

Lena Freeman
FLK 370
Final Research Paper

Activist Art and Social Change

In today's society, we are faced with many challenges, yet some communities are faced with far greater challenges than others. The United States is a diverse society, filled with multiple cultures, ethnicities, and genders. However, there is also a very strong emphasis on hegemonic white culture, as well as a strong preference of the heteronormative lifestyle. Although our country is considered as a diverse nation, there are countless people who identify as minorities based on their gender, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Often times, some individuals will identify with multiple minority groups, which creates intricate intersectionalities within their lives. There is often a great pressure for these individuals to fall within the hegemonic attitude of the heteronormative, caucasian, male dominated culture of the United States. Any resistance to these ideals leads to further marginalization and disregard of these individuals. To combat this silencing, artists have used their creative talents to gather awareness surrounding the issues that they often face. By using art as a platform of expression, one can broach topics that are difficult to discuss otherwise. Although throughout the course of art history, artistic endeavors are often created on an individual basis, countless other artists have used a collaborative efforts to give their messages strength and validity. Additionally, both in individual projects and collaborations, with the use of a participatory element between the audience and artwork, these projects often

will allow for expressive dialogue on the issues that the projects are attempting to address.

During the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic gripped the United States with fear. Before its classification, doctors were at a loss as to why higher reported cases of seemingly healthy men were dying from simple cases of pneumonia and rare forms of cancer (Mesch, 2013). As awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic became known, the gay community was stigmatized with the spreading of the disease as they were considered an at-risk community. However, during this time the US government failed to offer education on prevention, therefore “it is fairly certain that the State’s inaction led to the further spread of the disease...thereby indirectly allowing more citizens to contract it” (Mesch, 2013).

The AIDS Memorial Quilt was first conceived by Cleve Jones in 1985. During the annual memorial march of Harvey Milk and George Moscone, Jones learned that over 1,000 San Franciscans had already died of AIDS. During the march, Jones asked participants to write the names of friends, family and loved ones who had succumbed to the disease on placards. Later, these placards were taped to the walls of the San Francisco Federal Building. The collaged names created the appearance of a patchwork quilt, and served as the inspiration of the AIDS Memorial Quilt (“History of the Quilt”, n.d.).

As a continued effort of honoring the memory of those who had lost their battle with the disease, Jones and his friends created the first panels of the Quilt, and formally created the non-profit organization The NAMES Project Foundation with Mike Smith.

The public response to the project was overwhelming and the collaborative efforts that were soon to follow were staggering. In 1987, during the National March for Gay and Lesbian Rights on Washington, the Quilt made its first public debut at National Mall in Washington D.C. The Quilt included 1,980 individual panels and was widely received during its first exhibition. Later in the spring of 1988, the Quilt continued on a 20 city national tour which raised \$500,000 for various AIDS organizations (“The Inaugural Display,” n.d.). Since then, the Quilt has continued its efforts to promote education and serve as a memorial to those who have lost their battle with the disease. All 50 states, as well as 28 countries have submitted panels to the AIDS Memorial Quilt, which now includes 48,000 individual submissions. Since its creation, the NAMES Project Foundation has raised over \$3 Million towards promoting the education and awareness of the disease.

The AIDS Memorial Quilt and the NAMES Project Foundation have worked tirelessly towards promoting the education and awareness of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, while also creating a lasting memorial to those who have lost their battle with the disease. With the general assumption that those who contract the disease are individuals that live high-risk lifestyles, the topic of HIV/AIDS was considered a taboo issue. However, with the efforts of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, much has been done to remove the stigma surrounding the disease, and has put a personal perspective on the remembrance of those who have lost their battle with AIDS.

Another issue that is prevalent in American culture is the issue of domestic violence. Domestic abuse is often considered a silent issue in the United States. Victims

of abuse are often marginalized through silencing and victim blaming. Most often, domestic abuse happens behind closed doors, away from the public eye. With this delineation between the domestic sphere and the public sphere, there is often an attitude that if it doesn't directly affect our lives, then it doesn't happen here. However, the statistics of domestic violence rates are shocking. Rachel Anderson Droogsma (2009) states that information gathered in 2005 from the World Health Organization show that "worldwide, at least one in every three women reports having been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused" (p. 480). Unfortunately, there is often a negative stigma attached to the victims of domestic abuse, which continue to perpetuate the issue at hand. Victims of abuse are often times blamed for the actions of their abusers, implying that the victims are the instigators of the altercations. Additional pressure is placed on the victims to not label their partners as abusers, as these allegations are serious accusations. It is not uncommon that if and when women speak up about their abuse experiences that friends and family treat the victim with disbelief, saying that they could never imagine the abuser acting in such a way. These attitudes further marginalize the victims by nullifying their experiences, which lead to the silencing of the victim.

The Clothesline Project was created in attempts to change this attitude towards domestic violence. Droogsma (2009) explains that "[the Clothesline project] display consists of T-shirts anonymously created by survivors of abuse and loved ones in remembrance of the women and children murdered by abusers (p. 481). By offering a collaborative platform, victims are able to create a camaraderie by sharing their

personal experiences and narratives in a creative and healing manner. The freedom of expression in art can allow the artist to relive memories through their creative process, and in turn, can conjure memories in the viewer (Gregory, Lewton, Mattern, Schmidt, & Smith, 2002, p. 445). Symbolically, Minor suggests that “the clothesline represents the traditionally female task of washing clothes, whereas embodying the mission of the project by airing survivors’ ‘dirty laundry’ in public (as cited in Droogsma, 2009, p. 482). Additionally, Gregory, et. al., argues that “the process of creating a t-shirt requires that the survivor confronts her experience of violence. For some, this is a liberating experience in which the process of confronting memories of emotional and physical pain helps the survivor move beyond the fear (p. 439). Since the exhibitions of Clothesline Projects forces the issue of domestic violence and abuse into the public sphere, it allows these individuals’ stories and experiences to be heard. The anonymous sharing of their experiences allows victims to also remove the blaming and shaming that is often associated with expressing their experiences publicly.

On the individual level, the Clothesline Project is an important outlet that offers a platform for both the public and participants to confront the issue of domestic violence head on. By allowing for personal experiences to be exhibited publicly, conversation and individual viewer awareness surrounding the depth of the issue can happen. For the participants, it is apparent that the freedom of expression and collaboration makes victims of domestic abuse face their fears and their past experiences, which allows them to offer a level of healing. Martha Nussbaum states that “narrative art has the power to make us see the lives of the different with more than a casual tourist’s interest

- with involvement and sympathetic understanding, with anger at our society's refusals of visibility" (as cited in Lawless, 2001, p. 17). Yet on the grander scale of society, how does the Clothesline Project address domestic violence and the issues surrounding it? Gregory, et. al., argues that "though the Clothesline Project opens public spaces where the issue of violence against women is aired, it cannot, of course, guarantee that this will put the issue on the agenda of policy makers in more traditional political and public arenas" (p. 440). Furthermore, it is difficult to determine empirically whether or not the Clothesline Project has any direct effect on reducing the number of the cases of domestic violence (Gregory, et. al., p. 441). However, even though it is nearly impossible to directly correlate any reduction of reported cases of domestic violence to the Clothesline Project, it has the possibility of changing one person's awareness on the issue, which can lead to one less case of domestic violence. That one case can then lead to two fewer cases, then three, and so on and so forth, thus creating a domino effect on the resolution of of this issue. Another project that attempts to remove the silencing of victims of sexual assault is Suzanne Lacy's 1977 project, titled *Three Weeks in May*.

Three Weeks in May was created in the aftermath of Los Angeles being dubbed the "rape capital of the nation." Instead of idling accepting this label, Lacy teamed and collaborated with other activist artists to create a project centered around forcing the problematic issue of rape and sexual assault in American culture and the silencing of victims into the public sphere (Fryd, p. 23). Since attitudes towards sexual assault often

place the blame on victims, Lacy's project attempts to eradicate these attitudes and remove the silencing that victims often endure.

One of the keystone elements of Lacy's project was an installation titled *Maps*. With the statistical data collected from the Los Angeles Police Department, Lacy used two 25 foot municipal maps of the city of Los Angeles and stamped the word RAPE at the locations of reported rapes on one map. Lacy also stamped nine other fainter marks on the map to signify the estimated statistic that for every reported case of rape, nine other cases go unreported. The second map was highlighted with the sites that offer assistance and prevention, hospitals, crisis centers, and rape hotlines. The juxtaposition between the two maps was intended to show how widespread the rape crisis spans, and to counter the blame and victimization of the victims of sexual assault. The positioning of *Maps* also had significant symbolism. Housed downstairs from City Hall in the City Hall Plaza, the isolation of the installation was to also signify that the issue of rape, while still public, is not always in direct view of the public sphere. (Fryd, p. 29).

As performance piece to Lacy's project, *Talking With Women* was a participatory project that collected visitors stories to exhibition. In personal interviews, audience members told their stories of rape and sexual assault to the collaborating artists, who recorded their personal experience narratives by hand. Later, as an additional performance piece, collected narratives were displayed in *She Who Would Fly*, a highly stylized and symbolic performance. Visitors to *She Who Would Fly* were allowed to enter the gallery space three of four at a time. In the center of the exhibition, the skinned carcass of a lamb with wings was suspended, as if in flight. The stories collected during

Talking With Women were displayed throughout the room. Additionally, four nude women with their skin tinted red, sat perched in a loft space in the gallery. As visitors explored the gallery and read the collected narratives of the women, the four nude women gazed down on the viewers in a predatory manner. The unnerving presence of the four nude women was to manifest similar feelings that victims of sexual assault often report on the audience (Fryd, p. 31).

Three Weeks in May was able to gather a strong media following, and stimulate a high level of public conversation on the taboo issue of rape and sexual assault. This project has been one step in the counteraction of rape culture in the United States. However, like the Clothesline Project, it is difficult, if not impossible to empirically correlate any decline in the numbers of reported sexual assault cases and Lacy's project. Yet, the project has allowed for an open dialogue and stimulated conversation towards discussing the taboo issue of rape in the United States. Furthermore, one can hope that by offering platforms to share their experiences through projects like the Clothesline Project and *Three Weeks in May*, that the silencing of victims can be put to an end.

Although the collaboration of victims sharing their personal experiences through the Clothesline Project is one of the defining factors in its success, as well as the collaboration of multiple artists seen in *Three Weeks in May*, individual projects have the ability to stir just as much conversation and awareness. Emma Sulkowicz's project *Carry The Weight* is an activist performance project that has recently caused a multitude of heated debates over the past year. As student at Columbia University,

Sulkowicz's individual performance project protests university involvement in the handling of sexual assault cases. In 2012, Sulkowicz attests that she was raped by a fellow student, Paul Nungesser, whom she had been in a prior consensual relationship with. Roberta Smith (2014) of the *New York Times* writes that "In the aftermath, Ms. Sulkowicz suffered in silence, then filed a complaint with the university. This led to a hearing before a panel that found him not responsible, according to a campus newspaper report in *The Columbia Spectator*, a decision that was upheld upon appeal" (para. 9).

In response to the university's decision, Sulkowicz has created her senior thesis on her performance piece, and has vowed to carry a 50-pound mattress with her everywhere she goes on campus until her perpetrator is either expelled, leaves the school on his own accord, or until graduation; whichever comes first. Her performance serves as a visceral and symbolic message to viewers that portrays the emotional weight that she carries from her experiences, and gives a strong statement about the rejection of rape culture. Carry The Weight has also sparked additional activism in her fellow students as well to participate in her message. Rebecca Nathanson (2014) of *Rolling Stone Magazine* reports that "On October 29th, a group of Columbia University students left 28 mattresses on the steps of university president Lee Bollinger's house...representing the 28 students who have filed Title IX complaints against Columbia" (para. 1, para. 2). Although Carry The Weight has caught the attention of national media, it has not all been positive. While many have offered their messages of solidarity towards the expression of her work, she has also been branded as a liar.

True to the rules of her project, Sulkowicz graduated from Columbia University this spring, and with the help of four friends, carried her mattress with her across the stage during commencement. However, Emily Bazelon (2015) from *The New York Times Magazine* reported that the following day after graduation, “the campus woke up to nasty posters in the neighborhood, with a picture of Sulkowicz and her mattress and the words ‘Pretty Little Liar’ and ‘#RAPEHOAX’” (para. 4). Additionally, Nungesser has filed a lawsuit against Columbia University for gender discrimination. Although he has been cleared of any responsibility of his actions, Nungesser has been the target of hateful remarks, being labeled a rapist among other things. He feels that with the University allowing Sulkowicz to conduct her thesis project and receive academic credit for it, that he is being publically, and unjustly targeted. Nungesser argues that if the gender roles were reversed, the University would never allow a male student to target a fellow female student in such a publicly humiliating way.

The vast publicity of Carry The Weight has caused some significant changes within the university’s sexual assault and harassment procedures. Bazelon (2015) reports that “Students are now permitted to bring a lawyer to their hearings, and if they can’t afford an attorney, the university will provide one. The university also hired new investigators and other staff members and gave training on how to hear cases to the administrators who serve as panelists” (para. 16). Although the direct influence of activist art can often be difficult to measure, in the case of Carry The Weight, we are able to see that in light of the statement that Sulkowicz has made through her artistic endeavors, Columbia University has since made amendments to their procedures.

Although, it can be difficult to judge whether or not activist projects such as these actually have an impact on individual behaviors, it is apparent that these projects have forced seemingly taboo issues into the public sphere. By doing so, these projects can allow for dialogue on the topics, and allow for individual and personal reflection. While some projects have clear results on their impact on society and their ability to stimulate social change, others may have a much slower, trickle-down effect on the issues at hand.

In the case of the AIDS Memorial Quilt, over \$3 Million has been raised towards the promotional efforts of education and prevention in North America. These additional funds can lead to more literature on the disease, which in turn can lead to the education of individuals, and thus, leads to one less transmission of the disease. However, in the cases of the Clothesline Project and *Three Weeks in May*, there is little to no way to directly correlate the reduction of reported domestic abuse or sexual assault cases to these projects. Yet, these projects do serve a greater good, as they create platforms for victims to share their personal experiences in a creative platform, and allow for a camaraderie to grow between other victims. Furthermore, these projects allow for these taboo topics to be discussed openly, and allow opportunities for awareness, education and communication in the public sphere.

Resources

- Bazon, Emily. "Have We Learned Anything From The Columbia Rape Case?". New York Times Magazine, May 29, 2015. Accessed May 31, 2015.
<http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/29/magazine/have-we-learned-anything-from-the-columbia-rape-case.html>
- Droogsma, Rachel Anderson . "I Am the Woman Next Door": The Clothesline Project as Woman Abuse Survivors' Societal Critique." *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 2009, 480-502. Accessed May 1, 2015. doi:10.1111/j.1753-9137.2009.01049.x.
- Fryd, Vivien Green. "Suzanne Lacy's Three Weeks in May : Feminist Activist Performance Art as Expanded Public Pedagogy" *NWSA Journal*: 23-38. Accessed April 20, 2015. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4317229>.
- Gregory, Jill, April Lewton, Stephanie Schmidt, Diane "dani" Smith, and Mark Mattern. "Body Politics with Feeling: The Power of the Clothesline Project." *New Political Science* 24, no. 3 (2002): 433-448. Accessed May 16, 2015.
<http://web.b.ebscohost.com.libproxy.uoregon.edu/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=791d5e13-67d8-4ad3-ae72-b86b2774e4c1@sessionmgr115&vid=2&hid=107>.
- Lawless, Elaine. 2011. Introduction: Gathering Stories. In *Women Escaping Violence: Empowerment through Narrative*, p. 17. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Mesch, Claudia. "Gay Identity/Queer Art." In *Art and Politics a Small History of Art for Social Change Since 1945.*, 125-147. I.B. Tauris, 2013.
- Nathanson, Rebecca. "How 'Carry That Weight' Is Changing the Conversation on Campus Sexual Assault." *Rolling Stone*. December 1, 2014. Accessed May 31, 2015.
<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/how-carry-that-weight-is-changing-the-conversation-on-campus-sexual-assault-20141201>
- Smith, Roberta. "In a Mattress, a Lever for Art and Political Protest." *New York Times*, September 21, 2014, Arts & Design sec. Accessed May 18, 2015.
http://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/22/arts/design/in-a-mattress-a-fulcrum-of-art-and-political-protest.html?_r=0.
- "The AIDS Memorial Quilt." The Names Project RSS. Accessed April 29, 2015.
<http://www.aidsquilt.org/about/the-aids-memorial-quilt>.