
AN INEVITABLE QUESTION:

Exploring the Defining Features
of Social Justice Art Education

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

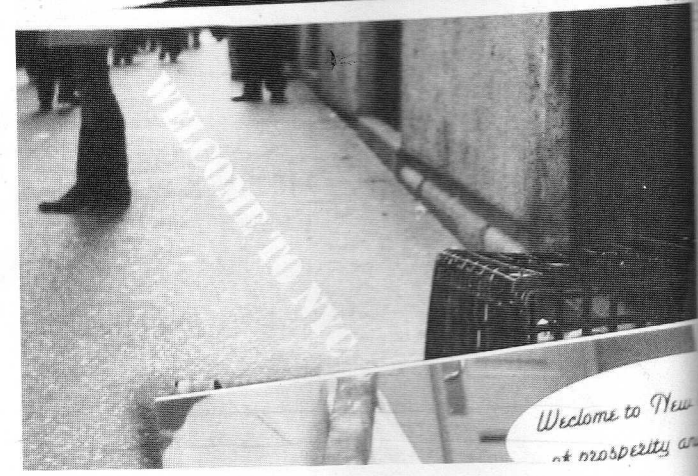
I am not surprised because this question constantly causes confusion among not only the students, but also the educators, researchers, and artists working at the intersection of art, education, and social justice. The labels for this work come in many shapes, among them, activist art (Felshin, 1995),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

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

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



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



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

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

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

critical pedagogy, a pedagogy of its own emerged. While this pedagogy of activist art¹ is by no means conclusive, it raises several distinctions that hone our understanding of what really is social justice art education.

A Particular Practice

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

