Power and Control: Responding to Social Injustice With Photographic Memes

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Figure 1. *Women are Seen, Not Heard*. Digital print, by Molly Shimmick (2016). Photograph by Molly Shimmick.

Why Address Social Justice in School Art Curriculum?

Do social justice issues get swept under the rug due to formal curriculum demands and discomfort with topics such as racism, sexism, and homophobia? In the United States, 50.5% of students are students of color (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017) and by the year 2026, students of color will represent 55% of all students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2017). These statistics cite an imperative to enact culturally relevant pedagogy in the classroom (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014).

The current political climate is one that condones bigotry, seeks to exacerbate racial tensions, and aims to eradicate many of the rights that the 1964 Civil Rights Act guarantees. What is the message to students if these topics are met with silence in the classroom (Zimmerman & Robertson, 2017)? Will students of color feel invisible? Will White students continue to move through their daily lives without an understanding of how their "Whiteness" and White privilege contribute to the climate of social injustice in our schools and community (Irvine, 2014)?

Many of my students were feeling dejected after the 2016 election because of the racism professed in the Trump campaign. They wanted a way to fight back. Together, we decided to create a No Place for Hate installation in the school to protest un-American values such a bigotry, racism, misogyny, homophobia, and other social justice topics (Figure 1). No Place for Hate is a national campaign initiative dedicated to eradicating defamation of "the other" in schools (Anti-Defamation League, 2017).

Resistance: An Artistic Response to Social Injustice

This instructional resource is the result of our No Place for Hate project. The 35mm camera provides a rich medium for exploration of these topics. Photographers used 35mm cameras with great success during the civil rights era to bring national awareness to Jim Crow laws in the South. Photographers of the civil rights movement transmitted the atrocities committed against activists in Selma, Alabama, for example, to the homes of Americans across the country. Photographers Bruce Davidson, Bill Hudson, and others (Figure 2) captured this brutality in the same way that the cell phone has created an increase in citizen photographers using it as a documentation tool of police shootings like those of Philando Castille, Laquan McDonald, and Eric Garner.

This awareness of police brutality and aggression against young Black men has heightened as these images go viral (Speltz, 2016; Wagner, 2016). I used these sources to inspire my students to create their own social justice memes (Figure 3). "A meme is an idea, behavior, style or usage that spreads from person to person within a culture" (Merriam-Webster, 2017). "Memes are to culture what genes are to life" (Dawkins as cited in Merriam-Webster, 2017). We used images as memes, and the process was successful and addressed the National Core Arts Standards (2014).

In 2014, through the Getty Artists Program, Barbara Kruger worked with students in the Los Angeles school district to create an installation that was displayed at the J. Paul Getty Museum, June-August 2015. As part of this artistic collaboration, Kruger prompted students by asking questions about power and control (Getty Museum, 2015). I used Kruger's work with the young people in the Getty program to provide a similar learning experience in my classroom with students, grades 9-12, in Aurora, Colorado, on November 9, the day after the 2016 presidential election. I wanted to empower my students to have a safe place to explore issues of injustice, racism, inequality, power, and control. My students used the 35mm camera as a tool to create social justice memes in

Figure 2. *USA Civil Rights Protest*. Silver gelatin print, by Bill Hudson (1963). Photograph by Bill Hudson.

Figure 3. *Do You Fear Being a Black Woman?* Digital print, by Lauren Smith (2016). Photograph by Lauren Smith.

Kruger's style. They took photographs with the cameras, developed the images, scanned them into digital form, and used Photoshop to overlay text onto the images.

Kruger's work came to the forefront in the 1980s and 1990s. During this time, female reproductive rights were again under attack, and politics around sexual harassment occupied the airwaves with the Anita Hill trials (Petroni & Skuster, 2011; Sontag, 1992). Kruger's images and words became instantly recognizable with a voice that was authoritative, sarcastic, and "demands participation of the spectator, who must read the text, whose gender address causes a displacement of the spectator's fixed displacement" (Kamimura, 1987, p. 40). In other words, the text and image were a direct challenge to engage in political discourse around power and control. The purpose of my project was to give my students the tools to create a social justice meme that challenged the "spectator" to engage in a "displacement."

About Barbara Kruger

Barbara Kruger was born in 1945 in Newark, New Jersey, to a working-class family. She briefly attended Syracuse University and Parsons School of Design, worked in advertising, and designed for *Mademoiselle*. Kruger alternated writing for publications

Figure 4. *(Untitled) "I Shop Therefore I Am."* Photographic silkscreen, by Barbara Kruger (1987). Copyright by Barbara Kruger. Courtesy of Mary Boone Gallery.

Figure 5. *Ignorance Is Not Bliss*. Digital print, by Namita Palsupuleti (2016). Photograph by Namita Palsupuleti.


NOT
Bliss

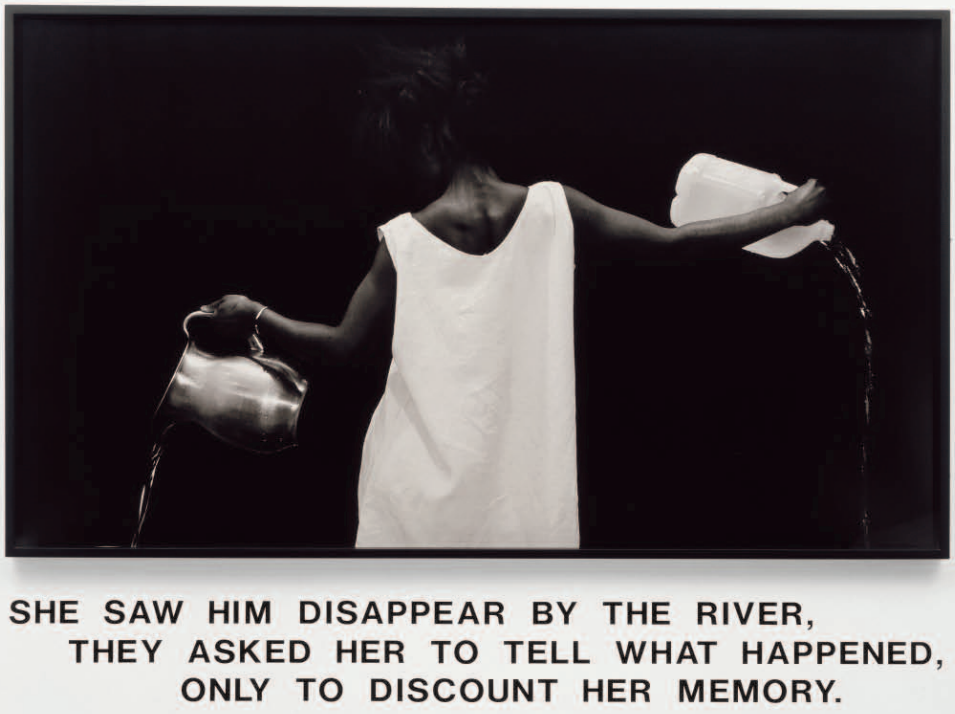

Figure 6. *The Waterbearer*. Silver gelatin print, by Lorna Simpson (1986). Copyright by Lorna Simpson. Courtesy the artist and Hauser & Wirth.

and serving as a visiting artist at several universities. In 1979, she began to superimpose text onto "found images." Her work evolved into re-photographing her sources of found images. She applied text to create a specific voice of engagement with the viewer. She also curated shows that culminated in the 1987 exhibition of her own work, "Picturing Greatness," at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. A hallmark of Kruger's work included projects on billboards, buses, posters, and large-scale architectural commissions (Figure 4). Themes found in Kruger's work challenge the viewer to engage rhetorically with ideas of power, control, and consumerism. She consistently plays with stereotypes, clichés, and gender politics in her work (Art 21, 2001; Goldstein, 1999).

Pedagogical Prompts

Responding: Perceive and Analyze Artistic Work

***Essential Questions*:**

- How did the technological advancements of the 35mm camera capture the action of the civil rights movement?
- How did the mass circulation of the images change the ultimate success or failure of the civil rights movement?

Instructional Activities: With the new capabilities of 35mm cameras, civil rights photographers had a new range of aesthetic choices. With these technological advances, the photography of the civil rights era was framed to include the space of the viewer. This created intimacy the viewer felt when responding to the image. In order to generate ideas about the technological advances of the 35mm camera, examine and analyze the work of civil rights photographers such as Bruce Davidson and Bill Hudson. Discuss how the camera became a tool of the civil rights struggle. For more context, listen to Robert F. Kennedy's *On the Mindless Menace of Violence* speech given in 1968.

Creating: Generate and Conceptualize Artistic Ideas and Work

***Essential Questions*:** Based on Barbara Kruger's work with students in Los Angeles public schools (Getty Museum, 2015), students answered four essential questions: "What do you fear?" "What do you hope for?" "Whose power?" and "Whose justice?" Some of the essential questions in this section were used to get students to respond in this manner.

- Who has power and control, and how do they use it?
- How do you feel when you are on the receiving end of unequal power relationships because of bigotry and hatred?

***Instructional Activities*:** View and analyze the work of Kruger in terms of photographic and conceptual content. Brainstorm a list of social justice concerns in small groups. From this list, identify a central issue of personal interest. Create thumbnail sketches of slogan ideas. Consider the following elements in developing a slogan:

- Voice: Words in slogans are often clever, ironic, or humorous.
- Words in slogans are often short.
- Words emphasize an image or contrast with it.
- Placement and fonts are important.

Imagine an appropriate photographic subject to accompany slogan ideas. Then, take photographs, scan the images into a digital format, and use Photoshop to complete a social justice meme (Figure 5).

Presenting: Convey meaning through presentation of artistic work.

Essential Question: Is the artwork enhanced if presented as a social justice service project within an educational context such as a school, library, community center, museum, or other venue?

Instructional Activities: Present the completed artwork as a social justice service project within a school, library, museum, community center, or other public and/or educational space. At my school, we erected large banners of the images in collaboration with the counseling department for No Place for Hate. Share social justice memes on social media. The banners became part of an Instagram campaign to raise awareness on campus. In this manner, the banners served as a dialogue between participant and creator just as in Kruger's work (Kamimura, 1987).

Discussion

Students produced intimate personal work of their desires, fears and dreams. Nevertheless, there were limitations the project failed to address. The issues related to bigotry and racism fell flat because the artist being used for analysis was singularly Kruger, a White artist. If the goal is to help students delve into issues of identity and self-concept, an artist of color should be included, such as Lorna Simpson (Figure 6), whose work also explores social justice issues through the interplay of text and image (Enwezor, 2006).

It is short-sighted to include social justice discussions exclusively through the lens of an artist that is White. Including Lorna Simpson in the instructional materials would be a wise choice to ensure that "Whiteness" is not the only lens through which students engage with concepts of social injustice. The work of Kruger informs viewers of her work in relation to the power and control through a White experience. However, issues of power and control are very different if viewed through the work of an artist such as Simpson, whose relationship to power and control look and feel different as a person of color, just as students of color experience issues of power and control very differently from White students. ■

Web Resource

http://amandaarlington.weebly.com

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