

## *Interest-driven sociopolitical youth engagement: Art and gun violence prevention*

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### Peer-reviewed article

**Citation:** Samuels, J. T. (2020). Interest-driven sociopolitical youth engagement: Art and gun violence prevention. *Journal of Media Literacy Education*, 12(2), 80-92. <https://doi.org/10.23860/JMLE-2020-12-2-7>

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**Received:** July 11, 2019

**Accepted:** July 15, 2020

**Published:** July 21, 2020

**Data Availability Statement:** All relevant data are within the paper and its Supporting Information files.

**Competing Interests:** The Author(s) declare(s) no conflict of interest.

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### ABSTRACT

This exploratory case study examines the National Youth Art Movement Against Gun Violence intervention launched in Chicago in 2017 that used public art and new media creation to engage youth in activism for gun violence prevention. Five African American and Latino youth artists participated in the program; the study focuses on three of the participants' experiences. The researcher's goal was to determine whether the unique mix of media and education practices used to develop and deliver the intervention curriculum impacted participants' art practice, understanding of gun violence, and/or self-concept. A theoretical thematic approach to coding was applied to the audio, video, and text-based data collected. The artwork developed by the youth was analyzed using visual methodologies of compositional interpretation and semiology. Findings reveal that, within this cohort of youth, activities that connected their intrinsic interests in art with work toward a cause strengthened their affinity toward sociopolitical engagement.

**Keywords:** *youth leadership, art activism, gun violence, learning theory.*

### **Journal of Media Literacy Education**

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE  
NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR MEDIA LITERACY EDUCATION (NAMLE)  
Online at [www.jmle.org](http://www.jmle.org)



## INTRODUCTION

Youth are often characterized as civically disengaged due to a dearth of civics education in schools, and to normative ideas of what civic engagement looks like (Bhavanani, 2010; Cohen et al., 2018; Mirra & Garcia, 2017; Shapiro & Brown, 2018). However, youth social and political activities are marginalized as is their presence or perspectives in predominantly adult or, in the case of race, white spaces. If one is open to meeting youth where they are, youth civic interest and agency can be witnessed, as it happens in online social platforms and in the real world in extracurricular or community groups (Rabkin, 2017; Sloam, 2011). The construct of youth apathy as it relates to civic engagement is rooted in a limited adult-perspective of youth culture as well as the objective and failure to direct youth en masse and in consistent numbers into political participation (Bouie, 2018; O'Toole et al., 2003; Pontes et al., 2018).

Youth cannot be cajoled by adults to participate in traditional forms of civic engagement such as voting or campaigning because young people tend to have skeptical views of political leadership and institutions and are largely motivated by intrinsic interests (Beck, 2002; Carpini, 2000; Ito et al., 2013). For youth of color, skepticism and even outright fear of the political system is an outgrowth of a long history of inequitable treatment by law enforcement, the courts, and the US prison system, which they view as having deeply damaged rather than defended their rights and the rights of their families (Lopez, 2002; Sanchez-Jankowski, 2002; Watts & Flanagan, 2007; Weaver & Lerman, 2010; Vincent, 2015). Amongst all youth, widespread distrust of political actors and political intent have led successive generations to be more inclined to seek self-expression and impact outside of politics and formal institutions (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Henn & Foard, 2011; Millennial Dialogue Report, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2015).

Youth are frustrated with politics but are not apathetic. In fact, Millennials' interest in social and political issues is leading them to volunteer in greater numbers than any other recent generation and to use the Internet for political action and expression, often referred to as "participatory politics" (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Flanagan & Levin, 2010). Cohen and Kahne (2012) noted that "not only are young people engaging in individual acts of participatory politics at rates comparable to their engagement in more institutional acts, but the domain of participatory politics is a

substantial component of young people's current political lives" (p. 13).

While online social participation is significantly empowering to youth, excessive engagement in online social and political activities has the potential to minimize their civic efficacy. The unrestrained creative and personal expression that online social networks provide is a paramount experience for testing and bringing validity to youth voice (Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Rideout & Robb, 2018). While online experiences amplify youth voice (i.e. give opportunities for youth self-expression), especially youth of color due to equity of access and transmission, these experiences may not mean influence or political power to advance change in issues of interest (Cohen & Kahne, 2012).

### Youth, art, and gun violence

Gun violence is an issue that youth are particularly interested in changing (Witt, 2019). This is because persons 24 years old and younger are disproportionately affected by gun violence in the US, with firearm homicide being the second leading cause of injury and death among youth 10 to 24 years of age (Fowler et al., 2015). Despite firearm homicide rates being higher in cities than in suburban and rural areas, youth living in all areas of the US contend with the fact that the firearm homicide rate for 15 to 24 year-olds is 49 times higher in the US than any other high income country and, as a result of an increasing amount of mass shootings in public places like schools as well as continuing gang violence, safety anywhere at any time has become a legitimate concern (Grinshteyn & Hemenway, 2016). As a result, youth are interested in the issue of gun violence; in fact, many are overwhelmed by it. Yet, youth opinions were largely ignored in social or political debates on gun violence until youth in the aftermath of the 2018 massacre at Marjory Stoneman Douglass High School in Florida took adult leadership locally and nationally to task (Alter, 2018).

Given the disconnect between representation of youth in the media and the marginalization of youth voice, the National Youth Art Movement Against Gun Violence (NYAM) project was developed in 2016 to provide support and infrastructure for moving 13 to 25 year old youth into positions of influence as thought leaders on gun violence. Using media communication and education strategies, NYAM engages youth who have an intrinsic interest in art creation and, through weekend and summer workshops, teaches these youth techniques for developing socially engaged art in the

form of billboards (and other commercial products) and new media for the purpose of mobilizing their communities to take action for gun violence prevention.

NYAM's art activism framework is rooted in educational theories and strategies that examine the intersections between community, meaning-making, and identity formation. Lev Vygotsky's theory of learning, Social Constructivism, is a pivotal piece of that framework. It posits that our cognitive process for meaning-making (attributing understanding and value to experiences and objects) arises out of our social interactions with others (Vygotsky, 1978). According to Vygotsky, we learn first from our experience of the world and the people around us, we internalize this learning, and then we test what we've learned, which strengthens its utility and the veracity of our knowledge development.

Additionally, Vygotsky believed that within the context of social learning the strongest learning gains occur in what he described as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). ZPD occurs when a person's learning is supported by a more knowledgeable other (MKO), a teacher or a peer with advanced experience and/or skills. The co-construction of knowledge between the learner and the MKO gives the learner more leverage in their development to achieve expanded capability (Vygotsky, 1978). Another potential byproduct of co-construction is self-discovery. It's been noted in the literature on youth participatory action research (YPAR) that youth who take part in environments that provide opportunities for the co-construction of knowledge have been found to experience changes in the way they see themselves and their capabilities (Anyon et al., 2018). As a result of these co-constructing civic engagement experiences, they often see themselves as leaders or becoming leaders (Anyon et al., 2018, Harris & Beckert, 2019; MacNeil, 2006).

Lave and Wenger (1991) expand on Vygotsky's work by delving into the shifts in identity that occur when groups of like-minded peers with varying capabilities lean on each other to learn. Lave and Wenger found that within a group process of co-construction, which they call legitimate peripheral participation within a community of practice, the identity of a learner moves incrementally over time from newcomer to old-timer and from novice to expert (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Curnow (2014) describes this process of peripheral participation within a group of university students he studied that joined a local chapter of United Students for Fair Trade (USFT), and became

acculturated into the rituals, norms, and practices of the organization. Curnow (2014) noted that among his respondents, most said that, as newcomers to USFT, and as novices to the issue of fair trade, they did not initially see themselves as activists. It wasn't until after a year of working hand-in-hand with the old-timers with expertise in fair trade in the group that they came to self-identify as activists. Curnow (2014) notes that "[f]or many, immersion in USFT changed their conceptions of activism, grounding them in real-life activity" (p. 212). As such, it was through their performance of the practices of the group, as peripheral members, that they learned "to participate in social change work" (p. 206), and to align their identity with their new roles.

NYAM's framework for art activism was developed based on Anna Stetsenko's theory of Transformative Activist Stance (TAS), which, grounded in Vygotsky (1992) and Lave and Wenger's (1991) theories of learning, adds another dimension for understanding how learning can impact identity formation. TAS asserts that learning as part of a community informs identity not just in the expansion of one's capabilities or in the development of an idealized self as a result of being able to do and create in new ways, but also in what we believe we are capable of changing in the world around us. TAS theorizes that learning within a community of practice deepens one's knowledge and expertise in the practice and, if the practice and the group are formed for gaining knowledge to make a change in the world, it can provide tools to transcend the "givenness of the world" (p. 196) i.e. transforming the status quo into an alternative reality (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Stetsenko, 2014).

Freire referred to this ability to change one's reality as the development of "critical consciousness" (Freire, 1970, p. 35). Freire first applied this concept of critical consciousness to the educational experience of children and young adults in schools in his seminal book, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1970). He famously laid out his banking theory of education where he asserted that in a traditional education context students are viewed by teachers and school administration as empty vessels to be filled with knowledge rather than producers of knowledge in their own right. Under these conditions, where their voice as contributors to the learning process is denied value, young people occupy a marginalized space as an oppressed population. Oppressed or "marginalized populations are systematically prevented from accessing opportunities and resources that are normally available to others, and that are critical to enabling them to reach their full potential and become contributing members of society"

(Iwasaki et al., 2014, p. 317). This pattern of marginalization of youth is evident in the limited pathways to legitimate leadership youth are afforded in and out of schools, which frequently provide opportunities for helping youth to be future leaders (as adults) rather than leaders at any age (Camino & Zeldin, 2002; Charteris & Smardon, 2019; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Kirshner, 2008; Mortensen et al., 2014).

Numerous studies have found that a failure to engage youth equitably as producers of knowledge and leaders in their own right can negatively impact community change efforts, especially in instances where youth are heavily affected by the issues to be addressed (Frank, 2006; Libby et al., 2005; Stoneman, 2010; Soleimanpour et al., 2008).

Because youth are disproportionately impacted by gun violence, youth have wisdom to share and build on. It is for this reason that NYAM encourages its youth artists to unpack the deeply layered ways that violence affects their lives and to turn their knowledge and experience into artworks that spur intergenerational engagement with coalition building. Within the NYAM community of practice, artists work together to examine the issue of gun violence in their communities, including how it is depicted in the media, and decide what messages are missing from these representations that could help communities all across their city work together to create solutions (Samuels et al., 2018; Stetsenko, 2014).

In seeking to provide an infrastructure for youth to be seen as thought leaders in gun violence prevention, NYAM used art as its main medium not only because of its evidenced-based efficacy in helping people cope with trauma and its long history as a tool for influencing public opinion and behavior, but because as an area of interest and growing expertise for each of these young people art provided an organic foundation for their leadership (Hagtvedt & Patrick, 2008; Pelowski et al., 2016; Slayton et al., 2010; Smith, 2016).

### **Aims and objectives**

While the larger goal of the research for the NYAM intervention is to understand if and how public art can influence the public's thinking and action on the issue of gun violence, the purpose of this paper is to discuss a preliminary exploration of NYAM's impact on the youth artists themselves. NYAM's mission is to raise marginalized youth to the position of thought leaders on gun reform. As such, the goal of this study was to assess if and how this was realized within the context of its first

cohort of youth artists: Millie, 16; Daria, 17; Liz, 27; B'Rael, 25; and Leah, 25. In this phase of the study, the research question examined was: *How did selected participants in the NYAM intervention change their art practice, understanding of gun violence, and/or self-concept?*

## **METHODS**

The study utilized an exploratory case study design due to the NYAM intervention's newness and uniqueness as a program and the limited scope of participants and data collected.

### **Sampling**

In the spring of 2017, NYAM distributed a call-for-art to middle schools, high schools, colleges, and community groups in Chicago. The 200+ middle schools and high schools selected were participants in the Chicago Public Schools Department of Arts Education Art Liaisons program. Colleges and community groups who received the call-for-art were selected at random. Designed by NYAM's executive director and licensed expressive arts therapists and expressive arts therapy students, the call-for-art was intentionally created to provide all who chose to participate with an iterative process of art development meant to provide a pathway to healing, a transcendence from conscious or unconscious emotional suffering or distress, and empowerment (Egnew, 2005).

The call-for-art was designed as a three-part exercise to be facilitated by a teacher or group leader in a classroom setting. In exercise one, youth were asked to explore the dichotomy between how they view themselves (self-identity) versus how others view them (external perception). Completed as a group, this exercise instructed facilitators to have youth come up with descriptive words that they felt represented them and to place those words within a heart shape on a large shared piece of paper. Then the youth were asked to come up with words representing someone else's perception of them and to place those words outside of the heart. Lastly, facilitators instructed youth to circle any of the words, inside or out, that they wished more people knew about them.

In the second exercise in the call-for-art, using individual sheets of paper, facilitators had youth explore the dichotomy between how they viewed their neighborhoods versus how others saw them. In this exercise, instead of using a heart, the instructions asked

that each youth choose a symbol for their neighborhood that had significance to them. And, instead of using descriptive words on the image, the young people were to imagine those words as colors. The colors that represented their perceptions were used to highlight and define the inside of their symbol and the colors that represented other people's perceptions highlighted and defined the outside. The sharing of thoughts and emotions that arose from these exercises was suggested as an activity to close out each of the exercises.

The third and last exercise instructed the youth to individually apply what they learned or what arose emotionally for them in the previous exercises into an original artwork. The goal of the final image was to reveal, based on the structural gaps of understanding inherent in mutually exclusive perspectives like self-identity and external perception, what the larger public might be missing on the issue of gun violence as seen through their eyes. Again, group discussion was suggested to close out this exercise. The group discussion instructions stated, "Learners share their finished pieces with each other and discuss whether they believe their art (or any art) can cause people to take action and/or activate healing within those that view it."

NYAM received close to 50 submissions to their call-for-art. The submissions included both an original artwork and an essay by each youth artist explaining the intended message of their artwork.

A panel of judges consisting of NYAM's executive director, its lead artist, and a college-enrolled art student selected youth to participate in NYAM's first cohort based on the criteria enumerated on a rubric for scoring the submissions. The artwork was evaluated based on its use of color and symbols, creativity, public impact, technicality, and its ability to develop a meaningful and coherent narrative. The final selections were made based on being ranked as one of the highest scoring artworks among multiple judges' selections. Youth whose artwork was selected were invited to become members of NYAM's Cohort 1, which required a two-year commitment to participating in educational and leadership opportunities and creating artwork for the purpose of promoting gun violence prevention.

A total of five African American and Latino youth artists were selected for the NYAM program and for presentation in NYAM's signature event – a citywide interactive outdoor art tour featuring the work of both youth and professional artists on large-scale billboards enhanced by a mobile app, which included Augmented Reality interactions, video commentary from the artists, narrative stories about the issue of gun violence, and a

sign-up form to volunteer in local gun violence prevention programming.

Prior to the interactive art tour, the selected young people were required to participate in five weekend workshops. The four-hour workshops, held at the School of the Art Institute's Homan Square campus, which is located in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago, were facilitated by NYAM's executive director, a long-time education professional and education technologist, and Chantala Kommanivanh, an award-winning Laotian painter and mixed-media artist who grew up in Chicago. The first two workshops were open discussion sessions where the facilitators and youth shared: 1) what led them to start practicing art and when; 2) what their art practice meant to them; 3) what made them engage in the NYAM project and what they hoped to achieve; 4) what their previous experience with activism and/or art activism was; 5) what they knew about gun violence; and 6) who in the media spotlight they saw as peers that they looked up to as leaders and why. During those initial sessions, several newspaper articles from local newspapers with distinct styles and viewpoints on gun violence in Chicago were also shared and discussed. The last three meetings were dedicated to workshopping the individual art submissions as a group, learning narrative art techniques for further development of their submissions, and time and space for art creation and revision.

Max Sansing, a well-known Chicago artist and prolific muralist, visited the latter sessions to share his story on being an artist, his experience with gun violence in the city, and to provide expert support. Additionally, Susy Shultz, then the President of Public Narrative, a Chicago non-profit organization that connects marginalized community organizations with the media, led a 1.5 hour workshop on storytelling that was customized to assist the youth on the development of their visual narratives. Susy, a former Chicago journalist, also provided the group with a professional understanding of the field of journalism as it related to reporting on gun violence in the city. All of the workshop sessions were intermittently video-taped and photographed.

### **Data Collection**

Several types of data were collected during NYAM's pilot run between May 2017 and May 2019 and analyzed for this study.

1. Original artworks and an essays submitted by young people in order to participate in the workshop.

2. Documentation videos that included short snippets of NYAM's year 1 (2017) workshop experience, NYAM's visit to the Nobel Peace Prize Forum (2017), and the promotional videos captured for the NYAM art tour.

3. Audio-taped casual one-on-one interviews that each of the youth artists participated in at the completion of NYAM year 1 (2017) workshops; they answered questions about their identities as artists and art practice.

4. Short questionnaires that each of the youth artists completed in the end of year one to reflect on and provide feedback for their experience in the program.

5. Short responses about an international human computer interaction conference held in Montreal, Canada (GameJam at CHI2018) attended by some youth artists.

6. The principal investigator's various notes on what was experienced and witnessed by the NYAM youth artists during their two-year tenure.

Due to resource constraints and the limitations of the data collected (some participants did not provide written feedback when requested), this study focuses on only three of the five participants of NYAM Cohort 1: Millie, 16; Daria, 17; and Liz, 27.

## Analysis

In this study, text and visual-based methodologies were used to conduct qualitative analysis. HyperResearch version 4.02 was used to examine the text-based data. While there were no pre-set codes, the researcher used a theoretical thematic approach to code formation and refinement, which was informed by a preliminary review of literature and the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006). All data sources except the investigator's observations and the artwork were uploaded to HyperResearch for analysis. The analysis of the artwork utilized Gillian Rose's (2001) visual methodologies of compositional interpretation and semiology.

## RESULTS

The coding of the multiple text-based sources collected over the two-year period of NYAM's pilot intervention revealed that as a result of their work with the group, a shift in the three youth artists' art practices occurred over time, which had an impact on their self-concepts. In this study, the term self-concept is defined as a person's perception of his or herself based on both

their experiences and their interpretations of those experiences (Shavelson et al., 1976).

## Self-concept and art practice

Millie described herself at the outset of her two-year tenure with NYAM as being new to art: "I'm only 16 years old, so I'm not exposed to that much yet. I've just started working as an artist." Although she publicly referred to herself as an artist, her tone in expressing this to the group during her first NYAM meeting was hesitant. Growing up in a family with several older siblings with established interests and art practices, Millie personally saw herself as dabbling in art in comparison to her siblings. Like 4 out of 5 of her peers in Cohort 1, she admitted that her initial impetus for creating art was as a means of "escape" and for "self-healing." She said, "It's a hobby, but it's also a way for me to be able to communicate without words, and also a way of healing. Whenever I'm down, or something, I use painting as a distraction."

Daria never hesitated to refer to herself as an artist. In her family, the visual arts were an interest and a creative expression unique only to her. Like Millie, however, she also began drawing and painting for self-healing or what she referred to as "coping." In describing her affinity to art, she said, "I'm an artist because I use it to communicate the feelings that I am not able to say verbally."

More than ten years older than Millie and Daria, Liz, from the outset of her tenure with NYAM, was completely comfortable with describing herself as an artist having honed her craft as a portrait artist at a local amusement park in her teens and then as a student of art in college. While her work continues to focus on portraiture, she uses this medium now to better represent the underrepresented (particularly women) by telling their stories in visual narratives. "I'm an artist because I enjoy telling others' stories as well as telling my own and having a way of writing my own narrative and the narratives of others in a way that I feel people have not been represented, especially people of color, especially women." Like the younger members of Cohort 1, Liz turned to art to deal with life challenges when she was younger. She also saw art as a means of healing, which, as a matured artist, she shares with the women whose portraits she paints: "Healing is a big part of my practice... The act of looking at yourself and being like, 'What do you want?' Like, how do you see yourself? What's important to you? How do you want others to

see you? Why? I feel like my [art] practice gives people an area where they can actually ask those things.”

Although Millie and Daria’s purpose for creating art prior to NYAM had been largely self-focused, they also had aspirations of being of help to others as part of their future professions. A rising senior in high school, Daria hoped to become an art therapist and was looking into colleges with art and psychology programs. Contemplating her future, Millie stated, “I like helping people. I like making people feel better... that’s why [becoming] a doctor wouldn’t be so bad.” As a junior in high school, still in the process of figuring out what she wanted to study in college and to “become” as an adult, it was in fact her compulsion to be of service and her interest in art that led her to NYAM. She shared in an interview with NYAM’s director that it was her teacher who encouraged her to submit an art piece. They discussed how the mission of the NYAM project aligned with her personal goals to help people and seeing that connection, prompted Millie to try to make art for a social cause and to say, “Hopefully, I get the chance.”

While the opportunity to create art for NYAM began Millie and Daria’s shift in self-concept, from making art as a hobby to making art to help others, it was NYAM’s curriculum focus and revision process in the workshops that profoundly changed how they both came to understand audience resonance with and interpretation of images. During the workshops, as part of preparing the youth for creating narrative artworks meant to convey a message and a call-to-action for mass public consumption – two main concepts were addressed: the use of symbols and color in media. For both concepts, the group looked across their collective artwork to dissect and discuss how they were using symbols and color and if their intended messages were clearly being communicated in the artworks they submitted.

In reviewing her own work, taking part in discussion with her peers in the group and witnessing their revision process, Millie noted that “Now, I realize... even the smallest choice of color can represent something or the smallest choice in a shape or a painting can also mean something.” This lesson was distinctly illustrated in the changes Daria made to her submitted artwork following its workshopping.

Daria submitted to NYAM a watercolor image that she described as a child with a gun and an American flag to his head (Figure 1). She explained during the workshops that the intention of her artwork was to show that she felt that politicians were holding young people of all races in America hostage to gun violence by not passing firearm legislation to protect them.



Figure 1. *Initially submitted artwork by Daria Velazquez*

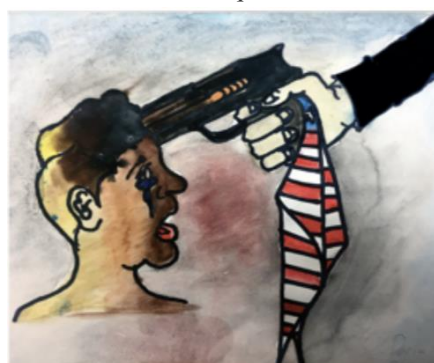


Figure 2. *Revised artwork by Daria Velazquez*

Discussion of her artwork led her to a revelation: her artwork was being interpreted as making a statement about police shootings because the blue sleeve and the pale white hand holding the gun triggered familiar images of police officers for the group. Becoming aware of the unrealized psychological effect of the color blue in the context of her painting, Daria honed the messaging in her artwork by replacing the blue sleeve for a black suit jacket, which produced greater resonance for the group with a politician (Figure 2).

The subject of Daria’s artwork arose from her personal experience with gun violence. Daria lived in two vastly different Latino neighborhoods in Chicago at different points in her childhood; one of them a quiet community in the far north side of the city, and the other, on the west side of the city, a community that struggled with increasing levels of crime and shootings. She spoke of hearing gun shots from her bedroom at night when living in Chicago’s west side and of friends who had been arrested because of guns.

Personal stories like these were what drove each of the youth artists to create their art, but it was in the group, through their analyses, that they refined their understanding of what their art could do for others. For Millie, this meant developing the sense that art actually touches people’s lives: “Being a growing artist, I



definitely learned a lot [about] how a simple painting or a sketch could mean so much to someone else.”

And, it was in the implementation of their art in acts of activism, that they experienced a shift in what they saw as possible with their art. Reflecting on seeing her art displayed on the college campus of Augsburg University in Minneapolis, MN as a component of the 2017 Nobel Peace Prize Forum, Daria divulged:

When I was standing on the field where my art was being displayed in front of hundreds... my heart was racing and my body felt ecstatic... I never thought that I would ever have a voice, especially a voice so big that hundreds of people in a whole other state would be able to hear, but after being with the National Youth Art Movement Against Gun Violence, I realized how my art was able to give me the voice I was never able to use.

Previous to this experience, Daria noted that due to incidents like bullying that she’d endured in her childhood that she “never thought that anybody would be interested in what [she] had to say.”

After seeing her artwork displayed in Chicago and Minneapolis (Figure 3), Liz described her shift in self-concept in this way: “[NYAM] has given me a chance to think bigger because this project is not only about women, but it’s about all types of families, all different ages, all different individuals throughout Chicago and in the cities in general.”



Liz Gomez listens Monday as Mayor Rahm Emanuel hosts a press conference with community activists, local politicians and families of gun violence victims to urge Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner to sign a gun legislation bill calls for the licensing of gun dealers in the state. (Photo by Scott Olson/Getty Images)

Figure 3. Photo in *Chicago Sun Times*

She noted that the change in her self-concept also resulted in a shift in her art practice because it provided a path for her to merge her interests into a singular vision: “[Prior to NYAM] I was stuck in the space between artist and activist with no clear way to fuse the two worlds in an action-oriented way.”

For Liz, NYAM provided a model for art activism. In addition to the showcasing of her artwork in the

interactive art tour, Liz and her peers in the group sought influence on gun violence by drawing attention to their artwork and their stories at press conferences on proposed firearm legislation, by developing and giving out protest posters of their artwork at the Chicago March for Our Lives, and by performing and live painting at rallies and peace concerts locally and in other parts of the country. “The whole experience taught me a lot about each of our potential and how it magnifies together,” Liz said at the end of her 2<sup>nd</sup> year with NYAM.

Captivated by the possibilities for influencing change as an artist, Liz is now leading the charge for her own large-scale art intervention: the Divine Gratitude Self-Portrait Movement whose goal is to honor people who are working to reduce fear and division in their communities. Two years after her tenure with NYAM, Daria is now a sophomore art major in college.

### Self-concept and gun violence

Although close in age, Daria’s experience with gun violence was much different than Millie’s, which is reflected in the subject and point of view expressed in each of their artworks. Unlike Daria, Millie’s whole childhood was spent in a northwest neighborhood in Chicago that historically has had lower levels of firearm-related injuries and homicides than the west and south sides of the city. Millie explained that it wasn’t until she joined NYAM that her perception of gun violence in the city changed: “When I came into these workshops and I talked to everybody else, I realized ‘Wow, this is a huge issue.’” Her shift in perspective on the scale of the issue is visually represented in the changes in her artwork.

In the essay that she submitted to NYAM with her original image, Millie explains the intention of her artwork:

I got a symbol that reminded me of the city – the shoes hanging. You hear so much about what those mean, but no one really knows the true significance of it. That’s how I feel about gun violence and youth violence in general – that I don’t know that much of it, but you know it’s there and you don’t really take notice of it until it happens to you.

Millie changed the focus of her image from a kind of mythology of gun violence (Figure 4), which was indicative of her previous perception of the issue, to illustrate the reality that she came to discover in participating in the group, that not only is gun violence a genuine problem, but it is one that is taking the lives



of thousands of her peers. Her revised artwork (Figure 5) depicts a Chicago skyline filled with the sneakers of its missing youth. In describing the revision, she said: “With the shoes in the background, I wanted to spread awareness of the mass quantities of people who are victims to this [gun violence] everyday.”



Figure 4. Millie Martinez submitted artwork



Figure 5. Millie Martinez revised artwork

Millie’s increased understanding of gun violence motivated her to take an activist stance on the issue. “Hearing all these stories about tragic events that have happened to my peers is very upsetting. I felt lucky about where I live, but at the same time I felt guilty because I shouldn’t be labeled safe or feel lucky because of the neighborhood I’m in.” In that statement, Millie is expressing her recognition of the unequal circumstances that are leading to the violent deaths of her peers. She adds, “While it is upsetting to see my peers go through so much at such a young age, I was more upset when I realized that there was more people like me who weren’t aware of how serious gun violence is or [who don’t]

acknowledge the issue because it’s not happening to them, and that’s why I decided to get involved.”

At the conclusion of the workshops, Millie reflected on working with her peers to develop artwork on gun violence and expressed feeling changed by the experience: “I feel like you can do a lot with art, especially now, and this organization because of it. I can kind of call myself an activist now, because I’m doing something for the better and I’m using my art.”

## CONCLUSIONS

Youth are not apathetic to the sociopolitical issues that affect their communities (Clark & Marchi, 2017; Pontes et al., 2018; Stoneman, 2010; Witt, 2019). Potential barriers to engagement could be mitigated if participation in issue or cause-based activities were connected to the intrinsic interests of youth (Ito et al., 2013). In this study, youth activism on gun violence was motivated for each participant by a personal desire to explore how their intrinsic interest in art creation could be of service to the community. The opportunity to apply their interest and skills to gun violence, a cause none of the three had previously pursued, was a significant entry point for all. It tapped into their strengths, a feeling of competence in art creation, and their beliefs, personal experiences with art that convinced them that it had the power to heal, which gave them the feeling that they had something to contribute to the cause. This finding reflects a major reason for what adults have unknowingly perceived as youth apathy – their avoidance of social and political activities due to feelings of insecurity in being able to provide value or appear credible in supporting causes (Achieve, 2017; Henn & Foard, 2014).

This study also found that among Cohort 1 participants making public art for a social cause had a profound impact on these youth. While drawn to participate in the NYAM intervention because of the pairing of a sociopolitical issue with an area of expertise, it was the process of thinking through how their choices in art creation could influence the residents of a city and the public display of their artworks that made an indelible impression on each youth artist. The application of color theory and the study of semiology became meaningful, as reflected by Millie when she witnessed how these attributes guided interpretations and evoked feelings of resonance, establishing a strong connection between a viewer and the image. Already thoughtful about her use of color and symbols, for Liz, being a part of using art at a magnified scale, in a

citywide billboard art tour for gun violence prevention, provided a real-world entry point i.e. a model for how to use art to change lives. And for Daria, the public display of her artwork legitimized for her the value of her art and her voice.

Integral to the work of each artist in the NYAM intervention and to the lessons learned was the use of revision in creating art. Revision as a learning strategy is commonly associated with the writing process, which encourages writers to critically consider whether the text they've written meets its intended purpose and, if not, to develop a more successful alternative (Ephron, 1986; Goldstein & Lieberman, 2016; Speck, 2003). With that in mind, famed composition teacher, Bruce Lane (2015) instructs that revision is "not accepting writing or even life at face value, but that it is a way of seeing new realities" (p. xi). In this case, each successive draft coaxed the artists to consider what is possible for themselves and their city (Golden, 1986). Applying the creative process to a social change initiative (i.e., using the visual arts as a means of considering what is possible with gun violence prevention) is what situates the work of NYAM within the TAS framework. These artists, as a community of practice, used their growing skills in art to envision new possibilities and, through the nuances of their practice, transcended their sense of self and what they believed they were capable of doing with their art in the world.

Within its limited context, this study reveals that youth interests can be major drivers of sociopolitical activity. However, while this report offers insights into how art was used to provide a pathway to engagement in activism for these specific young people, more research is needed to gain a greater understanding of the significance this work could have within the general youth population in America.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you, NYAM Cohort 1, for being willing to try something new and for supporting each other so beautifully in the process.

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