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Contemporary Art and Modern Politics:
Reactions to activist art and why audiences interpret artworks as political

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Abstract

In this study I examine the major factors that lead to museum-goers’ reactions to political works of art. Why do some people react to a work of art while others do not, how do works create discomfort in its viewer and what went wrong if they fall short of producing a reaction? Political art is defined by its political content and its involvement of the public, so then the audience plays an important role in its politicization? What role are the viewers taking on within the context of the artwork’s exhibition, artistic intent, art historic background, general demographics, and the society? The politicization of art is an intersection of the context of the social world the art is being exhibited in and the cultural conditioning and person-specific characteristics of the person viewing the work. Main factors that impacted the reception of political art by a viewer can be divided into previous involvement with and exposure to the arts and identification with a marginalized population.
Introduction

The air is full of voices and conversation, it is the first Friday of the month and throngs of people are gathered around the art on display their reactions varying on a spectrum from political protest, solidarity, and everywhere in between. During my last summer as an undergraduate student, I worked at a nonprofit contemporary art museum in a small coastal town in Maine, known for its bustling art scene and the schooners and sailboats that occupy its harbor. The museum’s focus on exhibiting local artists and artists with a strong connection to Maine is the primary element of the museum’s founding. Being one of the two main museums in the town, it is a leader in the art community and offers a variety of educational programs and collaborates with other institutions to make art more accessible. With a focus on accessibility, the museum prides itself on being able to bridge the gap between the sometimes elitist world of the art educated and the general public. The museum turns over its galleries three times a year and with no permanent collection, a variety of artists and artworks are in constant rotation, offering a wide range of contemporary art from all walks of life.

During my summer working there, I observed the reactions the museum goers had to the exhibitions on display. One of the exhibitions from the summer addressed the election of the Trump Administration through steel sculpture that used metaphors such as caged birds, a giant wall script that said “Dream On” written in barbed wire, and a trumpet—a reference to the current president’s surname. The sculptures represented the artist’s personal politics and protest to the ideologies, specifically immigration-related, held by President Trump and his colleagues. Another was a walk-in cardboard and black paint installation of an upside-down flooded artist’s studio which was created as a way to explore the devastation hurricanes can bring. The third exhibition was a photography exhibit that blended portraiture and landscape photography with whimsical
ethereal thematic consistency throughout the photographs. The subject matter of the photography was primarily nude women with bodies that do not conform to societal beauty standards and rotting fruit. Complementary in medium and narrative the exhibitions that were on display offered a broad and full commentary on the variety of social issues that have perforated the art world from the political sphere.

Working at the front desk one day, a woman came in and made a huff about how the museum was not free and unwillingly she paid the $8 admissions fee. On her way out, after spending a brief couple of minutes perusing the three galleries, she made a point to stop at the front desk to talk to me. “It wasn’t worth the $8, maybe $4 but not $8” she said, waited for a moment for a response, I apologized, and then she stalked out of the museum. She had paused before leaving, perhaps hoping that I would reimburse her for the admissions fee. I was surprised because I was used to hearing the visitors to the museum sing the praises of the exhibitions. Many talked about how wonderful it was to have these three well-known artists exhibiting in the same place and how the works were well executed and moving. I had never come across a reaction like that to the three shows that summer, but it was not alone. My coworker also reported a woman storming out, upset at the portrayal of older women in the nude, demanding that the more traditional, young and slim, models be used in future work. I was baffled by how rudely these two visitors to the museum dismissed and ridiculed the exhibitions that the majority of museum-goers who came through praised.

The three exhibitions received both high praise and criticism from critics and viewers. As an employee of the museum, I watched first-hand the broad spectrum of reactions to the exhibitions there were. These exhibitions created a dialogue between each other that sparked conversation among the viewers of the art, some questioning it, some being turned off by the narratives in its
content, and others praising it for its progressive nature. Witnessing these interactions between viewer and artwork sparked a plethora of questions for me: why was this art taken as political by some viewers and not others and furthermore when it was perceived as overtly political what made that viewer see political messages in it? These are the questions I try to answer in my study.

**Literature Review**

*Context and Politicalization of Art*

Art is a tool, the product of an artistic process, which becomes political when artists attempt to convey political messages and audiences interpret their works as political. Chan (2017) in her analysis of Ellen Gallagher’s exhibition *Watery Ecstatic Series* looked at how art acts as a metaphor to convey messages that are relevant to the current politics of Blacks in America through the retelling of old African myths. Contemporary art then is partly defined by its narrative qualities through metaphoric display (Chan, 2017). Art is not just the final product but the culmination of the intentions and ideas behind the process through which it is created, and the meaning imbued by the artist (Dubin, 1992). Art can function as a tool that the artist uses to reveal truths to the public, but its interpretation relies heavily on how it is defined and if its defined as political by its viewers (de la Fuente, 2007). As a tool for viewers to understand the complexity of social change, art engages with its audience through conceptual and metaphorical messages and is reflective of the social climate and the viewer’s own personal biases (Mullin, 2003; 2000; Griswold, 1978). Mullin (2003) used Peggy Diggs’ *Domestic Violence Milkcarton Project* as an example of how political art is a collaboration between artist and audience in her study of activist art. Diggs’s work was representative of the artist’s own political intentions but also relied on the audience’s—the victims of domestic abuse—own personal reactions to the piece to complete its intended function as a political artwork (Mullin, 2003).
From the historical setting of the artworld to the contemporary scene of today, art has become more politicalized and intentional in its addressing of social change. Political artwork does not have a coherent stylistic approach but rather a thematic message, interacting with the audience in an inherently political manner (Mullin, 2003). Examples of Mullin’s (2003) case that political art has no fixed style or medium would be Renée Cox’s *Yo Mama’s Last Supper* and Mel Chin’s *Revival Field*—the works being entirely different—one photography and one installation art, but both considered very political. Political art has left behind the requirements of being the product of a rigorous and traditionally trained artist who historically produced visual retellings of events and religious tales (Gielen, 2011). Artists such as Leonardo da Vinci who endured years of training have been replaced by contemporaries such as the Guerilla Girls—a group that uses text and graphics to create art combating various issues regarding gender—who did not go through the same traditional training as da Vinci. Art has become more political as societal norms change and art becomes a manifestation of these changing values and conditions (Dubin, 1992; Mcneely and Shockley, 2006). Art is politicalized through its role as a cultural object because it holds power as a visual representation, therefore institutions that exhibit art do so accordingly and take into consideration the political connotations of the artwork (Roslak, 1991; Schudson, 1989).

The context of art production and its politicization is heavily reliant on different variables such as the economics and the identity of the society at the time. Criticism of the arts becomes the perfect target and distraction in times of upheaval so political unrest and political artworks become more controversial during more politically unstable times (Dubin, 1992). Dubin (1992) noted the shift in the subject of artworks, controversial topics like sex, race, religion, and power—for example brazen sexual depictions such as Robert Mapplethorpe’s photographs—disrupted the status quo of the artworld and startled its audience. Societal conditions thus enable artworks to
become inherently political through the frameworks that the current society observes the art piece (Fischer, 2007). The social context—economic, political etc.—influences the personification of problems through the interpretation of artworks (Dubin, 1999; Sandoval, 2014). Dubin (1992) looked the social issues of race and class in Chicago, IL in the 1960s and the censorship of arts at the time using David Nelson's *Mirth and Girth* as an example. Washington, the subject of *Mirth and Girth*, had just passed away and the population, in the process of mourning him, reacted to Nelson’s painting accordingly (Dubin, 1992). When the social climate requires that social change become visible, art is then viewed through the lens of that need, becoming political due to the contextual requirements of the society (Dubin, 1992; Tepper, 2011). The social context becomes inherently important to the politicization of artworks as well as the frameworks the art is viewed through by people, within certain contexts, leading to varying reactions to the same work (Tepper, 2011).

With Dubin’s (1992) literature on the overlap of artists who exist in different spheres, the definition of what makes political art political art has to include a variety of realms beyond just the traditional art community. Mullin (2003) who specializes in feminist art offers a definition for political and activist art when she defines the two as:

“Political art” is not a broader umbrella term, but instead designates art that explores political subject matter, but is not made in a way that involves political action. "Activist art" also explores political topics, but is distinguished from political art in its greater concern with the politics involved in both the creation and the reception of the art.

Mullin (2003) talks about political and activist art as they are involved with political issues, questions and concerns. An aspect of political and activist art is its explorative nature of the political realm and its subject matter (Mullin, 2003). Mullin (2003) looks at two separate categories of art that engages with the political realm, separating political and activist art as “activist art” seeks public participation while “political art” does not.
For the purpose of my study I will combine Mullin’s (2003) definitions into one: political art can both simply display politics on its own, but also can seek to involve the public in its explorative process. I hypothesize that, based on the previous literature reviewed, the context in which artworks are viewed colors the perception the audience has of them. Therefore, artworks are received as politically charged objects and politicized through the context that they are viewed and the volatility of the public sphere.

*Museums and Art Professionals*

Museums are the most common place of art exhibition and their role within the art world is important when examining political art and social change. Museums, through their exhibitions, become a place where culture and history are put on display in physical form (Hoggart, 2004; Shelton, 1995). A museum’s role within society centers around their power as a material visualization of culture and how they use of their exhibitions to examine and push boundaries set by cultural norms (Levitt, 2015). By pushing boundaries and causing unrest within an audience through the art they display, museums can facilitate reactions such as shock and discomfort regarding political events (Dubin, 1992). Another purpose of a museum is to bring cultural ideas into the physical realm, not simply display aesthetically pleasing objects for the upper class (Yaneva, 2003). Functioning as an honest reflection of current cultural events, contemporary art museums work as a visual representation of society (Shelton, 1995).

Curators hold a lot of power over the exhibitions that museums display and subsequently the message that a museum chooses to convey to the public. The final product of an exhibition is the culminated efforts of the artist and their vision as well as the curator and their vision for the museum (Yaneva, 2003). Museums are the stage where cultural symbols, chosen by curators, are used to communicate with the public the political values of society (Tepper, 2011). The whole
mission of the museum can be greatly influenced by the curator as they hold authority over the kind of exhibitions displayed (Levitt, 2015). Levitt (2015) focuses specifically on how the curators have taken traditional museums and turned them into strong cultural representations that rewrite the narratives of historically marginalized groups. She examined the development of the Brooklyn Museum in contrast with the MFA in Boston over time and the different roles the museums played in their respective cities (Levitt, 2015). The artwork on display in these museums conveys a powerful message about the relevant political movements of the community that the museum is trying to represent. The transformation of the museum from exhibition to exhibition, as a reflection of contemporary society, is a product of the museum’s mission which is heavily rooted in curatorial direction (Levitt, 2015).

How the institution of the museum is set up and runs is important to the function of the museum within the social and political sphere. The museum as an institution approaches an exhibited artwork differently than the artist or the audience because of the institutional rules and regulations they have (Yaneva, 2003). Funding is an important facet of the functioning of a museum and influences the kind of art it decides to display (Dubin, 1992). Contemporary museums no longer rely only on the patronage of the wealthy elites and so their focus can and has changed as they become locations for clashing of political opinions (Dubin, 1999; Tepper, 2011). Public support for museums greatly affects the amount of funding government funded museums receive and is an essential factor in what they choose to display (Dubin, 1992). The different types of museums and where they get their funding places various constrictions on the liberty the museum can take with their curatorial decisions (Levitt, 2015). For example, nonprofit vs for profit museums and galleries operate in vastly different ways when it comes to choosing the artwork they have on display and the agenda they have with their exhibitions.
I hypothesize that where funding comes from and curatorial decision plays an important role in the kind of exhibitions museums put on and influences the amount of risk of political discomfort museums are willing to project on their audience.

*Artists and Motivations*

A trend within the contemporary artist community is the insertion of political propaganda into art. Artists that create political art generally do not approach art as a commodity but as a medium through which to display oppression, suffrage, and other highly politicized topics (Mullin, 2000). Because the context within which the art is created factors into its political clout, the artist that is more attuned to their community produces more representational work instead of art created for the wealthy elite (Collins, 2006). Artists have become more active in responding to societal changes and incorporating the social and political environment into their artworks (Rasmussen, 2009). Ellen Gallagher brought Black and queer politics into the discussions surrounding her art with her exhibition *Watery Ecstatic Series* that ignited comments about race and gender binaries as LGBTQ+ issues and Black Lives Matter became more aggressively tackled by activists (Chan, 2017). Artists often choose a specific social problem and use their artwork as a vehicle to communicate and elicit a response in those that are not directly affected by the problem that they want reach (Felshin, 1995). Artists draw upon their personal history to respond to calls for social justice and present their own take on politics and social change movements (Chan, 2017). Activist artists tend to push back against the social order with their work to resist mainstream pressures to conform (Collins, 2006).

Artists respond to the calls of the public when creating art that goes beyond their personal opinion to meet the needs of their audience. Rasmussen (2009) used the Vietnam war riots as an example of how artists met the public appeal for visual representation for their political protests.
The exploration of oppression through the creation of art has become a vehicle for artists to connect with an audience politically through visual representation (Mullin, 2000). Felshin’s (1995) collection of essays examines the different kind of activist artists that emerged with the rise of various social movements such as the civil rights movement, environmental movement, and so on. Contemporary art is often considered political because of more recent trends among artists who incorporate the infusion of cultural and political ideologies into their artworks (Felshin, 1995; Collins, 2006).

I hypothesize that artists are motivated to create political art because of a public need and desire for visual representations of popular political opinion. Therefore, the insertion of the political through the placement semiotics within their artworks relies heavily on the social justice movements that call upon then artists.

*Audiences and Reception*

When a person sees an artwork, the kind of interaction between the viewer and the work becomes dependent upon a variety of internal factors belonging to the individual who is seeing the piece. How cultural objects are received can be affected by a variety of factors such as the kind of message the object is intended to project as well as the preconditioned cultural biases of the viewer (Griswold, 1978; Press, 1991). The audience that engages in the viewing of art is made up of a variety of different kinds of individuals such as specialists, academics, and those uneducated on the subject of art (Sifakakis, 2007). Each museum-goer is different and the background and cultural conditioning—the upbringing and individual instillation of what that person considers acceptable and normal by societal standards—shapes the kind of experience and reaction an individual has to a cultural object (Griswold, 1978). Differences in socioeconomic status, cultural beliefs, previous exposure to art, race, and gender are all variables that can affect the type of reaction an individual
has to an artwork (Press, 1991; Childress and Friedkin, 2012). The cultural markers of the museum-goers help shape the kind of reaction the artworks receive (Griswold, 1978). Jasper (1984) argues that the reaction an artwork produces in an individual is a product of the viewer’s own personal background and cultural beliefs.

Large reactions to artworks, such as *Yo Mama’s Last Supper*, which become controversial beyond the original artistic intent, are large in part to the collective cultural understandings held by the individual. Press (1991) looked at audience reception to visual messages broadcasted through television programs. The unconsciously accepted norms of the viewer can be disrupted by something that strays outside that framework (Press, 1991; Tepper, 2011). Controversial art such as Renée Cox’s installation steps beyond the normal parameters of what some of the population considers appropriate artwork and elicited protest, in the case of *Yo Mama’s Last Supper*, in a conservative-religious population. Meaning however, is made by the viewer and the artwork so meaning can be remade as societies change and cultures evolve (Griswold, 1978). Individuals that exist within these larger frameworks are then influenced by the unnoticed messages and cultural conditioning they receive through commonplace messengers such as television (Press, 1991). Because there can be a cultural affinity for the visual arts, the interaction a museum-goer has with the artwork in a museum exists in the intersection of cultural tastes and socioeconomic status of a specific population (Childress and Friedkin, 2012).

Audiences pay attention to different details depending on what they were brought up to notice. When their underlying conditioning comes face to face with political works of art, it influences the kind of message an individual interprets from the artwork (Griswold, 1978). Museum-goers make active choices to attend exhibitions and people who view art are often times repeat visitors of the museum and have attended and enjoyed previous exhibitions (Brida et. al,
2013). However, as Jasper (1984) argues, the individual nature of viewing an artwork becomes a major influence on the type of reaction produced. Individuals notice specific aspects of the artwork and pick out different messages within the piece that align with their own personal cultural conditioning (Griswold, 1978; Jasper, 1984).

Why do some people see a rainbow and think of unicorns and fairy tales while others see a rainbow and immediately think of the LGBTQ+ community? I hypothesize, based on previous literature, that audiences are greatly influenced by their upbringing and cultural conditioning when consuming artistic narratives. Reactions to cultural objects then rely on the specific experiences an individual has had that has conditioned them to notice different details when viewing art. Therefore, the audience’s personal views on politics, religion, and their status be it socioeconomic or marginalized population affects the details that stand out to them in the art exhibitions and the political messages they see there.

Methodology and Data Collection

The sight of my study is a small nonprofit contemporary art museum in Maine. The museum is the oldest art museum in Maine dedicated to exhibiting contemporary art. When exhibiting artists, the museum exhibits solely Maine artists or artists with a strong personal connection to the state. In the town the museum is situated in, from May through November every first Friday of the month there is free admission to the galleries and museums in the town and the streets flood with people looking through the local galleries. The museum has three large galleries where they display, generally, three different artists and their exhibitions at a time. They turn over exhibits every three to four months. The museum also hosts a biennial where they host a competition and 48 artists from across the state are picked from among a plethora of contestants to be exhibited in their three galleries. There is also an ArtLab that is free to the public where
people can come and make art from the supplies in the lab. There are classes run through ArtLab for the local community and participants in ArtLab classes range from childhood to adults who have retired to the coast.

The three exhibitions that my study centers around addressed three different controversial areas within the political realm. The first exhibition was a metal sculptural installation made from nails that the artists said was created as a response to the election of President Trump. As seen in Figure 1 through Figure 4 the sculptures are obviously referencing America with the text and the map of the continental United States. The three-dimensional sculptures such as the trumpet, the bathtub, caged birds, and wall text created a multi-faceted experience for the museum-goers who walked through the exhibition. The photography exhibition captured the beauty of atypical models and melded portraiture and landscape styles by picturing the models deeply immersed in whimsical nature scenes. The different ages and body types of the models in Figure 5 and Figure 6 are indicative of the kinds of models the artist utilized in her photography. Finally, the environmental walk-in installation that was created as a response to Hurricane Sandy can be seen in Figures 8 and 9. The artist used cardboard, hot glue, and black paint to create an upside-down flooded studio. By turning the studio upside-down, he was able to bypass the constructional issue of creating a flooded room by placing the water on the ceiling. There were metaphorical implications of the topsy-turvy room and its relationship to the uncertainties of the social world.

I used qualitative methodologies to collect data on the reactions of art museum-goers who saw the three politically charged exhibitions, museum employees who curated the exhibits, and the artists who created the art. I used an in-depth interview process to better understand the minute and individual experiences that shaped the viewers reactions and understanding of the exhibits. Through the interview process, I was able to collect data on the background and cultural
conditioning of museum-goers and from that data looked at how that affects their interactions with political artworks. While my primary sample was museum-goers, I also interviewed artists. Through interviewing artists, I hoped to understand why they make art that leaves an impression on viewers and what motivates them to include political narratives in their artworks. I chose to interview museum professionals as well so I could analyze as many factors as possible that might contribute to the kind of reactions these political exhibits elicited. By interviewing curators and museum professionals I got a better understanding of how the installation process affected the viewing experience of the museum-goer, if it did at all. For all types of interviewees, I sought to understand how the context—the situational factors in which they view, create, install, or market art—informed the kind of reaction and subsequently political action the display of political art can cause.

The population of the town the museum is in is predominantly white, however because it is a tourist town it attracts a variety of different visitors. The politics and culture held by the residents were somewhat limiting at first because of the demographics (Table 1) of the town—predominantly white, middle-class, and college educated—however the opinions I managed to collect were at times noticeably diverse. I interviewed a collection of museum-goers, artists, and museum professionals that all visited and worked with or for the museum I chose to study. By looking at all three categories of interviewees I was able to see how artistic intent and curatorial intent compare, contrast, and complement the kind of interaction the museum-goers have with the three political exhibitions in question. When speaking with museum professionals I was able to glean the extent to which these museum-workers influenced the decision-making regarding displaying, curating, and marketing and how that impacts the kind of individuals the museum attracts and subsequently the reaction produced within the audience. I spoke with artists to explore
the interest and agenda the artists had when exhibiting their work and how that overlapped or
influenced the viewer’s interpretation of the exhibitions. Finally, many of the museum-goers saw
the exhibition more than once and so the extensive exposure they had to the exhibitions allowed
for a more complex interaction between viewer and artwork. Despite my interest specifically in
how political art interacts with the audience, knowing the artists’ intent as well as the curatorial
choices were anticipated as important components of the process of producing a reaction in a
viewer. Jasper (1984) said that viewing an artwork is a process, so to build a more comprehensive
explanation, I collected data not just from museum-goers but also as artists and museum
professionals.

There were many variables examined when determining the relationship between an
artwork and a viewer. The dependent variable in my study is the reaction a political artwork
produces in a viewer. The reaction varied from distaste or disgust, to passionate support and cries
of joy, sad and sorrowful, or sometimes there was no reaction at all. I also examined whether or
not the viewer perceived the artwork as political at all and if so why and what made them consider
the exhibition as apolitical contrary to artistic intent. When asking about the complexity of the
politics surrounding controversial artworks, I used Robert Mapplethorpe’s photography exhibit as
an example of how artworks can produce a reaction or no reaction within an audience. By using a
well-known example, I was able to pull a more extensive and thought-out response from my
interview participants. Broadly speaking, the independent variables I examined were the related to
the artists influence on the viewers reactions as well as the curatorial decision-making and the
impact it has on how museum-goers experience an artwork. In terms of the viewer, independent
variables examined were their general demographic background, race, political affiliation,
previous exposure to the artworld, and socioeconomic status. When looking at the greater context
of the social and political world in a more macro-examinational approach, the main factor examined was the attachment the viewer, artist, or museum professional had to current politics. When speaking to the artists, the independent variables that I asked questions about examined the artist’s intent, what motivated them, and whether they felt called to produce political and activist art. I wanted to look at how this intent translated through in the artwork they produced and the reactions a viewer had to the artwork. Finally, I spoke to museum professionals about how the curatorial decisions acted as independent variables and how these decisions affected the kind of reaction an artwork created. Did the marketing strategies, the way the exhibition is displayed, and agenda of the curator affect the way a viewer interacts with an artwork?

I chose to use interview data collection methods because it provided a more detailed and personal explanation of the individual experiences of the viewers, artists, and museum professionals regarding the creation and exhibition of political art. For a comprehensive explanation of the issues raised by political art and the reactions, specifically the three exhibitions examined, produced in an audience, the in-depth interview process was the most effective. In-depth interviews allowed for me to gather more personal accounts of the experiences the museum-goers had and gave both me and my interviewees more freedom to explore their own interactions with the artworks on display. The interviews allowed for me to create a more complex and layered explanation of why and how these political exhibitions and the artworks produced the reactions they did in the audience that saw them.

There were limitations to choosing the interview process for data collection, such as an inability to generalize the results to a greater population. The sample size was too small for generalization as I interviewed three museum professionals, three artists, and eight museum-goers. Quantitative survey data would have been more useful if the purpose of this study was to generalize
to a greater population, however survey data lacks the ability to acquire intimate details regarding the personal processes of the actors in the political and art viewing domain. Longitudinal data was not feasible given the time-frame within which I was collecting data and an ethnographic study was not feasible due to similar time-related reasons. Because I collected data from a small sample, interview data was the most effective given the time-frame and the type of information I wanted to examine; specifically, the complex personal processes a viewer would go through when interacting with political artworks and if their personal experiences helped shape their reaction. Therefore, I chose the in-depth interview methodology for data collection because it was the most effective way to gather the type of information needed for my study.

Results

The three different perspectives looked at through the interview process—museum professionals, artists, and the audience—offered a comprehensive idea of the process of politicizing artworks in the contemporary world. By organizing the data by interview type, the independent variables can be more effectively considered. When looking at the data from the museum professionals the main independent variables considered will be the power of the curatorial decisions, where funding comes from, the status of the museum as a nonprofit, and the museum’s mission statement. I will look at these institutional variables and how they affect the kind of art produced by artists and subsequently how the politics of the show are interpreted by an audience. With the artists, the main independent variables are artistic intent and whether or not the artists feel a sense of responsibility to represent public opinion in their art. Finally with the museum-goers, one independent variable is the background of the viewer and how that changes their reaction to the exhibitions; a recurring theme was familial connection to art. Within the three categories of interviews, the context of the social world will be an independent variable on whether
or not the politics at the time of creation, curation, or exhibition changes the kind of reaction the artists, curators, and viewers have with the artworks.

*Museum Professionals*

When discussing the agenda of the museum, the museum professionals generally stated that the museum’s mission statement helped dictate what exhibitions were put on display. The museum’s mission statement varied between which museum professional I spoke to but as seen by the responses of the three employees I interviewed there are consistent themes within in their replies:

The mission of the museum is to allow artists and Maine residents, both year-round and seasonal, opportunities to expand the art community through either their own work or through understanding and appreciating Maine artwork.

I think the museum is definitely meant for public consumption, it’s a place for tourists and residents to have a space to view and further investigate contemporary art that’s happening in the state. It is very focused on promoting contemporary art by Maine artists or those connected to Maine and to educate or help residents or those interested in contemporary art to access that work.

The mission of the museum is to work with and show artists that have a strong connection to Maine as well as show new artists and get their art out there. We also work with the community and educational programs, including ArtLabs and talks to expand the community’s relationship with the local art community.

The most prominent constraint on the type of art the museum puts on display and one they openly acknowledge is the dependency on Maine artists. Showcasing artworks created by only artists that have a personal connection to Maine is a deciding factor in whether or not the museum can display an artist’s work. Accessibility also seems to be a major theme within the museum’s mission statement and the programing they have. The museum wants the artworks to be accessible, generally in the financial sense, to those who might not otherwise be able to afford to visit a museum. Connecting the contemporary artworld to the community of the town that the museum is situated in is a prominent part of what the museum strives for. When speaking to the three museum
professionals, “community” was brought up consistently in the interviews. The museum focuses on bringing what some might consider “high art” to the general public of the town and bridging the gap between the art educated and town residents by expanding the local art community. In the following quote, Eli talks about the directives they have in place to facilitate a more accessible experience for members of the community:

If an organization chooses not to fund education programs through grants or through private donors and requires people to pay for them, you’re always going to have situations where families can’t afford to participate. So, because of this we’ve tried to remove the financial barrier and in terms of accessibility that is all we can do and so I feel like the organization has made it a key point of its mission to make it open to everyone.

Eli talks about the programs that the contemporary art museum has in place to make sure that the art on display is accessible to those in the local community, people who do not have the funds to pay a high entrance fee. Eli also talks about how the museum has incorporated this component of their programing into the long-term goals of the museum, as seen by the three quoted mission statements. What can be seen here is the importance of the local community, the people that surround and support the museum, to the museum’s mission. The interest in being more inclusive towards marginalized groups parallels Levitt’s (2015) analysis of the museums like the Brooklyn Museum and the MFA with their changing roles in relation to their local community where they focused on minority groups as their target audience. The museum is trying to expand its focus to be more accessible and inclusive with community-oriented approach.

When looking at where funding comes from and the status of the museum as a nonprofit, the museum professionals said they try to avoid censoring the exhibitions. I spoke with three employees of the museum who all were on the same page about if the donors and benefactors of the museum affect the exhibitions; they all said that they do not know. When pushed further to elaborate they basically told me that they do not consider their donors when curating exhibits and
choosing what to display. Because of their decision not to account for the personal opinions of their donors they do not know if they have lost funding or turned away potential donors with the types of work they have exhibited in the past. Their stance on censorship is pretty explicit stated and Eli addresses that point when he talks about censorship and funding from the museum’s donors in the below quote:

That is where we get into the intangibles, where we don’t know how much money we’ve missed out on because of the political shows that we show, and we may never know. But that is a risk that we run, but we have more freedom in our current state to show what we want to show and unfortunately most organizations like that who censor their work censor it because of past experiences where they’ve run into trouble and now this is a policy.

Though he does not give a concrete example, he talks about how museums who censored their work do so because of past negative experiences with the reactions to their shows. Negative feedback and protest can damage a museum’s reputation and cut sales for specific exhibitions and so critical reception ties in with the funding problem that museums can face. However, Eli remains clear with his assertion that this museum does not censor the artwork it exhibits.

When looking at the politics contained within certain artworks and whether or not the museum will censor those exhibits, funding was not a major consideration. When asked about the kind of art they feel they are allowed to display and what constraints they might have beyond funding, Judy had this to say:

I don’t know either, but I think that directors and curators that work at like the National History Museum of African American Culture probably—like the Smithsonian there’s less curation it is more about—I don’t know I guess with like National History Museums it’s like you would lose your job if you showed something that wasn’t right, if it is inaccurate. But contemporary art is usually inaccurate in the sense that it is all expressive, totally subjective… The idea of a wide audience, like the wider the audience the more they’re all interested and if it is one narrow viewpoint you probably won’t get as many people.

In this quote you can see Judy compares the type of institution this museum is to other well-known American museums. She brings up the expectations of historical museums vs. contemporary and
particularly emphasizes the subjectivity of contemporary art as a major component of their ability to display a wide range of artworks that speak to a variety of subject matter. Judy seems to allude to the meticulous work required when it comes to setting up exhibits for historical museums and what they are expected to exhibit. She compares it to the work she did at this contemporary art museum which she believes has more liberty in terms of what can be put on display. When she was speaking toward the end, she fumbles with her words a little, but what can be drawn from what she said is the message that contemporary art attracts or has the ability to attract a wider audience due to its subjectivity and the expressive nature of the artworks.

An important component and nonnegotiable restraint on the kinds of exhibitions the museum can display is rooted in its status as a nonprofit. There are so many laws surrounding what nonprofit organizations are allowed to do, endorse, and say regarding the political environment of the United States. So, the politics of these exhibitions had to be approached carefully to make sure the museum did not break any laws. Eli had a lot to say about the rules and regulations governing the museum’s ability to speak to the political realm directly:

In order to be a 501(c)(3) your organization cannot openly endorse political candidates and while showing a specific art piece with a political message is not an endorsement, you’re walking a line where you can either invite criticism as an organization or you can invite scrutiny from political officials in charge of public officials in charge of your 501(c)(3) status. So, it’s either biting the private hand that feeds you or biting the public hand that feeds you.

From this quote we can ascertain that as a nonprofit organization the museum has to be very careful about how they curate and exhibit artworks with political messages. Obviously, not wanting to lose their nonprofit status, the museum legally has to conform to the legal rules and regulations governing nonprofits. By conforming to the legal rules of being a nonprofit, the museum mirrors exactly what Yaneva (2003) said in her paper: institutional rules affect the approach the museum has to exhibiting artworks. Now Eli did continue on to say that them being a museum offered them
more freedom of expression to dabble in the political realm as opposed to other nonprofit organizations like agricultural programs, etc. However, he was very adamant, as were the other museum professionals I spoke with, that the status of the museum as a nonprofit is something that informs most if not all of the decision-making that goes on behind the scenes.

Tying funding and nonprofit status together, Nicole spoke about her experience on the curatorial staff and what considerations she has to take into account. While not as involved with the financial side of things, she mentioned that budget and funding is something that the staff always take into account when making decisions. She also talked about partisan neutrality and its importance when making curatorial decisions. Like her colleagues, Nicole stressed that although the museum does not endorse political opinions or partisan politics, they are a vehicle for the voices of the artists they choose to exhibit. She spoke about nonprofit status, funding, and the kind of works they can exhibit in the below quote:

As a nonprofit, we don’t have to think about what a commercial gallery would think of as “what would sell.” So, that really frees us to show work that isn’t necessarily… like the climate change installation, I suppose you could buy pieces of it, but our nonprofit status doesn’t restrict us as much and gives us some freedom to show more of what we want. Also, as a nonprofit we have a much smaller budget so that’s always a consideration.

While at first somewhat vague, a key point Nicole was trying to make was that the type of work they display belongs within its own niche in the contemporary art world; it is specifically museum-artwork. A full room installation (Figure 5 and 6), such as the one Joseph exhibited cannot be bought and sold the same way a photograph, painting, or sculpture found in a for-profit art gallery would be. As a nonprofit art museum, this allows the curatorial staff more freedom in deciding what exhibitions to have on display as they do not have to consider what artworks would sell. The status of the museum as a nonprofit and where it gets its funding when compared to other art exhibiting institutions creates certain constraints but also allows for some liberty when choosing
what to exhibit and the content of the exhibitions. In some ways, this allows for the museum to embrace what Dubin (1999) said about museums in his analyses where he spoke of the museum as a site where clashing political opinions can be put on display for public consumption. He used museums that dedicated certain exhibitions to addressing sensitive topics such as prostitution, violence, and slavery during World War II era as examples of the kind of contested sites he argued museums were (Dubin, 1999). Without the constraints of selling art as a commodity or collectible, this museum has more liberty to act as a space and facilitate political dialogue.

In the interviews with museum professionals I asked about the politics of the exhibitions and how they complement the museum’s mission statement and influence whether or not they will exhibit an artist. I asked them how and if they considered the politics of the artwork when choosing to exhibit an artist’s work. When asked about whether or not the politics impacted the decision to display three exhibitions in my study, this museum profession said:

It’s not so much that these exhibitions complemented or shared ground with our mission, it was their form and their content and their quality that we share with our mission and the fact that all these artists felt that Maine influenced them. So, I think that’s always a tricky thing for us because we, at least on paper, can’t bring that out and endorse a specific political opinion. Technically we walk a dangerous line when we say that. I would say that more critically the exhibitions complemented each other’s politics.

In the above quote we can see that this specific museum professional, Eli, is more concerned with the rules and regulations that the museum is legally required to follow as a nonprofit institution. He explains that by focusing on the quality of the art instead of its message the museum is able to expand on the kind of art—political art—they exhibit. Eli is clear that the museum needs to be careful due to the legal ramifications of endorsing a political party through the artwork they put on display. He tries to steer the focus of the interview away the exhibitions politics in relation to the museum’s mission and direct the focus toward the politics relationship with each other. Eli emphasizes that the politics complement each other and not the museum and its agenda.
Complementary narratives were an important consideration when curating the exhibitions at the art museum in Maine. When asking a member of the curatorial department, Nicole, she went over the various aspects of the exhibitions and their relation to the political climate:

On different kinds of levels, they all address political and social issues. The metal sculpture exhibit addresses the political state of the country and directly references the current president. Also, the exhibition that looked at the effects of climate change on artists and the world in general by creating the topsy-turvy studio that was flooded. So, he was particularly referencing Hurricane Sandy that hit the New York area and many of his friends had studios that were affected, but also the broader idea of what is happening with the climate and all of these hurricanes that are coming. And then the photography exhibit was looking at how we perceive the human figure, especially women. With that exhibition the artist embraced every type of figure, every woman, and then combined them with elements of the landscape.

In the first quote Nicole’s clear and concise analysis of the politics surrounding each individual exhibition demonstrates the extensive thought that she has put into curating and understanding the exhibits. She talks about the American partisan politics relating to the most recent presidential election. When talking about the flooded studio installations, there are implications towards climate change as well as the political aspects of the response to flooding in NYC and the artist’s friends who lost their means to produce income. Finally, she touches upon equality and feminism and the role of genders and gendered expectations of the female body. Following up with her observations, Nicole goes on to say:

The reception of the artwork, hearing people talk about the work and the exhibitions, and sparking those dialogues and conversations makes it successful. We’ve been trying to these kinds of themes and then we have the biennial. So, it’s “how do the artists speak to each other” and in particular with the theme, how they speak to the theme in relation to each other. How do they either complement each other and sometimes it’s okay to have conflicting ideas too.

Nicole articulates specific political and abstract agendas within the three exhibitions and mentions the importance of how those three different narratives within the galleries of the museum to start a live and active dialogue in the second quote. Nicole talks about how she looks for dialogue
sparking artworks when deciding what exhibitions to display together. While complementary themes when exhibiting seems the natural course of action, she also acknowledges that conflicting ideas can go well together, too. Going off of what Nicole described as her job and the themes that she said the curators are trying to incorporate into what they are exhibiting, the behind the scenes conversations and decisions seem congruent with Levitt’s (2015) analyses of the power of museum professionals. Curators can change the course of the museum’s direction by making executive decisions about what artworks to display (Levitt, 2015). Nicole’s role in the curatorial department directly affects which artists to display and influences the political clout the museum has. Nicole’s curatorial decisions literally shape how the museum as an institution is perceived and what direction it goes with its mission.

When asked about the political content of the three exhibitions, one museum professional was hesitant to ascribe political meaning to the works in relation to the museum’s mission statement. Like Eli has said previously, this museum professional Linda, also put emphasis on the exhibition of artists and their artistic journeys as opposed to the narratives of the specific works and what that means for the museum’s mission:

I think that the exhibitions are political or can be skewed and interpreted as political and I think that it does help and it works for the museum’s mission statement because it shows the public and our viewers and supporters what those three artists are thinking about, making work about, and concerned with during that time. Those artists in particular are very interested in their position in the world and the society they live in and it comes through in their art, whether it is intentional or not, because obviously if people think it is political it is political.

What can be drawn from her words is Linda’s priority in focusing on the artist and their intentions with their work. Her focus, as a museum employee as well as a viewer, is on the narrative of the artists within the context of the artists’ own interests and how that surfaced in their art. Linda is interested more so in the artists’ telling of their own narratives and less so on the audience's
perception of the works. At the end of the quote though, she acknowledges that “if people think it is political it is political” which is falls along the lines of Press’s (1991) analysis of audience of reception, where she looked at the effect watching television had the beliefs and perspectives viewers culminated. This approach that Linda takes aligns with what Eli said about the rules and regulations of being a 501(c)(3) that regulates what the museum can display regarding politics and what art is appropriate for them to exhibit.

Artists

When talking to the artists about the politics surrounding their art and why they chose to incorporate political narratives into their work they generally attributed it to self-exploration. None of the artists incorporated politics into their art with the eventual audience of their work in mind, they were all very adamant that they create first and foremost for themselves. This is opposed to the example provided by Rasmussen (2009) who looked at protest artists during the Vietnam War who created political and activist art as a response to public outcry. While Karen did identify as an activist artist, she still strongly held that the reason for her taking up the camera is purely an explorative process to examine the philosophical aspects of aging and motherhood. Karen said that when she was twenty her interest was in photographing mothers and pregnant women because that was the next stage of her life. Now that she’s older she is photographing elderly women as a means to explore through her camera’s lens the psychological and philosophical questions she has regarding aging and her expectations of growing old.

The following quote by artist Brent illustrate the three artists general views on why they created artworks that draw from the political realm:

You just try to make the best work you can. Don’t think too much about the audience. People do that, but then again if you’re your own audience, you close your own loop and you just make the goddamn best work you can. It’s really not that mystical… don’t suck

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1 There are no quotes from Karen due to the fact that her interview audio file was corrupted.
you know? Which is a lot of pressure, and even more pressure than that is that you need to continually and eternally top yourself. You always have to do something even more astonishing every time, which is awesome but also it is exhausting. But it always happens, you always get better at whatever you do, and top yourself and that's part of the experience. It’s kind of fun.

An artist’s responsibility is solely and strictly to do whatever the fuck they want, untethered from any kind of external expectation or burden, it’s infinite. Whatever people want to do is art. Is it considered good art? Is it considered bad art? To figure that out we need to call on the art historians.

In the two quotes, Brent is giving his take on artistic responsibility and if he believes that artists owe their audience anything when creating their art. From the quotes, it is apparent that he does not believe that the audience should influence the artistic direction of the artist. Brent makes it explicitly clear that artists only responsibility is to create what they want. In the first quote he lays the ground and acknowledges that some artists do consider the audience, but he also explains why he thinks they should not. When pressed further, asking about public protest and whether he believes artists have a responsibility to create when there is a general need he responds with no; their only responsibility is to their self and not any external expectation. It is obvious that Brent has powerful opinions about what he is saying in the quotes above based on the strong language he uses when opposing the idea that artists create for their audience. This contradicts a lot of the literature that focused on art created in times of social protest, such as the Vietnam War, where artists produced a plethora of artworks in response to public outcry (Rasmussen, 2009). Karen and Joseph², the other two artists interviewed, both said that the audience was not their priority when creating art and that neither of them feel their artwork came to fruition because of the political climate and activists’ pressure.

While Karen and Joseph agreed with Brent on the artists responsibility to create, an interesting thing all three disagreed on was art’s purpose within the political realm. The artists

² Joseph’s interview audio file was corrupted so there are no direct quotes from Joseph available.
were not completely clear on how politics percolated into their artwork and yet from the interviews with museum-goers and curators we can see that it did. This aligns with Mullin’s (2000) writings on contemporary where she says that the personal politics of the artist inevitably influence the politics of the art they create. However, the effectiveness of art as a tool for social change was contested among the artists. For Joseph, he was clear in his position that art is not an effective tool for protest, that it is highly ineffective, and so he does not therefore classify himself as an activist artist. Karen agrees to a certain extent with Joseph however, she limits the kind of art she finds ineffective to gallery and museum art. She does not believe that art in galleries and museums is an effective tool for social change because of the specific population that these institutions attract. Karen did mention in her interview however, that she wants to try exhibiting her photographs outside in the streets where activism takes place as opposed to a museum or gallery. Finally, Brent seemed more enthusiastic about art as a political tool and open to its use in affecting change:

Well, it depends on the art. Is it political art? Then its role is clearly to affect change and influence minds. If it’s not political art… is there such a thing as nonpolitical art? Because even a mundane fucking portrait of a flower vase in some ways is revolutionary, it’s still a symbol. That’s the explosion of everything we’ve seen is that simple ability to have signifiers. So, art is a signifier of the highest part, so I think art is by definition revolutionary even if it’s like totally pedestrian and pastoral, but that can be its beauty, beauty is revolutionary.

Brent is clear that art’s role within the political realm fully depends on its categorization as political art. He also posed an interesting question in the above quote about whether or not art can be nonpolitical. Brent talks about art’s ability to be revolutionary and implies that even the most minute details can be used to affect the viewer. It can be taken from the above quote that he attributes a lot of the politicization of art to the viewer and what the work signifies and how it acts as a messenger. All three artists held different opinions on whether or not art is an effective tool within the realm of social movements. They did however say during their interviews that how the
viewer interprets their work is beyond their control and if their works affect protest or social change, there is nothing that they can do about it.

The consistency of the artists personal explorations within their artwork over the years adds to the context through which their art is viewed. All three artists have stuck to a specific style and medium; Karen uses the same camera she did twenty years ago, Brent creates sculptures using only nails, and Joseph uses black paint, brown paper, and cardboard. The artists three exhibitions coincided with different social issues—extreme partisan politics, feminism, and environmental issues—and that social context influenced their artistic motivations because it offered areas of interest for them to explore through the creation of their own work. Joseph created the cardboard flooded artist’s studio installation after witnessing the aftermath of the damages done by Hurricane Sandy to his peers in NYC; an example of how what is going on in the political and social realm directly influences the artist. Similarly, Brent created the steel sculptures as a direct response to the election of President Trump, diverting from his previous works that were non narrative to the current exhibition that held a very strong political narrative. The clash of Brent’s personal politics with the politics of the current administration greatly shaped the course of his artistic journey in creating his exhibition. Brent’s creation of the sculptural installation responding to the politics within the United States is divergent from his previous works. In the following quote Brent speaks to his sudden switch from complete abstraction to narrative work:

If I hadn’t met Donald Trump in my dark heart, I’d still be making abstractions which were unchanged by any political event, let alone even any event in my life. My work was even removed from my life. It was just a sequential series of discoveries about shape and texture and hopefully beauty. It was sealed in its own juices, so of course I believe it’s possible for art to be separate from politics. But again, is making it a revolutionary act? I hope so. The act of making useless beauty seems revolutionary, feels revolutionary, but it’s not political.

In the above quote Brent talks, in somewhat theatrical terms, how the rise of President Trump and the Trump Administration’s political agendas flipped a switch in him. Previously, he had simply
created shapes that were not based on a real-life or referenced actual objects. He goes on to talk about how removed his previous works and exhibitions were from the political realm, making the shift in artistic approach with his current exhibition even more drastic.

Audience

Out of the three exhibitions examined, the museum-goers generally seemed to attach political messages to Brent’s steel nail sculptures that addressed the state of American politics. Macy had this to say when explaining why she thought that the nail exhibition was the most overtly political of the three:

Let’s take the nail exhibition to begin with, I think it was obviously very poignant just because of the timing, politically. All three of them really, but the nail exhibition was the most obviously connected to the political climate and the content… it was something I saw and felt passionately like “yes that’s true and we’re not helping each other at all and our society is completely corrupt and works for people it doesn't say it works for.”

I definitely agree with all of Brent’s points, but again I don’t feel the same kind of stagnation and oppression that a lot of the people he’s referring to feel, if that makes sense, but I still acknowledge it and understand that we do have these problems and that they need to be addressed but they don’t speak to me personally.

In the first quote it is obvious Macy connected with and supported the narratives that Brent put into his exhibition that was responding to the Trump Administration. She talks about the content of the exhibit and how she perceived it and internalized its message, resulting in support and agreement with what Brent is trying to say with his art. Macy also mentioned the timing of the exhibition and how it coincided with political events at the time and how that affected her perception of the show. The politics at the time directly influenced the artist, Brent, as well as the viewer, Macy, and shaped the experience and politicization of the exhibition. The social context shaping his artistic process aligns with Dubin’s (1999) writing, which stated that the macro-societal changes shape the artists, the work they create, and the artworld, inviting criticism and providing distraction from other areas of political unrest. In the second quote, Macy admits that
while she feels strongly about the issues the nail sculptures brought up, she cannot relate to the feeling of oppression that the minorities Brent referred to in his work have felt. As a white middle-class female, the levels of oppression that the immigrants referenced in Brent’s work would be a difficult role for Macy to step into and empathize with.

In contrast to Macy’s assertion that the political content was “obvious,” Michael had an opposing understanding of the overtness of the political content of Brent’s work. In the following quote he says:

What I thought what a wise move on Brent’s part was, was that a lot of the political content was ambiguous as to what side he was one and what the message was. If you know Brent personally you know that he’s for the most part a liberal with a little bit of a libertarian edge. But much of the things he said in the exhibition had enough ambiguity to them, so it wasn’t absolutely certain what his position was, which I thought was excellent in stimulating the thinking of viewers.

As can be seen, Michael thought that the message of Brent’s exhibition was subtle and ambiguous and that his partisan politics were not overtly evident in the work. Michael, who has worked with Brent in the past, touches upon the contrast between who Brent is as a person and how that surfaced, or did not, in his work. Kim also agreed with Michael and in the following quote Kim notes that his knowledge of the artist and knowing the Brent’s intent with the work really gave him a deeper understanding of the work and what it was trying to say:

I like knowing who the person is and seeing some of the poetic gestures in the work, it was thoughtful, and I really pondered over it because the artist is not like that in his mannerisms. So, it was refreshing to imagine this pretty loud and masculine person making this bird that is trapped in a cage and utilizing delicate metaphor. Also, the whole like political side was kind of—I thought it was a little too forceful, I guess.

Kim talks about how his working relationship with Brent effected his understanding of the exhibition’s political message. Kim ends his quote by saying that the intended political message of the sculptural installation he thought it was too forceful. His mentioning this is indicative of how artistic intent changes and changed Kim’s perception of the exhibition as a whole. It can be
inferred from his quote that had he not known the artist’s intentions with the exhibition, he probably would have enjoyed it as he mentioned his appreciate for the delicate metaphors scattered throughout the installation. His initial appreciation for the poetic execution of the exhibition is diluted by the roughness of the artistic intent of the message the artist was trying to convey.

Allie, another museum-goer, was in direct contrast with Michael’s comment about the ambiguity of Brent’s nail sculpture exhibition. In the following quote she says:

I thought it was just very obvious, what all three artists were saying with their work. I would like to see more ambiguity in the messages of the artworks. They were just overtly political in their composition and messages and what the artists were trying to say was so clear to me.

Allie disagrees with Michael, saying that there is not enough ambiguity and that she would have had a better appreciation for the artwork if there had been. Macy and Allie’s strong detailed unpacking of the exhibition can be attributed to their background and previous relationship with the artworld; Macy is an art history student and Allie is an artist with an MFA.

Macy had been exposed to fine art and museums since a young age. In the following quote she walks us through the start of her art education:

I have two artists, one on either side—actually three. My uncle was a sculptor and his wife was an artist, an interior designer and architect, but they mostly focused on West Pacific art, especially a lot of influence from Hawaiians and Native Americans and then my grandmother was a photographer, but mainly worked for nature conservatory or conservation places to help highlight the natural beauty of Pennsylvania and preserve it. So, from a really young age my parents like—they always exposed me to art and took me to museums.... And then, my own knowledge, I’m an art history student so I spend fifty percent of class time in museums and different historical houses.

What is important to note about what Macy is saying is that she has been fed art vocabulary and even is going to school for art history. Macy is then equipped with different and perhaps more refined tools for interpreting and ascertaining artistic intent within a work of art. Michael in contrast grew up with very little art in his early formative years and it wasn’t until later in life that
he become more invested in the artworld. The background and cultural conditioning of Macy and Michael and their different understandings of Brent’s exhibition is an example of what Griswold (1978) wrote about; peoples varying upbringings and cultural background produces differing reaction to cultural objects (Griswold, 1978).

Sasha’s personal background influenced the interaction and the politics that she inferred from the Brent’s exhibition. For Sasha the exhibit represented something more personal than just politics and that can be seen in the following quote:

I think “Dream On” because when I first walked in it didn’t appear to me and I don’t know if you ever did those little, they’re papers and you take pencil and draw over it and the little image will appear, like when I read “Dream On” it was like I had that moment of clarity and it felt very emotional to me because living in Los Angeles I had really great friends whose parents had crossed the border and paid money and got ripped off and had to pay again so I knew a lot of the stories of what it took to get to America and so to me I think that was the most awe-inspiring moment when I could actually see it.

Sasha talks about the emotional clout that Brent’s exhibit, specifically the “Dream On” wall (Figure 3), had because of her past experiences living in Los Angeles. In Los Angeles she had had friends and even a Mexican nanny who helped raise her children, so she had a very personal connection to the issues brought up by the exhibition and the Trump Administration’s opposition to Mexicans and Mexico. For her, it was her friends and people she knew and how politics affected them that created her intense reaction to the exhibit.

The state of Maine’s politics does not offer an appropriate stage for political discourse within the contemporary artworld. When talking about the context in which Brent’s work was being exhibited Macy had this to say:

Given the area that the museum caters to, it was almost ironic in a way because the majority of the people who support the museum are the people that he’s critiquing in a way—they’re all very wealthy, with a lot of money, and definitely voted very conservatively and traditionally very conservative people, so I thought it was a great choice—almost a slap in the face to a lot of people and I know a lot of people had a lot problems with it, but I think it was good. We need— there’s like a lot of culture around ignoring things with the whole
trigger warnings and stuff and people feel like they should not be exposed to things they’re not comfortable with. So, I think his was great in acknowledging these things that people were not necessarily comfortable acknowledging.

Macy talked about the demographics of the area and celebrated the steps the museum took in confronting the homogeneity of the wealthy people in the coastal town that frequent the museums and galleries there. Macy mentions the discomfort she assumed the well-off museum-goers felt when confronted with an exhibition that, in Macy’s interpretation of its content, made them check their privilege. In contrast however, Taylor does not seem to believe that the exhibition took strong strides in pushing the boundaries comfortability within the world of contemporary art. She believed the museum was not doing a good job of representing contemporary art as a whole based on her affinity for the colloquial definition of contemporary art:

While the three exhibitions that the museum displayed were contemporary in the sense that they were made by living artists, it does not fall into the colloquial definition of contemporary art. The colloquial definition being art that is strongly fixated within the political sphere and tightly connected with social movements such as human rights, pride, etc. The exhibitions on display in this museum are generally safe and does not push the boundaries that museums like the Brooklyn Museum does. The only exhibition that might need some fair warning, specifically to parent's, is Karen’s photography because of the nudes and that’s mild compared to other contemporary artists and their work.

From the above quote, we see Taylor takes issue with what she perceives as the mildness of the political content of the three exhibitions. By using the word “safe” do describe the content of the museum’s exhibitions illustrates the divide between what Taylor sees as contemporary art versus the kind of content that is put on display at this museum. Her understanding of the three exhibitions were that they did not push the boundaries enough for her to be pleased with their execution. Out of the three exhibits, the one she seemed to have an affinity for the most was Karen’s work simply because of the potential for content warnings due to the nudity.

When looking at the reactions to Karen’s photographs that explored the female body and feminine power, there was an overtly political difference between those who identified as
marginalized minorities and those who did not. When asked about the progressive nature of the exhibitions, especially the photography exhibit that focused on unconventional female beauty, those that held minority status seemed to think it was lacking. While the photography exhibit received mostly praise from the interviewees, the two people of color had little to say about its empowering qualities. As seen in the following quote, Skyler expressed her discomfort at the lack of inclusivity of the exhibition when it came to empowering females:

Like if a white man were to make the same work as Karen then I feel as though it wouldn’t be perceived the same way, and also those are largely white bodies and white bodies are, for me at least, its—I mean also in America mostly it’s almost a point of contention—like why didn’t you include queer bodies or bodies of color? And that woman, she’s a white woman, she’s a white straight woman and her identity clearly comes through in her work because she comfortable photographing women who look and maybe experience the world similar to what she experiences, and I think that is important to understand the work… There’s one image I remember of a young black child and I feel that it was more like “I need to do this to cover my bases” and that’s disingenuous in my mind.

Skyler clearly has found issue with the lack of representation of people of color within Karen’s work. She points out what she perceives as gendered praise of the work and the position of privilege Karen comes from is evident in the subjects of her photographs. Karen, when looking at previous literature, then occupies the role of the artist who creates for the privileged that Collins (2006) writes about, who exists in opposition to the artist that is attune with the community creates more representational and powerful political work. While not openly attacking her, there are antagonizing undertones to the way she picks apart the photography exhibition. She makes it clear that she understands how a feminist message can be derived from the exhibit, however she is adamant that she herself does not see it as very feminist. She also talks about feeling like there was racialized tokenism in Karen’s exhibition, mentioning the presence of a picture (Figure 7) with a young black girl. Skyler says she felt that using the girl as a subject of her photography was more of a moral responsibility than the natural direction Karen wanted to go with her artistic endeavors.
Skyler’s reaction to the photography exhibit exemplifies arguments found in previous literature that the status of the viewer as a marginalized population affects the details of an artwork that stand out (Press, 1991; Childress and Friedkin, 2012). Skyler is very aware of her racial status and that awareness informs how she takes in information, specifically related to this exhibit, her less popular opinion on the feminism within Karen’s photography.

Skyler heavily cited her perception of the artist’s intention as a main contributing factor for her interpretation. For example, when Skyler was talking about the controversial photography exhibit, she said:

It also matters, at least for me, a lot of the time the identity of the artist affects how people see the work. I think Karen has been making this kind work for a long period of time and I think it is more about the composition of the bodies within a landscape that is also within the landscape of the salon style installation. They’re all in separate worlds but at the same time the same world, just due to the fact that they are assembled in a way that makes them related. But I feel like it’s not as if they’re overtly political, she didn’t put #MeToo on them, they’re beautiful, but personally I feel like, as an artist, the intention of the artist is very important.

This was what she said when asked about the politicization of Karen’s photography exhibition and Skyler’s opinion on the political conclusions drawn by the museum-goers who saw it. For Skyler, artistic intent is paramount when understanding the artwork and directly affected her reaction to the work in terms of its politics. However, an important variable to consider is Skyler’s status as an artist and how that status affects how she views the exhibitions and their politicization. So, Skyler did not seem too pleased to have political interpretations forced upon an exhibit that, from her understanding, the artist did not intend to be political. Jesse had similar views about artistic intent and how that influenced his interpretation of the exhibit as Skyler. He said:

I didn’t quite so much connect with political messages in the exhibitions. But I think that art is political when the artist is thinking about the politics during its creation and then

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3 Karen’s exhibition was specifically hung to mirror the old French salon-style of exhibiting art. Both the museum professionals and Karen mentioned the hanging of the photography exhibit and the old French Salon as the main inspiration for the curation of her exhibit.
however the message gets out, whether that’s people recognizing the imagery the artists are using or the forms they’re using.

Jesse, while not deeply invested in the politics of any of the exhibitions does not discount the politically narratives of any of the exhibitions. He relies heavily on what the artistic intent behind the artworks are.

Skyler was not alone in her opinion, another person of color, Kim, who also happened to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community did not have a large or political reaction to Karen’s work. Although he was less clear as to why the exhibition was disappointing to him, he was adamant that he was underwhelmed by the final product. In the following quote he tries to articulate his lackluster reaction and opinion of the exhibition:

It’s like a glorified Instagram… The photography exhibit, I thought was very, I wouldn’t say empowering, but it was kind of a statement for the models to put their bodies on display in whichever way they wanted.

In this quote Kim, like Skyler, also expressed how the exhibition fell short of what he’d expect from an exhibit that was meant to exemplify the power and beauty of every woman. Although he did praise it for the freedom it gave the models in terms of showing off their bodies, he did not get an empowering feeling from the work. While no mention of race was brought up in the above quote, Kim made it clear that he didn’t find the imagery, that the other white museum-goers found feminstic and powerful, to have a strong and compelling narrative of female liberty and power. Another thing to note was that Kim himself is not a huge fan of photography as an art medium, so if the politics of the exhibition fell short of his expectations then it probably did not help that the medium was not to his liking either.

Generally, the interviewees that were well-off and white, which was the majority of my sample, offered more praise for the progressiveness of the artworks as opposed to their minority counterparts. For example, one well-off participant said:
The vulnerability, I think, I’m not sure men feel that way, but I think it was the vulnerability of a female to me, it was the symbol of everything.

From the quote we can tell that she really connected with the message she got from the artwork and there is implied gratitude towards the artist for her insight into a female-only experience. The artist’s status as a woman affected the kind of reaction Sasha had to the artwork, for Sasha’s words indicate an appreciation for a woman artist telling a narrative that really relates primarily to women. Her mentioning that she is unsure if “men feel that way” draws a gendered line between the female experience and the male experience and the mentioning of vulnerability is telling of the extent to which Sasha connected with the content of the exhibition. However, this is in contrast to Skyler’s interaction with the photographs, as her background as a person of color directly erases any sense of vulnerability that Sasha might feel when viewing the work. She is more fixated on the lack of racial inclusiveness regarding the models than discovering ambiguous messages of feminism in the photographs.

Jesse who did not have a particularly strong reaction to any of the politics in the three exhibitions had this to say:

Generally, nudes are of younger people, maybe talking a lot about beauty maybe sexualization of the body and for me at least this was not exactly a step in the opposite direction but it wasn’t as hard of a focus, it felt more of a relaxed celebration, some of the images I seem to remember the facial expressions did have some kind of tension in them for me, but it was different from other nude based images I have seen.

Despite his somewhat apolitical reaction to the exhibits, Jesse expresses an appreciation for the representation of unconventional bodies in Karen’s exhibition. Jesse said he did not think too hard about political narratives but did enjoy and appreciate the content that Karen portrayed with her lens. But again, Jesse is not a person of color or a woman, so as a white male he is less affected by the issues that feminism combats. Macy also held a strong intimate appreciation for Karen’s work when she said:
I think Karen’s exhibit was more intimate in a way just because I am a woman. Although I couldn’t connect on a physical level to any of her subjects, but the kind of acknowledgement of my own body, it definitely pushed me to reevaluate how I view the female body in a way and there are a lot of artists who do that, but within the pretense of that exhibit it was good.

Well I think the exhibition coincided nicely with the #MeToo movement, so it was really about the kind of need for acknowledgement that females have and are asking for right now. But also, I thought it was very personal so it could be both ways—so someone could take it on a very personal level which in the end can really influence social change because you have to want something personally to advocate it publicly.

Here Macy expresses her personal connection with the content of Karen’s work and the kind of thoughts it provokes. She mentioned how the imagery forces her to face her own body and also reevaluate the way she sees other bodies. In the second quote she mentions some of the contextual factors of the time such as the #MeToo movement. Macy also talks about how personal can lead to public and subsequently political in terms of internalizing the message of Karen’s photographs and then acting after that.

The exhibition that Joseph created addressed the politics surrounding climate change and the devastation of hurricanes through the anecdotal use of an artist studio for his installation. Cam and Macy had very different things to say about their initial impressions and judgements of his work:

Well it kind of seemed like a glorification or at least just poor portrayal of like a New York City artist’s struggles they had with hurricane sandy and I know it was meant to be an exhibit about climate change as well as the impacts it has on everyday lives, but in terms of actual hardships having your art studio have some water come into it is not up there with what I would consider real struggles, that was one of my qualms with it, it felt pretentious and removed from the reality of the situation. But at the same time, it was very impressive how he made everything out of straight cardboard he managed to make it look like a real building.

I found it to be more about how everything on the surface may seem okay and you think you understand what it is but you don’t really, when you really look at things they’re completely different from what you thought they would be and it really reinforced Brent’s point of really looking at things and examining things and not taking things at face value, so I think they worked really well together.
Cam, the first quote, took the cardboard installation of the flooded studio on a very literal level and took offense as he perceived it as a poor representation of the havoc hurricanes can wreak. Cam when compared to Macy is less invested in the artworld and the lack of value he places in artistic pursuit can be seen when he says that losing your art studio is not an “actual hardship.” In contrast to Cam, Macy in the second quote, took the message of the flooded studio on a more metaphorical and philosophical level. She took the flooded studio as more a metaphor for when things get turned upside down simultaneously with the political aspects of it. Macy also draws a connection between Joseph’s cardboard installation and Brent’s work and how the two exhibits narratives complement each other. The difference in reaction the same exhibition can be attributed to the socioeconomic status of Macy vs. Brent who are middle and lower class respectfully.

Michael attended a talk Joseph did with director and mentioned that it added more layers to his interpretation of the flooded studio and made the work more complex.

I attended a gallery talk he did with the curator and he talked a lot about Reinhart and other artists. There were all kinds of clever little bits, the things that were drawn on the walls, the way artists will have reproductions of art or postcards or things pasted up on the wall, there was a small reproduction of a Frank Stella black stripe painting a famous cartoon by Ed Reinhart.

Michael talks about how after hearing the artist speak, he became more aware of the smaller details, such as the changing political propaganda on the walls of the studio depending on where its installed. This greater awareness of the details of the installation which led to not only a greater appreciation for the work but also a more educated understanding of its political connotations. Being informed about the minute details of the exhibition changed the level of political intent Michael saw in the installation. Using Michael’s experience as an example it can be inferred that when the viewer hears what the artist intended, they defer to the source when it comes to seeing and understanding the political narratives of art that addresses social issues.
There was a general consensus when museum-goers were asked why they reacted negatively to a work of art and what it was that made them react in that way. When something was well thought through and well-crafted there was an underlying appreciation for the work, even if the viewer did not agree with the message behind the piece. As noted by Amy:

For me, it is the tranquility of the whole experience too, being in a place like this or a museum and really stepping out of reality. Time stops and you can sort of clear your mind but at the same time it helps me think, I can figure things out. For example, I can go see an exhibition with problems or questions and come out with answers.

In this quote it is apparent that the experience and intellectual journey an artwork takes her on is part of what defines something as “good art” for Amy. It is the thought-provoking exhibitions that make up good art, “the going in with questions and coming out with answers” aspect really highlights the quality of the art that Amy is looking for. Macy said something similar when asked about her reactions to art and what makes it good art:

I think art has to be something that—telling a story may be too specific, but it can’t be too objective—makes the viewer think, makes the artist think, and allows people to have a broad understanding of the artwork and construct different views on it. I think when something is direct and obvious, I wouldn’t consider it art in a way, but if it’s something that really makes you think… it just has to make you think about what is going on, what are the connotations about it, and what it denotes to you.

The more complex the artwork in terms of its intellectual properties and the use of metaphor is a recurring theme when looking at what museum-goers look for in art exhibitions, what they enjoy, and what they consider to be good. Macy is very clear in the quote above that part of the viewing experience is the questions that artworks ask and the answers the viewer is challenged to come up with. When an exhibition is well curated, carefully crafted, and well thought out in its execution, that is when the viewer derives the most pleasure and gets the most from the exhibition according to the interviews. The metaphorical qualities of the artworks and the ways that they relate to the exhibitions mirror claims Chan (2017) made when
she was analyzing Ellen Gallagher’s *Watery Ecstatic Series* where she drew parallels between
old African tales and current racial social change movements. These qualities in artwork are
what differentiates and contributes to the reactions the viewer has to the artwork, be it positive
or negative.

**Discussion**

While the study’s focus was to find out why audience members see art as political, most of
the individuals I interviewed did not have a strong political reaction to the three exhibitions. The
museum-goers did report having a great appreciation for the artworks and their narratives, however
the appreciation was rooted in the quality, craftsmanship, and execution of the installations. While
marketed and exhibited as political—museum professionals even talked about the complementary
aspects of the three exhibitions—the reactions to the politics of the show were mild compared to
the expectations the literature setup using examples like Mapplethorpe and Cox. While the
exhibitions were not as risky as either Mapplethorpe or Cox’s photographs, they did contain
controversial topics that have been coming up more consistently in recent political discussion; the
Trump Administration, environmental issues and climate change, and feminism.

Museum visitors’ reactions to the politic narratives within the works relied on their
previous exposure and knowledge of the artworld. Coming from a background where art is
consistently relevant to their lives changed how the museum-goers approached these exhibitions.
With more appreciate for craftsmanship and also a less narrow idea of what art is supposed to be
directed the area of interest away from the actual politics of the message to the execution of it.
While most of the museum-goers all saw political messages within the exhibitions not all of them
felt the political clout of the messages personally. When questioned about whether or not they had
a strong reaction to the political messages in the works however, they said that they either had no
reaction or a mild one. The audience members were more invested in picking apart the details of
the exhibitions and the subtle messages hidden in metaphor than the overt political agendas of the artworks. Those who talked about their interest in the details of an exhibition also reported an upbringing that was saturated with the art and artworld experiences. Twelve out of the fourteen participants interviewed had a familial connection to the artworld; a relative who practiced some form of art, be it fine art, dance, or music. Previous exposure to the artworld conditioned the way they approached viewing artworks and changed the type of reaction the museum-goer had with the political works.

Art became more political when there was less ambiguity and the intentions of the political message were made clear to the audience. When looking at Mullin’s (2003) definition of activist art—art that consciously involves the public—the artworks in these exhibitions fall short. But the majority of the sample I interviewed were all people that are deeply invested in the artworld, conditioned to approach viewing art in a specific way. Many of the participants were disappointed in the lack of political clout or how they felt the incorporation of politics into the exhibitions fell short. Those interviewed who were members of marginalized groups were more highly critical of the way the artists pushed expressed their politics than the middle-class and white museum-goers, who all had some appreciation for the political intentions of the exhibitions. As members of an oppressed group, with first-hand experience of minority hardships, the two ethnic participants expected more from activism and activist art than they felt they received with these exhibitions. In contrast, their white counterparts were more appreciative of the art but were unaffected by the political messages contained within it.

The artists while very open about politics their work contained, seemed unsure about how the actual process of how their politics percolated into their respective exhibitions. While all of them openly admitted to their personal political leanings, two of them were hesitant to talk about
how their own politics showed up in their work. Only Brent was open about his political agenda and how his nail sculpture installation was a direct response to a political change. However, he did not talk about in what ways it acted as a response. When asked about the artistic process of the exhibitions created, he did not reveal how he actively channeled outrage at the political climate was into his work. Because of the detail and meticulously thought out planning required of the medium and type of sculpture Brent makes, it is hard to imagine he did not have a specific plan for the exhibition in terms of its execution, however he did not share those plans. When describing his reasoning, he used broad terms when explaining the politically choices he made with the exhibition and did not whittle down his answers to specifics.

Overall, when looking at the artists there seems to either be a lack of coherent recollection of how the politics entered the artwork or a reticence to reveal it. However, the audience relied heavily on their interpretations of what they thought the artists were trying to say to explain the politics of the work. The viewers were more interested in the details of the execution and how they perceived artistic intent came through in the work than the reaction it invoked within them, leading the political exhibitions to elicit no reaction or very little reaction at all. What the interview data reveals is that, except for the two minority interviewees, little to no discomfort was felt and no politics-centric reaction was produced in the viewers of the three exhibitions. The two minority participants subsequently reported their disappointment in the exhibitions and how they felt the execution was lackluster and the artists could have done more.

What can be inferred from the data then is that for the viewers the exhibitions—while falling within Mullin’s (2003) definition of political art—did not resonate with the messages on the level that the literature suggested they would. Perceived artistic intent had an influence on the audience’s perception of the artworks, but the actual intentions of the artists did not appear to come
through to the majority of the participants interviewed. Except for Michael, who attended a gallery talk with Joseph, none of the participants were aware beforehand—from the source—of the artists’ actual intentions with their exhibitions. Therefore, while perceived artistic intent influenced audience reaction, actual artistic intent had little to do with the outcome of the museum-goers’ viewing experience.

In conclusion, the data did not match up cleanly with the reviewed literature, what was the most telling information was how previous exposure shaped the reactions of the viewer. Race was another variable that seemed to significantly influence the reaction the viewer had. Those with a racial background looked for, were more sensitive to, and more critical of the politics within the three installations. The context of the social sphere did not really appear to influence how the museum-goers felt about the artworks, despite being aware of the relationship between the exhibitions and current politics. Secondly, the museum professionals were evasive in their answers so conclusions surrounding the influence of funding were hard to formulate. The artists interviewed strongly opposed the notion that they created political artwork as a favor or in response to public request so my hypothesis on artistic intent was not supported. In the end, essentially what the data collected told me then is that the more knowledgeable about art, the less reactive to political artworks the viewer will be.

For future research I think an important change in study design would be to gather data from a more representative sample of the population, people with a variety of political affiliations, socioeconomic statuses, etc. As seen in Table 1, the sample population I interviewed was very homogeneous, so by using a more representative and larger sample it could be more clearly ascertained which independent variables had the most influence on the interaction between interviewee and the political artwork.
References


Appendices

*Museum Professional Interview Guide*

Questions:

Could you tell me about the mission of CMCA?

_Probe:_ What are the goals of the museum as an institution within the art community and/or the general community at large?

Do you consider the exhibitions (American Steel, The Appearance of Things, Studio Flood) to be political, to what degree, and how does this complement the museum’s mission statement if it does?

_Probe:_ Does the museum have a specific demographic it caters to and if so why?

Could you describe the process and decision making that goes into curating exhibits?

_like American Steel and Studio Flood that are more openly political as opposed to The Appearance of Things which does not have any obvious political inclination but does not exist entirely separate from that sphere of society._

_Probe:_ What would you consider political about Appearance of Things and do you think it’s less overtly political than American Steel and in what ways?

How would you describe the success of the exhibitions and what makes something successful for the museum and its mission?

_Probe:_ Do the critics responses influence the direction that the museum will take in the future?

_Probe:_ For example, *American Steel* was very well received but had it not been what impact would that have had on the curatorial decisions going forward/would it?

In terms of the museum and subsequently your role, how connected to the political realm is this institution and in what ways? Do you think the museum stands apart politics or do you think the museum is a reflection of the current events and/or representative of contemporary culture?

_Probe:_ For example, the political climate in America is heated and American Steel is a direct response to the election of our current president. In that way the museum has taken on a role as a messenger in the political sphere, but to what extent would you describe that role; a role as a commenter or an activist or do you define the museum’s role as something else entirely?

How do you decide which artists to exhibit together when turning over the galleries?

_For example, how do you want the exhibits to complement each other or contrast each other?_

_Probe:_ Do the assumed messages of each exhibit factor into whether or not you display the art?
What things do you take in to consideration when deciding how to curate an exhibit and what exhibitions you want on display?

_Probe:_ Does the political climate and the potential politics of the art to be displayed play a major factor in the decision making?

When marketing contemporary art exhibits, which tend to be more tied to politics, how do you choose which marketing strategies to employ?

_Probe:_ With such a partisan political climate at the moment do you try to steer clear of catering to or alienating one population or the other?

How does the status of the museum as a nonprofit business influence the direction of the museum and the decision making that goes on behind the scenes?

_Probe:_ I know where funding comes from can influence the curatorial decisions surrounding what art is displayed. For example, a college museum is an educational museum and has fewer concerns about funding in contrast to a government-funded museum or a nonprofit.

The museum has community-based programs such as ArtLab and collaborates with other institutions in its programing. In what ways does the specific community that the museum is a part of impact the mission of the museum?

_Probe:_ Are you catering to the community for an audience or the art world more broadly?

_Probe:_ Are the artistically educated your primary or secondary audience?

**Artist Interview Guide**

Questions:

Why did you become an artist and what kind of artist would you classify yourself as?

_Probe:_ Do you consider yourself an activist artist?

How would you define art and what do you think makes something great art?

_Probe:_ What makes an object artwork?

How would you describe the kind of art you create in the broader context of the art world? Would you categorize it as any kind of art specifically?

_Probe:_ What does your art represent? Does it tell a specific narrative?

What thought processes go into the creation of art? Do you take into consideration the audience and the kind of interaction you want the art to have with the viewer? Or is art an expressive vehicle to explore your own narrative?

_Probe:_ How do you create art for an audience and what strategies to you incorporate when doing so?
How has your art and the way you approach its creation changed over your career as an artist? Do you feel like you found a specific style that you have stuck to or have you been constantly changing your approach?

Probe: If you stick to a specific style why is that?

Probe: What has influenced the change in your artistic approach?

Do you have an education in art and in what way has that training shaped the way you approach creating art?

Probe: Do the lessons you learned from your art education on what art is and how to create it shape your own artistic story, values, and goals?

What motivates you to create art (political or not)?

Probe: Are there any historical factors you’d like to share about your call to create?

Historically, political protests and social change movements have greatly utilized artists and art as a way to push cultural and social boundaries and produce activism. What is art’s current role in your eyes surrounding social and political movements? What problems or benefits do you see with the great politicization of art in contemporary America?

Probes: Historically art was used to tell stories through visual representation (the religious paintings, etc.). What do you think art’s main function is now?

When social movements and calls for social change arise, do you feel any kind of responsibility to create a visual cry for change when the public protests? Do you think artists hold any kind of responsibility to represent the public in their work or is artwork a private experience that should stand separate to politics?

Probe: Obviously artists approach to art can be highly individual, but from your perspective do you feel responsible to respond to the social and political climate?

Do you think that contemporary art can exist entirely separately from the political sphere? Why or why not?

Probe: What do you think factors into the politicization of art (especially art that might not be political in original design)?

Can you tell me more about the processes you went through when creating this exhibition (American Steel, The Appearance of Things, or Studio Flood)?

Probe: What were your original intentions with this exhibit and how did it change through the creative process?
What interpretations of your exhibition were you expecting? Were there any surprising reactions from the audience that frequented the museum that you didn’t expect?

*Probe:* How thought-provoking is your art when it comes to philosophical and controversial areas of life?

_Audience Interview Guide_

**Questions:**

What is your favorite kind of art to view? Do you have any favorite artists?

*Probe:* What specifically do you like about art?

Can you tell me about your exposure to art?

*Probe:* How often do you go to museums?

*Probe:* Do you collect art?

What would you consider artwork?

*Probe:* Are there any conditions that must be met for you to consider something art?

What was your first introduction to art and how has your view of the art world changed since then?

*Probe:* Has your definition of art become wider or narrower and why do you think that is?

Now can I ask you about your experience viewing _American Steel, The Appearance of Things_, and _Studio Flood_?

*Probe:* How did you find yourself interacting with the art intellectually? What reactions did you have to it?

What really stood out to you about _American Steel_?

*Probe:* Could you describe any standout moments and/or thoughts you had when you saw the sculptures? Why do you think you reacted in that way?

What really stood out to you about _The Appearance of Things_?

*Probe:* Could you describe any standout moments and/or thoughts you had when you saw the sculptures? Why do you think you reacted in that way?

What really stood out to you about _Studio Flood_?

*Probe:* Could you describe any standout moments and/or thoughts you had when you saw the sculptures? Why do you think you reacted in that way?
With the three exhibitions *American Steel, The Appearance of Things*, and *Studio Flood* do you think that any of these exhibitions are addressing social problems in any way shape or form?

**Probe:** For example, I personally thought that *The Appearance of Things* offered a visual commentary through photography of the female body and confronted the cultural definition of a woman and bringing the female body into a position of power. Did you see any political or social commentary within the artworks in these exhibitions and if so can you describe what they were and how you thought the artist represented those narratives?

Now I would like to ask you about how art becomes political to you and if you connected political messages to any of these three exhibitions.

**Probe:** Can you give me an example of an artwork that was inherently political to you?

**Probe:** How would you compare it to the works in these three exhibitions?

Can you describe a moment when you strongly disliked a piece of political art? What did you not like about it? Was it the message or something else?

**Probe:** When you react negatively to an artwork, is it simply the presentation/appearance of the work or something buried in how you interpreted the work?

Do you think your background, how you grew up or your political affiliation, influences how you view art and the kind of art you like?

**Probe:** What kind of art do you like and why?

When confronted with activist art, what is your initial reaction? Have you ever been so moved by an exhibition that you felt the need to participate in activism in any form yourself (ex. donation, protest, etc.)?

**Probe:** Does political art simply reaffirm preexisting beliefs, or do you find that your activist inclinations can be amplified by interacting with a political artwork?

Why do you think individuals experience art exhibitions differently?

**Probe:** What makes your experience viewing *American Steel, The Appearance of Things*, and *Studio Flood* different from another viewer?

**General Demographic Questions**

What is your age?

What is your gender identity?

What is your race/ethnicity?

What is your highest level of education?

What is your socioeconomic status?

Ex. upper, middle, or lower class?
Are you married?
Are you employed?
What is your political affiliation?
Do you identify with any marginalized groups?
   Ex. ethnic minorities, LGBTQ+, etc.
Are you politically active/engage in any activism?
Table 1. The general demographics of interviewee participants (N=14)

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Figure 1. Some of the sculptures made of metal from the exhibition addressing the election of President Trump

Figure 2. Some of the sculptures made of metal from the exhibition addressing the election of President Trump
Figure 3. Some of the sculptures made of metal from the exhibition addressing the election of President Trump

Figure 4. Some of the sculptures made of metal from the exhibition addressing the election of President Trump
Figure 5. A photograph from the photography exhibit that caused controversy for the use of atypical models.

Figure 6. A photograph from the photography exhibit that caused controversy for the use of atypical models.
Figure 7. A photograph from the photography exhibit that caused controversy for the use of atypical models.

Figure 8. A photograph of the walk-in, cardboard installation that was created as a response to Hurricane Sandy.
Figure 9. A photograph of the walk-in, cardboard installation that was created as a response to Hurricane Sandy