

Fall 2014

# The Role of the Artist as a Social Critic: as Interpreted through the Art of Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Wei Wei

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**The Role of the Artist as a Social Critic:  
as interpreted through the art of Swoon, Allora &  
Calzadilla, and Ai Wei Wei**

*A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Liberal Studies*

*by*

*Jessica Hasara*

*December 2014*

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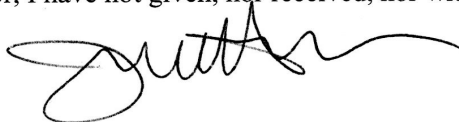
Rollins College  
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*Winter Park, Florida*

**Abstract:**

This thesis argues that the artists Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei represent three approaches to contemporary art drawing on the traditions of street art, performance art, and conceptual art to change our expectations of art, public space, and civil disobedience, challenging the limits of what we know as social criticism and building community. These new and lively ways of making art can be viewed in association with systems of thought like Danto's work which proposes a redefined way of looking at art; and Dewey's work which emphasizes the importance of an aesthetic experience as a way of engaging the community. Art made in this way inspires the audience to look at things from a different perspective, provides an occasion for the community to unite, and encourages social change.

"On my honor, I have not given, nor received, nor witnessed any unauthorized assistance on this work."

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Zutter', written in a cursive style.

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## I: Introduction

Artists whose work can be seen as a form of social criticism open the limits of what is possible in art, what art is, and the role that it performs in society. This thesis argues that the artist Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei represent three approaches to art intended to challenge the limits of what we know as community. In Swoon's case, she draws on a history of street art and graffiti to violate our expectations of space and society. Similarly, Allora & Calzadilla enact performances in the tradition of "anti art" in order to call attention to and reclaim space foreclosed by established power structures, and Ai Weiwei uses his sculptures and other work to draw attention to Chinese state oppression in the very act of being oppressed and censored.

What connects these three very different artists is the importance of uniting aesthetics with politics. They each have formal art educations from different cultural backgrounds and institutions. They each use a mix of many different and often experimental art forms including drawing, painting, sculpture, photography, performance, print-making, sound, and video. These skilled artists make a new and original contribution while drawing on tradition. These new and lively ways of making art can be viewed in association with systems of thought like Danto's work which proposes a redefined way of looking at art and Dewey's work which emphasizes the importance of an aesthetic experience as a way of engaging the community.

Artwork like this, according to Arthur Danto (1995), no longer fits in the historical narrative of art history. Danto states that "It was not my view that there

would be no more art, ... but that whatever art there was to be would be made without benefit of a reassuring sort of narrative...”<sup>1</sup> Contemporary artists like Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei look to art of the past with no sense that it is something from which liberation has to be won (as the impressionists may have looked at the prior period of realism and romanticism) but as art that is available for appropriation and reimagining in other words, as a form of raw material.

Contemporary art tends to be non-exclusive, and is therefore, not writing the next chapter in the history of art. This is an important concept for Danto, who talks about art ‘beyond the pale of history.’<sup>2</sup> Danto references the recent history of art where, for example, in modern art it was very important to move away from representation, making the form the only thing necessary (think of Jackson Pollock’s drip paintings). The period of ‘modern art’ is marked as a period of ascent to a higher level of consciousness. Artists no longer put emphasis on mimetic representation, but focused on their own methods of representation (what the world looks like to Van Gogh or Gauguin as individuals). Picasso and Braque pushed representation even further when considering subjects within a cubist framework. The story continues with the German Expressionists, who portrayed a subjective and emotional version of reality, to the artists from the New York School of Abstract Expressionism, who pushed abstraction to the point that painting was no longer representational at all. Critics of this time period, like Clement

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<sup>1</sup> Danto, Arthur. *After the End of Art, Contemporary Art and the Pale of History*. The A.W.Mellon lectures in the Fine Arts, 1995. The National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C. Bollingen Series XXXV. 44.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*

Greenberg, connected with works that could be seen as pushing the movement along, works like Pollock's *Full Fathom Five*, 1947. Greenberg praised Pollack's accomplishment while other artwork, such as those of the surrealists, were thought of (at least by Greenberg) as a regression that should be excluded from the narrative. Danto refers to an expression of Hegel's "outside the pale of history" to describe this exclusion. It is interesting to consider the different movements throughout history that were intended to divide and exclude whatever lies beyond the pale, for example the Great Wall of China and the Berlin Wall.<sup>3</sup> Contemporary art, or art that comes 'after the end of art' is no longer concerned with exclusion of any genres. Contemporary art is not fighting against what styles, strategies or agendas came before it in the history of art, but combining and re-considering these styles in ways that relate to today's world. Working in collaboration in an era of art where nothing is excluded, or left out beyond the pale, allows artists like Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei the platform to create innovative pieces of art that combine print, sculpture, sound, and performance in art with the aim of making social change. Being free of the burden of rebelling against previous trends in art makes it possible for these artists to draw on various forms, styles and methods to create art that not only changes art world aesthetics but looks to change real world politics as well.

Dewey's theory can also be seen in the work of contemporary artists like Swoon, Allora and Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei. The American philosopher John Dewey saw the importance of engaging the senses and using aesthetics as a

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid*



pedagogical tool capable of creating an informed community. He suggests that the fundamental element in a work of art is not the material object but rather the development of an experience. Art has the ability to personally affect one's life. This is why he felt it was an important part of society and education.

Artists like Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei create experiences that engage the viewers and encourage sensory understanding of their ideas. The experiences can challenge the audience to look at things from a different perspective and they can provide an occasion for a community to unite. In these ways, the artists' expression can lead to social change. They are not rebelling against the system just to do different or to be trouble makers; they are inviting a discussion and challenging viewers to be fully aware. Through work like this Dewey's theory about the importance of an aesthetic experience to bring unity and express emotions is realized.

These artists literally and figuratively take art off the canvas and away from the statue on the pedestal. Swoon displays her work on the sides of buildings, Allora & Calzadilla create performances, and Ai Wei Wei actively highlights issues with his blog and installations. These artists change the value of art being in a gallery on display by giving these art forms to the public for viewing. Art is no longer something revered; it is something real. Moving away from traditional art-world gallery pieces, these artists produce art that resists being valued monetarily, which makes its moral and thematic value that much more prominent.

Throughout history, art has been used as a means of communication, a way of performing ritual, and a method of inspiring action. It has often been re-

lated to the procedures of social control and planning. Statues were erected around which citizens could make offerings to their gods, praise the heroes of their state, or to exemplify biblical messages. In these ways art and ritual have been related to the maintenance and progress of society.<sup>4</sup> During the Enlightenment and Scientific Revolution the value of art changed, as religious power diversified. Following this, in the Modern Era art changed from primarily being associated with religion and ritual value to being valued as a commodity.<sup>5</sup> Portraiture became a popular luxury of the wealthy merchant class. Painters began to choose to paint scenes of nature and common people in parks, bars, or dance halls.

The value of works of art grew because of its uniqueness and desirability. "Perceived as scarce, works are characterized by their uniqueness and are evaluated for their standing of technical, intellectual, and thematic values."<sup>6</sup> Buying art work became an investment because it was seen as an asset with the potential to increase in value. As artists grew in popularity the prices for their work skyrocketed since capital is relationally determined by the number of people who have something versus the number of people that want it. Collectors sought an original Picasso, Matisse, or Monet; creating exclusivity and distinction thus creating scarcity and raising the value of the commodity. The extreme value of many works has made them prized additions to both private and public collec-

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<sup>4</sup> Saran, A. K. "Art and Ritual as Methods of Social Control and Planning." *Ethics*, 63.3 The University of Chicago Press. (1953): 171-9.

<sup>5</sup> Koenigsberg, Lisa. "Art as a Commodity? Aspects of a Current Issue." *Archives of American Art Journal*. 29.3/4 (1989): 23-35.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

tions. The aesthetic object is altered into a symbol by negating all those who based on their culture, sophistication, or wealth cannot experience or own it.

Artwork has become a symbol of wealth, status, or prestige.

Social status is then marked by the ability to acquire access to symbolic capital. The art world industry gains strength on every step of the social strata. Original artwork is at the top processing the highest symbolic capital, often selling for breathtaking prices at auctions. Due to the ability to mechanically reproduce artwork, it can be copied onto prints, postcards, and mugs. This way, the symbolic capital prized by the upper class can be imitated by lower classes. A commodity becomes available to the gradually descending tiers of the society. Although, this process of commodification has led many people to be excluded from the opportunity to buy or even view the works of art and alters the social and political context in which the work was first created.

Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei choose to present art in ways which are overtly politically resistive. Each of these artists draws on specific histories (street art, performance art, and conceptual art) to present art that work seeks to unite people not divide them. Working in this way challenges the art world system which creates art as a commodity and excludes certain members of society based on cultural, educational, or economical limitations. This creates a change in the way art is valued. These artists, whose work can be seen as a form of social criticism, open the limits of what is possible in art, what art is, and the role that it performs in society. This thesis argues that the artists Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei represent three approaches to contemporary art

drawing on the traditions of street art, performance art, and conceptual art to change our expectations of art, public space, and civil disobedience, challenging the limits of what we know as social criticism and building community. Swoon draws on a history of street art and graffiti to violate our expectations of space and society. Allora & Calzadilla create performance based pieces that use paradox and metaphor to call attention to presumptions made by established power structures about the use of land, military power, and financial might. Ai Weiwei uses his blog, installations, and other work to draw attention to Chinese state oppression and censorship.

## II: Creating an Art Experience

The artist known as Swoon began pasting life-size prints and paper cut-outs around New York City in 1999. Raised in Daytona Beach, FL, Caledonia Curry (her real name) moved to New York when she was nineteen. She studied painting at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, but wanted her artwork to reach more than those affluent enough to go to a gallery or own a private collection. Inspired by the posters and graffiti that adorn New York City, Caledonia Curry took the name Swoon when she began illegally displaying her artwork. During a TedTalk focused on her work, she describes why it was important for her to work in this way, saying,

Swoon, for me, has become not quite a name but a code word for the trickster's belief in miracles, which is to say that if you break a rule over here, move a boundary over there, have a moment of creative play, and create something of beauty, that through all of those actions and combined with a lot of dedication, you can start to create little cracks in the facade of impossibility and inevitability that overlays a lot of our lives and that a lot of us battle. Through those cracks little possibilities start to come up and they ask to be born and then they are born and they start unifying and linking with each other and that's a really powerful force, and that's the force I live my life by.<sup>7</sup>

She wanted to be part of the world in which she was surrounded. When she began transforming walls with her artwork, she discovered her ability to change the world.

Pasting her paper prints and cut-outs to various public surfaces using a biodegradable, wheat-based adhesive became her way of making a change and

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<sup>7</sup>"Callie Curry aka Swoon" [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com). Video. 20 Oct. 2012. *TED Talks For Aspiring Artists*. <<http://tedxtalks.ted.com>>

visualizing her impact on the world. She pastes her pieces on abandoned buildings, bridges, fire escapes, or street signs.

Having moved to Brooklyn from a small town in Florida, she was greatly influenced by her new environment. While studying in art school she decided she wanted to have her work known in more than the small circle of private collectors and gallery viewers. She wanted to be a part of the New York environment from which she drew inspiration. She began pasting her work around town in abandoned places, using the previous layers of graffiti as a background for prints and cut-outs. In this way she was truly able to be a part of the community around her.

Displaying her work publicly and making it available to everyone are important issues to Swoon. She sees the beauty in the layers of posters and graffiti found in many places in New York City, and she wanted to express herself as part of that world. To feel part of her community she felt it was important to have her work out on the streets not just in a private collection or displayed in a gallery.

Others like philosopher John Dewey and the artists and writers involved in the Arts and Crafts movement of the early nineteenth century shared this belief that art should be incorporated into daily life. This idea differed from the predominant idea of aesthetics prior to this time which favored classic forms of art, or “high art” and intentionally set it apart from everyday objects. Part of Dewey’s aesthetic theory points out that many of the objects the public now reveres as

“high art” and displayed in museums were once a part of daily life. In *Art as Experience*, he states,

The factors that have glorified fine art by setting it upon a far off pedestal did not arise within the realm of art nor is their influence confined to the arts...Domestic utensils, furnishings of tent and house, rugs mats, jars, pots, bows, spears, were wrought with such delighted care that today we hunt them out and give them places of honor in our art museums. Yet in their own time and place, such things were enhancements of the processes of everyday life.<sup>8</sup>

Dewey and later the artists of the Arts and Crafts Movement emphasized a focus on nature and put restored importance to the value to the senses. For them, art became a way to unite the material and the ideal, especially as it was incorporated into everyday objects. Swoon’s desire to make her art available publicly relates to these ideas about the importance of art in everyday life. The act of creating something and putting it in a gallery or museum cuts it off from certain parts of the community, however displaying work on the streets allows viewers to experience it in their everyday lives.

Swoon creates experiences that engage the viewers and encourage sensory understanding of their ideas. The experiences can challenge the audience to look at things from a different perspective and they can provide an occasion for a community to unite. In these ways, the artists’ expression can lead to social change. Through this work, Dewey’s theory about the importance of an aesthetic experience to bring unity and express emotions is realized.

Swoon chooses to put her art on the streets because she wants to include the members of her community that would not go to a gallery or museum to look

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<sup>8</sup> Dewey, John. *Art as Experience*. Penguin Group, New York. (1934): 37.

at art. Dewey advocated for people to see the artistic value in their everyday experiences. His work suggests that art has been compartmentalized into museums over time partly due to capitalist, nationalist, and imperialist reasons. These are all ways of dividing people, but for Dewey art was a way of uniting people and that is why it is important that it be available to the community; Swoon's work embodies this idea.

Dewey also saw the importance of engaging the senses and using aesthetics as a tool for creating social change. He explained,

Only those who are so far removed from the early experiences as to miss their sense will conclude that rites and ceremonies were merely technical devices for securing rain, sons, crops, success in battle. Of course they had this magical intent, but they were enduringly enacted, we may be sure, in spite of all practical failures, because they were immediate enhancements of the experience of living(Dewey 30)<sup>9</sup>.

Here Dewey expressed his idea that the importance of the rites or ceremonies is not necessarily in their goal but in the experience that affects the community. He applied this this same idea to a work of art, suggesting that the fundamental element is not the material object but rather the development of an experience. Art has the ability to personally affect one's life. This is why he felt it was an important part of initiating social change.

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<sup>9</sup> Dewey, John. Art as Experience. Penguin Group, New York. (1934): 27.



### **III: Swoon's take on Street Art and Social Criticism**

The artists Swoon, Allora and Calzadilla, And Ai Wei Wei each contribute new and different perspective on the role of public art. These artists have found a way to make art in public as a means of social criticism and bring up issues such as governing of public space, ownership of public space, and freedom in public space. Who gets to decide what is approved to paste on the walls? Who can say what land areas people can or cannot possess? Who determines what can or cannot be said or done in public space?

The idea of public space is at times contradictory because it can be at once public and exclusionary. Some marginalized groups feel that public space allows them to create spaces where they can represent themselves to the wider public and insert themselves into the activities of mainstream society. There is a continual dialogue between identity and urban space, as public space is increasingly commodified, being shaped, reshaped, and challenged by various groups in society with different spatial desires. For example, large scale advertisement, store fronts, and posters and flyers all shape, reshape and compete for space in population dense public areas. Think of how a new billboard or store front can change the atmosphere of an environment.

Advertisers use idealized images of people and products on a variety of different public spaces including benches, bus stops, and inside subway cars. This bombardment of advertising images creates a violence of exclusion in that it repeatedly presents an idealized image while often excluding images of diversity. Some argue that there is also a violence and exclusion in graffiti and street art

because it is largely made up of “tagger graffiti.” A person spray painting his or her name on a wall is commonly referred to as tagger graffiti. This type of graffiti is sometimes used by gang members to make certain sections of cities their territory. The website, Anti-Graffiti.org, offers statistics stating, “According to the Graffiti Resource Council (GRC), about 80% of graffiti is “tagger graffiti.” The GRC is a nonprofit corporation in the City of New York that assists communities in developing programs to help clean up and regulations to effectively prevent graffiti and vandalism. Another 5% are “pieces,” or large visuals. Nationally, gang graffiti makes up about 10%.<sup>10</sup> Opponents of graffiti feel that it decreases a resident’s feeling of safety thereby decreasing property value, and leading to reduced business growth and tourism. Street art has different levels of acceptance; some places consider it graffiti and a crime, while other cities consider it an art form. In many communities it is illegal. The laws, codes, and ordinances vary in different places but conviction can lead to fines and restitution charges, even arrests and imprisonment. The graffiti tradition in the past has focused on tagging, marking territory, and thereby conquering space.

Modern graffiti began in Philadelphia in the early 1960s, when taggers known as Cornbread and Cool Earl scrawled their names all over the city.<sup>11</sup> By the late 1960s, graffiti writing was flourishing in New York City, specifically in Washington Heights, Brooklyn, and the Bronx neighborhoods, where a tag writer

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<sup>10</sup> <<http://www.antiGraffiti.org>>

<sup>11</sup> Ehrlich, Dimitri and Gregor. “Graffiti in Its Own Words: Old-timers remember the golden age of the art movement that actually moved.” *New York Magazine*. July 3, 2007.  
<<http://nymag.com/guides/summer/17406/>>

known as Julio 204 was using a Magic Marker and spray paint on city walls. In 1971, a tag writer called JOE 182 started “bombing,” which is marking as many surfaces as possible. In July of 1971, the New York Times published a small profile piece on the graffiti artist named TAKI 183.<sup>12</sup> Not all graffiti is merely writing on a wall.

Some cities invite artists to paint murals on public spaces. For example, Detroit’s Grand River Creative Corridor is a space where graffiti artists are invited by the city to paint murals on certain permissible walls. In this area graffiti maintains that status of art and is believed to help revive and enliven aging gray industrial cityscapes.<sup>13</sup> Artistic graffiti gained popularity in New York City the 1970s and 1980s. Early forms of artistic graffiti were public writing executed in a distinctive style with a certain attitude or intention. Many contemporary graffiti artists use a wide range of different media including paint, chalk, light, video projection, and computer programming.<sup>14</sup> Unlike street art in which the use of the street is relevant to its meaning, most artistic graffiti can be anywhere and have the same meaning. The classification ‘Street Art,’ typically excludes territorial graffiti or pure vandalism; however some artistic tag graffiti can be considered street art.

They are different art forms, but can sometimes meet in a single work. Some early graffiti was associated with the Jazz culture of the late 1960’s, as many “Bird Lives,” tags were found (an homage to the late Charlie Parker -an

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid*

<sup>13</sup> Derringer, Nancy. “Graffiti’s Role in the revival of Michigan cities.” *Bridge Magazine Online*, March 20, 2014. <<http://bridgemi.com/2014/03/graffitis-role-in-the-revival-of-michigan-cities/>>

<sup>14</sup> Riggle, Nicholas Alden. “Street Art: The Tranfiguration of the Commonplace.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 68.3 (Summer 2010): 243-257.

icon for the jazz/Beat subculture representing an uncompromising artist and intellectual). In the early 1980s graffiti began to be associated with the hip hop music culture. This link to hip hop and rap music helped move graffiti into more of the downtown art and music scenes. Graffiti began being associated with crime and the local governments began to take a more serious stance towards it. At the same time, it began to enter the mainstream as museums and art galleries began inviting graffiti artists to display their work. In the early 1980's, the popularity of artists such as Jean-Michel Basquiat (who started out tagging locations with his SAMO signature) and Keith Haring (who displayed his early work in subway stations) brought graffiti wider acceptance and greater appreciation by the public and art world.<sup>15</sup>

Street artists, although born from the graffiti tradition, tend to be more concerned with aesthetics and inhabiting space. Street artists chose to take the risks associated with graffiti to display their work in public space in order to violate the public's perceptions of space and society. Artists who choose to display their work on the streets, tend to prefer the direct communication with the public at large. Street artists often feel free from perceived confines of the formal art world. Many street artists look to spread socially conscious messages with their work. For example, Keith Haring's *Crack is Wack* mural 1986 on New York City's FRD Drive carried an anti-drug message; any of his other murals were created for charities, hospitals, or children's care centers. In 1989, after he was diagnosed with HIV he established the Keith Haring Foundation to provide funding

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<sup>15</sup> "From Graffiti to Galleries: Urban artist brings style to another level." [CNN.com](http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/03/21/otr.green/index.html) November 4, 2005. <<http://www.cnn.com/2005/US/03/21/otr.green/index.html>>

and imagery to AIDS organizations.<sup>16</sup> This is a widespread motive for many street artists, who may feel insignificant or marginalized by the mainstream art world, to reach a broader more diverse audience than the typically gallery setting normally allows. Street art has many forms including stencil images, wheat pasted poster art, sticker art, street installation, and even sculpture.

In Nicholas Alden Riggle's article, "Street Art: The Tranfiguration of the Commonplace," he suggests that street art grew out of the Pop Art tradition where, "works [of art] effectively collapse the formalist distinction between art and every day."<sup>17</sup> Riggle argues that taking art work out of the museum setting, displaying somewhat anonymously, and leaving it to be destroyed by nature or humankind creates a practice that gains its significance because it is not preserved for the appreciation of an elite few, but rather has the power to engage people in everyday life. This indicates that, for street art to be classified as such, it must gain its significance from the artistic use of the street, abandoned building, bridge on which it is displayed, and therefore, removing it changes its meaning. The use of public everyday objects in street art is essential to its meaning; therefore, to make sense of it an art critic must consider what is intended by the artist's choice to use these spaces.

Riggle argues that historians and critics can no longer fit street art into the master narrative that attempts to categorize and group artists and art move-

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<sup>16</sup> <<http://www.haring.com>>

<sup>17</sup> Riggle, Nicholas Alden. "Street Art: The Tranfiguration of the Commonplace." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 68, No. 3 (Summer 2010): 243-257.

ments.<sup>18</sup> This fits with Danto's ideas about "post-historical" art in the modern world. Modernism that was linked to formalist theory separated art and life by defining a work of art's significance only its aesthetic visual and formal properties, and not by any representational, social, or political theme. These narratives often reinforce distinctions between art and life in that they create boundaries and exclusions to delineate what is art and what art should be. Pop artists like Andy Warhol took this idea and flipped it by taking everyday objects, placing them in a museum and calling it art; as a result art could no longer be distinguished solely by its visual properties. As Danto reflects on how the narrative of art history can be looked at differently, street artists look at how the role of the art world can be reconsidered. They respond to this by removing art from the museum, gallery, or private collection; taking it out of the art world and into everyday life.

Many street artists feel frustrated by the fact that public space could be sold for advertisement, but it is illegal for them to display their work on publicly owned structures. Some of the street artist Banksy's work has incorporated consumerist images. In these works he uses satire to portray the feeling of frustration with the vast amount of consumerist images that occupy public space. One example is an image he created where an impoverished child walks hand in hand with Ronald McDonald. He also incorporates images of bar codes into his work, and even created an image of crucified Christ holding shopping bags. Swoon's work also conveys the idea that she street artist frustrated by the use of adver-

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*

tisement in public space. At one point she worked with a collective of artists that she met while studying at the Pratt Institute of Art. They worked to cover all street level billboards along a stretch of Myrtle Avenue in Brooklyn at one time. The collective of artists organized and would board the subway in the middle of the night armed with art work scaled to the exact dimensions of the ad boxes. Then they would cover all the ads on the train with their art. In doing this she is challenging the community to take notice of the bombardment of advertising surrounding them. She is also making a statement about the messages' advertising; since much of the images are computer enhanced she creates a point of contrast by presenting people with her realistic drawings of people.

Swoon's work is mainly portraiture that captures experience. She created the portrait of Sylvia Elena after traveling to Mexico and hearing from the families of missing girls and seeing missing flyers and memorials in many locations that she visited. With her mural *The Portrait of Sylvia Elena*, she looked to give a face and make a memorial to all the missing girls. In her portraits she wishes to pass this delicate, fleeting, poetic experience along to others. Imagine her frustration with the idea that this was not legal. Then she looks around and is bombarded with advertising images, each pushing an agenda, promoting a product that promises to bring happiness or make life better. These advertisements are full of messages, designed by consumer institutions; often they are selling not just their products but how their products can define one's social status. For example, the branding associated with Marlboro cigarettes features a strong and rugged looking cowboy; often there is no a cigarette shown in the advertisement.

This suggests that the company is selling more this strong image than their products. The messages suggest one must look, act, or conform in a certain way to be accepted. Someone looking at this advertisement might get the idea that if he smokes he might also look tough and rugged like the Marlboro man. The agenda of most advertisers is profit based and the images they are selling can be deceiving. But this is legal. These advertisements sell fantasy, coded in messages, derived through business plans, primarily interested in profit. Artists like Swoon feel these cannot be the images of a community.

Swoon decided not to just be a passive consumer of these commercial messages, but instead to offer another choice. By pasting her endearing and captivating work on the hard concrete facade of her community, she is reminding her community that there is more to life than just these consumerist interests. She pastes her work in the public realm as a way of competing with large corporate advertisements, giving it away for people to view for free, as a way of challenging companies that are making things for profit. She brings the people of her community, or any community in which her work is displayed, back into the moment, by producing work that passes on a moment that she experienced and gives the viewer the experience of finding a beautiful image where it may not have been expected. She reminds viewers that people are delicate and moments are fleeting by creating work that slowly disintegrates over time. The sensitive quality of her portraits suggests that one can find happiness by looking around and engaging with people.



One of the things that make Swoon's work so unique and unforgettable is the way she combines her ephemeral, sensitive images with solid, hard architectural structures. Swoon's 'wheat pastes' are often portraits, printed from either wood or linocuts. These portraits are often of her friends and family, but sometimes include people she has just met. She states that she always tries to capture the essence of the person or the moment that she relates in her work.<sup>19</sup> For her, the importance of the portrait comes in her ability to capture what she sees in or loves about the person and to preserve it like a memory. This results in images that are almost like walking shadows, so full of life and expression. Swoon then takes these memories and pastes them into abandoned walls, giving a life back to that little piece of the city, giving an experience to all who pass it. Sharing these experiences with others, I argue, enables Swoon to connect with others and impact the community. From her desire to be part of the world around her she was able to create an inspired world where connections are not seen but felt.

Displaying her work on the streets, Swoon transforms commonplace, conventional urban settings into little spaces of enchantment and beauty. Her images are hand carved, printed on delicate paper, and then pasted on the side of abandoned buildings. She leaves them out to face the elements, reminding her viewers of how fragile each moment is and how quickly it can pass away. She chooses to print her images on newsprint paper which decays slowly over time, instead of white paper that curls and peels off like a sticker. There is beauty in

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<sup>19</sup> "Callie Curry aka Swoon" [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com). Video. 20 Oct. 2012. *TED Talks For Aspiring Artists* <<http://tedxtalks.ted.com>>

watching the life cycle of her characters from the time she pastes them to the time they rot away. First the edges of the paper peel away and are carried by the wind, then the rain works on the piece dissolving it little by little until it is gone.

The artist's intention can be interpreted in many ways. The disappearance of her work might be a statement that death itself is a part of life and a reminder that the moment is fleeting. Choosing to create work on newsprint makes her work biodegradable; this must be an important issue for her considering the work she has done to protect and raise awareness of environmental issues. She might also be defying the consumerist value of her work. As many other graffiti artists have also done, she puts it on the streets to be seen freely by the public. In doing so she is able to make her mark on the community and engage parts of the community that would otherwise have been left out of the art world museum scene. She then lets it disappear into the elements, resisting commodification because it is washed away over time. Her work makes a claim to public space while at the same time is left to be destroyed by the elements. Its disappearance reifies its presence, perhaps as a reminder to her viewers that public space, the people in it, and the time with them is fleeting.

Swoon's work can be seen as a metaphor for how humans must face the world. It depicts human frailty, beautifully displaying it? in the face of a desensitized and impersonal world. Encountering Swoon's work is like happening upon a moment, figures alive with movement that breathe, dance, and play, and which seem to pause and pose silently in front of the viewer. In that moment all are

united artist, subject and viewer, all share the experience.<sup>20</sup> In his article, *Swoon, Noted in Passing*, Carlo McCormick comments on Swoon's work stating,

In a world where public space has been all but obviated by the privatizing effects of all-pervasive advertising and corporate sponsorship, and where most crucially the idiosyncratic character of individual neighborhoods that have long been the fabric of our cities has been homogenized into mundane and generic iterations of soulless functionality, the emotive character of Swoon's figures and the effusive power of the artist's hand so evident in her craft offers a humanizing touch that is rare in the contemporary urban experience, as do the discreet ways in which they populate sites of benign neglect, temporal abandonment, and socially displacing transition.<sup>21</sup>

Swoon's figures embody the stories of many people living in the city and her feelings concerning space and identity. Legally her work does not belong there. By insisting on being there, Swoon and her images tell the story of many who may have been told they do not belong but refuse to be ignored.

Swoon's art explores and reveals the potential for transformative experiences in mundane places. With her work, she inspires people to reach for their own personal potential and reminds people that all humans are connected. Her careful and insightful work sets out to endure the elements without protection from harsh wind, pouring rain, or blazing sun. I interpret this as a metaphor for the resilience found in people who survive difficult situations. The idea that this beauty she presents is fleeting also reminds her viewers of the importance of appreciating the moments and personal connections in life.

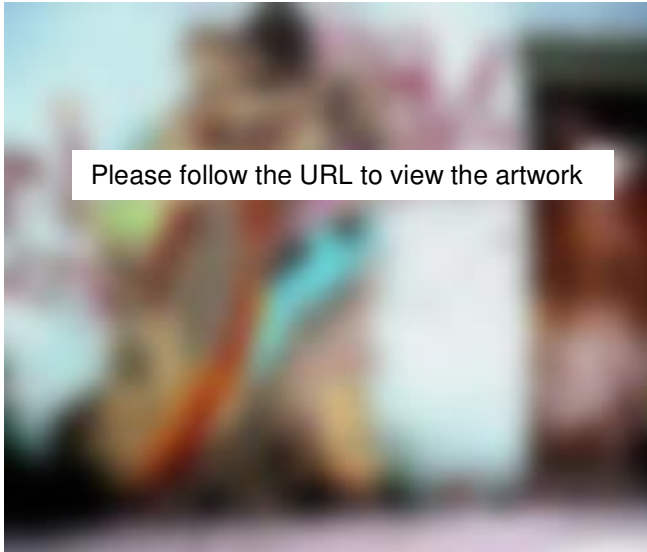
In the TEDx talk focused on her work, Swoon describes her first decision to place her artwork out on the street illegally, saying "I was a young woman, and

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<sup>20</sup> McCormick, Carlo. "Swoon, Noted in Passing." *Swoon / Caledonia Curry*; introduction by Jeffrey Deitch. Abrams, New York. 2010: 23-24.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid*

I really had no sense of my ability to make any kind of change in the world, and suddenly in this very concrete way, I went outside and I put up a wheat paste. I



Swoon. *Alix-Naime*. 2008.

<<http://www.thedirtfloor.com/2011/11/06/embraced-street-art-by-swoon/>>

walked by it the next day and there it was, I had changed that street corner...it was a very small change but for me to see that I could have an impact was really transformative."<sup>22</sup> She pasted her first drawing up on the streets of her Brooklyn neighborhood ten years ago, thinking it was a project she would continue for a couple months. The experi-

ence is so important to her that she has continued to paste her work on the streets ever since that first transformative occurrence. She depicts people of different ethnicities, creating a connection between people interacting within their urban environment. Often incorporating images of women and placing these drawings on concrete walls, she fosters a sense of empowerment in women in urban and industrial spaces typically thought of as male-dominated.

She describes in her presentation for TEDx talks a memory she has of a man with a mild mental handicap that was drawn to her pictures that she had placed in a hole in a construction wall. The man discovered the painting and

<sup>22</sup> "Callie Curry aka Swoon" [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com). Video. 20 Oct. 2012. *TED Talks For Aspiring Artists* <<http://tedxtalks.ted.com>>

took pride in telling others of his 'secret.' The area became his new favorite place, with an added element of magic from Swoon's wheat paste drawing. Not only had the ugliness of the construction wall been transformed, but so had many people who interacted with its 'secret.'<sup>23</sup>

Swoon's work is unique and unforgettable because of the way she is able



Swoon. *Miss Rockaway Armada*. 2006. <<http://www.inhabitat.com/wp-content/uploads/armada1.jpg>>

to build community through her work.

Her work is more than just a realization of her creative ideas in a physical form; it acts to unite people through the building of community. An example of this desire to create community

comes in Swoon's, *Miss Rockaway Armada*.<sup>24</sup> By the middle of 2005

Swoon had made a name for herself in the street art world and had a foothold in the high end art world. She received many commercial offers and could have chosen to focus on print runs and major installations, which would have made her a major player in the high end art world. She chose to jump into dumpsters and make rafts out of garbage. She gathered a team, constructed rafts, and floated them down the Mississippi River. Some members of her team were looking for adventure, others were interested in the idea of a traveling home, and

<sup>23</sup> "Callie Curry aka Swoon" [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com). Video. 20 Oct. 2012. *TED Talks For Aspiring Artists* <<http://tedxtalks.ted.com>>

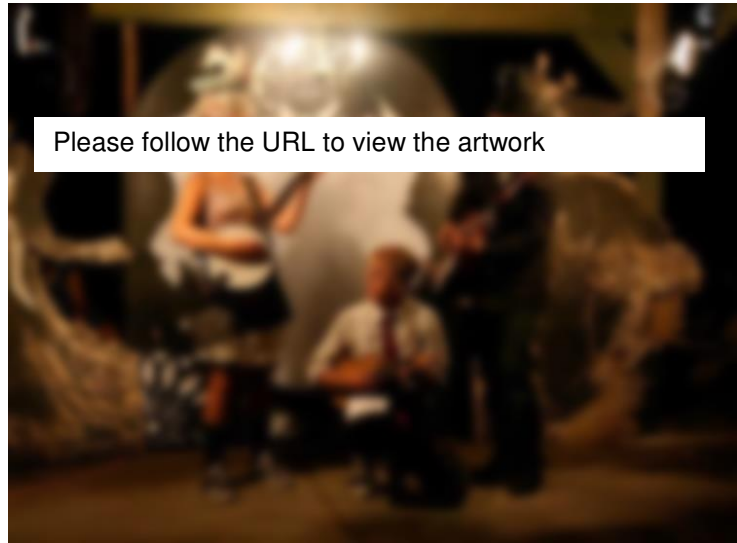
<sup>24</sup> Swoon. *Miss Rockaway Armada*. 2006. Photo courtesy of <<http://inhabitat.com>>

Swoon wanted the experience of meeting people where they lived and bringing them an art experience which they might not have otherwise been exposed to.

In this way she went beyond wanting to be a part of the community surrounding her; she wanted to bring everything that she loved about the art and culture that surrounded her to people

who otherwise may not have had the chance to experience

it. Swoon understood that having a cultural experience was a lifeline to the rest of the world. She felt that she could give this experience to the people on the river [see photo of evening performances given by the crew members and featuring Swoon's work in the background].<sup>25</sup> In the article, "Making It" from the book titled *Swoon*, Jeff Stark, a member of Swoon's raft building team, quotes Swoon as saying, "We want to be a living, kicking model of an entirely different world—one that in this case happens to float (Abrams 82)."<sup>26</sup> Swoon used aesthetics to initialize social change by exploring the spiritual connection between a human's environment and his or



Swoon [drawings in background] Evening Performances. *Miss Rockaway Armada*. 2006 <<http://caledoniacurry.com/rockaway.php>>

<sup>25</sup> Curry, Caledonia. Swoon - "Miss Rockaway Armada." <[caledoniacurry.com](http://caledoniacurry.com)>

<sup>26</sup> *Swoon / Caledonia Curry*; introduction by Jeffrey Deitch. Abrams, New York. 2010.

her happiness, resuming the importance of nature and the senses, and understanding that the highest art of all is the art of living.

Swoon's *Miss Rockaway Armada* traveled down the Mississippi River during the summer of 2006, docking to wait out the winter and sailing again the following spring. The crew performed at towns along the river and camped in the forest or on the beaches in between. She describes her intentions when creating her first raft project, the *Miss Rockaway Armada*, saying that the inspiration came from many different sources. She describes her frustration at hearing (then) President George W. Bush announce the invasion of Afghanistan, questioning whether to leave the country or go deeper into it. She describes several other influences for making the decision to create the rafts; in the end she chose to go deeper into the country and show that a different system was possible.

In her blog post she writes,

And it was a kind of freedom and joy and wonder that I have never known in any other form. In this alone, it was singular. Otherwise, we all wanted different things, there were 30 of us. We each had something to give, our tiny piece of the puzzle without which the whole thing could never have happened, and we each had our own reasons why we were doing it. Me, I wanted to build a floating microcosm of all that I held dear about the creative culture I call home. I wanted to live on a honey-comb of junk rafts, grow food, compost our waste, build our own motors that ran on grease, and learn how to live in a different way than the system we now know, which gobbles up species at the rate of 100 per day, and wages wars of aggression over resources. I wanted there to be performances, and workshops and a zine library and sewing circles, and guided tours, and more that anything I wanted to find myself, at 16, waiting, in a small town, for something like us to appear.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Curry, Caledonia. Swoon - "Miss Rockaway Armada." <[caledoniacurry.com](http://caledoniacurry.com)>

It was not easy to accomplish this ambitious dream; there were many ups and downs. Some days the motors broke down continually, stranding the rafts in the path of danger from approaching larger vessels. Some days no one could get along, everything was dirty or broken, or had fallen overboard. Then there were days when the crew was able to find food in the nearby forests, and they realized that thirty people had only produced one small bag of trash in week. In their second year, Swoon describes them “spiraling further into wildness,”<sup>28</sup> and people grew weary of the tough life on the river. While hosted in St. Louis, the rafts were cut from the shore or burned to their bases, and the crew had to walk away.

In the face of all these difficulties Swoon continues to say, “nothing could touch the beauty [of the river], and the joy [of the people who came to see them], and the freedom and the wonder,” of the experience. She and the crew felt especially rewarded when people would gather around the boats expressing feelings of admiration for what *Miss Rockaway* was attempting. This was when they knew they were changing lives. They saw the appreciation on the faces of the people they affected with their mission of bringing a creative new world experience. Years later Swoon tells of receiving a letter, written by a woman who as a teenager had seen and experienced *Miss Rockaway*. The woman describes how that experience changed her life and showed her that another world was possible, something more than the prefabricated existence she had before solely known. Swoon was moved to tears.

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<sup>28</sup> *ibid*



In this great adventure Swoon experimented with using aesthetics to initialize social change. Creating sculptural rafts and traveling circus style down the Mississippi River to deliver her message of sustainability and preservation through creativity, she relied on nature and the senses to guide the way. She explored the spiritual connection between a human's environment and their happiness, when challenged by the trials of this life at sea, she found happiness in the people she encountered. Combining different styles of art, involving performance, and the relevance of the environment to the piece, makes her work become an experience where the viewer is consciously participating. Once again Dewey's theory of engage the senses and building a community from the bottom up can be applied. Dewey states, "that life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it; through interaction with it."<sup>29</sup> This message is seen in the context of Swoon's work and the importance of the site or environment makes to her aesthetics choices.

What was left of the recycled junk rafts was turned into a display at the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MoCA) in 2009. The exhibition continued to promote the cause of sustainability using the experience of the rafts and their floating eco-voyage as an example. The rafts have been converted to dry land and became a creative dream-like space. Visitors are invited to participate in activities and view photo archives of *Miss Rockaway's* two year voyage. In this way the experience was able to reach more people and continue to inspire

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<sup>29</sup> Dewey, John. Art as Experience. Penguin Group, New York. (1934): 34.

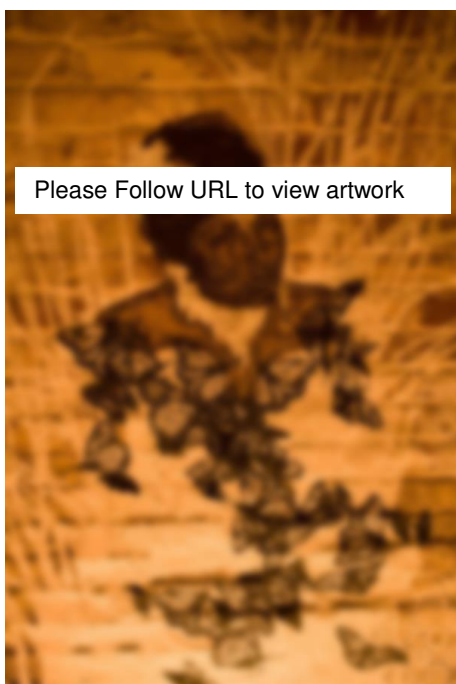
viewers to dream big and pursue radical ideas. She and the crew promoted the understanding that the highest art of all is the art of living.

Swoon's choice to make impermanent prints and wheat paste them up around the city for people she will never meet to enjoy is essential to her character, and this pattern runs throughout her work. Her talent, drive, and notoriety could make her a celebrity artist, but she chooses to spend hours making prints and giving them to the people of the city. She pastes her work publicly in New York City where she lives, and in many different cities to which she travels. She told London's *Sunday Times* newspaper reporter, Eleanor Mills that she believes, "Western life is sensing its corruptness," and "What we do about how we live is the defining question of our lifetimes. The artist's role in that is not just to pose in galleries, but to be interactive and holistic, to try to find solutions."<sup>30</sup> Putting her artwork on public display is one solution she has found to reach people and raise awareness for social issues. It also is a way of including people that may not have money or feel comfortable going to galleries to look at art. Her projects include many examples of her using art to work for social change.

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<sup>30</sup> Mills, Eleanor. "Floored Genius - At first she kept the fact that she was female under wraps. Now there's no hiding for Swoon - America's answer to Banksy - as she redraws the boundaries of street art." *The Sunday Times*. November 27, 2011. London, England.

In 2012 Swoon visited Kenya with a group called *Equality Effect*, which uses human rights laws to protect women and girls, working together with another group called *160 Girls* they are seeking justice for women and girls in Kenya who have been raped.<sup>31</sup> International and national laws are in place that prohibit abuse against children and women; however the group, *160 Girls* has discovered more and more cases where these laws are not being enforced and in some



Swoon. *Portrait of Silvia Elena*.  
2010.<  
[http://caledoniacurry.com/sylvia\\_elena.php](http://caledoniacurry.com/sylvia_elena.php)>

cases even being broken by police officers.

They worked to build a shelter to protect these girls and help them recover from the abusive experiences. Swoon visited and participated in a creative workshop with the girls. Then she produced prints from drawings she made while she was there.<sup>32</sup> She pasted these drawings up in her Brooklyn community and in other cities throughout the world to spread awareness

of this issue.

Creating prints to be displayed publicly

is a way in which her art is used to promote social reform. One of the prints was given to the shelter; one print was auctioned with the proceeds going to the *160 Girls* project. The money raised will be applied to litigation fees associated with

<sup>31</sup> <<http://theequalityeffect.org/160-girls/>>

<sup>32</sup>“Swoon in Kenya: The Equality Effect and ‘160 Girls.’” *Fighting a War on Girls*. March 21, 2012. <<http://www.brooklynstreetart.com/theblog/2012/03/21/swoon-in-kenya-the-equality-effect-and-160-girls/#.U9-knFboboA>>

the girls' cases, as the group seeks to bring the girls' abusers to justice. The representatives at The Equality Effect organization state that fighting for these girls is a small way to fight for all women and girls who have been subjected to abuse, getting the government to enforce the law is the first step<sup>33</sup>. This is just one of many ways in which Swoon works to contribute to the world, effect real change, and not be confined to limits of the art world.

Another example of Swoon producing work that strives to effect real



change in the world is her *Portrait of Sylvia Elena*. In 2008, Swoon traveled to Juarez, Mexico with documentarian Tennessee Watson to better understand the social epidemic of 'femicides'<sup>34</sup>. In the last two decades, hundreds of women have been confirmed dead and thousands more have been reported missing in Mexico. Working with the activist group Nuestras Hijas de Regreso a Casa, Swoon and Tennessee interviewed

families that had lost their mothers, sisters, and daughters, finding massive amounts of reports of violence (mostly against women). Most associate the vio-

<sup>33</sup> <<http://theequalityeffect.org/160-girls/>>

<sup>34</sup> Curry, Caledonia. "Swoon - Sylvia Elena." 2010. <[caledoniacurry.com](http://caledoniacurry.com)>

lence with the drug trade and prostitution, but theories range from serial killing, human trafficking, worker intimidation, corrupt police, to drunken frat boys from Texas. There is no easy answer.<sup>35</sup> They found that Sylvia Elena Morales was one of the first reported disappearances in 1995. Family members interviewed said that the authorities put the blame on the girls. Saying that the mothers had been lied to, the girls were good at home but bad in the streets. Often the police would say that the girls were prostitutes or in a place they should not have been. Family members told stories of the police beating brothers and friends of the victims until they corroborated the lies. Family members would give up the investigation to avoid further violence. Tennessee Watson and Swoon were saddened to hear that the girls' character was brought into the investigation and they were almost blamed for their own murders. By analyzing the violent crime rates in the United States and throughout Latin America they found that the violence against women was a global situation.

In her blog Swoon writes, "The situation in Juarez might shine a startling spotlight, but the problem it illuminates is anything but isolated." She includes an interview with Watson, in which she says, "Each explanation was a slow peeling back of a complex grid of power that seemed inextricably linked to the emotional, psychological, economic and political precarity that characterized Juarez. This town exemplified the destructive and traumatic nature of capitalism."<sup>36</sup> Many of the victims they learned about were from very poor backgrounds, often it seemed

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<sup>35</sup> *ibid*

<sup>36</sup> *ibid*

that the cases were not treated with high importance because of this. Tennessee and Swoon wanted to bring back to everyone that would see the project that the issue could not be reduced to just one cause; it is complex and a result of the many problems within the system. With this work they wanted to be careful not to over-simplify the issue and to bring understanding to their audience the feeling of powerlessness with which most victims of gender violence struggle.

Swoon writes in her blog, "With *Portrait of Silvia Elena* I hoped to create a memorial that would honor the life of one young woman. And, I hoped that by looking closely and lovingly at one face, I could pull through the keyhole some bit of understanding that would resonate through my lifelong questions about the victimization of women in cultures all over the world. It's a beginning is all, but a beginning it is."<sup>37</sup> The original piece was installed in Yerba Buena, it featured a twelve foot by eight foot woodblock print of Sylvia Elena in her Quinceñera dress. Included in the installation were flowers and candles, flyers about other missing girls, and pink crosses strewn on the floor. The print was surrounded with speakers broadcasting the stories of the mothers and friends that were interviewed. The audience viewing the piece could pick up the speakers individually or as a cluster, but there was not a coherent story being told, rather a "jumble of sounds,"<sup>38</sup> that conveyed a sense of confusion; again mirroring the confusion felt by so many looking for answers. The print has been pasted again in other locations. In her blog Swoon states that she plans to go back and continue creating

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<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

memorials that will bring awareness to the issue and honor the lives of the women.

Working in this way Swoon shows how art can be used as a social criticism and can be used to connect people. In this case, there not an easy explanation to the problem or a charity to which her viewers can simply write a check. She states in her that whenever she pastes the *Portrait of Sylvia Elena*, she works to bring awareness to a global problem of violence against women.<sup>39</sup> Any given passer-by may take notice of the print, look into the story behind it, and learn of the complex web of problems that lead to this situation in Juarez and in other places in the world. This awareness may lead to a change in thinking where people no longer look to discredit victims because of their socioeconomic status. In this way, Swoon seems to be saying that not only should art not be valued as just a commodity but human life also should not be valued as a commodity; and that the aesthetic experience incorporated into daily life can not only unite people in a community but also can be used to educate them about global issues.

Swoon has done several installation pieces displayed in museums including the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Black Rat Project in London, and the Brooklyn Museum of Art. The impact of her work changes when displayed in a museum. It no longer can draw on the idea of civil disobedience associated with illegally displaying her work on the

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<sup>39</sup> *ibid*

street. In this setting, Swoon has been invited and paid to display her work. How can she challenge the capitalist, consumerist system from the inside?

The commodification of art objects is an issue of concern. Even fifty years ago the philosopher, Theodore Adorno, saw this as a problem. In his 1944 essay, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception," Adorno states,

The culture industry perpetually cheats its consumers of what it perpetually promises. The promissory note which, with its plots and staging, it draws on pleasure is endlessly prolonged; the promise, which is actually all the spectacle consists of, is illusory: all it actually confirms is that the real point will never be reached, that the diner must be satisfied with the menu.<sup>40</sup>

Swoon seems to be questioning that menu. An example of her changing the menu can be seen in the installation *Thalassa*<sup>41</sup>, in the Grand Hall of the New Orleans Museum of Art. In the centuries old Grand Hall lined with classical paintings featuring historic figures in white wigs, Swoon installed a twenty foot portrait of a sea goddess.

While it is true that making art and displaying it in an art world setting, like a gallery, can lead to it losing some of its organic energy and being commodified; however, even in a museum setting Swoon continues to work to promote social reform. She creates site specific installation art pieces often inspired by various environmental concerns. For example, in this work she uses her public platform to spread awareness of environmental issues.

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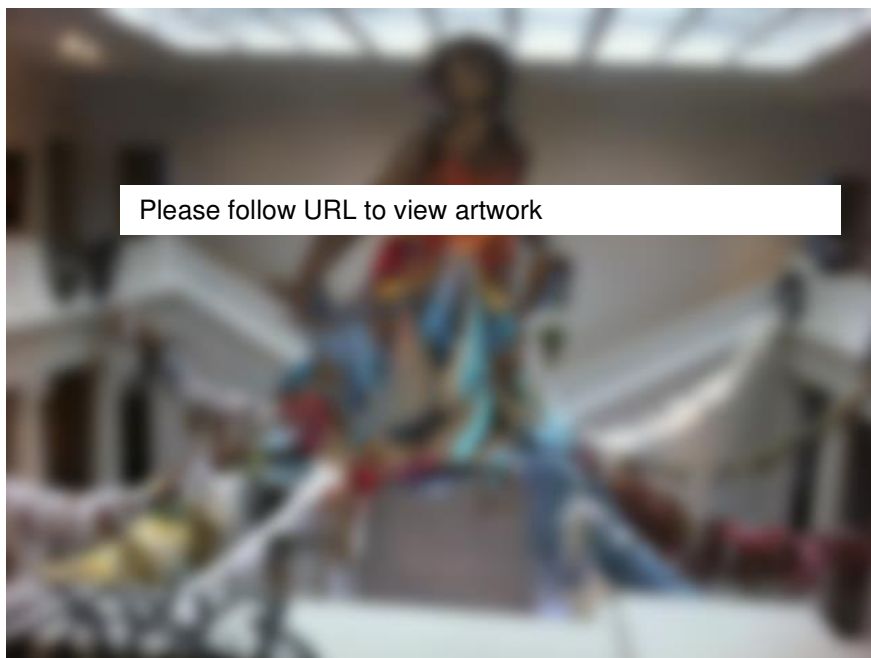
<sup>40</sup> Horkheimer, Max, Theodor W. Adorno, and Gunzelin Schmid Noerr. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 2002.

<sup>41</sup> Swoon. "Thalassa." New Orleans Museum of Art. 2011 <caledoniacurry.com>



Thalassa, in Greek mythology is thought of as the mother of all sea goddesses. Suspended from the ceiling, the figure of *Thalassa* hangs directly over visitors that enter the space. She is surrounded by colorful swathes of fabric, linocut prints and paper cutouts of all varieties of sea creatures. Her tentacles extend from the second floor balcony and are draped with mixed-media figures of

sea life.



Swoon. *Thalassa*. 2011. <<http://caledoniacurry.com/thalassa.php>>

The idea of human consumption and destruction of the environment is a social issue present in many of her works. In this work Swoon depicts Thalassa as

suffering; she says it is her reaction the 2010 oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. She discusses her belief the western capitalist system is destroying species at alarming rates.<sup>42</sup> The city of New Orleans has strong ties to the sea; they depend on it for commerce, transportation, energy, and food. The oil spill was disastrous in all of these areas; it was also harmful to the many varieties of life found in the sea. Representing these sea creatures in her work, Swoon reminds visitors that the

<sup>42</sup>Swoon. *Thalassa*. (The Great Hall Project) 2011. <<http://noma.org/videos/detail/3/Swoon>>

sea is not only the provider of their livelihood but also the home and life habitat for many other life forms as well.

#### IV: The Performance Art Tradition

The history of performance art can be traced back to ancient Greece where the philosopher Diogenes of Sinope practiced a form of performance art with his “performance philosophy.” Diogenes enacted challenging public behavior meant to encourage consciousness and social change. Diogenes lived on the streets and public squares of Athens displaying his every action for public examination, and becoming known as “the dog.”<sup>43</sup> Much of his public behavior involved absurd actions. With these gestures he worked to reverse customary values and reveal hidden possibilities that could constitute personal freedom. He used his simple lifestyle and behavior to critique the social values of what he saw as a corrupt society. Diogenes opened up a category of philosophy in his day, in our time a category of art has been opened in a similar way as performance artists put themselves on display and present stimulating or provoking public acts.

Performance has also been used to communicate with people and convey issues of ritualistic and social importance. In Russia the rise of Agitprop, stage plays, pamphlets, and other art forms with a specific political message, were used to spread ideas about communism. Agitprop comes from the combination of the words agitation and propaganda. Agitation was used to appeal to viewers' emotions and urge them to do what government leaders expected of them. Propaganda engaged the mind and was used to explain policy and other beneficial information. Agitprop proved to be a powerful tool to reach people who would not otherwise have been exposed to theater of art. Trains toured the Rus-

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<sup>43</sup> McEvelley, Thomas. The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism. McPherson & Co Publishers. 2005: 217-218.

sian countryside, after the revolution in 1917, performing short plays and broadcasting propaganda.<sup>44</sup> During this time in the Western world, agitprop grew to have a negative connotation, as it was associated with extreme leftist views. Gradually it came to describe any type of highly political art.

Agitprop may have been one from which modern performance art drew, but other art movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century helped inspire its later form. Until the late nineteenth century Immanuel Kant's ideas in *Critique of Judgment* were held as the standard in the theory of aesthetics. Kant's ideas distinguish between an aesthetic object as beautiful or sublime. For Kant beauty is immediately apparent and universal, while something sublime holds an air of mystery that stretches one's understanding of reason<sup>45</sup>. These ideas began to be challenged by artists like the Fauvists, Cubists, Dadaists of the early 20th century, and Marcel Duchamp. Many of the creative minds were pursuing an art form where elements of literature, painting, and performance mixed; this creative union had its origins in the Dada.<sup>46</sup> After the outbreak of World War I many writers, artists, and performers banded together to protest against bourgeois nationalist and colonialist interests that they believed were the cause of the war. With participants in Europe and North America, the Dadaists became a cultural and intellectual community that attacked all traditional values and institutions.

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<sup>44</sup> Bodek, Richard. "The Not-so-Golden Twenties: Everyday Life and Communist Agitprop in Weimar-Era Berlin." *Journal of Social History* 30.1 (1996): 55-78.

<sup>45</sup> Kant, Immanuel, 1724-1804. *Critique of Judgment*. United States. (1951): 35.

<sup>46</sup> Hunter, Sam. *American Art of the 20th Century*. New York: H. N. Abrams, (1972): 89.

In Germany, many participants in the Dada Movement later merged into a Marxian political movement, where in Paris the Dada Movement affected more particularly the arts. They rejected any standards of aesthetics that were based in reason and logic, and favored artistic expression that embraced chaos, non-sense, irrationality and intuition. There were no rules for Dadaists. In Tristan Tzara's *Dada Manifesto* he writes,

Every product of disgust capable of becoming a negation of the family is Dada; a protest with the fists of its whole being engaged in destructive action: Dada; knowledge of all the means rejected up until now by the shamefaced sex of comfortable compromise and good manners: Dada; abolition of logic, which is the dance of those impotent to create: Dada; every social hierarchy and equation set up for the sake of values by our valets: Dada; every object, all objects, sentiments, obscurities, apparitions and the precise clash of parallel lines are weapons for the fight: Dada; abolition of memory: Dada; abolition of archaeology: Dada; abolition of prophets: Dada; abolition of the future...<sup>47</sup>

They developed interrelated art forms that mixed combined visual art, literature, poetry, music, and theater arts that resulted in total freedom for the artist. This freedom allowed Dadaists to combine art forms as they had never before been combined and break down boundaries re-defining what is art. Where aesthetic standards of the past seemed to appeal to sensibilities, much of the Dadaists' work looked to challenge and even offend as a way of social criticism. This confused, chaotic, nihilistic and destructive Dada movement brought with it more than just a platform for social criticism, it presented a way to express feelings of anarchy and individualism present in many artists at the time.

Dadaists were not the first to seek individual freedom and originality in the arts; however, their attempts to involve all of the senses in both artistic expres-

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<sup>47</sup> Tzara, Tristan. Dada Manifesto. March 23, 1918. <<http://391.org/archiveofdada/>>

sion and reaction resulted in the combination of art into a form that was never before seen. Known art categories represented an established order, which the Dadaists saw as restrictive and proposed to destroy. What started as a form of rebellion resulted in an aesthetic sensibility that demanded involvement of the senses in both the creative process and in the viewer reaction. This commitment to total sensual experience influenced writers, painters, poets, and performers to cross boundaries and mix modes of expression. Emphasis was placed on how a viewer experienced a work of art, not on the work as an embodiment of any single, established meaning.

The Dadaists would speak about the “death of art, of being against art, [and] disintegrating or destroying art.”<sup>48</sup> The term anti-art applied both the meanings ‘opposed to’ and ‘instead of.’ The work of the Dadaists attempted to break with every possible standard of style, taste, or convention that had been established by artists in the past. It often involved taking a confrontational or antagonistic stance and turned away from tradition. In the Dada Movement, the mass destruction of war shook the foundation of many people’s beliefs and value systems. The old rules of aesthetics in art no longer seemed to make sense, they felt that art had to be about something else. Dada artists introduced montage, the readymade, and chance into the practice of making art.<sup>49</sup> Marcel Duchamp although not directly associated with Dada groups also significantly impacted the revolutionary developments that were happening at this time in art. He is credit-

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<sup>48</sup> McEvelley, Thomas. The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism. McPherson & Co Publishers. 2005: 16.

<sup>49</sup> Molesworth, Helen. “From Dada to Neo-Dada and Back Again.” October. Vol. 105, Summer 2003. The MIT Press. <<http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.rollins.edu:2048/stable/3397693>>

ed with producing the fist in the genre of ready-mades. He experimented with techniques and subjects and looked to bring the focus of art not in the eyes but in the mind.

Artists continue to struggle with these issues and have a constant need to address ever changing problems related to art and life in a global consumerist society. Some of the Dada strategies that focus on spontaneity, absurdity, and montage offer one way to articulate a problem and possibly offer a solution. Some of these threads of ideas are present in contemporary performance art.

Certain theatrical performances and performance art have similarities, but contemporary performance art tends to be defined as an ephemeral event and authentic experience used to challenge traditional art forms and cultural norms, rather than a performance for the sake of entertainment. Performance artists often strive to challenge the audience to think about things in new and different ways. They tend to break down conventions about what art is and how it is made.

Contemporary artists continue to change and adapt the art form. In the 1960's and 1970's the variety of new works, concepts and an increasing number of artists led to a new level of popularity for performance art. The 1970's have been described as the decade in which performance art moved from being an assortment of unconventional actions aimed at disrupting established ideas about the definition art to a fully accepted art form itself. The decade of the 1970's featured the increase in prominence of women performance artists. Much of the performance art of the 1970's was rooted in the feeling that the world

needed help and to help would require self-sacrifice.<sup>50</sup> This call for social activism transformed into art that often involved the artist hurting him or herself. Performances were enacted as a way of appealing to the public as well as shocking audiences into reassessing their conception of art and its connection to culture through the themes of violation, shame, and sexual exploitation.

This tradition of performance art illustrates that aesthetics can be used as a powerful tool for manipulating senses and advancing political agendas in the process. Allora & Calzadilla respect the power that art has to affect people, and they use it to promote social change. Allora & Calzadilla approach visual art as a set of experiments through which they wish to test their audience's ideas about themes such as authorship, nationality, and explore the associations between objects and their meanings.<sup>51</sup>

They are also interested in creating art experiences. In their work, they look to find meaning in the connection between sensory perception and cultural understanding of the meaning attached to such perceptions. The combination of different styles, often involving music, performance, and the relevance of the environment to the piece, makes their work become an experience in which the viewer is consciously participating.

John Dewey commented on the value of the senses and art. He stated, "Art is the living and concrete proof that man is capable of restoring consciously, and thus on the plane of meaning, the union of sense, need, impulse and action

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<sup>50</sup> McEvelley, Thomas. The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism. McPherson & Co Publishers. 2005: 227-228.

<sup>51</sup> Allora & Calzadilla. "Paradox" 1998-2002. Art21 <[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)>



characteristic of the live creature.”<sup>52</sup> Dewey explains that art is the union of the senses and the intellect. This is why in the work of Allora & Calzadilla it is essential to appeal to the senses; they want their viewers to use both the power of their senses and their intellect. The artists are suggesting to their viewers that their learned reactions, ideas, and responses to the feelings their senses are stirring up are valid and these responses need to be carefully considered.

Working together as artists and activists, each with their own different cultural background, has led Allora & Calzadilla to question means of communication, the challenges with language, and verbal associations used in rational means of making political impact. For this reason, much of their work targets the senses, erasing the boundaries of what has been understood as art, and combining high and low forms of art to appeal to their viewers’ senses.

Dewey’s message is seen in the context of Allora & Calzadilla’s work where the viewer’s perceptions become part of the work, thereby emphasizing the importance of and questioning the various interpretations of these perceptions. Dewey states, “that life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it; through interaction with it.”<sup>53</sup> They often incorporate basic objects that are used as metaphors for objects with historical, cultural and political meaning and display them in a way which challenges the viewer to reconsider these meanings and associations. For example, their piece *Revolving Door* features a group of dancers lined from wall to wall blocking the visitor’s way through the

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<sup>52</sup> Dewey, John. Art as Experience. Penguin Group, New York. (1934): 12 & 26.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid*

space; the line slowly rotates allowing the public to pass as if through a revolving door. The dancers' movements are inspired by political protests, military marches and chorus lines.<sup>54</sup> In this piece the dancers become a metaphor for a revolving door; their movements combine many different historical and cultural references, which then allows the viewer to reconsider the pageantry and performance associated with military displays in juxtaposition with the agitation and unrest associated with a protest.

Many rational arguments are often tangled in political agenda and propaganda and can be just as exploitive as emotional appeals. Allora & Calzadilla are asking their viewers not to just accept things as they are presented to them but to also think about the significance the art experience has to them in a cultural and historical content. Danto suggests the importance for the contemporary artist to have an audience look at artwork with 'an innocence of the eye.'<sup>55</sup> As a collaborative duo from diverse backgrounds, Allora & Calzadilla understand first hand how images, sounds, and actions mean different things in different cultural and historical content. They produce artwork that attempts to strip away all pre-conceived ideas and get people to look at things with an innocent eye. Once the viewer does this he or she can better understand why they interpret things as they do. People can no longer trust just what they see, they can no longer believe everything they hear, but their senses are not failing them, their senses are being manipulated.

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<sup>54</sup> Allora & Calzadilla. *Revolving Door*, 2011. Performed for '11 Rooms,' Manchester International Festival, 2011. <<http://www.14rooms.net/en/Artists/Allora-and-Calzadilla>>

<sup>55</sup> Danto, Arthur. The Transfiguration of the Commonplace: A Philosophy of Art. Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA. (1981): 36.

Allora & Calzadilla create art experiences to find meaning in the connection between sensory perception and cultural understanding of the meaning attached to such perceptions. Their work has been in several locations around the world, each with the same environmentally specific social, cultural, and political considerations.

## **V: Allora & Calzadilla - Paradox and Metaphor Create New Understanding**

For more than a decade the artists Jennifer Allora and Guillermo Calzadilla have formed a unique partnership. After meeting on a study abroad trip in Florence they became partners, and have worked together since creating an innovative way of incorporating political and ethical ideas into artwork. Jennifer Allora is American, born in Philadelphia in 1974. Guillermo Calzadilla was born three years earlier in Cuba. Jennifer Allora received a Bachelor of Art degree from the University of Richmond, Virginia in 1996, and a Master of Science from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 2003. Guillermo Calzadilla's education includes a Bachelor of Fine Art from Escuela de Artes Plasticas in San Juan, Puerto Rico, completed in 1996, and a Master of Fine Art from Bard College in 2001. They currently live and work in San Juan, Puerto Rico. They continue to be inspired by the cultural experiences of their surroundings, and seek to make artwork that challenges viewers to look at things differently and often makes a statement without the shortfalls in communication known to be associated with language, symbols, and sounds.

Much of their work deals with the theme of conflict. In an interview with Carlos Motta from Bomb magazine, Guillermo Calzadilla explains this idea of conflict as an aesthetic force, saying,

We see a fundamental relationship between violence and form in the sense that the creation of all forms entails a certain violence—the exclusion of everything the said form is not. The idea of “conflict as an aesthetic force” is much more troubling for us, as it asks how social violence in the form of conflict affects sensory values and taste. This is a

provocative question that opens up new angles we hadn't considered before in the relation of our work to militarism and music.<sup>56</sup>

Calzadilla suggests that his understanding of violence is often through exclusion. This exclusion has often throughout history been a result of warfare or political conflicts: people being divided, land or territory being partitioned, or rights being revoked. Calzadilla continues to explain how military conflicts have in many cases also brought cross-cultural influences to the art and music scene in different regions. Both the themes of exclusion and influence are important to their work as they look to examine how culture has changed due to what has been removed and what has been given new meaning and comment on the meaning of so-called "truths." Allora & Calzadilla identify themselves as both artists and activists. In their collaboration, they use metaphor to make historical, cultural and political statements out of their chosen, often basic, materials. They create relationships between aesthetics, perspective, sensibility and taste, and how people relate to a subject to address conflict. Presenting their ideas with metaphor and using aesthetics helps give viewers the opportunity to gain new insights and meaning. This becomes a powerful tool in reshaping society's way of looking at, identifying with, and being influenced by things within a community.

Allora & Calzadilla inspired by the cultural experiences of their surroundings, and seek to make artwork that challenges viewers to look at things differently. Their work often makes a statement without the shortfalls in communication known to be associated with language, symbols, and sounds. Much of their

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<sup>56</sup> Motta, Carlos. *Bomb magazine*. September 2009. Edited by Nick Stillman. <<http://www.carlosmotta.com/text/example-text/>>

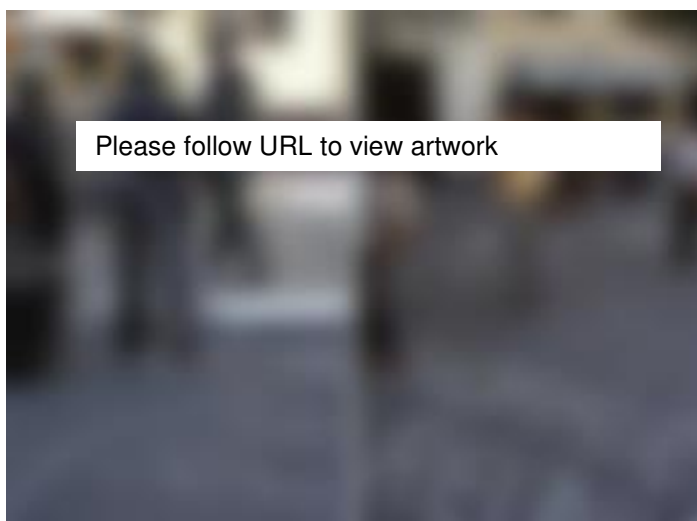
work deals with the theme of conflict. Calzadilla explains that his understanding of violence is often through exclusion. People are divided as a result of war, political conflicts, association with land of territory, or unequal rights. Calzadilla continues describing how military conflicts have in many cases also brought cross-cultural influences to the art and music scene in different regions. Both the themes of exclusion and influence are important to their work as they look to examine how culture has changed due to what has been removed and what has been given new meaning and comment on the meaning of so-called “truths.”

Allora & Calzadilla create relationships between aesthetics, perspective, sensibility and taste, and how people relate to a subject to address conflict. Presenting their ideas with metaphor and using aesthetics helps give viewers the opportunity to gain new insights and meaning. This becomes a powerful tool in reshaping society’s way of looking at, identifying with, and being influenced by things within a community. In their work, Allora & Calzadilla tend to combine objects in a way that causes the audience to re-examine the objects’ meaning. Their work has a close connection to the social, cultural and political environment in which it is produced. Many of the themes they are working with are a thoughtful response to the determined site where the artwork will be produced.

Their work has been in several locations around the world, each with the same environmentally specific social, cultural, and political considerations. The oldest and most common forms of public art include monuments, memorials and statues. Art has often been displayed in public spaces to attract large populations to sections of cities. Public art ranges from large-scale, commissioned

work, which is often supported by the government to encourage residents and visitors to enjoy and appreciate it; to small-scale works that require no funding.<sup>57</sup>

Public art was often an integral part of society linked to rituals or designating gathering places, and this tradition has continued. Exposure to art in public spaces has formed an important part of many cultures, helping viewers to enhance their perceptions, increase their ability to reflect and speak fluently on aesthetic ideas.<sup>58</sup> Contemporary approaches to public art include various community-based projects frequently involving interactive, guerilla, performance or sound art.



Allora & Calzadilla. *Chalk Lima*. 1998.  
<http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/allora-calzadilla/chalk-lima-1998-2002>

The work, “Chalk”<sup>59</sup>, is an example of these goals working together in one piece. “Chalk” was produced in Lima’s central square where the artists provided enormous pieces of chalk to the public, who were invited to use it to write messages on the pavement. The artists placed two-

dozen pieces of 64 inch long chalk in the public square, which is generally known as a space for self-expression. The medium of chalk was chosen for very specif-

<sup>57</sup> <http://www.americansforthearts.org/by-topic/public-art>

<sup>58</sup> <http://associationforpublicart.org/public-art-gateway/what-is-public-art/>

<sup>59</sup> Allora & Calzadilla. “Chalk Lima,” 1998-2002. Art21 [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)

ic reasons. They wanted to explore peoples' associations with chalk as a tool for education. Chalk is fragile, organic, and ephemeral. The messages can also be seen to possess these qualities and also need to be handled with care.

*Chalk* elicited political commentary from the participating citizens. Angry political invective such as "Fat Rat" and swastikas were drawn side by side with doodles of hearts and declarations of love. The citizens were writing out their messages as a way to educate their government about their desire for equality and other needs. One message can be translated as, "Someday we all will be one." In Lima, the citizens are only allowed to make statements about their government, in that square, at specific times. Allora & Calzadilla's work provided an outlet for the citizens' messages to be more concrete. By using an art form, performance, this social criticism may have been more tolerable to the government. However, three hours into the artistic expression, government officials "arrested" the artwork, taking away the chalk pieces and washing the streets clean.<sup>60</sup> This piece combines several different artistic styles including sculpture (over-sized chalk), drawing, and performance in a specific location to expressing the message of the citizens desire to participate in free speech.

Allora & Calzadilla create art experiences to find meaning in the connection between sensory perception and cultural understanding of the meaning attached to such perceptions. The artists explain how this piece exemplifies this aim by saying,

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<sup>60</sup>Allora & Calzadilla. *Artcaste* on-line magazine. 6/2011. <[www.artcaste.com](http://www.artcaste.com)>



We were interested in the matter-of-factness of what chalk is- a tool- something you find in the classroom. But it's also a geological substance, found naturally in the earth. Because of its nature, it is ephemeral and fragile. It's a beautiful white form, minimal looking and very clean- but paradoxically it's also something that can have a connotation of something dirty because it is used to mark a surface. This was interesting, how this material could be symbolic, iconic, and also nothing else but itself. It was like trying to think about or reconcile a minimalistic form made of this material and putting it in a public setting to see what might unfold. (Allora & Calzadilla).<sup>61</sup>

This draws on the performance art tradition by working out of any traditional artistic practice to focus attention on the human beings. Here the artists used a non-traditional artistic practice to examine the complex intersection between global politics and personal identity. This unique combination redefines art world aesthetics and aims to activate social change.

Their work has been in several locations around the world, each time suited to the environmentally specific social, cultural, and political considerations of the location. The relevance of the environment to most pieces of their work is key to understanding these connections. *Chalk* seems to make a statement about whether or not the citizens of Lima are truly allowed a voice in government, for which that public square was commissioned. Placing the chalk there soon caused the government to react by removing the chalk and washing away the messages; which might lead one to question their openness to statements by the public. In this work and other that Allora & Calzadilla create; the viewer is often consciously participating in the art experience. Allora & Calzadilla's work exem-

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<sup>61</sup> Allora & Calzadilla. "Chalk Lima," 1998-2002. Art21 <<http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/allora-calzadilla/chalk-lima-1998-2002>>

plifies the importance of the site or environment in relation to their aesthetic choices.

Allora & Calzadilla's work in Vieques, Puerto Rico is an example of how the location determines the specifics of the work. The island of Vieques has been a site for protest and civil unrest for decades. In 1941 the eastern and western edges of Vieques were acquired by the United States. The site was used as a Navy Training Facility, where naval strategies were practiced. The land was used to store ammunition and test explosives. It was also rented to U.S. allies for this purpose as well. In 1998 alone, 23,000 bombs were dropped in the impact zone of the firing range.<sup>62</sup>

For years the local people of Vieques have fought to have the testing ground moved and to reclaim the land. In her thesis for her Master's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Jennifer Allora discusses questions of ethics concerning this use of land. Her work with Calzadilla, *Land Mark: Towards an Alternative Testing Range, Vieques, Puerto Rico*, looked to illustrate some of these ethical questions regarding the meaning of land being taken over and marked for certain purposes. What statement does it make politically about colonization and the concerns of colonized people? How has their culture changed by the people of Vieques being excluded from this land? How do they relate to the US government making this decision? In 2003 the U.S. Department

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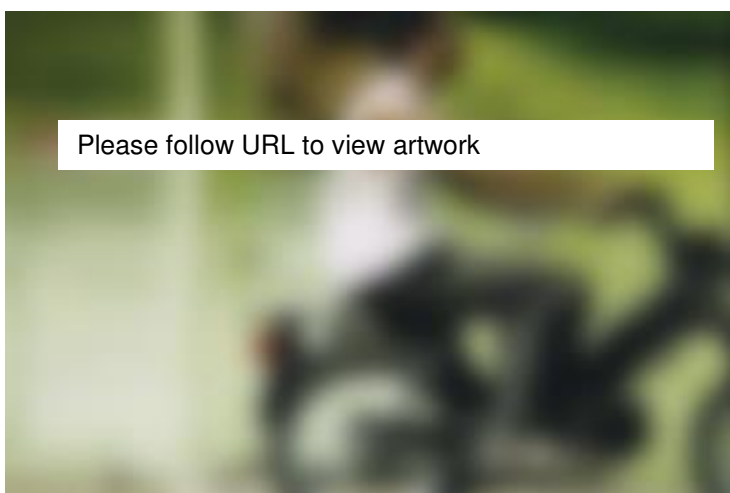
<sup>62</sup> Allora, Jennifer. *Landmark: Towards an Alternative Testing Range, Vieques, Puerto Rico*. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, thesis document for Master of Science in Visual Studies. September 2003.

of the Interior was given ownership of the land and areas of the island were rezoned as wildlife refuges.

Allora and Calzadilla respond to these questions by creating three pieces in Vieques, “Under Discussion,” “Half Mast, Full Mast,” and “Returning a Sound.”<sup>63</sup> These pieces were made over the course of a decade and were first

shown together in London in

2011.<sup>64</sup> They show the removal of the military from the land as a victory for the locals that has initiated a continuing debate about the future of the land. The works “Returning a Sound” (2004), “Under Discussion” (2005), and “Half Mast/Full Mast”



Allora and Calzadilla, *Returning a Sound*, Vieques, Puerto Rico. 2004. <<http://www.pbs.org/art21/images/allora-calzadilla/returning-a-sound-video-stills-2004?slideshow=1>>

(2010) address the complicated history of Vieques. They question the violence that is involved when marking a space as a military zone and how the past value of the land, to the native inhabitants of the island, was overruled by the value of this land for a testing site accessed by the colonizing power (the US government). After a civil disobedience campaign waged by local residents and supported by many others around the world, the US Navy discontinued its use of the

<sup>63</sup> Allora & Calzadilla. “Returning a Sound. Vieques, Puerto Rico.” 2004. BOMB 109, Fall 2009. <<http://www.carlosmotta.com/text/example-text/>>

<sup>64</sup> McKee, Yates. “Allora & Calzadilla: Vieques Videos 2003-2010.” Cornerhouse Publications. Manchester. <[www.cornerhouse.org](http://www.cornerhouse.org)>

land. The Vieques series combines the juxtaposition of familiar objects and participation of locals to address the complex issues still present on the land.

Allora & Calzadilla work with everyday objects but repurpose them in unique ways in order to illustrate the point they want to achieve with their work. In this case a simple conference table is overturned which symbolizes the absurdity of the discussion being exclusive to those who are most affected by the decision regarding the fate of the land. Then the table is mobilized, a metaphor for the need to get the discussion moving forward. The use of juxtaposition continues as the performance travels along the coast contrasting beautiful bright blue white and white sand beaches with bomb craters, tanks, and evidence of explosions.

The land was used by the United States Navy as a bomb-testing range from 1941 until 2003. The US military restricted its use to the residents; not only were they excluded from the land marked for testing, but also the residents' own space was contaminated by the continual sound of the bombs dropping. The artists consider the role that sound played in this conflict when then conceptualized and created the performance piece, and they use materials in an unconventional way to highlight this point. "Returning a Sound," is the first of the series and features a man named Homar, who travels around areas of the island that were forbidden to the residents for decades. He rides a moped that has a trumpet attached to the exhaust pipe, which emits sounds of various pitch as the moped travels along the land's terrain. It's an interesting juxtaposition because the ex-

haust pipe is usually used to muffle noise but in this case it is used to call attention to sound.

This performance is celebrating the victory that the local residents achieved in getting the land demilitarized. The artists call the sound created an “anthem,” explaining that they chose the instrument because trumpet music is often associated with war and military.<sup>65</sup> Attached to the exhaust pipe, the trumpet makes a screaming noise while the driver is accelerating. The bumps and dips in the road also change the score of the trumpet. The sound of this piece of artwork is not just symbolizes the residents’ joyful exclamations but it is expressing the sound of the land itself as well. This noise was used to juxtapose the sound of the ear-splitting detonations that residents had been subjected to up to two hundred and fifty days out of the year. In “Returning a Sound” the conflict that drove the aesthetic choices of the artists was the violence related to the landscape of Vieques and the sonic noise that marked this place.

The artists take an instrument, the trumpet, typically associated with military and therefore violence and turn the tables of its meaning and associations by using it to express the voice of the people, the land, and their joy in reclaiming this space. Music is a prime example of how the senses can be used to invoke meaning, evoke emotions, and provoke reactions. In the BOMB magazine article, Jennifer Allora explains,

Sound has played a major role in many of our works. It is a very interesting territory to explore because of [...] its affective nature. Sound literally touches. The vibrations produced by sound move tiny bones inside

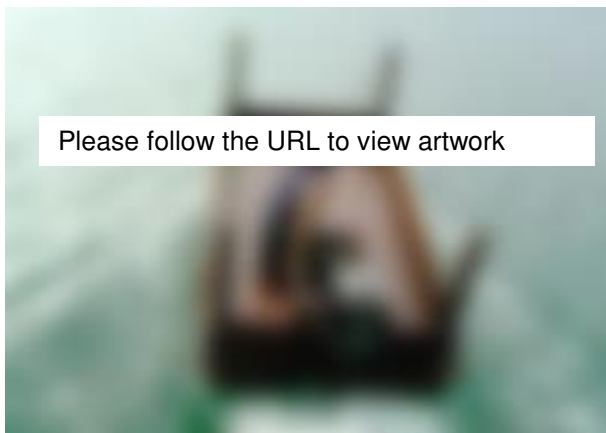
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<sup>65</sup> Allora & Calzadilla: “Vieques Series.” Indianapolis Museum of Art. March 2012. <[www.imamuseum.org](http://www.imamuseum.org)>

our ears. This stimulation is registered first as an intensity (affect) to which the body responds with feelings, emotion, and cognition. The sensorial experience of sound—physical, bodily effects—unformed, unstructured and prior to any attribution of particular meaning is perhaps what people refer to when they say a musical experience is “moving.” How our senses, our emotions, our beliefs, and our judgments are mediated through affects and resonances constitute a very rich line of inquiry within the larger terrain of the bio-politics of embodiment, especially since it foregrounds the body as the material site from which people are connected to each other and to the world at large.<sup>66</sup>

The artists thought about what this sound would evoke in the residents of Vieques and what trumpet music meant globally concerning war. They see that people can be mobilized by music and they interpret how this can be used as a social influence.

The next performance piece Allora & Calzadilla conceptualized and created in the Vieques series is called “Under Discussion,” it follows Diego, the son of



Allora & Calzadilla, *Under Discussion*, 2005.  
<http://repeatingislands.com/2010/09/09/puerto-rico%E2%80%93based-creative-duo-allora-calzadilla-at-the-2011-venice-biennale/>

a local fisherman as he circles the island in a boat made from an overturned conference table with small motor attached. The boat travels along the coastline that has been riddled with deployed bombs when it was previously occupied by the military. These images are juxta-

posed by images of luxury resorts that have been built along the coastline since the land was turned over. A mobilized conference table symbolizes the need for

<sup>66</sup> Motta, Carlos. Bomb magazine. September 2009. Edited by Nick Stillman.  
<http://www.carlosmotta.com/text/example-text/> >

peaceful discussion about the fate of the land. In an interview with Art: 21, Calzadilla describes their intention behind the work saying, “We got interested in the idea of the conversation being stuck, Nothing was moving, and that was a common frustration for everyone, so we started with the idea that we wanted to mobilize the discussion.”<sup>67</sup> A discussion about the fate of the land that should include representatives of people like Diego’s father, a local fisherman, who makes his living from the land, not simply a mandate from the U.S. government or the desires of wealthy investors.

The path of the work, “Under Discussion,” takes the table into the areas being debated. Diego follows the historic fishing route along the eastern side of Vieques. This is where fisherman first saw the damage being enacted to the local ecosystem by the bomb testing. They were not only concerned with the ecological destruction but also what it meant to their livelihood. These were the first members of the Vieques community to become involved in the fight to reclaim the land from the Navy’s bombing range; however, they were excluded from the conversation over policy that has been created since the Navy’s departure.

This draws on the Dada tradition of offering an absurd action as a way to confront and draw attention to a problem. Allora & Calzadilla’s performances of both “*Returning a Sound*,” and “*Under Discussion*,” offer the citizens of Vieques a way to relate and contribute to a problem that in general may seem overwhelming. They take a form that means something, like a conference table and turn it upside down and this process calls for people to see it differently. The artists

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<sup>67</sup> Allora & Calzadilla. “Under Discussion,” Art21 - Paradox. 2002 <[www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org)>

have chosen to take these pieces and perform them in an area where their presence has the most meaning. The same pieces displayed in a museum or gallery would not make sense. This follows the performance art tradition of functioning in a specific moment in time.

The third performance piece in Allora & Calzadilla's Vieques series is a video piece called, "Half Mast\Full Mast." The video of this piece is presented as two videos, filmed on the island, each projected one on top of the other. Each of the video projections shows a different landscape, but each depicts a flagpole in the center of the image. Together the images of the two projections create the appearance of one flagpole connected between the screens, despite the obvious different backgrounds. A gymnast appears on one screen then the other, in alternation. The gymnast grabs the pole and pulls his or her body parallel to the ground, taking the position of a human flag. When depicted on the top screen, the action resembles a flag at full-mast; on the lower screen it evokes half-staff. The associations of full mast are authority and security, while the half-staff position indicates mourning or distress. The display of gymnastic skill is a subtle but emotionally charged way of presenting the peaks and valleys in the struggle over this land. The sites portrayed in the videos were chosen because they symbolically mark either places of victory or setback in the inland's struggle for peace, decontamination, ecological justice, and sustainable development.<sup>68</sup>

This piece, like much of the artists' work, incorporates irony and absurdity to arouse discourse and consideration of controversial issues. Their artwork

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<sup>68</sup> "Allora & Calzadilla: Vieques Series." Indianapolis Museum of Art. March 2012. <[www.imamuseum.org](http://www.imamuseum.org)>



which combines performance, sculpture, sound, video, and photography targets areas of political tension. Often the photographs or videos of the performances are displayed at galleries and museum around the world. In this way, the artists' focus on issues of nationalism, environmentalism, presumptions of colonizing governments, and military and financial power can be examined by a global audience.

With this work Allora & Calzadilla present objects to be looked at in a new way, they also contrast the tradition of performance art, which in the 1960's and 1970's became associated with the artists performing the work themselves. This tradition gave validity to live performance by bringing the artist and the spectator into direct involvement with the work. The performance art tradition has expanded to include not just a single performers but instead a collective social group. Allora & Calzadilla have chosen people to perform their pieces based on their socioeconomic category, including local residents and workers. This creates a different kind of authenticity and connection to the work.

Allora & Calzadilla's work maintains a comfortable relationship with the gallery, using it as either a frame for the work or an exhibition space for videos or photographic archives of their performances. Sometimes they use the museum as a space to create an impromptu meeting between visitors and total strangers. For these cases, photographs or videos do not capture the intention of the work, these performances must be experienced to fulfill the transformative function of the art. The viewer almost takes on an active role. This type of work can lead to

conversations where cultural attitudes that divide people can be expressed. The museum can be used as a platform for this dialogue.

The idea of audiences participating in the performance of art work is not new. In her 1965 performance entitled, "Cut Piece," Yoko Ono invited audience members to pick up a pair of scissors and cut away her clothes. George Brecht would print up "scores" of simple tasks for spectators to do.<sup>69</sup> Years later, in her work "Rhythm O," Marina Abramovic laid still on a table for six hours waiting to see if visitors would pick up and use one of the seventy objects surrounding her. The objects included scissors, perfume bottles, and a gun. Reportedly many audience members used them to cut her clothes and pierce her skin, and might have shot her, had they not been restrained.<sup>70</sup> The violence experienced by the artist is key to the concept of the work.

In Allora & Calzadilla's work they explore violence but not as it relates to the specific artist performing the work. They work with the idea of violence as it relates to themes of nationalism, colonialism, and ecological destruction. Allora & Calzadilla's piece "Stop, Repair, Prepare," features a musician playing Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" from inside a cut out piano. Understanding that these works cannot be documented or represented any other way changes the piece and emphasizes the importance of the experience. Throughout history the intention with which the work was created and the meaning associated with it have

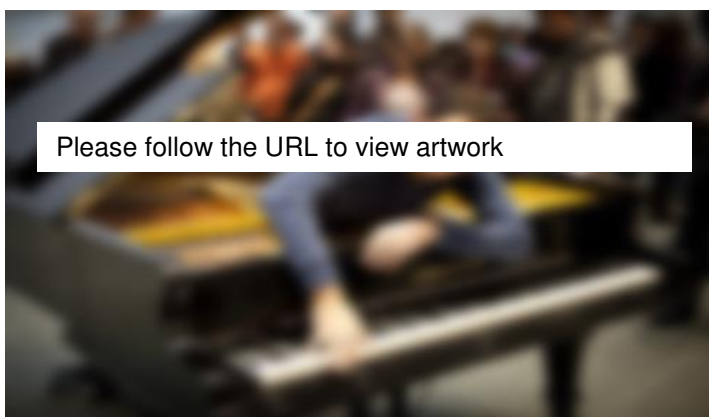
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<sup>69</sup> Yablonsky, Linda. "You Had to Be There." ARTnews (June 2009): 70-75.

<sup>70</sup> *ibid*

changed. Their piece changes it once more, motivating people to question why it is being presented to them in this way.

Music has often been used in warfare, and certain pieces of music have been chosen as anthems for regimes to promote feelings on nationalism. The artists continue to explore the ideas of how music affects individuals. In Allora & Calzadilla's piece "Stop, Repair, Prepare,"<sup>71</sup> present a piece that encourages the viewer to think about and question his or her association with certain music. In this piece, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy" is played from inside a cut out piano, in



Allora & Calzadilla. *Stop, Repair, Prepare*: 2008. (pianist Amir Khosrowpour shown).  
<http://www.moma.org/visit/calendar/exhibitions/1124>

which an octave of the strings must be removed to fit the performer inside. Different pianists performed the piece on various nights while it was displayed at the museum.

Changing the instrument and the performer this way also changes the composition and

sound of piece as well as its meaning. Beethoven would have never composed a piece with this hollowness. What does it mean to the viewer/listening to experience "Ode to Joy" without the richness and intensity with which it was originally created? The artists play with the ideas with which this piece of music has been

<sup>71</sup> Allora & Calzadilla. *Stop, Repair, Prepare: Variations on "Ode to Joy" for a Prepared Piano*. 2008. Prepared Bechstein piano, pianist (Amir Khosrowpour shown). Piano: 40 x 67 x 84" (101.6 x 170.2 x 213.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art.

associated. It was considered in Beethoven's time to be an anthem of German nationalism and universal brotherhood. Later, it was used by the Nazi party and played at the dedication of the Propaganda building. It was also conducted by Leonard Bernstein to celebrate the fall of the Berlin Wall and is now the anthem of the European Union.<sup>72</sup> With their piece, Allora & Calzadilla engage people to think about the messages and emotions connected with this piece of music.

While the pianist is playing he or she is also pushing the piano around the room. The artists present another paradox for the viewer to consider. What is the significance of the musician in this context? Is he or she trapped by the conceptions of the past linked with this piece of music? Or is he or she emerging into the present from the center of it and creating a new perception of the music? The artists may want the viewer to consider the piece as a commodity, with the musician pushing his product along. Is he a selling his art or talent as his labor, trapped by the piano as the clock traps the hourly worker? Allora & Calzadilla present many conflicts and give viewers a lot to think about while experiencing this piece.

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<sup>72</sup> Cotter, Holland. "Art in Review. Allora & Calzadilla," *The New York Times*. January 30, 2009.

## VI. The Idea of Art - On Conceptual Art

The artists Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei produce artwork with a message of social criticism. These pieces are often ephemeral and are displayed publicly or fashioned into conceptual installations that defy the high end art world structure and do not lend themselves to mass reproduction. In these ways Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei exemplify the idea that art has taken on a new role, beyond its aesthetic value, more than symbolic value into a role of being valued based on its social importance. The move beyond aesthetic value alters the definition of art and also broadens its limits as established, accepted, and understood by society.

These artists choose to produce work that becomes more difficult to fit into the capitalist system; works that are more experience based such as, installations or performance. These works often cannot be reproduced, bought, or sold. Working in this way, artists change the economic system associated with the high end art world. In his lecture titled, "The Author as Producer," Walter Benjamin discusses the idea that writers who support socialist reform must be mindful not only of the product which they turn out but also the means of its production.<sup>73</sup> This concept can also be applied to artists who seek social reform and hope to change their role in the art world. Artists who wish to resist the objectification of art, or wish for their work to be valued conceptually, and not necessarily monetarily, can choose to change the means in which it is manifested. These artists may

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<sup>73</sup> Benjamin, Walter. "The Author as Producer," Art in Theory 1900-1990 An Anthology of Changing Ideas. Edited by Charles Harrison and Paul Wood. Blackwell: Cambridge. (1934): 493-4.

choose create performance art experiences, conceptual installations, or even produce beautiful prints that are pasted to abandoned buildings for anyone passing to view freely. Benjamin suggested to change the result one must change the system, by producing art in these forms artists make it more difficult for their work to become a commodity.

Art objects have been valued for many reasons including, social, political, and aesthetic purposes. Some artists combine all of these reasons producing art that is also a social criticism. Artists who wish to use their work as social criticism look at a social issue and choose to address it in some way with their art. They realize that as artists they can raise awareness of important issues, give a voice to the powerless, or make people feel motivated to change in some way with their work. Artwork that is also a social criticism can be created in many different forms. The work of Ai Weiwei illustrates how the role of art has changed to encompass not just aesthetics, but social criticism as well, in the form of conceptual art.

Conceptual art, like Performance Art grew out of the Dada and Anti-art tradition. In America, the Dada Movement lasted a short time, dissolved somewhat perhaps by the more rudimentary problems of the Great Depression. The Neo Dada movement later emerged and became a somewhat lasting way in which culture deals with art. Many of these ideals of Neo Dada and Anti-Art became connected with the developments of Conceptual and Performance Art. The Dadaist idea that art should examine its own nature and Performance art

tradition of imploring the audience to seek meaning in the action presented combine in conceptual art.

The idea is the most important aspect of the work, in conceptual art. It drives the planning and making of the art. Marcel Duchamp's ready-mades were some of the first art pieces that question the role of art, the artist, and the gallery. Duchamp challenged the definition of art when he submitted "*Fountain 1917*," a standard urinal base signed "R.Mutt" for an art exhibition.<sup>74</sup> It was rejected although the group that organized the exhibition claimed that no art would be rejected. The artistic standard on which it was judged did not see a common object which was not hand-crafted or unique, and was not made with the intention of being art; as art. It's true that the piece did not meet these standards; however, the physical aspects of the urinal are irrelevant to appreciating Duchamp's idea.

Duchamp's readymades were ordinary manufactured objects that the artist selected and somewhat modified then placed on display and asked the viewer to look at them as art. In Sol Lewitt's article, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," he defined "conceptual" saying,

In conceptual art the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an artist uses a conceptual form of art, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the art. This kind of art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman.

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<sup>74</sup> Sullivan, Graeme. "Duchamp, Dewey, and a Fountain of Knowledge." *Studies in Art Education* 43.4 (2002): 291.

In the process of doing this Duchamp emphasized the importance of the idea over the visual example. This shift from art that was only visual, what Duchamp called "retinal art," to art that was based on an idea furthered diminished the possibility of defining art.<sup>75</sup> By displaying these works publicly he asked juries and the public to consider them and think, is it art? If it is not, why not?

This process embraced Dewey's idea of the importance of the aesthetic experience, in which the viewer partakes in the art. Duchamp stated, "the creative act is not performed by the artist alone; the spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contributions to the creative act."<sup>76</sup> Dewey saw this exchange as a communication between the artist and the viewer. Searching for meaning while viewing Duchamp's *Fountain* raised many questions about process of ascribing meaning to an image or object.

Conceptual art regained popularity during the 1960's partly as a reaction against the formalist ideal that had dominated the New York School of art. The influential New York art critic Clement Greenberg articulated his ideas that Modern art was following a process through which representative elements were progressively reduced or pushed further into abstraction. Greenberg expressed that the goal of this progression in modern art was to define the essential form of a

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<sup>75</sup> McEvilley, Thomas. The Triumph of Anti-Art: Conceptual and Performance Art in the Formation of Post-Modernism. McPherson & Co Publishers. 2005: 228.

<sup>76</sup> Sullivan, Graeme. "Duchamp, Dewey, and a Fountain of Knowledge." *Studies in Art Education* 43.4 (2002): 291.



medium. For example, a painting should be flat, a canvas with colored pigment, with no references to subject matter, figures, or illusion of depth.<sup>77</sup> For some conceptual art seemed to continue this dematerialization of art by removing the importance of the visual object; while others saw conceptual art as a break from Greenberg's ideas in that it often does not stay within Greenberg's stipulations of the confines of each medium.

Conceptual art can also be seen as a reaction the role of the museum or gallery and against the commodification of art. Duchamp's *Fountain* was rejected from the show in which it was entered, although it claimed to be a non-juried exposition. In this way Duchamp's conceptual art piece challenged and questioned the role of the gallery or museum as the location for and determiner of art. Conceptual art can be seen as a reaction against the commodification of art in that the work of many conceptual artists is only known through documentation of it, for example, photographs, essays, or objects displayed. From some works of conceptual art there is no material with which to document it. One example is Yoko Ono's *Instruction Paintings*, in which she displayed only instructions as painting. She went one step further from her previous exhibition where canvases were displayed with instructions attached to them. The *Instruction Paintings*, pushed visual art to an optimum of conceptualism where the art exists in idea only.<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Greenberg, Clement. "Modernist Painting." *Art in Theory 1990-2000*. Blackwell Publishing. Malden, MA. (1992): 773-779.

<sup>78</sup> Ono, Yoko. "Instruction Pieces." 1995. <[a-i-u.net/yokosays.html](http://a-i-u.net/yokosays.html)>

The study of signs and symbols shows that the image is a powerful tool for communication. Seeing the image as a tool for social, economic and political change leads one to question what are the pieces missing from the image? For example, Swoon saw in the most common advertisements around New York City the spotlight was focused primarily on one gender, race, and social class. The idea of a certain image was being communicated to her community. She decided contribute a different image to her community, highlighting images of people not of the dominate gender, race, or social class. Allora & Calzadilla take a an object commonly understood to be interpreted as one thing and ask viewers to look at it differently. Both of these ideas of using images to communicate with the viewer and challenging them to look at images differently are combined in conceptual art.

For Ai Weiwei the role of the artist is that of an activist. Using his art he calls attention to issues concerning censorship and oppression. Ai's work takes on many forms including internet activities, sculpture, architecture, music and video. His work has been highly and openly critical of the Chinese government. He investigated and blogged about the corruption and cover-ups concerning the student casualties of Sichuan earthquake and his own arrest and eighty-one day detention without any official charges being filed. He also creates work focused on drawing attention to issues of human rights and globalization. Using diverse techniques he creates conceptual art pieces that intelligently and provocatively encourages social reform.

## VII. Ai Weiwei - The Concept of Change

Ai Weiwei is a Chinese contemporary artist who works in sculpture, installation, architecture, curating, photography, and film. His work often reflects social, political and cultural criticism. His father, Ai Qing, was thought of as one of the finest modern Chinese poets, but was imprisoned and later exiled for his political beliefs. Ai Weiwei was only one year old when his father was sentenced to a labor camp and the family lived in exile for the following sixteen years, not returning to Beijing until 1976. He studied film in Beijing, and later moved to the United States, where he spent time in New York studying at Parsons School of Design and The Artists League of New York. He did not finish a program of study at either school, but he was exposed to the work of Marcel Duchamp, Andy Warhol, Jasper Johns, and befriended the beat poet Allen Ginsberg. Ai Weiwei began to work drawing portraits for people on the street corners in New York and later began creating conceptual art from ready-made objects. He returned to China in 1993 when his father became ill.

After his return to China, he helped establish the Beijing East Village, and worked to print the work of this group of experimental artists, resulting in three books, *Black Cover Book*, *White Cover Book*, and *Gray Cover Book* (1994-97). Ai Weiwei continued to curate projects, create installations, design architecture, and write his blog. His work deals with issues such as loss of value from rapid modernization, changes in perceptions of value due to mass production and globalization, and the concepts of 'real and fake,' especially as these concepts

relate to urban space and preservation of ancient cultural elements in China. Ai argues that 'altering' ancient architecture is not much better than destroying it.<sup>79</sup>

One platform Ai uses to communicate his ideas and political invective is his blog. Though he may be considered a very public and demonstrative artist he also operates in a way different from making material things through his blog. Similar to Ono's *Instruction Paintings*, Ai partakes in the importance of the idea stressed in conceptual art. Much of contemporary art focuses on the dematerialized object, a mixture of genres, and hybrids; for example, installation art or the combination of fashion and music, video, sound, and performance. Ai Weiwei's blog takes these elements and reshapes them into a platform for his social activism.

Many contemporary artists have incorporated ideas of conceptual art and social change into their work. Ai Weiwei looked to the internet and found a powerful communication tool for social change. He spent hours every day blogging; in this process he was able to connect with thousands of readers. His blog was more than just a treasury of his creative thoughts and artistic ideas; it was a revolution, full of provocative and controversial information and concepts. In an interview for the Hirshhorn Museum, Ai states, "I will continue using the internet, and as an artist, I think that this platform holds incredible potential and expressive features."<sup>80</sup> Art historians like Hans Ulrich Obrist has called Ai Weiwei's blog,

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<sup>79</sup> Molesworth, Charles. "Listening to and Looking at Ai Weiwei." *Salmagundi*. Proquest Research Library. (2012): 28.

<sup>80</sup> Ai, Weiwei. "According to What?" Artist Interview. Hirshhorn Museum. 2013.

<<http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/ai-weiwei-according-to-what/#collection=ai-weiwei-quote-2>>

“social sculpture.”<sup>81</sup> Ai Weiwei has been a working activist since free speech became a possibility in 1970. He works to expose truths (often hidden or distorted by the Chinese government) to the people. He actively fights for freedom by detailing examples of censorship and injustice at the hands of the Chinese government.

With a group of volunteers, he launched a ‘Citizens’ Investigation,’ in response to the government’s lack of transparency in revealing the number of students who died as a result of the collapse of their school during the Sichuan earthquake. Accusations of substandard school construction were circulated as the cause of the collapse and Ai Weiwei worked to compile the names and information of the young victims that the government refused to acknowledge. He posted his intentions for the investigation on his blog March 20, 2009, writing, “To remember the departed, to show concern for life, to take responsibility, and for the potential happiness of the survivors, we are initiating a ‘Citizens’ Investigation.’ We will seek out the names of each departed child, and we will remember them.”<sup>82</sup> Ai and his team interviewed local citizens and compiled a list of names of children missing or confirmed dead. In what appears to be a response to the actions of Ai and other Chinese activists; the government did release an official number of student deaths in the Sichuan earthquake; however, they never released the names. This number differs substantially from the number that Ai and

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<sup>81</sup> Ai, Weiwei. [Ai Weiwei’s Blog - Writings, Interviews and Digital Rants, 2006-2009](#). Edited and Translated by Lee Ambrozy. MIT Press: Cambridge, MA. (2011): 209.

<sup>82</sup> *ibid*

his volunteers collected, thus fueling his argument that the government is at best telling half-truths.

Ai continues to pressure the government to take responsibility for the poor construction of the schools which made it impossible to survive the disaster. On his blog he called for volunteers with engineering or technical expertise to aid in a “construction standards investigation.”<sup>83</sup> Two months later his blog was shut down by Chinese authorities. In August 2009, he was beaten by a police officer in order to be prevented from testifying in defense of fellow writer, activist, shoddy construction and student casualty investigator, Tan Zuoren. The beating by Chinese police led to Ai being hospitalized and undergoing an emergency surgery to relieve pressure on his brain caused by damage to his skull. Ai Weiwei’s studio was raided, he was later arrested and detained by the police and held for observation for eighty days with no charges filed. His wife and several employees were taken in for questioning. He now faces charges of tax evasion which Ai describes as the “fake case.”<sup>84</sup> The Chinese government retains his passport and even his movements within the country are monitored and restricted.

Since the earthquake Beijing has spent billions of dollars on reconstruction and many families have begun rebuilding their lives; but many remain incensed by the shoddy construction standards that allegedly led to the collapse of schools. Many are concerned by the state of society and its future course; if the

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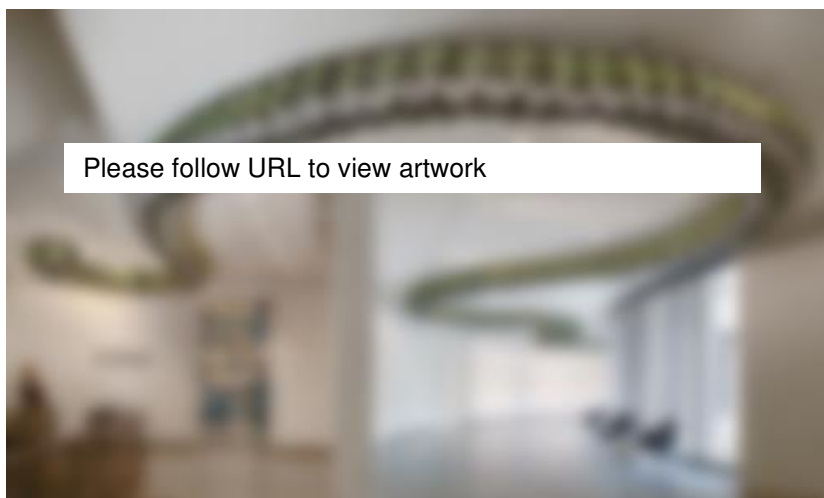
<sup>83</sup> Grube, Katherine. “Ai Weiwei Challenges China’s Government Over Earthquake.” *Art Asia Pacific*. July/August 2009; Issue 64.

<sup>84</sup> Molesworth, Charles. “Listening to and Looking at Ai Weiwei.” *Salmagundi*. Proquest Research Library. (2012): 28.

standards of construction are not improved than citizens have no hope of avoiding such disaster in the future.

Ai continues to honor the memory of the deceased children and memorial-

ize them in his work.



The installation, “According to What?”

originally displayed at the Mori Art Museum in Tokyo in 2009 and

has been recently

revised displayed at

the Hirshorn Museum in Washington,

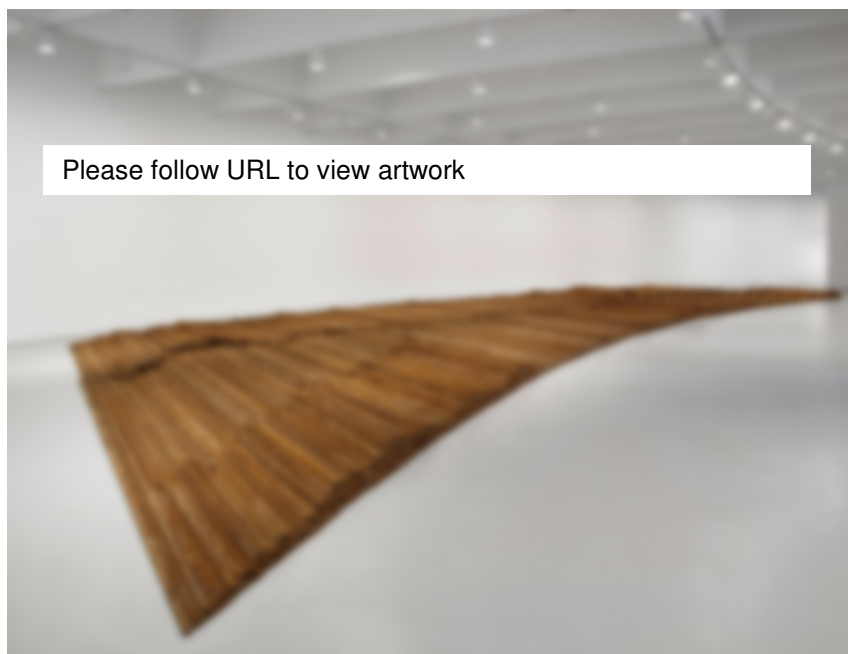
D.C. through February 2013. The most recent version of the exhibition includes several works that had not been displayed previously. The exhibition features a list of names and ages of the thousands of students who were killed in the massive earthquake. The list is printed in Chinese on white paper and takes up an entire wall. This work called, *Remembrance (2010)*, also features an audio track on which the names of the children are read and projected through loud speakers. The audio track takes three hours and forty-one minutes to play completely.

Ai Weiwei, *Snake Ceiling*, 2009. Installation view of Ai Weiwei: *According to What?* <http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu/collection/ai-weiwei-according-to-what/#collection=ai-weiwei-according-to-what&detail=http%3A/www.hirshhorn.si.edu/bio/ai-weiwei-snake-ceiling-2009/&title=Ai+Weiwei,+%E2%80%9CSnake+Ceiling,%E2%80%9D+2009>

Another work in this installation is *Snake Ceiling (2009)*<sup>85</sup>. It is composed of various sizes of backpacks each selected to represent the ages of the children that died in the earthquake. Ai traveled to Sichuan following the disaster where he witnessed and documented the debris and ruins. The backpacks represent the various disseminated objects found left behind in the wreckage of the schools. Hundreds of backpacks link together to form a snake.

The installation also includes, *Straight (2008-12)*<sup>86</sup>, a massive floor piece composed of steel rebar the artist collected from collapsed buildings. Thirty-eight tons of twisted

steel were collected, straightened, and arranged into an orderly pile with a seam running through the center; which conjures the idea of a fault line. The



Ai Weiwei, *Straight*, 2008–12.<  
<http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10000872396390443982904578044391183702084>>

<sup>85</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Snake Ceiling*, 2009. *Installation view of Ai Weiwei: According to What? at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington D.C., 2012. Photo: Cathy Carver.*

<sup>86</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Straight*, 2008–12. Collection of the artist. *Installation view at the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC, 2012. Photo: Cathy Carver.*



line formed by the various sized poles lying next to each other is reminiscent of the graph-like reading of a Richter scale. While sleek and minimalist, the painstaking arrangement of the steel rods come together to create a sizable piece measuring fifty-eight feet long and twenty feet wide. Each piece of steel rebar was pulled from the wreckage of the structures that failed to protect the children inside their school buildings. A quote is placed on a nearby wall in which Ai Weiwei states, "The tragic reality of today is reflected in the true plight of our spiritual existence. We are spineless and cannot stand straight."<sup>87</sup> This quote adds another level of depth when considering the piece, suggesting that the artist might be encouraging others to stand up for human rights; stand straight against corruption. Viewers can see subtle differences in the shades and tints of the steel bars. This can be interpreted as representing the individuality of all those who were lost.

The enormity of these pieces demands attention and can come across as confrontational. By working in this large scale the artist may be referencing the Chinese reality of enormous size. China is known for its brimming population, massive land dimensions, and feats of engineering both in infrastructure and society. The rest of the world cannot really understand the challenge of governing and maintaining a stable economy for 1.3 billion citizens. The artist might be trying to suggest that while this may be a difficult feat; there is no excuse for dehumanizing the masses. Ai Weiwei reminds his viewers that each one of the children that lost their lives is an individual; not just a number. His work expresses

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<sup>87</sup> Block, Melissa. "In 'According to What?' Ai Weiwei Makes Mourning Subversive." January 23, 2013. <<http://www.npr.org>>

his concern for his country's future, asks the government to realize the importance of treating citizens fairly and decently, and seeks a way to join dimensions and values.<sup>88</sup>

These works all represent how Ai combines ideas of conceptual art with his continued effort to seek truth, fight injustice, and challenge the government over issues of freedom. In his blog he truly embraces the spirit of conceptual art by introducing ideas combined with photographs and poetic musings to his viewers - creating art in a dematerialized form. At the same time he is mourning and honoring the students who lost their lives he is also exploring the concepts of real versus fake, human rights, and the urban landscape in these installations.

He takes these ideas and pairs them with art objects or artifacts to encourage the viewer to reflect on both the immediate issue of the tragedy close to home but also the impact and repercussions that exist globally. In his artist statement for the Hirshhorn Museum, Ai Weiwei states,

I have lived with political struggle since birth. As a poet, my father tried to act as an individual, but he was treated as an enemy of the state. My detention was an extreme condition for any human to endure. Many, including my family and the people who know me and care about the incident, were frustrated by the lack of an explanation or reason. Some of my life experiences have been tragic and painful, but I value them all. Going through these events allowed me to rethink my art and the activities necessary for an artist. I re-evaluated different forms of expression and how considerations of aesthetics should relate to morality and philosophy. These reflections give new strength to my work. I am able naturally to conceive of works that confront the accepted ethical or aesthetic views.

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<sup>88</sup> Foran, Charles. "Exhibit by dissident Chinese Artist Ai Weiwei Explains Why Size Matters." *The Globe and Mail (Canadian Newspaper)*. Aug. 10, 2013. <<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/art-and-architecture/exhibit-by-dissident-chinese-artist-ai-weiwei-explains-why-size-matters/article13689306/>>

I've always believed it is essential for contemporary artists to question established assumptions and challenge beliefs. This has never changed.<sup>89</sup>

He titles the exhibit *According to What?* to evoke this reflection. According to the numbers the government released, far fewer children died, and according to the government, the names and ages of the children are not important enough to document. If these lives do not matter, whose do? According to the government the construction standards should not be questioned neigh should their implications in this disaster. Can all of those questioning be silenced? Does the Chinese government want to hide these issues in order to preserve their established position in the global society and not look bad to their peers? Should preserving their own sense of dignity and authority surpass importance of basic human rights? These issues resonate far beyond the art world, and displaying them in a museum in Washington, D.C. at the doorstep of American policy-makers can be seen as a way to encourage a dialogue about these cultural, social, and political issues on a world-wide platform.

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<sup>89</sup> Ai, Weiwei. "According to What?" Artists Statement. Hirshhorn Museum. 2013. <<http://www.hirshhorn.si.edu/bio/ai-weiwei-according-to-what-artist-statement/>>

Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* is another work that can be compared to the exhibit *According to What?* Ai Weiwei created *Sunflower Seeds*<sup>90</sup> as part of his



Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010.

<http://www.aiweiweiseeds.com/about-ai-weiweis-sunflower-seeds>

series “Unilever” for an exhibition for the Tate Modern museum in London which opened in October 2010. The work was displayed in a large hall in which the artist lined the floor with a thick layer of handcrafted and painted porcelain sunflower seeds.

There were a total of 100 million seeds that weighed 150 tons. The seeds took over two and a half years to produce and are displayed in different forms, including a “heap of grain,” a grey “beach,” and the “carpet” (seen in Tate Modern).<sup>91</sup> When the work was first displayed, visitors were allowed to walk on the seeds. Over time the museum and the artist decided not to allow this because the dust created when the seeds rub together can be dangerous to one’s health if exposed over long periods of time. Juliet Bingham, the curator at Tate Modern, commented on the exhibition, saying,

Ai Weiwei’s Unilever Series commission, *Sunflower Seeds*, is a beautiful, poignant and thought-provoking sculpture. The thinking behind the work lies in far more than just the idea of walking on it. The precious nature of

<sup>90</sup> Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, Tate Modern, 2010. Original installation view, photo: Loz Flowers.

<sup>91</sup> Ai Weiwei. <http://www.aiweiweiseeds.com/about-ai-weiweis-sunflower-seeds>

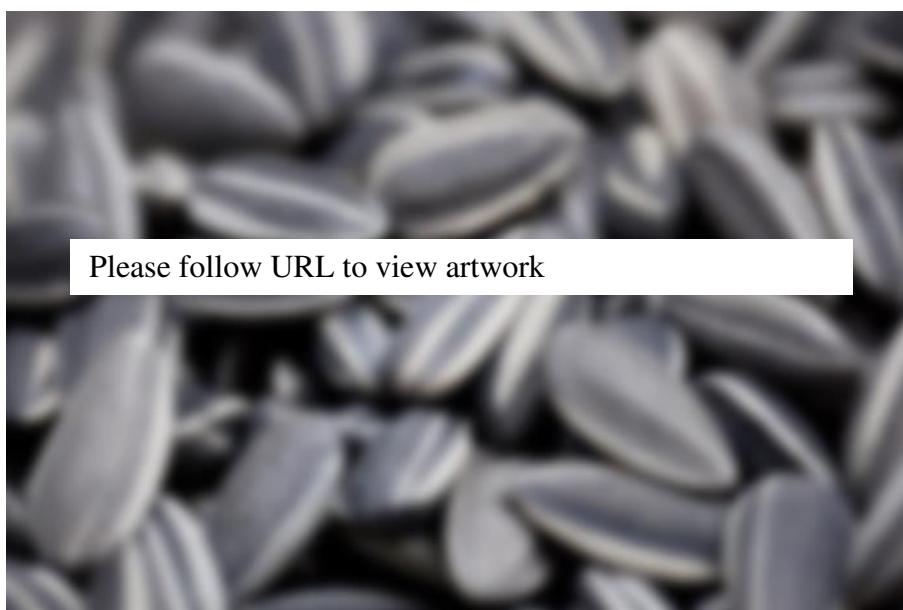
the material, the effort of production and the narrative and personal content create a powerful commentary on the human condition. *Sunflower Seeds* is a vast sculpture that visitors can contemplate at close range on Level 1 or look upon from the Turbine Hall Bridge above. Each piece is a part of the whole, a commentary on the relationship between the individual and the masses. The work continues to pose challenging questions: What does it mean to be an individual in today's society? Are we insignificant or powerless unless we act together? What do our increasing desires, materialism and number mean for society, the environment and the future?<sup>92</sup>

Since the original opening Ai has produced newer smaller versions of the seeds changing the total weight from 150 to 100 tons. The exhibition has been displayed in various versions at different twelve galleries.

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<sup>92</sup> <<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/exhibition/unilever-series-ai-weiwei-sunflower-seeds>>

In this work Ai once again challenges the Chinese by taking on the issue of the dehumanization of the individual. Every seed, a singular tiny sculpture, is hand painted, creating subtle and individual nuances. Then the individual seeds are combined on a mass scale to create a sea of similar looking seeds. Ai commissioned 1,600 artisans from Jingdezhen, the town that made imperial porcelain for over a thousand years to manufacture the seeds. They are made from kaolin clay from the local mountains and processed in a thirty step procedure before being hand painted and fired. This traditional method of crafting was once used to



Ai Weiwei, *Sunflower Seeds*, 2010.  
 <<http://www.aiweiseeds.com/about-ai-weiweis-sunflower-seeds>>

create China's most prized exports. Each step in the process helps to create little differences in the finished seeds. The sculpture can be seen as light the idea of

individualism in the very way in which it was made. Each one of the 1,600 artisans completed repetitive steps to make the seeds, just as millions of Chinese workers do in manufacturing plants each day. By ensuring that each seed is unique Ai brings into focus the significance of individuals. The seeds are made

in small shops by specialists; a process chosen by Ai Weiwei to create a juxtaposition between small craftsman and the hundreds of industrial workers producing products made in China. 1.3 billion Chinese citizens, like the seeds, may seem silent as a crowd but creates an imposing image of strength when gathered together.

The fact that Ai Weiwei chose to create this sculpture representing seeds is also significant. Sunflower seeds are something many people can relate to, an everyday object from the artist's childhood, and a common street snack in China. Sunflower seeds also evoke the memory of difficult times in the past during the Cultural Revolution and the era of socialist planned economy many Chinese people faced hunger and hardships. During this time the country was under the leadership of Chairman Mao, who was at times referred to as the sun. Mao is regarded as a controversial figure, credited with modernizing China, promoting the status of women, and improving health care and education, he helped establish China as a world power. However, he is often characterized as a dictator whose rule resulted in systematic human rights abuses, the deaths of 40-70 million people through starvation, forced labor, and executions. With the choice of sunflower seeds Ai Weiwei again combines his country's history, his concern for its future, and a great sense of hope. In an artist statement about the piece, Ai says, "Seeds grow...The crowd will have its way, eventually."<sup>93</sup> This statement illustrates Ai's hope that the seeds of reform that he plants will one day grow to make a better community.

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<sup>93</sup> <<http://www.aiweiseeds.com/about-ai-weiweis-sunflower-seeds>>

## VIII. Conclusion

This thesis argues that the artist Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei represent three approaches to art intended to challenge the limits of what we know as art and community. Swoon draws on a history of street art and graffiti to offer alternative view of society and build community. Allora & Calzadilla enact performances in the tradition of “anti art” in order to call attention to issues of public space and established power structures. Ai Weiwei uses his sculptures and other work to draw attention to his objections to actions of the Chinese government and the global issue of the individual in society; while documenting the very act of being oppressed and censored.

Swoon, Allora & Calzadilla, and Ai Weiwei choose to present art in ways which provide the viewer an experience and encourage social change. Each of these artists draws on different histories (street art, performance art, and conceptual art) to present art that work seeks to unite people. This challenges the art world system which creates art as a commodity and excludes certain members of society based on cultural, educational, or economical limitations, thus changing in the way art is valued. These artists, whose work can be seen as a form of social criticism, open the limits of what is possible in art, how art is defined, and the role that it performs in society. Swoon draws on a history of street art and graffiti to oppose expectations of public space and society. Allora & Calzadilla create performance based pieces that use paradox and metaphor. They call attention



to presumptions made by established power structures about the use of land, military power, and financial might. Ai Weiwei uses his blog, installations, and other work to challenge the Chinese government's oppression and censorship.

Artists whose work can be seen as a form of social criticism open the limits of what is possible in art, what art is, and the role that it performs in society. These artists continue to make art that builds community from the bottom up. This type of artwork can be interpreted through theorists like Danto, who proposes a redefined way of looking at art; and Dewey, who emphasizes the importance of an aesthetic experience as a way of encouraging the community to be informed, engaged, and fully awake.

Dewey's writings suggest that through the art object the artist and the viewer encounter each other beginning the process of the experience. They combine their physical and mental environments, as well as combining cultures; this connection between art and everyday experience is a platform for social change. Swoon describes her experience of making creating this kind of art experience saying,

You create a little opening into this child like part of themselves, it's usually a little ground down by the restless, grueling details of everyday and if you can break that open then there's suddenly this feeling of a lot more possibility and that the world is kind of stranger and there's a lot more going on then maybe you imaged five minutes ago. I feel that kind of space, the place where you believe in an infinity of possibilities, is the place within ourselves with which we are able to make positive change. That is what gives me strength...and being the these boats [Miss Rockaway Armada, Swimming Cities of the Switchback Seas, and Sismenia] and seeing this sense of wonder in people really gave me this sense of a lot of possibilities.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Callie Curry aka Swoon" [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com). Video. 20 Oct. 2012. *TED Talks For Aspiring Artists* <<http://tedxtalks.ted.com>>

Human beings divide themselves by social class, religion, and race. These divided groups do not always communicate well. Art with the goal of social change can be used as a way of helping people to share in the art of living.

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