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Washington University in Saint Louis
Graduate School of Art

Art and...

By

Dayna Kriz

A thesis presented to the
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Abstract

Almost anything goes in this time of contemporary artistic production as long as an artist can 'back' their ideas and the position they operate from. This expanding territory of production and engagement is an exciting potential for working artists, providing freedom to self-determine ones modus operandi within an expanding support system to engage the world with. While this is an exciting growth it is also potentially dangerous. The un-named and historically ambiguous position that Art¹ operates from has created a rootless position to the production of culture. This rootlessness or, universal position has historically established itself as the gatekeeper and continues to unconsciously perpetuate a hierarchical aesthetic ordering of culture. In this cycle of non-acknowledgment of itself, it continues to estrange forms of creative labor -and therefor communities of people- and maintain segregated cultural spaces rendering it unable to effectively relate to *historically othered* forms of American art and cultural production.

This has created a need to clarify the origins and values of Art as we know it. This is an open attempt to do some clarifying, in writing and in the work of my practice. My practice is inspired by the places I physically inhabit and my relationship with the: people, history, intangible connections and material aspects that create the conditions as they are through the filter of my White-Female-Midwestern-American experience. My practice takes up the everydayness of art and culture and its connective and transformative capacity for mutually building self awareness and relationships with others in a place; while also using Art to disrupt established unconscious values in the institution and in the personal.

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Figure 1

Understanding Foundations: Origins of Western European Art

New forms of artistic ² and cultural ³ production are challenging and confronting the accepted territories of artistic production. These new forms are alternatives working in relationship to representation (based production) to do the work of confronting the difficult histories that continue to haunt our present reality. As an Artist, I am in the unique position of being able to use my practice to engage these historical realities in order to contribute to the creation of new fully realized historical trajectories.

As artists we have the unique position of being conduits because artists tools, methods and concepts are created from our curiosity and creativity exercised in the world. As artists we have the potential to work as an intellectual, practitioner and trickster straddling many worlds -of academia, institution, street, society and culture- never blending perfectly into one. Artists operate primarily through intuition which contributes to the world through connection: to one's surroundings and one another. In bell hook's, *Art on my Mind: Visual Politics*, she quotes anthropologist A. David Napier who is relating the production of self to connectedness:

At issue here is not simply what used to be called 'animism' but an ontology, a system of connectedness by which an individual's awareness of self is predicated on a system of reciprocal exchanges in the visible world. In a universe of relations...in which the individual 'know' themselves by actually exchanging with others those objects by which they are 'identified'- knowledge can exist in the absence of intellectualism since much of what is worth knowing is quite literally self-evident. *The self, in other words, becomes evident through a visible demonstration of its connectedness.*"⁴

The ephemeral act of building connections materially and socially is the ‘product’ -or rather process- worth emphasizing as it is the active expression and production of value. Within this privilege and burden of connecting is artists ability to self reflectively deal with history as it plays out in the present, the *historical present*. In American culture, Art is a space of liberation that contends with the historical present as it exists within the city and its many manifestations of culture and art, alongside Art and its established institutions.

Artists who engage the interests and processes of their practice in a way that contends with the historical present in the social and/or civic life of a place are modeling new forms of contemporary art production. These types of practices are often times straddling differing value systems between segregated cultural communities. In doing so they provoke questions that challenge canonized artistic values and *historically othered* forms of cultural production. Regarding socially engaged (outside of purely artistic terms) Carter G. Woodson said:

“The question is whether these "educated" persons are actually equipped to face the ordeal before them or unconsciously contribute to their own undoing by perpetuating the regime of the oppressor... It is merely a matter of exercising common sense in approaching people through their environment in order to deal with conditions as they are rather than as you would like to see them or imagine that they are.”⁵

This provokes a question regarding artistic production within United States Art institution's: Are we seeing with common sense and doing the work to recognize the conditions at they are? The promise worth holding onto is that *art* -in the broader

world history- was an integral part of an active community; a vessel of exchange, an experience actively formed with others.^{6,7} To ask this question we have to look historically at the origins of what currently defines the values of Art within United States culture.

Within European Art, specifically the Western European tradition, artists created representational depictions through painting and sculpture that stood in as the conduits for the transference of the knowledge, rule and mysticism of a Christian God. These relics assisted in territorializing land and its people by erecting cathedrals that housed and preserved these value and ideology laden paintings and sculptures into the forever future. Artistic efforts, employed by the wealthy, helped depict and establish a power hierarchy in the mind of the land it territorialized. In *Build Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States*, Doug Borwick writes “[Western] art was removed from its role enhancing community cohesion; instead it contributed to and emphasized divisions.” As Borwick clarifies, “The arts supported by the resources of the Church were no longer inclusive, community-based, and participatory. They became an exclusive, performer-based, observer experience.”⁸

Once secularism came, the Church lost its power and influence. The tools that were used in the glorification of a Christian God became the labor for establishing the legacy of people in power and positions of wealth that could afford artists specialized services. At the same time, focus on the individual—starting with the

Renaissance—shifted support of the arts away from the Church and religious glorification into celebration of the individual. This history of art making is specifically and uniquely Western European.

Through the colonization of America by Western Europe, they established and developed new territory (physically and ideologically) which subsequently lead to the establishment of the Western European institution of Art as the standard and measure of American (United States) Art. It is easy to reconcile how this happened when one understands the gaze by which Europeans colonized land. As Okwui Enwezor describes:

“...the apotropaic device of containment and desublimation through which the modern Western imagination perceived other cultures, so as to feed off their strange aura and hence displace their power...”⁹



Figure 2

Three Lakota boys on their arrival at the
begin
Carlisle Indian School.
1877.



Figure 3

The same three Lakota boys
the process of deculturalization Carlisle
Indian School. 1887.

In the American context, under the totalizing name of colonialism, culture—and therefore identity—was one of many things that was stripped from all peoples that did not fit within the European standard or measure. The *feeling* of this loss can begin to be comprehended through the small example produced through Howard Zinn’s research and finding of writing done by a Moravian minister who lived among Indian society in the early days of European settlement in America:

“Thus has been maintained for ages, without convulsions and without civil discords, this traditional government, of which the world, perhaps,

does not offer another example; a government in which there are no positive laws, but only long established habits and customs, no code of jurisprudence, but the experience of former time, no magistrates, but advisers, to whom the people nevertheless, pay a willing and implicit obedience, in which age confers rank, wisdom gives power, and moral goodness secures title to universal respect.”¹⁰

The Native American culture that established this way of being was generationally carried by “...language-heavily poetic, metaphorical, beautifully expressive, supplemented by dance, drama and ritual-had always been a language of voice and gesture.”⁵ In Native American culture, art is lived in the everyday and is philosophical guide to how one relates with ones surroundings (relational and materially) is a generational carrier of knowledge. This reflection on Native American culture and artistic form demonstrates another value system for art and cultural production.

Through current standards and values of art today, could/would we call this Art? Is this way regarded as contemporary United States Art? The way United States colonial history has organized our current relationship to and understanding of art (and culture) is through a lense specific to the Western European tradition.

Simply put, United States Art establishments are operating specifically from a Eurocentric frame. The unarticulated and unacknowledged position such as this leaves it rootless and unable to connect with the larger narratives, values and forms of art in United States while also allowing it to assume the position of the universal through its privileged position in history. Because of this it continues to produce a hierarchical aesthetic order that perpetuates fragmentation and physical segregation. What if United States Art institutions committedly acknowledged and contextualized the

identity and historical position they operate from? A openly named and therefore accountable position like this has the potential to produce dramatic, unimaginable changes in how we conceive of Art in our society. A vision uniquely American (United States kind) that is acknowledging of difference and demonstrates democratic behaviors.

Right now, non-acknowledgement and lack of accountability to history and Art's current form creates naive and dangerous transgressions. Danger lives through the unconscious and therefore unchecked maintenance of Eurocentric value systems that are the cultural gatekeepers who privilege "high art" aesthetics and Western European ideologies of representation and display. The grappling of this issue through multiculturalism in the 1990's wasn't and isn't enough. As Abigail Solomon Godeau writes in 1992:

— if multiculturalism is taken to mean the assimilation of cultural difference to mainstream art culture — then it evades the more profound implications of its own critique. Which is to say that the significance of the multiculturalist debate does not so much lie in its recognition of diversity and difference per se, but in its consideration of differences, both in their historical specificity and in terms of the power relations in which they are moored.”¹¹

This is the tension that haunts the reality of the established contemporary 'Art world' today. Since the late 1800's into today, some artists and cultural workers¹² working within and outside of the established Western European United States Art system—professionally sanctified or not—work to liberate cultural possibilities to the larger narrative of art. In the words of Godeau, “this shift might be described,

somewhat sweepingly, as the demise of the universal artist and the birth of a specific and historical one.”¹³

In terms of audience, Art values intellectualism over all others, which renders it inaccessible and therefore stereotypically elitist; withdrawn from anyone outside of its codes. In this way, serious intellectual work is required of its audience in order to decode its symbols, which isolates a large sector of society from having any relationship with Art whatsoever. For artists, this historically manifests as: any other(ed) forms of art or cultural expression (outside of Western European standards) that are allowed to participate in the fruits of larger art platforms that are publically funded, are often granted access by way of assimilation, appropriation and/or exploitation in regards to this framework. Eurocentric discernment and allocation of public funds help maintain these “high art” values in society and in learning institutions, which further perpetuates and maintains the hierarchical ordering of the arts.

In *Build Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States*, Doug Borwick creates an alternative set of terms that undo the imprecise and value-laden connotations of High Art and any other form of art. Instead he uses the terms *reflective art* and *visceral art* which “...aid understanding [while] at the same time acknowledging the merits to be found in all artistic expression.”¹⁴ This frame is important because it produces terms that are non-hierarchical in that they equally value the ways that

external stimuli enter our bodies and provide us inspiration. These terms create an inclusive way of envisioning a contemporary artistic framework.

“The principle characteristic distinguishing reflective art and visceral art is aesthetic focus. By this is meant the relative emphasis placed upon depth of content as opposed to immediacy of impact. Works emphasizing depth of content challenge the mind and spirit and offer rich rewards for repeat exposure to them. Work emphasizing immediacy of impact are designed to have a profound and immediate effect upon the perceiver. The two foci are not mutually exclusive. Great works of art attend to both of them...Beyond this, reflective works often have as one motivation an attempt to educate or edify and require effort to be appreciated. Works that are primarily visceral...are characterized by ease and accessibility”¹⁵

These new terms help to create a new, non-hierarchical dynamic that includes Eurocentric Art within the larger world of art. However, these terms and their definitions as they are don't fully reconcile the reality of a history of oppression and cultural genocide upon certain bodies of people. To relegate *historically othered* art to the world of “ease and accessibility” is an insult. Visceral Art's definition as is does not clarify itself in relationship to history and cultures who are still recovering from past historic trauma, in the present. It's far to simplifying to clump *historically othered* forms of cultural production and Popular Art into one term. However, it does *start* the work of building a non-hierarchical institutional frame.

Contemporary art, in its most optimistic and promising form, within this developing new frame, encompasses all forms of production and is grappling with what it means to create a reconciliatory, new trajectory. I'll call this form *reconciliatory progress*: work that deals with the dis-ease of our lack of historical understanding of the present while

also recovering past traditions in order to bring them into a contemporary understanding. This work is done deep within the historical voids that compose present reality and point creative momentum towards new historically realized trajectories while avoiding the pitfalls of the rhetoric of inclusivity-as-veiled-assimilation.

Artists of color have been mining this territory throughout the history of colonialism in order to create visibility to sustain their form of humanity within the power structures that be. I use James Baldwin's writings from *Nobody Knows my Name*, written in the mid 1950's to illustrate the similar un-nameable force undergirding his situation as a feeling that is still present within our culture at this time:

“One of the things, said Senghor -perhaps the thing- which distinguishes Africans from Europeans is the comparative urgency of their ability to feel. *Sentir c'est apercevoir*: it is perhaps a tribute to his personal force that this phrase then meant something which makes the literal English translation quite inadequate, seeming to leave too great a distance between the feeling and the perception. The feeling and the perception, for Africans, is one and the same thing. This is the difference between European and African reasoning: the reasoning of the African is not compartmentalized, and, to illustrate this, Senghor here used the image of the bloodstream in which all things mingle and flow to and through the heart. He told us that the difference between the function of the arts in Europe and their function in Africa lay in the fact that, in Africa, the function of the arts is more present and pervasive, is infinitely less special, “is done by all, for all.” Thus, art for art's sake is not a concept which makes any sense in Africa. The division between art and life out of which such a concept comes does not exist there. Art itself is taken to be perishable, to be made clung to is the spirit which makes art possible. And the African idea of this spirit is very different from the European idea. European art attempts to imitate nature. African art is concerned with reaching beyond and beneath nature, to contact, and itself become a part of la force vitale. The artistic image is not intended to represent the thing

itself, but rather, the reality of the force the thing contains. Thus, the moon is fecundity, the elephant is force.

...It was the esthetic which attracted me, the idea that the work of art expresses, contains and is itself apart of that energy which is life....What he had been speaking of was something more direct and less isolated than the line in which my imagination immediately began to move. The distortions used by African artists to create a work of art are not at all the same distortions which have become one of the principal aims of almost every artist in the West today. (They are not the same as distortions even when they have been copied from Africa.) And this was due entirely to the different situations in which each had his being. Poems and stories, in the only situation I know anything about, were never told, except, rarely, to children, and, at risk of mayhem, in bars. They were written to be read, alone, and by a handful of people at that -there was really beginning to be something suspect in them being read to by more than a handful. These creations no more insisted on the actual presence of other human beings than they demanded the collaboration of a dancer and a drum...The only thing in Western life which seemed even faintly to approximate Senghor's intense sketch of the creative interdependence, the active, actual, joyful intercourse obtaining among African artists and what only a Western would call their public, was the atmosphere sometimes created among jazz musicians and their fans during, say, a jam session." ¹⁶

Baldwin's reflections are echoes of the spirit of another way of doing art that are present within many contemporary cultural figures I have noted here and many more. I have hope for this kind of connected practice that Baldwin reflects on, but in order to get there, we have to contend with the distortions of our current condition: the un-named, un-racialized, rootless universalizing, historically representation based European position that is the gatekeeper to defining culture in the United States and globally.



Figure 4

Alison Saars practice is a vivid example of a practice that attempts to reconcile with the colonial and diasporic while operating within the territory of Western tradition(s). In *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*, bell hooks describes Saars work as

Trained in traditional institutions to think about art in the usual Eurocentric ways, Alison Saar chose to break with that thinking and reeducate herself. That process of nurturing critical consciousness enabled her to form an oppositional perspective that could embrace her holding in high esteem vernacular aesthetic practices, especially folk art, even as she continued to be interested in canonical works within the white Western classical traditions. Freed of the academic biases common in old-school art departments, which devalue folk art and vernacular culture, Saar

looked to those traditions as resources, allowing them to shape her aesthetic.

Saars practice is reflective of a value system that seeks to reconcile through critique and through the vernacular sensibilities of the traditions she works within in order to redeem. She shapes material and interjects historically othered narratives through the ethos of those traditions.

Deconstructing Foundations: Learning from Feminism

Years ago, when Saar first made the choice to commit herself to an art practice that would engage the ordinary, call out the beauty in the everyday, and celebrate the metaphysical, she did not contemplate the reality that no critical framework existed to theoretically validate and illuminate the significance of this shift, its political subversiveness. Now she has lived with the implications of her choice and understands more intimately what we sacrifice when we choose to dissent.¹⁸

hooks' reflection on Saars practice articulates the danger mentioned previously for an artist whose works falls outside of what has been accepted and institutionalized as Art within the Western European value system. A system that compartmentalizes the metaphysical and positions it within a sphere beyond the everyday. There is no argument that this creates a hierarchy, a highering and a lowering in relationship to artistic or cultural values and products. In Saar's case, the lack of language and institutional frame positions her outside of high art measures. The European lense privileges intellectually rigorous and societally detached work that provides formal audiences with an evolved consciousness. An expression of one form of the transcendental. Saar's art work stands as an opposition, a politicized position against the Eurocentric standard of Art. Her work upholds a value system that puts herself; her experiences, memories, inspirations, emotional state and surroundings in an creative elixir that produces a poetics of soul that in itself is sustenance for the spirit (hers and others) in the everyday. Manifesting in multiple materials and methods of display.

If we lean on Borwick's non-hierarchical terms, we could call this *visceral art*. The ideologies at work within a perspective such as Saar's, lack the solidified critical

framework in order to be seen, evaluated and valued, and thus institutionally supported. Saar's work (and many others) requires language that can deconstruct the Eurocentric frame that marginalizes it from being supported within established institutions of art. It needs the act of deconstruction of current institutional values in order to restore and/or create new terms. In the need for a framework to support it, we can look to the feminist movement in Art which demonstrates the mutual relationship of deconstruction and inclusion. Or, *disrupt and mend* are terms sensitive to differing contextual issues and ones that relate to my own practice. Terms that I will clarify later.

Previous to the feminist movement in art, the standard for female participation was always in measure with the historically male-dominated canon that prioritized painting and sculpture in the Art historical hierarchy. Previous to the 60's, female artists were tasked with eliminating their 'female hand' in their work because the presence of it tainted the Artwork which distracted the viewer from the true message of the work itself (too much female expression to be read clearly). Leading up to the 60's, Female artwork did not portray feminist content; meaning it didn't address or criticize the conditions women had to face historically because they were felt experientially and largely unarticulated in society.

American society in the 50's leading into the 60's had access to new electronic technologies, such as television, which contributed greatly to the social conscious and civil unrest that began to challenge the idea of 'neutral history'. Within the art world at

this time, female artists began to not only realize that Art History wasn't operating from an unbiased (neutral) perspective, but it worked actively against them and so they began to assert and challenge the male-centeredness of Art History. Mediums and techniques formerly relegated to the world of craft were revisited under the task of revolutionary historical recovery in order to *disrupt* the current narrative of Art and to begin to do the work of *mending* the larger Art historical narrative to its whole form. The revolutionary task of reclamation acknowledged the previous generations of women's work in mediums and in concepts of production that operated under the limits of patriarchy.

Women's work identified how patriarchy functioned to form and limit the parameters of women's identity and production historically. Part of the task of women's revolutionary recovery was also the task of building new artistic platforms in order broaden how the larger narrative of history could come to understand women's work within their own self-determined terms that were outside of the defining logic of dominant narrative(s). In response, female artists created galleries and alternative venues for artistic consideration, while at the same time promoting women artists to work in the established Art world and challenge the institutional policies (and values) that limited access for women at that time. In particular, I want to focus on one aspect of the deconstructionist model of the feminist movement in Art. The use of space. Space allowed women to produce their own opportunities, models and values outside of the

limitations and projections of the institution. Through space, they built their own platforms for self-representation.



Figure 5

One project in particular, *Womanhouse* created in the fall of 1971 by Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago. An initiative within the Feminist Art Program at the California Institute of the Arts and was inspired by Paula Harper, art historian in the Feminist Art Program. The goals of *Womanhouse* were stated as the following:

- 1.) To let students confront their problems as woman while grappling with the demands of a project rather than undergoing extended consciousness-raising;

- 2.) second, to give students the chance to learn many skills and work collaboratively;
- 3.) and last but most important, to force the students to begin pushing their role limitations as women and to test themselves as artists.²⁰

Womanhouse was created to claim space for women to assert themselves and push the limits of what they personally and collectively thought was possible. The process was as such: the participants worked to find a physical structure, rehabilitate that structure and turn it into a space that actively sought after and formed an embodiment of a uniquely female form of art. The nature of the project also established the need to articulate a governing structure which emerged from a rehabilitation process that was taxing on the women who were rapidly learning and building on a strict time line. The pressure produced the need for a democratic, consensus-reaching governing structure to be established. Through a combination of individual and collaborative-collective action that played out materially and theoretically, participants garnered a sense of support and validation of their ideas that they would not have achieved in regular circumstances.

The space of collaborative and collective action gave participants a sense of enrichment and a set of new skills. After the collaborative work of *Womanhouse*, participants were left inspired to create individual works from the experiential material generated by creating *Womanhouse*. The use of space personifies a way of mending whole history(s): pedagogy, collaboration, collectivizing, creation of new techniques and the incorporation of traditional materials used anew. The use of space outside of

the limitations, expectations and projections of established Art institutions allowed them to explore new skills, desires and questions. Through the space of *Womanhouse*, they were given a platform that challenged their sense of possibility and therefore enabled a female identity that countered the current narratives of femininity within larger society.

Feminist art was an innovative force that expanded the territory and definition of Art and subsequently ushered in the postmodern era. The Feminist movement in Art disrupted established values, which made room for reparations of the female identity historically and presently. In the long view, it transformed the possibilities for everyone in Art, not just women.

The luxury of the position we have to look from now is that we are able to be more specific about the qualities of the Feminist movement in Art. We can articulate that this movement was predominantly a middle-class-white-female operation that centralized certain values over others. Currently, we can look at Feminist work in Art as a model that demonstrated a way to de-center the patriarchy operating within established art institutions and social norms at large at that time. We can celebrate its victories while understanding its limitations in full reconciliation of the span of oppression, articulated by hooks as “imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy”.²¹ Feminists have given us a model for participating in the changes of these hard realities. We have yet

to reconcile a whole historical form that operates within the acknowledgement of oppression to work in relationship to it in a mutual cultural form.

Rebuilding Foundations: Social Practice & Community Arts

Place and economic circumstances of Artists has played a role in the evolution of Community Arts into Social Practice. Many Artists living in the city, in need of studio and living space while living off of an Artists salary end up living in post industrial spaces in the urban landscape of cities, in sections of cities that have been mostly abandoned by city services. These economically deprived sections of cities are space opportunities for Artists. In the history of Community Arts, Artists have an informal relationship to the places they inhabit. Any combination of things can happen by their presence in a place, but in relationship to Community Arts practices, they tend to get involved in the dynamics of the place around them. They may support projects or initiate them, but they are essentially neighbors first, and their artistic and cultural sensibilities find a home and relationship to the community around them.

Social Practice comes from a different place. It has evolved out of a conceptual framework in Art. The participation in the community life of a place often times starts with a concept first and then finds a place to enact that idea. Social Practice has been a growing field of art within the Western European Avant Garde tradition in that it has been an expansive space for redefining the relationship of Art to people. It is the

expansive initiatives of Museum and granting agencies that invite Artists to be a part of public commissions that support an Artistic engagement with the life of a city. It is the space of Artistic production that is challenging Eurocentric Art's representational nature and aesthetic hierarchy as it relates to other forms of creative production and site specific engagement.

The language and trajectory of Social Practice and its expanding territories and definitions of artistic production into the social-civic space are potentially liberating while also dangerous. In the illuminating and cautionary words of Okwui Enwezor:

“[The] Western historical avant-garde seems inadequate to do the job of producing a unified theory of contemporary art. Because of its restless, unfixed boundaries, multiplicities, and the state of permanent transition within which it is practiced and communicated, contemporary art tends to be much more resistant to global totalization.”²²

Politely said, but to paraphrase this: Western (European) historical Avant Garde's trajectory consumes the identity of the thing it encounters because it operates within privilege (access to education, resources, opportunities, time, etc.) and upon consumption, claims the thing it consumes as its own within the universal position.

To clarify this further I reference a conversation between self identified community *and* social practice artist Rick Lowe, who is founder of *Project Row Houses*, a community and artist run cultural development initiative in the 3rd Ward of Houston Texas with Nato Thompson, Chief Curator for *Creative Time*, an arts granting and public programming entity operating out of New York City. This conversation happened in

2013 at the *Creative Time* Summit. Rick Lowe starts the engagement by talking about race and its dynamic in the work:

[Talking about race]

Rick Low: It's like shadow boxing. People of color want to have this conversation about race, and they have it all of the time. But when they turn and they try to have it with white people, it's like they can't see them because it's not there. Race does not exist. It's hard to have it. To make it a real [conversation]...

Nato Thompson: You know, there's something I said to you awhile ago and your reaction to me was really interesting was that, I said 'Rick, what are you going to do now that there's all of these Social Practice programs where a lot of white kids are graduating and they're going to go into communities of color and try to help everybody. And then you said 'It sounds like they're finally going to get an education!' ...Gentrification and even Social Practice...there is a certain kind of confronting of race and place inherent in both of them that is posing a riddle.

RL:...When you think about the field of Social Practice, I start thinking about -I'm kind of inbetween. I come out of somewhat of the Community Arts era and now straddling into the Social Practice side. And so, it's really funny, today I was thinking, man, is Social Practice gentrifying Community Arts out? So it's a question, right? From the generation I come from, there wasn't all of these programs and all that stuff, right? People were in communities because they wanted to be there and because they were trying to figure it out...they were just being a part of a neighborhood. And then out of that a project might come up. Right? And then they might start getting access to resources for community based work. But now, now all of a sudden we've got all of you Social Practice artists out there with credentials... so they have this pipeline to the resources. I've been fortunate enough to straddle both communities, but I do wonder how many community folks out there are in their communities and being overlooked, and those people are people of color and they are connected to those communities...

NT: ...It is a question of resources.

RL: ...Community folks are just sitting back and they're like 'How do I access that?' When they're coming in on the Social Practice side, they're

already in the pipeline and its a real divide. And there should be a lot of connections between them [Social Practice and Community Arts]²³

Connections between them indeed, but why aren't there connections? This conversation helps expose the values that the Art and Cultural communities and institutions at large are struggling to reconcile themselves with. Social Practice contains a lot of potential in its position -engaged within the world- but it's a matter of perspective and relationship to resource, as Thompson pointed out. It is currently of field of practice that is institutionally supported by its evolution out of the Western European Avant Garde, but the danger of it is it's lack of historical self awareness and its emphasis on singular authorship of the artist in relationship to 'the community'. Meaning, the artists conceive of an idea -like how they would in a representation based practice- and then finds a community to enact that idea upon/with.

Usually these ideas are terminal, meaning they have a start and an end, and are focused on the production of a particular thing and the process of producing that thing may be documented so that the object made and the photos taken hold the place of the Artwork in a display context. This way of engaging and objectifying a process of communal making has everything to do with the Western European tradition it evolves out of and its need to have an authored object to display to an audience. In this case, the emphasis is on the Artist and the concept and object produced for aesthetic consideration within a display context. As Lowe and Thompson pointed out in their conversation, the expanding field of Social Practice has everything to do with the

privilege of education and the ability to access opportunities. This is the fundamental relationship driving the work of Social Practice. Whereas, an artist living in a place come to an idea through a relationship with that place and those particular issues.

Because of this, a practice that prioritizes listening as its primary engagement function is critical to transformational 'community' work. In Community Arts, the aesthetic object (if there is one) originates from the priorities manifested in the process with people. The priorities of a project are made through a relationship in a reciprocal process of production. This form of making may have no formal relationships with the context of display because its main charge is based in the communal production of place.

People who have lived in a place for a long time know what it needs best through the accumulation of experiences and connections they have built there. Community relationships are often tighter in economically disadvantaged spaces of the city because people are living in survival mode and communal relationships are the fundamental support mechanism for enduring the challenges. Artists have to understand themselves in relationship to that ecology. Community Arts work has historically privileged the voice of the community and situates all energy towards aims that realize its outcomes in a place. In Community Arts, there is no audience, only constituents in a process of production.

There is a healthy and potentially transformative tension in representation based practices, Social Practice and Community Arts practices; with each one possessing a varying degree of relationship to established Western European Art institutions and the cultural gatekeeping it tends to. Representational practice receives the most fundamental support, because it is an institution that has been formed through this framework of creative production. Social Practice and Community Art Practice offer established Western European Art institutions an opportunity to connect with a broader base of constituents that wouldn't typically find themselves in a museum. Social Practice and Community Arts share a lot of similarities that have yet to be fully explored and accounted for, so understanding what sets them apart is important.

The degree of difference has to do with the aforementioned education and access to resources, as well as where the initial inspiration and conceptual work happen. Social Practice privileges the authorship of the artist and usually relates its activity to another set of audiences outside of the initial act. Social Practice holds an ethical tension because it is situated directly in between the world of the representational legacy of Western European Arts -and its need for authorship- and the world of the social and therefore political. For Social Practice Artists, accountability lives within two zones; first, the aesthetically oriented aims of the artist as it relates to an authored idea and its conceptual rigor and second, its ability to connect to the community it is engaging.

This proximity and accountability to both worlds presents a tension in regards to how one's work is measured and to whom it is relevant. In relationship to artist

sustainability, it's easy to prioritize the aesthetic and conceptual rigor required by established Western European Art institutions, because they are the ones capable of providing continual support through traditional Art Market economics, public grants and commissioned public projects. All of this points to Lowe's critique of Social Practice mentioned earlier, Social Practice's relationship to resources. One could say that Social Practice values resources over a relationship to place.

So often the fault of ethically challenging Social Practice projects falls on the Artist to shoulder the blow. This is scapegoating in attempt to not have to deal with the systemic issues at play within the established Western European Art institution. Ethical tensions of Social Practice are not just the Artist's issue. It is an issue that has to do with the orientation of how Art is currently conceived within established Western European Art institutions. They are the cultural gatekeepers and create the parameters and expectations for Art that exists within the social. Because of its infrastructural form; the brick and mortar buildings that make up the sanctuaries of display. White walls built for 2D objects to hang on and plenty of square footage for 3D work, its clear how the aim or top priority manifests a need for an object of high aesthetic quality to translate itself to a secondary audience that is expecting to come to an established Western European Art institution to engage in the *reflective arts*. Because of this un-evaluated logic in relationship to other kinds of creative works -artistic and cultural in nature- entities supporting this kind of work almost naturally position the community interests, concerns and voice as a secondary consideration. This exercise of power

creates bad practice. This points to the need for established Western European Art institutions to claim the framework of their participation internally, and publicly.

The space of the unspoken historical framework has affect in our present. The inability to confront this tangle of values and contexts in Art is what is currently driving the perpetuation of “high art” representation based reasoning in Art institutions in the U.S. in the Twenty-first century. The education system of Professionalized Art practice, Art History and Curatorial practice continues to produce and therefore maintain these standards and preoccupations. However, as Borwick clarifies:

In a capitalist democracy, the long-term viability of any enterprise is only assured if it can fully support itself through earned revenue or if 50% plus one of the voting population is passionately committed to it. There is an intuitive awareness that neither are true of our [U.S.] established cultural institutions.²⁴

An increase in support for these Eurocentric institutions would mean a broadening of its invitation within the *reflective arts* and a expansion of the base of the public being served by those experiences. If we can't come to change within our cultural institutions on ethical terms, then society will do it for us.

The U.S. Census Bureau projects that in year 2045 Whites will be in the minority. White is defined by the US Census Bureau as: a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.²⁵ This definition is problematic but a topic for another paper. I define White as a person with features that are able to pass as European, most prominent of those features being lighter skin

therefore granting them access to historically crafted privileges. Whiteness is the racial identity for Western European. For the arts, White identity as a future minority means that the unchallenged Eurocentric frame, privileges and values of established Western European Art institutions will be challenged, and already are being challenged.

Local, state, and federal subsidies contribute significantly to the maintenance of these sanctuaries of established Universalizing Western European Art values. Within U.S. history, we can make the claim that a significant amount of public money has gone into supporting and maintaining Eurocentric Art. Established Western European Art institutions subsisting off of these governmental supports are beholden to the current issue of public accessibility and relevance. Presently this issue has established Western European Art institutions wrapped up in knots in an effort to maintain and operate from the same value system while attempting to be more inclusive. Hence the growing field of Social Practice as it arrives out of the logic of Western European Art.

All the while, growing digital technologies and social media platforms are providing a growing social conscious likened to the growth in electronic media through television in the 50's and 60's that led to a civic unrest and confrontation of the status quo. We are starting to see traces of growing awareness through the unrest created around visibility of police brutality against black and brown males (and females) and manipulations of the narrative by mainstream media. Social media has become a tool of the socially marginalized through its ability to eliminate the proxy in mainstream media production.

Social media provides the ability for one to vocalize and be an alternative voice to mainstream media on a public stage. In this way, social media is rapidly expanding social consciousness.

With this in mind, we the social media society, have the ability to publicly hold institutions and public figures accountable while increasing our knowledge and connectedness. Art in the social realm has the ability to use these digital platforms as a means to increase connectedness and breakdown previously held barriers. It is a new form of 'studio' as well as platform for artistic consideration. If the institutions we hold sacred in our culture will not provide access, new platforms in digital and social space can be made to counter it.

Learning from the feminists, we can see how the use of space provided an outlet to re-imagine artistic production for women while also creating new narratives that explored their place in society and culture. Through feminism in art, the oppressive nature of patriarchy was articulated and confronted. In the list of tangled oppressions as bell hooks terms it: the "Imperialist white-supremacist capitalist patriarchy"²⁷ places pre-established and unconscious parameters on the world around us that direct how we participate, while limiting what we imagine is possible. Unconfronted, this maintains the status quo and perpetuates oppressive forces. Feminism has shown us a model of deconstructing in order to make anew.

My Foundations: Disrupting and Mending

Borwick writes:

Any industry that demands growth of its consumer base for survival at a time when it is faced with what appears to be a saturated market must undergo fundamental reevaluation of itself. The arts are not a product delivery industry. They are a personal relationship industry. Those whose heart and soul is their art must remember what it is that drew them to the profession. It had something to do with the effect that the arts had upon them as individuals and the connections it allowed them to make with others. If a means must be found to grow in order to survive, that growth can only take place by re-imagining what it is artists and arts organization can do and for whom they do it. The personnel of the arts industry need to engage not an undifferentiated “audience” but a collection of individuals in a community with them.²⁶

This statement stands as a warning and a vision. In my work I continue to be drawn to the act of grappling within white master narratives that help me reconcile the dis-ease in me that is reflective of our history which is all an attempt to make tangible the veil the cloaks our American vision. My work lives inside of the segregated spaces of cultural history and expression and the subsequent hierarchy and compartmentalization of culture and its varied forms of production. Spaces of Art within established Western European institutions *and* art of place provide the potential for grappling with the historical present through *acts of disruption* within current value systems and/or in *acts of mending* that produce reciprocal -non-hierarchical- exchange and rethread social-civic relationships.

The act of mending is to try to piece together a whole form from our segregated legacies still present in our living situations. Mending is making intuitive connections between concepts, materials and surroundings that are responsive versus projected. It is an activity specifically related to the nature of place and requires listening. Not hearing, but listening -which is a full body experience and requires self reflection while absorbing the reality around oneself. This has most often taken ephemeral form, filtered through intuition, connection building, pedagogy, and collaboration with place.

My work in Hyde Park through Rebuild Foundation created the opportunity for this kind of engagement. Through the process of getting to know a place, a multitude of connections were formed near and far to explore and navigate meaning in a place using art, cultural traditions, entrepreneurship, architecture and other mediums and methods to contribute to an active community life within a historically marginalized neighborhood, suffering from economic abandonment of public and private funding.

In the duration of my time in Hyde Park with Rebuild Foundation, I worked to build connections while rolling through waves of failures, successes and misfires.

During my time at graduate school, Rebuild Foundation experienced dramatic shifts all while growing deeper roots into the Chicago branch of work. Rebuild Foundation in Hyde Park could not sustain the changes and decided to close its doors in Fall of 2014. At this time, I decided it was important to be a part of the shift, as I was still living in Hyde Park and connected to its civic life. During this time, the core group of

us rallied around one another and listened to one another's struggles to make sense of the loss while confronting expectations we had about where we lived and how Rebuild Foundation offered us connection and a space to re-imagine in. Through weekly meetings and we chipped through doubt and decided to continue forward together and actively ask our questions about what was possible through the act of doing.

For the first event, we decided that we wanted to create a living question to our neighbors and to our expanded community of folks outside of Hyde Park. Ricky Staten, resident DJ offered to share his music as a starting point and so we got to work. Mid-way through, a friend, Betty Davis called to see if we could organize another food event (we've done many of these in the past) to help raise money for her sons tuition. It was a perfect confluence of things. Donna Lindsay grounded the logistics and gracefully kept all parts in check and moving towards the event. Norma Steele held down the conversation, illuminated our collective wisdom and brought level headedness to the work. Eileen Cheong, Vanity Gee and RC Patterson and myself -cultural workers- were the conceptual pins holding and connecting all of the dots near and far, and founder of Rebuild Foundation, Theaster Gates supplied the space. One event led to another and another (Halloween Party, Thanksgiving, Open Studios, Open Houses) until the Holiday's asked us to take time to be with our own families and self-reflect.



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11

After a full season of events and some time away, we came back together to share the change in life circumstances between us all. At this time, we decided to temporarily suspend any forward movement because there were too many undetermined variables and life circumstances to continue the work for now. Our personal foundations had shifted and there was no committed organizing figure that could anchor our work together.

The 5 years with Hyde Park and Rebuild Foundation gave me a deep understanding of a place-based art practice. The communal nature and purposefulness of the challenges we had through doing the work were expansive and meaningful exchanges. This was a form of a fluid and responsive organization building, one that is neighborhood based and scaled accordingly. Its nature rests on proximity as a connective tissue. This alternative institution provided a meaningful place to put the energy of our lives and our bodies into our own life circumstances. In the word of Lucy Lippard: "neither a style nor a movement but instead a value system, a revolutionary strategy, a way of life."²⁸

The act of disruption is to expose unquestioned value systems and deconstruct positions that uphold hierarchies. This particular way of working is one that graduate school has provoked more fully out of my practice. I have come to realize that without exposing underlying value systems, that *historically othered* artistic and cultural expressions, as well as practices that exist outside of established zones of Art's

consideration can be mis-understood and therefore continue to be marginalized.

Naming, transparency and accountability are personal and institutional qualities that allow us to move forward on more real and realized ground and are therefore conditions of my work.

As a white, female artist, the only way that I feel I can contribute to this process of institutional racial deconstruction is to use my own whiteness and my constant self reflection process as an exposed process that works to clarify Whiteness itself.

Whiteness is not graspable in our current culture. We're constantly dodging charges in an effort to not deal with our own guilt. A present guilt brought on by hundreds of years of violence upon *historically othered* communities of people in order to create and maintain a place of privilege for White skinned (European features) within a culture that continues to perpetuate this dis-ease through its non-acknowledgement. I am to call out its characteristics, qualities, policies and behaviors to engage them in a present context. I need to make Whiteness more tangible, for myself and others, so we are able to contend with it and its silent presence in the foundations of our society and make it more realized in our everyday.

I was sitting on a train in Chicago recently, and it struck me. There was a group of young African American teens sitting in a group together. 60% of the casual conversation they were having together was about qualities of blackness and what kind of blackness they were, making jokes and throwing playful insults. I realized how

much whiteness is never talked about. Whiteness never has to know itself. Unless I provoke conversations about whiteness, it doesn't exist, it's a non-thing. Which just isn't true. People of color are constantly talking about their own color and white people. Whiteness is a race *and* we are individuals, just like everyone else, but White people don't have to struggle with the presence of race in their identity and what it means in all the spaces they occupy daily. The world is constructed so White people don't have to consider themselves.

I remember feeling my Whiteness for the first time. It was that feeling that I was behaving in an expected way, but I had no idea how I was doing it. It was a stereotype I was fulfilling because I had never had my whiteness challenged before. Since then, I have been in a constant pursuit of unpacking my Whiteness to get to a more authentic self and develop a more sincere connection with the world that isn't limited by false barriers.

Established Western European Art institutions currently operating without a realized public identity in relationship to race are only advancing the fruits of Art for some people. The cultural values and expressions of individuals of color are marginally present within Established Western European Art institutions which isolates the value of their content to a limited section of society. My work is in relationship to these unspoken value systems that continue to perpetuate marginalizing forces within our arts and cultural institutions.

My first attempt at this was born out of conflicting values that charged a need to take a stance in my practice. For the first year of graduate school I was engaged in a complicated restructuring process with Rebuild Foundation that was somewhat painful for myself and people previously involved in the work. My priorities were in continuing to thread in the relationships I had developed with Hyde Park into the fold of the new leadership and to assist the new leadership with situating itself in Hyde Park as best I could while managing graduate studies and all other things. The continual charge for my practice within a studio based program was that I would create something for the gallery to display as my final and totalizing form of evaluation. At that time and place in my practice, manifesting some kind of object felt like a misplaced and imposed value on my practice. When I attempted to explore other options for evaluation I was only pointed towards the gallery as the end game. After a year of battling and holding my stance in regards to not wanting to use photography in a gallery setting to communicate the work we were doing in Hyde Park because I felt that it would further perpetuate a voyeuristic gaze in alignment with historical tendencies of people in power upon marginalized bodies. And alternatively and plainly, any other objects for consideration in a display context felt removed from the very internal transition process I was engaged in. The place I was in was deeply complicated and required meaningful care for myself and for others involved in the work previous to this change.



Figure 12

What came of this challenge was *'White Flag'* and *'Open Letter'*. It allowed me to confront the complicated mix of values that were being assumed about the nature of my place-based practice in relationship to the established tendencies of Art production and display. I want to make it very clear here, that in no way is this a reprimand on art production and display and the opportunity the program offered me. My odds against in this instance were completely relative to the circumstances I was in and the expectations that had been placed on my practice. This opposition resulted in me taking a stance that was specific. I wanted it to be heard. This position allowed me to claim the space and the value of my own practice at that time. Through this act, I willfully and knowingly surrendered through a critique that related to the circumstances of the program as they connected to the larger systemic issues in our culture.



Figure 13

Beyond this moment, I have continued to flux in and out of traditional spaces of Artistic consideration. In Fall of 2014, I was given the opportunity via the Graduate Professional Council to co-curate ,with fellow Art Graduate Kellie Spano, a campus wide, interdisciplinary exhibition. This allowed me the opportunity to flex my value system in relationship to curating. Kellie and I worked hard to open up the hurdles people had around submitting because “they weren’t creative” or lacked the skills to make Art. We went in depth in one on one conversations and held a workshop that helped expose where the aesthetic or object might live in relationship to their interests

and studies. A lot of our work was in debunking the hesitation people had about entering their ideas into the loaded framework of Art. We had a strong pool of submissions from across the campus and the community that came to support it equally as strong and present. This curatorial endeavour was a confluence of the nature of my practice, disrupting accepted ideas of Art space and what happens in it, while mending people's relationship to what they imagined was possible in their practice, using art as a vehicle to share their work and make it applicable to a broader audience for consideration.



Figure 14

This thesis is a call for truth in alignment with the charge of my practice. Through naming, transparency and accountability we might more fully imagine *Art and* something else. What would an established Western European Art institution who named their historical identity, talked transparently about their underlying values and were accountable to the inequities that may uncover, offer us? Offer other people who haven't considered Art before? Offer artists exploring expansive territory in their practice? What would an Art institution that valued visceral and reflective arts equally feel like? What form would it take in relationship to the one we already have? Could Art institutions more fully invest in creative practices based in place? It is out of a belief in our public spaces and democratic potential. Because we're not there yet, it is a charge of my practice to find moments to contextually disrupt and mend in order to find and be a part of creating a more whole arts and cultural community. My work aims itself towards the historical present with a charge towards the contemporary promise of a more realized American cultural (and political) life.

Notes

¹ All lower and upper-casing of this word is intentional

² Artistic production as expression of an individual.

³ Cultural production as the expression of a group.

⁴ hooks, bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: New Press, 1995. p. 20

⁵ Woodson, Carter G. *The Mis-Education of the Negro*, First Published in 1933. PDF sourced from: <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/misedne.html>

⁶ hooks, bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: New Press, 1995. p. 71.

⁷ Borwick, Doug. *Building Communities, Not Audiences: The Future of the Arts in the United States*. Winston-Salem, North Carolina: ArtsEngaged, 2012. p. 17.

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Enwezor, Okwui. *The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition Source: Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), pp. 57-82 Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana. **p.**

¹⁰ Zinn, Howard. *A Peoples History of the United States of America*. p. 137.

¹¹ Godeau, Abigail Solomon. *Mistaken Identities*, Santa Barbara, California: The University Art Museum, 1992.

¹² A practice of multiple mediums and situated within differing industries and contexts.

¹³ Godeau, Abigail, Ibid.

¹⁴ Borwick, Doug. Ibid. p. 20

¹⁵ Borwick, Doug. Ibid. p.20

¹⁶ Baldwin, James. *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son*. New York: The Dial Press, 1961. p.23-26

¹⁷ hooks, bell. *Art on My Mind: Visual Politics*. New York: New Press, 1995. p.14.

¹⁸ hooks, bell. Ibid. p.21.

²⁰ "Womanhouse", accessed on March 15, 2015, <http://womanhouse.refugia.net>

²¹ Central organizing position of bell hooks cultural theory.

²² Enwezor, Okwui. *The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition* *Source: Research in African Literatures*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Winter, 2003), pp. 57-82 Indiana University Press, Bloomington, Indiana. p.69.

²³ Rick Lowe in Conversation with Nato Thompson, Creative Time Summit: Art, Place and Dislocation in the 21st Century, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loloNoVKDXE>

²⁴ Borwick, Doug. Ibid. p.25

²⁵ US Census Bureau, last modified July 8, 2013, accessed on April 6, 2015, www.Census.gov

²⁶ Borwick, Doug. Ibid. p.26

²⁷ hooks, bell. Ibid.

²⁸ Lippard, Lucy. *The Lure of the Local: Sense of Place in a Multicentered Society*. New York: New Press, 1997.

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Figure 1

Fred Wilson: "Picasso/Whose Rules," 1991. Mixed media construction and video. The Matthew and Iris Strauss Family Foundation.



Figure 2
Three Lakota boys on their arrival at the Carlisle Indian School.
Source: Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives [Choate #125].



Figure 3
The same three Lakota boys begin the process of deculturation at the Carlisle Indian School.
Source: Smithsonian Institution, National Anthropological Archives [#57,490].



Figure 4

Alison Saar. *Rouse*, 2012. Wood, bronze, paper and antler sheds. Photo: Chris Warne



Figure 5
Sandy Orgel, *Linen Closet*, 1972, Womanhouse



Figure 6
Hyde Park event 2014, image by Eric Garland



Figure 7
Hyde Park event 2014, image by Eileen Cheong



Figure 8
Hyde Park event 2014, photo by Dayna Kriz



Figure 9
Hyde Park event 2014, photo by Dayna Kriz



Figure 10
Hyde Park event 2014, photo by Erica Garland



Figure 11
Hyde Park event 2014, photo by Dre Steele



Figure 12

Dayna Kriz, *White Flag*, 2014, cotton sheets, thread, metal, wood



Figure 13
Andrew Johnson, *Doorways Series*, 2014, doors, photos
Parabola:Collabora, photographic installation



Figure 14
Shaniqua Washington, *Pop of Color*, pop up nail salon
Parabola:Collabora