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Art Politics of the United States Since 2014: Understanding the Role of American Contemporary Art in Rendering Change

Thesis for a Masters Degree in Mexico-U.S. Studies

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Whose hopes?
The hopes of the home-renegade,
Trapped in a binary cage,
Labelled *he*,
When *she* has chosen otherwise.

Whose fears?
The fears of the culturally-diverse,
Stripped of their humanity,
With a single word,
"Illegal".

Whose values?
The ambivalent values of American people,
Home of the brave,
Land of the free,
But what is bravery and freedom,
At the hands of violence?

Whose justice?
Justice for a teen boy,
Caught taking some stogs,
Shot twice in the head,
Bam! Bam!
Now he is dead.
- RJ

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Introduction

Art often renders and articulates an ideology that describes a reality that has been interpreted by an artist. This reality and its consequential ideology represent the socio-political terrain of a given historical context with a particular emphasis on the visual, spatial and temporal characteristics of an event or a moment. In this sense, art can be understood as a form of political discourse that describes, interprets, and sometimes criticizes what is happening, creating a dialogue that aims to transcend what is political in nature.

The study of contemporary visual representations depicts forms of social inquiry that supplement knowledge generated in the social sciences. This research project deals with the intersection between art and politics to analyze American contemporary art and its implications in the socio-political sphere of the United States. The two fields are defined not by their intrinsic qualities, but by the potential for social engagement and change that allows for boundaries to shift, hegemonic relationships to grow or fester, and for new paradigms and ideologies to be devised.

Art contests the meaning and interpretation of artistic representations, embedded with power, through which historical moments are made. Contemporary art departs from its original purpose - to generate a reality instead of simply representing it - in order to emphasize change as a political and social process that unfolds itself as a critique of the systems that are already in place. Using the elements of Postmodernity (plurality, liminality, and the spectacle), it further aims to present an aesthetic that deals primarily with an adjustment at the hands of the audience to address something that might not necessarily be *beautiful*, but that has such an impact that it

pervades their mind. In this manner both aesthetics and politics become entwined with the world of art.

The methods utilized in this analysis look at the spiritual concerns of the individual as the origin and defining rule for cultural or artistic representations, positing that artists and contemporary art successfully render the ideological and socio-political terrain that corresponds with their reality, and more than often they comment and criticize such terrain in an attempt to create awareness and propose desired change. Through a sociological perspective, the innovations of individuals, in response to how they interpret reality, play a significant role in shaping the history of art and in explaining the political needs of such reality. This as a defining factor of the Postmodern individual. Insofar, the struggles of contemporary art in reconciling individuals with their social existence affects the way in which others might perceive and experience socio-political phenomena. Thus, the rendering of the objectives of contemporary social movements provides discourse through politics.

The project cannot be thought of without my academic socialization with the fields of political science and art history, my institutional affiliation with Western thought (particularly following the vision and liberal arts curriculum of the National Autonomous University in promoting relevant discourse about the present social and political atmosphere), and my interest in both social movements and visual images. Therefore, this multi-disciplinary study serves to provide a qualitative, interpretive, and poetical analysis of both art and politics as a means to produce knowledge that contributes to a better understanding of the present socio-political situation of the United States (Freeman 2017).

The onset of socio-political tension in the United States in 2014 serves as turning-point in the progression of American history to address the emancipatory potential of American contemporary art at the hands of social movements and the artists that adhere to their values. Four pillars have defined American politics since their colonial inception: representative democracy, plurality elections, geography-based representation, and private property rights. Democracy and capitalism have permeated the socio-political sphere of an ever-evolving American society - pursuing these pillars as values to establish the present hegemonic system. However, time and time again, periods of polarization have historically been contended over issues with these pillars; polarization being the socio-political division of a community with basis on distinct and sometimes contradictory interests. Thus the primary division between the Democrat and the Republican parties revolves around regulation, taxation and tariffs as main economic estranging factors. When non-economic divisions permeate the political sphere or when the divisions disappear altogether (which rarely happens), polarization occurs, marking major socio-political developments in the history of the United States.

The first instance of polarization occurred around the issue of slavery, ultimately provoking the Civil War from 1861 to 1865. Representation and property-rights, at the expense of the lives and liberty of African Americans serve to delineate ideological and political instability and ultimately mark the Jim Crow Era through “separate-but-equal” policies (Taylor, K. ch. 4). The second reemerged with the Civil Rights Movement starting in 1954 when regional actors pursued proportional representation and absolute plurality in doing so, accounting for the explicit institutional and social discrimination that followed the Supreme Court decision of *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Insofar, some of the issues addressed through this movement are yet

unresolved and the political tension of the United States today showcases socially stratified divisions as anti-establishment sentiments keep proliferating.

In particular, issues revolving minorities: misrepresentation, under-representation, and violence, have prompted social mobilization among the American public building upon the knowledge and will of these groups as they are channeled towards a common objective - an equitable inclusion in both politics and society. *Black Lives Matter*, the LGBT Movement, and the Immigrant Rights Movement as social movements have resurfaced as a response to the divisive socio-political situation of the nation when dealing with these respective minorities. Their voice reflected through different forms of cultural expression, whether it be taking over entire highways or propagating posters. Their protests take on elements of performance as hundreds sit silently outside government buildings; these become performative acts in a political arena. The art that derives from these movements validates these actions. Politics defines them.

Contemporary American artists have taken heed on the process of ideological polarization and these ensuing protest movements, focusing on depicting politically-charged phenomena to purposefully showcase the social-democratic values that fuel them and to further promote the change that they ask for. While public spaces turn geopolitical as protest movements occupy them; they emphasize the present, suggest the future, and create a dialogue among the actors involved. In a gallery setting, the artwork adheres to the essence of protesting to do exactly the same. American contemporary art thus helps to establish the possibility of a new ideological terrain and new cultural practices that are inspired directly from these social movements and a notion of socio-democracy. The American contemporary art at hand is a small sample of a set of art pieces that respond directly to socio-democratic values pursued by

minorities in the United States. The artist use media to its full capacity in addressing contemporary political phenomena as issues of social justice. These art pieces, however, are supported by the renown of the artists at hand in the artistic community. The confluence of art and the socio-political sphere allows this artwork to occupy a space that is both cultural and contra-cultural. Cultural in a sense that it response directly to the social reality from which it emerges, and contra-cultural in that it critiques its own origin, and its subject matter, and its viewers.

The contributions of this project are two-fold: an analysis in political science on art, and an analysis of art through political science. A constant dialectic between art and politics therefore helps define how *American contemporary art seeks a new interpretation of the nation's ideology since it is an inherent response to American Postmodernity, validates and renders the socio-democratic values produced by the ideological polarization of the country in 2014 and the Black Lives Matter, LGBT+, and Immigrant Rights Movements that stem from it, and proposes de-hegemonizing tendencies to achieve critical and emancipatory potentialities within the socio-political sphere of the United States.*

First, I focus on reviewing and analyzing how American politics have laid the foundation for contemporary art to flourish and develop, particularly as a result of American Postmodernity defined through the concepts of liminality, plurality, and the spectacle. Second, I describe and analyze the contemporary socio-political situation of the United States and how it has influenced the art sphere. In doing so, I propose an analysis and an art-historical evaluation of artwork that addresses this socio-political moment in accordance with the objectives of the aforementioned movements. Again, the artwork chosen is a sample of a larger body of work that

addresses change by reinterpreting and assimilating symbols prominent not only in what we deem contemporary, but also throughout history. Finally, using Gramscian and Arendtian perspectives, I expand on art's critical and emancipatory potentialities as a form of politics, and a means to foster a new ideological terrain in the United States. Through this, I utilize the field of Art Politics to consider the relationships developed with this artwork and the extent in which it internalized the current social reality of the country. I culminate with a manifesto in which I explore the extent of American Postmodernity through Spoken Word Poetry to dissect the purpose and extent of Art Politics today.

Methodology

The transformative potential of American contemporary art can only be identified through a critical analysis of its aesthetic value, context and socio-political dimension. The complexities of meaning, medium, and purpose behind contemporary art make it incredibly hard to conceptualize and measure its effects on social interactions and the social sciences altogether. To understand contemporary art we therefore have to rely on what contradicts itself or is dialectical in essence for a variety of qualitative perspectives - a combination of literary analysis and observations might foster a reflection of the reality at hand, but visual analysis is key to understand this field.

In *Working with Images* by Nicole Doerr and Noa Milman visual analysis extends to socio-political dynamics due to the "class of expressions" and visual manifestations produced in the current sphere, "the representation of social movements in images disseminated in mediation processes", and "a larger societal framework" which grants visibility to certain groups (Doerr et

al. 418). In this way, I depart from the work of Kehinde Wiley, Kara Walker, and Robert Longo who deal directly with the objectives of the *Black Lives Matter Movement* and address issues of plurality representation and institutional racism, the work of Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Zak Krevitt, and Ben Cuevas who reinterpret gender and deal with the minorities within the LGBT+ community, and the work of Byron Kim and Aman Mojadidi as they address matters of immigration and displacement. In this way I can analyze the visual images that I have gathered according to the objectives of these movements together with the objectives of the polarized left both which align with socio-democratic values.

An analysis of this visual media can therefore allow to scope movement culture, strategies, and identities such as gender or intersectionality as they develop in the polarized playground of the United States. The premise of how social reality is rendered provides the capacity to analyze social transformation. Through this it is possible to identify the visual aspects of framing to pinpoint specific emotions such as pride or resentment within a given social reality and artists, activists and movements use these images to communicate culturally coded visual frames to pluralist publics (Gamson et al. qtd in Doerr and Milman 2014). To achieve this I use political iconography which is a "comparative method, aimed at disclosing the meaning of visuals in a specific context at a specific time" (Müller and Özcan qtd in Doerr and Milman 2014). It combines social science research with methods of art history and therefore requires a three-step process: iconographic description, content analysis, and a contextualized interpretation of the visual in order to fully grasp what Art Politics is.

A critical theoretical approach helps to comprehend the byzantine nature of contemporary art within the socio-political sphere of the United States today. The dialogical

interactions prompted through this method allow both me as the researcher and you as my audience to question our reality and challenge our perception of it. Through the fields of Visual Arts, Art History, and Politics it is possible to describe the current atmosphere from a particular vantage point in an attempt to "conceptualize praxis (the enactment of theory)... to extend the scope of political possibilities" (Bohman 2010). In this sense, this research project can explain how art responds to the affirmations of institutionalized political ideology and the executive functions of government and society; these affirmations are all "feasible under current conditions or modification of those conditions" (*Ibid*). The project thus focuses on the concepts of democracy and capitalism as pillars for the foundational ideology of the United States, and while their definition has been abated and modified, in essence these notions are extremely valid today for social movements to reexamine what works and what simply doesn't. By explaining these pillars it is possible to describe the current polarized environment of the country. While seemingly spontaneous, 2014 serves as a start-point for this research due to the multiple instances of social instability that had been developing ever since 9/11, reaffirmed with the 2008 economic crisis, and bombastic creedal passions sparking polarization during the Obama and Trump administrations. This spontaneity, however, also defines the characteristics and medium-specificity of the art that has resulted from this social reality.

The methodology at hand is based on Horkheimer's definition of critical theory: "it must be explanatory, practical, and normative, all at the same time; that is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation" (Horkeimer qtd in Bohman 2010). This research project aims to explain the current social reality of the United States,

identifies social movements and artists that address this social reality, and their audience as key actors involved as they "produce their own historical form of life" (*Ibid*). The analysis of praxis - the way that these actors behave and interact with each other, gives us a better understanding of how norms are repeated and interpreted, sometimes enacted under the social and historical circumstances that the United States faces today. This research project therefore includes a historiographical approach in the first chapter to understand American ideology and its polarization; and the subsequent rise of social movements that attempt to shift the ideological terrain to their favor, together with the art that renders their objectives in the second chapter.

Critical theory therefore demonstrates the plurality and intersectionality of Art and Politics in addressing the way American contemporary art deals with reality. While American contemporary art becomes political as the actors involved employ their practical and aesthetic knowledge to develop forms of cultural expression that showcase complex perspectives, Politics earns an aesthetic value that appeals to how these perspectives create a discourse with an audience in an attempt to present a new definition of American ideology altogether, through a social democratic lens.

1. The Development of American Postmodernity or Defining the Contemporary

Modern art is rooted in convictions. In Europe, there had been a collective belief among Modernist artists in surpassing pre-established standards, breaking from tradition in order to reach the avant-garde. In fact, contemporary criticism assumes that the achievements of modernism can only really be understood against the rejection of conventional values (Gablik 87). Individually, artists sought the avant-garde through artistic freedom and a fixation of a particular aspect of the painting (light, color, character...). However, they retreated to privatism and developed a self-centered transcendent idealism. The Fauves, for example, searched for immediacy through candidness by using heightened color contrasts and emotional, expressive depth. Claude Monet, on the other hand, sought to capture the atmosphere of a particular moment in time through an analysis of light. Artists had become entrapped within the limits of the avant-garde, looking to expand the dimensions of the art world until their work would be considered as surpassing tradition. They dwelled in the cultural expression of a society that was based on capitalist leisure and a yearning for innovation, regarding the past only as a start point for their work.

This European invention and modernist avant-garde translated in juxtaposition to an American context. The Founding Fathers of the United States constructed the nation without a common history, inherited social class, and norms to react to, but rather by including a constantly shifting diversity of ideologies, and a multiplicity of cultures that derived, at large, from the tenants of the Enlightenment. The agreed principles of equality, individual freedom, private-property, and religious tolerance served to delineate the creation of laws and a Constitution, later turning into core values that notably “have become increasingly corrupted over time by self-

serving politicians and some of those with a disproportionate share of [American] wealth" (Fineberg 18). Instead of prioritizing a "chronicle of a continuous past", the Founding Fathers established a set of symbols to represent these values - perhaps, the most prominent ones are the American flag, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution. Now, these symbols represent the past of American society (*Ibid*).

The divergence of American symbols as emblems of both national culture and the American Dream exemplify a departure from European modernism imbedding Postmodernism with inherent American constructs; Postmodernism as a concept that defines American contemporary art. Driven by vanguardism towards plurality, liminality and submission to the spectacle, Postmodernism attempts to negotiate and establish an eloquent dialectic between the art piece and its audience. The dialectic is marked by redefining the meaning of symbols, a newfound sense of individuality, and constant questioning of reality.

According to Fineberg, it is the "fundamental hybridity and mutability of American culture [which] is implied in the multicultural identity of its founding self-conception [that shapes how it] is committed to a destabilizing fluidity of its forms - politically, economically and socially" (Fineberg 19). In an analysis on how American artists engage with reality, it is assumed that they are ahistorical insofar as they address the popular culture and neglect any canon of style or technique that had previously been used; artist Barnett Newman saw art as a forms of thought, claiming that "to start from scratch, to paint as if painting never existed before" addresses art as "an act of self-creation and a declaration of political, intellectual and individual freedom" (Newman 192, xxv).

American contemporary art therefore redefines the country's ideology since it is Postmodern in nature: it achieves a transformative interaction between artist, artwork and audience through plural, spectacular images. The characteristics for American Postmodernism, however, originate from the historical and political trajectory of the United States which is defined by a liberal ideological foundation, a sense of cultural hybridity, and fundamental (now rather skewed) notions of democracy and capitalism.

1.1 The Liminality of American Democracy

The term liminality describes a threshold, not necessarily defined by a limit, but as an account of a process - a transition in-between. It serves to demonstrate a space, time, and middle-ground in which transformations can take place and an equilibrium exists between ambiguities and contradictions. American contemporary art is inherently liminal. It breaches distinctions between style and structure, past and present, medium and concept specificity, incorporating anachronistic and present-day symbols to address their relationship and at the same time deconstruct and re-explain the meaning behind them.

In sociology, Arnold Van Gennep develops the term through a study of rites of passage, transitions of states, places, and social positions (Turner 94). This transitory experience defines a specific spatial and temporal character, recognizing an anti-structure within this liminal phase (Westerveld 11). Such phase allows for a "stage of reflection that is characteristic of liminality, [and prompts its participants] to think more abstractly about their position within their society, within their nation, and within the universe at large" (Westerveld 13). This realization thus allows both artists and audience to engage in a dialectical relationship, identified through

communitas: described by Victor Turner as a moment in which people realize the need to engage with one another allowing for human interrelatedness. A sociological approach to ideology sees it as a construction at a given moment that cannot be defined through simple dichotomies, but rather as a dynamic process of meaning-making. The construction of an ideology is liminal.

Liminality not only addresses a sense of one's place, but deals with the categories of outsiderhood, marginality, and inferiority. Westerveld defined outsiderhood as "a condition of a person or a group of people that either permanently or temporary, but often voluntarily, opt to live their life outside the structural arrangements of the hierarchical social structure" (Westerveld 14). Marginals, on the other hand, appear as individuals who are "often pushed to the edges" and "actively live in a two-fold existence" (*Ibid*). Finally, inferiority is measured through economic status, and while never voluntary, the situation can be permanent or temporary.

In art, liminality plays a dual role: it establishes the artist as an outsider, and addresses the marginal quality of subject matter, medium, and audience response. Most contemporary artists use their practice to set themselves aside from society in order to be in the position to question, criticize, and reflect upon the social system, and the social reality that they come from. By voluntarily playing the role of an spectator, the artist acquires a wider perspective of what is contemporary and is able to account to their own vision of events. Furthermore, the contradictory nature of liminality allows for a form of expression that directly establishes a relationship between the artists, the artwork, and its audience. As Turner puts it, liminality allows art to give "an outward and visual form to an inward conceptual process" (Turner 96). In this way the artwork raises questions that correspond to how the artist interprets reality, and how the audience interprets the interpretation, but the answers are left for the audience itself to decipher. The

subject matter is presented with ambiguity or creates ambiguity of meaning as in the context of the artwork individual stories, struggles, ideologies, all unfold into a complex explanation of reality. Medium, only a way to present this complexity.

American contemporary art reflects the country's progression because the socio-political atmosphere of the country allows it to be - its liberal ideological foundation ensures it through the preservation of the basic rights such as freedom of speech and private property in relation to both democracy and capitalism.

The appeal of democracy for the Founding Fathers lies in their intellectual commitment to citizenship under an idealistic notion of majority rules and equal representation, in contrast to the institutional injustices instated by the British government. Dealing with this contradiction unfolded a liminal process of addressing each other as socio-political actors within a system were change was necessary. (Note that citizenship is not fully inclusive until 1868 with the 14th Amendment). Stemming from the Magna Carta and the English Bill of Rights, colonial ideology focused on a representative government and Lockean liberalism to legitimize democracy throughout the colonies. A definition of American democracy can be acquired through Robert Dahl's "poliarchy," a notion in which this type of government requires free, fair and competitive elections, freedom of expression and organization, access to unadulterated information, and legitimate, citizen-driven institutions. Through Westerveld's propositions it is possible to recognize this colonial identity as one of self-awareness against the imposition of British ways in contrast with their own independence. To achieve this the system is delineated in the Constitution of 1787 which guarantees the rights described as Lockean natural law, legislative representation, and a system of checks and balances.

More important, however, is the colonial focus on equitable economic representation in response to the taxes imposed by the government of King George III. The Intolerable Acts of the 1770s paved the way for a revolution departing from the colonial unity that was created by these policies. Arguably, the Intolerable Acts prompted the first threshold that the colonies had to address. The First and Second Continental Congresses, for example, fomented an economic alliance in the form of an embargo against Britain, that later was translated into the Declaration of Independence as an outright socio-economic claim against British rule, putting Americans on the margin as they slowly established a separation between themselves and the British *others*.

When the Founding Fathers thus came together to revise the system of government for the colonies - then the failed Articles of Confederation, three main compromises were met, serving to identify democracy and capitalism as guiding ideologies within the constitutional framework of the country and paving liminality as a key aspect of their identity-building. The first, denominated the Connecticut Compromise, established a system of checks and balances within the legislative branch of government aiming at both proportional and equal representation in both the House of Representatives and the Senate respectively. Checks and balances served to concretize as a process of redefinition through the interpretation, creation, and execution of the laws.

The second settled a disagreement on plurality representation based on the political value of enslaved African Americans, primarily within Southern states. The Three-Fifths Compromise, as the name implies, thus instated that three-fifths of the enslaved people within a state had to be accounted for both tax purposes and representation in legislature. Again, this serves to justify the liminal nature of the country's foundation in addressing slavery as an economic process and

restructuring it through the interests of the Southern actors involved in the process of self-recognition not towards differences among the colonies, but against the British (obviously this changed during the Civil War).

The final compromise was reached over commerce, dealing with distinct economic notions from Southern and Northern states with regards to regulation and the trade of African Americans. The compromise determined that Congress did not have the power to ban slave trade - which it eventually did in 1865 with the 13th Amendment, but they could regulate interstate and foreign commerce, protecting states themselves by suppressing taxes on exports.

The next liminal reinterpretation of the country comes when addressing the commonalities between the contemporary Democratic and the Republican parties which constitute the intertwined notions of democracy and capitalism. Political parties rose after Washington's Presidential term as competing ideologies focused on democratic values: the Federalists who posited for a central government, and the Democratic-Republicans who aimed for a federal government.

Before the Civil War these parties contested presidential power and seats in Congress as they concretized a system of government very similar to what we experience today. However, by 1828 under Jackson's presidency, the Democratic-Republican party dissolved due to contentions over slave trade, tariffs, and state economic systems, splitting into an early version of the present Democratic and Republican parties. According to Gramsci, "changing socio-economic circumstances do not of themselves produce political changes. They only set the conditions in which such changes become possible" (Gramsci 190). The socio-political sphere of the early 1800s in the United States demonstrates a clash between the rising socio-political involvement of

free slaves beyond the Missouri line, and the economic interests of the South, issues that permeated into the ideology of both political party members and members of society at large as they took account of their reality and established "relations of force, the degree of political organization, and combativity of opposing forces… [ensuring] political alliances which they manage to bind together [to] their level of political consciousness, of preparation of the struggle on [their given] ideological terrain" (*Ibid*). To depart from theory, this Gramscian perspective describes the given scenario in which the founding ideology of the country becomes polarized at the hands of social, political, and economic factors that delimit and represent widely different ideologies.

An organizational capacity defines these ideologies within a multiparty system, and therefore establishes a way to simplify the complexities of both politics and society as proposed by Hunt, to define decision-making in response to their given context as posed by Grafstein, and, when developing an analysis of these events, to verify and criticize the development of American history, thus presenting new norms such as the abolition of slavery as a fact (Filippini et al. 19; Wartofsky 240). This reinterpretation thus helps to define liminality as a product of American history in addressing a conception of self-awareness and process-oriented decision-making when dealing with a contention of the principles established in the Constitution.

In the history of the United States, when non-economic divisions permeate the political sphere or when the divisions disappear altogether, polarization occurs, marking major socio-political change. Again, polarization is the socio-political division of a community with basis on distinct and sometimes contradictory interests. This political phenomenon is an outcome of the "pressure from the determinant economic forces [that] are interpreted by parties" (Gramsci 121).

The events that led to and the Civil War of 1861 exemplify the first instance in which polarization among the actors of American government constitute major socio-political ideological divisions; polarization is liminal in that it deals with a process of recognition of otherness in Democratic and Republican self-concept development. The Republicans, for one, opposed the spread of slavery, while the Democrats held economic interests over the welfare of three-fifths of their citizens. These ideological differences carried through among American society in defining a period of candid discrimination and institutional racism. Liminal in nature this polarization guided the country forward in multiple transition periods throughout its history.

While a drastic ideological change happened after the New Deal of the 1930s within the Democratic and Republican parties - constituting the ideological terrain that we know of today, the political atmosphere of the country remained homogenous until after World War II when issues of representation and property-rights reached another zenith. A second Reconstruction was needed due to the repercussions of the "separate-but-equal" ideology established through *Plessy v. Ferguson* which permeated both politics and society - an new liminal reinterpretation of society and politics ensued (Wilson et al. 124). Non-violent movements and protests took the streets, calling for an end to the Jim Crow Era. The American public, particularly minorities, could not see the principles of democracy reflected in the way that they were being represented against government, and treated by their neighbors, and thus issues with plurality representation rose, acting as a catalyst for Congress to take action. The polarization of ideology again helped to instate major socio-political restructuring as moderates in Congress called upon the foundational values of the nation to address the turmoil.

Three pieces of legislation serve as explicit outcomes of the Civil Rights Movement: the Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968 (Wilson et al. 133). Along with the social change that followed these institutional reforms, these Acts have defined the inclusion of minorities within a socio-political context given the extent of both democracy and capitalism as pillars of American ideology, and the foundational values of the country. However, while the institutional framework is in place it seems that these pieces of legislation are taken for granted. Today, I observe that the same level of social mobility that stems from socio-political tension is evident, and many are claiming that the steps that were taken towards social justice back in the 60s, have in no way allowed the country to reach what would be ideal for the underrepresented. Socially stratified divisions and anti-establishment sentiments thus define a new wave of polarization.

1.2 The Cultural Context of American Plurality

Philosopher Roland Barthes proposed that the text is not a line of words releasing a single meaning, but a multidimensional space in which a variety of writings - none of them original - blend and clash (Barthes qtd. in Buckingham 290). Following this post-structuralist theory, any given piece of contemporary art is directly related to the text: it does not have a defined meaning and it creates a multidimensional space where other artwork merges into one. Besides, Suzi Gablik affirms that “artists are finding that the only way to make something new is to borrow from the past” (Gablik 85). References therefore play a key role in contemporary art as they provide this juxtaposition of symbols that deliberately marks what defines the art piece. Any work of Post-Modern art therefore uses *pastiche* as a means to incorporate itself to contemporary

society, while still maintaining distinct characteristics unique to itself. The works' use of references blurs any distinction between assimilation and integration in art as an institution, and allows for compliance to a social relationship between people that is mediated by images or symbols as posed by Guy Debord in his Fourth Thesis (Debord 1). Taking into account the constant reinterpretation of democracy and citizenship through the symbols of the United States (the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence), the cultural context of the country flourished incorporating the backgrounds of thousands who had once migrated there in hope of achieving the American Dream.

Liberal values are explicitly stated in the American Constitution making a clear reference to the aforementioned definition of democracy, and the four pillars that account for the foundation of the country: popular sovereignty, plurality elections, geography-based representation, and private property rights. By the 18th and19th centuries, the principles had come to define the American Dream and set it as a goal for both citizens and internationals seeking to redefine their own lives through the *rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.* The four pillars of American politics built a sense of cultural hybridity, poorly addressed through plurality representation, which has been translated into the basis for pluralism within postmodernity. The notion of the melting pot serves as the epitome of plurality as a concept within the foundational tenants of the United States.

In *Letters from an American Farmer* published in 1782 by Hector J. St. John Crevecoeur, he winsomely defines what it means to be American not only addressing the multifaceted background of the immigrants who had arrived in this country, but also the opportunities once available in it and the rights it proclaims. First, he delves into politics, defining an American as

an individual who is “unfettered and unrestrained” since “mild government” allows them to respect all laws without dread or opposition since there is a ubiquitous sense of equality (St. John Crevecoeur 1). Under the standards of capitalism, this liberalism allows all men to be free: “no aristocratical families, no courts, no kings, no bishops, no ecclesiastical dominion, no invisible power giving to a few a very visible one; no great manufacturers employing thousands, no great refinements of luxury” exist, the American is able to live a full life of comfort through their own work (*Ibid*). An the backgrounds are plenty: “they are a mixture of English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, Germans, and Swedes” and the author goes on to claim that many wish they could be more intermixed (St. John Crevecoeur 2). The notion of the melting pot thus becomes normalized under a sense of political, economic, and social equality due to the plurality from which the country emerges.

From its conception the country has always been considered an asylum, but not one where multiple ideologies collide and collapse (perhaps not until recently), but one where all of these ideologies merge to create a beautiful sense of what being an American implies. A farmer who migrated to the country almost two hundred and fifty years ago, someone who observed and recounted what had happened around him, how plurality grew and revivified an American identity, seems to have a much better notion of the demographics of the country than the current administration. He understands that an American citizen has left behind “all his ancient prejudices and manners, receives new ones from the new mode of life [they] have embraced, the new government [they] obey, and the new rank [they] hold” (St. John Crevecoeur 3). They had become infused with the expectations of the government, imbedded with the Protestant ethic, and overall succeeded in living the lives that they wanted.

Yet to be American is not only an assimilation of American culture but a constant redefinition of it. To St. John Crevecoeur: “the American is a new man, who acts upon new principles; he must therefore entertain new ideas, and form new opinions. From involuntary idleness, servile dependence, penury, and useless labour, he has passed to toils of a very different nature, rewarded by ample subsistence. --This is an American” (*Ibid*). His words should resonate throughout history in an attempt to incorporate this notions of both liminality and plurality in defining the contemporary American identity. “Are we a “we”, one people or several? If we are a “we”, what distinguishes us from the “them” who are not us?” (Huntington 9). Has the United States truly become homogenous? Is there room for anyone else?

Samuel P. Huntington re-examines the statute of what comprises American citizenship. In *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity* he addresses the changes on the multiethnic and multiracial composition of the country after the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 as a result of the Civil Rights Movement and thus traces American creed from Anglo-Protestantism, to Christianity, to Lockean rule of law, to individualism, and to American international exceptionalism. “‘We hold these truths to be self evident’, says the Declaration. Who holds these truths? Americans hold these truths. Who are Americans? People who adhere to these truths. National identity and political principle are inseparable. `The political ideas of the American Creed have been the basis of national identity’” (Huntington 46). The self-conception of what means to be American is no more. Huntington explains how identity politics, economic opportunity, and national identity clashed after 9/11 with failures of the United States to address dual nationalities and loyalties and to further assimilate the millions of immigrants constantly throwing new ingredients into the melting pot. Today, as Huntington concludes, American

national identity is in jeopardy at the hands of the liminal and plural nature of its citizens and the inflow of new transformative ideologies at the hands of immigrants.

An inherent contradiction between the Constitution and this cultural uncertainty have sparked divisions among Republicans and Democrats in addressing the necessary change to deal with the undocumented citizens of the country. "The preamble [of the Constitution] registers the people's commitments to improvements: to form a 'more perfect' Union; to remedy injustice and disorder by establishing justice and domestic tranquility,; and to pledge security and commonalty ("the common defence… the general Welfare") for all and for generations to come" (Tomlins in Dubber and Valverde 35). The words in the preamble express the individual rights and governmental capacity to maximize opportunities for all citizens to participate in the framing of what the country builds up to be and in all senses establishes the prospect of plurality representation. But so is the case that these words are taken too far in establishing domestic tranquility at the hands of an outsource of police violence or policing law in commonality to immigrant matters. Markus D. Dubber and Mariana Valverde in *Police and the Liberal State* recognize the "virtually unlimited extent of police powers, their roots in a long history of *state* necessity, and the absence of restraint on their exercise" (Tomlins in Dubber and Valverde 37). The government has gone beyond its established enumerated powers to address protection and security as so was the case in *Chae Chan Ping v. United States* which ended with the Chinese Exclusion Act. Many instances are outlined in which the government has over extended its powers against minorities: *United States v. Kagama* (1886) which "found Congress had complete authority to legislate unilaterally to control Indian tribes rather than treat them as previously and to abrogate treaty terms formerly negotiated and recognized" or the *Nishimura Ekiu v. United*

States (1892) which defined the power to police the entry of foreigners "under a maxim of international law inherent in sovereignty" (Tomlins in Dubber and Valverde 45). Multiple instances of this confrontation between the ideals established or interpreted from the Constitution and what is enacted by the government have been exhibited as events from which the country has redefined itself through its demographic ideological composition, the latest being the issue with the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) program which I go in further detail in later chapters. While the essence of cultural hybridity remains a backbone to the foundation of the country, little has been done to embrace this plurality and time and time again the melting pot is boiling over or even banged out of shape. The institutional framework of policing cannot sustain a polarized ideology regarding both these American symbols and their meaning in defining American identity and a notion of homogeneity developed through American right-wing nationalism. American plurality does not have the same weight it once had.

Cultural hybridity has become a cause for polarization both among the American public and the government, but this polarization has only motivated artists to develop a response to it. Contemporary art is inherently American as far as the artwork is defined first through a blank slate, looking at the past and present, referencing both, and constructing itself from nothing and everything at the same time (a liminal contradiction in itself). The country has constantly done this throughout its history. Every time a branch is checked, every time a Supreme Court case is resolved, every time a new President is elected or a new person crosses the border into the country, the identity of the United States is redefined. Contemporary artists are simply doing what the country has done all along, but now with a purpose. They are using the plurality of American symbols, the plurality of the country's composition, the plurality of its democracy, of

its government, to comment on what needs to change. I have therefore shown that this sense of reinterpretation has been characteristic of American ideology since its foundation and is now being applied by artists who want to continue feasting on America's melting pot.

1.3 The Capitalist Essence of the Spectacle

American contemporary art submits to the spectacle following the premise that social reality is mediated by images as proposed by Debord. The spectacle, as a subject of study, is both society and the forces that influence it. The concept defines a society consumed by consumerism, devoid of dynamism, who seeks pleasure through superficial manifestations of reality. The spectacle is performative in that it demonstrates the ways people interact with each other and artwork in an exhibition, and in that it transforms humans "into something more or less than themselves" (Nowicka-Wright 45). Its main actor are comprised in this research as artists and their audience through the interactions that the spectacle entices.

Given the binary quality of the spectacle, one in which the audience can either be attracted or repelled, the audience itself becomes objectified in a way in which they can analyze themselves within a given setting and context. Nowicka-Wright helps identify three types of spectacles from which contemporary art implements Postmodernism: the spectacle of domination, the spectacle of resistance, and the spectacle of deconstruction. The first is associated with hegemonic relationships and the dominance of one actor over another. The second deals with the revolutionary or the avant-garde. The third displaces conceptions of reality with "whimsical masquerades, shamanic tricks and trompe l'oeil effects that veil the ambiguities of such entertainments and their inherent manipulative potential" (Nowicka-Wright 47).

Contemporary art therefore plays a triple role in addressing its audience and their corresponding ideology. It first establishes a dialectical relationship with a hegemonic actor through subject-specificity or liminality - most commonly this actor is either society at large or the government. Furthermore, it breaks with the normative perception of a given topic in addressing the interpreted reality of the artist, usually embedded with a political ideology and with a transformative objective. Lastly, contemporary art displaces a perception of reality to comment, recognize or criticize it. This is because the spectacle "presents itself simultaneously as all of society, as part of society, and as an instrument of unification," [and] "in all its specific forms, as information or propaganda, as advertisement or entertainment, the spectacle is the present model of socially dominant life. (Debord 113, 114). The spectacle thus serves to integrate ideology into the masses by appealing to their hedonism and redefining their perception. On one hand, it serves its purpose when addressing the objectives of social movements in changing something about society, on the other it might polarize the masses promoting political, ideological, and socioeconomic divisions. Both cases are prevalent within the United States today.

The ideology of the country is founded on capitalist tendencies from which society has become enthused with the notion of the spectacle. *The Protestant Ethic and The Spirit of Capitalism* by Max Weber paints a partial account of the origins of capitalism through the adaptation of the moral practices of Protestant religion into a work ethic. Huntington explains that "Protestantism stressedfl the work ethic and the responsibility of the individual for his own success or failure in life. With its congregational forms of church organization, Protestantism forced opposition to hierarchy and the assumption that similar democratic forms should be

employed in government" (Huntington 68). The Protestant background of the country thus serves to shape the profit-based habitus in their labor an in their lies as well as the functions of government. Early American's thus sought evidence of predestination in their daily experience later developing into an attitude within the economic system - this Webber calls the spirit of capitalism. St. John Crevecoeur alludes to this spirit by recalling the motto of all immigrants *Ubi panis ibid patria* - where there is bread, there is my homeland. This early notion of the American dream - almost 250 years old - becomes explicit in Crevecoeur's letter through an explanation and justification of becoming an American citizen: "here the rewards of his industry follow with equal steps the progress of his labour; his labour is founded on the basis of nature, *self-interest"* (3). The language couldn't be a clearer reference to the definition of capitalism.

The American Dream therefore constitutes a cultural assimilation to capitalism on the basis of equal opportunities and social mobility within the economic system of the United States. This has become imbedded and reinterpreted across the history of the country as a standard, one which cannot be fulfilled with the current economic composition of the country.

The Undeserving Rich: American Beliefs about Inequality, Opportunity, and Redistribution by Leslie McCall describes the emergence of economic inequality as a social issue, drawing on the level of ignorance that Americans use in order to create their conceptions of economic opportunity and the American Dream. McCall produces a twisted conception of the American mentality in which, under the aspirations of social equality, the ever-existing availability of economic opportunities, and the relentless notion of American entitlement, Americans interpret economic inequality as a restriction of the opportunity.

In her introduction, McCall provides a definition of the American Dream: a set of beliefs that expounds why Americans accept and tolerate the income gap between the rich and the poor and why they fail to demand a different framework from the government in order to better their economic security. This definition serves as a justification for McCall's main argument: why do Americans believe that opportunity is available, inequality is okay, and redistribution is bad? The aforementioned conception of the American mentality presents an answer to this question, following the American Dream as a psychological basis and inherent national ethos that describes the typical American. Although the chimeral aspect of such notion makes it somehow unreliable as an ideological construct, it seems that this perennial American social idealism defines the general outlook of society towards the topic at hand.

The American economy functions based on the belief in the American Dream where hard work pays off, social mobility is imminent, and there exists equal opportunity for all. Socially, Americans believe that they deserve such opportunities in an egalitarian manner. "It is well recognized that social and economic norms are not free floating but embedded in a national culture developed over time and congealed in institutions that feed back into beliefs" (McCall 230). These beliefs have become a part of the culture of the United States, and it seems to be reinforced continually both by time and through the government as an institution. However, now more than ever, the spectacular qualities of American society commodify income inequality through the propagation of media. Debord would agree in that the Dream itself is the most spectacular proponent of subjugation to mass media as it has become an inherent part of culture.

McCall explains that this notion influences any decision, thought, or activity of the American individual. This construct ties together the beliefs of all Americans into a single,

unified ideological identity, it gives them a creed. They believe in the American Dream because they have been taught that that's what they have to believe, they have seen this notion develop and amalgamate into a permanent part of their belief-system, and the culture itself recurrently establishes the notion as an idealized truth. Today we are seeing the development of a polarized and reactionary American dream.

Insofar, within the United States, there is always a typification of the spectacle subdivided into Nowicka-Wright's categories: the spectacle of domination, the spectacle of resistance, and the spectacle of deconstruction. It is possible to analyze multiple instances in which a dialectic between the three types of spectacles is well represented in the mediatic forces of the socio-political sphere. At points the spectacle of domination appears as an American flag, waving at the end of a Bank commercial that sells personal credits. It appears as a rhetoric for greatness, printed at the top of red caps. Maybe it unfolds as a message for hope. The spectacle of resistance develops from opposition taking the form of speeches reminding citizens of their fundamental dreams, or even as a statement printed over and over on the walls of a museum. The spectacle of deconstruction appears sporadically, often as a liminal process of self-recognition, that prompts change. These spectacles are nothing but information manipulated towards the masses, and the masses internalizing a social reality proposed by them.

The inevitable characteristics of the American Dream have always permeated contentions among the government and social actors asking for an equal chance at opportunity, the luck of the few. Douglas Kellner, in *Preface: Guy Debord, Donald Trump and the Politics of the Spectacle,* explains that the conditions of American media development from the introduction of the television in the 1950s has unfolded as a series of increasingly controversial news: the O.J.

Simpson trial, the Clinton sex scandals, the Al Gore v. Bush crusade, the rise of cable news networks (biased since inception) such as Fox, and CNN, and even the Occupy movement (Kellner 2). The Internet and social media have only added to the development of a society guided by digital capitalism, not only showcasing opportunity through digital platforms but micromanaging the way in which Americans perceive each other. Conceiving these as media spectacles, defined by Kellner as "media constructs that present events which disrupt ordinary and habitual flows of information", any viral news story trumps and redefines the American conception of the present.

Arguably, this ubiquity of spectacular occurrences has promoted deeper levels of polarization not only in regards to the social conditions that Americans face today, but also in regards to the capitalist establishment of the country, one where the American Dream is no more. Today and since the conception of the dual party system of the country a mutual displacement of imagery against the public assimilation of the *other's* ideology exists both for domestic and international outlooks of the social composition of the country. The same occurs when dealing with skewed notions of representation and recognition at the hands of the plurality of ideologies, opinions, and backgrounds that already exist in the country. The work ethic is no longer prompting economic prosperity nor the equal opportunity to *rise to the top*, rather the country now aims to *stay afloat.* The people creating these spectacles are masters in doing so.

The capacity to manipulate information has become key in leading and being heard. Kellner proposes that Reagan's background in Hollywood, Obama's media-oriented campaign, and Trump's celebrity status through media exposure such as *Miss Universe* and *The Apprentice* allowed these leaders to utilize the spectacle in their favor, manipulating information to colonize

politics. Twitter, for example, continues to a major source of contention among politicians today as public opinions spurt nation-wide debates almost immediately. This rather obscene exposure thus has played a role in the development of individual identities across the United States, having the media take a side for them.

It is this spectacle that artists have to use to deconstruct how society and politics work, address the capitalist flaws in the country, and attempt to change it. The capitalist drive of the country can be used as a mechanism, as Debord puts it, that allows contemporary art to extrapolate consumer culture into truly getting a reaction from the American public. As the country continues to take ideological extremes the spectacle promotes disparity and contention. It is up to us to use it in our favor.

1.4 Johns, Kruger & Fairey

The historical trajectory of contemporary art alludes as much to Postmodernity as to the polarized ideologies that have made up the socio-political terrain of the United States. With the onset of Postmodernity, the art world started directly addressing issues of politics - not that art from previous movements didn't do so, but artists now play with a convoluted arrangement of images and symbols to overtly criticize the ideological terrain, or to demonstrate their own interpretation of it. The statement "I do not know why, but they do it anyways" serves as a startpoint for how contemporary art addresses the artist as an independent, conscious individual in their attempt to marry symbolism and reality in order to understand the latter (Sikora 2011). The art of Jasper Johns, Barbara Kruger and Shepard Fairey demonstrates how contemporary art is a product of American politics, history, and Postmodernity. The artist as a subject of study thus

serves to solidify an understanding on how Postmodernism has played a role in the development of art since the 1950s, and intertwined with politics, it directly renders the social reality from which it originates.

What do we really see when we look at an American flag? Jasper Johns, for example, reimagined this patriotic symbol through his artwork, *Flag,* which he produced after being discharged from the US Army during 1954-55. This encaustic painting serves to interrogate American politics in a subtle way. It is obvious to first recognize the intrinsic symbols on the painting: the stars alluding to each of the States, thirteen stripes for the original colonies, and its red-white-and-blue color scheme representing valour, purity, and justice. Samuel P. Huntington

Jasper Johns, *Flag,* 1954-55, Encaustic painting.

legitimizes the importance of the flag by explaining that it "predominates over all other symbols and has been pervasively present in the American landscape" (Huntington 126). It is depicted on clothing, merchandise, and flown before homes and businesses, in concert halls and sports

stadium, in clubs and classrooms" (*Ibid*). Yet, juxtaposed with this primary interpretation is the fact that this artwork is not only an American flag… it is a painting of it. Johns allows for the audience to explore a familiar object by applying the tenants of Postmodernity. *Flags* embraces plurality by extending the application of the American flag as a common image and transforming it, playing on the liminality of the symbols themselves and contrasting it with what the audience already knows about the flag, and contesting the interpretation of the audience by building a spectacle. The ambivalent nature of this artwork extends to the ambiguity that Johns felt as a response to the socio-political sphere of the country, the context from which he took inspiration. The painting stands with its history as hundreds of newspaper scraps make up its composition.

Addressing symbolism as liminal has since allowed contemporary art to be ideologically polarized and to contest the essence of what is American. *Untitled (Whose)* by Barbara Kruger (2014) goes beyond a stereotypical media typography, and it's red, white and black color-blocking strikes its audience with a set of questions, raising accountability for their actions within the current socio-political ambiance of the United States. The pithy message had been recurrent in Kruger's trajectory, but now more than ever, it has risen to adhere to the instability of

Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Whose),* 2014, Conceptual art.

a multi-faceted society. The artwork adjudges a radically polarized, ideologically distinct, and extremely reactive American public that has chosen not to habituate to contemporary changes, but to deluge in antipathy towards an ideological *other*, disregarding the liberal values from which the country emerged.

Shepard Fairey also takes up anti-establishment attitudes and dives right into protest movements, creating fine art that can be transformed into political icons at the hands of pickets. *Are Greater than Fear* (2017) is a mixed media painting that depicts a Muslim woman covering her head with an American flag-print hijab. The composition is comprised of different layers that

Shepard Fairey, *Are Greater than Fear*, 2017. Mixed media.

allude to synthetic cubism in that it compiles patterns with newspaper typography and clippings; these clippings are references to Trump's Executive Order 13780 which limited entry from a variety of countries, but particularly those from the Middle East. As people took the streets holding this poster, the image showcased a united front made up of the underrepresented.

Together among references to the African American and Latino communities, Fairey's artwork called upon identity politics to address the American public together as a single nation: *We the people… Are greater than fear… Protect each other… Defend our dignity.*

The work of Kruger along with Fairey and Johns serves as an exceptional example to how contemporary art is both Postmodern and inherently American as a product of the socio-political and ideological composition of the nation. More than ever in the history of art, artists are becoming involved in changing the social reality that they are a part of, addressing their own discomfort and that of others, and visualizing it in an attempt to reach an audience - whoever it may be, whenever it may be. I will further analyze these artists against the conclusions of previous chapters in this study to demonstrate how they are most successful in addressing the destabilizing polarization of the country. When applied by these artists, Postmodernity departs as an outcome of American history and politics and becomes an active method of proposing socio-political change.

2. 2014: Another Turning Point in American Ideology

Antonio Gramsci describes history through events: some happening over periods of time, defining what could happen afterwards; others happening in an instance as an outcome of a bigger event or a response to individual circumstances. Arguably both the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement are organic events in that they have a "very far-reaching historical significance" and they give rise to "socio-historical criticism" based on "wider social groupings" (Gramsci 201). These two periods in time revivify the notion of American democracy and account for private-property in addressing the country's foundational ideology and shaping both society and politics to the extent that we experience them today. Cultural processes such as social movements or contemporary artwork thus serves to validate multiple interpretations of American freedom, democracy, and creedal ideologies.

Gramsci would argue, however, that a crisis ensued after the Civil War, one that was addressed by the Civil Rights Movement, but never appeased. For Gramsci, a crisis lasts for decades since "incurable structural contradictions have revealed themselves (reached maturity), and , despite this, the political forces [in play] are struggling to conserve and defend the existing structure itself" (*Ibid*). The structural contradictions are overt in dealing with representative democracy, plurality, geography-based representation, and private property rights when addressing the political ideal of the nation in contrast with its social reality, particularly at the hands of minorities. These groups therefore struggle with their political counterparts in Congress to satisfy the notion of foundational American ideology when dealing with polarization between Democratic and Republican partitions.

To this extent, events in Congress, protest movements, social media campaigns, newscasts, and art exhibitions are merely conjectural events that depend on the historicity of organic ones, validating both organic events and the aforementioned crisis by giving rise "to political criticism of a minor, day-to-day character, which has as its subject small ruling groups and personalities with direct governmental responsibilities" (*Ibid*). In this terrain of the conjectural, opposition arises, and thus I argue that 2014 marks a conjectural year that serves as a start-point for a new organic movement or the rekindling of an old one, stemming from the Civil War - polarization of ideology being the spark that defines socio-political change within what we deem contemporary.

Understanding 2014 as this conjectural event, however, requires a given context departing from economic and political instability previous to this specific year. This new wave of polarization begins in 2008 when American ideological hegemony is completely rattled. Failures in Afghanistan and Iraq in the post-9/11 world provoked strained relations with the Bush administration. Taken together with the collapse of an economy sustained by the strength of a dollarized market, Americans were forced to face the shortcomings of their own beliefs and occupy their own tongues. With uncertainty ahead, they turned to presidential candidate Barack Obama who, through Shepard Fairey's artwork and his progressive liberal proposals, was able to reinstate an ideological path for society. Permeated in Fairey's posters were the words *hope, change,* and *vote* which became major motifs in the presidential campaign - *Time* goes so far as to call this a "feel-good protest movement" (Andersen 2001). Although initially released without involvement with the campaign, the posters had a profound effect on the socio-political acclimation to the time period. Only a couple of weeks after circulation, Obama wrote to the

artist: "The political messages involved in your work have encouraged Americans to believe they can change the status-quo. Your images have a profound effect on people, whether seen in a gallery or on a stop sign. I am privileged to be a part of your artwork and proud to have your support". This is not the first example of the normalization of a concept - in this case *hope* - through a means of cultural expression, but serves to highlight a continuous pattern of how ideology shapes the way in which culture is promoted visually. Note that very few examples exist on the conservative spectrum, again based on the values inherent to the Republican way.

Once Obama became president, his economic recovery program served only as a band-aid for an autoimmune disease; while it stabilized the economy minutely, it failed to address the flaws in the financial system. On September 11, 2011 a new banner rose from lower Manhattan as the Occupy Wall Street movement flared across the country. This was a result, not of erroneous policy implementation nor a local revolt against the privileged few, but of a cascade of insurrection spring-harvesting on the streets of Tunisia and Egypt and subsequently raging all over the world. Social media had changed the power of the individual protester as thousands congregated after reading a single re-Tweet. In this way, the protest becomes a form of cultural expression through which the medium of performance shines through, where this form is not justified through an art institution, but through the development a *viral* purpose that influences a group of people to behave and respond in a particular way, based entirely on their ideology. The potential risk to the establishment of the subject of the protest has led to the use of violence as a counter-measure of the American police force. The events in Oakland, California in October, 2011 speak for themselves.

By 2014, the American public had imploded. The disproportionate use of police force reached its zenith when 18 year-old Michael Brown was shot without apparent motive by misjudging the color of his skin. Not the first, not the last. Minorities took the streets, branding them with the slogan *Black Lives Matter*. Demonstrations, militant in nature, were aimed at exposing the inherent racism in the economic and social system of the country. Both Democrats and Republicans split towards how to deal with gun control, regulation of force, and basic issues of liberty and power between society and government, rather than dealing entirely with economic reforms. Together with a migratory crisis revolving around Latin American and Arab States, the United States public became more divided than ever. Thousands of unaccompanied minors entered the country. Many were allowed to stay through the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals policy; many more were detained and sent back across the border. While the Democrat ideology pushed for a fair decision-making process when dealing with immigrants, the Republican side kept building a stronger case against open borders - polarized ideology in practice.

Similar systemic discrimination further affected and fueled social reactiveness towards sexual diversity. Between bigoted bathroom bills, same-sex marriage legalization, and gender disenfranchisement, the American public bisected itself, choosing to abide by either the Democratic values pushed forth by the Obama administration in its last year, or a rather controversial Republican agenda at the hands of President Donald Trump. Historically, gender equity and LGBT representation had already been addressed in American society, little by little gaining relevance publicly and then legally until social norms became written into bills. With a racial, misogynist, and populist rhetoric, Trump won the hearts of many and broke the hearts of

many more. With disdain towards immigrants from Mexico and the Arab world, and ridiculous remarks about women's genitals, Trump prompted the ideological opposition to drastically respond to such a level of outright political incorrectness culminating in major demonstrations against him like the Women's March in January of 2017, which is yearly since, and supporting his policies like the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia back in August. Now, with legal proceedings to modify programs like DACA and the DREAM Act, and a continuation of Executive Order 13780 which limited the traveling rights for specific countries, particularly those in the Middle East, the social situation in the country is more tense than ever.

Tension between Democrats and Republicans in Congress, together with social tension among the American public, and a variety of social movements as actors addressing such tension and attempting to alleviate it, concretize a Gramscian ideological terrain in which these aforementioned conjectural events demonstrate opposing forces in action. What has become of the flag of the United States within this ideologically radical society? 50 stars making constellations for the beautiful lives that have been lost at the hands of institutional injustice. Silver tongues blurring straight lines as politicians keep on interpreting information to benefit their arguments. Red symbolizing the passion of successfully diminishing the arguments of the other. White a symbol for separation; the melting pot has been sitting out for too long, a coat of grime now floats on top. Blue like the faces of all those people choking on their words while trying to incite the necessary change. The United States has become whitewashed by its own citizens. It is time to start grasping reality as crude as it may be.

2.1 The Polarization of American Ideology

Competing views of what ideology is or isn't adhere to a succinct level of complexity, an explanation of how and why our decisions revolve around the world's mechanisms, and how we organize, categorize, synthesize, and implement political information in response to ourselves and our surroundings. Michael H. Hunt posits that only when the complexity of individuals is categorized into ideologies, is society able to understand its environment, develop a coherent dialogue, and act upon it. For Hunt, ideology is a simplifier: "an interrelated set of convictions or assumptions that reduces the complexities of a particular slice of reality to easily comprehensible terms and suggest appropriate ways of dealing with that reality" (Hunt 108). Thus, ideology stems from a socio-cultural understanding of meaning - meaning that we make as we grasp the smallest of details around us and contemplate them as art pieces for our experiences, as beautiful or incredibly heartbreaking as they might seem, fill up the canvas that we call life.

Ideology defines how people think and behave within a socio-political context. It can also go as far as to define the purpose of an art piece through an interpretation of its visual elements and their historicity, again in an attempt to explain what was and why in a given socio-political context. Insofar an ideology must be defined within a given time and a given space to appropriately represent the contemporaneity of such context. While it does focus on a specific moment, it also exposes what should be. Using Higg's premise: "every sane adult, unless he is completely apathetic politically, has an ideology. The notion that ideology is only the distorted, fanatical thought of one's intellectual or political opponents cannot be sustained", Grafstein posits that ideology plays a role in decision-making when an individual interacts with their political environment, sometimes prompting a necessary change for a proposed future (Grafstein

77). In this way ideology is both a false consciousness and a vision of the world. The first because political hegemony mostly determines an individual's consciousness, promoting an agenda to be followed. The second because this consciousness is also determined by a struggle between the ideal and the reality - delineating a difference between conformity and acceptance of the current order. When such ideology is both "verified and criticized by the real development of history", when "norms present themselves as a description of facts", then ideology takes the shape of a terrain, functioning to characterize a given context (Filippini et al. 15; Wartofsky 241).

Antonio Gramsci follows this argument in defining ideologies as *practical constructions* in that they are "necessary to a given structure [and] have a validity which is 'psychological'; they 'organize' human masses, they form the terrain on which men move (think), acquire consciousness of their position, struggle…" (Gramsci 196). In this sense any given ideology imbues society with an organizational structure that allows them to create a governing body insofar as it represents such ideology.

Hence, the creation of any governing system is based on the political ideologies that participate to organize human behaviour into masses and social groups and acquire a consciousness of their needs and wants in an attempt to attain or protect them. In this sense ideology propulses political activity as individuals interpret "the way in which the structure and the so-called laws which govern [the] development" of a given system and implement these structures onto their own lives (Gramsci 46). Civil society attempts to aggregate their interests to establish a governing body that ensures self- preservation and order. The mode of government in any given state is dependent on the historically organic ideology that they have when they reach this agreement. A political ideological spectrum of citizen-agency is therefore required to

identify the essence of any government. This spectrum can be based on a tripartite distinction between democracy, authoritarianism, totalitarianism, or sometimes a combination of these.

In the contemporary socio-political sphere of the United States the ideological center has hollowed out. Less liberal Republicans and less conservative Democrats fill up seats in Congress, and the American public demonstrates the same polarization. Since 1994, the Pew Research Center has been analyzing the ideological consistency of the American population using a set of ten political value questions to encapsulate the inherently multi-dimensional nature of the public (Suh 2014). These questions deal with governmental efficiency, social welfare, race, immigration, financial regulation, and the environment. After establishing a median Democrat and Republican standard, the study demonstrated a shift in consistency from 2004 to 2014, and then again from 2014 to 2017. Data within the first time frame indicates a departure from the mean of approximately 25% of both Republican and Democrats, having over 90% of both ideological groups outside of the set median (*Ibid*). Within the second time frame, another 3% joined each group, determining that 95% of Republicans are now more conservative than the median Democrat, and that 97% of Democrats are more liberal than the median Republican (*Ibid*). Hence, when dealing with issues such as gun control, abortion, and immigration, the political sphere of the United States is completely split.

Three reasons explain this growing ideological disparity: ideological homogenization, partisan antipathy, and polarized quotidian compromise. Most Democrats are increasingly more liberal, and more Republicans are increasingly more conservative in today's society, but this homogenization goes hand in hand with a growing dislike towards the other. Over 79% of both political parties voice outward disapproval of each other, a major increase since 1994 (Suh

2014r). Furthermore, the ideological spectrum has sinked in to the daily lives of the American public: “those on the opposite ends of the ideological spectrum disagree about everything from the type of community in which they prefer to live to the type of people they would welcome into their families” (*Ibid*). Distinctions between urban jungles and suburban mansions, ethnic diversity and faith, and even political engagement showcase the ideological differences of Democrats and Republicans both in Congress and within society respectively.

On a similar note, polarization, as proposed by Nathaniel Persily in *Solutions to Political Polarization in America,* deals with three key tenants: hyperpartisanship, gridlock scenarios, and the erosion of politics-constraining norms. The first addresses both the “ideological convergence within parties and the divergence between parties” insofar as the ideological center has disappeared, leaving measures of ideological coherence among party members with regards to specific issues such as economic disparity and social entrepreneurship and extreme partisan differences when dealing with the ideological *other* (Persily 6). This is transferred over to the mass public to a lesser degree, but has permeated public decision-making in a similar way. The second typifies the exploitation of the system of checks and balances together with the aforementioned level of polarization which block policy-making processes and functions “due to obstructionist tactics” such as filibustering, exercising the power of the veto, budget stalemates, and unilateral decision-making at the hands of Republican rule in most branches of government particularly since 2014. Finally, polarization happens because of incivility through the erosion of politics-constraining norms. This is determined not by the mechanism of government, but by the ethics of American nationalistic thought in contrast with the values of minorities exposed through social movements. Surprisingly, both income inequality

and immigration have major implications in political polarization. The influx of low-income immigrants and non-citizens “has increased the proportion of non-voters at the bottom end of the income distribution” shifting “the position of the median income voter upward along the income distribution” - the electorate is therefore more involved in securing better economic opportunities, promoted by the Republicans, rather than subscribing to redistributive social welfare policies (Hare et al. 14). Income inequality furthers the ideological stratification of minorities, who struggle to discern how they fit within this socio-political sphere as neither geographical-representation, nor plurality elections serve to protect their basic rights, and the rights of their own bodies as private-property. McCarty, Poole, and Rosenthal (2006) "argued that inequality and polarization are lined by a dynamic relationship in which the increased inequality generated by rising top incomes produces electoral support for conservative economic policies and facilitates a movement to the right by Republicans” (qtd in Persily 31). The socio-economic composition of the country does not facilitate homogeneity, on the contrary, the foundational equality and the American Dream have vanished at the hands of the 1%. The majority of the American public lives with scarcity as they struggle to maintain their status in an unstable financial market managed by the few affluent leaders of American industry. The erosion of a political mid ground further stems from the unfair advantages of the capitalist market.

There are two clear divisions in the ideology of the nation, one predominantly between Democrats and Republicans, and one defined by an adherence to the foundational ideology of the nation and its anti-establishment opposition. Both inherently play a role in how the American public perceives itself and how individuals within that public act in regards to their defining ideology. These actors play key roles in how contemporary art is defined as each addresses what

is ideologically relevant, engages with one another, interprets their surroundings, and presents their conclusions. For politicians, they simply establish an agenda and lobby towards getting it done. For a member of a minority, they attempt to address their confounding reality as victims of both institutional and symbolic discrimination, and proponents of change. For an artist, they seek to visualize their own ideology, stemming from what they perceive as relevant, to create awareness - maybe to promote change. Again, each draw from distinct values or no values altogether, building on an ideological terrain that overall paints a picture of the United States.

2.2 The Art Politics of American Contemporary Art

An analysis through Art Politics of 2014 demonstrates a correlation between foundational issues, ideological polarization, and the consolidation or resurgence of major social movements. However, it is not possible to address this correlation without compartmentalizing the value of politics and the value of art as separate from each other.

In *Art and Cultural Industries: Autonomy and Community*, Laikwan Pang explains the interconnectedness of art and politics through the contractual relationship between artists and cultural industries. He first establishes the historicity of the concept of autonomy by explaining the traditions of Modernists in contrast with contemporary artists in having a notion of art supported by "art for art sake" and the role of the "Romantic genius who creates art out of [their] own unique talent and private, interior journey [which] continues to influence our conception of cultural workers" (Pang 46). As explained in the first chapter, this modernist conception of the avant-garde still fuels contemporary art, but to a lesser extent than during such time period. For this reason, the author establishes the artist and their art as being autonomous from other contexts

when dealing with comparative or multidisciplinary approaches which is the case for the artists dealt within this research. In fact, Pang argues that this Modernist perspective contributes to a definition of art that derives from the artist's choice of subject matter and style as well as how the viewers and critics can "judge arts independently from any other structures of meanings" (*Ibid*). And thus this European tradition is carried over into our times in addressing art that is not only independent from its context, but also directly results from it; Jacques Rancière "reminds us that art must retain a certain autonomy in order to relate to the world, and it is this dialectic of autonomy and connectivity that makes art politically powerful" (Pang 50). In this sense art is directly related to politics as there is an established dialectic between the artist, the artwork, and an audience where the transference of meaning happens. The aesthetic qualities, the purpose of the artist, and the social context that it derives from thus play a role in shaping the autonomy of art in relationship to politics. "For Rancière, the political value of art can be located only if art is respected first and foremost as art, autonomous from the realm of the political; only through the dissensus between art and politics can each interrogate the other" (qtd in Pang 50).

Thus in further sections of this research please note how these artists are analyzed as independent political actors within the field of art that respond first to their own human experiences, then to the social reality that shaped those experiences, and finally to a blank canvas as they transform their observations and skills into masterpieces. This is embedded with a political process of recognition. We must acknowledge the work itself, its background, its purpose, and the role it plays within the current socio-political sphere particularly in regards to 2014 as a start point for ideological instability, minority visibility, and artistic creativity.

2.3 Visual Rendering of Socio-Democratic Values

While the Democratic Party has always aspired to be receptive of the social democratic values, major obstacles have impeded the country to actually develop a frame of social justice at the hands of holistic participatory democracy, and the current polarization of the country makes it as hard as ever for this to be achieved. I define social democracy as an ideology that stems from Lockean liberalism, addressing a liberal democratic polity, within a capitalist economy, with the purpose of promoting social justice through income redistribution, plurality policies, and social egalitarianism regardless of race, sexual preference, and even country of origin. Social democracy is too liminal in nature and adheres to the principles of Postmodernity in seeking a redefinition of democracy and capitalism to address instances of racism, corruption, economic disparity, and discrimination.

With the extreme polarization of both politics and society in the United States today, the country has yet to acknowledge social justice as key for its own progression since, as Katznelson puts it, there is a clear difference between social democratic politics and movements in that one does not account for the other without a change in economic policies (Katznelson 76). American social democratic politics seek to recreate the capitalist order by merely addressing social welfare as a side issue, while the movements call for full recognition and participation under the law by modifying socio-economic policies towards a welfare state. Gramsci would agree that it is necessary to a achieve "a substantive historical *process* of modifying and reshaping market patterns, which for many - but by no means all - of its adherents promises an end to capitalism in the distant and dimly seen future" (Katznelson 77). An end to capitalism

may seem controversial, but it is not calling for the collapse of the economy, but for a redefinition of equality and equity in economic terms.

Nevertheless, new trends in social movements have demonstrated that economic disparity and social inequality are not the only factors involved in examining a social movement. *Emerging Trends in the Study of Social Movements* by Oliver, Strawn and Cadena exemplifies socio-constructivist concepts that must be analyzed in order to fully understand the extend of any social movement today. Under an Anglo-Saxon tradition these concepts are ubiquitous, however they have come to be essential in understanding non-Western frames, collective action, and movements as well as the perspective of the arts. Lives have truly become intertwined with the movements themselves, their emotions, the force driving the movement forward, and their identities built upon the notion of activism, promote movement ideology, establish larger scopes for membership, and contribute to how they achieve their goals. More than ever the Feminist movement through the #metoo campaign, the LGBT movement with the inclusion and voice of the trans community and other members of sub-cultures, and the *Black Lives Matter* and Immigrant Rights movements stemming from the direct involvement of the families and friends (supporters) of countless other victims of institutional racism, serve as examples for the applicability of emotion, framing, identities, and culture to attempt to create change.

In the case of the three social movements at hand: *Black Lives Matter,* the LGBT+ Movement, and the Immigrant Rights Movement, framing is used to analyze the process through which their collective situation is identified and experienced (Oliver et al. 12). Their objectives, those directly addressing plurality representation, a recognition of basic rights, the dissolution of precarity, and the installation of socio-democratic values, play a role in the development of a

frame of social justice which "may lead people to consider what was previously seen as an unfortunate but tolerable situation as inexcusable, unjust or immoral" (*Ibid*). In a sociological sense, it denotes "an active process-derived phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction" (Benford & Snow 1992). What these movements are doing is constructing meaning against their collective experience as African Americans, as immigrants, as ethnically discriminated, as people who fight for their own bodies, for their own choices, and for better opportunities. "Movement activists become strategic actors, who consciously seek to draw on old frames or creates new ones which will resonate with their targets and enhance movement mobilization or goal-attainment" (Oliver et al. 12). *Black Lives Matter* draws upon the roots of slave trade, while immigrants appeal to the intrinsic American dream, and the LGBT community to their citizenship and social standing since the Civil Rights Era. They use frames from their predecessors, use similar symbols, and revitalize old objectives in attempting to address change today. Their ability to do so, however, will appear constrained by the cultural implications of the country, again alluding to the homogenous notion of American identity addressed in the first chapter, and the failures of American democracy and capitalism in dealing with social plurality.

Social Movement Theory further proposes an analysis of identities from which a deeper constructivist understanding of the purpose of these organizations can be reached (Oliver et al. 13). The social movements involved in this study highlight contentious identity politics in addressing how they fit as both individuals and a group within the social construct of the American public in relation to the government and the economy as key institutions. Their emotions play a role in handling a process of self-reflection from which solidarity among group members successfully identifies a broader purpose within society at large. Whether it be a

woman losing a kid in a police shooting, or one being held in a containment center for her illegal status, or not being able to marry her longtime partner, lives are truly at stake as these movements keep developing. Together with the frame of injustice, the identities of these people help establish these movements as prominent actors across the socio-political sphere since they appeal to the people… again, *we the people of the United States of America*.

The definition of social democracy is achieved through the Arts since it comes with the interpretation of individuals who have already idealized such concept through their work. Multiple artists are constantly redefining plurality representation, tackling economic disparity, and portraying not only the injustices that they see across the United States, but painting a future where these issues might be solved. In this chapter, I analyze the artwork of particular artists who interpret both the social democratic objectives of social movements in the United States and of the country's socio-political atmosphere. Artwork by Kehinde Wiley, Sara Walker, and Robert Longo references the objectives of *Black Lives Matter.* The work of Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Zak Krevitt, and Ben Cuevas appeals to the art history of the LGBT+ Movement as little by little their objectives have been met, and the work of Aman Mojadidi and Byron Kim deals directly with the immigrant experience. These artists explore the contemporary social and political realities of the United States through the incorporation of Postmodern elements. These artist solidify the culture of the social movements they relate to. They provide categories to provide better understanding of their own lives and their social reality in addressing inequality, mediate political, economic and social structures, and blend the objectives with action. They depict a crude reality seen through their own eyes.

2.3.1 Black Lives Matter at the hands of Wiley, Walker and Longo

Since 2012, major incidents at the hands of the police sparked controversy due to the anti-black prejudice that surrounded each case. Excessive use of force to pacify African American protesters, and the unjustified deaths of innocents like Michael Brown who have been shot because of assumptions and stereotypes towards their race marked the rise of an opposition movement within American society. After the acquittal of George Zimmerman for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013, the movement gained exposure becoming a full fledged organization with black female activists Alicia Garza, Opal Tometi, and Patrisse Cullors as founders and leaders. Branded *Black Lives Matter*, this movement has the objective to expose the inherent *symbolic* racism that poses a threat to the lives and security of the African American community of the United States. The movement emerged when ideological tension appeared between the systems in place and the individuals that made up such systems; the African American community had no other option than to formalize their opposition as rightful constituents of the nation in order to define a new validity for themselves. The objective of the movement is "to build on local power and to intervene in violence inflicted on Black communities by the state and vigilantes" (*BLM* Website). In their mission statement the movement elaborates on the concepts of inclusivity addressing not only an exclusively Black community but the lives of "Black queer and trans folks, undocumented folks, women, and all Black lives along the gender spectrum" - interesting to note the use of the term "folks" as non-binary. Furthermore, the movement recognizes that the African-American community is marginalized and "systematically targeted for demise". In this way the movement is entangled in both the present and the past as it addresses issues that stem from the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement.

Its organization is loose, giving the movement flexibility in its demonstrations which range from purposely disruptive protests to mass demonstrations (Charles 2). Methods used by *Black Lives Matter* range from repetitive chanting to public demonstrations but new ways to communicate such as hashtag proliferation and social media activism have lead to the development of forms of cultural expression that are unique to the movement. #BlackLivesMatter appeared first on social media platform Twitter on July 13th, 2013, reappearing "58,747 times per day in the roughly three weeks following Brown's death"; later reaching over 150,000 mentions after Tamir Rice was killed by the police for playing with a toy gun in November 2014, and with major recurrences after key incidents demonstrating police brutality, mistreatment, racial discrimination, violence such as the Charleston shooting in 2015, and even celebrity endorsements after the Oscars in 2016 (Anderson & Hitlin 2016). Lipstiz goes on to claim that it is a miracle that "black people, the people farthest from democracy, have been the most eloquent and passionate creators of new democratic institutions" (qtd in Green 9). I believe this is the case for artists such as Kehinde Wiley, Robert Longo, and Kara Walker as they attempt not only to address the failures of democracy in the United States, but also abide by their history as African Americans and the changes that they want to see in American society with regards to institutional racism and plurality representation. It is important to note that these artists are a part of the *Black Lives Matter* Movement by association as they have similar objectives to the organization yet have not explicitly addressed their membership.

Kehinde Wiley is a Los Angeles based artist that transforms the stereotype of African Americans and places them in the context of Gothic/Renaissance art in order to address issues of inequality and plurality representation. In *Saint Remi* (2014) Wiley uses stained glass to depict a

young African American man in modern clothing as a religious saint. In tradition stained glass was used as a medium to establish a connection between church-goers and divinity through what is described as *lux nova*. By presenting a stereotypical figure of an African American man through this means, the artist juxtaposes religious ideology with the predispositions of what a saint can be. In this sense, an African American man can become and is a saint as well, since the medium achieves this notion of divinity through the manipulation of light. The symbolism is clear, there is a red ornate background alluding to the color for spiritual awakening, a halo representing divinity, a staff representing royalty and power, and a representation of the Holy Spirit as a white dove. Empathy in the language of the religion collides in this piece. The old - this allusion to Gothic and Renaissance art, creates a discourse with what is deemed contemporary in particular by creating a religious image out of the quotidian nature of being black. The pedestal upon which

Kehinde Wiley. *Saint Remi*, 2014. Stained glass.

the figure stands elevates the common man to the societal height of whomever was previously depicted in tradition. The dove a guiding light to which all people can look up to and be shown a path towards morality which contemporary society seems to have repressed (or rather keeps ignoring).

There are two reasons why this piece relates to the *Black Lives Matter* Movement: the details in the figure, and the fact that it's a black saint. Because saints are traditionally white, transforming this stereotype to fulfill a vision of the African American community within the United States is part of the movement in and of itself, but the little details in the figure, like having him wear Timberland boots, black jeans, a bomber jacket and a bandana indicate that this is a figure of modern times, in the same way that the *Black Lives Matter* movement is a current and active movement, and the victims of institutional deficiencies are nothing but saints to this community. *Saint Remi* seeks to destroy the preconceived notion of black people as inferior, or criminals deconstructing what it means to be black altogether.

The Lamentation (2016) is an oil painting that has the same purpose. The piece is an ode to the glorification of black culture in the 21st Century. The artwork itself is a reference to humanist paintings that depict the grieving of Mary and the Apostles after the death of Jesus, usually showing the corpse covered in a white sheet like the one on the middle ground of the image. It uses the same style, adhering to composition, chiaroscuro, and perspective in the same way that any Renaissance artist would. Usually, a religious symbol such as Jesus himself is represented through the ideal body: a white, tall, muscular male. However, the fact that Wiley uses an African American to represent the figure of Jesus indicates that he is elevating people of this ethnicity, who before, were usually underrepresented due to the fact that they were not seen

Kehinde Wiley. *The Lamentation,* 2016. Oil on canvas.

as part of the ideal aesthetic or humane standard. Additionally, the use of naturalistic elements such as the flowers in the foreground and background is another reference to the relationship between man and nature that is usually represented in Renaissance paintings, especially by artists like Sandro Botticelli. These elements bridge the past and the present through the use of floral motifs from traditional design. Wiley is able to transform the notion of the black man by addressing this religious death in a contemporary setting. The allusion to *Black Lives Matter* is evident in that Wiley reflects on the death of thousands of African Americans at the hands of institutional racism and overt injustice and portrays this suffering through oil on a canvas. The black man is depicted not only as a victim of his own circumstances, but also as an idol for his community.

Wiley's pieces were presented in an exhibition at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts called *A New Republic.* They speak for the rehabilitation of the black figure in media in an attempt to reaffirm their presence in a society that has undervalued them. It's a new way of seeing black and brown bodies as normal in the contemporary polarized sphere. It's a picture of

the global story of how young people are learning themselves and how we can build a new republic from this notions of Afro-individualism in the context of a diverse, always-changing society.

Robert Longo, on the other hand, goes deeper into the motivations of the movement and the instances of police brutality that are ongoing in the United States today. In the lapse of his career, Longo has become known as a leading protagonist "working across drawing, photography, painting, sculpture, performance, and film to make provocative critiques of the anaesthetising and seductive effects of capitalism, mediated wars, and the cult of history in the US" (Longo). In *Untitled (Ferguson Police, 08-13-14),* Longo uses charcoal to depict the anti riot police which was deployed in Ferguson, Missouri to control the riots caused by the protests - this was one of the first public demonstrations of *Black Lives Matter* that was countered with

Robert Longo. *Untitled (Ferguson Police, 08-13-14)*, 2014. Charcoal

violence. Surprisingly, the only clear symbol present in the drawing is the McDonald's logo which speaks to the capitalist nature of American society and the economic discrepancy that profit-based policies have caused and continue to be perpetuated. It further speaks to the practice of actively glorifying U.S history and using it as a justification for the belief of national superiority and identity. This art piece thus relates to the *Black Lives Matter* movement simply because it portrays a scenario in which many black people come together, fighting for their rights, and they are hindered by the obstacles of a society that claims that freedom and liberty are what make America great. This image is quite strong. It gives the viewer an idea of how dark and sad this fight was (and still is) for African Americans due to the lack of respect and basic recognition that they receive.

Since we are living in a time of constant political change, the fact that Longo in fact glorifying the effect that protests have in socio political issues indicates that he is capturing this pragmatic contention within society. Nonetheless, the artist that most takes into consideration the historical past in order to push racial stereotypes to the extreme is, in my opinion, Sara Walker. Race constitutes an unavoidable part of the American identity and due to the vigor and overall weight of this concept throughout the history of the country, it continues to be a key issue within a socio-democratic spectrum. "I realized…that the shadows of the past, the deriding names and titles, in fiction and in fact, are continually informing, no, more like de-forming and re-forming who we think we are - who I think I am" (Walker qtd. in Fineberg 500). Walker's artwork deals directly with the rendering of a cultural identity defined not only by her own experience of race and African American culture in the United States, but of the shared black experience that American history has mangled throughout time. In *Slaughter of the Innocent (They Might be*

Guilty of Something) (2017), Walker presents an eerie composition of dramatic cut-out silhouettes that references not only the antebellum South but the unjustified treatment and, in some cases, the deaths of African Americans who are perceived as guilty. The title of the piece alludes to the contentious murders of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Romain Brisbon, Tony

Kara Walker, *Slaughter of the Innocents (They Might be Guilty of Something)*, 2017. Cut Paper.

Robinson, Eric Harris, among others who were considered dangerous with no motive under a white armed gaze. The art piece utilizes racial stereotypes such as bulbous lips, voluptuous bodies, headdresses, and pigtails, while further adding to cultural stereotypes like sexual deviancy, abortion, and blood libel in order to comment on the absurdity of these conceptions and the fact that they still exist and perpetuate violence against African American communities in the present-day.

In an interview, Walker explains that "some images irritate serious social reconstructivists, who do not appreciate her humor, and she questions the responsibility and ability of artists to deal with issues of social justice alone" (Walker 2010 qtd in Milbrandt 11). As

an artist, Walker has a clear purpose within the social reality that she lives in, interprets, and renders. She seeks to represent multiple viewpoints, reexamine their value both in history and today, and criticize what needs to change based on that multiplicity and plurality of symbols. In this sense, Walker has gained mastery of the expression of cultural identity in developing the field of identity politics through her work. She deconstructs African American identity and rebuilds it as something beautiful, something to remember, and something to reflect on.

Walker's work is transcendent in the application of Postmodern techniques to achieve transgressions on her audience. According to David Wall, the artwork "forces an unsettling confrontation with images of violence and depravity and the repeated transgression of sexual, social, and racial codes" (277). Walker's audience is able to interpret the work by experiencing a transitional state of self-recognition against the social processes of race, gender, history, and the present. Not all interpretations are positive, nor does the art negate the mistreatment of African Americans through satire. Betty Blayton comments on Walker's exhibitions: "I walked away from both exhibitions… feeling that I had been exposed to a deadly toxin from which I needed to leave right away and find some spiritual mind-cleaning antidote to insure that I would not be infected for life" (qtd in Wickham 335). Walker is not attempting to present something beautiful, but a crude compilation of images of the historical social reality of African Americans.

Her application of history and the present is not smooth nor glorifying like that of Wiley; Kara Walker confirms a Western African fantasy through an "unsettling collision and collusion of violence" inherent in Western notions of *otherness* (Wall 282). A neocolonial analysis of *Slaughter of the Innocent (They Might be Guilty of Something)* would develop into a discourse between a black-white dichotomy, eroticism and sexuality, abolitionism, and historical

brutality. Her imagery directly alludes to these. A Hegelian notion of *otherness* would be understood through a white gaze prominent among a museum audience and thus establishes a black subversiveness that permeates not only across Walker's murals but also across American society at large.

Her work becomes anti-establishment by addressing her own treatment as an artist within the curatorial and museum sphere; she explains: "I feel that the popularity with whites of negative stereotypes is a combination of restricted gaze and constricted empathy… I feel that work that uses the negative stereotype against African-Americans is welcomed by the art world because the negative image is a reflection of what [a person] is permitted to see or imagine… To have. Person of color give you those images as if to say that they agree with your imprinted gaze, makes the work hypnotically enticing for whites" (qtd in Wickham 338). In this way Walker is commenting on the institutional racism inherent not only in the art world but in the mass audience itself since people overall are comfortable seeing the brutality of her work in a quotidian setting. Yet, here we are having to write about how art is attempting to change the socio-political sphere of the country, instead of talking about progress.

These images propose a notion of Afro-futurism; they interpret, visualize, and criticize reality to address the issues of the present, comment on the past, and propose a future defined by a frame of social justice situated between the racial divide. These artists cling to the elements of Postmodernity to successfully establish a dialogue between themselves, their art, and a given audience (as large as it may be) to create awareness of the history of overt and institutional racism in the country through a radically polyvalent combination of images that not only make reference to one another, but the the identities of thousands struggling within the current socio-

political sphere. Wiley could not explain the role of the artist in applying Postmodernity better: "the artist eroticizes the invisible, those traditionally excluded from representations of power, endowing them with hero status. His work takes the vocabulary of power and prestige in a new direction, oscillating between politically-charged critique and an avowed fascination with the luxury and bombast of our society's symbols" (Wiley). The art is liminal in that it explores a process of deconstructing race, demystifying stereotypes, addressing marginality and outsider hood, and creating a dialectic that allows an audience to become self-aware. Finally, these images are spectacular. The aesthetic qualities of these pieces combined with an array of references to art history allow these artists to blend the beautiful, the religious, the royal, the magnificent with their own identities as African American in a context that undervalues and misrepresents them.

2.3.2 Reinterpreting Gender Through the Work of Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Jonah Groeneboer, Zak Krevitt, and Ben Cuevas

Gramsci once stated that "sexual instincts are those that have undergone the greatest degree of repression from society in the course of its development" (Gramsci 280). Historicity has showcased an ominous trend towards orthodoxy and an intolerance for difference and change. Sexuality, in turn, has historically been taboo - addressed merely in secret if at all. However, the principles of democracy reject standardized thought; they promote representation and dialogue among those who are participant within the system. Since the rise of the LGBT Movement during the Civil Rights era, orthodoxy has thus been contested in an attempt to challenge both intolerance and sexual repression.

In 1950 a US Senate Committee Report substantiated the claim that homosexuals working for the government were a threat to national security, and after the implementation of a review under Republican presidential supervision, thousands lost their jobs. The Lavender Revolution had begun. Issues of gender identity and performativity had permeated the history of the country since the late 19th century particularly at the hands of the Suffragist movement who aimed to first gain legal recognition through the 19th Amendment and then transformed itself by addressing gender discrimination and equality through a Second Wave movement inspired by Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in 1949. The boundaries between public and private spaces slowly dissolved as many came clear about the violence and repression felt at home. For the LGBT community that openness about private life and the ensuing sexual liberation of the 60s, allowed them to start a dialogue to address the inherent discriminatory nature of their surroundings. Tainted lavender, a series of demonstrations against a police raid in Stonewall Inn, NYC took place in an attempt to safeguard a space in which the LGBT community could be free to express their sexuality. The Stonewall Riots of 1969 served to unite the community, again calling for equality and democratic representation under the law. Since then major gay pride marches are organized each year in an attempt to normalize the inclusion of the community within society at large, plea for inclusive policy-making, and create a space for freedom of expression. At least by 1974 homosexuality was no longer classified as a disease by the American Psychiatric Association.

The objectives of the LGBT Movement are outlined in *Refugee from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto* by Carl Wittman which was published in 1969. Inspired by the African-American freedom movement, Wittman identified frustration, alienation, and cynicism as key

characteristics of the community due to years of self-censorship and repression. He called upon the LGBT community to free themselves by creating a discourse, allowing straight people to understand them and developing a group consciousness: “we must govern ourselves, set up our own institutions, defend ourselves, and use our energies to improve our lives” (Wittman qtd in Ingalls et. al 151). These objectives have changed throughout the years, addressing minorities within minorities, and accounting for queer identity.

By the 1980s, a new wave of Feminism had been developed redefining gender, womanhood, and minorities altogether by addressing intersectionality and diversity. The inclusion of intersex and transexual individuals within the movement served as a stepping-stone for the LGBT community to expand their platform. This was justified through Judith Butler’s Queer Theory. Butler is a major proponent of this inclusion; she believes that there is no “truth” in gender and, therefore, agrees with the idea that gender roles are simply standards defined by a context (Butler 530). She argues that male and female are not roles set by biology, but rather constructed and reinforced by society. It is important to note Butler’s constant use of the term she names *gender trouble,* which is used to describe situations in which the binary performance of feminine and masculine is broken. What is neither or both, Butler defines as queer. The definition of queer not only encompasses biological sex, but also sexual expression, sexual identity, and sexual attraction and while the LGBT community embraced all labels, the majority still struggled to understand and assimilate difference.

Unquestionably with the turn of the century the LGBT+ movement has been successful in addressing foundational democratic ideology and consequently achieving their goal through policy-making and more social acceptability. The first major organic event in the history of the

movement was the Supreme Court decision of *Lawrence et al. v. Texas* in June 26, 2003; it overturned sodomy laws in 13 states who still considered same-sex relations illegal. In the exercise of liberty - a key principle for the Founding Fathers, the court concluded that free adults could engage in these activities. The repeal of "Don't ask, don't tell" policies in the US military in 2010 and the 2012 reforms on the US Department of Housing and Urban Development further increased the inclusion and participation of the LGBT+ community as regulation prohibited discrimination within these two institutions. More importantly, however, is Supreme Court case *Obergefell v. Hodges* in June 26, 2015 instating that the Constitution legally allows same-sex marriage across the nation. Law has forced the American public to recognize the LGBT+ community as a minority and accept their presence as normal within society. This has not been easy. Hostility and discrimination actively create distinctions among its members. A lot is yet to be done to address issues within the movement and individuals who are still marginalized and excluded within a national discourse.

Today, both the Feminist and the LGBT+ Movements have become actively involved and use social media as a tool and platform to fulfill their objectives. Most marches and meetings are usually organized through digital means, but most importantly the voices of many individuals have been heard, compiled, and spread across thousands of screens. Movements like #metoo or even the incorporation of the gay flag as an emoji speak for the extent in which social media pinpoints the incredulity that certain attitudes towards gender and sexuality still exist.

Artists have long dealt with gender and sexuality as a major topic of controversy in our society. One that they have attempted to understand and interpret in their artwork, showcasing a development in how these concepts are perceived in society at large. The Feminist work of

Marina Abramovic, Cindy Sherman, Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann… speaks for a re-contextualization of the limits of the body, what it means to be a woman, and gender identity altogether, while art by Jean-Michael Basquiat, Robert Mapplethorpe, Keith Haring, and more recently Allison Bechdel has addressed sexual preference, nudity, and even the AIDS epidemic as the LGBT+ movement has grown and expanded since the Civil Rights era. Today, however, artists are interpreting the experiences of minorities within these movements particularly given the rise of trans-issues in 2013 with the North Carolina bathroom bills and the solidification of the LGBT+ community after same-sex marriage became legalized across the country in 2015. While many artists have been extremely successful in presenting different conceptions of gender and sexuality and addressing the changing atmosphere regarding gender diversity in the United States, I focus on the work of Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Zak Krevitt, Jonah Groeneboer, and Ben Cuevas who directly address under-represented groups within the LGBT+ community.

First, however, I would like to revisit the work of Judith Butler from which it is possible to pinpoint intersectionality and diversity as legitimate political discourse within the LGBT+ community and Feminist movement and thus justifies the artwork at hand. In *Performativity, Precarity, and Sexual Politics,* Butler defines gender as performative, an action taken based on a process of reflexive capacity in which an individual is able to define an "internal or inherent truth" about their own gender expression (Butler i). This truth is influenced by obligatory norms imposed by the society in which we live in - "usually within a strictly binary frame" (boy/girl) - in which the reproduction of gender based on those norms is expected (*Ibid*). Butler thus proposes that it is an individual's decision to perform gender, allocating recognizability onto the individual rather than onto what is accepted. In this sense an individual

can identify as a black homosexual transexual woman and it is equally as valid as being a white heteronormative man. As Butler states, gender performativity is therefore a problem of politics in addressing both personhood and subject recognition within the public sphere. Power operates not within a binary framework, but rather as a socializing dialectic established between the multiple individuals in a polity, who have previously been "misrecognized or unrecognized" due to the limits of the established norms (Butler iii). While full recognition is almost impossible, Butler would agree with the following artists in addressing intersectionality within the multiple categories already in place in the LGBT+ community, but acknowledging their validity as individuals with power, power to perform as they wish, whenever they want.

Androgyny has become a standard for sexually fluid, pansexual, gender queer, and transitioning individuals who have trouble identifying directly with a masculine or feminine form of gender expression. These people are often marginalized even within the LGBT+ community since their character and gender expression is inherently liminal. Artist Jonah Groeneboer addresses androgyny in an unconventional manner. He normalizes androgyny by exploring this concept through equalizing elements that accounts to both male and female genders. In *Double Mouth Feedback*, he uses sound to defy binary gender constructions. Groeneboer creates a performance space where the boundaries between audience and artist become blurred. Fischer-Lichte argues that the medium of performance has the potential to transform the audience into actors, in a way that they "become suspended between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives" (Butler 12). Groeneboer extrapolates from this idea by using human voice as a tool to disengage his audience from gender as a daily experience that is in turn regulated by societal and behavioral pressures. Instead he uses art to imagine new

gender models; wave patterns, interference phenomena, and vocal superposition play a role in creating androgynous forms at the hands of this participatory process.

Through *Double Mouth Feedback* he restrengthens a narrative imposed by the recognition of androgynous individuals through sound. This narrative plays with societal gender norms and challenges them as the audience experiences it as they walk through the gallery space and listen. They are asked to reimagine how gender sounds.

Jonah Groeneboer, *Double Mouth Feedback*, 2015. Sound Installation

Jonah is a New York City based multi-disciplinary post-minimalist artist who aims to demonstrate a relationship between form, movement, and meaning. He works with queer studies as well as other abstract concepts, and incorporates his own experience as a queer transgender person. Jonah often delves in "an impossibility of seeing in totality is an integral concept in his work, providing a counterpoint to Minimalism by its insistence on a political position within

these contingencies" (Groeneboer). This concept reflects the context Jonah often works with, such as politics and representation within the systems of gender and sexuality. His work mixes different media and technologies such as space and sound and creates a sequence of noises that disassociate with any gender, avoiding entering the binary spectrum.

Furthermore, Ben Cuevas explores the deconstruction of gender roles as addressed in Butler's notion of performativity as a way to posit that a society without them can still satisfy what is normal. In *Duality No. 2: Man's Body/Woman's Work* (2014), Cuevas uses his own body to explore the reversal of the action of knitting in juxtaposition to gender expectations on behavior. In this case the male figure, who is showcased against a "manly" haircut and facial hair is engaging in a highly passive action, often associated with femininity, which is weaving. In the first image, his stance is stronger than the second in which he reclines on top of his knit work; his gesture, which is bolder in the initial picture, becomes more concentrated in the last one. Both the change in gesture and stance are references to the multifaceted identities that women are

Ben Cuevas, *Duality No. 2: Man's Body/Woman's Work,* 2014, Performance.

expected to have: bold, yet unimposing females, and passive, dedicated housewives. Additionally, the fact that he is nude indicates the social tendency to over sexualize females, adding to the theme of reverse gender roles. Again, Cuevas posits that queerness within the LGBT+ community is as valid as being gay, straight, or transgender. Since the piece goes into conflict with the traditional gender roles of society, it is clearly not positive communication. If anything, the artist is demanding his social rights as a person regarding gender freedom.

Transsexuality is re-discovered at the hands of Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst. In a documented real-life performance called *Relationship* (2008-2014) these artists showcase a time where both their bodies are transitioning in opposite directions, from male to female, and vice-versa. Ernst transitioned from female to male and Drucker from male to female. The art piece

Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Image from *Relationship*. 2008-2014. Performance

exposes their personal journey of self-identification and gender-acknowledgement by revealing an intimate transformation and exposing it to a large-scale public in a gallery setting. The relics of this performance reveal a cinematic explicit version of the couples "romantic and creative collaboration" by simultaneously creating a vision of fact and fiction, that illustrates their lives as an unravelling construction of the self. Views on such practices contradict with traditional genders in society, and the explicit content of the images evokes an uncomfortable response from certain audiences.

Finally, Zak Krevitt sheds a light on the world of fetishes within the LGBT+ community. In his work, *Alpha, Beta Omega* (2016), Krevitt presents a male figure in leather gear, "stripping away their human flesh and replacing it with the imaged fur of a canine" (Krevitt). Within the pup/handler fetish community, many "pups'" continue to show allegiance towards what it means to be gay, but redefine it based on a twisted de-humanization that becomes sexualized. Krevitt's work is a homage to these fetishes and acknowledges that, despite the hierarchy of dominance or any sort of kink, all roles are of equal importance. While the aesthetic elements of the piece are not symbolic, Krevitt uses his medium to play with the notion of portraiture. The leather, the chain,

Zak Krevitt, *Alpha, Beta, Omega*, 2016. Photography

the mask, and the boxing gloves are representations of the fetishes an individual might have, but in this sense the artwork adheres not only to the male figure depicted, but to any single person who is involved with this community as the subject remains anonymous.

These art pieces achieve a dialectic between the artist, the medium, and the audience by detaching concepts from their meaning, revivifying individualism over societal expectations, and achieving a discourse towards the acknowledgment of differences within the current socio-political sphere of the country. Again, they are able to do this by using the principles of Postmodernity to explore gender and sexuality as a process of self-awareness, referencing the movement itself, their own identities, and a futuristic notion of sexual diversity in order to suggest better representation not only against an American public and the government, but among the LGBT+ community as well.

2.3.3 Understanding the Immigrant Experience with Mojadidi, and Kim

The Immigrant Rights Movement serves as a juxtaposition to the existence of the United States as a nation as historically it has been composed by immigrants. The 19th century turned the country into a safe-haven for voluntary immigrants and refugees coming from Ireland, members of Jewish and Hispanic communities, and even an Asian population, while the country's demographic background was already shaped by "conquest, colonialism, slave trade, territorial acquisition" since its beginning (Gerber 1). A melting pot had been brewing yet differences among anyone new, of a distinct racial background, and the white majority sparked discrimination and deviancy within the American public. In *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Samuel P. Huntington goes on to predict our present: "the various

forces challenging the core American culture and Creed could generate a move by native white Americans to revive the discarded and discredited racial and ethnic concepts of American identity and to create an America that would exclude, expel, or suppress people of other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups" (Huntington 20). Historically, this happened at the turn of the past century and got reinforced after 9/11. Today, we see a country not only divided by monetary profit and racial identity, but by the locality of shops, the languages spoken on streets, and the politics that surround the demographic composition of society.

The melting pot became contentious for the first time in California due to the enormous influx of Chinese immigrants during the Gold Rush of the 1840s in which they aided with mining operations (Gerber 25). White American politicians and the popular consent of the White working households provided the ideological foundation for legislation. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 is the first restrictive policy implemented by the U.S. Congress in terms of immigration with a designated population, together with the stereotyping of these minorities and their urban segregation, the sentiment of repression against them proliferated across the country. The state sought to reengineer the demographic composition of the country unless the immigrants at hand came from allied countries; the Chinese Exclusion Act was lifted when China served as a key allied against Japan with the Magnuson Act of 1943 (Gerber 30).

Points of contention had also existed with an influx of a Mexican population, yet there had been a vast Mexican demographic composition after the annexation of Mexican territory as an aftermath of the Mexican-American War. According to Gerber, while Mexican lineage was defined by European whiteness affirmed by American courts since 1897, the American public departed from such notions until Mexican labour was needed due to the shortages of World War

II (Gerber 33). From 1941 to 1964, the Bracero Program allowed temporal Mexican workers to enter in order to promote economic growth against a war-driven market.

The influx of Europeans had continued throughout the country's history but, by the beginning of the 19th century, Americanization efforts by Henry Ford and the captains of industry, the increasing role of Worker Unions, and the Immigration Restriction League (IRL) inspired by eugenic research, served as major proponents for the restriction of legal/illegal immigration in favor of nativist policies (Gerber 38). The 1921 Emergency Quota Act "maintained the ban on Asians and imposed for three years a quota system that limited European immigration to 3 percent per year for individual groups based on their presence in the population revealed in the 1910 census" (Gerber 41). New quotas were established again in 1927 and 1929. It wasn't until the Cold War that these policies were revised; the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 allowed for naturalization of 150,000 non-white immigrants, a limit highly challenged by the number of refugees from World War II (Gerber 46). Presidential *parole* powers and the Displaced Persons Act of 1948 served to mitigate issues with refugee resettlement.

It wasn't until the United States became a world economic leader by the 1950s and 60s that immigration was not regarded as a threat to the stability of Americanization for both the public and the government. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 demonstrates a turning point in immigration reform up to that date. Due to the rise of socio-political instability across the underdeveloped world, from 1965 onward immigration exponentially increased, allowing anyone a pathway towards the United States through a series of categories. According to Gerber, by 1970 "approximately 5.8 million immigrants entered the country", by 1989 an incredible

amount of 1 million immigrants started to enter the country each year, by the 1990s "60 percent of American population growth was accounted by immigration" (Gerber 53).

Parallel to this growth came the increasing waves of illegal immigration. While the act of 1965 made family reunification possible, the lure of the American Dream continued to attract millions of people willing to risk their lives to enter the United States one way or another. Penalties, amnesties, and special visas were constantly amended against the political views of Democrats and Republicans. In 1986, for example, President Reagan signed the Simpson-Mazzoli Act which granted amnesty to over 3 million illegal immigrants (*Ibid*). However, illegality never really became approved across any level of society or government.

On the local front, the former Bracero immigrants alongside second and third generation Chicanos, Chinese, and Filipinos took the issue to the streets. United under a civil movement, immigrant workers sought legal acknowledgment, the creation of labor unions, and the proper treatment for illegal immigrants. The amalgamation of these communities to American culture developed transcultural elements and an ideology defined by them. Chicano subculture, for example, had already been integrated into not only Californian but the national mainstream, taking on Cesar Chavez as a leader for the rights of immigrant communities across the country.

By the 1990s, national security appeared compromised by the amount of illegal immigrants entering the country. An attempt to revise the current immigration law with the Immigration Act of 1990 failed to ensure wholesome policies that would account with the steady influx of immigrants and later the 1994 North American Free Trade Agreement which "that shifted thousands of jobs from the United States to Mexico" (Powell 54, 2007). Unsure of what to do, the United States government decided to implement more restrictions. The Illegal

Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act (IIRIRA) of 1996 stated that unlawful immigrants staying over a period of 180 days were banned from entering the country again for another three years (Powell 44, 2007). If they exceeded a year in overstaying in U.S. territory then the consequence was extended to ten years.

Asylum laws became stricter, targeting specifically people who overstayed their visa, and people who crossed the border illegally. Again the representation of these people started falling outside the democratic parameters of the government as it claimed the unofficial nature of the status of these people. Operation Gatekeeper marked the spatial division of ideologies, increasingly delimiting the other as different - as illegal (more than 10 million Mexicans had crossed the border at this point) (*Ibid*).

After 9/11, IIRIRA Law was strengthened through Bush's strategy for national security; the Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism (USA PATRIOT) Act of 2001 expanded the definition of terrorism to a domestic level, increased the power of the attorney general to deport aliens, and developed strict monitor systems for aliens in the country (Powell 80, 2007). Immigrants from the Middle East become stereotyped as 'terrorists' adding to a list of discriminatory terms that also include terms like 'beaner' and 'chink'. Immigration no longer was just a social issue or a matter of work.

Today's Immigrant Rights movement stems directly from these repetitive restrictions by the government which promoted discrimination starting with 9/11. I ask myself the same as Huntington: "To what extent will these immigrants, their successors, and descendants follow the path of earlier immigrants and be successfully assimilated into American society and culture,

become committed to American forswearing other national identities, and adhere through belief and action to the principles of the American Creed?" (Huntington 178). The tipping point was the Border Protection, Antiterrorism, and Illegal Immigration Control Act (H.R. 4437) of 2005 in which it became a felony offense to be an undocumented immigrant. Again, the policing qualities of the state opposed the notion of citizen legality, and thus radicalized the Constitutional notion of domestic tranquility. This sparked a reaction from the immigrant community who had made the country their home and yet were explicitly told that they didn't belong: "illegal immigration was supplemented by illegal movements" (*Ibid*). The following year massive protests surged around the nation, the most prominent one on March 10th, 2006 in Chicago amounting to over 100,000 participants. Hoban identifies two major factors for the mobilization of this movement: "the increase in the size of the immigrant population" and "the political climate's hostility toward immigrant policy". Contradictory ideologies between Democrats and Republicans now includes the issue of the security of the country, disregarding the value of life, as an attempt to deal with immigrants. The American public has responded as politicians have.

When the Obama administration took over the movement was appeased with policies ensuring recognition and legality, maybe even a path for citizenship. The Immigration Reform which included both the Dream Act of 2010 and the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA) immigration plan of 2012, lessened the severity of the definition of being illegal, giving a status of 'low priority' to some who the law deemed deserved an opportunity to access education and possibly stay in the country with a work visa or a residency. With the other side of the ideological spectrum taking over with the Trump administration, the Immigrant Rights Movement was shook. President Trump's Executive Order 13780, titled Protecting the Nation

from Foreign Terrorist Entry into the United States, re-energized both social tension and the bonds between the people that form this movement.

A few artists like Aman Mojadidi and Byron Kim have directly addressed the immigrant experience not only dealing with issues of discrimination due to racial or ethnic differences, but also of institutional injustice at the hands of extreme political measures that sent thousands back to their countries of origin, put thousands of children in contention centers awaiting their legal status to be processed, and separated thousands of families.

Kim's *Synecdoche,* one of many oil on wax compositions, explores the problems of color and vision, and issues of human identity and existence. The name of the painting is a figure of speech in which a part represents the whole and vice versa, acknowledging Postmodern

Byron Kim. *Synecdoche*, 1991-present. Oil and wax on panels.

plurality in its conception. This title makes clear that issues of representation are at play,

particularly because most of the American public seems to be colorblind (unable to see anything except black or white). The piece features 400 panels of 8 by 10 inch, each containing the skin colors of strangers, friends, fellow artists, and Kim himself. This use of a wide range of skin colors represents a diversity and unity which is the antithesis of those opposed to immigration. This art piece is in support of a more immigrant-friendly America, while also harshly contrasting the issues of racial divide with a diverse set of racial undertones. Furthermore, the juxtaposition between each of the colors is used to symbolize the contrast we see in everyday life, right-left, black-white, and the many dichotomies that have split the country today. Importantly, Kim also addresses the issue of racial identity by displaying how all of us are part of a whole, and that without each others unique contribution, we could not make up the beauty that is put forth as a human race.

Through a performance installation, artist Aman Mojadidi invited his audience to make a call to a stranger in two telephone booths placed in the middle of one of the country's most transitioned placed, Times Square. *Once Upon a Place* allows people to listen to the stories of immigrants that arrived to the United States, but the purpose is to make more people aware of some of the challenges and the lengths people went to in an attempt to give themselves and their children better lives. By recounting the stories of those that went through American migratory processes, the artist is hoping to make the average citizen aware of the difficulties of immigration and how their lives can be so similar to that of immigrants. Their priorities are economic opportunity and their families.

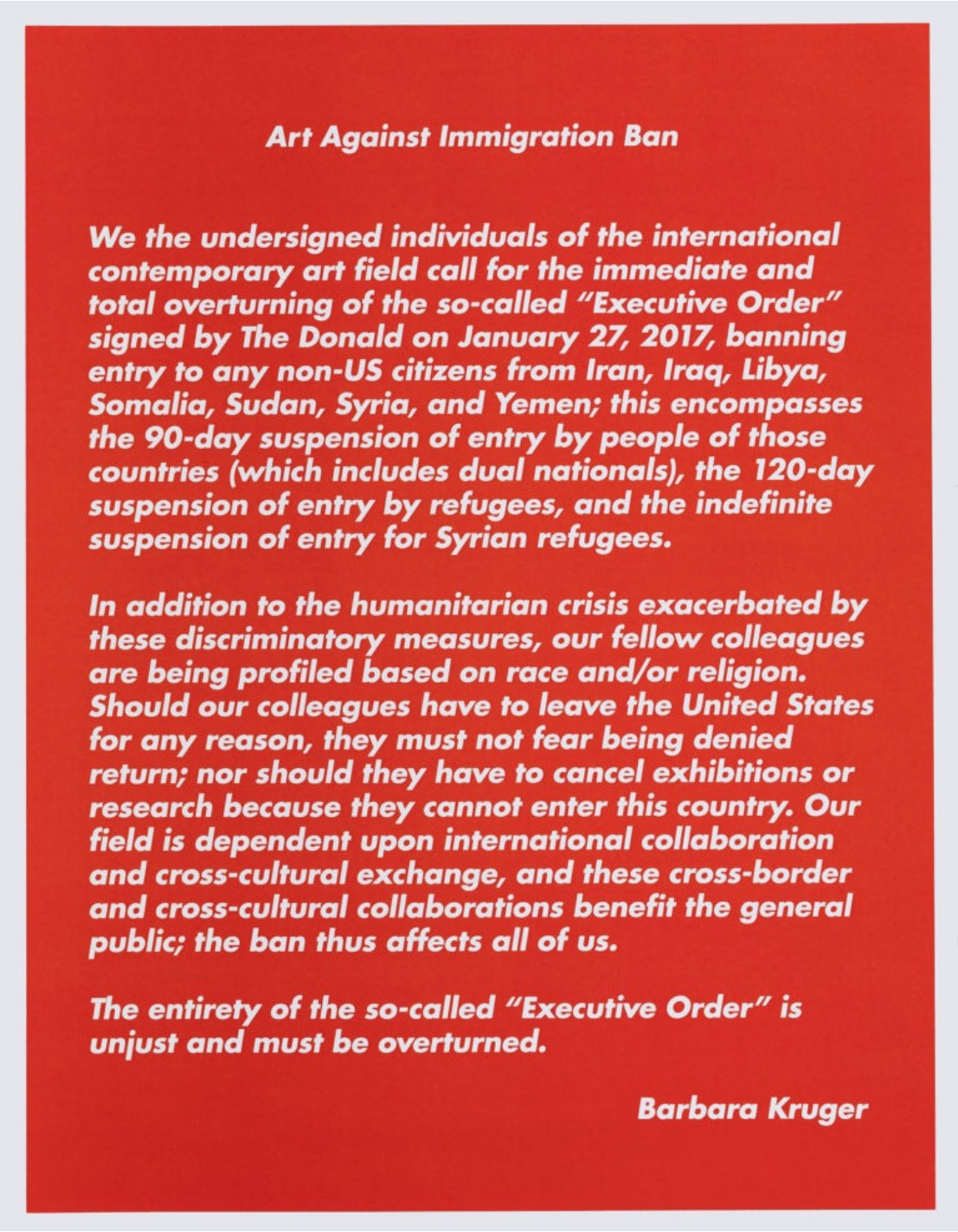
Once Upon a Place represents the cultural politics of identity in regards to the amalgamation of ethnicities and cultural backgrounds that make up American society. "Hello my

Aman Mojadidi, *Once Upon a Place,* 2017. Performance Installation. New York's Times Square.

name is Stefano Senna and I'm going to tell you a little bit about my life as an Italian American…" serves as an introduction to one of the many stories that are echoed across the wires of these telephones. Individual narratives are blended together in this art piece to build a collective experience based on the lives of immigrants across the country. Through the application of Postmodernity, Mojadidi is able to develop a direct relationship between his purpose, the art piece, and his audience. The experience displaces the experience of talking on a public phone from the streets of New York to a purposeful art piece placed in one of the most transited places in the world, to a process of self-awareness about what it means to live in the United States today.

Together multiple artists have directly addressed the restrictive policies of the United States, targeting an Executive Order which originally barred people from Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen from entering the United States for at least 90 days. *Art Against the Immigration Ban* serves as an institutional response to Executive Order 13769 also known as the Muslim Travel Ban which President Trump issued in January 2017. Nancy Spector, artistic director and chief curator of the Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, explains the purpose of this nation-wide effort to that recognizes "cultural exchange as a fundamental step in building tolerance and respect" (Spector 2017). Both museums as institutions and artists as main actors within them challenge the assumptions of national security at the hands of Trump and assert that "creativity has no borders".

Back in April of 2016 a brief of *amici curiae* was released against President Trump by the Association of Art Museum Directors, the American Alliance of Museums, the Association of Academic Museums and Galleries, the College Art Association, and 101 Art Museums in support of respondents who were affected by the ban. This legal document directly appeals to what it means to be American, claiming that the arts had played "a pivotal role in defining the United States since its inception [as] an anchor of American culture and democratic society" (Brief of *amici curiae* 6). The argument begins with a quote by John F. Kennedy from *The Arts in America* 1962 where he states that "the life of the arts, from from being an interruption, a distraction, in the life of a nation, is very close to the center of a nation's purpose - and is a test of the quality of a nation's civilization" (*Ibid*). *Art Against Immigration Ban* calls upon the same ideals of the brief's argument in addressing art that is "a vehicle for political dissent and social commentary" for immigrants across the world as one of the only means to effectively criticize the inequities



Barbara Kruger, *Art Against the Immigration Ban*, March 2017. Agitprop.

and corruption in government (*Ibid*). Artists Chitra Ganesh, Liam Gillick, Joan Jonas, Barbara Kruger, Julie Mehretu, Walid Raad, Rirkrit Tiravanija, Danh Vo, and Anicka Yi teamed up the same way many had done during the 60s cultural revolutions, and in the 80s under the AIDS

crisis by producing similar representations of the same statement. In Barbara Kruger's work the statement affirms that the field of art "is dependent upon international collaboration and cross cultural exchange" which in turn are extremely beneficial to the general public and society at large (Kruger). Each poster is in the style of agitprop, a type of political propaganda, adding to the interpretation and original contribution of each of these artists towards the presentation of their statement. Barbara Kruger deliberately uses her style (now prominent in popular culture due to the brand *Supreme*) and her platform as one of the most influential contemporary artist in the United States today to deliver the same message. Kruger uses red and white design elements to allude to the commercial nature of news media. The Futura font together with a specific typography allow for Kruger's work to be unmistakable. Kruger's contribution is that of the weight of her words. Already appearing in multiple public spaces and galleries across the country, her work demonstrates a constant criticism against the establishment of systems, whether it be economic when addressing consumer culture and buyer impulses or political in this way when addressing the actions of her own president.

Similarly, Ganesh goes in depth towards the history of immigration of the country, recalling the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1917 and the restrictive measures of the country to ask her audience to persevere against oppression. She further explains the role of the artist in this Immigrant-rights movement through her own theory of the value of art: "art's value lies in its ability to link seemingly disparate ideas, pasts, and futures and offer new possibilities for reconsidering age old questions; to unravel the ways we become accustomed to seeing the every day. Art makes, undoes, gives perspective, and takes it away. Part of the resistance as an arts community is to use our skills, platforms, experience, and art practices to disrupt, imagine,

inspire, and above all to make clear that we will do everything we can to refuse normalizing the frightening political shifts signaled by a so called 'Muslim ban'". In this way, a statement in the form of an art piece takes on a direct political meaning. It is an outright protest against the president. Ganesh ends her statement with a drawing asking the audience to "Resist" and "Rise up" as if the only way to survive the current onslaught from the government an immigrant's only choice is to fight back.

2.4 Power, Precarity & Art History

Butler published a curious account of a group of illegal immigrants living in Los Angeles who, on May 2006, took the streets signing the national anthem of the United States both in Spanish and English (Butler iv). Their purpose: "to petition the government to allow them to become citizens" (*Ibid*). These immigrants went beyond their legal status in "exercising the right of free assembly without having that right" which belongs to citizens (*Ibid*). Ultimately, their performance - their capacity to use their own bodies, interact with an audience, and make the audience self-aware - allowed them to challenge governmental authorities and the conservative ideologies of the American public in order to become visible, as if this visibility would guarantee their safety as aliens in a foreign territory. Needless to say, they were able to assert they social reality, a multilingual, diverse one. They relegated the power of the majority to them, acting as political individuals to create politics among themselves and towards others, ensuring their rights were protected within this socio-political space that they themselves created (Arendt qtd in Butler vi).

The artists in this chapter manipulate power, not through song, but through contemporary art and by appealing to Postmodernity. They apply a specific medium to potentially disrupt the general conception of a social reality, and make another visible, creating a socio-political space in which politics can happen. This space is performative on its own. It allows an audience to interact directly with the purpose of an art piece and indirectly with the interpretation of reality of the artist. Broadly stated, these artists are exercising the rights of the minorities, of people outside politics, and of those for whom politics work against.

Precarity serves as precondition to contest the normal since these individuals live in a state of unpredictability, instability, unemployment, and overall decent welfare. Their rights and their lives are not guaranteed. In the case of those addressed as a sexually diverse minority their rights are entwined with their own bodies and their own choices as well as the guarantee of their safety in public spaces and under the law. Similarly, those of ethnic descent appeal to a sense of justice under the policing capacities of the United States and the biases that already exist within American society. Other simply want to be recognized under the law. They attempt to disseminate their own narrative, to acquire visibility by using their own voices and transferring that message across groups, movements, aesthetics, and media. The artwork restrengthens that narrative and exposes it as relevant political phenomena in hopes to be understood as a necessity for change.

Medium specificity plays a key role in this process. Art history has seen the media of performance, installation, painting, and sculptures merge into what we now deem contemporary art, applying plurality, liminality, and the spectacular to achieve a given purpose. Most recreate narratives by representing them and as a compilation of images, text, and experiences that, when

confronted by an audience, translate into a spectacle that prompts a self-awareness check from the viewer. In turn the dialectical interactions between the purpose of the art, the medium, and the audience therefore determine what we can commend as liminal in that art reaches a point in which it approaches the boundaries of what society has since accepted, what it asks it to accept, and why that matters to a given social reality. Accordingly, the artwork in question gives a voice to the unspeakable communities it depicts and allows them to make their claims, disrupting whatever power scenarios had been preconceived within politics and society, and taking ownership of their own agency.

Thus, the trajectory of Art History is defined not by the revivification of a Greenbergian understanding of art, but rather by how it allows for a power dialectic to be developed. Contemporary art in the context of the United States today gives significance not only to the aesthetic qualities of what is conceptual, and performance, and avant-garde, and deconstructive, and exploratory, and radical within the arts, but to the politics behind it. It amalgamates the extent from which the medium allows the audience to response with political actions with a proposition for change. It's an example of non-violent social and collective action for the sake of pursuing what a section of the population needs, with every right to be heard under the definition of government. It does not delve in the past, it deals with a present to define a future.

3. The Transformative Potential of American Contemporary Art

When we ask: *what is politics?*, we immediately refer to contentions of power among political individuals, groups, parties, governments as they interact within a polity. Social contract theory posits that these political interactions are an inherent part of being human as we begin to differentiate among each other based on the roles we create and ultimately take action to deter or speed up the process of politicization. Hannah Arendt expands on this notion presenting politics not only as inherent to human beings but also as a means to create a political space that happens liminally, it occurs when humans interact with one another (translated from Birulés 19). For her, "human action is only the beginning of a chain reaction of events", to "innovate", and to ultimately achieve "plurality" in addressing all as political entities (*Ibid*). While plurality and innovation do appeal to a sense of universality, for Arendt these factors are what shapes individual identity as to how we incur into who we are, what our political discourse is, and how we transfer this discourse into political action. A political actor, in this way, has the potential to change the world as "he finds a sense of one's place among others, shares this world with others, but also changes who they are in response to how this identity unfolds" (translated from Birulés 21). Plurality thus shapes what we see as a space of transition, a space of visibility, where through word and action, the political actor can reveal who they are and ultimately who they want to be (*Ibid*).

Therefore, when a government originates, it does so by encompassing the shared experience of individuals whose participation in the public sphere allows them to be presented as equal under a political umbrella. This chapter embraces the role of the stakeholders involved in the processes of Art Politics within the current socio-political sphere of the United States,

expanding on the definition of a political actor as presented above. Taking Arendt questioning of politics as a departure to analyze the interpersonal dialogue achieved between the government, the American public, contemporary social movements, artists, art, and its audience, the chapter delves into the role of contemporary art and restrengthens the case for art to be both a product of politics and a proponent of it in that the act of producing it is inherently political.

3.1 The Validation of Vulnerable Groups & their Objectives through American Contemporary Art

Racism and discrimination have marked a predominant part of the history of the United States to the extent that these notions became institutionalized from the foundation of the country through the 3/5ths Compromise, later reinforced through Jim Crow, as a platform for education with "separate but equal", and finally as lawfully addressed with the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Taylor K. ch. 4). For some, however, the Civil Rights movement merely gave them recognition legitimized through the use of violence from the government when addressing protest movements like the 1969 Stonewall Riots. It seems repetitive to mention the history of discrimination when it is still extremely evident today. Backtracking though it is important to recall Japanese concentration camps, Christian gay-to-straight conversion groups, the Ku Klux Klan (and its contemporary counterpart: the alt-Right movement), and even trans-violence as key conjectural events that mark the Gramscian social crisis that the country is and has been facing. Today, the traditional racism that we know from history has diffused into more subtle representations, but it is still discriminatory nevertheless. As posed by Corlett, racism today seems to be founded on a *circulus in probando* fallacy. Once an individual holds a given view about the essence of race, ethnicity, and sex, when a competing view warrants attention, it is

dismissed or posed as an appeal to authority in order to defend those preliminary views (Ikuenobe 129). Thus, Corlett goes on as to establish a Thoreauesque proposition in revising or discarding institutions that provide a phantom sense of justice to the oppressed (Ikuenobe 130).

The United States withstands an existential conundrum when identifying issues of social justice and the legitimacy of *being* black, gay, or from a different culture. In this context the dominant white majority "morphologically identified for itself a group of people it calls 'blacks', 'terrorists', 'abnormal' and oppresses that group"; who we therefore identify as a minority relies on this inherent obsessive compulsion to categorize these individuals into a group. These minorities are vulnerable; the law cannot differentiate between the members of a given group and the quantity and quality of discrimination that an individual might experience because they are a part of it. Insofar it is unintentional racism, or a subvert form of discrimination that most affects the socio-political sphere of the United States. Positing that racism is rather universal, many overlook their own remarks because they are not conscious of the powerplay of their statements - and even going as far as calling a particular someone a 'rapist' or inherently attributing weakness to women. Contemporary racism can therefore be defined as symbolic whereas negative attitudes socialized through resentment against the African American population, the LGBT Community, and other minorities has led to the development of a belief system at the hands of the American public and of contrasting political ideologies throughout the nation (Redlawsk et al. 681).

Citing Tesler and Sears, this racialization is exposed through a prejudicial conservative opposition *to* and prejudicial liberal support *for* when dealing with actors that play a role in both the social and political sphere of the United States, particularly presidential candidates (qtd. in

Redlawsk et al. 682). This form of prejudice defines the political ideology of the United States which since 2014 has become polarized into two opposites: one defined by a Republican conservative mindset, and the other defined by formally democratic values - the in-group/out-group distinctions solidified through solidarity among members of each group, antipathy towards an ideological *other*, and disregard towards the democratic values from which the country emerged (Suh 2014). This polarization has thus shaped repression in two ways: one from the conservative side of politics represented by Republicans, the other by the white majority towards the *other*.

Since the Civil Rights Movement, three major groups can be identified as minorities within the socio-political ideological terrain of the country: the LGBT community, immigrants, and African-Americans - the latter two already embedded within its history. In this sense the theoretical and conceptual background of these minorities demonstrates the way repression has shaped their ideologies, setting them on the Democratic spectrum, but still unsure about how they fit within the parameters of American democracy. Due to both symbolic racism and overt instances of discrimination, and in an attempt to address misrepresentation and abuse, these minorities have mobilized society, concretizing major social movements that are attempting to change the current ideological terrain. Since 2014, these movements have become major actors in defining the ideological fallacies in both society and politics of the United States.

Social movements are often a response to organic events or in the case of the aforementioned ones to a Gramscian crisis that revolves around a definition of democracy, the repression of minorities, and systemic injustice. For Gramsci, there are clear distinctions between majority and a minority that in turn influence social mobility. While events usually depend on the

wills of a society at large, when the wills of minorities are united over common goal, then they can establish an event on their own. To the majority there is "no social goal other than preservation of their own physiological and moral integrity. It therefore comes about that they adapt to circumstances and mechanically repeat certain gestures which, through their own experience or through the education they have received (the outcome of others' experiences), have proved themselves to be suitable attaining the desired goal; survival" (Gramsci 47). The case for the white majority is to preserve the status quo of their socio-economic position, disregarding inequality as a source for social conflict or conflict whatsoever. The relationship between the majority and the minority is thus influenced by a master-slave dialectic that promotes hegemonic instability. The power dynamics concretize the objectives of both groups pushing for the creation of social movements attempting to balance opposing forces, establish a process of transformation, or simply attest to their contemporaneity in ensuring a time and space where minorities are recognized (Gramsci 217). A social movement must therefore raise both political and social significance when addressing the demands of its members, examine what conformity truly entails, and fulfill social expectations.

I argue that *Black Lives Matter,* the *Immigrant Rights Movement,* and the *LBGT+ Movement* satisfy a Gramscian definition of social movements in addressing a war of position against the United States state-of-affairs as opposed to a war of movement (one which is a frontal assault on the state). The war of position is conducted on the terrain of civil society. Gramsci states that "civil society is a site of consent, hegemony direction, in conceptual opposition to the state (political society) which is a site of coercion, dictatorship, domination (Gramsci 224). Civil society is therefore at once the political terrain on which the dominant class organizes its

hegemony and the terrain on which opposition parties and movements organize, win allies, and build their personal power" (*Ibid*). The concept in and on its own alludes directly to the development of democracy in ensuring a government *for* the people *by* the people. The aggregate interests of the minorities concur in ensuring self-preservation and outright recognition through American democracy. The ideology of the majority clashes directly with that of the minorities in addressing issues with foundational plurality representation and those of the Democratic party in dealing with social justice. A balance of hegemony is therefore sought.

The movements are political in nature. They "seek to alter power deficits and to affect social transformations through the state by mobilizing regular citizens for sustained political action (Tilly, qtd in Amenta et al. 288). This definition is holistic. It includes both collective action, protest marches, civil disobedience, lobbying, lawsuits, and even press conferences insofar as these measures have consequences at the structural level, allowing for an "extension of democratic rights and practices and the formation of new political parties (Amenta et al. 289). However, it isn't until policy is passed that political outcomes such as a higher level of acceptance, reinforcement of collective identities and inclusion actually become valuable for these movements.

In an interview addressing these movements, Professor George Lipsitz stated the that "there's never been one way to be black. There's never been one way to be poor. There's never been one way to be a woman, to be queer. These differences all expose different forms of power and there's no simple solution that can come to be applied to all of them" (qtd in Green 9). The only way left is to consolidate an opposition against the ideological terrain of the majority,

justifying it through the pillars of American politics, and taking action through civil society. This is what contemporary social movements are doing.

Minorities, within the current socio-political sphere of the country, are never presented as victims in art and are thus given a direct participatory voice through the interpretation of contemporary artists. While vulnerable, minorities and, in extension, members of social movements are never presented "as a standardized visual accounts that anonymize victims and depoliticize conflict" (Campbell qtd in Möller 2017). On the contrary, artists holistically account for the individual essence behind their subject matter as they identify and portray the citizens who want to be heard by a government that ostensibly represents them. Artists play with the tenants of Postmodernity in order to produce images - icons - that are "transformed into politics" as an audience becomes exposed to individuals just like themselves. The plural, liminal, and spectacular characteristics of contemporary art allows this audience to reexamine who they are as they confront the conditions presented in these images.

The application of American contemporary art in these social movements and in addressing the current situation of the country thus sets a difference between how an individual reacts to a piece of art and how they may" act politically as part of the public" (Möller 2017). Because social movements encompass collective history, collective ideology, and collective action, the response to a given piece of art can be constructed through a public visual discourse defined by "common spectatorship" (*Ibid*). Franz Möller explains that individual responses are inadequate "in the sense that [the responses] do not directly or immediately contribute to the alleviation of the suffering depicted" (*Ibid*). Only when the icon becomes public discourse,

organized at the hands of a movement is there a potential for collective action, a potential to change the country as we know it.

With regards to minorities, contemporary art establishes a relationship between their struggle and a larger audience, not by portraying them as victims but as individuals within the context and symbolism of the artwork itself. The artwork demonstrates a teaching opportunity since "aesthetic production and experiences of cultural groups can be studied by focusing on the maker of art as well as the socio-cultural context in which it was produced" (Powell 35, 2012). The validation of minorities through democratic means can therefore be attributed to how artists create ways to revivify and render their collective purpose to redirect justice, and maybe change something about their situation. We have thus analyzed multiple instances of successful interpretations of the current socio-political sphere of the country in an attempt to transform it.

3.2 The Role of American Contemporary Art in the Socio-Political Sphere

In order to fully comprehend the extent in which contemporary art plays a role in how we define the present, it is necessary to backtrack into the political history of the United States. While the ideological foundation of the country and its polarization sets a precedent to the way contemporary art deals with specific socio-political phenomena by recognizing and depicting both minorities and social movements as main actors within an ideological terrain, the ahistorical nature of American politics allowed for Postmodernity within the arts in the country to flourish, consequently defining American contemporary art with its tenants.

The potential of American contemporary art to address this issue allows for the fields of art and politics to merge as we are able to understand the scope of social movements and their

objectives in restructuring ideology and generating societal change. Overall it is clear that art enables social movements to increase their scope and validate both their purpose and the role of individuals who make up the movement.

I previously defined a social movement through a Gramscian perspective, pinpointing a hegemonic struggle between main social actors on an ideological terrain as one attempts to gain socio-political significance when addressing the demands of its members in order to fulfill their expectations. Contemporary social movements in the United States are political as they address a failed notion of democracy because misrepresentation and underrepresentation permeate civil society. Minorities have mobilized trying to dissolve repression and discrimination as a quotidian aspect of their lives. I therefore posit that contemporary art has been key in validating and promoting the objectives of *Black Lives Matter,* the *Immigrant Rights Movement,* and the *LBGT+ Movement*.

In contemporary democratic societies, just like the United States, art not only serves as evidence to the historical trajectory of the nation, but as a means to solidify traditions and describe the events through which it develops. In a similar sense, the democratic nature of these societies allows art to be the voice of many individuals who use it to inform a larger audience about their needs and wants (Milbrandt 8). Social movements employ cultural forms to transform society in a variety of ways. Without them, these movements would merely establish an opposition, rather than actually acting towards change. According to Jacqueline Adams, art in social movements is used to frame work, mobilize resources, communicate information about the movements themselves, and as symbols that represent them. “Movements are ‘actively engaged in the production of meaning for participants… They frame or assign meaning to and interpret

relevant events and conditions in ways that are intended to mobilize potential adherents and constituents, to garner bystander support, and to demobilize antagonists" (Snow and Benford qtd in Adams 22). The hidden social scripts of art thus help social movements to fulfill T.V. Reed's functions: "to encourage social change; empower and deepen commitment; inform larger society about social issues, harmonize social activists within the movement; inform internally to express or reinforce values and ideas; inform externally as a more effective way to communicate movement ideals to people outside the movement; enact movement goals directly historicize to invent, tell and retell the history of the movement; set a new emotional tone; critique movement ideology; and provide elements of pleasure and aesthetic joy" (Reed qtd in Milbrandt 1). These functions clearly define the role of contemporary art within the current socio-political sphere, but particularly establish the potential for art for producing social change.

A given movement is exposed to a politically diverse group of individuals, that must interpret the information, empathize with it, and act in favor of the movement's objectives. "In trying to attract and shape media coverage, win the support of bystander publics, constrain movement opponents, and influence state authorities, insurgents depend first and foremost on various forms of signifying work" (McAdam qtd in Adams 23). This social relevance that each movement seeks can be established through the application of Postmodernity to employ images in order to produce a critical understanding of reality - what is spectacular is key for this. Images influence the process of framing since political communication is established between artist, artwork, and audience, meaning is transformed and produced, and awareness reached. The relationship between contemporary art and the spectacle therefore allows it to "shock our

sensibility, our imagination and our rationality" as we dispose of what we know to fathom what is presented (Nowicka-Wright 47).

These images used and produced by social movements or that adhere to the identities within them take on a political aura. Pratt states that "art has political power that can support the status quo, act as a safety valve for discontent (and therefore of benefit to the oppressor), or serve as an emancipatory force, challenging dominant institutions, and reinforcing the subversion of existing systems" (Adams 26). The power that lies behind these images transforms them into political icons: forms of communication that depend on visual rather than textual messages to convey the movements' causes. From a poster to a meme, the icons might even directly achieve the goals or purposes of the movement; such is the case for the group of feminist artists, Guerrilla Girls as they had change museum policies to include more female artists (Milbrandt 11).

An analysis of contemporary art through Art Politics allows us to see the process of framing within social movements unfold as a series of emotional affective bonds. These are established through a recognition of the historical relevance of what is depicted, a confrontation between the social reality of the audience and the reality of the artwork, and the ethos that the artist is transmitting. Art is able to modify the ideological locus of a given audience, and when applied to social movement, it builds a sense of commitment. This, in turn, helps the movement recruit new members, reassure their own messages, showcase the potential of a given proposition, and provide a renewed feeling that social and political change is possible (Adams 27).

Emotion can also affect the way contemporary art deals with identity politics. As part of social movements, artists recall and retell the stories of repression and discrimination, pride and progress as a means to "depict the stereotypes and assumptions that have shaped collective memory and identity" of the members of these groups (Desai and Hamlin qtd in Milbrandt 11). Again, the images depicted take the form of political icons in challenging and reframing the conceptual and historical background of the subject matter. As Milbrandt explains, the artist is able to portray an individual story - "presenting it through multiple viewpoints" to revise its legitimacy - that "disrupts and discredits the grand narrative by revealing its omissions and biases" (Milbrandt 11). The emotional commitment to modify this perception of subject matter and address the injustices of a supposedly democratic society help movements address the construction of new identities and the validation of others.

Finally, contemporary art can play a role in the development of Gramscian organic and conjectural events. When images become icons they are often appropriated and diffused through history and through larger sections of society. The key to ensuring the movement's durability, however, is to prevent the icons from losing their significance as protest pieces - to acquire the semblance of organic events in truly adhering to the contemporaneity of the reality that they represent. The artwork from Wiley, Walker, Kim, Mojadidi, Ernst & Drucker, and Cuevas among the artists identified in this research speak to the accomplishment of these social movements in having their values become visible as artistic conjectural events and protest pieces today. Arguably, *#blacklivesmatter* as a symbol of black empowerment, American multiculturalism, and the rainbow flag serve as iconic examples that signify not just a group of individuals, but also the

historical legacy, ideological weight, and overall essence of each and every single one of them. Their identities are charged with aesthetic and political power.

3.3 Politics through Art; Art as Politics

This research has elucidated on the duality between art and politics in addressing the foundational concepts of change and diversity and how they have been transformed by the homogenization of American ideology in enveloping exclusion above justice. This duality fomented a conception of American contemporary art as both a product of politics and a political means on it own while further solidifying the correlations among the different actors involved within the current socio-political sphere of the country.

When defining politics, Arendt describes polarization as a division between presuppositions and judgements. The former influenced our general perception of the world, defining who we are and how we act within a given space at a given time. Yet for Arendt these presuppositions only limit our understanding of reality as they solidify a conception *a priori* to experience, but rather former by biases and the countless tale of who told who. She goes so far as to describe the race conflict of the United States as a "question of ancient prejudices" (translated from Arendt 54). Her solution is simple, in order to resolve and dissolve these presuppositions we must first recognize the previous judgements that once defined those prejudices to fully grasp their entire veracity (*Ibid*). Thus prejudices allow for an understanding of politics as a commodification of our social reality. As long as it is conditioned as stable - stability being social complacency and a general sense of comfort - the politics assumes that the status quo must be maintained. Judgements, on the other hand, would ultimately shape our decision-making process

based on the political inter-relations that constantly redefine our social reality, asking why and how these prejudices exist, to propose an end-goal to a given polity. I posit that the actors involved within this research showcase a dialectic between judgements and presuppositions in defining their political identities and behavior, thus transforming what they *do* (protest, chant, draw, perform, install, paint, envision, and imagine) into politics.

The space in which politics happens, a space where humans are free to interact, to make decisions, and learn from one another allows for artistic behavior to become political and thus for the field of Art Politics to come into play. The space acknowledges both prejudices and judgements within a political terrain as these political actors respond to innovation, and, as Arendt put it, would allow politics to happen *in-between* these interactions (Arendt 57). The process of disproven a given presupposition in addressing the truth of our social reality occurs in spaces that are legitimately contemporary and that have the purpose of producing social normative change. The spaces are twofold. On one hand, there is a traditional gallery setting attempting to constrain the eccentricities of what we deem contemporary art. On the other, there are public spaces taken up by means of protesting. Two spaces that by every means have demonstrated the changing ideology of the American public through history and have thus helped to normalize polarized political phenomena in their own contexts. The contemporary artists in this research address both spaces in identifying the social democratic values contesting a polarized government, and a radically divisive society within the public space, while developing their own judgement as they address their own social reality in a gallery space. Sometimes their art even transcends space as has been shown with *Hope* by Shepard Fairey and

Art Against the Immigration Ban, in becoming not only political icons, but also transforming art into politics and directly addressing ideology and law respectively.

The space is therefore contemporary in nature. Peter Osborne's concept of the contemporary legitimizes the social democratic values presented in this artwork through spatial and temporal relationships. The gallery setting as well as the public sphere allow for a *moment* to happen by asking whoever is present to analyze who they are, what they are doing, and why they are doing so. The concept of the contemporary projects the present as a single historical time, "a living present," that functions to generate relevance among its participants for there exists a perpetual dialogue among them (Osborne 3). The contemporary, however, goes beyond this temporal setting and presents itself as an idyll. According to Osborne, "it functions as if the speculative horizon of the unity of human history had been reached" (*Ibid*). In this way the contemporary serves to exemplify a junction between an imaginative future and the present. What these contemporary spaces do is therefore offer American contemporary art a platform to revise presuppositions, reinterpret ideology, and ultimately shape, through social democratic values, a future for both American politics and society.

Ideology and its polarization justify a full separation between judgments and prejudices at the hands of Democratic and Republican values when dealing with the political actors involved in these spaces. While the artist is presenting political phenomena as topical subjects, they go beyond a mere representation of the current socio-political sphere. They contest the presuppositions of party-oriented American ideology against the social justice of race immigration, and sexual diversity. They offer a new dimension of American foundational ideology focusing purely on applying Postmodernity, the historical trajectory of the country, and

its inherent values and infusing them with social democratic idealism. These artwork translates into future political goals and offers the present visual imaging of the contemporary as a gateway to reach this conception.

Osborne's concept is mediated through dialectical interactions among these social spaces. Public spaces turn geopolitical as protest movements occupy them; they emphasize the present, suggest the future, and create a dialogue among the actors involved. In a gallery setting, the art pieces adhere to the essence of protesting to do exactly the same. Social interconnectedness hence attributes value to American contemporary art since both the spatial and temporal settings of these means of cultural expression allow the audience to become aware of the historical factuality of the issue at hand and to start thinking about the future social implications of these phenomena - almost like the Gramscian perspective on conjectural events as they become a part of an organic one. Hence, the introduction of social democracy through the political phenomena rendered in American contemporary art not only has to be related to what we deem as quotidian, but must be a product of a significant interaction between the people who participate. As the viewer walks around an exhibit or encounters a passing protest, they are confronted by strangers who might or might not have different subjective perceptions of reality. Alfred Schutz would argue that the viewer develops both spatial and conceptual awareness in response to what is in front of him, transmuting into the shoes of this stranger to successfully understand both differences and similarities - the viewer is fully engaged with what is *contemporary.* As posed by Charles Taylor, stranger sociability is a necessary premise to grasp our existence within society. This means that what the viewer experiences as normative as they acknowledge a given cultural expression is challenged by an inherently different ideology at the hands of what is portrayed. In

this way, American contemporary art showcases three hierarchical interpretations of relevance in accordance to the political actors involved significant in the processes of Art Politics: a politicized perception of the artist, a political response from the audience, and possibly a socio-political reaction from Americans at large. If Huntington is correct we will wee a multi creedal America developing from the multiple political responses that constantly appear both in society and the arts: "groups with different cultures [would be] espousing distinctive political values and principles rooted in their particular cultures" and yet defining what it is to be American today (Huntington 340).

The artist has a conscious effort towards creating relevance towards a given phenomena, in this case addressing the objectives of the *Black Lives Matter*, LGBT+ and Immigrant Rights Movements. They have chosen to adhere to a given political ideology (a more Democratic one) and have taken the position to manifest their political values overtly, by exploring their medium, subject matter, and the spaces in which they present the artwork. American contemporary art in relation to these protest movements is confrontational; it demands recognition by projecting itself as a physical and material obstruction in the viewer's passage through space, as they move through a contemporary space. The presence of the object activates its surrounding space, shifting the perception of the viewer to address themselves as both subject and object and creating a sense of self-awareness. The stage presence of this artwork therefore builds a kind of spectacle that displaces the experience of the viewer from aesthetic engagement to a non-artistic exposure of self-awareness, creating a dialectic relationship between the viewer and the artwork. As a result social relevance is established in the way that the audience takes different points of

view from the what the artist presents, with different meanings depending on the context in which each individual has developed.

The recognition of multiple individual identities when this dialectic unfolds is therefore key to understand Arendt's definition of politics. We live, we interact, we thrive, and we also wither, but in the process we decide and act, and for the simple fact of doing so we become political and what is political only triggers a domino effect of political actions and recognition (translated from Birulés 23). Under this political perspective, identity is fragile. It depends on self-exhibition and courage to maintain a given ideological position in a contemporary space, while also emphasizing the permanence of narrating as a political act (*Ibid)*. The Postmodern attributes of American contemporary art accept Arendt's construction of the political act in that they allow art to be a reinterpretation, re-appropriation, and construction of narratives. These serve to destabilize the prejudices of the audience and preserve the judgements of those who choose to be visible or rather choose to make visible those who are vulnerable (Arendt 55). These judgments are charged with entire movements, social democratic ideologies, and a cry for help from those who have been marginalized.

A Weberian analysis would contend that art is an entity that has no sense of its own outside of what the subjects that produce and reproduce it validate. The third level of relevance hence falls under the societal interpretation of American contemporary art in accounting for future change and narrating the injustice of the present. The American public has a collective understanding and interpretation of each other and their situation. It is an understanding based on the political ideological values of two distinct groups: Democrats and Republicans that goes back to basic pillars that have, up to this point, somehow homogenized what is American. Taylor

would describe this scenario as a social imaginary based on the rationalization of structures or sets of values, institutions, and symbols that are ubiquitous to these given social groups: "the social imaginary is not a set of ideas; rather it is what enables, through making sense of, the practices of a society" (Taylor K. 91). Insofar, American society is energized with ideological pompousness. However, the current artistic landscape showcases an emerging social imaginary that is demonstrated through the *interpretive devices* of cultural expression. In this case these pieces of contemporary art thus interpret not only the reality of the United States, but a future for it. The rendering of political phenomena hence serves to shift the relevance of a given social group - a group that assumes and presupposes, a white majority, a conservative 1% - to rationalize the world differently.

Both the general public and a majority of artists have become engulfed in the current political situation of the United States. While many only have the means to protest on the streets, the exceptional few have deliberately chosen to portray topics that are relevant to the current socio-political atmosphere of the country to depict where they stand on an ideological spectrum and hopefully convince their audience to change the way they perceive such phenomena. The topics of race, immigration, and gender diversity have gained extreme notoriety today with such radical decision-making coming from the presidential administration and the general public. Gallery and public spaces are being transformed into political ones where there the process of politicization of the arts helps re-examine standards, practices and different aesthetics that define the present. An opportunity is created where artists and the audience are able to assimilate their social reality without the pressures of defined social constructs or prejudices, but by being able to

explore the multifaceted perspectives of each of the participants involved in and producing politics.

3.4 Manifesto

*This is meant to be spoken.

Backs turned,
Politics always redefining,
Power,
Could be given and taken away,
A simple commodity in the market of life,
Even though slavery was supposedly abolished in 1865.

But we are still slaves after all,
Slaves to the constraints of democracy,
Manipulated like children,
Raised by their maids and chauffeurs,
Expecting a long distance call from the Middle East,
Once their parents end the blood feast.

Slaves to ourselves,
To our insecurities,
Our race,
Place of birth,
Culture,
Gender,
Money,
Our creed.
To each other.

Slaves to the blank canvas of our future,
Waiting to be drenched by past mistakes,
As if we actually learned from history…
Well, that's what politicians always say…

Fake news,
Defining these power structures,
The six degrees of separation,
The…
"I know a guy,
Who is that,
Has that,
Sells that,
And better yet,
I can introduce you".

To another Wall Street executive,
Selling the American Dream,
In a plastic bottle imported from Oaxaca,
Produced by immigrant families,
Now only available with terms and conditions,
As if being American required restrictions.

Do not ignore it,
Turn around again,
And see your family and friends,
Disputing abortion laws,
Discussing whether the wage gap is real,
And jabbering,
About how your cousin came out in a Facebook post.

You see a country divided,
By an ideological wall,
Congress should be fundraising to destroy.

Think about *Making America Great Again*,
If you can really define what being American entails.

You see banners,
Hear songs of sorrow,
Cries for help,
Unfolding into social movements,

You follow them through hashtags.

And sometimes what happens around you
Rendered,
Through history maybe,
As if injustice and discrimination,
Were fundamental in the creation,
Of this nation.

Rendered,
At the hands of a black trans woman,
Raising a sign,
To chant for their rights,
Of immigrants,
Being saved by their phone cameras,
As the police blur the lines of:
Power,
Could be easily given and taken away.

Rendered,
In gallery settings,
In intricate work,
Alluding to the sprezzatura,
Of filigree virtuosos.
Capable of interweaving the threads of fate,
In an attempt to produce a different destiny.
Manipulating power,
Not through rhetoric,
But through aesthetic.

We'll stop staring at black mirrors,
To see a reflection of our own reality,
In the details,
Of Renaissance motifs,
And paper-cut figurines,
Phone booth recordings,
And performance pieces.

We, the people of the United States of America,
Have forgotten who we are,
Seem to be reminded,
Only through violence,
Depicted in art.

We, who trust in God,
Go colorblind,
As the gods of our past,
Fade away,
Replaced by those who lobby,
To buy property in heaven.

We, have woken up from a dream,
Expecting greater things,
Whose hopes?
Whose fears?
Whose values?
Whose justice?
We keep on asking questions,
When all we need are actions.

With this manifesto,
I call on myself and you,
To paint the political truth,
In the pleasant disguise of an art piece.

Conclusion

What is contemporary becomes defined through Art Politics since this research elucidates on the potential of the artwork at hand in rendering the current socio-political reality of the United States parallel to the social-democratic objectives of the actors involved within the polity. This research therefore provides evidence of the efficiency- or lack of - of the institutions and mechanisms that shape both government and society, while further presenting an aesthetic interpretation of a critique on them.

First, I provide an understanding of American contemporary art as an outcome of American politics based on the concept of Postmodernity. By defining the process and integration of plurality, liminality and the spectacle as key tenants of American Postmodernity, I am able not only to provide a historical background for this research, but also develop a historical justification for what shapes American contemporary art and politics. This demonstrates that American Postmodernity is a product of the history of the country, while further defining not only transition periods in the American narrative, but also conditioning the American creed by addressing the foundational tenants of the country: representative democracy, plurality elections, geography-based representation, and private property rights, as flawed.

Furthermore, I depart from 2014 to contemplate the divisive ideological polarization of the country, phenomena that has deliberately incited social and political tension across the American government and society at large. It can be inferred that both creedal and political hegemony has become unstable at the hands of radical ideological unification, antipathy towards the other, and the politicization of daily lives. With multiple and historically recurring instances of discrimination and racism, this social unrest was transformed into mobilization which helped

resurface and solidify *Black Lives Matter*, the LGBT+ Movement, and the Immigrant Rights Movement as a response to the historical flaws of the country and as proponents of much needed change. Their objectives as social movements revolve around the concept of social democracy to address not only institutional discrimination, but the inequalities of the American economic, social and political spheres.

I research the extent in which social justice is promoted under the frame of these movements concluding that the objective's inclusion in the art world speaks to its politicization due to the dialectical relationships established between the artists, the artwork and its audience. These are developed through the principles of American Postmodernity in addressing the *here* and *now* as defining factors for art's potential in politics. I explore the aesthetic and visual characteristics of the artwork of Kehinde Wiley, Sara Walker, Robert Longo, Zackary Drucker and Rhys Ernst, Zak Krevitt, Ben Cuevas, Aman Mojadidi and Byron Kim who directly represent the struggles of the racial, ethnic, and sexual minorities that compose the aforementioned social movements. I argue that these examples of American contemporary art intervene in American politics due to their revision of democracy and social justice across the socio-political sphere of the country. The artwork renders the social reality of the United States based on how these artists interpret such reality through a specific medium. It borrows from the history of art and from the struggle and life experience of the subjects it renders, as if the pure art of creating could change someone's perception of the present. Hopefully it does.

The last section of this investigation addresses the way in which *American contemporary art seeks to redefine the perceptions of the American public through the application of Postmodernity. It validates and renders the socio-democratic values produced by the ideological*

polarization of the country in 2014 through the Black Lives Matter, LGBT+, and Immigrant Rights Movements that stem from it, and proposes de-hegemonizing tendencies to achieve critical and emancipatory potentialities within the socio-political sphere of the United States. This research thus defines American contemporary art as an agent and subject of study in order to understand change by extrapolating on the concept of contemporaneity and how it is achieved through American Postmodernity through a given artistic medium. Furthermore, it demonstrates the dialectical hegemonic relationships between the actors involved through the field of Art Politics. In particular it determines the importance of the role between the artist and the audience in dealing with the past and the present to recognize a possible different outcome for the future.

The visual analysis of the art selected for this study allows us to explore the social sciences through a multi-disciplinary approach, expanding on the field of Political Science by applying Art History. The art pieces at hand serve as relics for their time period in becoming embedded with power by contesting the social reality from which they emerge. Within the field of Art, this research validates the manner and success in how the art pieces studied render socio-political realities, respond to social-democratic objectives, and critique both the government and society. However, the limitations of the research deal with the sampling and direct correlation between the artwork and its objective as rarely do artists disclose their purpose, but rather the interpretation at the hands of their audience or the art world defines art's purpose. Additionally, the the art world has not applied Art's potential within the field of Politics to propose the necessary social awareness either through thematic exhibitions or the development of larger communication schemes. If there is a common objective then a gallery setting could be the best way to foment social awareness. However, rarely does the artistic community or museums as

renowned institutions organize exhibitions with a given political purpose, whether it be because of funding or by maintaining a neutral position. If *Artists Against the Immigration Ban* campaign had any success, then why not promote racial equality or transgender rights by compiling the best art pieces across the current contemporary art pool to fulfill a given agenda. Maybe this is the future of the arts.

Another limitation is that knowledge within the field of Art rarely trickles down to society at large, so a full understanding of how these pieces share common ground across the social democratic spectrum is reserved for the field of Art Politics. Nevertheless, it is possible to uncover the flaws in the social, political and economic systems of the United States which the art pieces directly address. The visual, symbolic and conceptual elements of a given art piece generate a reality by departing from the traditional purpose of art. In turn, this reality becomes political by directly critiquing what needs to change wether it be discrimination, legality or widespread recognition.

Appendix I: Definition of Postmodernity

There exists a distinction between Postmodernism in the arts and Postmodernism understood through Critical Theory. The former departs from the Modernist tradition in addressing an approach and attitude towards art, rather than the artistic qualities that had, until the 1950s, defined aesthetics through formal elements such as line, color, composition, et cetera. Postmodern art thus deconstructs and amalgamates multiple styles, subject matter, and media for a purpose identified by the artist or as a response to the audience. It serves as a reflection of the past, present, and future in refusing to recognize authority, addressing popular culture and everyday life, and reacting to its contemporary social, political, and economic spheres. Postmodernism in critical theory addresses a "liquid time" where traditional structures and institutions are redefined against a deconstructed narrative. It is *liquid* insofar as it describes processes relative to a variety of perspectives and is always creating, de-creating, and recreating as if instability was the norm.

As broad and abstract as these definitions might sound, the byzantine qualities of both are Postmodern. Throughout this essay, I categorize this qualities as liminality, plurality, and the spectacle in helping me find a midpoint between Critical Theory and Art History to better satisfy the purpose of my research.

Liminality refers back to this liquid state in which the process is more important than the outcome. Postmodernity as liminal, rather than proposing an end-point, it questions the existence of it and asks you to self-reflect on what that would mean to you. Liminality in Postmodern art, therefore, allows art to develop a process of self-awareness and recognition through a dialectical interaction with the audience and in terms of medium, it demonstrates an understanding of

subject matter and formal elements as a historical and contemporary process, rather than as something fixed in time and space.

Plurality addresses both democratic processes and a multiplicity of perspectives where the whole is bigger than its parts. In the arts it plays a key role in shaping what is contemporary as there is no fixed style, but rather a constant borrowing of references to create new ones.

Finally, the spectacle is essential to understand the way in which Postmodernity appeals to a given audience and can be used by artists and theorists to propose change. Of course, a spectacle might be used to manipulate, but in the case of the arts, it simply attempts to shift paradigms, again through a process of self-reflexion.

Appendix II: Biographic Data

Ben Cuevas

Californian, Jewish and Puerto Rican are only a few qualities that describe the extensive background of Ben Cuevas whose artwork focuses on queer and feminist ideologies, always departing from his own identity. He has a Bachelors of Arts in Fine Arts from Hampshire College where he launched his career, later gaining notoriety for *Transcending The Material,* a mixed media installation which consisted of a knitted skeleton in lotus position on top of a pyramid of condensed milk cans under a series of plexiglass prints of anatomical parts. His main objective is to open dialogue on sexual diversity while also raising awareness around HIV/AIDS. For this purpose, he deconstructs

gender norms and behaviors by performing non-conformist acts and using media often linked to femininity or womanhood.

Barbara Kruger

Born in 1945, Kruger has always responded to a male-dominant, consumer-oriented society. She started as a designer, graphic and cover artist for a series of print and media publications and took inspiration from the typical media typography of both newspapers and magazines throughout her career. She studied Visual Arts at Syracuse University and later graduated from Parson's School of Design. Her background has allowed her to transform commonplace advertisement into conceptual and feminist art by appealing directly to contemporary visual culture. She is known for silkscreen prints superimposed with powerful slogans that critique the viewer, the economy, and society at large.

Kehinde Wiley

` Los Angeles, California became a case study as Wiley grew into adulthood. His African American experience and his commentary on it are directly rendered in his artwork. He started painting at age 11 where he took art classes at a conservatory at California State University. Wiley received the Bachelor Fine Arts degree in 1999 from the San Francisco Art Institute and then later

on in 2001 received his Masters of Fine Arts form the School of Art at Yale. Wiley's work is characterized by African American portraits in the context of Renaissance Old Master paintings in an attempt to redefine the historical narrative of the black man. A recent portrait depicts former president Obama for the National Portrait Gallery.

Aman Mojadidi

Born in Florida but of Afghan descent, Aman Mojadidi is known for his multicultural artwork and his focus on including multiple perspectives. He refers to himself as "Afghan by blood, redneck by the grace of God" as if being American was actually defined by who he is as a person. He specifically works on site-specific projects and uses an experimental ethnographic approach using qualitative research and traditional storytelling. Mojadidi blends his American upbringing with his Afghani heritage, mixing styles of clothing, impersonating police officers, but most importantly, recalling the immigrant experience.

Zak Krevitt

Photographer, animator, artist, documentary enthusiast of all things LGBT+. Zak Krevitt is a Los Angeles-based soul. He has a Bachelor's degree in Photography from the School of Visual Arts in New York. He began his career in photojournalism, focusing on events

revolving around fetish communities and LGBT Pride. He compiles a narrative from the LGBT+ community to capture its essence rather than choosing to create his own. His objective is to create awareness and to consider inclusive perspectives in the world of art.

Kara Walker

Walker is the epitome of a African American female artist since she explores themes of slavery, violence, sex, and stereotypes by contrasting history with the present in a gallery setting. She was born in California in 1969 and studied at the Rhode Island School of Design where she developed her most famous medium: the silhouette form. She uses cut paper to create murals that directly modify time and space as the audience approaches them. She has received numerous recognitions like the "Genius Grant" from the John D.and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

Byron Kim

Born in La Jolla, California 1961, Byron Kim is a well-known contemporary artist. His early work began in the 1990s in Brooklyn, New York, were he began developing minimalist paintings which explore racial identity. Exploring a topic such as racial identity is not easy at all, and what Kim does is create awareness through color, composition and the concept of objecthood. In 1983 he graduated from Yale University. He has brought one of the less talked

about topics in society back into the public eye, really helping the situation. He uses his art to communicate key ideas back and forth between his artwork and his audience who be colorblind, unable to recognize a multicultural ethnic reality.

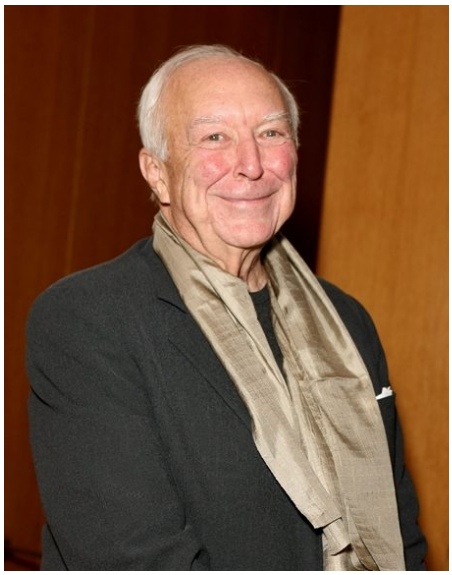
Rhys Ernst and Zachary Drucker

Rhys Ernst and Zachary Drucker are former New Yorkers who build a confluence of film and art to explore trans-identity. Both of them identify as queer individuals while also being a trans-woman and a trans-man respectively. Their art-making background has allowed them to explore their own minds, bodies, and sense of self, and appeal to the public in raising awareness of the trans-community and normalizing trans-inclusivity. They are currently working in Amazon's new series *Transparent*, which has helped them advance their goals. Their mission is to build bridges for trans-people to become involved in the art industry.

Jonah Groeneboer

Groeneboer is a transgender artist originally from New York. His art focuses on deconstructing the notion of gender through art, not only having the body as a focal-point in his exhibitions, but also as an inspiration for his more contemporary work where he explores things that are androgynous. He currently teaches in the Masters in Fine Arts program in the School of Art,

Media, and Technology at the New School, however, his work is still exhibited in a variety of galleries including the MoMA. His main objective with his art is to produce work that is available for visual scrutiny yet leaves something missing, something invisible. In this way, he offers a view into the life of transgender individuals without having the audience experience it first-hand.



Jasper Johns

Departing from Abstract Expressionism, Jasper Johns began to play with common place symbols such as flags, maps and targets to comment on the relevance his audience often placed on them. He was born in Georgia in 1930 and studied at the University of South Carolina, later joining Parson's School of Design in New York City. John serves as an inspiration for the Pop Art movement. He created a series of paintings, prints and sculptures that ask his audience to interpret the art themselves, rather than simply providing an explanation for it - *Ale Cans* made in 1964, for example, presents an allegory that is up to you to decipher. His work with *Flag* though is what led to him receiving the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2011, awarded by then president-elect Barack Obama.

Shepard Fairey

As a teen in Charleston, South Carolina, Fairey delved into skateboarding culture, applying his own drawings and designs onto

both his streetwear and the streets. His work spans from large-scale murals, to protest imagery, to clothing lines. He earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Rhode Island School of Design. While his Obey trademark flourished, his propaganda was transformed at the hands of candidate Obama who commissioned the work for *Hope*. Today, Fairey continues to expand his brand across stores, gallery settings and protest movements.

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