and identity formation. The four areas of focus include education in public content, in the classroom, in the home, from the media, and from artists.

In Public Content

Let's consider for a moment perhaps our most moldable audience—children. Some amazing strides are being made in the way of artistic content being created for kids. As we know from Gadamer that children learn from play and what they see around them so representation of healthy identities of the self and a love for all identities not just the dominant narrative set up each upcoming generation to become stronger and stronger activists than the last.³⁵⁵ Consider how significant it is for toy designers to include multiracial Barbie dolls and action figures. Now suddenly it isn't just the white girls that are pretty or the

³⁵⁵ Gadamer, Hans. *Truth and Method*.

white people who are superheroes. We have seen an increase in attempts to combat ablism with the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in comics and story books. Or something as simple as the classic example of Mr. Rogers, on his show of the same name, inviting Office Clemens, a Black police officer to join him in the pool.³⁵⁶ This simple inclusion into the show combated multiple racial issues. First it included representation of a Black police officer during a time where this was especially uncommon. Second it helped to raise an entire generation of children who saw no reason that a Black person should not also be welcome at the pool despite being raised by a generation that after segregation ended threatened Black people in order to keep them out of White pools or even threw acid in the water or on Black individuals to force them to flee.

We have even seen books like *Red: A Crayon's Story* by Michael Hall, which elaborates the feelings of being trans in a very accessible way for young (and old) readers.³⁵⁷ This is the story of a crayon whose color is blue but came out of the box in a red wrapper. As the crayon goes through the story there is self doubt, confusion, and feelings of being left out because they are “supposed to be red” according to their wrapper, but every time they try to draw and express themselves they find it just comes out blue instead. But eventually with the support of this crayon's friends it finds the courage to call themselves Blue instead and to discard the mislabeled wrapper for one that fits their blueness. If this topic of gender identity sounds simplified, that's because it is. We see here that it isn't actually that difficult of a concept to understand—even children can get it!—when we approach the topic from a solid framing.

Not only do children's books and shows set children down a path of nurture to start off more open minded than the generation before them but this content area also has the possibility to impact the adults involved with the children's care. Not only do we see the kids “getting it” quite easily but they often have their own adorable ways of explaining “it” to the adults in their lives with one of those “duh” or “isn't it obvious” looks on their face. There is a weird kind of innocent shaming of adults that happens here, for not getting with the program earlier.

As adults engaging with content with children as a primary audience we also make comparisons to the content we grew up with. I'll use some new Disney films as examples here, as many of my readers surely grew up watching Disney movies. Consider the “happily ever after” stories we grew up with. Most if not all often hinged upon the concept of romantic love. Currently we see many new Disney films in which romantic love takes a backseat to other kinds of love. *Frozen*³⁵⁸ and *Frozen II*³⁵⁹ became particularly popular for just this reason. In *Frozen I*, though there is romantic love involved, the traditional “love at first sight” that we have seen in many prior Disney films is blatantly criticized by multiple characters include two many characters, Elsa, who is fearful for her sister's safety after Anna “fell in love” with Hans, and Kristof, who pretty much just openly mocks Anna for this.

Furthermore the “true love” that would ultimately save the day, and Anna's life from a spell that has her slowly freezing to death, does not end up being “true love's kiss” from Kristof who has been set up as her actual love interest. Instead the true love explored is a sisterly love between Anna and Elsa. And in fact Anna actually saved herself inadvertently because the act of true love was her stepping in between Elsa and a blow from the sword of the villain meant to kill her. This act thawed her frozen heart and led to a happy ending for both the sisters and the entire town of Arendelle.

³⁵⁶ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_FwbHiowdi4&t=1s

³⁵⁷ <https://karenaboutkids.files.wordpress.com/2017/05/book-hook.pdf>

³⁵⁸ Walt Disney Animation Studios ; directed by Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee ; produced by Peter Del Vecho ; screenplay by Jennifer Lee ; story by Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee, Shane Morris. *Frozen*. Burbank, Calif. :Walt Disney Pictures, 2013.

³⁵⁹ Walt Disney Animation Studios. Directed by Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee ; screenplay by Jennifer Lee ; *Frozen II*. 2019.

Frozen II takes true love in even more powerful direction as Elsa learns about the value of (healthy) self-love. The sound track Show Yourself from the film, particularly illustrates this message.³⁶⁰ At the point in the film that this song arises, Elsa has left on a journey that she believes is to find someone (who has been calling to her) with powers like herself. She has always had this yearning for there to be someone like her so that she feels less alone and othered, and she is literally trembling with excitement to have someone who understands:

Every inch of me is trembling
But not from the cold
Something is familiar
Like a dream, I can reach but not quite hold
I can sense you there
Like a friend I've always known
I'm arriving
And it feels like home

As she hears the voice calling to her she reflects on how she herself has been closed off but here provides empathy asking this voice to open up, encouraging them to value themselves. Reminding them it is their turn to step into the spotlight, to be heard, to be their authentic and true self.

I have always been a fortress
Cold secrets deep inside
You have secrets, too
But you don't have to hide
Show yourself
I'm dying to meet you
Show yourself
It's your turn

As she nears the end of her journey, she finds that she herself is no longer scared of coming into her authentic self:

I'm no longer trembling
Here I am
I've come so far
You are the answer I've waited for
All of my life

However, the chorus of "You are the answer I've waited for" quickly changes and Elsa comes to realize that she hasn't been chasing someone else, but herself. The song switches back and forth now between being sung to Elsa.

Show YOURself
Step into the power
Grow YOURself
Into something new
YOU are the one YOU'VE been waiting for
(Elsa: All of my Life)

³⁶⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qYb7Dgzd404>

All of YOUR life
Oh, show YOURSELF

All the while, of course, the 3-D animators have put on an incredible show of color and a visual sense of power and confidence exuding forth from Elsa as she realizes it was her own identity and her own confidence in herself that she always needed, not someone else's approval or support. Imagine the impact on a child of rendering value of oneself not from other's approval but from your own love for you.

Even in the one romantic relationship featured in this film we see a very healthy sense of self from Anna and support from her partner Kristof. A particular scene that feminists of the internet have gone wild over features Anna in the midst of being her strong independent woman self, and Kristof comes running up to her, not to declare how he will protect her or take over the situation, but instead "I'm here, what do you need?" leaving it up to Anna to consent to and structure what they will do moving forward in the situation. Kristof goes through his own emotional journey in the film where he worries about his relationship with Anna but in the end it doesn't become the typical scenario where the woman is expected to make the man feel better. Instead as they reconcile at the end of the film he notes "It's okay, my love is not fragile." This is a really important example for young folks to have of an actual healthy relationship, which has, until recently been difficult to find *consistently* in mainstream tv and movies (yes, there are examples, one of my personal favorites being the Golden Girls, but not as many as regularly as we are seeing today).

But Frozen is a "new-to-us" story (it is actually pulled from Christen Anderson's *The Snow Queen*,³⁶¹ but most have not read the original fairy tale from 1845) so what about remakes of stories we have "heard before"? *Sleeping Beauty* is a classic Disney animated film that supported a lot of problematic mentalities that feed into modern rape culture and sexism.³⁶² Which isn't surprising because the original tale of Briar Rose actually DID unabashedly include rape. Disney simply spun the nonconsensual story into something a bit more palatable for its audience. In the original³⁶³ Briar Rose was supposed to wake up from true love's kiss... only when a king came a long and kissed her, she did not in fact wake up. He then proceeded to "have his way with her" despite her state of unconsciousness (and despite the fact that he was married). So it wasn't until nine months later when she gave birth to twins and the nurse maid set the children to her breast to suckle that she finally awoke from their lips. At this point the king wanted her as his concubine and things got complicated as his wife got mad... tried to murder Briar Rose, because clearly it was her fault for being raped, and instead settled on trying to kill the children. "The happy ending" comes when the king murders his wife and continues to use Briar Rose, who the viewers all know is not her true love (lest she would have woken at his kiss) as his concubine.

Disney takes out the blatant acceptance of rape but does not dismiss rape culture in the animated version. They do this by in fact having Rose wake from "true love's kiss" from the prince when he finds her. All this despite not having really had the time to meet and get to know one another, let alone build the kind of relationship necessary to fall in love. Effectively he sees a beautiful woman asleep (he does not know she is cursed), and wants to kiss her, so he does.

In Disney's more recent *Maleficent* film the director blatantly calls out this problematic behavior as the prince notes he cannot kiss her while she is asleep; he also notes he barely knows her!³⁶⁴ In the end it is Maleficent's kiss to her forehead, as a mother kisses her child, that wakes the sleeping Aurora. The entire film is actually centered around rape and PTSD as at the beginning of the film Maleficent had her wings

³⁶¹ Anderson, Christen. *The Snow Queen*. 1844.

³⁶² Walt Disney Studios. *Sleeping Beauty*. 1959.

³⁶³ Basile, Giambattista. *Sun, Moon, and Talia*. 1634.

³⁶⁴ Walt Disney Studios. *Maleficent*. 2014.

cut off (the metaphor for rape) by the man she loved, and whom she thought loved her. He got close to her, then cut her wings off as a trophy such that he could take the throne. We watch her struggle through her PTSD and her hope that nothing that viscous would ever befall Aurora who becomes a daughter like figure to her. She is no longer the devil as featured in the animated film but the survivor. This identity is incredibly important, no victimization, just survivorship. At the end we see her, wings restored (something *she* ultimately did for herself, though with the help of the relationships she made along the way), flying, confident, and happy through the world she protects.

So we see that it is very possible for the art content that is presented to children to be meaningful in ways that we often assume children cannot understand. Just setting examples of healthy societal norms, healthy relationships with one another, and a solid sense of caring for oneself can go a long way in raising a generation that doesn't need to "unlearn" bad habits before learning to be vulnerable and make good ones. They will already be immersed in a world where courage is the norm and where being being happy with their authentic selves is the greatest purpose of all. But we need the content presented to children to do these things:

- Normalize all identities, not just that of the dominant narrative
- Normalize being open to new ideas and learning about identities other than our own
- Normalize that being wrong or making mistakes is okay, that it is good to try to improve ourselves
- Normalize that being ourselves is far more important than trying to be like someone else, not only for our own happiness but for the world

In the Classroom

While "The Little Boy" emphasizes some of the natural issues that arise in art classes at a young age, when teachers are overwhelmed with overpopulated and underfunded classes, there are also some pretty significant issues that arise in higher education around art. Take Art Appreciation courses for instance. These courses become especially important to the mainstream narrative of what "art" is because they are often courses that the general student body (not just students who enjoy making art and want to be artists) take. They are commonly used to fulfill curriculum of liberal education graduation requirements.

While I am 100% in support of, and think it is necessary to, "keep arts in the curriculum" by utilizing appreciation courses even for non-art majors, I think we should be careful with how these courses proceed. A lot of people are moving through these courses without necessarily having a desire to be there and for many of them this may be their only real opportunity to have someone emphasize the importance of the arts to them. This means these courses have the ability to completely shape the way these students are viewing the arts for the rest of their lives.

Going through course descriptions for Art Appreciation courses from high schools, community colleges, and universities for non-majors, over and over again the descriptions, though worded slightly differently, come down to covering three topics: the principles of art and design, historical context, and medium usage. These three things are important as they provide us with a vocabulary with which to speak about particular works of art. They also may prove to students that creating a strong composition is a little bit trickier than just having fun—so ultimately this aids in, hopefully, seeing art as a "legitimate" endeavor beyond a fun past time. However, they are less helpful in terms of understanding the overall ameliorative purpose of art that I have proposed.

Perhaps the problem that I have is partially in the name of the course. It is not as though art majors do not also need to know the principles of art and design, historical context, and medium usage. But many

universities at least call the courses for majors that cover these topics Technical Foundations or Principles of Art and Design or Principles/Foundations of “Media Name Goes Here”. Art History courses have enough content to make entire majors from the study. It is made clear to art majors that these are skills necessary to have the proficiency to produce their ideas in the visual format they desire. These three areas also allow them to hold conversations which provide and receive critique in relation to these skills. But these students also know the technical skill is not what constitutes an object becoming “art” but merely helps with public presentation. The general populace should not be led to believe any different from what the artists know.

I actually do believe the general populace, whether producing artworks themselves or not, would benefit from knowing about these technical skills and vocabulary in addition to the goals I want to emphasize. But, perhaps, these courses could be named something different. Perhaps, Analysis of an Artwork, or the Vocabulary of Artworks, or How to Talk About Art. And then make another actual Art Appreciation course (or maybe named Living with Art or Art and Your Identity or Being/Everyone is an Artist) that emphasizes the goals this work has laid out. In a perfect world you would have both these courses be required and there would be such infinite funding that the class sizes could be small, and students’ needs could be attended to individually. But let us talk a bit about what can pragmatically be done, assuming funding levels do not change, for our Art Appreciation and even Intro to the Arts or Art 101 courses in elementary through college:

- The first big thing we can do is shift the focus from value on artworks as objects to value on artists as critical thinkers. Have students consider artists’ contributions as preparation for diving into a life of not knowing, yet, striving to get the most out of life through exploration and curiosity.
- Shift from a focus on artworks THEN to *artists* NOW. Obviously, I wouldn’t say we should stop teaching students art history, but I do firmly believe we need an emphasis on introducing students to artists today and in their own communities. Plus, if we have separate art history courses, why not use intro courses to emphasize artists students may see now in their social media feeds such that they can feel a connection to this field even while on their screens?
- Why do art field trips (which are already a rare occurrence) typically start and end in a museum filled only with historical works? Even an introduction to works from 30 years ago is not the same as an introduction to artworks made by artists today—and, even better, introducing them to the artists themselves! (Personally, I don’t think I even met another artist, aside from my art teachers, until college. And I am far from the exception to the rule.)
- Furthermore, it doesn’t make sense to be trying to ram memorable facts into elementary and middle school students’ heads about artists and dates, when we could first foster a passion for the arts by helping them create meaningful relationships and memories with artists they could actually meet and converse with. That memorization stuff can come later if their field requires it. Realistically, the same goes for your college student simply trying to fulfill general education requirements. Memorization is not going to be as meaningful for their lives ahead.
- Whenever possible, shifting to using artists’ writings and documentations as the primary source in lessons is important. Works from critics and historians should be seen as supporting material. It is important to maintain an environment where artists are legitimized as academic authorities on their own works, lest we perpetuate an environment where artists are seen as inherently below the intellectual level of other individuals.

- Shift from a focus on “the masters” to the everyday hero. Part of the reason I believe most of art education seems to focus on historical works is because it allows us to confidently point out which works are the masterpieces (as time and society has already passed judgement). While I understand the notion of using impressive works and stories as inspiration—and, certainly, the historical impact is important—this goes against the ideals of liberation, which require an everyday hero to show that all of us have the ability to participate in art in a meaningful way.
- We should be encouraging students to interact with artists in their communities whenever possible. We should teach them to ask meaningful questions that help them to empower themselves with the five fundamentals. And, when students are learning about the “masters” (because this should not be removed from education, simply shifted away from being the focus) don’t talk about them as the masters—humanize them! Make them accessible!
- Shift from thinking about art as either a career or hobby into thinking about it as a lifestyle and a human pursuit. Being relegated into a career creates, once again, the hierarchy that is possibly unreachable for the everyday individual. But, likewise, being relegated into a hobby seems like an afterthought, or something more frivolous, rather than something completely fundamental to personhood. Hobbies tend to be privileges; art should be a fundamental human right. This is not to say that you can’t still have people who make their living off participating in the arts, but, first and foremost, students should be taught that being an artist is a lifestyle. This lifestyle should be marketed as one that all people should wish to participate in.

And, of course, in general, we should be using the five fundamentals and referring to the liberation that the art process leads to, when educating our students. But much of this could be achieved automatically by following the bullet points above.

In the Home

Children learn through play and copying the actions of those around them, specifically those they look up to or are close to emotionally. Parental figures and older siblings or cousins can be hugely impactful in the relationship that kids develop with art. Some inexpensive recommendations for fostering the proposed relationship include:

- Ensuring accessibility to looking at art works. This can happen in a variety of ways. If you have the time and accessibility museums are always a good place to start, but especially trying to attend local galleries with current artists can be important. Many cities’ and towns’ art programs are working to promote local art walks on opening nights of galleries so you can meet and talk with the artists. Even if the children are young and may say embarrassing things, let them ask the artists what they want to ask. The artists treating them as a legitimate audience is hugely important. Also, let them make the comments they want to make, and provide follow up questions to them to get them to consider why they feel the way they do about the work.
- Accessibility to viewing artworks could also simply mean pointing out works you see outdoors in your community. This includes graffiti. Praising street art as legitimate art is incredibly important to providing a voice not only to that artist but to the child. Even if you don’t see artworks in your community there are seemingly infinite kid friendly free resources online for looking at and learning about art works (though you may wish to preview the sites first).

- Another aspect of this is that you must make sure you yourself find artists to follow on social media so you can understand what it is like to follow the artists. This will allow you to have meaningful conversations with the kids and more importantly allow you to set an example to them that following artists is cool and interesting. Even if they don't get to meet the artist in person, seeing status updates and getting to see "in real time" how their portfolios develop through the ups and downs, rather than just historic pieces that have been cherry picked by museums, is important to emphasize art as a process, not a product.
- Accessibility to unrestricted creative outlets is going to be important. By this I mean not correcting the kids on things like how to draw a particular image or what colors they *should* be using. This is more important than whether you can afford to provide a whole paint set or just a pencil and paper. The key is not just to not correct, but to praise what is created by showing interest. Again, a great way to show interest is by asking questions. Not only does it show you care, but it emphasizes the critical thinking aspect to the children. Very much in line with Kim's TedTalk,³⁶⁵ about encouraging your children to lie, get them to run with it so they dig even deeper and think even more about the story behind their work.
- Of course, what you call art is going to be important to these impressionable ears. Do not call it a hobby, don't discredit it as an unacceptable career choice (this means you also can't make comments about artists and how they have made bad life choices going into the arts). But again, most importantly we want to emphasize art as a lifestyle and something that *everyone* needs. Emphasize that thinking and learning like an artist are positive things. Artists should be seen as intelligent and as possible role models.
- You can also practice things like encouraging art be used as a medium not only to express things the kids see in the world around them but also non visible qualities about the world like emotions, sound, touch, taste, concepts etc. For example: "Can you draw for me what you are feeling?" "What do you think that taste looks like?" To solve these sorts of problems kids are going to have to engage more deeply than simply copying something they see. They will need to confront different ideas and perhaps even be a little vulnerable depending on the question.
- Foster personal growth, cherishing the idea that dynamicism and change are good, but do not foster competition with others through art. Impermanence can also be an important aspect of this. So, do not just make artworks that you can hang on the wall later. (Again, it is not the object that is important.) Also make things that will disappear or even things that the plan is to destroy through the creation.
- When asked for help, practice being a springboard rather than the provider of answers; do not try to give unsolicited answers unless absolutely necessary. Guidance to finding their own solutions and ideas is help too.
- Allow for exploration of unconventional media and in unconventional ways (aside from hazardous things). Who says you cannot draw with paint? That you cannot sew on a piece of paper? That you have to draw with colored pencils not glue them into a sculpture? Why not make art from leaves or dirty socks?
- Possibly most importantly, you are going to have to set aside your own insecurities. Even if you have been habitually taught that you are not good at "art" you still need to participate in making art with

³⁶⁵ Kim, Young-ha. "Be an Artist, Right Now!" TED: Ideas Worth Spreading, www.ted.com/talks/young_ha_kim_be_an_artist_right_now?language=en.

and in front of the kids. *And* you need to be *proud* of what you are making. If you cannot find it in yourself to be proud of your work, “fake it till you make it,” and you may find this is good for both the kids and you. You need to come up with stories and think about the work in the way you are asking the kids to think about their own works. You need to show that art is for everyone through your own actions. Show them that your work is valid, good, and *important*, regardless of your level of technical skill, so that they know theirs is too.

From the Media

On the other hand, for adult audiences who cannot be reached by a change in the art education system we would need to emphasize these five fundamentals directly and market why they are important:

- Market to audiences that they should want to engage with works they do not immediately understand or agree with. Furthermore, that the artists themselves are wrestling with the confrontation of ideas that they, themselves, do not necessarily understand or agree with. Emphasize how this is a journey together into exploration rather than an attempt by artists to lecture at them pre-decided facts. It is a dialectic process of thesis and antithesis synthesizing into something greater.
- Market that the most exciting works are the ones that at first turn them off. While the artists are trying to be vulnerable and share something with the viewer, the viewer can also use this as an opportunity to confront themselves and try to have an honest, internal, conversation about why they may be initially turned off by a work. Emphasize that engaging with the work does not mean that they have to agree with, or even understand it. It is about attempting to better understand themselves through that engagement. So, take the opportunity to learn more about yourself!
- Market that it is not about this *one particular* art object that the artist created. It is about how the entirety of the body of work, and all the works that artist made, were part of that engagement in the five fundamentals. This engagement allowed the artist to be prepared for a world of not knowing and find themselves in it.
- Emphasize that thinking about the artist as a person on this journey is meant to be inspiration for them (the audience) to also go on that journey. How does looking at these artworks and looking at the world help them (the viewer) to shift reality around them and search for their own identity? How can they use these moments of engagement to spur further exploration and liberation in their own lives?
- Unfortunately, much of the media is not going to change. For many reasons it is beneficial to big business and government to market art in the way that it already is. So, when I talk about shifts in education from the media I mean on a much more grassroots level. We as individuals are going to have to think critically about what we are sharing on social media... are we sharing artworks or are we sharing the people that make art? Share the artists.
- Local/small businesses, organizations, and government can also push to support these endeavors ensuring that the artists that they employ are promoted based on the above bullet points and that they are also paid fair wages. Perhaps even more importantly, when artists are employed it should be publicized that they are considered legitimate workers and are being paid fairly, so as to emphasize to others that they too should view artists as legitimate workers, who deserve respect and pay.
- Do not cut corners paying in “exposure” when there is a budget to pay in real wages. Likewise, artists should do their best not to accept anything less, regardless of if they have the means to, so as to not

enforce a negative precedence for other artists. If they don't desire to keep the wages, they can easily donate them back to the funding source or to another organization they support.

From Artists

There is a lot here that needs to be done by a lot of different people, who may have varying levels of interest in actually following any of the suggestions I'm outlining. But, above all, I think one of the hardest overhauls to make might be in artists themselves. The reason for this difficulty is a combination of economic and prestige factors that are burdensome to combat. (It is a bit difficult to stand up for these principles, when making a living is on the line.) Regardless, however, I truly do think we need to overhaul the way in which we talk to audiences that aren't also artists (though it may require help from academia and power players in the political and business world):

- Consider talking to non-artist audiences (including those who do not express excitement in your art) about the process more genuinely—about fears and worries and the benefits of vulnerability and confronting ideas that you don't necessarily understand. Talk about learning about your identity etc. (Generally, emphasize the five fundamentals). Recognize a broader mission of getting the audience to engage with the process as a whole for artists, not just a particular art object you have made. Help to create a united front of artists.
- While you shouldn't be expected to have to force an education on the audience, do try, to some extent, to make audience accessibility to learning about your process better; but you do NOT have to make the content of your works more accessible—you aren't responsible for that. Do not feel the need to streamline at the cost of nuance in order to ensure content is understood.
- Likewise, emphasize the academic authority of artists when it comes to art. Do not let this be taken from you by critics. If you disagree with them about YOUR work, disagree with them loudly and competently. Do your best to not allow economic or societal power, which critics may hold over your career, to silence you.
- Furthermore, emphasize this to young artists you might mentor. Let them know the power they hold and the obligation to do good with it. Encourage students to create a united front, rather than going out alone to “play the game in order to change the game.” We already have generations and generations who have tried that strategy. The advice to “play the game” is outdated.
- For artists who did in fact “play the game,” now is your time to shine. The whole point of playing the game was to get to a place where you could help others NOT have to play the game. So, figure out how you can personally contribute to that.
- Overall, be loud about your goals and stop having a different conversation with your non artist audience than you do with artists. Treat them like you would other artists, otherwise how could we ever expect them to learn to value your work the way you do and the way your work deserves? But be patient in this endeavor and do your best to answer questions competently and deeply. Likewise, most certainly, stop suggesting this marketing tactic—of disguising their real thoughts about their work with something more marketable—to young artists, they should not adjust what they care about in their work just to try to sell.

Be confrontational. Be vulnerable. Ultimately, if, we want to teach our audiences the importance of the five fundamentals when appreciating art, then, as artists, we cannot just follow the five fundamentals when creating art... we must, also, follow them in *sharing* art.

Chapter 7 - Additional Considerations When Artists Use Their Platform

Speaking to an Unreceptive Public

Stan Lee, the inventor of Marvel Comics and many of the superheroes we know and love, had a very firm position on ethics and the arts. He believed that all artists had a moral responsibility or duty to the public to tackle these issues. In each monthly issue of a Marvel comic one could find something called Stan's Soapbox towards the end pages. Within these soapboxes there might be Q&A from fans but more often than not it included Lee's own commentary on ethics. Below is perhaps one of the most famous of Stan's Soapbox published in 1968:

Let's lay it right on the line. Bigotry and racism are among the deadliest social ills plaguing the world today. But, unlike a team of costumed super-villains, they can't be halted with a punch in the snoot, or a zap from a ray gun. The only way to destroy them is to expose them — to reveal them for the insidious evils they really are. The bigot is an unreasoning hater — one who hates blindly, fanatically, indiscriminately. If his hang-up is black men, he hates ALL black men. If a redhead once offended him, he hates ALL redheads. If some foreigner beat him to a job, he's down on ALL foreigners. He hates people he's never seen — people he's never known — with equal intensity — with equal venom.

Now, we're not trying to say it's unreasonable for one human being to bug another. But, although anyone has the right to dislike another individual, it's totally irrational, patently insane to condemn an entire race — to despise an entire nation — to vilify an entire religion. Sooner or later, we must learn to judge each other on our own merits. Sooner or later, if man is ever to be worthy of his destiny, we must fill our hearts with tolerance. For then, and only then, will we be truly worthy of the concept that man was created in the image of God — a God who calls us ALL — His children.

Pax et Justitia, Stan.³⁶⁶

While we now know many of the issues we face are a bit more complicated than this given their systemic nature, this piece is poignant and important for the context of the time. At the time that this piece came out Lee received many threats of harm to himself as did the company from angry readers who claimed they would refuse to read Marvel Comics if these soapboxes did not stop.

Stan Lee had first started writing comics in 1941 for Timely Comics. By 1961 his series The Fantastic Four was beginning to really make a name for Timely, which had now switched to the name Marvel. It wasn't until 1972 that Lee became publishing and editorial director. Yet he already was writing these Soapboxes before he had full control of the company; and the directors let him.

After becoming the head of Marvel, Lee would push even harder for focusing on ethical issues. And of course he would receive continued threats. But his laissez faire response was effectively, if you don't like it then don't read it, but this is what I have to do. He would note the power of the artist to impact society and thereby the duty that they had to make a difference. Though he has now passed on, we see his legacy continue both on the page and the big screen. And in the wake of his passing we saw social media light up with commentary from fans about how much they learned from the comics and what a difference they made in their lives.

“What I like about the costume” Lee would note, “is that anyone reading Spider-Man in any part of the world can imagine that they are under the costume. And that's a good thing.” With Marvel Comics, Stan

³⁶⁶Marvel Comics. Stan's Soapbox. 1968.

Lee not only emphasized representation of characters from all walks of life and all identities—Black, Muslim, disabled, former strippers, autistic, orphaned, thief, soldier with PTSD, LGBTQ+, survivors of assault, barren, women who didn't want children, literal alien, you name it—but he also ensured that the content engaged with the topics of systemic injustice. Lines became blurred between what had, in previously comic book brands, been a stark difference between good and evil. The anti-hero developed and helped us to understand for instance the lose-lose position that the colonized individual Fanon describes is placed in—how Kilmonger in Blackpanther is not the villain, but rather a necessary force to propel Blackpanther into becoming a true hero and true leader. And even those characters who were meant to be the heroes of the story often clash with one another, just as moral theories clash as there is no clear path to “the good”.

He explores the psychology of hate, for instance when the Legacy Virus pops up in the X-Men comics. The Legacy Virus directly parallels the story of fear mongering during the time of the outbreak of HIV AIDs, which was wielded to promote homophobic hate crimes. This virus was in the comics initially believed to be caused by mutants, quite like how the rhetoric spread that HIV AIDS was caused by gay men. But over the course of the story arc we would discover that in fact neither was the virus exclusive to mutants but it also did not begin with mutants. Rather, anti-mutant hate groups had encouraged these rumors in order to inflame further hatred of mutants.

Styles of Speaking Out

Outside of the work produced how can artists use their voice and popularity as a platform to benefit shifting away from the dominant narrative? This becomes a particularly important question for artists who work in teams and who may not always have access to working on projects with content that attests to this goal. For instance, actors.

In June of 2019, anti-LGBTQ+ protestors in Boston decided to throw a “Straight Pride” parade during Pride month, claiming to be negatively impacted by heterophobia due to pro-LGBTQ+ movements. While many saw through this hate group various actors posted differently in response. Below I want to compare and contrast two different approaches by two white, heterosexual, male actors both famous for their roles in Marvel films.

First, we have the approach of actor Ryan Reynolds, famous for his role as the anti-hero Deadpool, who opted for a simple positive post in support of LGBTQ+ individuals:

To all my awesome, strong, hilarious and beautiful friends and family in the LGBTQ+ community... #HappyPrideMonth (followed by rainbow colored heart emojis)³⁶⁷

Reynolds' commentary during this instance, backed up by previous support in words and action, continue to emphasize the strategy of normalizing being LGBTQ+ as a positive identity. Most retweets and responses on his initial post were overwhelmingly positive and thankful. His audience was likely those who have been touched by anti-LGBTQ+ hatred. Those who were themselves anti-LGBTQ+ for the most part refrained from commenting on his post.

On the other hand, Chris Evans, also known as the MCU's Captain America, went on the attack. Sharing James Fell's post “On Boston's ‘Straight Pride Parade’” for reference he said:

³⁶⁷ Reynolds, Ryan. Twitter. @VancityReynolds. June 1, 2019.

Wow, the number gay/straight pride parade false equivalencies are disappointing. For those who don't understand the difference, see below. Instead of going immediately to anger (which is actually just fear of what you don't understand) take a moment to search for empathy and growth³⁶⁸

Immediately before the above post Evans shared, in response to The Washington Post's "It's LGBT pride month, but three guys in Boston want a permit for a 'Straight Pride' parade wapo.st/2lcXhze":

Wow! Cool initiative, fellas!! Just a thought, instead of 'Straight Pride' parade, how about this: The 'desperately trying to bury our own gay thoughts by being homophobic because no one taught us how to access our emotions as children' parade? Whatta ya think? Too on the nose??³⁶⁹

His first post (the bottom of the two above) was a bit more fiery than the first. Brimming with sarcasm and direct attacks on the identities of the anti-LGBTQ+ individuals, his post was met with divided response. His outrage is evident and is a very real, very human emotion, that in many cases LGBTQ+ members and allies felt a connection to. Reposting and responding with positive messages like "Now, this is MY Captain America" (which also became a meme floating around social media). Likewise his outrage seemed to stoke the flames of the anti-LGBTQ+ members themselves who expressed their hatred not only for LGBTQ+ members but with personal attacks on Chris Evans, calls for his firing from the MCU, etc. (NOT my Captain America, in these folks case).

Interestingly enough, Evans also garnished some negative responses from individuals who claimed themselves to be LGBTQ+ or allies. Concerns arose that these kinds of posts from an individual with this kind of platform were cause for alarm as they caused further enragement of hate groups and increased the chances of violence, when instead Evans *could* have used his platform in a less inflammatory and more supportive or even educational response. It is likely that Evan's second post (the first in the image above), which is a bit more mellow in tone and emphasizes education via empathy over hate, comes in response to the provided constructive criticism. Even so, the more emotional response did act as a bridge to many individuals who felt this anger within themselves and desired an empathetic voice. Hearing one from a place of so much popularity was important.

So what kinds of strategies are most effective and most important for public figures to take? The route of normalization, of anger at hate organizations, or of education? Furthermore, does which strategy that is best to take depend on who most of the audience is? Say if either actor had an audience overwhelming comprised of LGBTQ+ members and allies vs. if they had audiences made up predominantly by anti-LGBTQ+ individuals? Additionally, both of these individuals happened to themselves belong to the dominant narrative. Something we must consider is how does the effectiveness of each strategy change if these were individuals of marginalized groups or even specifically LGBTQ+? Do some of the strategies put the individual at more personal risk to become targets of hate crime? Does being straight make it more likely for the individual to get through to straight readers that this is an important issue? Do some of the posts sound more or less sincere based on the identity of the poster? Etc.

While it may not seem directly related to the dominant narrative we ask similar questions about the sincerity and authority of the poster in situations like Leonardo DiCaprio's partnership with National Geographic to create the documentary on climate change, *Before the Flood*.³⁷⁰ Opposition argued that Di Caprio had no authority to make such a film given his background as an actor. While he happened to have been making the documentary in support of awareness around climate change, how would those who

³⁶⁸ Evans, Chris. Twitter. @ChrisEvans. June 5, 2019.

³⁶⁹ Evans, Chris. Twitter. @ChrisEvans. June 5, 2019.

³⁷⁰ *Before the Flood*. National Geographic. Director Fisher Stevens. Screenwriter Mark Monroe. 2016.

supported him in this endeavor have felt if he had been making a documentary about climate change being a hoax? Surely, then the same arguments would be used that he had not authority to make such a film given his background as an actor, not a scientist. Luckily, Di Caprio approached the project from the perspective of he himself learning about climate change rather than attempting to claim he knew all that there was to know.

So, likewise, what kinds of important steps should artists who do not belong to the marginalized group they are attempting to support take in order to ensure that the *way* in which they are approaching being an ally is effective. When one has the power of a public platform on their side, the responsibility is grand. As much as one can do good with good intentions it is also possible to do bad with good intentions. Being an ally requires not only an effective use of platform but a consistent one, otherwise one runs the risk of seeming ingenuous. For artists this could mean appearing as though our “ally-ship” is conditional and only exists when it is good marketing for our personal gain.

Additional considerations may include depth vs. breadth. Does one focus on one or a few specific social justice issues to really go in depth on and make a deeper difference in, while having to set aside other social issues, or does one give a little energy to as many issues as possible? This is a real and difficult decision that artists (and all people) face in their allyship. There is only so much time, energy, and money that one person can have and thus one’s influence must either be pointed in a specific direction at a high density or spread more thinly across many issues. Granted the larger goal of valuing diversity of identities is one that can come out in all these conversations for artists due to their processes.

Speaking Out Against Intentional and Unintentional Aggressions From Other Artists

As much power as artists have to create positive change, moving us away from the dominant narrative, they also have the same power to keep things the same. So it becomes important for other artists, when they see this happening, that they say or do something about it. Two pretty straight forward examples of this come to us from Ali Wong and Hasan Minhaj who would stand up to and speak about trespasses by other comedians. In Wong’s case she was speaking out against some intentional aggressions, for Minhaj it was about accidental transgressions.

In the clip below we find Ali Wong speaking to comedian Trevor Noah on The Daily Show,³⁷¹ exploring what it is like to be a woman comedian and what some of the obstacles are—for instance safety in a world rife with a still very lively rape culture—to becoming a comedian if you are a woman:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITM6ZHPQImU&t=6s>

Wong is particularly known for having completed two comedy specials for Netflix in the midst of pregnancy. And so one of the topics she brings up a little later in the clip is the interaction she has with a white male comedian that comes up to her after one of her shows. Immediately, she says, he puts his hand on her belly which is “so gross;” “It’s like why don’t you finger me while you’re at it!” its not okay. And this comedian seemed to think that Wong was only popular and getting a lot of attention because she was a woman, pregnant and Asian. She recalls that the comedian said “You’re so lucky Ali, because you get all of this attention cause you’re both a female and a minority” and her response was “Yeah, cause you know, historically that’s always been the winning combo for recognition and success.” To which he responded “You know what I mean, me I’m just another white guy...” Ali responded “Be a better white guy! ...I could go on this whole show for like 35 days naming like [white guy successful comedians].”

³⁷¹ The Daily Show. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITM6ZHPQImU&t=6s>. Oct. 23, 2019.

Ali's experience was clearly an interaction with an individual who believed in reverse racism and reverse sexism. For Minhaj, his experience would be with common but significant mistakes that help support systemic isms both by those making the mistake and by those who have been taught to collude with the mistake.

In 2019 he was a guest star on The Ellen Show³⁷² and as she went to introduce him she pronounces his name wrong: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3t3YhWQppAw&t=7s>

What is unique about this interaction, however, is that he corrects her. It sounds like a simple enough thing, but it is all too common that individuals with names that don't fit the bill of standard whiteness are conditioned to not correct people who pronounce their names wrong. After a while even going so far as to begin to pronounce their own names incorrectly when introducing themselves because it becomes too much of an emotional battle to constantly have people pronouncing it wrong despite being explained how to pronounce it.

He talks to Ellen about how when he first started doing comedy people told him he needed to change his name. But his response was "no, if people can pronounce Ansel Elgort, they can pronounce Hasan Minhaj," pointing out that there are many complex names that are difficult to pronounce but it is only those belonging to people of color that we ask to change their names or for permission to mispronounce them. When she asks what he does at Starbucks he jokes, "Oh at Starbucks I just go by Timothee Chalamet."

On his own show he would also reflect on this moment on The Ellen Show and how his mom was so upset with him that he could have ruined his career over his name. She thought you had the chance to be on The Ellen Show and this is what you took the time to talk about? But to him, and to many of his peers and audience it was important. It was confirming his identity.

"Cancel Culture" And Audience Responsibility

And what kind of responsibility does the audience have in response to trespasses made by artists? Recently the internet has broken out into a battle about what has been deemed "cancel culture" when an individual, via audience pressure, is for instance removed from a show based on commentary they made outside of the show.

For instance, Disney's reboot of the animated movie Mulan into a live action remake met with critical concern when star Liu Yifei commented on protests in Hong Kong.³⁷³ Anti-government demonstrators had been protesting in Hong Kong over the use of excessive force by police. Yifei posted "I support the Hong Kong police. You can all attack me now. What a shame for Hong Kong," on a Chinese social media platform. In responses protestors called for a boycott of the new Mulan film.

So we are posed with the question of should watchers boycott the film? What kind of impact does that have? While it sends a strong message to the actress, Yifei, what impact also does it have on the rest of the team that helped make the film? TV and film are an especially complicated area for cancel culture because it is difficult to only impact one individual. The jobs and security of all the other people working

³⁷² The Ellen Show. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3t3YhWQppAw&t=7s>. April 4, 2019.

³⁷³ "Liu Yifei: Mulan Boycott Urged after Star Backs HK Police." BBC News, BBC, 16 Aug. 2019, www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49373276.

on the project are also put at risk. In tv it may be a bit less complicated than film, however, in that an individual can simply be removed from the show moving forward.

Recently, for instance Gina Carana, who posted transphobic and anti-mask tweets as well as commentary comparing being Republican in America to being a Jew in the Holocaust, was fired from Disney's tv show *The Mandalorian*.³⁷⁴ Carana fans were outraged and often came back with tweets that were themselves problematic. Some though who even disagreed vehemently with her tweets asked questions that remain unanswered of does her firing do more good than the role that her character on the show, who represented a very progressive role, did on the show? How do we balance representation of characters with the poor moral stances of the actors playing them? Frankly, another role can be developed that represents the same needed progressive stances.

But sometimes we also have to ask about the historical context of the commentary. For instance actress Letitia Wright, who played Shuri in the MCU *Black Panther* film and who had been recently slated to play in the upcoming sequel is now under critique as well for anti-vax tweets.³⁷⁵ Unfortunately her original post has now been removed so we cannot directly reference it. But from the sounds of the rumors she either posted or retweeted a comment along the lines of "I've always been wary of vaccines."

This is a really intriguing post because when taken at face value it sounds problematic while we are attempting to combat a global pandemic. However, when we address it within the context also of systemic racism we must note that there is a long history of Black people being experimented on for the express purpose of improving medicine for white people. And what we do still see also are posts from those who retweeted responses to Wright, which in many case included Black individuals who agreed with her sentiment of concern but noted that she would be the prey of a witch hunt for the post, so why did she post it? This history of medical abuse has bred a very valid distrust across Black communities in the new COVID vaccines. So, should she be "canceled" for commentary that may make combatting the pandemic more difficult or should she be excused and we use this commentary as a place to consider our insidious past? This historical context is clearly not something that many of those calling for her cancellation have considered, as we also see that the majority of voices calling for cancellation appear to be white.

Another interesting consideration comes from the situation of behind the scenes abuse that we only learn about after the end of a show or film series. It is much easier to handle these scenarios when a show is still running as we can "see justice done" by removing the offender from their position. But what do we do with shows (and other art) that we only find out later had problematic employees? The popular late 90's tv show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* provides a good example of this. The show was created by Joss Whedon, who is now under examination for claims of workplace abuse and misconduct on a number of recent and past shows. At the time no one had said anything for fear of job security etc. But now *Buffy* star, Charisma Carpenter has come forward to talk about her experiences with Whedon and how they led to many many years of needing therapy.³⁷⁶ In particular she notes his attempts to pressure her into having an abortion because he did not want her to be fat on screen.

³⁷⁴ Sarkisian, Jacob. "Gina Carano's Firing from 'The Mandalorian' Is the Culmination of a Long Line of Controversies." *Insider*, Insider, 12 Feb. 2021, www.insider.com/gina-carano-fired-the-mandalorian-controversy-timeline-twitter-2021-2#:~:text=Gina%20Carano%20has%20been%20fired%20from%20%22The%20Mandalorian%22,after%20she%20retweeted%20anti-mask%20and%20voter%20fraud%20memes.

³⁷⁵ Williams, David. "'Black Panther' Star Letitia Wright Faces Backlash for Posting Video Criticizing Coronavirus Vaccines." *CNN*, Cable News Network, 5 Dec. 2020, www.cnn.com/2020/12/04/entertainment/letitia-wright-coronavirus-vaccine-controversy-trnd/index.html.

³⁷⁶ Ivie, Devon. "Sarah Michelle Gellar Is 'Proud' of Her Co-Stars Speaking Against Joss Whedon." *Vulture*, Vulture, 12 Feb. 2021, www.vulture.com/2021/02/sarah-michelle-gellar-responds-to-joss-whedon-allegations.html.

He asked me if I was going to ‘keep it’ and manipulatively weaponized my womanhood and faith against me. He proceeded to attack my character, mock my religious beliefs, accuse me of sabotaging the show, and then unceremoniously fired me the following season once I gave birth.³⁷⁷

This leads to an interesting dilemma for fans, who even if their desires and loyalties lie with the actors and actresses who have been abused over their love of the show itself, have a difficult decision to make. How does one best show support to them? An easy solution might sound like boycotting the show to prove you do not accept the problematic behavior of Whedon and so that he takes a financial hit from the royalties he makes. But the problem that arises especially for some of the stars in his shows that really “made their name” in them and perhaps may not have done much acting since, is that a lot of those actors and actresses also rely on either royalties or sales of show merchandise to support themselves and their families. This is why group art projects become so complicated.

Granted, even solo projects can be difficult too when an artist has made some important strides forward in their field that have become fundamental for new artists to emerge, but when that artist has in their own personal life made some pretty problematic choices. How do we support the steps forward without supporting the problematic behaviors?

Accessibility and Ownership of Art Tools and Materials

Something of consideration when we consider accessibility to artists has to be accessibility to art materials. One more obvious considerations may be price considerations that allow artists to participate. For physical materials additional concerns may be generated in where those materials come from—are they produced under consideration of fair trade laws? Are they sustainably sourced as well? These two considerations can mean the difference between art making activities participating in or combatting social justice issues.

An interesting dispute arose in 2016 between artists Anish Kapoor and Stuart Semple (though really this was a dispute between Kapoor and the entire world of artists).³⁷⁸ Vantablack was a technology being developed by and for the engineering world to be the worlds blackest black. No light bounces off, everything is just absorbed. However, artist Kapoor, grew interested in the color for his sculptures and as such decided to purchase the rights to the color. In doing so he ensured he made it illegal for any other artist to ever use the material. For obvious reasons this goes against a sense of community in the art world and against our goals here of accessibility to participating in the arts—keeping an art material all to one’s self so no one else can ever use it. His goals weren’t even business oriented in the sense of wanting to be the one profiting off of selling the pigment, he merely wanted no one else to ever use it but himself.

Much of the art world responded in rage but the most well known response comes from artist Stuart Semple. In response he created his own versions of the blackest black which, while not quite as black as Vantablack, were released for public use. Then he followed up with a new pigment which claimed to be the “Pinkest Pink” When he made this pigment available for sale, however, he made notations to the purchasing page. As you went to check out you had to sign a waiver agreeing that you were not Anish Kapoor or his representative, or in any way purchasing the Pinkest Pink in order to give or sell it to him. This was meant to be a slap in the face to Kapoor such that he experience what it was like not to be

³⁷⁷ Ibid

³⁷⁸ Rogers, Adam. “Art Fight! The Pinkest Pink Versus the Blackest Black.” *Wired*, Conde Nast, www.wired.com/story/vantablack-anish-kapoor-stuart-semple/.

allowed access to a material. Of course, Kapoor didn't take this kindly and ended up getting his hands on the pigment anyways. He then posted to his social media account an image of his middle finger dipped in the pigment. In many ways this child like reaction actually proves Semple's, and the rest of the art community's, point that all art materials should be available and accessible to all artists.

But these aren't the only concerns. For instance, many digital art making platforms shed light on the consideration of the content within these tools. There are many platforms which are working hard to make their software free and available to use for young aspiring artists (only charging fees for business use) and in many cases are open source. However, we need to consider what is available on these platforms? Does the free music making/mixing platform contain access to sounds from instruments all around the world? Or is it mostly just western instruments? Likewise, does the free painting app have brushes akin to a variety of types of drawing materials and brush styles used across the world or only common western ones? How do we ensure that these programs are more inclusive of cultures and identities beyond the dominant narrative?

Chapter 8 – Conclusion: A Call to Action

Today we sit in a space and time wrought with injustice. To the existential ethicist this is no way to live. Even from a completely selfish mode of thought, we ought to desire justice for all because we ourselves can never be truly liberated until all are. While this metaphysical argument may convince the ethicists in the room it is important to note also that our more physical studies, too, show us that one need not be altruistic to benefit from an agenda that is anti-racist, anti-xenophobic, anti-sexist/genderist, anti-homophobic, anti-transphobic, anti-abilist, anti-neuro-typicalist, anti-classist... the list goes on.

A lack of privilege for one marginalized individual helps to induce a lack of privilege for another marginalized in a different way. Even those seemingly belonging to the dominant narrative will find benefits from a more strongly and efficiently running society when all individuals are allowed to dream and flourish to their full capacity. The world, and all of us in it, can only be greater for this.

Then why do we struggle so much to create such a world? First, the belief that this kind of world would not benefit us is very much ingrained within our society--a plague that has existed for so many generations, that we believe this simulation to be true. Second, perhaps there is a void, as Viktor Frankl suggests that we are attempting to fill with all the wrong things. Perhaps we believe that “power” can be built from physical, social, or monetary dominance over others. These things could never *actually* fill that void. The void, according to Frankl comes from a missing part of our identity. The only way he was able to return a sense of urgency to live to his patients was to instill in them a recognition of what only *they* could provide to the world. A purpose.

I am inclined to believe Barnett Newman’s claim that “the first [hu]man was an artist”. In his essay, he analyzes the Biblical story of Adam through the lens of an atheist. Looking at the story he notes to readers that it isn’t a story of a fall from “Utopia to struggle” or “grace to sin” but rather the story of humans’ innate desire to create, like the gods. In a fit of jealous rage that a human would dare to try to be like this heavenly power and create, Adam was punished... and thus we now spend our lives toiling away facing inaccessibility after inaccessibility to creating as eternal punishment. Perhaps, then, it is the act of creating itself that is our purpose, that which can fill our void.

Thus, the basis of this effectively becomes, what if we tried to create a world where everyone did have accessibility to create authentically and therefore accessibility to the power of our own unique identities and contributions. Confrontation of ideas, vulnerability, choice making, truth or world building, and finally authentic identity formation are all parts of what make an artistic act, as well as the foundation for existentialism and, therefore, liberation. If we do not allow people accessibility to create in a true and authentic way, we deny them their right to their fullest lives, and we deny ourselves, as potential audience to those creative acts, the right to our fullest lives as well.

We must, as humans—as artists—strive to undertake true creative endeavors, ones that will shift us from the current dominant narrative into a more just and ethical world where all identities are not only recognized but valued.

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