

6-11-2019

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Humanities Edge Collaborative Research Grant Proposal

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May 9, 2019

“Flying Solo: the activist artist”

(Taking art beyond the conversation)

DESCRIPTION

Theatre has long-been regarded as an effective agent to bring about social change. The Greeks formulated a template fusing entertainment with education and while theatre today lacks the mass spectatorship of social media its’ work with more concentrated audiences continues to maintain a respectable place at the table of ethical and social debate. Through its facility to connect with audiences on emotional and intellectual levels theatre possesses the visceral power to engage the spectator in such a way that s/he will become an agent for change. In an age of division and uncertainty such as the one we are experiencing it is important that we recognize the role art plays in the defining and sometimes redefining of our diverse identities and freedoms. It is even more important to raise awareness in young people toward the importance of taking positive and constructive action and that a force for such action lies in the dynamism of applied arts. A single action of conviction can bring about inconceivable change. It is upon the principle of the “power of one” that *“Flying Solo: the activist-artist”* sets out to develop the power of one group, a team whose members, each in their own way, posses the power of one to take “one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind” toward social change and tranquility.

The ethical/political reflections on art of focus in this project highlight that narratives structure our self-understanding, our ways of seeing, our ways of being in the world (Berger, *Ways of Seeing*). As it calls on narrative structures art is in some sense political, reinforcing stock stories or highlighting resistance (cp. Bell and Desai, *Social Justice and the Arts*), supporting the status quo or calling for new ways of seeing and new ways of ordering life. Many facets of the ways in which art touches on ethics and politics will be explored by the students.

At the outset, it must be recognized that political, even activist, art, is not one thing. For one, in an ethically pluralist society, activists imagine various solutions to social problems. For another, not all political art is intended as such. Political art can be explicit or implicit. Students will explore ways that art is not only produced for activism but is also enlisted for it, and by varying political movements. Artists consciously and unconsciously contribute to political movements. The major focus here will be on how activist artists intend their work to be used. Another emphasis however will be on how art is freed up from its artists' intentions and enlisted by political movements in support of collective identity and social change. In social movements art of the past and present is taken up to support and inspire collective action. In the ethical/political reflections on art we will look to both "high" and "low" art, as used in social movements. Further, while the project will focus on various activist artists, it will also consider how activist organizations such as the Sierra Club use arts within their social movements. Representatives from the Sierra Club or other organizations will thus be invited to the curated lecture/displays to discuss how the arts are used in their own political efforts.

The student research will also highlight the ethical importance of art pedagogy, both formal and informal. Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* will serve as foundational for the reflections on the moral educational value of art. The texts creative reinterpretations by thinkers from Hans Georg Gadamer to Herbert Marcuse to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak will also be key. Such an aesthetic education of course is not exclusively, or not even primarily, the task of formal education. But educators play a role, along with gallerists, museum curators, activist artists, and social organizations. Especially in the progressive traditions, at times when structural political change appears unlikely, Schiller's view of art as allowing a shift in our sensibilities offers a refuge. The reordering of our values and ways of seeing reality that can be facilitated by an "aesthetic education" can, it is hoped, create the conditions for necessary political change.

Students will study the various ways that art is taken up in politics. But they will also look at some difficulties of a common aesthetic education given the political and social bubbles in our present social and media landscapes. Where there is not agreement about religion, ethics, or, as we find in the U.S., even scientific facts such as evolution and climate change, how is it possible to forge collectively accepted narrative structures and create a common "realm of the sensible" (Rancière) needed to address some of the most pressing ethical issues of our day—climate change, sea level rise, mass extinctions? In a cultural context where people cannot even agree to factual reality, we must frankly acknowledge the difficulty of forming a common aesthetic sensibility that might facilitate needed, collective, even global political action.

At the curated displays in Part I, (described below) students will present the results of their studies on arts and social change and use their acquired understanding of aesthetics, ethics and politics in the discussions at the fora.

With this in mind, *“Flying Solo: the activist-artist”* seeks to engage FIU and MDC faculty and students to form a multidisciplinary creative team drawn from Theatre, English, Art & Philosophy, Digital Arts, Video, Photography and Music to develop the “dramatic curation. The project calls for the collaboration of art galleries and museums in which to conduct the “dramatic curation”. *“Flying Solo: the activist-artist”* sets out to explore a chemical exchange between the work of the activist-artist and theatre practice and whether, by merging the dynamics of these two change-making agencies a form of “dramatic-curation” emerges in which the viewer/listener is taken beyond the conversation to a committed state of applied personal action. *“Flying Solo: the activist artist”* will explore the work and philosophy of a local activist-artist in context of history’s contribution to art activism while weighing both the ethical values of the activist-artist together with art’s efficacy as a change-maker. To quote activist-artist Ai Wei Wei, “If anything, art is...about morals, about our belief in humanity. Without that, there is simply no art.” If that is the case to what extent does art move us to make change happen on more pragmatic levels? Is art only the “influencer” whose objective is to provide a starting off point for debate within ourselves or does art (visual, theatre, music, dance, graphic etc.) have the capacity to move the viewer/listener to a state of realized action to bring about pragmatic change in life? To what extent does activist-art move us emotionally to take an *active* role in change-making? If, through his sociopolitical work Banksey was an activist-artist how many collectors currently buying his work at a hectic pace are seeking to bring about change to those areas of social concern vividly depicted in his art?

Format:

“Flying Solo: the activist-artist” will take place during the first two weeks April 2020 and will be presented in three parts. **Part I** and **Part II** are connected and will be presented in the same location. **Part III** comprises a middle school activist-artist festival. (Details contained below) *“Flying Solo: the activist-artist”* will be given four public presentations in art and museum locations on the following campuses:

FIU Philip and Patricia Frost Art Museum
MDC Art Gallery North Miami
FIU Miami Beach Urban Studios
MDC Wolfson Campus.

Part I offers a 30-minute pre-performance curated lecture/display researched and presented by two intern Curators (MDC / FIU). The lecture/display will cover broad themes associated with historical perspective of activist art through an examination of the ethics and philosophy of significant international, national and local activist-artists accompanied by success stories illuminating the ability of activist-art to move the social and political needle. Following the lecture/display will be a 30-minute forum featuring student and faculty members together with guest panelists. The focus of the panel will be to address the influence and effectiveness of activist-art with respect to its ethical concerns and its effectiveness with regard to local issues and the needs

of the Miami/South Florida community. A Q&A session will be moderated by the curatorial interns.

Part II offers the dramatic curation of *“Flying Solo: the activist-artist”* developed and written by intern playwrights (FIU/MDC) and performed by a solo performer focused on the life, work and philosophy of Miami activist-artist, Xavier Cortada. (See supporting documents)

Between Parts II and III an intermission will offer light refreshments enabling audience members to engage in a social meet-and-greet prior to the beginning of the Dramatic Curation performance.

Part III: In an effort to raise early awareness toward the importance of growing activist art in society the Humanities Edge Collaborative Research project will organize a *“Young Activist-Artist Festival”* to mark the conclusion of the project. Based on the success of a similar model conceived by the current grant applicant in 2018 (See attached supporting document) pairs of actors portraying Emily and Austin Dickinson visited middle schools throughout Miami Dade County to mentor poetry. Just as the workshops resulted in a “Dickinson’s Young Poets Festival” so the *“Young Activist-Artist Festival”* in collaboration with the Miami Dade County Public Schools Visual & Performing Arts Department will result in a festival of shared presentations. Paired art curators and theatre dramaturges will visit thirteen middle schools during the month of February 2020 mentoring teams comprising curator, director, dramaturge and performer. Each team will research, write, produce and perform a five-minute solo “Dramatic Curation” based on a chosen activist-artist. Teams will be encouraged to incorporate all types of media into the performance. Each performance must be preceded by a five-minute lecture/display about the chosen activist-artist. A secondary objective in developing the *“Young Activist-Artist Festival”* is to remind young people that activist-art does not have to be confrontational, belligerent or angry and that there are many alternative ways to bring about change through meaningful action. Art supplies, books about art and Certificates of Recognition will be awarded to all participants.

Research:

“Flying Solo: the activist artist” calls for research in the areas of theatre, art, philosophy, science and art curation that is to be employed as part of the development of a “dramatic curation”. Under faculty guidance, two curatorial interns from FIU and MDC will collaborate in the researching of artists and art movements that have strived through history to use their art to address social issues and injustice as a way of bringing about social and political change. This would include solo artists and groups that have incorporated art into their approach in order to affect change through the examination of broad-ranging issues such as racial and religious equality, penal reform, gun violence, human trafficking, climate change, sea level rise, conservation and preservation. The results of the research will be documented throughout the performance space on several public displays to be used as part of forum events prior to the performance of *“Flying Solo: the activist artist”*.

The dramaturge, curator and ethics intern researchers will work closely with a performer representing Xavier Cortada to develop a multi-media performance script reflecting his life, work

and philosophy. An intern photographer (FIU) working with an intern videographer (MDC) will document the work of Xavier Cortada through a combination of personal interviews and library archives contributing toward the “Dramatic Curation” performance. The Humanities Edge Collaborative Grant will be used to compensate participating faculty, students and performers while covering materials and productions costs. Research will include but not be limited to online databases, local artist interviews, and archival searches in collaboration with the Philip and Patricia Frost Art Museum, the Museum of Art and Design and the Perez Art Museum of Miami.

Collaborators:

It is anticipated that the following collaborators will be required as part of the research and creative team for “*Flying Solo: the activist-artist*” project.

- PI (FIU Theatre)
- Co-PI (MDC Ethics & Philosophy)
- 2 Art Curatorial Researchers (FIU/MDC interns)
- 1 Ethics & Philosophy (MDC intern)
- 1 activist-artist (Xavier Cortada)
- 1 Performer (FIU alum)
- 1 dramaturge/playwright (FIU intern)
- 1 videographer (MDC intern)
- 1 Photographer (FIU intern)

(2,043 words)