

ART FOR THE PEOPLE, BY THE PEOPLE:  
THE ROLE OF ARTISTIC EXPRESSION IN AMERICAN DEMOCRACY

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## CAPSTONE ABSTRACT

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The Role of Artistic Expression in American Democracy

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Drawing from a multidisciplinary approach, I outline the importance of visual art in a democracy, specifically in the United States. Art, unlike propaganda, allows the public to discuss political agendas through a visual medium. Art can be used as a tool to articulate the public's political wants and needs, therefore, being an agent in a democratic government. Although the relationship between art and democracy occurs before 1945, this literature solely focuses on art in the modern and post-modern era, a period that experienced great political activism and emerging art forms.

Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art movements of the 1950s, had direct inspiration from the American economy – domestically and internationally. In both instances the government utilized art that was inspired by the people to support political agendas. The art of the 1960's sparked discussion surrounding the Civil Rights issues. America not only faced inequality with race, but also of sex. Artists challenged these social norms through art, which led to changes to law and policy eliminating discriminated based on sex and race.

On a larger scale, art tests the American democracy on the national and international arena. Artist can use the visual medium to send a message to the government and the government has the option to respond. Visual art is necessary for a democracy to rightly function as it intends to influence, critique, and propel civic agendas and priorities *by* and *for* the general public. Democracy is not meant to stay static. On the contrary, for a democracy to function, it must continue to grow and adapt to the needs of the people. Art is a powerful tool for a democracy to rightly function.

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## INTRODUCTION

In 2008, the months before the election, Shepard Fairey created a red, white, and blue image of youthful presidential candidate, Barack Obama. The word “hope” is printed in a bold typeface on the lower half of the collage (Fairey, *Portrait of Barack Obama*) (see fig. 1). Fairey never expected nor anticipated the popularity of the *Portrait of Barak Obama* during the campaign - Americans used the image as email signatures and even as lawn ornaments. Given the rising popularity of the “Obama Hope Poster,” Fairey printed the image on merchandise to raise money for the campaign. The Obama campaign eventually adopted Fairey’s artwork as their official advertisement. Although Fairey openly admitted his excitement for the American people’s support of the image, the candidate and the election, he still urged people to conduct research and to make an informed presidential vote (Fairey, *What’s with That Obama Posters?*).

Besides its commercial popularity, the Obama portrait is significant for two reasons: it documents a politically charged time in modern US history; and, it indicates art’s strength and impact in the political sphere. Although art is not often at the forefront of political agendas, it is a powerful tool for the American people to comment on contemporary issues. Since the 1930s, the United States government has financially encouraged artistic expression and political, social, economic, and cultural commentaries through creative imagery. However, within the last five years, federal monetary support has significantly decreased. For the third year in a row, the White House plans to reduce funding to several organizations that fund artists, art program grants and scholarships including: the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), for the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), and the Institute

of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) (McGlone). In the initial budget released in March 2019, OMB proposed to cut funding by 81%, bringing the total funding of 994 million dollars to 90 million dollars.

Art will be created even without funding, but the absence of financial support indicates the United States government's lack of awareness in how art works within a democracy. Fairey's artwork promoting a political candidate and social constructs is a prime example that art is a powerful tool for a democracy to rightly function and survive. I argue that visual art is necessary for a democracy to rightly function as it intends to influence, to critique, and to propel civic agendas and priorities by and for the general public. In a multidisciplinary approach, I draw upon anthropology, history, philosophy, and political science to explore how the American public uses art to anchor discussions that surround the contemporary political climate. I attempt to redefine how art shapes, critiques, and reflects the United States government and politics, and illustrate the differences and similarities of art and propaganda.

## DEMOCRACY: PEOPLE POWER

Democracy is only successful with the participation and consultation of the public. Its origins can be traced to ancient Greeks (Cartledge 1). Democracy comes from the Greek word *demokratia*, which loosely translates to "people power." Since the ancient period, civilizations adapted and changed the definition of democracy to fit the population and culture of each society (3). For example, the United States is a modern adaptation that confuses the notion of "pure" democracy with a republic. In the United States, a representative democracy gives the public an illusion that they are directly

involved in governmental decisions. The public elect officials with the assumption that issues will be carried out to benefit the good of the American people. Since a democratic republic depends on representation, it is necessary for the public to participate. Without vigilant involvement from the American people, the democracy will cease to exist. If there is a disconnect between the general public and elected officials there is an imbalance in power.

Kevin Olson, Professor of Political Science at Northwestern University, believes that *democracy* is by definition contradictory because the founding of democracy depends on a previously oppressive government (330). Take for example the United States: A repressive British government that overtaxed and refused to offer representation to the American colonies in parliament, motivated the colonies to form an independent nation (331). Olson notes that a population must become reflexive, or the citizens' activities reflect on the government, therefore, granting the citizens a sense of agency in the democratic government, regardless of race, gender, religion or land-owning status (338). Citizens' actions include the creation of art. Works of art spur conversations and discussions while propelling artistic movements. I argue that the movements create such a profound connection between people and the government, that it reduces the gap between the representatives and those being represented.

## ART VERSES PROPAGANDA

Any artwork hinting at politics can be, and is more often considered to be, propaganda; however, this is not an accurate definition. Art and propaganda are similar, and can intersect, but are not interchangeable. For the purposes of this paper, I define art

as any creative visual representation that documents and gives a narrative to fictional stories.<sup>1</sup> Regardless of the subject matter, art communicates. Although a broad term, communication's power should not be overlooked. Art communicates three particular messages: artists'<sup>2</sup> artwork can express moods, thoughts, feelings and beliefs; art can communicate the intention of the people; and lastly, through art the government can broadcast agendas to the people. No matter the message, art is a method of speech and expression – a protected right from the First Amendment of the United States Constitution. This is not to assume, nor to argue, that propaganda is *not* a form of communication. The sole difference between art and propaganda is the work's *intention*. If the work is meant to spark discussion and reflect another person's perspective, then the work should be defined as art. If the work commands how the audience should feel, then the work must be defined as propaganda.

Art critic and philosopher, Boris Groys argues that the public uses art as either a commodity or as propaganda (3). According to this, art cannot be both: an economic good and a statement piece. Groys' definitions are skewed because he does not take into account the artist's intent. He argues that artists creating propaganda are not making art, rather they are making advertisements. However, art that references any idea or topic

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<sup>1</sup> For the sake of this paper, "art" is defined as a visual work that was created with the sole purpose to document history. Subject matter and content can vary, but this paper will monopolize on works that have a political slant. Primarily two-dimensional work will be discussed in order to stay on track with the argument. I do not deny that film, music, and literature are also forms of art and can be politically charged. These media are important forms that artists choose to showcase their feelings/opinions/beliefs, but this paper will not serve as platform for that discussion.

<sup>2</sup> I loosely use the term "artist" throughout the paper. An artist is defined as *anyone* who creates art. I understand that there is a distinction between a professional artist and a hobbyist; however, this paper does not discriminate on such economic status. Art has the power to motivate audiences regardless of economic purpose.



relating to politics is automatically considered propaganda (3). I disagree with this notion because art invites the artist to digest a specific belief and then to present it in the visual form. Subsequently, the audience is meant to comprehend the artist's viewpoint as an entry way into a greater discussion. Conversely, propaganda does not encourage a conversation; instead, propaganda directs and commands how the audience should react. Fairey's *Portrait of Barack Obama*, according to Groys' definition, the work should be considered propaganda. A politically charged work should be considered propaganda if it has the following elements: the subject matter is of then-presidential candidate, the image is painted in red, white, and blue, which together symbolize the United States, lastly, the word "hope" is located at the bottom of the composition. Nevertheless, the intent of the work is not to convince the American people that President Obama symbolizes hope for the struggling nation. The work was a visual representation of Fairey's political views (Fairey, *What's with That Obama Poster?*). The sole purpose of art, including Fairey's work, is to spark a discussion.

Propaganda is also a powerful visual aid; however, it solely advertises a singular point. For example, during World War II, state sponsored posters depicted patriotic symbols. One in particular, depicts the back of a chair with a golden dog on top of the US Navy flag (1944) (see fig. 2). Directly behind the dog – the focal point of the poster – is a service flag that indicates a service member died. In a scrawling script at the bottom, "because somebody talked!" is written. The World War II poster uses fear mongering to influence the American people to act in a certain way. The poster condones an action without room for argument; it does not promote free speech and agency therefore, defying the basic democratic model.

Art does not have to be overtly political to influence civic agenda. On the contrary, art becomes political when art historians, critics, and politicians disagree on the piece's meaning. (Segal 131). Initially, the artist must seek to understand a current policy or agenda to create a work of art. His/Her work and the work's message are available to debate and discussion. Although a work may spur debate, it should be celebrated for sparking a discussion about political policy and agenda. Citizens must make a conscious decision to participate in politics; art can be used as a dynamic instrument for participation.

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Art, unlike propaganda, allows the public to discuss political agendas through a visual medium. Art can be used as a tool to articulate the public's political wants and needs, therefore, being an agent in a democratic government. Often, scholars disregard fine art and only consider art with any political agenda as propaganda. There is plenty of literature on art and democracy, however, the literature lacks a discussion of how art *impacts* democracy.

The scope of my research starts at the conclusion of World War II. Although the relationship between art and democracy occurs before 1945, this literature solely focuses on art in the modern and post-modern era, a period that experienced great political activism and emerging art forms. The first chapter of the paper discusses Abstract Expressionism and the Pop Art movements following World War II. Artists fled to the United States causing a shift in the capital of the Western art market from Europe to the

United States. Therefore, they challenged conventional artistic subject matters with an underlying theme of America's capitalist economy.

The second chapter brings attention to the civil rights and feminist movements of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s. Due to the success of the Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism movements, the American people found ways to communicate with a larger audience. Artists started to experiment with different themes in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, particularly gender and race. From the 1960s through the 1980s, art served as a method to participate and make social change.

Lastly, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, artists created work that addressed global issues. In addition, I will analyze art in other forms of governments to emphasize the importance of art as a way to participate in a democracy. The stark contrast on how art holds a different responsibility in a democracy will further prove that art is a necessity in the United States.

## CHAPTER ONE

### ART AFTER WORLD WAR II

Following the Second World War, the American people experienced a cultural upheaval, ultimately creating a new consumer culture, which was directly caused by an economic boom. This culture, made up of the Baby Boomer generation started waves of protest, in opposition to the Korean and Vietnam Wars, to racial disparities and gender inequality.

The war also had a profound impact on the art world. Immediately following the war, artists focused on human existence as their subject. Europe was left in complete

despair –collapsed economies, devastated cities, the horrors of the Holocaust.

Specifically, European artists' reflected on current events in their work. Art illustrated the psychological effects of the war on artists which spurred art movements as Surrealism and De Stijl. These movements focused on the artists' attempt to form a new reality, usually showcasing dreamlike sequences in a simplified space of geometric figures.

Following the war, European artists moved to the United States, and effectively made the capital of the Western art market in New York City. These artists brought experimental artistic nature impacting contemporary American taste for realism (Segal 70).

In 1945, the American society favored Modernism as it was strictly aesthetic and lacked any obvious political agenda. According to Joes Segal, Professor of Cultural History at Utrecht University, any art that lacked agenda was considered “pure.” The American people favored art that lacked political messaging because political art was considered Communist. Modernism typically showcased nonobjective subject matter which was well-suited for decoration (61). Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art rose to popularity within this time period because Abstract Expressionism showcased the artist's mind, and Pop Art focused on the country's consumer culture. Both art movements were hotly contested as neither were directly political; however, both styles honored the freedom of speech (62).

## AMERICAN ABSTRACT EXPRESSIONISM

Abstract Expressionism is non-figurative art, or art that focuses on subject matter that does not relate to the natural world. These paintings were the very essence of the medium – just form and color applied to a surface. Artists painted their reality which was

solely the physical painting -- the object is the present and is the immediate reality for the artist and for the audience viewing the work (Segal 72).

Shortly after World War II, the United States government did not financially support the arts. In order to rectify that, The State Department along with the United States Information Agency (USIA) sent an exhibition of American Art to Europe (Segal 74). There were many disagreements regarding the type of art that was selected for the exhibition. First, art should not be “too modern” nor was it “too political.” Conversely, the public negatively responded with disapproval because taxpayers’ money was supporting such “noncommittal” subject matter (71). Europeans thought the work did not showcase democracy nor freedom of speech, but the exhibition indicated the United States lacked culture (74). After the exhibits’ failure abroad, the United States’ State Department began funding art and art organizations to focus on freedom of speech and expression. The new exhibition showcased a broader range of artistic expression media and artists, including Jackson Pollack. However, many of these artists were not involved in previous art showcases or considered definitive “American” work but were now celebrated as examples of liberal democracy around the world (75).

The US government funded art that was not politically-charged in order to exhibit power on an international stage. The government promoted the freedom of speech and encouraged artists to have a greater discussion using their visual form. So, even though the work’s content, or meaning, is not overtly political, but rather the purpose *became* political. Even though the content of the art may have become political on an international stage that does not mean that works such as Jackson Pollock’s *Number One, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* (see fig. 3) became propaganda. The intent behind the work is still

to create some sort of discussion or conversation, particularly the American public and government supporting and discussing the open interpretation of the piece. According to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Pollack's work transformed the way of looking at art. The large canvases showcased dripped lines of varying colors. Although *Number One, 1950 (Lavender Mist)* refrains from using the color lavender, there are colors and sensations that create an immersive experience. It has a juxtaposition of controlled and loose lines splattered on the canvas. Pollock, his work heavily influenced by surrealist artists, such as Joan Miró, contributed to making an alternate artistic reality (National Gallery of Art). Although it has roots in Europe, the American government celebrated Abstract Expressionism works for its malleable content allowing open discussion and freedom of speech and the people's expression. The use of non-political art to make a political statement is an innovative tactic for the US government. In the time of the Cold War, promotion of art, not propaganda, was specifically important as it highlighted the stark differences between American capitalism and democracy to Soviet Union communism.

## POP ART

While Abstract Expressionism was inherently European, the Pop Art movement developed domestically. Compared to Abstract Expressionism, Pop Art focused on representational subject matter – objects seen and experienced in the natural world. Pop Art no longer fits Segal's the definition of "pure art" like European Abstract Expressionism artwork. Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and Roy Lichtenstein's subject matter was more pleasing to the American people. Segal notes that Pop Art deviated from

“self-willed artistic expression” (78). On the contrary, Pop Art made direct reference to the American culture, specifically consumer culture. The general public first rejected the movement as it did not appeal to the high art of Abstract Expressionism. Yet, in the mid-1950’s, Pop Art became a cultural phenomenon as it reflected the contemporary social climate (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica).

The Pop Art movement is revolutionary in securing the power and the identity of American culture. In particular, mass media, such as television, demonstrated a democratization of information as “things,” “concepts,” “ideas,” and art could be reproduced. As stated by David Joselit, Professor of Art History at the Graduate Center at CUNY, television and media broadcasted the world more widely than ever before (64). The image, or any mass-produced artwork, becomes a reoccurring image, or therefore, an artistic pattern. Advertisers used this consistent pattern in order to show direct influence.

Joselit believes that the American people became lost and numb in this continuous feedback loop. Andy Warhol’s work fixed this dilemma: “Warhol's art adopted the *content* of commerce through its appropriation of commodities and celebrities, but it simultaneously dismantled the institutional *forms* through which these objectified products circulate” (Joselit 67). By using images that the American people were accustomed to, the messaging became easier to distribute and process.

Distribution of images makes Pop Art images innately democratic. A greater number of people accessed the images, which widened the audience and the audience’s discussion. Warhol reproduced images for a social critique. The repeated images in his paintings and prints commented on the American dream: a capitalistic utopia where people are paid rightly for their labor (de Duve and Krauss 10). All the subject matter

stemmed from the artist's impoverished upbringing. Repetitive celebrity and objective images indicated his cynical approach of the American dream. According to Warhol, civilizations turned the arts – anything that is religious or artisanal – into commodities (de Duve and Krauss 6). According to Theiry de Duve and Rosalind Krauss, the audience's experience in appreciating Warhol's art is a euphemism for the American consumer culture. In 1960s consumer culture, Americans no longer felt pleasure (or pressure) in the creation of objects, but in purchase or potential use of the object (8). Meaning, the satisfaction of, for example, making soup is no longer about the labor in cooking, but in the quick "fix." This notion is of utmost importance as it illustrates a shift between a pre-World War II and post-World War II America. Americans became more enthralled with the consumerism than the labor in which was necessary to create a product. This is the major difference between communism and capitalism.

Warhol's social critique on America's consumer culture is strongly present in such works as *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962) (see fig. 4). The work consists of 32 white canvases, each resembling the red, white, and black design of a Campbell's Soup can. He displayed the work lined in rows, much like the cans would be placed on a shelf in a grocery store. Each print indicated a different type of soup: tomato, chicken with rice, onion, cream of vegetable, etc. (MoMA). Much like the actual cans of soup in a grocery store, Warhol's paintings were a commodity. His work was meant to be bought and sold without any thought nor pleasure in the creation process. Warhol believed that a machine could replace the labor process. The audience lacked any acknowledgement for the creation process for the soup as well as for the art (de Duve and Krauss 10).



By placing his work on the same level of consumer goods, he made art available for everyone. His work normalized the hybrid of class systems and generations. Since Pop Art was more accessible, it appealed to younger generations. The movement was a rejection of the nonobjective subject matter of Abstract Expressionism. A generation so heavily involved in protests, felt that Pop Art showcased a truer American reality (Funk & Wagnalls New World Encyclopedia). Political figures understood the democratization and impact of Pop Art and some campaigns used this type of media to advertise their candidate. For example, the Democratic National Committee commissioned Warhol to paint a portrait of Jimmy Carter for the presidential campaign in 1976. It was believed that the image would help attract the younger voters (Revolver Gallery) (see fig. 5). The print is a bust portrait of candidate, Jimmy Carter, staring at the viewer with his hand propped under his chin. A black and white image of Carter served as the foundation for the layering of artistic formal elements of line and color. Warhol heavily outlined Carter's facial features and hand with a black line and blocked a saturated peach color over the right side of his face and hand. Carter's signature is included in the left side of the composition. Blocks of saturated red frame Carter's face in the background. Carter's portrait appealed to young voters as it referenced an optimistic viewpoint of a post-World War II America. Pop art illustrated the mass-media culture focusing on images of Elvis, Marilyn Monroe and the Beatles. If Carter was able to visually associate himself with youth culture, he then could at least appeal to newer voters.

Much like Fairey's Obama portrait, Warhol's print is not meant to sway nor convince voters. On the contrary, the art style meant to appeal to the younger voters to encourage democratic participation. This work intends to be a political piece, but still

references the Pop Art movement. As compared to the Campbell Soup Cans, the intrinsic value of this work is not held in the creation process but in ability to view and interact with the work of art.

## CONCLUSION

Abstract Expressionism set the foundation for the Pop Art movement. Both art movements allowed for the American people to respond and critique the government. For the art, the American government reflected the people's agency. From Abstract Expressionism, the people formed a new reality by focusing on nonobjective subject matter. The government used the painted canvases as way to celebrate the artistic freedom of the people. Comparatively, the Pop Art movement represented the capitalist economy of the 1960s. Objects and materials were produced at remarkable rates granting equal availability for any American regardless of social status. Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art had direct inspiration from the American economy – domestically and internationally. In both instances the government utilized art that was inspired by the people to support political agendas. To return to Olson's argument, for a democracy to be successful, it must be *reflective* in nature. The American people must have a form of agency in government. The power in democracy lies in the self-correcting aspects. Art created during the Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art movements generated a platform for people to respond and critique American economic agendas.

## CHAPTER TWO

### ART FOR EQUALITY: MOVEMENTS OF THE 1960s – 1980s

Even though the US constitution is founded *for the people, by the people*, the term “people” initially excluded much of the general population. From 1789 to 1868, “people” described only land-owning, white men, effectively marginalizing women, non-white races, and low-income citizens. After several amendments to the constitution, US voting rights expanded to include almost all citizens; however, voting rights were only the first step in making all citizens equal. During the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s through the 1980s, equality became a contested topic for the diverse population. Civil Rights movements of the 1960s through the 1980s allowed for art to serve as a platform for participation in social change. Due to the success of the Pop Art and Abstract Expressionism movements, the American people continued the tradition and found art as a successful way to communicate social issues with a large audience.

### RACIAL INEQUALITY AND ART

Among the several social movements, racial equality was one of the most prominent in art. After the Supreme Court’s ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896, racial segregation became an engrained prejudicial system in the United States. The fallacious “separate by equal” structure was prevalent in housing, education, and public administration (Lewis). However, in the 1950s, *Brown v. Board of Education* and other monumental moments, such as Rosa Parks refusing to give up her seat on a bus to a white man, propelled the Civil Rights movement for African Americans. Artists, as activists, turned to the visual form to advertise their stance on racial inequality.

Popular artists and American fixtures, such as Norman Rockwell, gave credibility and integrity to artistic social movements. Working for popular periodicals such as *Boy's Life Magazine* and *Saturday Evening Post*, he idealized American culture, especially American achievements such as the automobile or airplane and the American family life (Park West Gallery). In some cases, he used the familial images to illustrate political speeches. For example, in January 1941, President Roosevelt spoke to Congress about the America's Four Freedoms: Freedom of Speech, Freedom of Worship, Freedom from Want, and Freedom from Fear. The American people did not respond to Roosevelt's call until Rockwell published his four paintings with the same names in the *Saturday Evening Post* (Tucker). Rockwell created images that resonated with people in order to support the war effort (see figs. 6-9). These images helped teach the American people what the government was asking from and protecting for the public and how it affected the public's life. It was Rockwell's intent to depict the democratic ideal, which is important as it heavily contrasted with Nazi German propaganda (Tucker).

After the war, Norman Rockwell continued to show the democratic ideal using familiar images, but also including social commentary and images of social change. In 1967, Rockwell painted *New Kids in the Neighborhood* for *Look* magazine which accompanied an article about desegregating neighborhoods (see fig. 6). The painting depicts five children in the foreground split into two groups in front of a moving company truck: two African American children, a boy and a girl, stand on the left side; three white children, a girl and two boys, on the right side of the frame. Only two adults are present in the image – coming out of the moving company truck and an onlooker in the top left-hand corner. The children look hesitant, but still interested in playing with

each other. The onlooker witnesses the change in the neighborhood. *Look* magazine encouraged Rockwell to explore social themes and effectively document the racial tension in the United States in a digestible way (Jegade).

Rockwell's work exemplifies the need for art in a democracy during the Civil Rights movements. Rockwell's painting *New Kids in the Neighborhood* shows the potential for children of different races ability to coexist. Rockwell educated the public on the current climate of the American culture. Art of the 1960s and 1970s addressed many of the issues of the time and educated the American public on what the future may hold.

Black artists, having experiences in such injustice, also depicted the power racial struggles in contemporary America. Jean-Michel Basquiat, in sketch-like line work, depicted black men alongside words and symbols focusing on fighting against racism. Many of Basquiat paintings repeated motifs such as skulls, crowns, and dark oppressive lines as in *Untitled* (1982) (see fig. 11). The abstract rendering of the skull is a *memento mori*, and it meant to remind for people to push back against socially constructed ideas (Davis). Additionally, Basquiat painted the image with erratically placed bold white, blue, and black lines. From the visual standpoint, the three colors fight for attention but not one can serve as a focal point. Again, he uses visual cues to let his audience feeling an internal tension, specifically referencing the racial tension in the US. And for that reason, did not have an intended audience for his work, but he wanted his work to be for everyone (Laing).

For Rockwell and Basquiat, the art was a point of discussion. Both artists depicted contemporary social situations and created a commentary on the subject. Neither artist

was trying to convince nor demand a group of people to act. On the contrary, the art offered a specific viewpoint to lend discussion surrounding the Civil Rights issues.

## SEX AND GENDER AND ART

America not only faced inequality with race, but also on the basis of sex. Men and women were not equal in the workforce. After the successes of the First Wave of Feminism winning the right to vote, during the 1960s, Second Wave of Feminism focused on sexuality, family life, and the workplace.<sup>3</sup> Artists challenged these social norms through art, which led to changes to law and policy eliminating discrimination based on sex.

In the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, there was a shift in gender norms specifically in relation to the family unit. A woman's primary participation in the labor force was to care for her children, while the man was the breadwinner. Several factors steadily increased women's interest in the labor market; such as, rise in education and decline in fertility. Additionally, since the 1970s a man's financial earnings steadily decreased requiring a second income to support the family unit. An economic recession challenged the gender norms. As they entered the workforce, women were paid less for their participation than men. Furthermore, the rise in female labor increased male unemployment rates, even though there was gender-specific labor. Women were employed as schoolteachers, nurses, and bank tellers. The discrimination women faced

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<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that the term Feminism does not infer that women should achieve superiority over men; rather, that men and women should be considered equal.

limited their economic success to jobs considered “woman’s work” (Cotter, Hermesen and Vanneman 432).

The term “woman’s work” also refers to any craft created in the home. Since women dominated the private sphere, many excelled in household craft (such as needlework, fiber work, and cooking). Artists used this notion to exercise their political standing on the gender inequality. By using a medium that were associated with the woman, the message became to represent women.

Judy Chicago, in her piece *Dinner Party* (1974–1979) (see fig. 12), highlights women in a social commentary on gender equality. The triangular, life-size dinner table seats 39 historical and mythological women. Each unique place setting represents an individual woman’s background while praising the female genitalia, highlighting women’s ability to bear children. The sculptural plates are flanked with knives and forks that could be misconstrued as a joke. In the open center of the dinner table are an additional 999 names of influential women throughout history who contributed to gender equality.

When the work debuted, Chicago’s work received mixed reviews. Many museums and galleries denied showcasing the work due to its overt sexual imagery. Critics such as Lolette Kuby argue that the extreme sexual nature of the piece makes it misogynistic. Throughout history, men reduced women to sexual beings. Kuby explained that women who fought for gender equality are simplified to a name and genitalia representation (Kuby 128). However, Kuby’s argument proves that the work is democratic. First, Chicago was able to promote the female form in a public space as right given to her by the First Amendment. The artist has the right to support and defend her

sex. Conversely, Kuby's ability to comment on the work (and disagree) supports the conversation about the piece. Kuby's distaste for *The Dinner Party* ignites a conversation about work and female representation. In her piece, Chicago attempted to showcase the sexism in history and in the artworld.

Other artists like Barbara Kruger also capitalized on the female stereotypes of sexuality. As a female artist, she used growing media outlets as platforms for her work. Kruger is a conceptual artist that combines typography and photography in her work. She critiques the notion of feminine beauty using Constructivist-style of black and white images with bold, red font. She prints her images on T-shirts, posters, and billboards, which are all forms of mass media. These images make distinctions that muddles the line between public and private spheres and what can be discussed in either sphere. Kruger believes that her work and media creates an anchor for discussion and debate. Additionally, her work toys with the notion of being a spectator. All work must show some type of representation, even if it just within ourselves. The representation can be a constructed form of power. That power of representation can produce drastic results through conversation. Kruger states that her art is:

The process was one of negotiation...I basically don't feel that I'm like some mediator between God and the public who comes into a space and has got an inspiration and that's it...All my work comes out of the idea of a social relation. And I hope that all my work-regardless of where it's seen-is an extension of that relation. (Mitchell and Kruger 436)

She does not seek to challenge anyone's belief system but to create a space for reflection and negotiation. Kruger realizes that art is an experience for the artist as well as the audience. The artist must digest his/her standing on a subject and the audience must



respond. Much like responding to her artwork requires active participation, so contributing to a democracy. A citizen must make a conscience choice to participate.

The American philosopher, Hartley Burr Alexander, believes that art is particularly important in a democracy as it connects power and the spirit of humanity. Art brings in solidarity and communion of ideas that create a greater sense of national identity (Alexander 76). Since democracy is about the people (and promotes freedom of speech), human messages through art should be strong and “raw” (77). Kruger’s images show the truth of behind equal participation. In an interview with Kruger, W. J. T. Mitchell, Professor of English and Art History at the University of Chicago, assumed the speaker in her art is female, and the addressee is male. Kruger disagrees with Mitchell as there is no human body in work, solely words. Mitchell assigned a stereotype on the work (Mitchell). Her work is democratic because it includes anyone and everyone, regardless of gender.

## CONCLUSION

Equality amongst the people is a pillar of democracy. As a democracy, the United States must uphold a representative government. Through art, the public called for gender equality and for more female representation in the workplace, which eventually included government office. Several instances of political representation include: in 1980 political party nomination conventions saw equal attendance of men and women; in 1981, Ronald Reagan appointed Sandra Day O’Connor to the US Supreme Court; and state-based agencies were launched to promote women’s status and interests (Rutgers, Eagleton Institute of Politics). For example, in 1989, at the Congressional Caucus for Women’s

Issues (CCWI), the lack of research on woman's health became apparent leading to the founding of The Jacobs Institute of Women's Health (Nichols 58). From a political party stance, supporting the feminist agenda coincided with left-wing policies, which put favor in left-wing parties (McBride, Lovenduski and Mazur 11).

The latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw direct movements involving civil rights. The American people demanded equality amongst race and gender. Using the template of Abstract Expressionism and Pop Art movements, American people continued to use art as a platform to discuss social and political agendas. Artists depicted social issues, which provided discussion points, therefore showcasing agency in governmental policy change.

## CHAPTER THREE

### MESSAGING AROUND THE WORLD: GLOBAL POLICY THROUGH ART

Democracy looked different after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. This was the first time since Pearl Harbor that the United States experienced an attack on American soil. President George W. Bush responded to the attack by invading Afghanistan and Iraq. The hope was to democratize the countries, which was mostly successful by the beginning of Bush's second term (Dobbins 17). This is not a new tactic, as the US attempted to democratize countries such as Korea, Vietnam, and several other countries in danger of falling behind the Iron Curtain. The push for democracy implied that the United States believed in a sense of utopia. However, the American democracy is far from a utopia. John-Paul Colgan, a scholar in post-Cold War nostalgia, argues, the American culture and democracy breeds a sense of "self-hatred" (122). This criticism showcases a weak point in the American democracy. It shows that people are losing faith

in the American government, which leads to dependence on outside nations and increasing critiques from other countries.

The growing relations with neighboring countries, allows for external pressures on American democracy even physical threats, such as several orchestrated terrorist attacks by the al-Qaeda. The attacks negatively impacted the economy. Specifically, the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased by .5% and unemployment rates increased by .11%. Years after the attacks, the United States has yet to reach pre-9/11 economic status (Roberts 1). According to Dr. Bryan Roberts, a Senior Economist at the Office of Immigration Statistics in the Department of Homeland Security, there are two factors that impact a country's economy following an attack: a "fear factor" and the immediate impact on the affected population. He defines a "fear factor" as any behavioral change in a person's daily routine. Also, he explains that the affected population can determine a change in economy through factors as the attack's death toll (2).

An economic downturn was just one issue that the United States faced after the 9/11 attacks. Nationalism and patriotism grew in the US, but it was racially charged and targeted natural born citizens of Middle Eastern heritage. International relations magnified growing conflicts on American soil. After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, artists created artwork that addressed more than the issues in the United States. Artists emphasize the domestic distrust in the US government commenting on both domestic policy and global agendas.

The democratic state did not cause the terrorist attacks, but the country's response may have aggravated the situation. After the attacks, artists started to respond differently to political policy and agenda. Artists, such as British-born Damien Hurst, believe that

the terrorist attacks were a form of avant-garde artwork as the attack visually impacted the American people (Longmuir 45). Additionally, the media outlets capitalized on the image of the burning Twin Towers. Using this particular images, art started to take on new narratives of fear and terrorism. Much like other narratives, fear can be a powerful motivator. Kristiaan Verluys, Professor of American literature and culture at Ghent University, argues that art in a post-9/11 world can no longer hold a transformative experience (43). Instead, he believes that art has solely become politically charged and made into a platform to relieve aggression (44). His argument fails to hold validity as the evidence of art created after 9/11 is transformative as artists have challenged the way they depict peace. Additionally, the post-9/11 era caused artists to become more introspective. As John Dewey believes, art is an experience and comes from the development of everyday occurrences (13). The terrorist attacks of 9/11 transformed the art world, especially how artists depict social issues on and off American soil.

A fear that raged its way through the United States was rooted in the “other.” The other, or more accurately described as multiculturalism, divided the nation instead of uniting it. A country founded with the “power from the people,” did not support the new definition of the people of America in the early 2000s. The popularity of Shepard Fairey’s *Portrait of Barack Obama* offered a platform to continue works in a similar style that commented on America’s multiculturalism. His series *We the People* is meant to protest the then President-elect Trump’s inauguration. Fairey showcased un-named individuals from groups that Trump had openly criticized: African Americans, Muslims, Latinas, and Native Americans (2017) (see fig. 13). He takes the title of the series from the opening line of the US Constitution, directly tying Fairey’s interest in promoting a

democratic government (Abrams). He focuses on the people involved in making a democracy successful. Fairey further adds to the discussion by offering his personal feelings about then president-elect. His work is not propaganda; on the contrary, *We the People* is meant to showcase a discussion about a represented official. Fairey states his work is, “reminding people to find their common humanity, and look beyond maybe one narrow definition of what it means to be American” (Abrams).

In Fairey’s piece *We the People are Greater than Fear* is a portrait of a young woman depicted in solid colors of red, white, blue, and saturated cyan, which is reminiscent of the Obama portrait (2017) (see fig. 14). An American flag is wrapped around her head like a hijab leaving her face only visible to the viewer. The included imagery gives the viewer the assumption that the woman is an American citizen with a Middle Eastern background and practices the Muslim religion. The piece directly speaks to Roberts’ point about changes following a terrorist attack. Fairey’s painting notes the “fear factor” that Americans experienced after the 9/11 attacks. The Muslim woman represents the group of Americans persecuted after the terrorist attacks. Fairey notes that regardless of background, all citizens are American and should be treated as such.

The 9/11 attacks inspired international artists to comment on the violence and the constant state of fear. Inspired by the poem “Wage Peace” but Judyth Hill, Banksy created *Flower Thrower*, a street art painting depicting a man throwing a bouquet of flowers (Roy) (2005) (see fig. 15). The man is dressed like rioter – in loose clothing, a bandana covering his mouth, and a backwards baseball cap. Like many of Banksy’s works, this piece relays message of social significance. The image promotes peace

instead of war and fear. With the flowers replacing a bottle bomb, the work relays the message that peace is in unexpected places.

Violence is not the only topic that artists continue to inspire their works of art. International artists comment on American politics in their own work. Ai Weiwei, a Chinese artist and activist, believes that Americans need to continue to fight for democracy. Much of his work critiques current political state in China: the lack of human rights, and intense censorship. One of his most recent works was part performance art, part protest. Ai was arrested and jailed for tax evasion. He was released after eighty-one days but his government refused to give him his passport. For more than a year and a half, he placed a bouquet of flowers in a basket hanging from the front of his bicycle outside his studio in Beijing, China. The art piece, *With Flowers*, lasted for more than 600 days and illustrates the imprisonment the Chinese government forced upon its own citizens (2013) (see fig. 16). By choosing flowers as the centerpiece, Ai highlighted his playful manner while also underscoring the mournful point of imprisonment. According to his interview with *The Atlantic*, Ai was prepared to stay in China as he did not believe he would ever get his passport back. The flowers then took on a different form of symbolism: persistence (Capps).

Ai's work is simple but had an impact on the Chinese government. In 2008, a devastating earthquake in Sichuan caused a school to collapse. The Chinese government refused to release any information regarding the collapse. With the help with investigators, Ai published on social media all five thousand names of the children that died in the earthquake (Capps). By using social media to perform his art, the Chinese government became aware of Ai. He urged the Chinese government to change and

protect human rights. Democracy is a work in progress – Ai does not believe it is perfect, but he believes that the United States must still fight for democracy. He tells A.M. Homes in a 2017 interview with *Vanity Fair*:

Here, in the U.S., particularly, you still have to fight for democracy and this freedom of speech. . . I realized human rights and human conditions are something every generation has to fight for. You cannot take it for granted. It's like milk; you cannot keep it fresh for very long (Homes).

He speaks to the importance for artists, and American citizens, to continue to fight for what they believe.

In the same interview, Ai comments on the current president, Donald Trump. He agrees with the interviewer that the president does not know, nor understand, the history of the United States; however, he does not feel that this is a completely negative point. On the contrary, Ai believes that some cultures fixated by the weight of the country's history it refuses to move forward. According to Ai, if the United States continues to fight then it has the perseverance to continue to move forward even when tested (Homes). Art tests the American democracy on the national and international scale. Artist can use the visual medium to send a message to the government and the government has the option to respond.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### ART OUTSIDE OF DEMOCRACY: THE ROLE OF ART IN DIFFERENT GOVERNMENTS

Art in other forms of government works differently. Communist governments focus on equally shared property and goods amongst all citizens. This does not allow for unique or dynamic artwork. The creative process becomes confined and lacks open

dialogue. Monarchy is a type of government where a family resides in power. Art from this type of government may highlight the family and nationalism, rather the beliefs of the public. The art of these governments will not focus on the people as individuals, but as a nation.

Currently there are only five Communist government: China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea, and Vietnam. Communists states are founded upon Marxist ideology. Marxist thought focuses more on the historical, political, economic and social relationships rather than human nature and thought. According to Marxism, class structure was the root cause to economic and social problems within a country. By controlling the economy and economic production, the government removed class structures. Additionally, in a Marxist society, the governing body provides all human needs to all citizens. It is with the belief that if basic human needs are met, the person is free to realize his/her full potential. The identity of the person restricted by work but freed to take part in the creation process of the material good. However, this style of government does not give the citizens full “freedom from want.” Citizens cannot create more than what can be consumed because the surplus of material good devalues that human experience. It must be made known that any material that is produced does not belong to the laborer. On the contrary, all created goods are property of the state (Chambre and McLellan). This is with hope to make all citizens equal.

Achieving equality within the classless society directly affects artistic production. Art’s purpose is to create an open dialogue between the artist and the viewer, which directly promotes change in a democratic society. Art cannot have the same impact in a Marxist society because it does not highlight the human subconscious or nature, or a



person's reality. Pauline Johnson argues in her book, *Marxist aesthetics*, that even if an artist chose to visualize his/her reality, it is inherently wrong (Johnson 2). Johnson further argues that art is needed in a Marxist society to allow artists to exercise emancipated thought since his/she is free from the constraints of human needs in a society (4). Any Marxist created work tells the viewer how to feel and does not allow for discussion. If anything, art is understood as a creation of labor which the governments controls. Since the audience is viewing Marxist aesthetics, the visual imagery must convince the viewer that the government provides for the people (5). Therefore, work created under Marxist thought is propaganda, not art.

## CHINA

Modern-day Chinese artists challenge Marxist thought. Up until Deng Xiaoping rule, socialist realism dominated the art market. Socialist realism, a propagandic style used to instruct citizens on appropriate ideologies, originated in the Soviet Union (Artsy, Socialist Realism). However, in China, Deng Xiaoping modernized politics in the later 1970s and allowed for artists to deviate from the socialist realism style. The artistic freedom granted artists the ability to experiment with different styles such as Political Pop, Cynical Realism, and performance art. Artists have considered placing "the self" instead of "the collective" in the forefront of art (Artsy, Contemporary Chinese Art). With this shift in art style, artists, such as Cai Guo-Qiang and Ai Weiwei, challenged larger social issues and the Chinese government.

In addition to his work *With Flowers*, Ai also comments on the Chinese economy in works such as *Sunflower Seeds* (2010) (see fig. 17). The work is comprised of millions

of small, porcelain sunflower seeds. Workers in small-scale shops in Jingdezhen sculpted and hand-painted each piece. The “seeds” were poured in a gallery at the Tate Modern, London which inadvertently created a small landscape. The work is meant to comment on China’s exports and international economic trade (Tate). His commentary on the Chinese regime led to his incarceration, confiscation of his passport, and yet he inadvertently became a symbol of the struggle against the tyrannical Chinese government. Although his art has gotten him in trouble with his government, Ai stands behind his art and continues to believe that art is meant to express the views of the universe in order to affect change (Stevens).

The lack of government support for Ai’s work demonstrates that the government was not interested seeing Ai’s point of view, starting a conversation on social or human rights issues, nor did it encourage further commentary on the government. In a democracy, art is used as a reflection of the social needs and wants amongst the people. Additionally, democratic government, such as the US, protect art, self-expression and even critique under the First Amendment. As a “people power,” a democratic society must thrive on discussion amongst the people. As a method of communication, art gives the people agency as citizens. In a democratic society, art is treated and received differently that Communist regimes -- the people are not heard; their labor is controlled.

## UNITED KINGDOM

The Communist governments do not allow for artists to have agency and/or political agendas in their artwork. Other types of governments give artists creative agency but the governments are not required to react nor comment on the artwork being created.

According to England's Policy paper, the government, a constitutional monarchy, supports arts and culture because it, "strengthen communities, bringing people together and removing social barriers" (United Kingdom). The same policy mentions that funding for the arts will be independent from the government. Additionally, the government will support the arts, but highly suggests that most of the funding will come from private investors. The policy even states that the government will not solely make decisions regarding funding. Additional organizations will be considered when discussing any fiscal allocations. But in the same statement, the government fully supports the art and culture because it impacts the local economy (United Kingdom). There is an interesting relationship between the English government and the production of art. Art is supported and encouraged, but the government does not want to claim ownership to work. It may be inferred that the art created may comment on the current affairs but will not influence governmental proceedings.

The most recent political battle between the English government and the people was the decision for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union (EU). As a member in the EU, people are free to live and work in other countries, but still claim citizenship to the UK. This governmental body allows free trade and open movement of people within the twenty-eight European countries. On June 23, 2016, the United Kingdom voted on whether to remain part of the EU. More than thirty million people participated in the vote -- 52% voted to leave the Union (BBC). Street artists painted murals displaying their disappointment in the vote. We Are Europe commissioned The Paintsmiths of Bristol to create *The Kiss of Death*, mural illustrating two pro-Brexit

political figures, President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Boris Johnson kissing (2016) (see fig. 18). At the bottom of the mural reads, “In for this?”.

Even Banksy commented on his disappointment with the Brexit vote. He painted a graffiti-style mural on a building in Dover, UK. Banksy presented a laborer chipping away at one of the stars on the EU flag (2019) (see fig. 19). He is not trying to convince viewers that Brexit was a mistake, but he conveyed his personal feelings about the vote. The stars represent harmony, unity, and solidarity between the nations in the EU. By leaving the EU, the UK has disrupted the balance of the nations (MOCO Museum). Even with these works of art, the vote for Brexit has yet to be overturned. Following with the English policy, the arts are meant to bring people together, but the government is not meant to get involved.

## CONCLUSION

Art in a communist government and in a monarchy plays a different role than in a democracy. The role of art comes down to the role of the people in government. In a democracy, the power belongs to the people, so art is a way to vocalize that power. Art spurs debate and conversation in a democracy. In a communist government, artists can comment on political agendas, but artists, like Ai Weiwei, may experience consequences due to their actions. In a monarchy, artist may also create art. However, much like the involvement of the English government in terms of funding, the government would rather not comment on messages illustrated by the English people. Funding is available to American artists and the government can comment on the work being created. Much like art in the United States is a conversation between artist and viewer, it is also a

conversation between people and government. The stark contrast on how art holds a different responsibility in a democracy further proves that art is a necessity for the United States.

## CONCLUSION

### ARGUMENT FOR CONTINUED ART FUNDING IN THE UNITED STATES

Visual art is necessary for a democracy to rightly function as it intends to influence, critique, and propel civic agendas and priorities *by* and *for* the general public. Specific art movements since the 1950s demonstrate that art is an important element to build a democracy. Democracy is not meant to stay static. On the contrary, for a democracy to function, it must continue to grow and adapt to the needs to the people. It must reflect the people and the people should have agency in their political agendas and ideas. To keep visual art at the forefront of democracy, the federal government should continue its financial support and end governmental censorship.

Censorship keeps the government and the artists accountable for the content created. The First Amendment “guarantees freedom of expression by prohibiting Congress from restricting the press or the rights of individuals to speak freely” (U.S. Const. amend. II). Art is a visual communication tool, therefore, protected by the First Amendment. It should be noted that the Amendment protects the content, or meaning, of the work (Tushnet 3). Artwork is meant to educate the society. Just as artist’s work should not be muted nor censored, nor should the audience’s discussion. On the contrary, the audience’s discussion should be cultivated and promoted as protected through the Freedom of Speech. Government censorship is detrimental to the true function of art -- to

educate the public on current issues and to spark conversation between the people and the government. The future of democracy rests in the people. The people must use devices, such as the visual arts, to promote, to critique, and to support political agendas. Art is a powerful tool for a democracy to rightly function.

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