Human Rights and Art Activism: The US-Mexico Border

Mira Seyal

Thesis advisor: Dr. Johanna F. Almiron

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

February 2020
Abstract

At the US-Mexico border, migrants have been fleeing a world of increasing violence, only to arrive at another one. Art-activism addresses the human rights of migrants against the growing tide of public hostility to the protection of Central American refugees and asylum seekers. This study involved interviews with eleven visual, media, and performance artists over a two-month period, in order to answer the question: How does art activism on the US-Mexico border contribute to the field of human rights? The findings are broken up into four chapters: 1. How art promotes human rights 2. Art as a critique to human rights 3. Problems with art as a tool of human rights 4. Art as it grows human rights. Despite the fact that art as a tool of human rights has its limitations, art activists play a central role in articulating and amplifying the stories of rightsholders and thus impacting public consciousness. An emerging segment of human rights literature has critiqued the field for becoming increasingly obsolete in the context of shifting paradigms and power structures. While the human rights movement has been held as a beacon, it was not born in a power vacuum and was in fact, largely shaped by cold war tensions and the Western desire for “democracy promotion” abroad. If human rights are to remain relevant in the 21st century, the field itself must find room for growth – both ideological and structural. As such, this study looks through art activism as one avenue in which the field may be able to do just that.
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Acknowledgements

I’d like to thank my family for allowing me the gift of education and for supporting me throughout this project. I am grateful for their guidance to always think critically and privileged to have been given the tools to do so. I’d also like to acknowledge my thesis advisor, Johanna F. Almiron, for her thoughtful guidance in writing this paper. Without her belief and support in my vision, this paper would not have been possible. Finally, I’d like to thank my dear friend Jenner Chapman, who passed during the time that I wrote this paper. Jenner’s rule-breaking nature and refusal to take “fact” for granted have always been a great source of inspiration as I learn to engage the world around me. I will miss him greatly.
Introduction

Finding dignity as a rightsholder has become increasingly complex in the last decade for Central American migrants. Although an increasing militarization of the border is nothing new and occurred previously under the Obama administration, the Trump administration’s new “Remain in Mexico” policy has brought the US to an unprecedented level of hostility towards Central American refugees and asylum seekers.¹ This policy has been designed to keep Central American asylum seekers entirely out of the US justice system. Many are fleeing violence in countries with some of the highest murder rates in the world such as Honduras, El Salvador, and Guatemala.² Thus the border raises many critical human rights issues, including racial profiling, denial of due process, and trafficking. Beyond the site of the actual border, the flow between the two countries raises further human rights concerns around issues such as citizenship and education. Women and children, in particular, have had to carry the weight of a political war waged mainly by men, fleeing issues such as death threats, extortion threats and sexual violence.³ These systemic issues operate in opposition to the dignity of Central American migrants and to the protection of their individual human rights.

Human rights injustices against Central American rightsholders have been coupled with what some see as the waning appeal and efficacy of human rights globally. This decline in efficacy and appeal coordinates with a continuous drop in post-Cold War democratization in

¹ Nicole Narea, “Trump’s policies at the border weren’t designed to keep out Mexican asylum seekers – until now,” Vox (November 27, 2019)
2019 that also marks the 13th year of a consecutive decline in global freedom.\(^4\) Human rights critics have formed three general camps as to why they believe the human rights movement has waned in efficacy and appeal: 1. Historical change 2. A global decline in democracy, and 3. A decline in US power. Whether these explanations hold true or not, one underlying call to action within these critiques is unavoidable: If a human rights movement is to remain relevant in the 21st century, the field itself must find room for growth – both ideological and structural.

Although art activism has not been significantly associated with the field of human rights, it has nevertheless provided great insight into how the field might adapt in the 21st century. In opposition to increased hostility towards Central American migrants, lots of political art has recently shifted out of private, elite institutions and into mainstream culture.\(^5\) Art activism has become highly political and focused on visible and public sites such as billboards, buses, schools, and prisons.\(^6\) In this sense, “border artists involved in artistic representations of the Mexico-U.S. border departed from canonical notions of aesthetic sensibility and [became] immersed in the aesthetic means of promoting a political cause.”\(^7\) In other words, art has taken shape as a medium to try to grapple with what it means to be a rightsholder in today’s social and political environment. This study features eleven in-depth interviews with the following artists: Ed Gomez, Gabriel Setright, Jackie Amézquita, Josemar Gonzalez, Lauren Strohacker, Louis Hock, Marcus Haney, Rebecca Goldschmidt, Sandy Huffaker, Sydney Barnett, and Velia De Iuliis. Although a visual analysis of the artworks is beyond the scope of this project, images of the artworks are included in the section “artist biographies,” for the reader to experience the work that has generated the discourse of this project.

\(^6\) *Ibid.*
\(^7\) María Herrera-Sobek, “Border Aesthetics: The Politics of Mexican Immigration in Film and Art,” *Western Humanities Review* 60, no. 2: 61
Research Question and Significance

The increase of art-activism on the border, in conjunction with the widespread suppression of rights on the US-Mexican border, begs the need for research on art-activism in this region. An analysis of human rights as they intersect with art provides an unconventional way to understand rightsholders and their rights claims. In looking at the political implications of art on the border, one can address, “the gaps between ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ data to a place where meaning is interpretive and the boundaries of meaning are expanded to include different ways of approaching immigration issues.”8 In this sense, art-activism may provide powerful insight as to how human rights can remain relevant in the face of a decline in freedom and democracy. The need for human rights to adapt to political, social, and economic changes, in conjunction with art activism as a novel means to understand rightsholders, begs the following question: How does art activism on the US-Mexico border contribute to the field of human rights?

My research question engages several larger debates and conversations within human rights. First of all, the project aims to look at how the field of human rights can use art to navigate the complexity of understanding rightsholders and their claims. In using art as a research medium, I hope to reveal the nuance and complexity that exists within the immigration debate which often appears two-sided. I also want to use art-activism as a means to look from outside-to-within the human rights movement in order to critique the field. Finally, the project aims to ask what it means for rights advocates in the US to be defining the needs of non-US victims. I hope to understand if an artist’s positionality and proximity to an issue affect how they represent migrants as rightsholders. By asking these larger questions, my project aims to contribute to human rights literature.

Literature Review

The literature on “vernacularization” will help me better understand the relationship between human rights and art activism on the U.S. border. Vernacularization as developed by Sally Merry and Peggy Levitt, is the “process of appropriation and local adoption of globally generated ideas and strategies.” The translation of human rights ideas both vertically and horizontally occurs through vernacularizers who make up three general groups: The anointed, cosmopolitan elites, and the beneficiaries and enactors of vernacularization. Vernacularization looks not only at the ‘diffusion of culture’ but at ‘diffusion as a cultural act.’ In other words:

How vernacularization actually works varies according to a number of factors. These include where its communicators are located in the social and power hierarchy and their institutional positions, the characteristics of the channels and technology through which ideas and practices flow, the nature of the ideas and the idea packages in which they are embedded, and the topography of the terrain in which these transfers take place. How diffusion actually occurs is important because human rights norms cannot be implemented in a top-down manner but must “become elements in the public culture of democratic peoples through their own processes of interpretation, articulation, and iteration.” Some argue that in developing the concept of vernacularization, Merry and Levitt failed to stress the role of power in the vernacularization hierarchy enough and in fact, translating human rights into the vernacular is “a highly political act rife with contradictions.” Literature on vernacularization will help my research look at what human rights ideas if any, have and have not resonated within the art activism community, why some ideas may have found a larger response, and how human rights ideas have been translated and refigured to fit the context.

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9 Sally Merry and Peggy Levitt, “Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women’s rights in Peru, China, India, and the United States,” *Global Networks* 9, no. 4 (2009): 441
10 Ibid: 449-450
11 Ibid: 444.
12 Ibid: 446.
Vernacularization as a concept pulls on literature around issue framing. The process of developing powerful human rights frames is a delicate balance between finding what is palatable to an audience, but also what will best serve the victims.\textsuperscript{15} Issue framing in a manner that serves victims comes into tension with the power imbalance between western and nonwestern persons. Western human rights frames run the risk of placing their own definitions of morality on nonwestern individuals.\textsuperscript{16} Some HIV frameworks for example, placed a burden on women in South Africa to be responsible for protecting and monitoring their male partners, thus detracting from issues of violence against women. Human rights frames must also take into account how best to secure policy change given that states will only take new norms into account when they are widely supported, thus putting pressure on the state to act.\textsuperscript{17} The manner in which art activists frame issues is especially important, given that visual human-interest framing has been found to elicit stronger emotional responses than text-alone framing.\textsuperscript{18} When imagery presents an issue in a narrow manner, such as only presenting one side of an issue, it becomes increasingly likely that viewers will develop ideas of the issue that fail to capture the issue at hand in a comprehensive manner.\textsuperscript{19} As such, the manner in which art activists frame migrant rightsholders has implications for both policy change and victim empowerment.

Vernacularization faces several issues both in terms of its use as a tool. Merry and Levitt identify two dilemmas in vernacularizing human rights, the first of which is the resonance dilemma, whereby rights ideas need to resonate with local ideas but to be legitimate as human


\textsuperscript{16} Hayley MacGregor and Elizabeth Mills, “Framing rights and responsibility: Accounts of women with a history of AIDS activism,” \textit{BMC International Health and Human Rights} 11, no. 3 (2011)

\textsuperscript{17} Richard Price, “Reversing the Gun Sights: Transnational Civil Society Targets Land Mines,” \textit{International Organization} 52, no. 3 (Summer, 1998): 613-644


\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
rights, they have to reflect universal principles. Some, such as Cheng however, argue that it is possible to study the process of vernacularization while steering clear of the universalist-relativist debate because there are many other factors which contribute to the resonance and applicability of a human rights idea. The second dilemma is the advocacy dilemma – the idea that when vernacularizers use human rights in ways that align with pre-existing ideas and strategies, human rights are more accepted but less able to challenge status quo. A study on how rights claims are vernacularized for migrant workers in Singapore found that, “many of the discursive strategies employed by activists mirror and reinforce ideas of workers as units of labor, or workers as victimized women from developing countries, or workers whose subjectivities must be produced and channeled into docility and productivity.” These issues may help me understand why the resonance of human rights ideas within the art activism community has occurred to the extent it has.

Beyond issues within vernacularization as a tool, lie concerns around the actual practice of vernacularizing human rights itself and these concerns finds basis in the work of several critical human rights scholars. It is important to first distinguish between global activism packages and global human rights package, or one that occurs “within a broader, historical context, shaped by events like the end of the Cold War; the decline of socialist ideology; and the rise of the Washington consensus on neoliberalism, the rule of law and democracy.” Critical human rights scholars argue that this human rights package is lacking in efficacy and global appeal today. The first perspective that addresses the waning appeal of the human rights

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20 Sally Merry and Peggy Levitt, “Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women’s rights in Peru, China, India, and the United States,” Global Networks 9, no. 4 (2009): 457
22 Sally Merry and Peggy Levitt, “Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women’s rights in Peru, China, India, and the United States,” Global Networks 9, no. 4 (2009): 457
23 Sally Merry and Peggy Levitt, “Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women’s rights in Peru, China, India, and the United States,” Global Networks 9, no. 4 (2009): 443
movement looks at historical change. By tracing the human rights movement through periodization, these authors show that the movement has not been continuously enforced, but rather subject to its historical context. Some of these authors point to the 1940’s, with the end of World War Two and the start of the Cold War as the beginning of the human rights movement. These authors argue that contrary to the term “human rights” first being used at the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the term did not really develop its meaning until the Cold War was well underway. The human rights movement was born out of the triumph of liberalism over its two main rivals—communism and fascism. Yet under the Carter administration, human rights developed meaning as a tool for “democracy promotion” and intervention abroad. Some authors point to 9/11 as the point in which human rights were no longer used to secure rights but rather to protect state power and interests. Through historical change, human rights have shifted meaning, not in accordance with shifting ideas about how best to secure rights, but with shifting balances of state power. Because the human rights movement was born from power politics in the 21st century rather than deeply held values, it is rooted in an unstable foundation. Thus, the movement today is unable to secure the goals it originally laid out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

The second perspective on why the human rights movement has lost its global appeal points to a global decline in democracy. The global balance of power has shifted away from the

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27 Ibid.
The increasing violations of human rights in countries such as Syria, Sri Lanka and Sudan serve as examples of the declining power of the U.S.’s push for democracy and the protection of human rights. Some authors argue that liberal democracies have in fact become less democratic. As a result, international norms around the protection of human rights have lost influence and legitimacy. The world’s powers use humanitarian rhetoric as a means to intervene in underdeveloped countries – a façade which often fails to actually secure rights in those countries. States are, “most at risk for systematic violations of rights when they define targets as something so evil, they are beyond the scope of human community.” By manipulating human rights rhetoric, states intervene in other countries in an undemocratic manner. This has implications for both domestic and international law. Laws to protect human rights have become unacceptably “utopian” because they are independent of actual state practice. Legal systems must therefore move away from universalism and viewing liberal democracies as “utopian.” The call for democracy and the human rights movement go hand in hand, thus the decline of the former has led to the ebb of the latter.

There is abundant literature on how art installations on the border have given a voice to various individuals. Many artists feel their voice is augmented at the border, given the power and meanings reflected at the site itself. The border is a powerful place for political art because of the

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36 Ibid.
physical intersection of land, water, and national policing.\textsuperscript{37} It is also used by artists because it is a space of tension whereby it is “open and often invisible as an economic passage way, while also increasingly closed and visible as a crossing point for human transit.”\textsuperscript{38} Art on the border moves away from typical art aestheticism and engages activist aestheticism, in which the “artist becomes politically engaged and uses aesthetic strategies in order to disrupt master narratives of oppression.”\textsuperscript{39} Some use the border to make political demands through their art. A Tijuana-based Punk band for example, performed songs in front of the border that demand the border to be opened and in response to watchdog groups trying to “help” border patrol and catch “illegals”.\textsuperscript{40} Art gives individuals a voice by allowing individuals to transcend the confined nature of public policy debates and dominant narratives.\textsuperscript{41} The power of public art however, depends on how individuals engage with it. When individuals “look at” art and don’t know how to “gaze” at art, there may be a disconnect between the meanings held within the piece, and a public which views the piece superficially and indifferently.\textsuperscript{42} The use of the border as a space to exercise freedom of expression will help guide my research to better understand how artists frame migrant rightsholders.

The literature also looks at the border as a physical site, and examines how individuals repurpose that physical space. Artists have found that art installations that repurpose the border are a powerful way to attract public attention to political issues.\textsuperscript{43} For example, the festival titled

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{39} Maria Herrera-Sobek, “Border Aesthetics: The Politics of Mexican Immigration in Film and Art,” \textit{Western Humanities Review} 60, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 62
\end{thebibliography}
InSite, has attracted artists from all over the world and launched some artists, such as Marcos Ramírez, into international fame.\textsuperscript{44} The border itself is significant for artistic interpretation. The U.S. border enforcement has experimented with different kinds of materials at the border, from an ideological “picket fence,” to chain link fencing, to steel walls – all with their own meanings.\textsuperscript{45} The actual materialization of the border holds a great deal of information around the human experience, such as how individuals are restricted or enabled, what the interests of builders are, and what the intentions of those who experience the border are.\textsuperscript{46} The border can also be considered ideologically. Despite serving as a space between two democratic countries, the borderland is largely undemocratic: Decisions are centralized and representation is lacking.\textsuperscript{47} More than just a physical site, the border is open to many forms of interpretation.

A segment of the literature addresses how Latinx individuals represent the border through art. Since the mid 1990s, artists have incorporated their feelings about globalization into their artwork both on the Tijuana and San Diego sides of the border.\textsuperscript{48} The border is understood as a physical representation of globalization because, “the factors of globalization, including multiculturalism, economic exchanges, and the transport of people, goods, and ideas, all occur at the border every day.”\textsuperscript{49} There is a range of how Latinx persons engage with art on the border and sometimes these differing forms come into tension with one another. Some Chicanos/Chicanas for example, will look to the cultural past acknowledging their Aztec

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
heritage, while other artists focus on the political present of human rights violations. Thus, “Instead of demonstrating the endurance of the Aztec heritage, they demonstrated the bilingualism and biculturalism of the border region, pointing out that the border has produced a specific and living culture that spans the divide of the international border.” In a similar vein, some Latinx artists incorporate notions of harmony and “two countries living side by side” whereas others focus on the disunity that stems from the border. Latinx lesbian feminists have also situated themselves within and against Latinx social movements by queering revolutionary transborder figures. The literature reveals that there is no singular way that Latinx artists represent the border – in fact, there are many ways that the border is represented and sometimes these representations come into tension within one another.

The literature also addresses ways in which activist art may actually work against victims. First of all, activist art runs the risk of dangerous forms of representation. Stuart Hall cites three types of representation, which can be identified by asking:

Does language simply reflect a meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, people and events (reflective)? Does language express only what the speaker or writer or painter wants to say, his or her personally intended meaning (intentional)? Or is meaning constructed in and through language (constructionist)?

Sometimes, artists will represent victims in a dehumanizing manner. Judith Butler for example points to the photographs of the victims of Abu Ghraib to argue that the humanity of the victims was lost when the victim’s faces were deliberately obscured in

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51 Ibid.
52 María Herrera-Sobek, “Border Aesthetics: The Politics of Mexican Immigration in Film and Art,” *Western Humanities Review* 60, no. 2 (Fall 2006): 70.
order to protect their identity. Women in particular are dehumanized when art involving female victims focuses on the femininity of the body and the art thus, “severs the body from its materiality and from the historical context.” As the literature suggests, victim representation is an important factor in determining how a rightsholder is represented within an artwork.

Activist art in the name of human rights also runs the danger of including a victim-savior narrative. A study conducted by Dhanani and Connolly found that within NGO content output, there exists a pattern of non-neutral content which poses the NGO in a positive light. They argue that NGOs take deliberate actions to represent themselves as “do-gooders” in order to meet the expectations of their financial stakeholders. Creating the image of “vulnerable victim” appeals to donors but does it directly benefit victims who are viewing the art? Furthermore, a continual reiteration of suffering creates an image of dependency on the “savior.” Victim-savior art invokes emotional responses but does not offer actual solutions. It also creates “Us” and “them” discourses, which operate to secure power structures. The victim-savior narrative can

57 Alpa Dhanani and Ciaran Connolly, “Non-governmental Organizational Accountability: Talking the Talk and Walking the Walk?,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 129, no. 3 (July 2015): 613-637
58 Ibid.
operate to confine victims to their victimhood rather than presenting them as rightsholders.

Another critique of activist art looks at how the art is funded. Some for example, argue that neoliberalism affects artistic output. Because private causes must compete for funding in the international marketplace, there is a commodification of human rights art which means that art is not always produced in the interests of the victims but in interests of generating a profit.63 Through the process of globalization, there is a mass reproduction of images of the “powerless,” which leads to the domination of these sorts of images.64 The free market as well as globalized trade present challenges for representation in activist art.

Although separate literatures exist on art activism as well as on human rights, there is a missing link between the two. My research aims to understand how, if at all, the field of human rights is connected to and can learn from, the work of artists. Furthermore, the literature on vernacularization is largely focused on how human rights rhetoric translates within the human rights community. It has not explored how human rights translates or fails to translate outside of the human rights community. Researchers must begin to look at how subjects beyond the human rights apparatus understand it in order to assess the efficacy and appeal of human rights globally. My project addresses this blind spot by looking at art activists who are not necessarily working within the human rights paradigm. The literature on vernacularization also focuses on how ideas disseminate downwards. In contrast, I ask to what extent if any, ideas that are formed at the local level can move upwards into more elite and influential circles. A common finding within research on vernacularization is that vernacularizers often have to avoid using direct human rights language when translating ideas. My research examines why this may be and whether the

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solution is simply to put abstract concepts into laymen’s terms, or if this points to a bigger issue, such as public resistance to human rights language.

Furthermore, the literature generally discusses vague ideas around what art activism does for victims, such as increasing public awareness and transcending political debates. If, in fact, human rights have vernacularized within the art activism community on the U.S.-Mexico border, they have not been explicitly stated and defined. By translating these larger ideas into specific human rights claims, I hope to clarify how art activists frame rightsholders and their rights claims. By defining rightsholders and their rights claims more clearly, the field of human rights can better understand human rights on the U.S.-Mexico border. Furthermore, the U.S. often promotes the concept of human rights internationally and houses the major human rights institutions within its borders. Given the power of U.S. citizens to express themselves, as well as the U.S.’s promotion of ideas outside its borders, it is important to look internally and understand how those with power are defining those without power. By looking at a wide range of art activists, from white U.S. citizens with no personal connection to the border to transborder artists who have held their personal rights suppressed, I evaluate the role of proximity and its effects on the appeal of human rights language to the art activism community. By filling these gaps, my project aims to make a meaningful contribution to the intersection of human rights and art activism.

Methodology and Limitations

Methodology

My data derives from qualitative ethnographic research. During the summer of 2019, I conduct semi-structured interviews with U.S. artists working on the Tijuana-U.S. border, located from San Diego to Los Angeles. Interviews were conducted in English. Primary documents including artist’s statements, photographs of artist’s work, and footage of the artist’s process
were also used to augment my research. I used grounded theory as my primary method of data analysis. In this sense, I inductively analyzed my data and built my theory through developed codes. Grounded theory was useful for my study because it eliminated some preconceived assumptions and biases from my work, thus allowing the analysis to summarize my interviewee’s perspectives, instead of mine.

**Research Design**

My research design was developed to answer the question, “How does art activism on the US-Mexico border contribute to the field of human rights?” In order to answer my research question, I found artists willing to take part in an interview by reaching out through emails, phone calls, social media, and by visiting artist events. I also reached out to artist collectives, who then sent an email blast to their artists in order to notify those who might be interested in an interview. In order to build my base of interviewees, I used a snowball sample. Interviews took place in local coffee shops, restaurants, and in artist’s studios and homes. My final sample included 11 interviews, each lasting 45 minutes to two hours.

Because the artists I spoke with came from wide-ranging backgrounds and engaged different mediums, I used a different interview schedule for each interview. My initial interview schedule however, roughly asked the following questions:

1. Tell me a bit about yourself and your own upbringing as it relates to your ultimate interest in _[specify medium or project]_ on the border.
2. Who is the intended audience of your work? Who, if anyone, are you trying to hold accountable for human rights violations? Who, if anyone, do you identify as a victim?
3. Do you have a goal with your work? Is there something that you hope its production will achieve?
4. What actors in the immigration crisis has your work brought you in contact with?
5. Has your work allowed you to interact with individuals who’s work appears to be in opposition to protecting the rights of migrants? If so, what have these interactions taught you about the broader issue of immigration?
6. How do you feel an art activist’s proximity to their subjects affects the final product?
7. How do you understand the word “human rights”? Do you have a positive, negative, or neutral opinion on the word? Is it something you think about in your work?
8. How do you understand the relationship between art and human rights? What does art activism allow for that other forms of activism do not?
9. What about relationship between art and academia? Can human rights academia learn from the work of art activists?
10. How do you understand the word human rights? View it positively or negatively? Is it something you think about at all in your work?
11. What are the greatest challenges you see ahead for artists working on the U.S/Mexico border?
12. That’s all of my questions – is there anything else you feel would be important to cover or talk about?

After learning from my interviews and as my understanding of the field developed, my interview schedule changed in order to ask questions that I later understood to be more important and relevant. For example, upon learning that some artists view the association of art with the word “human rights” or “activism” as problematic, I began asking, “How do you understand the word ‘art activist’? Do you consider yourself one? If not, why and how to you label your artistic work that addresses/ involves itself with, human rights issues?”

Limitations

There were several limitations to my study, both personal and structural. Personally, one of the greatest limitations was my basic Spanish speaking skills. Many of the artists I interviewed spoke Spanish as their dominant language. As such, conducting interviews in English may have affected the quality of idea communication between my interviewees and I. I also only spoke with artists living on the US side of the border. Talking with artists on both sides of the border would have helped to diversify my sample. Finally, due to scheduling conflicts, some of my interviews had to be conducted via Skype or phone call, thus impacting the quality of some of my interviews. My study was also ideologically limited, in that upon beginning my interviews, I found a much stronger resistance to the words “human rights” and “art activism” than I expected. Much of this resistance was due to an association of these words with elitism, disconnected institutions, and buzz words for self-promotion. Because my initial interview schedule used these words frequently, some of my initial interviewees felt they did not fit my sample population and this affected the quality of the interviews.
De Iuliis was born in San Francisco and received her BFA with distinction in illustration from the California College of Art in 2013. De Iuliis:

Works from a standpoint of preservation. Her rich gouache & oil paintings pop with endangered plants on sharp backgrounds. By giving these threatened species new life on the canvas, De Iuliis reinvigorates admiration and refocuses attention on the fleeting flowers that may disappear completely in our lifetime. More than a floral painter, De Iuliis uses her art as a call to action and the paintings live on as time capsules.

The interview with De Iuliis specifically focused on her recent mural in the border town of Agua Prieta, “Which focuses on the question of community in today’s political realm,” because “as border politics become increasingly divisive and polarized, art plays an important role in addressing human rights, cross-cultural community, survival etc.” De Iuliis’s goal was to

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65 “About – Velia De Iuliis,” Velia De Iuliis, https://www.veliadeiuliis.com/contact
66 Ibid.
67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
“foster curiosity and spark conversation surrounding community, environment and humanity” and to speak “to the unity of both cities and the seamlessness of the natural environment.”  

Throughout the entire process of the mural, De Iuliis collaborates with a local female artist named Lupita. Although De Iuliis was selected because her work addresses a number of rights issues, perhaps the most predominantly visible rights issue apparent in her recent mural work was a critical analysis of the right to freedom of movement.

*Josemar Gonzalez and Rebecca Maria Goldschmidt*

Both Gonzalez and Goldschmidt were interviewed simultaneously for their piece, *¿A Donde Vas?*, pictured above. Gonzalez is an artist and community organizer who grew up in both Tijuana, Mexico and San Diego, California. Gonzalez has used his experience as a transborder student to launch a program called Borderclick, “a participatory project that workshops with Transborder communities creating a digital living archive of Transborder

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69 Ibid.
70 “Borderclick,” Josemar Gonzalez https://josemargonzalez.com/borderclick
experiences.” González founded this project with Rebecca Goldschmidt, a Honolulu-based artist currently pursuing her Master of Fine Arts in the Department of Art and History at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa in Honolulu. Goldschmidt’s work based in Honolulu, “reflects on studies and reclamation of the Ilokano language and her attempts to reconstruct connections with the land and cosmology of her ancestors which has been lost through displacement, colonization, and miseducation.” In the installation piece that appears in the photographs titled ¿A Donde Vas?, Gonzalez and Goldschmidt transferred images of self-documentation by the students onto black backpacks, which were connected by black tape to evoke their transborder journeys.

James Marcus Haney

Haney is a Los Angeles-born photographer and videographer, who was raised in California and took frequent trips to Tijuana throughout his life. Although much of Haney’s past work captures the music scene, he was interviewed for his recent documentary work for a film that he is still completing. In the film, Haney joins a caravan of migrants traveling up towards the US-Mexico border from Honduras. The film does not stop when the subjects reach the border, but instead follows their journey through the US immigration system. Because the film has not yet been released, film stills cannot be included within this research. The interviewer however, was able to watch the documentary in a preliminary stage of completion. In focusing heavily on immigration detention within the United States, the film makes an indirect appeal to Articles 9 and 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which hold that, “No one shall be

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72 Ibid.
subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile” and “Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution,” respectively.75

Ed Gomez

*Transborder*, an installation by the Homeless for the 2009/10 MexiCali Biennial76

Gomez received his MFA from the Otis College of Art and Design and “his practice includes abstract and representational painting, printmaking, graphic design, video and three-dimensional work, as well as conceptual models of art making.”77 Gomez is also a curator and he was interviewed specifically for his work curating the MexiCali Biennial, the most recent of which occurred in 2019 and revolved around the etymology and iconography in the mythology of California and the California-Mexico border.78 The interview predominantly focused on the 2009/10 biennial, which was “really about bringing artists from L.A. and having them physically cross the border with their artwork, installing it in Mexicali, and having to experience that whole

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76 “For Artists, the U.S.-Mexico Border is Fertile Territory,” *Artsy*, https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-mexican-artists-threat-trumps-wall-fuel-inspiration
78 “About,” *MexiCali Biennial*, http://mexicalibiennial.org/about/
process of customs, having their stuff looked over, interrogated.”79 One project presented by the collective Homeless and titled *Transborder* for example, took the form of a transborder soccer match. The works selected by Gomez addressed a range of human rights issues on the US-Mexico border, from the individual rights of movement to freedom of expression.

*Louis Hock*

Hock was born in Los Angeles, California and received his MFA from The School of the Art Institute of Chicago.81 He engages with film, video tapes and media installations. The interview with Hock primarily focused on a public media art project he did in 1993, titled *Arte Reembolso/Art Rebate* in collaboration with David Avalos and Elizabeth Sisco. This project

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81 “About,” *Louis Hock*, http://www.louishock.info/about/
entailed, “refunding $10 bills to 450 undocumented workers along the San Diego, California/Mexico border as a symbolic recognition of their contribution to the southern California economy.” The goal of this project was intended to show and spark public conversation around the integral nature of undocumented immigrant labor in the US economy. Although the artists did not directly appeal to human rights rhetoric in their work, the project appeals to article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights:

(1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
(2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
(3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
(4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

The project became a media sensation and sparked public dialogue around the individual rights of immigrant laborers.

Lauren Strohacker

Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando by Lauren Strohacker, 2017

Strohacker is a US-born artist whose work focuses on wildlife through public murals and installations. She received her MFA in 2011 from Arizona State University. Strohacker’s interview looked at a work she completed in 2017, titled *Un-Fragmenting/Des-Fragmentando*. To draw attention to how the physical border wall has harmed the endangered jaguar species, Strohacker projected images of jaguars on opposite sides of the wall in both Douglass and Agua Prieta. Although Strohacker’s work focuses on wildlife, she was chosen for this research project because her focus on the non-human raises interesting questions around the human. Strohacker’s work inexplicitly challenges the species-exclusivity of the human rights movement and challenges the movement for placing the human at the top of an artificial hierarchy.

*Sydney Barnett and Gabriel Setright*

*Barnett and Setright were interviewed separately for their collaborative work on a project by Art Made Between Opposite Sides (AMBOS), titled *Border Quipu/ Quipu Fronterizo*. Barnett is an Oakland based, queer artist engaged in filmmaking and DIY organizing. She grew up on*  

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85 “Bio/CV,” [Lauren Strohacker](http://www.laurenstrohacker.org/about)  
86 “The AMBOS Team – Sydney Barnett,” [AMBOS](http://www.ambosproject.com/team)
the San Diego/Tijuana border, frequently traveling between the two places to visit her family on both sides. Barnett studied Film and Media Studies and Chicano Studies at UC Berkeley. Setright was born and raised in Nicaragua and their “artistic and activist work focuses on critiquing neoliberalism while problematizing the revolutionary history of Nicaragua.” Setright studied Philosophy and Psychology at Warren Wilson College in Asheville North Carolina. In this project that both interviewees participated in along with 6 others, the AMBOS team walked around to commuters on both sides of the US-Mexican border crossing and asked them to describe their experience of crossing the border on a postcard, as well as tie two strands of thread into a knot, which was intended to reflect their time and emotions crossing the border. The knots were then bundled into a large-scale quipu which was displayed in front of traffic crossing the border with the goal to, “materialize our connection to one another as a community and make our presence and experiences visible to bi-national audiences.” The project inexplicitly pulled on human rights concepts by focusing on the individual in the context of broader social issues. Many of the grievances raised on the postcards drew on a wide range of rights issues, including the right to human dignity in the workplace as exemplified in the photograph of a postcard featured above.

89 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
Huffaker is a Southern California-based Freelance editorial, news and corporate photographer from North Carolina. He attended Pratt Institute before visiting San Diego for the first time and thereupon moved to Southern California to pursue his instant fascination with the US-Mexico border. Huffaker’s recent work has involved documenting business and industry

93 Sandy Huffaker, interview with author, June 21, 2019.
facilities and some of his regular clients include *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsweek*. Huffaker’s work pulls on human rights ideology in that many of his photographs on the border focus on telling the story of the individual rather than the group. When analyzed through the lens of human rights, Huffaker’s work provides an interesting critique to a field which often only studies victims. Huffaker’s work looks at putting victim’s stories in dialogue with the complex network that has led to their victimization, perhaps providing more insight and understanding into the rightsholder in the context of their environment.

*Jackie Amézquita*

Photograph of the crochet suit that Amézquita made and wore during her performance piece De Norte a Sur, 2019. Photograph taken by Mira Seyal.

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94 “About Me,” *Sandy Huffaker Photography*, https://www.sandyhuffakerjr.com/about
Amézquita is a bi-national artist-activist from Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. She migrated to the US in 2003 and is currently a MFA candidate in the New Genres program at the University of California, Los Angeles. Amézquita explores, “the impact that two opposing cultures create on their social environment and how socioeconomic differences between cultures affect the social structure.” She uses textile making techniques she learned in Guatemala to, “explore a visual language that rebalances the power of socio-political relationships. This practice has allowed her to intertwine historical and contemporary references.” For the purposes of this research project, the interview with Amézquita focused a performance piece titled De Norte a Sur (2019), that at the time of the interview, she was still in the process of preparing for. During this piece, Amézquita travelled from the US southern border in San Ysidro CA to the Mexican border with Tecún Umán, Guatemala in Tapachula, Chiapas. The path of her journey retraced the steps that she travelled 17 years prior when migrating to the United States. During this performance, Amézquita wore a “crochet suit dyed with twelve months of her period blood. The suit [served] as a bridge to connect her interior with their exterior to explore the transformation and interaction between her body and the environment.” Amézquita used this journey as a chance to interact with migrants as well as to reconnect with and heal from the human rights abuses that she faces as a migrant.

**Findings**

*How Art Promotes Human Rights*

The power of art as a tool to promote and frame the needs of rightsholders manifested in several ways. Despite the lack of concrete terminology to define the union of art and human
rights activism, all participants addressed human rights in some form, whether implicitly or explicitly. This section explains what rights claims within the artist’s work looked like. It then goes on to explain how artists were able to promote those rights claims through five main tactics: Active pursuit of rights claims, bottom up definitions of rights, universal appeal, action outside of the system and accessibility. Ultimately, this section shows how art activism can be used as a tool to promote human rights.

Rights Claims Within Art

Although most participants did not use human rights vernacular to describe their work, human rights ideas were nevertheless intrinsic to the work of all participants. Some artists for example, focused on women’s rights, looking at issues from sexual abuse by border patrol to machismo in the borderland. Velia De Iuliis hoped to empower women in a border town by:

De Iuliis: Coming and creating a mural there and doing workshops and demonstrating a way to paint walls as a creative outlet for... specifically for women... how to prima paint a house just simply white. And the villages were... all of the men of the villages were giving so much hate and like frugal hate... like this is a man's work not a woman's work like who do you think you are coming in and painting and teaching out women, they're not going to be able to do this in a week's time. Of course, they did it in less time than that (laughing) you know the classic like your place is inside not outside kind of mentality.  

Although De Iuliis did not use explicit human rights language to explain her work, several rights claims were intrinsic to her project including women’s rights, the right to live free from violence, and the right to work. Each participant’s work generally addressed more than one human rights issue. Josemar Gonzalez for example completed a project where he had children document their transfronterizo lifestyle through photography and drawing. Gonzalez started this project because for many transfronterizo children:

Gonzalez: You're going to school and you're fucking exhausted and you're in 8th grade and you got up at 3 in the morning and you slept sin the car on the way to school and then you have to take the train and like 5 busses to get home again of course your grades are

100 Velia De Iuliis interview with author, June 19, 2019.
Intrinsic to Gonzalez’s project was the claim to children’s rights, right to freedom from hunger, and the right to education to name a few. As these projects show, all of the participants interviewed addressed human rights issues in their work, even though many were unaware of their work’s relationship to human rights or did not use human rights language to explain their work.

Active Pursuit of Rights Claims

Artists actively pursued their rights claims in several ways. Some for example, worked towards policy change:

Goldschmidt: There's a whole list of asks that we had for border patrol that was like can we get more water fountains, can we get this can we get that… They were really all like civil and human rights issues.102

De Iuliis: I'm hoping the government will bloody listen and wake up. I'm also asking them to think deeply on both sides and I'm also asking them to put their political, or what they think about foreigners aside and look at the bigger picture...103

Other artists worked towards fighting systemic oppression counterproductive to the realization of rights. Cruz’s project for example involved working with those in the education system to create an environment hospitable to transfronterizo children:

Gonzalez: We literally had a workshop that was called safety and accountability and I think that a lot of the solution and a lot of the responsibility lies in the education system. In the schools, in the principles, in the lunch lady, in the janitor. In the people who are working there -- they're the ones who should be advocating for these students. And the thing is that students in these systems are so afraid -- transborder students -- so afraid to say that they're transfronterizo because of the stigma around it that they get no support. And the teachers are not trained to talk about these conversations.104

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101 Josemar Gonzalez, interview with author, June 21, 2019
102 Rebecca Goldschmidt, interview with author, June 12, 2019.
103 Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, June 19, 2019.
104 Josemar Gonzalez, interview with author, June 21, 2019
Advocacy also took the form of direct support for rightsholders. Jose* for example financially supported one of the subjects in his documentary work:

Haney: So, I went in and some of that footage in to courtroom is when I went in and I testified on his behalf. The judge set bail at $27,000 for him... what's the point? After testifying, I was able to get the judge to bring it down to $15,000 but still there's no way. So, I went and I got them to put up most of the money and I put the rest up myself and I posted bail for him and that reunification that we saw with those three was the day he got out on bail...105

For many participants, the artistic process involved making rights claims in their work in tandem with actively advocating for rightsholders.

*Bottom-up definitions of rights*

Several participants used the artistic process as a way to create bottom-up definitions of rights. In this sense, artists produce work that is a direct reflection of their own lived experience or the experience of those whom they have spent time getting to understand:

Gomez: We always try to work with artists that either have some kind of experience either with the border or with the area… A large majority pot the artists came from Tijuana um so they're literally dealing with border issues and transgressing spaces back and forth on a day-to-day basis.106

Hock: Um. I think it's unavoidable. I mean I make work around where I live. And where I live is near the border. Yeah... I was thinking just yesterday I was pointing the fence and there's a guy I know that's Guatemalan that would paint the fence and I've been in tune with his legal woes over the years and I was thinking maybe I can make a video about that... I've been thinking about that but you never know I mean... so yeah I mean I'll continue to make work and I'll make work about where I live.107

For those directly affected by the rights issues addressed in their work, the artistic process is a way for victims themselves to think about and develop their own language for what issues are affecting them, which issues are the most important, and what solutions could look like:

Gonzalez: Well I guess initially like when we were working together, I think the audience was ourselves like no? The Transborder community… because I don't think we really knew what we were... At least on my end I wasn't really sure what we were looking for I

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mean… I knew what we were looking for like identity you know? It was like a search for our own identity like we learned a lot from working with [name of other artist omitted], she taught me a lot about these hybrid identities. That already I was very aware of but didn't have a language for it... at least I didn't have a language for it and as we started working together and we started having more people working in the project, we realized that a lot of people didn't have a language for it. Or couldn't pinpoint it and say this is it exactly you know? And we realized that of the people that were showing up to the exhibits and to the workshops... they were all transborder.\textsuperscript{108}

Some of the artists not directly affected by the human rights issues addressed in their work still used the artistic process to center victim voices:

Strohacker: But that's where the human rights comes in. Like at what point are we just firing it off at Trump or border patrol and not centering the people that are actually down there. Like asking what they need or what they believe in.\textsuperscript{109}

Goldschmidt: And when we're talking about human to human contact or like understanding someone else's situation, art can be that way that people can interpret and understand something that is so difficult to comprehend. Like I cannot understand [someone else's] experience of being abused by the border patrol but I have my own experience and maybe he can't understand that... but if we can like create something together that represents that then maybe we can get a better understanding of who each other's humanity is...\textsuperscript{110}

Marcus Haney, built such a strong relationship with one of his subjects, a child who fled violence in Honduras only to get stuck in the ICE detention system, that he applied to get custody of the child. Within the artist’s documentary work, the voice of the child is represented and elevated. For this artist, deep commitment to understanding subjects and representing their voices is an intrinsic part of the artistic process: “I think that if I was not as involved as I am with these subjects, the art wouldn't be what it is. If I wasn't that invested in the time and you know...” \textsuperscript{111}

\textit{Universality}

Art’s universal appeal makes it a powerful tool to promote human rights. Several artists felt that their work allows them to reach audiences who may otherwise view human rights issues

\textsuperscript{108}Josemar Gonzalez, interview with author, June 21, 2019.
\textsuperscript{109}Lauren Strohacker, interview with author, June 13, 2019.
\textsuperscript{110}Rebecca Goldschmidt, interview with author, June 12, 2019.
\textsuperscript{111}Marcus Haney, interview with author, July 10, 2019.
as too “political”. Although these artist’s work is inherently political, the label of “art” allowed them avoid the label of “political” that other ways of approaching human rights issues such as journalism and research, have a hard time avoiding:

De Iuliis: Yeah... I think what was really interesting... and I mean going in I was really kind of unsure what the outcome was going to be but I think I felt extraordinarily unthreatening to the people. Like here’s someone that's painting. She's simply painting. Like I looked like a boy. I tried to be as... just was constantly covered in paints. My purpose there was very obvious and um you know I think there are difficulties potentially I can imagine between researchers or politicians who might not trust and share as much. And if you're simply just an artist painting in a neighborhood because you feel like giving that way... and I feel like I interpret my work as being very... it's not trying to convince anyone of a certain angle or opinion... like there's no political... overt political agenda relating to the actual subject matter. And I feel that people really felt moved to share their stories about the history... like the building that I painted next to it is where like the Mexican revolution paperwork was signed...

Interviewer: Wow...

De Iuliis: You know the people are telling me all about their stories and sharing really fluidly that way I think. Like came by and they would always ask you know... I think they just felt compared to share and that I would listen in a way that like maybe if I was a reporter they'd be like you know maybe a little more suspicious... I don't know but that was the sense that I felt... there was like a freedom of. It's like art is a universal language to begin with and so I think that it pulls at a really fundamental human part of our bodies and beings because we're all a part of this planet and so that ultimately is just simply a way to connect. Um...112

Gonzalez: it allows to have an open communication I feel and in a way art... you can justify the work that you're doing and say oh it's art. Like in a way you come under the radar -- people don't see you as an activist. people don't think you're doing activist work or y you're trying to decolonize the mind you know?113

Haney: Um calling people to like on the everyday micro scale... reset how they see immigrants, how they treat immigrants, how they interact with immigrants, how they you know... even if on the outwards they're very tolerant or whatever... if there are negative connotations that come up and that they suppress, hopefully this film can help shift that and you really do have this feeling of like... America, society, USA, us.... is us... as a whole. And how we treat each other is how we treat ourselves is how, you know....114

Art is also universally associated with beauty and spirituality:

Barnett: It's hard... It's very heavy and art just has this immediacy you know like especially that's why I really love film because it just draws you in and it adds such a... you know there's this idea of the soul of a piece of art that you can literally feel as you're interacting with it... that I really believe in. 115

De Iuliis: I believe that murals speak to the people and if they're just simply to give beauty back to the people and to give thanks to an area or to give light to a certain area, then I have to also... then it has to be to all people... to all areas of the world in that way... I think ultimately whether you resonate with the art created or you don't, I think I feel that the effort made to place art at this place that requires no language to understand and can um... be appreciated or disliked or people can have any opinion based on any background that they have... I think that's really special. And I think that's the power of art ultimately.116

In addition to its association with beauty, art it universally able to evoke emotional energy from viewers – an important tool for mobilization behind human rights issues. In painting a mural in Agua Prieta for example, one artist was able to generate an emotional energy allowed individuals on opposite ends of right violations to come together and engage with one another:

De Iuliis: I mean ultimately we're publicizing and making really visible an area that was not so that's you know that was part of the risk I think. Um there was another car that drove up on the sidewalk... all tinted windows like these men have tattoos and like walk through all the buildings and we just kind of ignored them really. Just stayed on our scaffold...

Interviewer: Wow...

De Iuliis: And just kind of of you know... and then that happened and then it was interesting. There was a man that came... older man and he came and he just sat in front of my scaffolding and just started singing and playing his guitar and singing all these Mexican ballads. This like all happened within two days. And then again another blacked out car and all these men with face tats (referring to cartel)... like really quite intimidating... came out and just approached him and then they just took the guitar and started singing with him... like these men... these deeply hard looking individuals and they were singing the most beautiful songs. Like it was as if they had said "okay it's cool you're here" kind of... it was like this shift in energy and it was cool. There was always a guy across the street. Always. the entire time I was there so I was like cool whatever...

Interviewer: Yeah...

De Iuliis: And then locals came and they were bringing coffee and starting conversations... I had this one guy who spoke [perfect English come and talk to me and

116Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, June 19, 2019.
he was like what are you doing? And I told him about the project and he was like "I've been deported three times. I crossed illegally with a coyote, I got caught, and I have a son in Phoenix, I've spent 3 years in jail around the US and I'm just so grateful for that experience" and I was like "really?" and he was like "ya I'm so grateful because in that time I learned how to speak perfect English, I learned about the law, I learned all that I need to know about US history because I have all of this education in jail available to me... and after the three years I got deported and now I have a great job because I'm bilingual and I'm in law school learning to... wanting to become a politician so that I can bridge this gap between the US and Mexico and I feel like I understand it better."

Interviewer: Yeah...

De Iuliis: And he was like "I don't blame Trump for his efforts at all, I don't blame him for protecting his country because that's all he's trying to do and I understand that" and I was like "whaaaat?" (laughing)117

Strohacker: Art allows people across cultures to see the humanity at the roots of issues which sometimes get lost in the news media or in the depths of academia. [Art on the border] really is a cultural spot where people at night can forget that monstrosity that separates everybody118

Universality does not only apply to those who gaze at art, but those involved in the artistic process. Through the appeal of art, one artist was able to engage transborder children to address the rights issues that affect them every day from inaccessibility to their places of education to abuse by border patrol agents:

Gonzalez: I modified it with a bunch of other people and to fit high school students. Because the language was too complex so how do we simplify it? So the curriculum went from a lot of like speaking and breaking down concepts to activities… a lot of activities because young students get bored. They want to take photos and get school credit. And this was at a charter school so a lot of these students like got kicked out of high school and this is the only way they can graduate so it's a very interesting population119

Universality is one of art’s most powerful assets in promoting human rights, because it allows individuals to connect with others across cultural and economic divides.

117 Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, June 19, 2019.
118 Lauren Strohacker, interview with author, June 13, 2019.
**Action outside of the system**

Art also serves as a tool for human rights advocates to take action and get involved in new and unorthodox ways that may contribute to traditional approaches to human rights. Several artists found their best work was that which broke out of traditional institutions (the gallery, the museum, etc.) and entered public space through unconventional means:

Barnett: I also just think that it's easier to create art. Like there's less rules... you get to engage with the way that you feel... instead of you know referencing all these all these things... but you still are because everything is informed by other things and we're kind of constantly recreating and touching base on things. So, film is like an important cultural work but it's just a lot easier to create I think especially for people that maybe grew up not believing that they can... that their voice matters or that they can engage with topics that are really big you know? 120

Hock: San Diego has very few galleries and they have few museums and so.. and very few alternative spaces... and so particularly in that era... you had to create your own space whether it be a conceptual space or a physical space, you had to make it yourself. And so, it wasn't as if you're competing... trying to fit yourself into something that they would say yes or no about... you were fabricating the thing. And afterwards sometimes that fabrication said you can't do that but when we were doing it, it was an open window. 121

Setright: Um, so the first time I did the interventions and... photography with the collage, I added all of that through social media and it went viral and that's like where... this is where it's at, this is what really works. And like none of my work has been shown in a traditional gallery setting 122

By engaging with art, these artists felt that they were able to avoid intellectual restrictions associated with various institutions in order to produce human rights work that was meaningful to them. Even within institutions, such as academia, art allows for some freedom of intellectual thought:

Goldschmidt: But I think by making it an art project, it liberated us from all the... Like I thought about this the other day because I'm doing my MFA and I was like why the fuck am I in the art department... like I should have done history, I should have done education... and then I was like yeah I chose it because it was like the most open. Like even you're working within a lineage of art history it still is the least amount of rules. Like art is no rules and you can do whatever the fuck you want. So I think when you're thinking about HR issues and like how can you overlap those and tie stuff in... like HR

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122 Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
stuff always comes back to these ideas of ethics and these ideas of like you know boundaries that pole create in society and art is notoriously the opposite of like breaking all these boundaries and overstepping rules and pushing things to the furthest point where pole get pissed off and angry and I think that... [I am] more on the punk side of things [laughing].\textsuperscript{123}

Ultimately, these artists felt that by pursuing action outside of the system, they were better able to promote rights claims.

Several artists mentioned art as a way to resist the damaging narratives around human rights victims as reflected in the media. Some interviewees were frustrated with the media for framing rightsholders in a one-sided or skewed manner:

Hock: In that project we did that and we realized that one of the things the news media never did is they never really talked about immigrants and that. They talked to us and they talked to border patrol and they talked to everybody else but they really didn't talk to undocumented... so in our rebate, when we did these performance rebates and we invited the press along but we made sure that they all talked with the undocumented. Uh the people who we were giving the rebate to, to get their reaction so that they became someone who had a take on the project, rather than a secondhand one...\textsuperscript{124}

Barnett: Like I don't know it's easy for politics and the media to just like completely erase this whole beautiful community you know?\textsuperscript{125}

Some artists argued that the news media does not invest time in their subjects, thus producing “knowledge” that does not reflect the reality of the human rights issues at hand:

Haney: While I was there it was like well shit CNN is coming down for 2 days and then leaving... but it's like no way... it's like that's like half the story... there's so many reporters and Instagram influencers coming down trying to get in their [the migrant’s] face with a microphone and they get closed off after that. It took a long time of showing that hey I'm here for the long haul, hey I care... that now... by the time the caravan reached Mexico City which is such a massive international city that like there were as many cameras as there were migrants... and they were all so sick of it.\textsuperscript{126}

One perceived reason for the media’s lack of subject interaction was financial incentive: “The news media is the news media. It's a business. They're going to do what they're going to do.”\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{123} Rebecca Goldschmidt, interview with author, June 12, 2019.
\textsuperscript{124} Louis Hock, interview with author, June 21, 2019.
\textsuperscript{125} Sydney Barnett, interview with author, July 12, 2019.
\textsuperscript{126} Marcus Haney, interview with author, July 10, 2019.
\textsuperscript{127} Louis Hock, interview with author, June 21, 2019.
These artists put their own work in contrast of the news media, suggesting that art allows them the freedom to do what the news doesn’t, namely building meaningful relationships with rightsholders in order to represent their complexity. Institutions can also generate a wider range of acceptable norms when those working outside of the system push the boundaries of the institution and challenge it:

Strohacker: So, academia can learn from artists, and not even all artists are like this it's a particular breed of artists that are not afraid of experimentation or failure um... aren't afraid of pushing boundaries to the point where people... like recently my new project... someone in academia at this college where I'm doing an exhibition asked "how is this art?" and like 10 year ago [Tanya] might have been like "oh no" but now I'm like "fuck yeah"… Like if you're already wondering if it's art then I'm on the right track because I want people to think differently about it. [laughing]

By working outside of the system, artists are able to challenge existing norms and expand the breadth of “knowledge” both internally and externally to institutions.

**Humanizing rightsholders**

Artists also used their work as a way to humanize rightsholders. Some artists did this by breaking negative stereotypes around rightsholders. One artist for example, had a group of artists revisit the story of Califia, which is how California got its name. In the story, Califia, “renounces her position as a warrior queen and converts to Christianity and marries a Spanish knight right... which is reinforcing this euro-centric kind of Christian, colonial type of position...” so, the artists “decided not to go back and reinforce that kind of stereotype and re-authored it in a way where Califia stays powerful with agency and uh and status.”

By breaking stereotypes of colonial history, these artists gave voice to victims of colonial history who have had their agency and autonomy stripped. Artists also humanized rightsholders by challenging existing negative

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representations. By giving cameras to transfronterizo children for example, Gonzalez hoped to address negative media representations, and give agency to rightsholders:

Gonzalez: Most of the photographers and the people I knew who were in the area were like photojournalists and I think from drug war stuff like coming out of the images that were coming out of Tijuana like from whatever in the 2000s like 2010 time I think it was a really particular kind of extreme, violent image that people were really capitalizing on... and I think our goal was to give a sort of more mundane, day-to-day image of what it looks like to just exist in that space because it wasn't just about okay like narco-war in Tijuana and it wasn't just the images you see of SD as being this like surf, navy, bro-town... like we were just kind of giving a platform for people who usually don't have that kind of voice.130

Other artists used similar tactics:

Huffaker: So, my style is one that I like to elevate people a lot... especially farm workers and things I really like to make them look noble and regal.131

Haney: for this film I really wanted to try to stick to the migrants perspective as much as possible... um I.. it could have gone down and you know.. immigration lawyers and judges... and interviewed a ton more... but it takes away from.. I just wanted it to be from their perspective.132

Accessibility

Finally, artists used their work as a way to spread the discussion around human rights to those most marginalized in society. Several artists contrasted art to other ways of obtaining information, such as museums and academia, arguing that public art is a much more accessible way for the public to obtain information:

Amézquita: I'm trying to use a language where people like me who are intersectional... people who have migrated and are in this like middle position you know.. in this middle ground of like I'm from here but I'm also from this... from this space because I've been here for such a long time so I think this is for people like me who migrated at a young age um... this is for the people who cannot speak up because they don't have the tools and the resources that I've learned through all these years. Um... and this is where I am right now and like people like my mom who have worked for such a long time believing that that's all they can do like have to labor with their body and not using their like intelligence... yeah this is where I am right now...133

131 Sandy Huffaker, interview with author, June 21, 2019.
Barnett: It's for people who don't see that [the broader human rights discussion] you know... like for people who aren't a part of that necessarily. Especially you know with like obviously going to museums that's a certain type of person that's able to go to a museum. I think the documentary will be more accessible. And it's gonna be more experimental so that's kind of more a piece of art that like anybody can watch and have access to... 134

In this sense: artists have used the border as a site to educate and inform those without access to more exclusive forms of education, thereby expanding the human rights discussion to a broader public. For some artists, accessibility should include a wide range of people. One artist for example avoided social media, despite its accessibility to younger populations because he wanted older generations to be a part of the dialogue as well:

Setright: I was thinking okay, I want it to be accessible to everybody so like adding to social media wouldn't work so of course I'm thinking about my own generation that's also complicit with capitalism and the tourism industry and stuff so I wanted to like start conversations between my generation that was a post-revolutionary generation and like my parent's generations.... the one's that lived in the revolution that are the ones that think that they don't have a big connection with my generation so it had to be... I mean it's very sensitive to do art about the revolution because as somebody that didn't participate in it so I intend to... I want people to experience that, to see what my generation's perspective is on that.135

For several artists, the appeal of creating accessible art was to create art that becomes a part of the civic narrative:

Hock: You know so we put thing on bus posters and raised the issue so it became a part of the civic narrative and so that was the idea.136

Setright: I think that more interesting art for me is art that is participatory and is created with community and is critical. And it doesn't necessarily look like artwork. It looks like workshops, it looks like building something together, it looks like a healing ritual 137

By engaging the community, human rights dialogue is no longer restricted to exclusive spheres, but becomes a part of everyday conversation for people of all socioeconomic statuses.

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135 Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
137 Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
**Art as a Critique to Human Rights**

While the work of some artists operated to promote human rights, some work also functioned to critique the field of human rights itself. This section pulls on vernacularization literature, showing that the lack of explicit human rights language in the artist’s work may have been an intentional move. The section proceeds to explain some of the human rights critiques that were repeatedly raised by interviewees. These critiques include taking issue with human rights academia, the effectiveness of human rights in current practice, and an ideology which some viewed as too restrictive. By providing an outside-looking-in perspective to the field of human rights, art activists are able to provide critique that is perhaps difficult for those within the field of human rights to see themselves.

**Human Rights Vernacular**

Several artists critiqued the human rights vernacular and argued that some definitions are too vague, while others are too restrictive. In response to questions around how they perceive the efficacy of human rights, participants had wide-ranging and contradictory responses. On one hand for example, some found human rights too abstract:

Ed Gomez: If we define it as something like equality okay that's true humanity has a history of inequality and we've always dealt with these hierarchies and power systems so would human rights be like a wage that stops sustaining salaried wage in which you could be a home owner and like is financial stability a part of human rights and like is it a lack of racism and discrimination that determines human rights or is it the ability to have agency say in government. Like it's kind of for me such an abstract concept like a master signifier or shifting signifier…

On the other hand, some found human rights to be too specific, stating that they associate the concept with issues of large-scale conflict such as genocide, rather than the often-hidden struggles that migrant face at the border:

Barnett: I do think about it um but I also feel that it can be reductive as well because when we think about human rights we think about like dictatorships or you know we

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think about like a mass-movement that has been very clearly like okay this was Hitler, and Nazi Germany, and concentration camps like we think about human rights being these like really massive things that sometimes I think we forget like the very small ways that um human rights are constantly being violated like maybe just you know patriarchy... what about thinking about these systematic ways that our society and our government perpetuate constant human rights you know or helpless you know... like thinking about the way that we wouldn't consider that human rights necessarily but it's the suffering of people... that like very small changes could potentially fix you know?  

Hock: You know I think to me human rights is more severe than that. I think it is about social justice that they pay in and don't get money back... to me when you're talking about human rights, you're talking about something much... it includes such things such as genocide and such severe things that I think when you talk about social justice it has to do with... it's no less meaningful to a population but it's not so severe in the particular instances…

What is clear from the variation in perception of human rights is that artists at the border do not have a clear, consistent vision of what human rights mean and how they can be applied to one’s work – despite the fact that all interviewee’s work promoted human rights or framed the needs of rightsholders in some way.

Artists themselves were conflicted about whether or not art has a place within human rights activism. All participants felt that a discussion around the word “art activism” was important to understanding their work as an artist. For some, actively fighting for human rights was an important component of their work:

Goldschmidt: So, I think then it because not just about some cute pictures or some cute backpacks but that was the power when it became a citizen-advocacy group where people were speaking directly to these large institutions and we did end up gaining some... I mean clearly there is power in just doing what we did. And those are making like actual infrastructural changes.  

Hock: You know our goal was not to being the art pages our intention was to make it political, to make people aware. It was not about sequestering itself in art as a safer territory... it was about using art as a mechanism to raise issues to a level in which they can be acknowledged by the news media and that acknowledgement transmitted information to the audience...

139 Sydney Barnett, interview with author, July 12, 2019
141 Rebecca Goldschmidt, interview with author, June 12, 2019.
Activism looks different for everyone, and for some it could be as vague as feeling a general obligation to the larger community and fulfilling that obligation by thinking in a matter larger than oneself:

De Iuliis: I think as a creative we have a responsibility in some way to do what we feel is necessary in order to better the world somehow. You know... whatever it is... if you choose simply to paint paintings in your studio that end up in someone's house after because they're moved by it then that's your form you know? And yeah... so I think you by doing this thesis... this is your form to better understand the global that we're in... I mean I don't know I don't have any answer but I think we're doing our part simply by addressing and thinking and contemplating these questions...

Artists who consider themselves “active” human rights advocates understood their ideas to be in conversation with those who do not consider their work to be active. One participant put their work in contrast to “high art critics” who consider the mix of art and activism “propaganda”:

Haney: The art side of it .... this is where it gets hazy because the word art is just so much more vague. Um the intention of the artists does... does art exist with an intention beyond you know... well first of all what is the intention of art? That's something we could talk about forever... but I think in most cases it's to make people feel... and um and I think if activism is a part of that it still is art. Um... I think in the high art world critics will look at some activist art and be like "oh that's not art that is just propaganda" you know... and it could be for a good thing but it's something used to push... even if it's for a good cause... um I think that the middle ground is where it's most exciting... where those two worlds really connect... artists making activist art for the right reasons and the art stands up on its own. I guess from the art side of things you look at this activist art and take away the activist part of it... is it still art?

Interviewer: Mm

Haney: Does it stand on its own? And then but if you look at it from the activist side, does it matter? Because if it's calling people to action then it's serving its purpose. So, I think it really depends on... I don't think there's any one answer to it.

For this group, human rights activism did not make art less “artistic” and in fact, they found that human rights activism gives art meaning and importance.

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143 Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, June 19, 2019.
For others however, the mix of art and human rights activism was dangerous territory, despite the fact that all participants were selected for their works which address human rights issues at the US-Mexico border in some regard. For some, art cannot stand up alone once it engages activist components:

Gomez: I think conceptually it could all be the same like you can make the case for everything being art but if everything is art then that kind of lessens or cheapens the power of art... I don't know it's just kind of something that I'm always thinking about... I tend to kind of create the separation between the two... between activism and art.  

Several artists associated human rights activism with the “political” and were weary of “the political”:

Strohacker: I can't be overly political because then it would just shut too many people out. And again, as an artist I can't do anything but hurt myself and my constituents in that way. Like I don't have the power to fight it so that's how I think about it...  

Huffaker: I don't get too political... I try not to get into all this Trump stuff but just say this is what I saw... I actually just don't even watch the news anymore. It's been one of the best things I've ever done is just turning it off um... but yeah I'm always excited I just get my photos in wait a day or two and then just post them cuz it's so much cooler than seeing them in the NYT. Like pole I know really look forward to them and are like thank you... it makes me feel like I'm creating change more than anything.  

Haney: So it's been like a big big... what I knew I was going to get into but... So You asked are you a director of documentary first or are you a humanitarian and... in this project's one of the same. The film is very very apolitical. Like we don't take political sides in the film at all. I think the only time you hear the word Trump is when Udie says "I hope god tugs at Trump's heart" you know? "and he sees that we'll go fight a war for him". We don't take any political sides and now a lot of people will argue that by showing their perspective, that is a side in and of itself. And it is but it's not a political film.  

De Iuliis: Well I think... it was interesting because my challenge to myself is to take my own political views out of the equation. That was something... it's one thing painting a mural about what's happening on the border on our side of the wall and voicing frustration or however you feel or not in that space. It's another thing all together to come as an outside entity and project your feeling or what you feel, what you think the community feels about the political ins and outs of what's happening right now. And so, I felt that I could... it was my job... like my job is to have a voice of course but to show

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146 Lauren Strohacker, interview with author, June 13, 2019.
147 Sandy Huffaker, interview with author, June 21, 2019.
through metaphor and symbolism, nature that is... nature that has no borders, nature that is deeply deeply affected as well by a wall that allows...  

Because directly aligning with human rights activism is considered dangerous territory that might “shut too many people out,” artists can address societal issues by addressing human related issues without focusing on the human:

Strohacker: So yeah I try to take my -- I certainly have my own political interests, it's super liberal -- but if I just kind of keep it to the wildlife and it's as simple as the wall... as here's what's hurting the populations... and then through more creative interventions like getting people to be like oh this is why... because a lot of people came up to me at the border and said things to me that I said those same things a year prior... "I had no idea the border wall affected wildlife this way"... you know people don't realize that the lights affect bat and butterfly migrations or bird migrations and the sound and so there's all these things where if you can get one person thinking like "oh" like maybe they don't think about human rights issues or migration unfortunately as we should... but if that's one thing that gets them to think about that then I think that's important.

This group of artists perceived the union of art and human rights activism as a challenge to the integrity of their work.

Yet for some, art as means to address rightsholders was a grey area. One’s understanding of their work’s purpose derives from their background and training which is variable to environment as well as changes in the dominant paradigm:

Hock: It all stems from this modernism and post-modernism approach to art right? So if you look at modernism was very much about neutral clean art for art's sake push that was very much about the sophisticated medium and art's not really commenting to anything social or political... art just talks about itself being itself... and then the more post-model position where like hell anything can happen, everything goes, everything is fair game... I think artists now are kind of maneuvering between those two extreme spaces where they do have the work that has modernist appeals of like a purely aesthetic level but then conceptually asks you to dig into social inequality uh or you know fill in the black.

It appeared that some artists had not come to a distinct conclusion around the union of art and human rights activism. Some were not sure if their work was considered “activism” because it

149 Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, Jun 19, 2019.
150 Lauren Strohacker, interview with author, June 13, 2019.
did not make a specific claim but rather made suggestions or provocations as a means of sparking conversation:

Strohacker: So yeah using other issues to sometimes come into that political discussion um and as an artist I don't want to give out answers. All I'm kind of doing is throwing out questions and letting other people kind of talk. And I think that's always been successful. I don't see my work as controversial but I always worry like how people come at it. I've never had anyone confront me in a negative way.152

In putting artists in conversation with one another, what is clear is that definitions around “activist” and “political” and “art” and the combinations of these terms vary greatly, despite the fact they used these terms often:

Hock: I never saw myself as an activist. Because and activist I looked up and they had specific goals they had or were moving towards by doing political acts. And I thought of ourselves as artists without a political agenda. And then my notion and what we had as a notion is to make things that were not being discussed. That were not talked about. To bring it into public consciousness. To enter it into the narrative and have people talk about it in a way that hadn't been before and using art as a mechanism to get us there.

Interviewer: So, would you call yourself an art activist or just...

Hock: Uh I would say a political artist. Some of my work is political work. I'm an artist... because I have a lot of work that's not necessarily political art. It has political consciousness but it's not necessarily political art. And so, um... you know I think that um there's an um... an aim to um take the skills that you have and give them a political utility.153

The lack of concrete definitions around these terms is exemplified by the fact that several artists contradicted themselves on their own understandings of these terms. Hock for example, stated early on that “our goal was not to being the art pages our intention was to make it political, to make people aware” and later stated, “I thought of ourselves as artists without a political agenda.”154 Some artists were hesitant to use the word “activism” even if they perceived their work to involve human rights activism:

Haney: It's very subjective. Um... because what I'm doing... I do want people to act but I'm not saying go do this, go do this, go do this. And my call to action if there is a call

152 Lauren Strohacker, interview with author, June 13, 2019.
154 Ibid.
to action is more along a personal level. I think it's more of a perspective thing... it's more of a challenge and a hope, and a gathering of empathy but then you go and use it.155

For Barnett, the reasoning behind hesitancy to identify as an activist was more specific:

Barnett: Yeah that's interesting cuz I think I struggle a lot with talking about what I do cuz I do... I am an artist and I make art but I also am really interested.... like nothing that I do is not active right? I'm always engaging with sort of political things... but I do have an aversion to that term also and I think it's because of the I guess activism just has this... what's the word... it just has this agenda and it has this um arrogance you know that I think I've noticed just in my years of living that um there's a lot of strong... there's a strong suggestion that you have to label yourself as an activist to be an activist but really a lot of people just existing is activism in that sense you know? And those people are enraged... they're just not seen and there's this kind of arrogance and sometimes I think overriding like "I'm here I'm fighting for this cause" and even if it's related to you, you're still... it's too egotistical too me um I think it gets really too far into the micro and the individual which I think is counter-productive you know?

Interviewer: mm

Barnett: And I also think that people you know... activism implies that you're fighting against this... these things that are the evils whether it's capitalism, or like racism or global warming but it's the same concept right? Like the people that are actively... like the KKK that's activism in a sense you know? I just feel like there's this immediate back and white where it's like I'm an activist therefore you assume all of my politics and you know what I stand for and that like grey area of like what does that even mean just gets completely overlooked when we use that term I think um whereas I just think that we're all kind of learning and we're all engaging in everything that we're kind of like doing has a role in what society creates in terms of the things that we might want to fight against in the future you know?156

These artist’s hesitancy to using human rights vernacular helps to answer one of the sub-questions guiding my field work, namely does resistance to using human rights vernacular point to a larger issue within the human rights movement? Sandra’s response reflects a larger theme within the findings, whereby artists felt that those who identify with the human rights paradigm engage a sort of savior-complex. As such artist resistance to identifying with human rights vernacular may point to a larger issue within the human rights paradigm – activists whose work has great potential to promote and intellectually develop the field of human rights, may be

hesitant to identify with a paradigm occurs “within a broader, historical context, shaped by events like the end of the Cold War; the decline of socialist ideology; and the rise of the Washington consensus on neoliberalism, the rule of law and democracy.”\(^{157}\) In this sense, resistance to the human rights vernacular generates the critique that the human rights paradigm may need to reconcile its own utopian façade as addressed by human rights critics within the literature.

**Human Rights within Academia**

Several interviewees found that their work led them to challenge academia as a site for human rights knowledge production. For these artists, all of whom had some degree of experience within academia, found that the institution restricted their ability to think creatively and challenge the status quo:

Strohacker: People couldn't see and I wasn't able to articulate the vision that was further ahead. So it seemed like I was all over the place. And being this lateral thinker it's like... they couldn't see my goal and it just took me time. I mean I'm almost 10 years out of grad school now so...People are like... they're just so stuck in the one way of doing it and I think academia is the same thing. Like they get stuck in linear thinking and they get stuck in disciplinarities.. or interdisciplinarities... like they stick in their one world and then everything else doesn't really matter..... I feel like academia just rolls out kind of the same stuff over and over sometimes you know like okay... so what? And I don't mean that to be flippant necessarily but... people have their own ways of thinking like "this is what a thesis paper looks like, this is what a human rights paper looks like"... and some people... especially art it's really touchy... that's what I think academia can maybe learn from the work of artists is the idea of self-critique and the idea of like when to just scrap something if it's not working.\(^{158}\)

Strohacker was repeatedly disheartened during her academic experience, but found that once she entered the non-academic art world, she had the intellectual work do start non-normative projects. Some artists also found that human rights dialogue in academia is often restricted to circles within the institution, thereby producing disconnected work and reserving information

\(^{157}\) Sally Merry and Peggy Levitt, “Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women’s rights in Peru, China, India, and the United States,” *Global Networks* 9, no. 4 (2009): 443

\(^{158}\) Lauren Strohacker, interview with author, June 13, 2019.
and knowledge production for higher-class citizens who have the means to access academia in the first place:

Setright: It was like um it was a good way to start conversation it was accessible in the sense that I'm not writing a 10-page paper on why I think that culture is being gentrified. I can do like a collage, I can do like a performance piece about memory and archive….\textsuperscript{159}

Barnett: I think there's a lot to learn and I don't necessarily have all the answers but I do believe that academia has a lot to learn and a lot of change to make to make itself relevant in this world right now... which is something I would love it to be because I do like academia and I really like these spaces where... that are intentionally meant to learn you know? Like nothing is happening here except education and that's really powerful but when it's so disconnected it doesn't matter. And especially when it has that title and that like just like otherness where it's like are you participating in to or not... like do you have this degree or not. I think that art has a lot to just open the eyes... art shows this micro that that is the macro that is being studied but the maybe the actual portrait of the micro is just completely missing form that story. Does that make sense?\textsuperscript{160}

These artists did not completely dismiss academia and instead argued that those within the institution must be more thoughtful about their work:

Setright: Like it can be really cool... like when you're thinking of a thesis to write our something like who's your audience and most like writings end up in a library and that's the way so how do you reconcile investing so much energy into something that's not going to be accessible to a lot of people.\textsuperscript{161}

Human rights knowledge production in other words, cannot be reserved for those within academia – academics must constantly ask who is producing knowledge and who that knowledge will serve.

*Effectiveness*

Another area of critique involved the effectiveness of human rights. Some for example perceived written human rights to be in tension with actual human rights practice:

Setright: It's one thing to have really beautiful rights but the other thing is like the actual implementation and accountability over these rights s like how do we not just make sure that we have rights but how do we make sure that our rights are held accountable?\textsuperscript{162}

\textsuperscript{159} Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
\textsuperscript{160} Sydney Barnett, interview with author, July 12, 2019.
\textsuperscript{161} Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
\textsuperscript{162} Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
For some, questions around the effectiveness of human rights were directed towards human
rights as an institution:

Barnett: It's this idea that until the UN gets involved or until NGOs get involved things are just invisible you know... I think that there's this like we have this weird good and evil idea you know... and the idea that like the UN or holding people accountable or putting people in jail or even reparations... which I do believe in reparations but even just that concept of like we have to fix the things that we did wrong, okay this has the stamp of human rights you know not being acknowledged... like this amount of people died in this event so it was qualified as this you know human rights... it's very dehumanizing.\textsuperscript{163}

Setright: In a lot of social movements there's this push towards human rights um but it ends up supporting human rights as an institution... as in like it removes people of agency when we're asking another institution to recognize people's rights... So that's why I don't like that in order for humans to be legitimate they need to be recognized by the UN, or an NGO, or the state. And those rights have to be like granted. Um in my particular work I don't usually talk about human rights and in my writing, I talk about autonomy and how I want communities to be autonomous and sustainable and to be um controlled form the bottom up.\textsuperscript{164}

In other words, human rights institutions represent an ineffectual middle-man between human rights ideology and rightsholders. Constructed definitions and “stamps of approval” limit what qualifies as human rights, potential excluding human struggle that does not meet institutional quotas or definitions or has simply not been recognized by institutions with the power to grant visibility. One participant compared institutional human rights to the church:

Interviewer: I'm curious what you think about the institution of human rights itself. So, when you think of like NGOs, the UN...

Haney: It's so wide and there's so much... same with the church. On paper the church could be a very positive thing for the world. But humans have taken something Ideologically pure and twisted it for their own good... their own individual game. That's why the crusades happened. That's why all these wars are fought, all the bloodshed in the world comes down to... the majority of it comes down to religion. So what on paper should be... it's just been so corrupted. The NGO world is similar too. There's a lot of bullshit. I've worked in some of the biggest in the world... like really deeply. Like Global Citizen all those ones. And there's so much fuckery that goes into those and it's just like human ego and human greed getting in the way of what should be pure.

\textsuperscript{163} Sydney Barnett, interview with author, July 12, 2019
\textsuperscript{164} Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
Interviewer: Yeah

Haney: Um I do think NGOs should be a thing obviously and charities. At the end of the day they do help a lot and you've got to be careful too because sometimes really well-meaning people end up doing more damage... you know a lot of aid groups go in after a disaster, throw barriers all over the place... metaphorical barriers... get the people to a place of dependence on those band-aids and then all of a sudden the next disaster, those band aids are stripped out and they're even more fucked because they... the sustainability is gone. The best NGOS are the ones that are there to make the situation sustainable long-term, and then as they slowly come out, they're replaced by locals who keep that going and grow on that...

M: Mm

Haney: Instead of just taking a rug out and everything falls. So, they either raise money, take before and after photos, got the money for the next one... out. So it's like there's no one there for them... it's terrible… 165

These participants ultimately saw their artistic ethos to be in tension with the goals of institutional human rights.

_Beyond “Human” Rights_

Through their work, several artists developed critiques to the broader human rights paradigm. The first critique held that human rights do not emphasize enough the non-human. In order to fully understand human rights at the border, one must look beyond just the human factors:

Strohacker: Yeah you know I've learned how important it is to talk about human rights in tandem with environmental justice because you can't really have either because you know for people living in Flint, Michigan, the water crisis is an environmental issue just as much as it is a social issue… And I mean that's what a lot of issues at the border seem so stem from I mean a lot of um... it seems like you know climate change is hitting some of these countries in South America and Central America much harder and that's part of the violence and the migration up north and so we act like it's a human issue but it's also an environmental issue because through our colonialism and what we've done, we've destroyed this landscape.166

Setright: Like a lot of countries are giving rights to rivers and to mountains and that's a very interesting step but we would need to completely change our view of how we understand animals and our diet and everything and I think that's what is interesting about

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166 Lauren Strohacker, interview with author, June 13, 2019.
border arts. It that like the bigger question is like what are borders? What are they for? and do we need them? 167

This is critical because the rights of humans depend on the well-being of the non-human world. Beyond looking at the non-human as it affects the human, placing them human at the top of a hierarchy is also seen as problematic:

Strohacker: I still think like human rights, it's like multi-species rights to me... And I think what is good for the environment as a whole is good for people and that's what that kind of mindful conservation and that indigenous-centered conservation that de-centers the Euro-centric whatever... I think is really important. So, for me human rights and environmental rights have to go in tandem.168

As Strohacker notes, placing the human at the top of the rights hierarchy, despite the fact that this is a Euro-centric approach to understanding rightsholders and excludes other worldviews which treats all rights equally.

Problems with Art as a Tool for Human Rights

Art, as interpreted by the non-art world, runs the risk of being perceived as benevolent and removed from systemic inequalities. As the literature by Stuart Hall and Judith Butler suggests, the tendency to view art in isolation from its creator is dangerous because an artist’s work is directly related to their worldview – an amalgamation of their own inherent biases and privileges. Although the previous findings suggest that art can be a powerful tool for human rights, it is important not to downplay the issues that exist within the art world and subsequently impact art as a tool of human rights. This section describes two main issues with art as a tool of human rights, as identified in the research findings. These two main issues identified include artist privilege as well as market-oriented art.

Artist Privilege

167 Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
A recurrent theme throughout the interviews was how an artist’s proximity to their subjects affects the work that is produced. All of the artists who had their human rights violated at the US-Mexican border felt that their experience allowed them to create work that was relatable and meaningful those with similar experiences. Gonzalez for example, created artwork to serve transborder students who face human rights abuses at the border as he did:

Gonzalez: When you're part of the community, automatically you can relate with the stories of the people you're trying to support. And they relate with you. So, the instant... the ways of communication and the stories your get are... more real... not safety but comfort because you are part of the community so it allows you... because you're living it. I'm not just some savior I mean I'm in it as much as they are. So, I think that changes kind off the dynamic in the way the participants relate to us no?169

Gonzalez in other words felt that his direct experience with abuse as a transborder student avoids the power dynamic that exists between a transborder student and an artist who has the privilege of not understanding what those abuses feel and look like to the victim. His experience also allows the subject to feel validated and part of a community rather than as a victim being “saved.” Barnett, an artist from the San Diego/Tijuana border with family on both sides, similarly felt that her collaboration with other Latinx artists allowed her to produce victim-centered work:

Barnett: It's a really intimate group, everybody is like you know Latinx of half or mixed or has a really strong connection um so I was just immediately like yes I need to do this… I think it is really important in terms of like all storytelling that people that are in close proximity to issues have a voice to speak on it. And people would ask about it you know people would be like what are you doing or where are you from and I think having you know being like this is where we're from this is why it's important to us, people trusted us more.170

In a similar vein to Gonzalez, Barnett felt that her close proximity to her subjects and to her collaborators allowed her to build an environment of trust.

170 Sydney Barnett, interview with author, July 12, 2019
When artists do not have the same socioeconomic experiences as their subjects, they risk misrepresenting human rights victims. Some artists run the risk of misrepresenting victims by placing value on those victims which they perceive as “innocent” and “pure”, thus excluding human rights victims who do not fit this imagery. In recalling what he perceived as his best work for example, Huffaker responded:

Huffaker: [showing photograph] this is the one and I don't know I was just there at the border and it was just the most innocent like this little girl and you think what the hell am I looking at you know, what is this? And I don't think she knew but she made the journey with her mom and it was just like such an honest innocent kind of look of just like "this is my life" and I don't know if it resonated like it didn't get a lot of attention. And maybe it was just cuz I was there... she was just so like an open book, there's no corruption in her. And we smiled, we had a little moment you know she was beautiful she was adorable...171

In his response, Huffaker placed value on victims which appear “innocent” and with “no corruption,” – a reflection on the societal value of femininity and childhood as “pure.”

Amézquita however, recalled an installation at the White House, and suggested that the choice to create art that reflects societal values of purity excludes victims who do not fit socially constructed ideas of purity.

Amézquita: There was this like installation... I read about this installation... I can't remember the name of this artist who created this installation at the White House where there were like these statues... these white statues of children uh... representing these children at the border with this like mesh fence around them and this um... and this aluminum... these foil looking blankets that are supposed to like keep your body warm...

Interviewer: Mm

Amézquita: So I saw these three elements and I saw this work at the White House and I... I was like breaking down the work and I was just like okay yeah maybe the artist is talking about like representing white as pure... but to me... it was just... I didn't like as a person who went through this and who has like friends and really close relatives who have been through that, I don't think it was a monument... I think we have to be really careful with the moves that we make as artists and also be really intentional with what are the steps that we're doing into the work because sometimes we can offend other people and I don't think this was the purpose of this artist... like I understand but um it can be... it was cold.172

In Amézquita’s opinion, an artist’s choice to narrowly define purity may be a result of their ignorance to the lived reality of victims. This issue points to the literature which raises issue with art that restrictively defines “victim.”\textsuperscript{173} In line with this literature Setright, suggests that the power imbalance between an artist with the ability to dictate representation and the victims they are representing is problematic:

Setright: If they pretend to be somebody they're not or if they assume they have the authority to speak on something that they don't have to um or other problems are if they use a community that they don't have anything at stake with or they're just like um parachuting into a community and then doing artwork and then leaving is very problematic. Um with that from like a very superficial analysis you'll be like oh this is cool but if you start asking questions like that as a researcher like what were the ethics behind this piece like oh, you're just doing this to get into the banal and then like not really following through I think it can actually be traumatic to the people that you're working with.\textsuperscript{174}

The dialogue between artists on the topic of misrepresentation suggests that art can in fact be harmful to the protection of human rights when artists adhere to socially constructed ideas of what a victim looks like. Misrepresentation has an affect beyond the work as it can operate to retraumatize human rights victims.

\textit{Market-oriented art}

Most interviewees addressed the commodification of art as a hinderance to art as a meaningful tool for the protection and promotion human rights. Because it is often perceived as prestigious for an artist’s work to be displayed in a gallery, many artists strive to find a gallery space to show their work. This becomes an issue however, when galleries are expensive to visit and the very act of visiting a gallery becomes an upper-class cultural practice. Barnett for example, was concerned about artwork that addresses human rights issues but remains in the gallery:

\textsuperscript{173} Roman Y. Belete, “The Contest of Representation: Photographic Images of Ethiopian Women in National Print Media, Development Aid Organizations and Galleries,” (PhD diss., Durham University, 2014): 270
\textsuperscript{174} Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019
Sydney Barnett, interview with author, July 12, 2019
Rebecca Goldschmidt, interview with author, June 12, 2019.
Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019
For Setright, art that is catchy and intended to go viral, often lacks in substance and meaningful call to action. The literature on market-oriented art suggests that art operates within neoliberalism and as such, some artists may prioritize scale of viewership and economic incentive, even if their art superficially aims to grapple with human rights issues. Gonzales for example, argued that many of the photographers who went to the border to capture a highly sensationalized migrant caravan, prioritized the media consumer audience and as such, the artists themselves were detached from the gravity of the rights issues at hand:

Gonzales: Yeah I got shot with a rubber bullet and I was there and while that was happening there were so many white photographers that were stoked. They were so happy to be there and they had smiles on their faces because they were getting that one shot that was gonna make them famous you know? For Gonzalez, racial privilege and market-oriented work were factors that led these photographers to capture human rights issues while remaining distant from subject and with “smiles on their faces.”

**Art as it Grows Human Rights**

Art expands the ideological capacity of human rights in two main ways. It reveals the complexity that arises when rights ideology is put into practice, and it also creates room for individuals to build a relationship with their personal human rights politic – thereby turning the complex reality of human rights into a means of self-growth. An essential part of promoting human rights for several artists was working on oneself – an often-missing element of most human rights work. Self-work took many forms as the interviewees had a wide range of backgrounds and experiences. All of the artists who used self-work in their artistic process saw it as a means of creating work that engages the human rights dialogue as thoughtfully as possible.

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Nuance and Complexity

Rather than only looking at the victims, as much human rights work does, many artists looked at all actors involved with rights injustices. The range of actors revealed by artists helps to show that who is on either side of a rights violation is not necessarily black and white. Identifying “victims” and “perpetrators” is difficult when one looks at how many different experiences exist the border:

Setright: Yeah so we were giving the surveys to people that were crossing into the US and we saw a bunch of different people and (long pause) it was just like a very very different people entering the US with very very different reasons and a lot of talk about how much easier it used to be crossing into the US but also confronting people that were doing medical tours and jus getting their teeth done and then going back in. We visited a lot of peel saying like oh I go to the US to donate plasma and then I go back in. SO just like very plural stories that you're not seeing in the media like you're not really representing and there's no like on singular immigrant. Everybody has very complicated and intriguing stories about why they personally cross and how they view the US like there were a lot of like very conservative Latino families that are part of perpetrating like this Trump narrative of anti-immigration but um I also saw lots of people from like very different ages…

Goldschmidt: Even though the border is so diverse and there's so many different kinds of experience there there's also like this other thing that creates this other group which is like the people who cross back and forth you know? So, it's not just two it like turns into a 3 plus situation because of the people who were born in Mexico and are up in the US and they can't go back to Tijuana you know? So, you start encountering all these different experiences. Or the white pole who moved to Mexico to live there because it's cheaper. They don't want to go back to San Diego... so you start realizing how multiplicitous like the entire situation is. And that's when you know it's not just about Mexicans and Americans or Mexican-Americans or Chicanos or trans... you know like and I think by creating Borderclick… we were just interested in seeing what that would look like...

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180 Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
181 Rebecca Goldschmidt, interview with author, June 12, 2019.
By looking at the other side, artists were able to analyze those who claim to support human rights, showing that those who are “left” or “liberal” so not always serve the needs of rightsholders:

Barnett: I think uh even liberal people and even more left-leaning people are really carrying a lot of harmful and violent ideals I think.182

To that end, artists also revealed the complexity and variation among those who are often lumped together as operating in opposition to human rights:

De Iuliis: I was really intrigued more by the commentary by the border patrol is sort of what stuck out to me in terms of... you know there's such a mixed, diverse feeling towards people coming in and out and so that was something that really stuck with me…183

Rights violation perpetrators are often a complex network of actors, rather than just one political party, person, or group:

Haney: There's 17 films in there and one of them is that: why is it happening, who's responsible... and that goes... there's so many people responsible... it's the gangs, the cartels, the central American government, our government, and any American that uses drugs. Those are all the people that are at fault for why there's a crisis in those countries and why people are leaving...184

Ultimately, many artists were brought into contact with a wide range of actors on either side of rights violations, or in a gray in-between area. As such, these participants were not quick to point to singular victims or perpetrators, but rather would point to the issue in using a simple definition for such a wide range of complex experiences.

Beyond the complexity of human actors, artists also revealed the complexity of the border as an idea. When discussing right violations at the border, the complexity of the borderland is often lost or not represented. For some artists, it was important to publicize the various elements which exist in the borderland:

183 Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, June 19, 2019.
Barnett: Like you've probably seen it now that you've been there but you know it just extends and you can see wilderness on each side... some houses go up against.. but for the majority like for most of it it's just like wilderness on the US side and I was so like every single city in Texas is like completely different landscape around the border and I think like having the river be the border was really interesting because it's like this is a natural thing you know and we went to like Big Bend which is a national state park where the Rio Grande runs through and there's a village on the other side. Our side is like... on the US side is like a national state park and on the other side is this normal village and it's like you see this... this juxtaposition of a naturally beautiful place, there's no building and on one side there's this thing going on and on the other side there's all these other rules.185

Other interviewees pointed to the fluidity of the border in their work – showing that the border is something which exists beyond its physical site. One artist for example, created a work around the border as it exists in North County San Diego:

Hock: I realized that I was living in an island of Mexicanness. And instead of having a border which was a linear one between the US and Mexico, it was a circular on that ran around the neighborhood. "La Colonia" they called it. And so when you went outside it was like crossing the border and I realized before I even made the tape, it was like revisiting my childhood. Because all of a sudden you had Mexican people around you but then you move a few steps and you're in Anglo culture. And that was just like going over the border.186

Revealing the complexity of the borderland frames rightsholders by humanizing and making real, the site at which rightsholders exist and cross.

Through their artwork, many interviewees were also able to reveal the sensory and emotional elements that are often lost in representations of the immigration debate. Beyond framing the needs of rightsholders, artists used their work to create awareness around the emotional toll taken on victims of human rights violations. Barnett for example, did this by directly asking individuals about their emotional status:

Barnett: Um and then this whole project with the little cards that we would hand out have people fill out and then the ropes that we would tie together and made the installation that's going to a bunch of museums and stuff... I would say that that represents the amount of people that are crossing every day, multiple times a day maybe. Um and how they feel when they cross right? It's a very simple thing like "how do you feel when you cross" and like let’s tie these two strings together to show that you aren't just on one side.

You aren't just Mexican, you aren't just American, you aren't just in one spot and then you're in another... it's always kind of connected because it's who you are.  

Artists tried to evoke emotion in the viewer by engaging sensory elements. Huffaker for example, explained that he tries to capture the sensory elements before him when capturing a photograph:

Huffaker: Like rather than if I was just writing about it… but when you just smell, hear, taste everything. You know like you can’t describe what the migrants go through… like a couple weeks ago I was at this women’s shelter and about thirty women and everyone was sick… like had a horrible cough… skinny... it was loud.  

In revealing a sensory and emotional component to rights violations on the border, artists ask the viewer to move beyond simply gazing at the presentation of information before them and to try to feel and empathize with those rightsholders being represented. Beyond trying to evoke emotion from the viewer, interviewees also used the artistic process to address and engage with the emotions of human rights victims. Amézquita for example, collected soil as a healing ritual for those affected by rights violations at the border:

Amézquita: I'm bringing with me soil from all the border... all the borders between Mexico and the United States um... the reason I'm bringing the soul is because I feel that it's part of the land... so I'm like bringing a piece of land where people cannot be at... where they probably lost someone and this person like didn't really come back physically to their grounds and um I want to release this soil into the river just to like um bring this like... bring closure closer to where you were from you know... you're thinking about your spirit you know, healing um like this land that it was ours but then it was taken... respect... love and connection to one another and the land.  

By utilizing touch through the feeling of soil, Maria not only created awareness around the emotional distress to those affected by abuse at the border, but went further to help those affected heal their emotional pain.

Self-Growth

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188 Sandy Huffaker, interview with author, June 21, 2019.
Several artists used their work to educate themselves about human rights at the border and ask questions in order to avoid blindly promoting rights claims as framed by the media or academia. For some this meant educating themselves about the human rights violations in their immediate surroundings, rather than focusing on foreign rights violations:

De Iuliis: Like we should really be focusing on our own country because we have tremendous poverty, we have shit a healthcare, we have so many issues of our own and that we should really be focusing on. WE focus a lot on the external because I feel like we have so many eyes on us as a country but I also feel like we need to ow readdress things in our own. But that said I think I would just like to find a way to spark conversation and broaden my own education of the world um through art in some way…\(^{190}\)

For others, this meant visiting and experiencing the sites of rights violations on the border:

Amézquita: Yeah... when all these caravans started coming at the border I just like started going down just to observe and see what's happening and of course like bringing water that I purchased to send... just to do this on my own like without having an body to go with me because I think um a lot of people are scared of what's on the other side... and then people started saying "I want to come!" and then it started becoming a bigger and bigger group so I started taking things down to the border for these kids and people... we're so grateful...they were so grateful to have shoes, apparel, socks, underwear, pants... it was like just basic, necessary, daily things...\(^{191}\)

Setright: had never been to the border before this trip so I was just like fascinated and asking a lot of like questions that were like common sense for people around the border... I was like can we really just easily cross and then just come back like what is this? (laughing) It was just like an entire side that has so much weight and I was just really curious about everything.\(^{192}\)

Self-education also took the form of engaging an unfamiliar audience:

De Iuliis: I invited everyone to come see it... which was a beautiful exercise for me just to see the diversity within our front line of people that are protecting the entry and exit of our country... our two countries...\(^{193}\)

Self-education was consistently used as a tool to create work that addressed human rights as a result of direct observation and experience.

\(^{190}\) Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, June 19, 2019.
\(^{191}\) Jackie Amézquita, interview with author, June 13, 2019.
\(^{192}\) Gabriel Setright interview with author, June 17, 2019.
\(^{193}\) Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, June 19, 2019.
For several artists, self-growth looked like recognition of and reconciliation with one’s own privilege.

Jackie Amézquita: Um and then I was thinking about like the privilege that we have in here and that we can actually like be more mobile like navigate around without... like of course we have those concerns but like you don't like feel that energy so vibrant in here that when you go there and you feel that... so that's how like my previous performances started... is like from there ... from like trying to get here.194

Setright: I needed to do a lot of introspection and ask like what's the role of having the privilege of having a US passport and like crossing so easily.195

Some artists with white privilege recall how their artistic career brought them face-to-face with their privilege, thus changing the scope of their work:

Haney: Um... I got to a point of like.. not status but like a place of I don't know... like I've been on the road with bands for 8 years you know and I've very lucky to do like music videos, and albums covers and documentaries and photography for some of the biggest bands in the world. And not only that but to live with them on and off tour and see and live that life and it's incredible. Um but artistically I didn't feel like I was scratching out the things I was meant to be scratching out. Um you know... you go on tour you get treated really well, you get paid well, you get top of the top of everything you know like it's ridiculous and it's really hard to say no to because it's like all your best friends just partying for months at a time.

Interviewer: Mm

Haney: But then you go to a town and the entire town is like celebrating that band and opening every door possible , it's like incredible opportunities to meet people that make culture and make things move you know... not just in music but every department... and they all love music so they're all there and anyway... but for awhile it was like okay this doesn't feel... this doesn't feed my soul you know it's really fun, I'm very lucky to be able to do it...196

The same artist is now using his financial resources to fight for the financial, legal, and educational rights of a family he met while creating documentary work:

Haney: So, like as his sponsor, I've got to make sure that he gets to every court date, every ICE check in, every... otherwise that money is gone and he gets put back in jail or deported. So, it's big responsibility. Also, they're not legally allowed to work for 6 months and they have no money so... every single cost I've absorbed this whole time. Rent for an apartment for them, every bit of food, school supplies... They have no idea

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195 Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
how to enroll [Name omitted to protect individual’s identity] in school. By law she has to go to school and just for her own well-being she has to be in school. So I went and enrolled her in school. Um she turned nine and we threw her a party at Shakey’s Pizza with balloons and the whole thing.197

In order to account for their privilege in their work, some artists worked to constantly question their own artistic process:

De Iuliis: Originally, I got permission from both sides of the border to paint the wall itself and so I went in January to scout the wall and I was looking at it and I just felt.... I asked myself what is the purpose of painting the wall? And I said well like what am I doing? I will paint a mural on this wall that divides these two countries and then I will leave and it will have simply beautified a wall that will continue to stand and divide. So, I might get kudos -- "wow Alex* you painted the wall" -- and get a lot more popular because whatever it is look at me ra ra. Or I can choose to integrate the mural into the towns themselves in places that are pseudo-forgotten so that the art is really for the people, to beatify the people, to not remind the people every day that there is a divide but to spark conversation between neighbors and myself and allow there to be fluidity and connectivity between these two towns where there is a physical divide but then the mural can unite the two.198

Barnett: We are trying to be that voice for our society whether that's here or Mexico but um I just would like to constantly keep that in the back of my head and I hope that other people would do that. Just thinking about like who's story you're telling, who is being affected by it, and what is it really doing for it. I think if I'm constantly asking myself those questions I'll be closer to reaching the goal of making a difference at all...199

Gonzalez: I was 13 so I think I've always sort of been interested in observing the world and documenting and then I think when I started realizing the power of self-documentation and kind of like not only telling... I guess rethinking the ethics of photojournalism and what it means to be capturing someone else's story and always reporting and then to sort of think more about what it means to do a personal or a self-documented kind of journey. I think that became more interesting to me as I got older.200

By dealing with their own privilege, these interviewees hoped to frame rightsholders in a manner which recognized their own identity as a part of their work.

Other interviewees used their artistic process to heal themselves from the traumas associated rights abuses. This type of self-work was difficult and retraumatizing:

198 Velia De Iuliis, interview with author, June 19, 2019.
Barnett: It's also just intense... like we would all get triggered constantly... I think each of us were on our own journey of like having it be so relative us that um I don't know... I think it wouldn't be the same if we were not getting affected or if one of us wasn't and wasn't able to understand what the others were going through and be there for them... It wouldn't have felt as safe to be as vulnerable you know?201

Amézquita: It's really um... I'm going to say brave to come back to some... to your past and like revise it like study it and like be like "oh wait but I've been down this and this and this" and feel proud of yourself when you have been... what is the word... when you have been um pretty much oppressed. And um I think it's important to... instead of like feeling sorry for what happened to your ancestors... to what happened to your family... to like you know confront the fear and say okay this is like what happened to my life but that doesn't define me. Of course that affects me and is something that is a part of my life and I should like embrace it instead of feeling shame all day because I feel that this is something that in my community we have felt for a very long time. Like feel shame because we migrated, feel shame because we're doing uh you know 14-16 hour shifts before like doing without thinking about self-care or just thinking about making the money instead of like... because this is like the mentality that we were... that this the system has like designed for us...

Interviewer: Mm

Amézquita: To do as the labor... and um I've been in therapy for almost the last year and I'm so glad I did it because I've been understanding more about me as a person um and as how this relates into my practice and how all these things have like empowered me and helped me be who I am right now instead of like taking me down...202

Self-healing was then used by artists to create work that moves beyond the individual and removes stigmas around healing practices for victims of rights violations:

Amézquita: So, I think that um it's really important as artists to... to like look at these things and then use them as like tools and skills to um become better humans, to produce... I'm not going to say better work because you know everyone has their own way of making work and their own materials and their own resources...

Interviewer: Mm

Amézquita: But that is... that is a tool that we're being not trained to use instead of like empowering us it's like making us feel shame and not to talk about it is like saying "Oh yeah live your present, don't work about the past now, just focus on the present and think about the future" but how can you be present in the moment if you don't know who you are as an individual? I don't know if that answers your question...203

By going through the difficult process of revisiting trauma, artists were not only able to find some release through art, but they also hoped to help others do the same.

**Discussion**

**Summary of Findings**

My findings suggest that art-activism contributes to the field of human rights in several ways. This study begins by explaining that although rights claims were not usually explicitly made in the work of art activists, they were nevertheless frequently intrinsic to their work. For example, art-activists included in this study were able to promote their rights claims by creating bottom up definitions of rights, and using a universally appealing language– not just appealing to elites and academics. On that note, art activists provided an unconventional approach to human rights by sometimes operating outside of the system (namely academic institutions as well as public/private institutions in the name of human rights). Finally, artists were able to promote their rights claims by using a highly accessible medium. Those who establish and promote human rights generally come from upper and middle-class backgrounds. Artists navigated class difference by creating a rights-based dialogue intended for individuals of all socio-economic status. For example, they created artwork to collaborate with the community and operated outside of the gallery. Community participants who may have not necessarily felt they had the background and experience to engage systemic “human rights,” would nevertheless engage a right-based dialogue through creative arts. In this sense, those with lower socio-economic status are no longer looked at just as victims but are pulled into the conversation to dictate and shape the field of human rights actively. Furthermore, art-activism also allowed the individual artist to
build their relationship with human rights. In this sense, some artists were able to use their work to heal from traumas associated with the abuses of their individual human rights.

My findings also suggest that art-activism serves as a tool for critiquing the field of human rights and showing how it must adapt to remain relevant in the 21st century. Through the lens of vernacularization, my findings suggest that certain concepts that are integral to human rights, including universalism, agency, and dignity, have made their way down to artists working on the US-Mexico border. Perhaps a more interesting theme which emerged, however, was how human rights ideas have not vernacularized because artists found an issue with them. Although the selected artists created work that addressed the rights of the individual in some way, many were hesitant to use the human rights vernacular. This reluctance amongst the artists appears linked to their critiques of the broader human rights movement.

Merry and Levitt’s resonance dilemma helps to explain why artists working on the US-Mexico border may have been hesitant about adopting human rights language. The resonance dilemma holds that rights ideas need to resonate with local ideas but to be legitimate as human rights, they have to reflect universal principles. The problem here is that many of the artists who represent local ideas, perceived the normative “universal” principles to be out of touch and unrepresentative of local ideas. They felt a sense of powerlessness in terms of their ability to affect what rights issues are considered “universal” since most rights dialogue occurs in institutions that are inaccessible to those who belong to marginalized socioeconomic groups. As such, even though this group produced work that could inform and educate the broader human rights movement, most artists were resistant to identifying with the movement, leaving a critical block to the flow of information between artists and human rights advocates.

204 Sally Merry and Peggy Levitt, “Vernacularization on the ground: local uses of global women’s rights in Peru, China, India, and the United States,” Global Networks 9, no. 4 (2009): 457
My interviewees pointed towards some general critiques of human rights ideology and how it was produced. Some took issue with the focus on the individual, arguing that human rights practitioners can protect the rights of individuals without placing the human on the top of an artificial hierarchy. Many interviewees took issue with how ideas are produced through human rights academia, arguing that the academic institution consists of knowledge production by an elite few, and as such, produces human rights knowledge that does not serve the general public. Whether or not the field of human rights sees these critiques as valuable, what is clear is that those outside of the field feel that change within is necessary.

Suggestions for the Human Rights Field

As addressed in the literature, a growing segment of those in the human rights field have come to recognize that human rights may be waning in efficacy and appeal. If human rights are to remain relevant and important, the field itself must change. Firstly, the broader human rights dialogue must become accessible to people of all socioeconomic statuses. The language of human rights dialogue and definitions must be meaningful outside of institutional human rights. Secondly, norms around who can practice human rights must change. All of the artists interviewed produced work that was significant to the promotion of human rights. Most interviewees, however, did not engage human rights institutions because they did not perceive their work to fit in with human rights. If the field of human rights is perceived as inaccessible, exclusionary, or unrelatable, then important knowledge may never reach the field. This goes hand in hand with making human rights dialogue accessible so that potential human rights practitioners no longer fear to identify with an ideology perceived as out of touch. Finally, norms around what human rights practice should look like must change. Many artists associated human rights practice with large scale operations, such as the work of major NGOs working to fight genocide. These same artists did not recognize their much smaller-scale, locally organized work
as human rights work. This disconnect is problematic because, for human rights to work, large-scale operations must be able to work in tandem with locally organized grassroots work. Otherwise, human rights definitions will be top-down, failing to account for the rightsholders themselves. Many artists also did not perceive their work to fit into norms of what human rights work looks like, and this void is further evidenced by the lack of scholarship on the relationship between art and human rights. My findings, however, reveal that the work of artists produced consequential knowledge to the field of human rights. As such, the discipline of human rights must expand its norms around what human rights practice looks like and create a more inclusive and comprehensive dialogue. Only by building bridges to communication and understanding, can we hope to tear down walls.
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Appendix 1: List of Interviewees

The following is a list of all in-depth interviews conducted during the field-work for this research project.

Gabriel Setright, interview with author, June 17, 2019.
Rebecca Goldschmidt, interview with author, June 12, 2019.
Sandy Huffaker, interview with author, June 21, 2019.
Velia De Iuliis interview with author, June 19, 2019.