Disrupt, Transform, Repeat:

Introducing Difficult Works Within a Secondary Art Classroom in the United States

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Abstract

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A combination of personal interest in challenging works of art, the practice of disobedience in art, and experiences as a secondary art teacher led to an investigation of the lack of contemporary, difficult works in high school curricula. Although studies exist on secondary students engaging with difficult works, none have focused on work in the classroom environment in the United States over an extended period of time. The theoretical framework of this study drew on the philosophical, developmental, and pedagogical work of Jacques Rancière, Judith Burton, and Dennis Atkinson. This dissertation addressed this gap by examining the research question: What are the potential benefits and challenges of discussing difficult works of art with secondary art students in a suburban public school in New York? Conducted at Hicksville High School in suburban New York over 10 months during the 2024-2025 school year, this qualitative study collected data from 20 students enrolled in a portfolio preparation course through questionnaires, interviews, group discussions, field notes, and artwork documentation. Findings revealed substantial transformations in participants' understanding and practice. Participants developed expanded conceptions of art and critical consciousness regarding art's capacity for social critique. Participation evolved from limited early engagement to universal involvement by the study's conclusion. Most participants reported a direct impact on their artistic practice through increased symbolism, material experimentation, and socially conscious subject matter. Sustained exposure to difficult works unexpectedly created safe spaces where some participants

addressed personal experiences with trauma and addiction. Through analysis of these data, this study illuminated how incorporating difficult works through emancipatory pedagogy created conditions for intellectual growth and authentic artistic voice development.

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K. B.

Chapter 1: Introduction

Selection of the Problem

From what I have observed as a practicing secondary art teacher, I assert there is a need for high school students to have the opportunity to consider and discuss works of art that challenge them to think in new ways. To put this in other words, students should be introduced to works that are difficult and disobey prior thoughts, opinions, and knowledge within art and experience. Throughout the course of my 16-year teaching career, I have seen many Van Gogh-inspired bouquet drawings, Monet water lily posters, and teacher-oriented Picasso workshops. While I certainly understand the motivation to expose students to the canonical greats of art history, I have not seen many opportunities for students to engage with works that demand to be difficult in our world today. At one time, Picasso was seen as a great revolutionary, breaking the established rules of art repeatedly to create his work. Although he consciously dissented from the norms of the artworld at that time, today his work is seen as far from difficult to most individuals, both children and adults alike. If one considers the National Core Arts Standards, genuine artistic learning experiences are emphasized when planning lessons for the art classroom. How is one to practice authentic ways of seeing, thinking, and making if not considering the authentic works of art from our world today?

Before moving forward, it is imperative to define two key terms that are utilized hereinafter. First, *difficult works* is the term I selected to describe the qualities of the artwork that is incorporated in this study. *Difficult*, and its etymons, has existed as a verb, an adjective, and a noun since the Middle English period (1150–1500) (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2023). The word *difficult* as a verb has an interesting etymology, stemming from multiple roots from at least the 13th century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* provides us with the following three etymons:

> 1. Difficulter (15th century Middle French), to make difficult in the sense to consider (something) carefully, 2. Difficulatre (post-classical Latin), to make difficult in the sense of to obstruct, and 3. Difficoltare (16th century, Italian), to make something difficult in the sense of causing problems for an individual or a group.

In other words, *difficult* has been used to describe an action that thoughtfully engages or interferes with and makes trouble for a person or group of people. Although rarely used today, this definition nicely describes the aim of this study as well as how the selected works themselves act out. Today, we most often utilize difficult as an adjective, defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary* (2023) as:

> "1. Not easy.
> - 1.a. Of a thing: requiring much effort or skill to deal with; presenting obstacles to progress or accomplishment.
> - 1.b. Of an action, undertaking, practice, etc.: requiring much effort or skill to do, carry out, or accomplish. Frequently with anticipatory it, often with to-infinitive, as it is difficult to.
> - 1.c. Hard to understand, answer, or explain; perplexing; complex, obscure.
> - 1.d. Of a situation, circumstance, period of time, etc.: characterized by or causing hardship or problems; adverse, troublesome; tricky, awkward."

To maintain clarity and consistency, I used the term *difficult works* to describe artwork that subverts, challenges, and/or dissents from established understandings of art and/or the world as it exists currently. *Difficult works* include artwork that supplants the norm within the realm of art as it is understood, whether it be through materials, ideas, presentation, or any other means.

Additionally, *disobedience*, specifically *artistic disobedience*, is defined here as a practice that intentionally sets out to utilize art as a way to challenge an individual's or a group's set knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs. Put another way, the practice of artistic disobedience is meant to subvert the ideologies of both the consensus and the singular. *Difficult works* are created under this conception of artistic disobedience. Pedagogies relating to the practice of artistic disobedience and the incorporation of difficult works are defined here as *disobedience-based art education*. This is discussed further in Chapter 2, Literature Review.

Justification: Personal Suitability

My goal as an artist and educator has always been to provide experiences to explore, create, and question as artists do. It is important to understand how artwork can disrupt, and has disrupted the norm, from one movement to the next throughout the history of art. This comprehension is necessary for arriving at new understandings and new ways of thinking, making, and experiencing art as well as the world within which art exists. My own most impactful educational experience as a student was studying with the late artist Jeffrey K. Fisher. I attended his life drawing, location, and picture-making classes from late high school, throughout undergrad, and beyond. What was so important about his pedagogy was that he demanded problem solving as he instilled a thirst for identifying our own artists to add to our own bodies of knowledge. Each Sunday, through hours of difficult life-drawing challenges, from five pounds of bologna in a three-pound bag (a spatial manipulation exercise) to drawing with our feet, we were expected to steal from the artist books we were required to bring in order to figure out what to say within our art and how to say it by ourselves. Fisher's exploratory, problem-solving approach to teaching, along with his emphasis on the works of adult artists, was drastically different from any of my public school experiences and changed how I see the world. The works that I first found in my library searches to bring to class were often difficult and have greatly impacted my own artmaking practice. My connection to contemporary difficult works has led me to think about how my students might potentially arrive at similar or even different outcomes than those I experienced.

In addition to my interest in introducing students to difficult contemporary works of art that are representative of the world in which we currently live, I am also focused on how to best provide experiences for students to challenge their own prior knowledge and beliefs in order to

form their own new understandings. From what I have witnessed, some educators are compelled by existing frameworks in schools to keep alive a teaching philosophy that is focused on the teacher as the keeper of information—in other words, a modernist and, frankly, outdated approach. This top-down distribution of knowledge lacks opportunities for students to create meaning while viewing works as well as to create works that are meaningful to them. While many teachers in the United States are also devoted to best practices in art education and are continuously providing authentic opportunities to create knowledge, I suggest that the notion of incorporating difficult works of art into the American high school art classroom warrants further investigation. This observation has led me to seek out alternative pedagogies that reject the teacher as explicator and give power to the students to take charge of their learning, while also considering the role of difficult works of art in society.

My search for other pedagogies revealed the theoretical work of Jacques Rancière. Rancière's (1991) view is that knowledge is not created from personal reflection; rather, knowledge is formed from pushing back against understood boundaries and accepted norms. In other words, students are challenged to create their own knowledge rather than having a teacher instruct them on what to do and how to do it (Rancière, 1991). This theory provides an alternative to what Efland (1976) described as the *school art style* approach to art education, where the teacher decides on the project and all student work looks similar. Although Efland coined this term in the 1970s, this style still exists in too many of today's art classrooms, further justifying the need for change. Although this method of delivering knowledge to students may be easier for teachers to practice, I feel it is more important to create an environment for students to challenge what they know through their art. It is not only my opinion that student learning in the art room should not focus on mimicry. Through conversations I have had with students, I

realized that they are far more interested in identifying and following their own intellectual pursuits than in creating imitative works.

As I continued my research, I came across Skregelid's (2020) study of students responding to difficult works of art in a museum in Norway. This work was particularly interesting to me because it related to my knowledge of students as well as my personal interests in art. Skregelid found that by exposing students to challenging works of art, students confront, disrupt, and reform both their own knowledge and society's understandings, thereby creating new thought. In addition, I have often observed high school students perform acts of dissidence, perhaps to test limits and develop an understanding of the world around them. Such acts include simply arriving late to class every day; however, other acts such as boasting about vandalism with spray paint at the local train station or being insubordinate by refusing to follow instructions in class are seen as more severe acts of disobedience. Thus, it seems natural to share artwork that in itself challenges boundaries as adolescents naturally do.

I have always had a personal interest in artwork that is deemed dissident, beginning with first learning about Marcel Duchamp when I was in high school. His difficult works entirely reformed my belief of what art was, what art is, and, most importantly, what art might be. This is why I feel this introduction was incredibly important in shaping myself as an artist and an individual. Based on these experiences, I feel strongly about the need for this investigation. Rancière (1991) argued for the emancipation of students from teachers who hold the knowledge and power. Atkinson (2008) described today's curricula as being subject to centralized state control which is not responsive to individual learners' needs. Atkinson argued that teachers must practice disobedience themselves in order to break away from irrelevant state standards. These

ideas resonated with me as an educator, motivating me to explore how they can be applied in the high school setting.

My consideration of Judith Burton's (2011; Burton & Bildstein, 2010) work investigating adolescent artistic development cemented, for me, the intrinsic connection between teenage art students and difficult works of art. Burton argued that students are naturally interested in the topics of subversion and dissent, as demonstrated in the artwork they make for themselves. This work illuminated my own experience (and that of almost everyone I know, for that matter), as I was that adolescent who was preoccupied with defying the norm, both with my work and with my sense of self.

I have observed the stunting of critical thinking and problem-solving skills as well as a lack of voice in high school student work, which I attribute to a teacher-centered approach to education. From my observations, students struggle with creating meaning within their work. They also lack knowledge of contemporary artwork. Instruction instead focuses on the teacher deciding parameters for student work, with particular emphasis on achieving hyper-realist imagery working from photographs. With this study, then, I intended to explore the impact of difficult works of art on students' abilities to make meaning and create new knowledge without explanation. In addition, by examining works of art that deviate from the norm, students may gain the ability to think and create in new ways that challenge what art is, what it does, and what is understood by the consensus. I have long sought methods on how to provide opportunities for students to practice artistic disobedience in the art classroom and, with that, be able to experience the spark that comes with it. I hope this study will lead to further studies of disobedient-based approaches incorporating subversive works of art and bring greater awareness to the theoretical

work of Rancière, Atkinson, Burton, and others who focus on disobedience in art, education, and art education.

My reflections on my own educational experience in the art room as well as my observations of art classrooms today have raised concerns about some dated practices in secondary art education. The students themselves have described, without prompts, the deficits of classically oriented art rooms. In candid conversations with high school students, more than one individual has expressed how art should be more free, and there were often too many rules about how they were expected to approach their artmaking. These comments were my motivation in considering the need for this investigation and the formation of the following problem statement.

Problem Statement

Considering my personal experiences and reflections, the problem I see from my observations as a high school art teacher in the United States is that secondary students have a limited ability to create works of art that are both meaningful and challenging, based on their own experiences. From what we know of development, adolescents are no strangers to disturbance. According to research conducted by Judith Burton (2011), at this phase of development, we can see this disturbance in the works of art the students make for themselves. Using doodles and sketchbooks, students question established values and structures, grapple with internal contradictions of identity formation, challenge authority, and seek independence strongly. Terms such as *dissensus* and *artistic disobedience* have been utilized by philosopher Jacques Rancière and art education researcher Dennis Atkinson to represent the acts of questioning and rejecting understood norms of society in favor of creating one's own new knowledge. Additionally, art history has shown us that in order to create new knowledge—for

instance, new movements of art—the consensus of work at the time must be challenged and expectations ruptured. To create an authentic studio experience for students, critical appraisals of difficult works of art might play a role in the development of new knowledge. It seems only natural to suspect that adolescents might find interest in difficult works of art because the art functions to challenge the majority, just as the students tend to do. Perhaps it is within the discussion of difficult works of art that students might be able to gain the ability to make sense of their own lived experiences through the creation of their own challenging works.

Research Question

It is within the careful consideration of these thoughts that I developed the following research question: What are the potential benefits and challenges of discussing difficult works of art with secondary art students in a suburban public school in New York? Additionally, the following two subquestions emerged:

- How might students' views of art's function change after being introduced to difficult work?
- How might discussions of challenging works of art contribute to changes in how students understand themselves, make art, and are sensitive to the world around them?

It is my hope that a longitudinal case study might begin to illuminate the context from which my research questions emerged. This study focused on one class of advanced art students enrolled in a portfolio preparation class. This study was designed within a set of assumptions about the participants. It is necessary to define the assumptions I lay out before the study so that what we already know about the topic and what I suspect I might learn by the conclusion of this study are clear.

Assumptions

To frame the study with what I have already found to be true and what I found as a consequence of carrying this study out, I list below the assumptions that are and are not to be debated:

Assumptions Not to Be Debated

- Adolescent students are interested in subversion and challenging authority. Students have expressed to me, unprompted, that they do not like too many rules, both in art and in general.
- Advanced art students are interested in artmaking and discussions about art. Students would not be included in an advanced class without taking multiple art classes prior to and demonstrating success in these classes.
- Students have the ability to use artmaking as a way for them to make sense of their world. Research has shown that students create art, even if on their own free time, to understand events and environments around them (Burton, 2011).
- Students have been limited by their teachers or other school authority figures in their ability to create "subversive" works in the secondary classroom setting. I have witnessed teachers reacting negatively towards students who have drawn difficult images, including referring them to administration.
- Adolescent students will find the works selected for this study to be challenging, subversive, and/or difficult. Images will be selected with a group of art educators who understand adolescents and artwork and are already familiar with such work.

Assumptions to Be Debated

- Students will engage in conversations about subversive artwork to arrive at their own understandings of the works. In informal conversations with my own students, students were eager to share their thoughts about works they found shocking.
- Students will gain an expanded view of art's function in society. They will be provided with opportunities to see work they have never engaged with before.
- Students' own understandings of the world, and further artmaking, will be impacted by discussing difficult works of art. With interest in an expanded personal definition of art, students will find themselves approaching their own artmaking differently.
- Adolescent students naturally create their own difficult works, which makes them sensitive to subversive works within adult contemporary art culture.

Educational Aims

This work is important to both adolescent art students and art teachers in New York and beyond. This study investigated how teachers in schools might provide experiences for students to expand their idea of what art is, connect with contemporary works through their own interest in subversion, and expand how they approach their own artmaking. In addition, students might broaden their ability to make sense of the world around them through their work. The goal was to find pedagogical methods that invite dissent, giving students a firsthand experience of the spark it creates. In other words, students will learn of contemporary artists and their work; this expansion of their knowledge of art may lead to new perspectives on the role of artwork.

Additionally, students might adopt a new approach to their artmaking by challenging the consensus or disobeying any sort of set norms in artmaking or in their lives. Teachers may use the study to promote/argue for alternative approaches to high school art education, particularly

utilizing this approach to bolster critical thinking skills. It is my hope that this study will lead to additional studies of the role of difficult work in art education and bring greater awareness to the work of Rancière, Burton, and Atkinson.

In Chapter 2, I provide a literature review to inform the body of knowledge surrounding this problem and my research question.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In this literature review, I first explore thoughts on art education in the United States, specifically highlighting problems that currently exist to justify the need for change. The discussion then moves into what artistic disobedience is and how artists practice disobedience in their work. Once an understanding of artistic disobedience is established, I then introduce theories of disobedience in education and art education, tying in how artistic disobedience relates to teaching and learning. Artistic disobedience is connected with the artistic development of adolescents to explain how difficult works of art fit within a secondary art classroom. Following this connection between adolescent development and artistic disobedience, a variety of studies implementing a disobedience-based approach is examined, each study highlighted for its implementation of the approach as well as for how it illustrates the gap in the knowledge focusing specifically on secondary students in the U.S. art classroom. After this examination, I discuss seemingly related practices to define further what disobedience-based art education is and is not. Lastly, I review the overall gap in the knowledge and connect prior research to what is missing from the body of knowledge on this topic.

Why Do We Need Change in Today's Art Education Practices?

Beyond my firsthand experience working in a secondary school and forming my own opinions on the necessity of systemic change, there has been moving literature advocating for revisions to ineffective practices in education that follow what Efland (1976) described as *the school art style*. School art is a type of art created in a school and directed and influenced by a teacher (Efland, 1976). Efland provided a sarcastic yet effective description of the typical outlook of a teacher trapped in teaching the school art style:

> What the child may have on his mind for his expression may be the Snoopy symbol in Peanuts, but such manifestations need to be discouraged by the teacher who alone knows what the art of children should look like and, what's more, knows how to get it to look like that. (p. 42)

In this quotation, Efland (1976) effectively captured the view of a teacher's practice which is all too common in the United States. The requirements of the school art style are as follows: cognitive efforts are not required; art should be made in a short time; the art utilizes materials that should be easily controlled with low skill requirements; and minimal stylistic influences of relevant material for the student or what the student wishes to create (Efland, 1976). Art in schools serves as a guise that schools are offering an individualized, well-rounded democratic education; however, covertly, schools are training students to accept authority. The school art style does not relate to the practices of professional artists; rather, it reflects the rigidity and intention of schools to prime students to accept social roles required by society (Efland, 1976). Although these thoughts are dated, and many teachers practice progressive methods to promote critical thinking that do not reflect Efland's description, I have seen this practice firsthand at both the elementary and secondary levels. The teachers who I have seen subscribe to this style of teaching also appear to be overly authoritarian in the general management and workings of their classrooms.

Most schools follow modernist approaches to art education which focus on accountability, measurement of student understanding, and standardization of procedures (Thompson, 2015). Students have little to no choice in the work they create in American schools (Gates, 2016). This is in direct contrast to contemporary postmodern art education theory that knowledge emerges from the students' experiences, shifting away from one-size-fits-all instruction and singular, correct, teacher-led outcomes (Thompson, 2015). Students are rarely allowed to explore meaning-making from their own experiences and are barred from genuine

relevant learning through the world around them. American art education has been described as nothing more than brief investigations that culminate in the production of a project that is similar to the work of others in the class (Thompson, 2015). Although I agree that these notions and circumstances exist in American classrooms, it is important to note again that I also think many teachers are doing good work and fostering student-centered environments that promote exploration and critical thinking.

For teachers who continue to practice in these dated, autocratic approaches, it may be a challenge to shift from the teacher-as-master model in schools, especially in schools focusing on testing. Although this is by nature difficult for teachers, it is vital that educators allow students to make choices about their own learning (Gates, 2016).

Studies have shown that rejecting a teaching model of mimicry that is common in U.S. schools benefits student learning. Critical thinking exercises within the art classroom lead to significant increases in average critical thinking skills as well as student motivation (Gates, 2016; Lampert, 2013). For example, in a mixed-methods study of an afterschool elementary program, students were asked to respond to the big idea of identity. Students were shown a variety of artists' work as possibilities of the types of artmaking they could utilize (Lampert, 2013). The results showed that each student solved this problem differently, which led to gains in critical thinking capabilities (Lampert 2013). This approach was in direct contrast to the teacher-led, step-by-step instruction of many American art classrooms. Although schools strive to emphasize a facade of their democratic nature, the organization is far closer to the hierarchy of the corporation (Efland, 1976).

What Is Artistic Disobedience? What Forms Does Disobedience Take in Art, Within Artists, and Artmaking?

Before one can begin examining what disobedience-based art education is, one must first understand how disobedience is enacted within the practices of artists and their work. Throughout history, artists have challenged accepted ways of thinking about and making art in order to create new movements, methods, and ideas. Before looking at disobedient artists and their work, though, I would like to define the term *aesthetic disobedience*, or acts that break from artworld norms in order to focus the viewer's attention on reforming the artworld and the greater community surrounding it (Neufeld, 2015). Much like the definition of artistic means "of relating to, or characteristic of art or artists," *artistic disobedience* challenges assumed characteristics of art and the roles of artists which have been created within the culture. In other words, artists disobey accepted rules governing art, resulting in the transformation of what art is and how it functions. For purposes of this study, aesthetic disobedience and artistic disobedience may be used interchangeably. Having established a full definition of artistic disobedience, I now discuss past movements of art that were seen as disobedient as well as notable dissident artists from art history. This section concludes with both artists and art practices at work today that represent artistic disobedience.

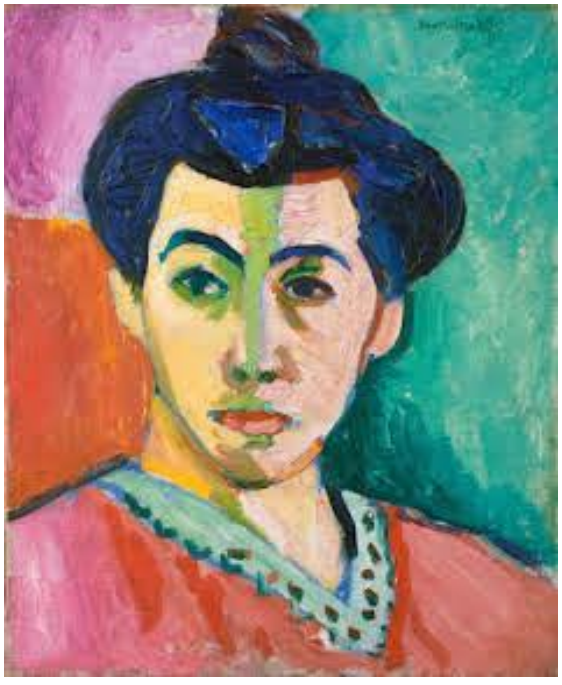
Disobedience in Movements of Art

Considering the above definition of artistic disobedience, it is possible to consider the inception of every new movement of art as being rooted in dissent. For instance, Fauvism, a well-known movement in western art, was in direct opposition to society's view of art at the time. Fauvism describes the work of a group of artists working in France between 1905 and 1907 (Chilvers, 2022b) who were chastised by the community for their bright and unnaturalistic colors, bold and visible brushwork, and application of paint directly from the tube instead of

mixing colors (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). The Fauvist artists earned their name from a local critic who described their work as being like wild beasts, or Fauves in French (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Rather than cease their challenge of the norms of painting at the time, the artists proudly adopted their newly given name and led the way as the first Avant-garde movement of art of the 1900s in Europe; thus, their disobedience to the norm created new knowledge (Chilvers, 2022b). Matisse, perhaps the most prominent artist in the group, painted a *Portrait of Madame Matisse*, alternatively titled *The Green Stripe*, in 1905 (see Figure 1). This painting embodies the departure from previous works in the artworld, declaring that an artist could use color freely and not be held to the limits of natural appearance (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Put another way, Matisse was redistributing the sensible by rupturing the accepted knowledge of colors needed to mimic reality.

Figure 1

Portrait of Madame Matisse (The Green Stripe) (Matisse, 1905)



Statens Museum for Kunst, Copenhagen, Denmark.

A second movement of art comes to mind when considering artistic disobedience—the defiant works of Dada. This movement, beginning in 1916, has uncertain origins, but the name Dada is believed to be a term that came to describe the chaos created in Cabaret Voltaire, a meeting place in Zurich for people to be free to assault existing beliefs and values openly (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). The performance space was open to all who wished to disobey. One example of this is a photograph taken of German writer Hugo Ball in 1916. Ball brought abstract poetry to the stage while acting in a cardboard costume. Ball chanted syllables that had no meaning as a way to oppose conventional language in poetry and make space for new understandings of the art form (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). A wave of artists, writers, and free thinkers landed in Switzerland in 1915 after being displaced by World War I, with the goal of attacking the assumptions of what art and literature were at the time (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Their goal was to disobey, to destroy not only the state of art but the state of the world at war. The Dadaists were searching for a new way of creating and being by transgressing the current state of society (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). In other words, Dadaists wished to shatter the beliefs of the rational culture of the time, the society that brought on the disastrous war and led to so much death and destruction (Lewer, 2016). The Dadaists felt they must disobey all beliefs of the society that forced them to flee their countries and live as exiles rather than participate in a war for a broken, misguided culture; their art communicated dissent. Works were anti-bourgeois, destructive, and explosive, using materials such as garbage and processes such as collage to reject society in every way. The next section focuses on individual artists who have practiced artistic disobedience, starting in the time of the Dadaist movement.

Difficult Artwork of the Past and the Artists Who Created Them

Not only did groups of artists in a movement practice artistic disobedience; individual artists have also disrupted the consensus with their difficult works throughout the course of history. One of the most noted artists known for disobedience, Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), thrived in challenging the artworld at the time. Duchamp's *Readymades* broke away from what was seen as what art should be and caused a major disruption within the artworld (Atkinson, 2012; Neufeld, 2015). *Fountain, 1917* (see Figure 2) is one of Duchamp's most well-known *Readymades*, yet it was rejected by the Society of Independent Artists when he submitted it for exhibition (Chilvers, 2022a). These works were composed of salvaged commercial objects, at times combined in unusual ways. With these pieces, Duchamp disobeyed the norms of materials of art, the artist's craftsmanship to manipulate these materials, and the meaning-making behind the work (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Additionally, Duchamp rejected the idea that art had to be visually pleasing in favor of the notion that artwork functions for the mind (MoMA Learning, 2022). While the European Dadaists were focused on challenging the war, New York Dadaists, such as Duchamp, targeted the art establishment as they saw the need for change.

Duchamp was another artist who fled from the war but instead of going to Switzerland, he chose New York as his refuge, as did other European artists. Here, he practiced within the realm of Dadaism but was not focused on challenging World War I. Rather, he specifically set out to defy art itself. His dissent from the culture of the time was expressed in his mocking of the work included in museums and galleries. Duchamp intentionally made works designed to overthrow the art historical canon, as evident in his painting *L.H.O.O.Q.*, where he paints a mustache and goatee on a postcard of da Vinci's revered Mona Lisa. The added letters on the bottom of the postcard, when said aloud in French, sound like "Elle a chaud au cul," which

Figure 2

Fountain, 1917 (Duchamp)

Sculpture, replica 1974. Tate Modern, London.

translates into English as “There is fire down below” (Norton Simon Museum, 2022). Duchamp had essentially defaced the Mona Lisa with vulgar graffiti, transforming the world’s most famous painting into a crude joke.

These works were created in a time and an environment that could not be easily understood within the existing frameworks of knowledge (Atkinson, 2008). Duchamp’s work led to the creation of new knowledge and an expansion of understanding what art is. By utilizing unconventional materials, challenging ideas, and breaking through this understanding of art, Duchamp’s work became the new knowledge or the new art. In reflection, this practice of disobeying ideas of what art is and how art is made is imperative to foster in the art classroom.

Following Duchamp, one finds the difficult work of Joseph Beuys (1921–1986), a German artist known for his controversial materials and perplexing performances (Arnason &

Kalb, 2004). After surviving a plane crash in World War II, Beuys set out to change the way art and life were seen by merging them together as one (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Beuys specifically set out to transform the idea of art by rejecting what was seen as typical artmaking media in favor of unorthodox materials, primarily his repeated use of animal fat and felt in his work (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). The use of these materials had significant meaning for the artist. Beuys wrapped himself in fat and felt to symbolize the medicinal rituals of the Crimean nomads who had healed him after his plane crash. The fat and felt also symbolized common materials in everyday life that can be used for artmaking and represented the idea that art and life are inseparable (Arnason & Kalb, 2004).

One of Beuys's most significant pieces is his performance, *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, which was created in 1965 in a gallery in Dusseldorf (see Figure 3). Beuys sat himself within the gallery, his head covered in gold leaf and honey. Familiar materials such as fat, felt, wire, and wood surrounded him (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Cradled in his arms was a taxidermied hare to which he began to whisper as he roamed the gallery for hours. The performance ended with the artist seated on a stool, back to the audience, and still cradling the hare (Antliff, 2014). Beuys explained that the performance pointed out the complexities of feeling that one experiences when viewing a morbid piece. Humans naturally reacted to the dead hare which removed the space between life and art (Arnason & Kalb, 2004).

In this work and others, Beuys set out to disobey accepted boundaries of artmaking and, by doing so, created new understandings of what art is and how it functions (Antliff, 2014). His difficult work serves as another example of how art challenges the viewer and art norms—in short, artistic disobedience.

Figure 3

How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare (Beuys, 1965)

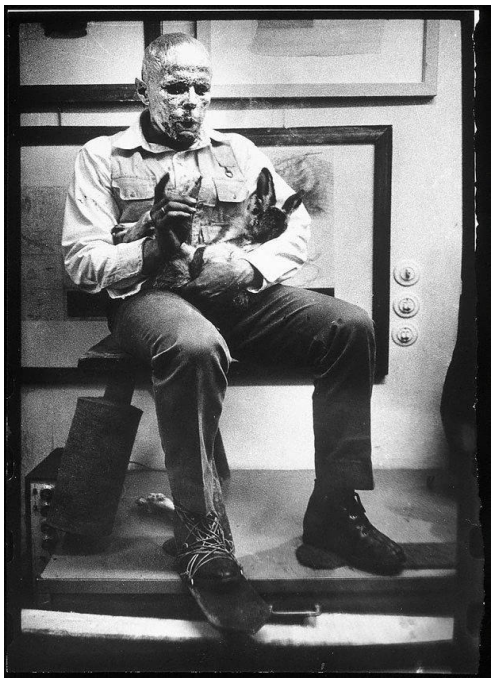


Photo by Ute Klophaus

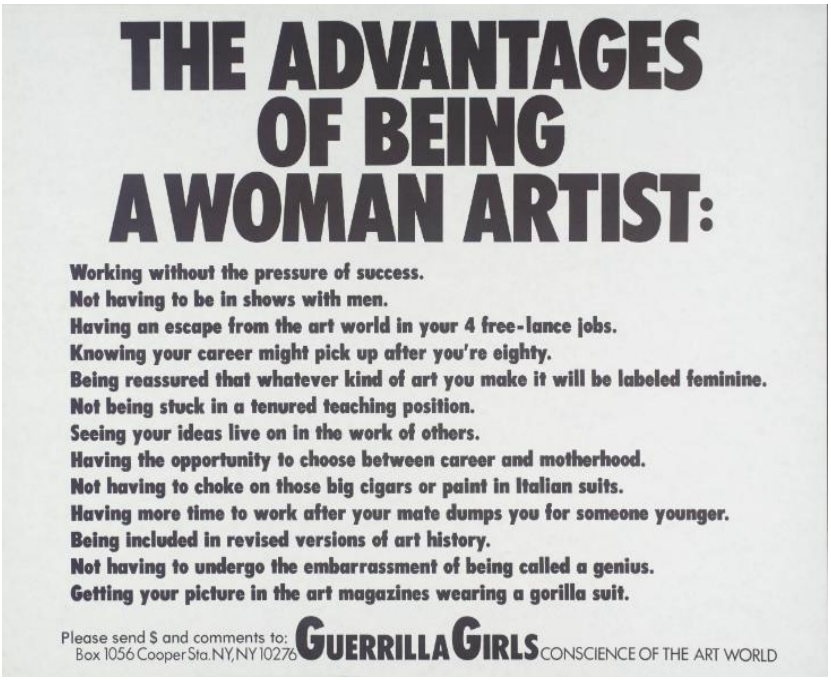
About two decades after *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* was performed, Andres Serrano (b. 1950) overturned the artworld with his piece, *Piss Christ* (1987)—an infamous photograph of a crucifix immersed in urine. The image is dramatically lit, with a vibrant red background. The crucifix, submerged in the tank of urine, appears to emit a soft glow (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Serrano intentionally provoked viewers because the urine was unrecognizable as an element in the photograph until the title was read (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Serrano clearly intended to disobey and disrupt the consensus and was indeed successful (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Much political controversy ensued, including accusations of the impudence of contemporary artists and questions on the boundaries of free speech in the First Amendment (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Many were more enraged that the artist had received a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Although the image

disobeyed art and social norms, the artist intended to connect the urine as Christ's body fluid, just as wine represented Jesus's blood and water his tears (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). This work pushed artistic disobedience past the consensus into new notions of art.

The last artist from the past discussed here is an anonymous collective of artists, Guerrilla Girls. Considered a political activist group, Guerrilla Girls began creating work in 1985, making public appearances dressed in ape costumes to maintain their anonymity (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). This feminist group created a slew of images that looked like typical advertisements but were infused with content relating to the politics of gender, particularly how gender impacted women's inclusion in the artworld (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). These posters and advertisements were pasted all over cities—in itself, an act of disobedience (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Guerrilla Girls worked to redistribute the sensible or point out the unfair exclusion of women in the artworld, especially those few represented in galleries and museums or important roles in the world of art (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). In one particular poster from 1988, Guerrilla Girls listed the advantages of being a woman artist but sarcastically noted the unfair distribution of power in the artworld. Ironic statements such as "having the opportunity to choose between career and motherhood" highlighted their goal of naming and subverting the consensus that polices women artists (see Figure 4). The art by Guerrilla Girls ranged from posters and billboards to lectures and even a website, www.guerrillagirls.com (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Beginning their disobedient practices in the 1980s, the anonymous collective is still active today. This group clearly uses art to disobey the culture, including the artworld, and highlight its problems. Now we move on to other contemporary works displaying artistic disobedience.

Figure 4

The Advantages of Being a Woman Artist (Guerrilla Girls, 1988)



Tate Modern, London

Disobedience and Difficult Works in the Artworld Today

Building on the past, artists today continue to practice disobedience in the creation of difficult works. Street artists and graffiti writers pursue artistic disobedience because their work challenges the norm of how artwork is typically disseminated, displayed, and sold in the artworld (Neufeld, 2015). In other words, the work is within the community and is seen by the community, thus preventing institutions such as museums and galleries from collecting it or making it marketable (Neufeld, 2015). The roots of graffiti were planted in the 1960s in large cities like New York City, Philadelphia, and Los Angeles. Tags and throws were scribbled and sprayed across trains, walls, and other unsanctioned areas. The consensus saw these images as nothing more than pure destruction, yet if one looks back to the marks made by the artists

Pollock, DuBuffet, and Twombly, there is a direct connection between their work and that of the graffiti artists (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). The energetic expression of line and movement captured in the artwork of both fine artists and graffiti artists refutes the idea that the tags are solely vandalism.

Not until 1983 was graffiti first shown in exhibition spaces, one at the Boymans-van Beuningen museum in Rotterdam and another in a show organized by Sidney Janis, a monumental dealer of contemporary art (Arnason & Kalb, 2004). Since the 1983 exhibitions, street art and graffiti have become even more prominent, yet are still disobedient in materials, actions, and intent. Since then, local governments have not ceased in the policing of young writers, arresting individuals and buffing walls (Museum of Graffiti, 2022). Unconventional media such as spray paint, commercial paint, wheatpaste, fire extinguishers, etching fluids, rollers, and other atypical media and tools are utilized in ways antithetical to accepted artmaking methods. Moreover, street artists continue to challenge the laws of the spaces they inhabit by trespassing and then vandalizing both private and public spaces where they can create. Street artists and graffiti writers are in a constant state of resisting governance and disobeying rules of the consensus to push the boundaries of how art is understood, but they are not the only individuals challenging laws and government with their art practice.

Contemporary Chinese artist, documentarian, and activist Ai Weiwei (b. 1957) focuses on disrupting the artworld as well as the political world in China (Atkinson, 2012; Neufeld, 2015). As a child, the artist struggled in poor living conditions after his father was exiled from China (Tate, n.d.). Although seen as dangerous and subversive, Ai Weiwei's work has criticized the Chinese government, specifically on issues related to human rights and democracy (Tate, n.d.).

Ai Weiwei's alteration of 2000-year-old Han dynasty vases which he dipped in paint and photographed dropping are a prime example of his work disturbing both art and society in order to promote change (see Figure 5). In another work as part of an installation, Ai Weiwei strapped together children's backpacks to mourn the deaths of children; in the same space, children's names filled a wall as they were spoken on recorded audio, representing those who perished in China's poorly built schools after an earthquake struck. Both of these works were included in the 2013 exhibition, *According to What?* along with other challenging materials, such as rebar, to transgress the rules of art and political control. As a viewer of the exhibition, I was very aware not only of the overtly subversive qualities of the work but also of the reactions of other museum visitors, ranging from confusion to intrigue and frustration. Ai Weiwei has been beaten, arrested, and detained in China for his subversive and political works of art. In 2011, the Chinese government arrested Ai Weiwei, alleging economic crimes. He was held in prison without any charges for 81 days before he was released (Tate, n.d.). Despite these retaliations by the government, Ai Weiwei continues to challenge the consensus through his art—in this case, the police state of China. His works of art often incorporate Chinese art forms to further his disobedient intentions and confront the government (Tate, n.d.).

As demonstrated above, subversive and difficult artwork addressing the time in which it is made and exists functions as a continual interrogation of what is understood to be an artist, art material, artistic process, object, and viewer (Atkinson, 2012). Specifically, artists create their work to challenge a part of the artworld and the consensus of the world around them.

Not only does the artwork function for the artist as a way to disobey, but the artwork gives the viewer an opportunity to practice disobedience as well. By discussing subversive works, one exercises democracy in a safe and meaningful way (Skregelid, 2021). Contemporary

Figure 5

According to What? (Ai Weiwei, 2013)

From top to bottom: *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995/2009; *Colored Vases*, 2007-2010. Installation view at Pérez Art Museum Miami.

art drives us to break through the boundaries of our existing understandings. As discussed later, researchers have used dissenting artwork to create a space for dissensus among the participants. A bridge between the artist and the viewer is that of education and pedagogy. However, before considering how to marry difficult artwork with pedagogy, it is important to understand why it is relevant and potentially necessary for adolescent art students.

What Connection Is There Between Difficult Works of Art and Adolescent Artistic Development?

In thinking about adolescence, an adult might recall at least one instance of breaking a rule, challenging authority, disobeying the powers-that-be, and perhaps even enjoying it. Such acts of defiance are hallmark moments in how adolescents grapple with themselves to develop

their sense of identity and place within a chaotic world. Erik Erikson (1970) defined adolescence as "a critical phase marked by the reciprocal aggravation of internal conflict and of societal disorganization" (p. 6). He discussed a new emergence of dissent, "a revolt of the dependent," with the dependent being identified collectively as youth as a developmental phase, those who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and those who are politically underserved. The revolt of the dependent is a head-on opposition of established gateways that guard and filter the path into the major realm of society (Erikson, 1970). In other words, adolescents actively challenge the consensus by rejecting the expectations of the adult majority, placing emphasis on navigating through their own frameworks. At the time he wrote his article in 1970, Erikson named musical events, political revolt, and experiments in communal environments as examples of these new adolescent-defined "ritualized self-graduations." Thinking to today, these adolescent-determined and ever-changing self-graduations may take the forms of interest in difficult works of music, art, fashion, and culture, all rejections of the majority in addition to overall political and social dissenting acts.

Focusing on artistic adolescent development, the artwork that teenagers make for themselves can most certainly be difficult. When I discussed this topic with my secondary art teacher colleagues, all could recall instances when student artwork was so challenging that it caused some level of discomfort for the viewer. Images of weapons, injury, and death were some examples that were described. These difficult works, made by adolescents, are natural during this developmental phase of artistic development (Burton, 2011). Combining the work of Piaget, Lowenfeld, Erikson, and other theorists, Burton (2011) defined the adolescent phase as a shift to a new understanding of multiple views of the world; with that shift comes instability and confusion, leading to the questioning of the adult world (p. 6). As teenagers frequently re-

examine themselves and those around them, they may struggle with parents and teachers, among others, especially with independence, and these struggles may emerge in their music, poetry, dress, slang, and doodles (Burton, 2011). Put another way, students are practicing disobedience and expressing these thoughts through the artwork they create for themselves.

These doodles, sketches, even public visual expressions such as graffiti allow students to play outside of the expectations that are typical of secondary art classrooms (Burton, 2011). Within these self-directed images, adolescents can combine multiple styles, experiences, and ideas to represent themselves and the conflicts they are working through as they continuously refine their identities. Burton (2011) described these personal drawings as "transformational images," or images that begin as play, with many influences coming from comics, cartoons, album covers, and movies; they serve as artifacts of the transformation of thinking itself. Transformational works can be very difficult, depicting violent and/or sexual representations, and are usually "emotionally charged, for they deal with issues of identity, sexuality, ambiguity, power, loss and body vulnerability" (p. 15).

Finally, the works of multiple, well-known adult artists can be seen as having visual connections with adolescent transformational images (Burton, 2011). Surrealist painters have juxtaposed unusual images within a canvas to question reality and reveal similar qualities to adolescent personal art (Burton, 2011). Pop artists take references directly from contemporary culture, such as advertisements and cartoons, just as adolescents do, and manipulate them to create new understandings of the world. Burton (2011) explained the role of popular culture in contemporary art and its impact on adolescent artistic development as follows:

> Possibilities for image play distilled from popular culture and mature art respond to the new feelings, insights and critical appraisals of self and world that youngsters experience every day. They come to realize that not all is as it seems, and that visual

> appearance often masks other realities. They experience this within themselves as they come to understand that their physical presence in the world masks another self, often hidden and vulnerable to others. (p. 15)

In other words, it is through the work of mature artists that adolescents can further the exploration of their own conflicts in the creation of transformational images. The work of mature artists can be as equally difficult to view as adolescent work because these pieces also intend to question the culture and world of the time, just as adolescents themselves naturally do.

Now that the connection between difficult works of mature artists and adolescent artistic development has been established, it is necessary to visit the work of theorists who incorporate disobedience, artistic disobedience, and difficult works into how one learns and how one approaches pedagogy.

How Is Artistic Disobedience Theorized in Education? In Art Education?

Theoretical work that investigates the role of disobedience in art and art education has been applied to multiple studies (Ciampaglia, 2013; Johansen, 2020; Kotin et al., 2013; Low & Proietti, 2020; Park, 2019; Skregelid, 2020). These studies specifically focused on Rancière's theory of *dissensus* and Atkinson's *pedagogy against the state* in order to frame their work. Both Rancière and Atkinson discussed the disruption of existing politics, understandings, and norms; embraced the role of subversive artwork within culture; and challenged the role of the teacher (Atkinson, 2008, 2012, 2021; Rancière, 1991, Rancière & Corcoran, 2010). While Rancière discussed both art and education in his work, Atkinson specifically focused on art education.

Philosophy Behind Disobedience-Based Education: Jacques Rancière

Before examining Rancière's work as it relates to disobedience in art education, I briefly introduce his background. Jacques Rancière (b. 1940) is a French philosopher whose work has been vastly influential on the philosophical topics of aesthetics, education, and politics (Duignan,

2022). Attending the École Normale Superieure, Rancière studied philosophy under the Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser (Duignan, 2022). Collaborating with Althusser and his peers, Rancière contributed to Lire "Le Capital'" in 1965, a text focusing on the work of Karl Marx and showing his devotion to his professor's work (Duignan, 2022). It was not until 1974 that Rancière broke from Althusser after the Paris uprising of May 1968 (Duignan, 2022). In this uprising, Rancière found that common people, such as students and workers, who were revolting were completely capable of identifying and freeing themselves from oppression (Duignan, 2022). This contrasted with Althusser's belief that common people needed the assistance of theorists to recognize and achieve emancipation (Duignan, 2022). Rancière's belief in the equality of intellectual capacities among all is an overarching theme in his philosophies and is important for understanding his theory of dissensus and, by extension, disobedience-based art education (Duignan, 2022).

Rancière's Theory of Dissensus.

> To explain something to someone is first of all to show him
> he cannot understand it by himself. (Rancière, 1991, p. 6)

Rancière (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010) explained how the distribution of the sensible, or known knowledge, can be ruptured by *dissensus*, thereby allowing for emancipation from the majority of society's accepted thoughts and ideas. In other words, by challenging accepted norms within knowledge, one breaks through to new knowledge created by oneself, not by being told what new knowledge is. This is bridged to how dissensus can break through dominant ways of representation in art as well as the logic that governs what is seen as accepted. Rancière's work on aesthetics and education focused on the individual's meaning-making and critique of the explanation (Brodén, 2020). Dissident works of art disobey the norms of how art may function at that time, creating new knowledge of what art is and what it does.

In addition, Rancière (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010) also discussed in his theory the disruption of politics. Rancière saw politics as the understandings of the majority within society that are disrupted with acts of dissensus, while aesthetics includes the predilections of the culture at the time. Considering this definition, as long as the existing logic of society is confronted, anything can be seen as politics and aesthetics (Park, 2019). Although Rancière did not connect art education to his theories of politics and aesthetics, these ideas can certainly be applied in the art room. Children participate in politics and aesthetics when challenging ideas imposed on them in art lessons (Park, 2019).

Similarly, Rancière's view of politics can be seen as the investigation of what pushes a person to act against understood norms to contradict the world (Siegesmund, 2016). This implies disobedience to established knowledge, those who police knowledge and sociopolitical norms (Siegesmund, 2016). One does not forge ideas from deep reflection within oneself. Ideas arrive as one pushes against the specificities and limitations of a specific notion, or the distribution of the sensible (Siegesmund, 2016). In other words, by disobeying the norms of society, one generates new thoughts of one's own, shifting the power back to the individual and away from the consensus.

Lastly, according to Rancière (1991), the role of the educator is to guide students' learning without being detected; the teacher is to keep students on their own route, the one route that only they themselves are following. Rancière gave an example of this in his text, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), in which he began with a story of Jacques Jacotot, a French teacher, who in 1818 had found himself in the difficult situation of having to teach in Belgium but with no knowledge of Flemish. Jacotot's solution was to ask the students to memorize *Telemaque*, a French literary classic, utilizing a copy of the French text with the Flemish

translation alongside. To Jacotot's astonishment, his students were able to comprehend and complete a review of the text in French without any instruction from him. Jacotot acted merely as a facilitator, simply ensuring the students stayed on track with their studies.

Rancière compared the achievement of Jacotot's students with that of children as they learn to speak. A baby is not born with the knowledge of his parent's language nor can the language be explained to the baby. However, by the child's own observation, repetition, and self-correction does the child acquire the language (Rancière, 1991). By allowing his students to learn for themselves instead of explicating to them, Jacotot became the emancipatory master, creating the circumstances under which the students could be emancipated from the lecturing educator (Rancière, 1991). The emancipatory master encourages the students to learn both independently and confidently. As Rancière (1991) stated, "the ignorant person will learn by himself what the master doesn't know if the master believes he can and obliges him to realize his capacity" (p. 15). Conversely, the teacher who makes the students dependent on themselves is a stultifying master, creating enforced stultification—a numbing experience in which students are lectured to and remain incapable of learning on their own (Rancière, 1991).

In summary, the teacher is not to impede on individuals' learning by limiting what they learn or how they learn it; rather, the teacher is involved to ensure that the students stay on track and to instill the self-confidence that students need to learn on their own. This is in direct opposition to the notion of a top-down teacher-as-explicator method of education.

Rancière's Role in Disobedience-Based Art Education. Rancière's work is distinguished from others by his emphasis on rejecting the boundaries of authority and accepted societal understandings (Lambert, 2012). He invited learners to defy discipline and the known to create new knowledge. His framework is regarded as having strong potential for critically

examining pedagogy and educational structures today (Lambert, 2012), making it particularly valuable for approaching art education in the United States. His theory of dissensus is specifically important when understanding a disobedient approach to art education. To rephrase Rancière's work, he asked individuals to disobey the structures that repress them, specifically educational systems that focus on the superiority of the teacher as the keeper of knowledge and the students as lacking the intellectual capacity to think on their own. When students disobey this false hierarchy and instead follow their own line of questioning, they are re-distributing the power of knowledge and becoming empowered to recognize their own capabilities to discover knowledge for themselves. Although Rancière's thoughts on dissensus apply to education and aesthetics, Dennis Atkinson, with his theory of pedagogy against the state, addressed art education specifically. His work on disobedience-based art education is discussed in the next section.

Theory Behind Disobedience-Based Art Education: Atkinson's Pedagogy Against the State

> Although school art practices understandably tend to rely on the security of tradition, such traditions bear little relation to contemporary social realities or to ways in which art practice, the artist and artwork are currently being developed to respond to these realities. (Atkinson & Dash, 2005, p. 15)

Dennis Atkinson is a researcher and Professor Emeritus at Goldsmiths University of London. His work is of importance to this literature review because it addresses disobedience in art education specifically, which to my knowledge is unique when searching for works on disobedience. Atkinson's work addresses pedagogy, curriculum policy, and governmental control as related to art education.

Atkinson (2011) built on Rancière's ideas of disobedience and challenged the consensus in arts education with his term *pedagogy against the state*. The definition of *state* holds multiple meanings in his work, specifically as "the state of being, the state of knowledge, and the state of

political control" (Atkinson, 2021, p. 10). Put another way, pedagogy against the state is the idea of creating ways of teaching and learning that disobey the consensus of society, the knowledge of the society, and the governance of society. Atkinson (2012) defined the act of learning as a jolt into the new as well as the possibilities of a reshaped world. To make a leap into the new, one must defy existing knowledge and modes of thought in order to achieve, as Atkinson noted, *real learning*. It is in the necessity of defiance that one can draw ties between Atkinson and Rancière, but Atkinson provided specific issues to be resolved in the realm of art education.

To achieve *real learning*, Atkinson (2012) called for a pedagogy against the state as an anti-pedagogy, which must move beyond its own knowledge to reveal new learning communities and new pedagogies. In other words, the educator rejects teacher-centered pedagogies in favor of encouraging students to break new ground, allowing students to find their own truths (Atkinson, 2012). An event of disobedience is when a student's artwork does not fit within the teacher's expectations, leading to a potential transformation of understanding for both student and teacher (Atkinson, 2021). As part of this pedagogy, the educator must understand the many ways that learners learn, some of which may be outside the teacher's teaching and artistic practice (Atkinson, 2021).

Atkinson (2012) also applied his theory to challenge state curriculum policy. Overarching, state-produced curricula tend to focus on outdated modes of teaching that simply do not respond or function in the realities of present-day society (Atkinson, 2012). The centralization of curricula and the mandated application of blanket standards, combined with outmoded teaching practices, are ineffective in response to our rapidly changing world (Atkinson, 2012). The one-size-fits-all approach that is state and national standards does not consider how students learn and act in different ways, nor does it allow for the creation of

responses from teachers to meet the needs of student diversity (Atkinson & Dash, 2005). When teachers deny students the opportunity to determine the significance of their learning, they prevent the generation of new knowledge and understanding (Atkinson, 2021).

Finally, Atkinson (2008) explained that his ideas of pedagogy against the state should be applied on the political level, by questioning the relationship between democratic policies and pedagogy. Referencing the work of Badiou, Zizek, and Lacan and Butler, Atkinson implored the reader to think of pedagogy as needing to respond to teaching and learning in our current and future social and political environments. By creating works of art according to one's understanding of the world, particularly issues and injustices within society, one considers the consensus and has the opportunity to break away to form personal understandings of one's own life.

An examination of the work of both Rancière and Atkinson allows a clear sense of the connections between their work. Both believe in learning through challenging the consensus, practicing dissensus, or disobeying accepted norms in society, all of which result in the formation of one's own knowledge. Both believed in the teacher acting not as explicator, but as someone who favors a learning environment where students can question for themselves rather than being dictated and dispersed by the educator. The logical next consideration, then, is a review of studies from different countries revolving around the application of the disobedience-based art education approach.

What Research and Literature Has Been Produced Revolving Around Disobedience-Based Art Education as Well as the Incorporation of Difficult Works in Art Education Practice?

Having provided an overview on the theoretical, I next provide examples of studies focusing on disobedience-based arts education in practice. The following studies were conducted

in a variety of learning environments, from museums to afterschool programs and classrooms, both within and outside the United States. Student ages varied as well, from early elementary through high school. Additionally, those studies focusing on secondary groups begin to connect the consideration and study of difficult works of art with their impact on students' creation of such works.

Studies in Early Artistic Disobedience: Primary School Participants

The first study surveyed involved disobedience-based art education with the youngest participants, a class of 5- to 6-year-old students (Park, 2019). This ethnographic case study addressed aesthetics, politics, and dissensus in an arts-integrated kindergarten classroom where the accounts of two students practicing artistic disobedience were described. Following a theoretical framework based on Rancière, Park (2019) connected the emancipatory actions of the two students during a painting activity. The teacher-directed lesson presented the task of creating different dots on a page based on the work of George Seurat, a pointillist painter. The students disobeyed the teacher's instructions by making their dots much larger than specified and also got paint on their hands, all while explaining how their teacher would not like their actions (Park, 2019). In other words, the students thought their actions would be policed by the authority in the room, the teacher. Park described the disobedient actions of the boys as both accidental and intentional, in part as a response to the policing of the consensus, or the correct way of making the painting. Interesting notes about the students' actions were that they were thrilled to break the rules created by the adult, the disobedient act was intentional, and this act was a political one in order to redistribute the sensible (Park, 2019). Although the teacher was aware that the students were not following her instructions, she allowed them to continue, thereby affording the children

the opportunity to control their own learning. These children were able to discover their own new knowledge by breaking the rules and learning how to make their own marks on the page.

This next case study investigated the responses of older primary school students to the introduction of challenging art. A group of fifth grade students in Denmark were asked to interact with three works by Danish artist Julie Nord, an artist who is categorized as creating ambiguous artwork that resists immediate and singular interpretations (Johansen, 2020). Johansen (2020), the researcher, selected three works that did not allow students to read themselves into the works to make meaning, and the works did not have a coded solution that led to conclusions. Johansen suggested that teachers should select materials that make students question their understandings. In other words, art that is different, confusing, and disturbing to the students' knowing is useful in broadening their horizons (Johansen, 2020). Students responded to the artwork in small groups, arriving at many possibilities but not one set meaning. Students usually began their explanations with "It looks like" or "It may be," demonstrating that they were uncertain of their explanations. Multiple explanations were given by students for each artwork, some built on others' ideas and others varying greatly (Johansen, 2020). Students also pointed out their own multiple ways of reading the artwork. They respected their peers' interpretations but definitely had their own. Johansen concluded that

> Teaching is not only about finding material the pupils can understand and explain. It is also about using works that make them doubt, something that is surprisingly different and broadens their horizons, and in that way disturbs the things they take for granted when they come to the lesson. (p. 136)

Nord's difficult work enabled students to construct their own understanding rather than relying on expert interpretation. Students respected differing perspectives from their peers and recognized that multiple valid interpretations could coexist.

Studies in Later Artistic Disobedience: Secondary School Participants

Of the studies surveyed with high school-aged students, the first was a program outside of the high school art classroom setting at a Chicago area community center. Ciampaglia (2013) discussed a course focused on teenage students relating to contemporary art and producing work that was relevant to them. In this course, educators avoided directly providing suggestions to students about their work, but rather encouraged students to respond to each other. This was contrary to the students' prior educational experience in Chicago public schools that followed a top-down way of disseminating knowledge, where the teacher explains and the students listen (Ciampaglia, 2013). After being introduced to contemporary activist artists such as Guerrilla Girls, students collectively agreed on their project: a performance piece reacting to being stereotyped as a minority teenager (Ciampaglia, 2013). The students took to the streets, interacting with the community around them. The resulting sociopolitical performance art piece challenged their assumptions about society and resulted in gaining new knowledge through their work (Ciampaglia, 2013). Ciampaglia described how students had experienced cognitive dissonance through the confrontation of their beliefs in the discussion and creation of their work. Students' beliefs of what art is and does were challenged by looking and creating activist work (Ciampaglia, 2013). Although this study involved secondary students in the United States, the program met after school for a limited amount of time; thus, it does not reflect the in-school classroom setting that I used in my study.

A second high school-based study introduced the Urbano Project, an afterschool program based in Boston that paired teens with adult teaching artists sharing the goal of creating social change (Kotin et al., 2013). The goal of the program was for students to achieve critical dialogue with authority figures about issues they deemed important (Kotin et al., 2013). This was

accomplished through the creation of performance work following an open-ended, explorative approach between students and teaching artists; this, too, was in direct contrast to typical hierarchical instruction (Kotin et al., 2013). Students were encouraged to tell stories with their bodies through movement explorations and recorded phrases of authority they encountered in their lives (Kotin et al., 2013, p. 198). The students then participated in a performance in front of the community, which included authority figures. As a result, the work provoked adults to consider the struggles to which students were responding. Kotin et al. found that students learned to understand the impact of their work, the value of disobedience-based art, and adopt ways to become agents for change (p. 199). Similar to the Ciampaglia study described above, Kotin et al.'s study was a short-term project outside of the classroom environment, which is very different from an in-classroom setting. Both studies asserted the importance of discussing difficult works and the effect of doing so on students' creation of works; moreover, both tasks are necessary. As pertaining to the present study, I argue that the relationship between looking and making difficult works warrants further study, specifically within the high school classroom, to build on the related research thus far.

Other studies related specifically to disobedience in art education but in other parts of the world. The first international study I reviewed was a 3-year ethnography conducted in a Montreal high school that followed the development of the Urban Arts Project (UAP) (Low & Proietti, 2020). The UAP was a program designed to respond to student interest in the contemporary art forms of street art and hip-hop (Low & Proietti, 2020). The researchers identified the incorporation of street art and hip-hop as acts of dissonance which disrupted the distribution of power by focusing on students' interests rather than the interests of teachers or administrators (Low & Proietti, 2020). Students actively took part in developing a gallery space,

a recording studio, and a dance studio. After the spaces were constructed, students curated their own art exhibitions, the first titled *The Struggle for Black Equity*. The pieces the students decided to include in the exhibition were works that addressed senseless violence, hope, and social critique (Low & Proietti, 2020). Works in the student-curated show included street artists who were local residents and popular among teens living in the area. The school gallery was transformed into a space where the consideration of disruption and critique of both curriculum and society was encouraged (Low & Proietti, 2020). Also, within this program, students presented a fashion show for the school community, but practiced dissonance in their behavior. As students walked down the runway, some chose to walk as they normally would in their daily lives—slouching, head down, disengaged—in an effort to resist adult expectations (Low & Proietti, 2020). The display of genuineness in presenting themselves to the audience was an act of dissensus, temporarily redrawing the lines of the sensible in the school space to challenge those in authority in the audience (Low & Proietti, 2020). The disobedience-based arts education project resulted in long-term change for the school, including the retention of the student-run gallery, but the program was short-lived and, again, not conducted by a teacher within an art class.

To conclude about work involving disobedience-based art education in practice with high school students, Skregelid (2020) presented research focused on secondary school students who visited three contemporary art museums in Norway for 3 years. This study examined whether dissensus could be initiated by both artwork and art education practices that contrasted with the norm (Skregelid, 2020). Student responses to controversial pieces showed they were clearly disturbed by viewing these works of art. The artist, Viskum, who used dead animals in his installations, caused a disruption to students' normal understandings of art and ethics (Skregelid,

2020). This provoked many different views, including disagreements between and even within students as their interpretations changed (Skregelid, 2020). Students noted they were grateful to see the exhibitions, even if they did not agree with the artwork, because it led them to understand more about themselves and their views of art and ethics. In other words, the students' prior knowledge of art was ruptured upon viewing Viskum's subversive work, leading to new understandings of art's capacity to provoke critical reflection rather than simply provide aesthetic pleasure. This study demonstrated the construction of new knowledge through a consideration of subversive art in a clear and easily understood way. The students' explanations of how they gained new knowledge from considering difficult work demonstrated the importance of disobedient works in art education. Although this study provided valuable scholarship supporting a disobedient approach in art education, it was conducted in a significantly different country and culture than the United States. In addition, it played out in a museum, not a classroom.

Preservice Teacher Participants

Finally, Skregelid (2021) conducted another study addressing disobedience in art education in Norway but instead focusing on student teachers. Proclaiming her interest in how students respond to subversive works of art, the researcher decided to invite student teachers to view a controversial exhibition of photographs of a female form at a museum in Norway. Student teachers then considered why 10-year-old students should or should not visit the exhibition. The specific research question for this study asked what democratic capacities would arise if one utilized dissensus as a strategy in art education (Skregelid, 2021). The results of the study revealed that the ambiguity of the imagery, with no explanation from the artist, disrupted the student teachers and resulted in a variety of responses about the purpose of the work (Skregelid, 2021). Skregelid stated she has adopted dissensus as an educational strategy, leading to the

transformation of the student teachers' knowledge. Conflicting opinions, especially those tied to subversive works of art, allowed the practice of democracy in a meaningful way (Skregelid, 2021). Although the researcher was again using inflammatory works of art to bring about dissensus, the study took place in a different country and culture with adult preservice educators.

Together, these studies reflected the wide application of disobedience-based arts education. Through the utilization of contemporary, resistance-based art and the theories of Rancière, Atkinson, and others, these programs promoted meaningful, student-centered learning based on disrupting current knowledge in order to form new understandings. Typical state-controlled, top-down instruction was dismissed in favor of students creating their own truths and exploring sociopolitical ideas that were meaningful to them. Although these studies demonstrated the application of disobedience to art education, none have specifically addressed this practice in a secondary art class in the United States.

In the next section of this literature review, I present alternative theories that may have some shared qualities with disobedience-based art education but are, in fact, different.

What Makes Disobedience-Based Art Education Different?

Here, I identify and address related theories in art education that may at first seem to function the same as a disobedience-based art educational approach, but upon deeper examination do in fact differ in crucial ways. Theories and practices focusing on inquiry, critical thinking, and Teaching for Artistic Behavior (TAB) are explored and discussed in order to understand more fully the unique qualities of disobedience-based art education.

The first comparison focuses on aesthetic, creative, and critical inquiry in art education. Aesthetic inquiry is the discussion of art with students, while creative inquiry is the exploration of artmaking to develop expression through visual language (Lampert, 2006). Critical inquiry is

the investigation of a specific piece of artwork (Lampert, 2006). Teachers are expected to create multiple questions for students to respond to when looking at a piece of art selected by the teacher (Lampert, 2006). Examples of such questions posed by the teacher include "Explain why," "What is the counterargument for?" and so on (Lampert, 2006). Students collectively respond to these teacher-selected questions. In this work as a group, students discover solutions (Lampert, 2006).

This contrasts with a disobedience-based approach where the questioning is within the individual, and the individual is not influenced by others. A disobedient-based approach encourages the individual to break from the majority. A group of students deciding the answers together still focuses on a consensus or an agreement among individuals. This inquiry-based approach also relies on teacher intervention. The teacher decides what the students will question and leads them along in their formation of knowledge; this is directly opposed to a disobedient approach where the teacher does not interfere.

The next step is to compare a choice-based art approach with a disobedient approach to art education. This choice-based approach, also known as TAB, involves teachers demonstrating how to use a new material or process at the beginning of class (Gates, 2016). After the lesson, students have the choice to work with the new material or with a material that has been introduced in another class (Gates, 2016). Different centers are set up in the room based on material, and students select where they would like to work in each class (Gates, 2016).

Although students have some freedom in choosing what to do, the teacher is still the master of the knowledge. The teacher must show the students how to use the material before they are allowed to use it, essentially policing how the students' work is created (Gates, 2016). Furthermore, TAB teachers still choose what to demonstrate, limiting centers to certain grades,

choosing which centers will be available, and telling students what they are expected to do at the centers. This is not the role the teacher should play when considering a disobedient approach. Teachers are only meant to keep students on track for their own learning, not to explain what to do or how to do it.

The last approach to consider is an art curriculum based on big ideas. These big ideas revolve around attempting to expand interest in social issues as well as themes that exist in postmodern art (Gates, 2016). Gates described how a specific big idea, memory, was provided by a teacher to their students for a project in art class. The teacher gave the students the task of creating a building they remembered using watercolor. Although the students had some power over their work by being allowed to choose a building from their experience, they were still limited by the subject matter, the big idea, and the material. The teacher was still the master, and the students were still ignorant followers who must adhere to directions for their art.

Bridging the Gap: Difficult Works, Artistic Disobedience in Art Education, and Defining the Need for This Study

Through this review of the literature based on disobedience-based art education, I utilized a number of texts and studies to define what the practice is and is not. Artistic disobedience was defined as the act an artist takes to challenge cultural art norms in order to create new understandings of art and its functions. Selected examples of artists practicing disobedience were named in conjunction with what made their work subversive.

Judith Burton's (2011) work connected the artistic development of adolescents with adults' difficult works. Students in this phase of development naturally challenged the world around them and often did so through images they made for themselves. The qualities of their work can be directly connected to those of mature artists, contemporary work, and even difficult work during past periods of art.

Next, Jacques Rancière's (1991) theoretical work on education, aesthetics, and politics was discussed specifically for how dissensus, or the act of rupturing societal norms and knowledge, can lead one to new cognizance. This is noted in both artistic and educational practices, with a goal of re-distributing the sensible and rejecting the policing of who holds knowledge. In other words, one can practice disobedience in artmaking, learning, and teaching.

Furthering Rancière's dissensus, Dennis Atkinson (2012) suggested that disobedience takes place in the realm of art education. Atkinson suggested that disobedience takes the form of an anti-pedagogy, where the teacher does not act as a gatekeeper to knowledge but rather as a facilitator. Real learning also occurs when students disobey as they create work that does not fit within expectations. In addition to being an anti-pedagogy and a challenging of expectations, disobedience in art education can be performed through a defiance of state curriculum policy and outdated pedagogical practices. Finally, disobedience in art education can be performed by students in the creation of works that are concerned with challenging the consensus of society.

Following the connections between disobedient art practice and disobedient art education in theory, I reviewed examples of studies in this domain. Through the range of examples discussed, it became evident that a disobedient-based approach, and the utilization of difficult works of art in education, can be of keen interest and benefit to the field of art education. Several studies were conducted in Norway and Canada, in addition to the United States, with students of a variety of ages from different backgrounds and settings. Even with the breadth of work on this subject, however, there are no studies to my knowledge that incorporate and discuss difficult works of art in a high school art classroom in a secondary school in the United States.

With this gap in knowledge, this study addressed the need for research introducing difficult works of contemporary art to secondary students in an American classroom setting over

an extended period. Drawing on Rancière's theory of intellectual emancipation, secondary students participated in a longitudinal case study and followed their own lines of inquiry without teacher explanation, facilitated through Visual Thinking Strategies (Hailey et al., 2015) discussions. The study investigated whether sustained exposure to difficult works impacted students' understanding of art's function, their own artistic practice, and their critical consciousness.

Given these connections to prior research and the identified gap in knowledge, this study of students interacting with difficult works of art in a high school classroom in the United States contributes to the body of knowledge for disobedience-based art educational approaches and demonstrates the value of using this type of artwork in secondary art education.

With the theoretical grounding established as the foundation of knowledge for this study, the next chapter describes the methodological design used to explore the following research question and two subquestions:

- What are the potential benefits and challenges of discussing difficult works of art with secondary art students in a suburban public school in New York?
    - How might students' views of art's function change after being introduced to difficult work?
    - How might discussions of challenging works of art contribute to changes in how students understand themselves, make art, and are sensitive to the world around them?

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this longitudinal case study was to explore the practice of discussing difficult works in a secondary classroom in the United States. Specifically, it aimed to identify the potential benefits and challenges of incorporating such works for students. By collecting and analyzing various forms of data, this study aimed to illuminate the phenomenon of integrating challenging works of art within a year-long high school course and to examine how this practice may influence student thinking and artmaking.

In this chapter, I begin with an overview of the study design, including a justification for choosing a longitudinal case study approach. Next, I discuss the specifics of the study, such as the site, participants, types of data collected, the researcher's role, positionality, and measures taken to protect participants. I then describe how I approached data collection and treatment, including coding methods, data analysis, and synthesis. Finally, I address the issues of reliability and validity of the data as well as the study's limitations.

Research Strategy

The research question and two subquestions led me to a qualitative research design. A qualitative research approach allowed me to focus on a specific small group of students—in this case, one high school art class. Qualitative research is particularly well-suited for exploring complex phenomena because it allows for capturing the rich, detailed social, emotional, and aesthetic data that are essential for understanding student engagement with challenging art (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). As Patton (2015) emphasized, qualitative inquiry focuses on understanding meaning and the perspectives of participants in their natural settings.

A case study was deemed the most appropriate design because it focused on describing a specific situation in detail, bounded by space and time, and led to in-depth analysis (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Stake, 1995). Creswell and Creswell (2021) noted that case studies are particularly appropriate for exploring "how" and "why" questions about bounded systems when the researcher seeks in-depth understanding rather than control over variables. In other words, a case study provided an authentic experience of observing students in the environment in which they usually learned about art. The case study design supported this aim by enabling an in-depth examination of a high school art class, using multiple data sources to develop a detailed understanding of the students' experiences within this specific, bounded system (Stake, 1995). Thick description was achieved through this methodology, allowing readers to arrive at their own naturalistic generalizations, or understandings, of the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The longitudinal component was well suited for this case study, as I worked with the same group of participants over the course of two semesters. Longitudinal qualitative research is particularly valuable for understanding processes of change and development over time (Saldaña, 2003). As Patton (2015) noted, longitudinal studies allow researchers to observe how phenomena unfold and evolve, providing insights into growth, change, and the process of perception formation, which were central to my research questions. This involved observations of the students and the development of their work over 10 months.

My methodological approach included active participation, as I facilitated discussions, introduced artwork, and observed students' responses. This aligned with phenomenological and constructivist paradigms, emphasizing understanding participants' experiences and meaning-making processes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Study Sample

Site

The site selected was Hicksville High School, where I have worked for 10 years. Hicksville is a town located in Nassau County, a suburb of New York City. The school is Title 1 and welcomes transfer students throughout the year from different districts, states, and countries, including a notable portion of English language learners. The district serves students representing ethnic groups from 49 countries, with a student population of 40% Hispanic, 38% Asian, 19% White, and 3% Black students, who collectively speak 47 different languages (Hicksville Public Schools, 2025).

My study focused on working with students within one portfolio preparation art class. The school does not offer art history courses or other opportunities to focus solely on examining and discussing visual works and their significance. However, the high school maintains a strong art program, demonstrated by its wide range of course offerings and consistent student recognition in competitive exhibitions. I chose this site because I was able to obtain approval to conduct this study without major difficulty, and I believe the data will prove useful in informing future instruction.

Participants

Participants were drawn from one class of 20 art students enrolled in a portfolio preparation course at Hicksville High School during the 2024-2025 school year. Students had completed two prerequisite courses, studio in art and drawing, before enrolling in the portfolio course. Student work was reviewed, and permission was granted by the instructor for participation. Students in this course were in Grades 11 and 12 and enjoyed making art. The

students ranged from 16 to 18 years of age, and their demographic backgrounds reflected the district's diversity. The course's purpose was to guide students in creating their art portfolios.

I selected to work with these students because I shared a classroom with the teacher and could coordinate all aspects of the study with relative ease. As a teacher at the school who did not teach this particular class, I maintained professional distance while having practical access to the research site. I was interested in potential benefits for the students I worked with, but I did not want to study my own students. Students might have been familiar with my role at the school, but I anticipated very few of my own prior students as participants, given the number of art classes and teachers, as well as the limited capacity of the portfolio preparation course. The study took place during class time, and the teacher found the parameters acceptable.

To recruit students to participate, I visited the class in advance to discuss the study and address any concerns. I explained the study structure, answered questions, and clarified that pseudonyms would be used to protect their identities. I assured students that there were no wrong answers when looking, thinking, and speaking about art, that confusion and multiple interpretations were expected and valid, and that this was not an assessment. The goal was to ensure that students felt comfortable and fully understood the study before moving forward.

Protection of Participants

I made it clear that this study was entirely optional and participants could withdraw at any time without penalty. This was communicated to the class 2 weeks before the study began so that students could fully consider whether they wished to participate. I explained that their participation would have no impact on their class grade, a point their teacher affirmed during my explanation. I reviewed the general schedule of the study, which involved discussions of difficult works of art on Fridays, along with interviews, conversations, and questionnaires for data

collection. I reassured students that they could skip any activity or question. I made myself available to answer questions. Some students asked why I was conducting the study, to which I explained that the data would be used for my dissertation.

Additionally, I hosted a virtual information session to answer questions from families and students. Students reviewed consent forms with a parent or guardian and obtained their signatures before participating. The district superintendent reviewed and approved the study, including these forms, to ensure ethical standards and participant protection. I clarified that students and parents could contact me with questions via email or in person at any time.

All data were stored securely on a password-protected personal computer and in a locked desk drawer, with access limited solely to me. Given the emotionally charged nature of discussions around difficult artwork, I emphasized that student privacy and emotional well-being were priorities throughout the study.

Researcher Role

As the researcher, I served as a participant observer over 10 months. During weekly Friday sessions, I facilitated group discussions by introducing preselected works of difficult art designed to challenge students' perceptions. The collection was reviewed by doctoral colleagues and practicing secondary art teachers prior to the study. On other days, I observed students at work, conducted interviews, documented their artmaking, and distributed questionnaires.

Positionality

As a White, 41-year-old female from a middle-class family growing up in a suburb of New York City, I had the opportunity to study art and art history since early high school. My secondary education experience afforded me the option of enrolling in a variety of art classes, including art history courses. I also had the opportunity to study with a professional artist who

focused on the exploration of materials and ideas in a student-centered approach. I understand that my experiences deviate from those of some students in this study.

I was also granted experiences and opportunities to engage and become comfortable with difficult works of art through my continued studies. I recognize that these privileges are not necessarily afforded to others and that my past experiences have shaped my interpretive lens. My comfort with difficult works and belief in their transformative potential may have led me to emphasize positive student responses while downplaying resistance or discomfort. Because difficult works profoundly shaped my artistic development and worldview, I entered the study anticipating similar transformations in students, creating potential confirmation bias in data interpretation.

My employment within the school also had the potential to trigger bias, as I might unconsciously assume expectations of students since I am familiar with them. Students may also have felt uncomfortable participating in the study of a teacher who works at their school. As an adult authority figure, even though I was not their teacher of record, students may have shaped responses to align with perceived expectations, despite assurances that participation would not affect their grades. To address these concerns, I spent time discussing the study with students to alleviate any feelings of apprehension about participating, as detailed in the participant recruitment process.

To mitigate these biases, I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the study. I used this journal to track how my prior experiences with difficult works might be influencing what I noticed and how I interpreted student responses. I paid particular attention to moments when students reacted differently than I expected and questioned whether I was truly facilitating without directing students toward predetermined conclusions. Throughout data collection and

analysis, I worked to minimize my influence on student responses while centering their authentic voices.

Data Collection

I collected a variety of data types that best represented the phenomena under study, following established qualitative data collection principles (Patton, 2015). Data collection included audio recordings of group discussions about art as well as individual student interviews, student responses to written questions, photographs of student work, and field notes. Audio recordings of class conversations and interviews, digital transcripts, and photos of student work were transferred to a password-protected folder on a personal computer and then deleted. Notes and questionnaires were stored in a locked file drawer. Data collection was multifaceted and designed to capture as much nuance as possible in students' experiences.

During group discussions, participants were prompted to consider difficult works by responding to Visual Thinking Strategy (VTS) questions: "What's happening in this picture?"; "What makes you say that?"; and "What more can we find?" (Hailey et al., 2015, p. 56). The VTS method was chosen because it avoids teacher bias and focuses on students creating their own meanings about the imagery, aligning with constructivist approaches to learning and knowledge construction (Stake, 1995). Length of discussions ranged from approximately 10 to 20 minutes.

Classroom observations were conducted weekly, with detailed field notes documenting participation, dialogue, and classroom dynamics. All discussion sessions were audio-recorded with student permission, and transcripts were used to analyze verbal interactions. Pre- and post-questionnaires were given at the beginning and conclusion of the study. The questionnaires

collected data on where students were in their thinking about art before and after the discussion of difficult works. The questions directly reflected the research questions:

1. What is art?
2. What is art's purpose/function in society?
3. In what ways have you related to art you have seen? In other words, what does it tell you about yourself/others/the world around you?

Semi-structured interviews with selected participants, based on their willingness to volunteer, were conducted midway through the study as well as at the conclusion. Six students participated in the interviews, during class time, and some as they worked on their art. Questions revolved around how students felt about the difficult works being discussed and whether there had been any noticeable changes in their thinking or creating. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility while ensuring that key topics were covered (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). During the final interviews, students had access to a packet of all works shown throughout the study to refer to if they wished. These interviews lasted between 9 and 22 minutes. These interviews offered deeper, longitudinal insights into students' perceptions, emotional reactions, and reflections, helping to contextualize their development across the entire study period.

A final follow-up questionnaire was provided to gather a deeper understanding of the potential impact of the study. The questions were adapted from the final interview questions, as I wanted to collect more detailed data. Since there was not enough time to interview every student and not all students might have been willing to sit for an interview, the questionnaire offered an additional way to gather rich insights from all participants.

Photographs of student work served as another means to explore any changes resulting from discussing difficult works. They offered a tangible record that could be presented alongside

other data sources. Additionally, some students referenced their documented work during interviews when discussing their processes and reflections.

I also maintained detailed field notes to document additional observations. Field notes are essential in qualitative research for capturing context, emotions, and subtle nuances that other data collection methods might miss (Patton, 2015). They captured feelings, nonverbal cues, and subtle interactions that occurred during group discussions, interviews, and within the classroom environment. They also allowed me to monitor overall student engagement and participation. Following each group discussion and interview, I recorded supplementary insights and key points that might not have been fully captured in the transcriptions.

The combination of these data sources allowed me to triangulate findings and deepen my understanding of student experiences, supporting robust qualitative inquiry through multiple data sources (Creswell & Creswell, 2021). Table 1 presents an overview of data types and sources and how each relates to the study's research questions.

Data Treatment

Transcription of recordings and interviews occurred during data collection, but coding and interpretation did not commence until all data collection was completed. The data analysis process was grounded in qualitative coding techniques that are supported in the literature (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Miles et al., 2020; Patton, 2015). I followed a multicycle coding approach that began with initial open coding to identify preliminary concepts, followed by pattern coding to group-related codes into broader themes. Since this was a longitudinal study, I also compared codes and themes across different data collection points to identify patterns of stability, emergence, or transformation over time, as recommended by Saldaña (2003) for longitudinal qualitative analysis.

Table 1

Data Types and Instruments

Data Type	Source	How	Related to Research Question
Group Conversations	Students responding to slides of artwork and to each other in class	Audio recordings on designated study recorder; transcripts coded	• What are potential benefits and challenges of discussing subversive works of art?
Observations	Observing students during class time, in conversation	Field notes, thick description of phenomenon	• What are potential benefits and challenges of discussing work? • Impacts on student work?
Images	Student artwork	Photographed by researcher, students, and classroom teacher	• What are the potential impacts on student work?
Individual Interviews	One-on-one with select student participants	During class time; transcripts coded	• What are potential benefits and challenges of discussing work? • Impacts on student work? • Have their understandings changed about themselves and the world around them?
Questionnaires	Student written responses to questions I ask	Printed for students to complete in class; coded	• What are potential benefits and challenges of discussing work? • Impacts on student work? • Have their understandings changed about themselves and the world around them?

First cycle coding served as the initial analytical step where I broke down the data into specific parts and examined them closely to identify concepts and ideas (Saldaña, 2021). I

applied this coding to interview transcripts, questionnaires, group discussion transcripts, and field notes using three distinct approaches. Descriptive coding provided labels that summarized the content of data segments. Examples included “initial discomfort,” “impact of difficult art,” and “personal interpretation.” In vivo coding captured students’ exact words and phrases to preserve their authentic voice and perspective, as Patton (2015) emphasized. Examples included phrases like “it opened my eyes,” “think deeper,” and “social change.” Concept coding helped me identify core theoretical ideas directly relevant to my research questions, capturing underlying concepts such as “social awareness,” “art as critique,” and “artistic process shift.”

After completing first cycle coding, I organized related codes into overarching themes such as perception shifts, conceptual growth, and artistic development through pattern coding. This approach involved grouping similarly coded data into broader themes while emphasizing meaning-making rather than simple categorization (Saldaña, 2021). This aligned with interpretive approaches to qualitative analysis that focus on understanding deeper meanings and connections in the data (Saldaña, 2021). For the longitudinal interpretation, I examined how these themes persisted, emerged, or changed over time to support a nuanced understanding of how students’ experiences developed throughout the study.

Code mapping became an essential organizational tool that helped me see relationships between different codes and themes. Essentially, code mapping is the process of organizing similar codes into larger categories to make sense of the data in a more systematic way (Saldaña, 2021). I went through several iterations of this process, starting with a simple list of individual codes, then grouping them into broader categories, and finally organizing those categories into overarching themes that captured the essence of what was happening in my data.

Throughout this process, I developed a detailed codebook to ensure systematic and transparent coding (Saldaña, 2021). A codebook is a reference document that contains each code's name, definition, and examples from the data. This served as my guide to ensure consistency in how I applied codes throughout the analysis. The codebook also helped me maintain reliability in my coding by providing clear criteria for when to apply specific codes.

The final interpretation integrated these themes into a narrative that aligned with my research questions and was supported by coded data and relevant literature. This approach aligned with established practices in longitudinal qualitative analysis, emphasizing both development over time and rigorous coding procedures (Saldaña, 2021).

Validity and Reliability

To establish the trustworthiness of my qualitative study, I employed multiple strategies consistent with best practices in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used triangulation by comparing findings across multiple data sources to corroborate themes and ensure findings were supported by multiple forms of evidence. Creswell and Creswell (2021) noted that triangulation strengthens the validity of qualitative findings by demonstrating consistency across different types of data.

I conducted member checking by sharing preliminary themes and interpretations with select participants, allowing them to confirm the accuracy of my findings and challenge any interpretations that did not align with their experiences (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participants confirmed that my interpretations aligned with their experiences. This process supported both credibility and confirmability in my study.

Throughout the study, I employed thick, rich description as a way to provide readers with detailed accounts of the classroom environment, student interactions, and the context

surrounding their responses. This approach involved providing enough detail and context so that readers can understand the setting and make their own judgments about the transferability of findings to other contexts (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

As discussed in my positionality statement, I practiced ongoing reflexivity by maintaining a researcher journal throughout data collection and analysis. This documentation of my biases, assumptions, and interpretive choices supported transparency in my analytical process (Patton, 2015).

Limitations

The small, context-specific sample limits broad generalizations beyond this suburban New York setting. This study examined students within one school and thus does not represent rural or urban schools. Self-reported responses may be influenced by social desirability biases. Another approach to researching this topic might include multiple classes from different schools across diverse geographic and socioeconomic contexts. It would be of great benefit to be able to select participant groups in art classrooms across the United States in order to compare findings with past studies conducted in other countries and environments. A cross-sectional study of this nature would allow for more opportunities to generalize outcomes and glean understandings.

The participants were from an advanced art class, which may not have provided the same data as students in beginner art classes in high school. The site studied was considered to be a school that is supportive of the arts. Outcomes may vary greatly within schools that are viewed as not having an encouraging art department. Students included in this study were also understood to have generally not had many in-class opportunities to discuss works of art. This may also prove to be another limiting factor in that data cannot be generalized to include students from schools who have had these experiences.

Although the study spanned two semesters, this duration may not have fully revealed the long-term impacts or sustained changes in perceptions beyond this period. My role as facilitator and observer inevitably influenced classroom interactions. Despite efforts to remain neutral, my presence and facilitation style may have subtly shaped student responses and dialogue.

Additionally, studying artwork across different formats might have influenced student engagement differently. For instance, while I included visual artwork, video work, performance pieces, installation work, and traditional paintings, drawings, and sculptures, focusing primarily on these forms of artistic expression limited my understanding of how other art forms such as music or literature might have affected student responses and discussions. Emotional reactions to difficult artwork can be intense and complex. I recognize that some responses may not have been fully captured or understood, despite my observations and documentation. Moreover, the influence of the art teacher's pedagogical style and attitudes could have affected participation and perceptions. Future research could expand to include multiple schools, larger samples, and longer durations to better understand broader applicability.

The methodological framework described in this chapter guided data collection and analysis throughout this 10-month study. The following chapter presents the findings that emerged from systematic coding of group discussions, interviews, questionnaires, and field notes, supplemented by visual documentation of student artwork, centering student voices and experiences as they engaged with difficult artwork throughout the school year.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter presents the findings from a longitudinal case study examining the impact of discussing difficult works of art on high school students' thinking and artmaking. I conducted the study over 10 months during the 2024–2025 school year at Hicksville High School with 20 participants enrolled in a portfolio preparation course. Data collection employed multiple methods to capture the complexity of student experiences and developmental changes over time.

This chapter is organized into three main sections with multiple subsections that move from broad classroom patterns to individual student experiences. First, I present whole class results, examining patterns across all participants through pre- and post-questionnaires, group conversation transcripts, and field notes spanning the entire study period. Second, I examine small group results, focusing on commonalities among the six participants who volunteered for interviews. Third, I provide individual case data for each of these participants, offering detailed portraits of their unique journeys and changes. Both sections drew primarily from mid-year and final interview data, with other sources included as needed. Finally, I conclude with a summary of key findings that informed the discussion chapter.

The data showed significant changes in participants' understanding of art, critical consciousness development, emergence of authentic artistic voices, and growing comfort with complexity. These shifts manifested differently across individual participants while displaying consistent patterns of growth in analytical refinement, collaborative meaning-making, and personal connection to difficult works.

Whole Class Results

Overview of Classroom Data Sources

I drew the whole class results from multiple data sources collected consistently throughout the 10-month study period. Pre-questionnaires captured participants' initial understanding of the definition, function, and purpose of art before being exposed to difficult works. Post-questionnaires administered at the conclusion of the study gathered deeper insights into student experiences with the difficult works. Group conversation transcripts from 20 discussion sessions provided real-time documentation of student involvement and analytical development. Field notes from weekly classroom observations documented participation patterns, nonverbal responses, and environmental factors influencing student interactions.

Pre-Study Questionnaire Results

Pre-questionnaire responses revealed participants' initial conceptualizations of art clustered around three primary themes: simple definitions, personal expression focus, and emotional connection to artists' stories. The dominant pattern showed participants' understanding of art primarily as an individual emotional outlet, with limited recognition of art's varied materials, broader social functions, and deeper connections to works.

What Is Art? Simple definitions of art constituted a significant pattern, appearing in 12 of 20 responses. Participants provided basic, limited descriptions of what constitutes art. Jay wrote, "Art is expression," while Julio's response, "Art is something made by a person," exemplified this constrained understanding. Rocio's definition focused narrowly on "express your thoughts and feelings through paints, colors, pencils, etc.," while Simran described art as "a visual object that you can draw or create through your thoughts and expression and also your imagination." Bella described art as "a form of expression. When I think of art I think of colors and all the

ways you can use colors." These responses reflected limited conceptual scope, a focus on traditional media, and minimal consideration of art's diverse functions or broader implications.

What Is Art's Function/Purpose in Society? Personal expression surfaced as the most prevalent theme for art's purpose and function in society, appearing in 17 of 20 responses. Participants consistently defined art in terms of individual communication and emotional release. Juan wrote, "To let people express their creativity in their own unique ways," while Alicia explained it as "a way to put your thoughts into an actual visual thing." Zoe provided a typical response defining art as "a way of expressing ideas and emotions through pictures or representations," and Angie similarly described it as "an expression of inner thoughts and feelings." Jay wrote, "To express one's feelings, emotions, beauties and thoughts." This pattern indicated participants' initial understanding of art function centered on art as individual communication of one's emotions.

How Have You Related to Art You Have Seen? When asked how they related to art, 14 participants wrote about connecting with the stories or the emotion of the artist. Jessie stated, "There are times where I see a picture and relate to the stories and feelings being displayed." Jay wrote, "[When I] share the expression on subject or object." Avneet wrote, "When I look at art, I try to see the message behind it," and Zoe stated, "I have connected through similar emotions shown in pictures or heard in a song."

Six of 20 participants had difficulty addressing the question of personal connection, providing responses that described art's function rather than their own relationship to it. This was evident in responses such as Julio's: "It shows people's interests and inspirations," while Simran said, "It shows what they're feeling at the moment or what they are doing." The data showed that most participants connected with artwork they had experienced, but in ways focused on

understanding the artist's emotion and story. This emphasis again represented the focus on the individual experience of creating and considering art.

Pre-questionnaire responses established participants' baseline understanding of art as limited, traditional, and individually focused. The dominant themes of simple definitions, personal expression emphasis, and emotional connection to artists' stories indicated participants' initial conception of art as primarily an individual emotional outlet with minimal recognition of broader social functions or diverse artistic approaches.

Post-Study Questionnaire Results

Post-questionnaire responses, administered at the end of the study, revealed significant shifts in participants' understanding. Three new themes materialized—expanded definition, political recognition and social critique, and deeper connection to works—while participants also explicitly reflected on their evolution in thinking and making with advanced understanding.

What Is Art? Expanded definitions of art became evident in 14 of 20 post-questionnaire responses, displaying a dramatic evolution from participants' initial narrow conceptions. Bella's altered understanding exemplified this shift:

> Art is a form of expression. It's a way of speaking without using words. Art can be anything; it's not just limited to oil on a canvas or pen on paper. It's indefinable, I believe art is anything and everything.

This represented a complete departure from her initial focus solely on colors and traditional materials. Ameena's reflection was particularly profound:

> Before the study I found art to be something that took a lot of effort and something that was intricate. I would think that works such as the *Comedian* weren't art. My view of what art is has changed because I believe anything can be art if it makes you think of the meaning behind it.

Similarly, Simran wrote, “I learned that art can be anything, it doesn’t have to be very detailed or fancy to be a work of art.” Julio broadened his conception of art forms, from “something made by a person” to include “paintings, music, theatre etc.,” while Kanishka evolved from basic expression to recognizing art as “any medium that you can think of, from paint to amusement parks.” Jessie similarly noted that art could be “anything from a simple drawing to large-scale installations.” Esteban’s initial definition of art was “lines, shapes, curves. It can be physical or digital,” which developed into:

> Art expresses something like emotions, trending topics, etc. It can be complex or simple, there are personal styles, and there’s no right or wrong. It is generational and can bring people together. It’s in everything—everywhere.

These expanded definitions departed from the simple responses such as “art is expression” seen in the pre-questionnaire. Students exhibited development through noting the importance of meaning behind the work and expanding their ideas of the forms art can take. They explained that art confronts emotions, topics, and ideas while being anything and everything.

What Is Art’s Function/Purpose in Society? Political recognition and social critique arose in 14 of 20 post-questionnaire responses as participants began acknowledging art’s capacity for social commentary and developing complex understanding of art’s social functions. Julio’s evolution was particularly striking—his initial simple definition of “something made by a person” expanded to include “emotions, politics or a simple concept or idea.” He continued to write, “Art is a way to bring awareness, whether it is to an emotion or an issue,” displaying new awareness of art’s critical potential. Jessie revealed similar growth in her response:

> I had always thought of art as simply a way to express an artist’s feelings and emotions/thoughts. Now, I see art can be a statement, a protest, an emotion, and so much more, depending on whatever the artist wants it to be.

Angie's development was dramatic: "I thought art was a path with two branches; profit and meaningful decoration. Now I know that in addition to an emotional expression, art is a form of protest and showcases issues that not many know about." Alicia recognized that difficult work "shows people what they don't want to see and that's the hard truth." These responses indicated participants had developed critical consciousness about art's capacity for social critique and represented a significant departure from the purely personal expression focus evident in the pre-questionnaire responses.

What Ways Have You Related to Art You Have Seen? A deeper connection in relating to work was reported in 15 of 20 surveys. Angie's response to art, "It holds parallels to secular problems as well as individual pain that we can empathize with," illustrated a more developed connection with art through empathy and social concern. Rocio said, "I thought art was just expressing yourself through your artwork. Now, I think it's digging deeper into a piece and seeing what specific ideas went into these pieces." She continued to explain:

> Before, I took a glance at pieces and didn't try to connect with it much. I viewed them as just another piece of art without deciphering what they really meant. I now try to take the time to nitpick the info.

Similarly, Aniyah noted, "After the discussions, I see myself taking more time to analyze the artworks." Julio provided a clear evolution:

> Before the study, the only art I've related to was music because lyrics were in a song, but after the discussions, I was able to find a new way to explain what I was feeling. On top of that, I found a new favorite artist, Yuko Tatsushima, and a favorite piece, *Shoot* by Chris Burden.

A dramatic shift took place from Simran's initial response, "It shows what they're feeling at the moment of what they're doing" to:

> Art can make a lot of connections, like how a person is feeling or just their type of art. People's art tells me how they are feeling deeply inside, it makes me relate to people that are going through the same thing as me.

Alison acknowledged that she had always connected with art that visually appealed to her, “but now I feel connected when I find myself understanding the purpose of the artmaker’s creation.” When compared to Jay’s pre-study response, “Share the expression on subject or object,” his post-study response identified growth: “With the art, I see I agree and disagree with the idea behind the work. This made me connect deeper to an art piece than what I’ve previously done.” Participants reported connecting to works before the study, but at the conclusion, most participants described a richer, more developed connection when considering works of art.

What Are Your Thoughts on Our Discussions? All 20 participants described the discussions positively, characterizing the talks as useful, insightful, helpful, and interesting. Four participants remarked that it was beneficial to hear their peers’ views. Juan wrote, “It was interesting seeing everyone’s takes and opinions on different pieces,” while Simarjit wrote, “Our weekly discussions were interesting and useful. I got to hear about my peers’ thought processes which was interesting.” Alison reflected, “They’re lovely! It made it easier to digest [the works] because we worked on finding the meaning together.” Julio noted that the discussions “helped me think outside of the box as well as teach me things about art and the world around me,” while Angie described how they “helped me expand my perspective when looking at art.” Kanishka noted that the discussions were useful as “they showed me how limitless mediums are and how extreme you can be to get certain messages across,” while Angie and Bella mentioned “expanded perspectives” and becoming more “open-minded” when considering art. Two participants stated that the work pushed them to connect their prior knowledge of the past and current issues to the artwork that was discussed. Aniyah explained that the discussions “forced me to think deeply and connect prior knowledge with the pieces being shown,” while Esteban noted that the talks

"definitely helped [reflect] on current topics—presidency, prejudice." Even though the reasons varied, all participants reported that the discussions were a valuable experience for them.

Has Your Artmaking Been Impacted by Our Discussions? Seventeen out of 20 participants responded that their artmaking had been impacted by the discussions of difficult works. Many participants responded that the discussions inspired them to incorporate more symbolism in their work. Julio directly stated the discussions "influenced me in how I could display symbolism during my investigation. It gave me more ideas regarding what I did for my peers," while Angie explained, "Now when I plan a piece, I make symbols, subject, colors, and perspectives all have meaning and purpose." Jessie wrote she wanted "to add more details to my pieces that make the viewers look closer and think of their meanings," while Ameena was making works that were "not so obvious," and Bella planned to create pieces that were "more thought out rather than having the same meaning every time."

Two participants responded that the discussions impacted their artmaking by introducing them to different materials and approaches. Jay stated that the discussions "taught me various types of art, which I can use in my pieces," and Kanishka explained that "it has made me experiment with my materials." Similarly, Aniyah wrote that she was inspired to "create artwork in which the materials contribute to the message of the piece." Alison described dramatic change in her work from the discussions, stating that she had "become more process-oriented instead of worrying so much about how it looks." Esteban's statement was striking in that he stated the discussion "definitely has related to many [of my] pieces, some even inspired. This shows how connected artists are."

Alicia and Jay both responded that the difficult works inspired them to confront issues in society. Jay wrote how he "started making more works that had ideas behind it, like the homeless person piece," and Alicia said plainly, "It makes me want to talk more about issues."

Two of the three participants who said their work was not impacted still wrote about the value of the discussions. Simarjit talked about the effect the works had on her as she explained, "I've been mentally impacted by them and apply our discussions to my thought process." Similarly, Rocio stated, "I can take these lessons and apply them in real life."

Overall, most participants responded that their artmaking had been impacted, and two of the three participants who stated their work was not affected made sure to respond that it still positively impacted their thinking. Whether through incorporating more symbolism, utilizing new materials, or focusing on new subject matter, including drawing inspiration from societal issues, participants clearly described the evolution of their work from discussing difficult works.

Post-questionnaire responses revealed dramatic shifts from participants' initial understanding, with three new themes materializing: expanded definitions of art, political recognition and social critique, and deeper connections to artwork. These changes indicated participants had moved beyond viewing art as purely personal expression toward recognizing art's complex social functions and diverse forms. The universal positive response to discussions and widespread impact on artmaking practices indicated substantial growth in both analytical thinking and creative practice.

Student Artwork Development

Visual analysis of participant artwork provided additional evidence of conceptual and technical development throughout the study period. The comparison of pre-study work (created before September 2024) with post-study work (created January–June 2025) revealed patterns

consistent with questionnaire and interview data, including expanded material exploration, increased symbolic content, and shifts toward personally meaningful subject matter. Table 2 presents representative examples of this development across 12 participants selected to demonstrate the range of developmental patterns, artistic backgrounds, and skill levels observed across all 20 participants. The artwork samples display three primary patterns of development (see Table 2). First, participants moved from imitative, reference-based work toward original, conceptually driven creation. Second, technical skill became subordinate to meaningful expression, with participants prioritizing communication of ideas over photorealistic accuracy. Third, participants increasingly incorporated symbolic elements and layered meanings requiring viewer interpretation rather than creating work with singular, obvious meanings.

While the artistic development of the six interviewed participants is discussed in detail within their individual case sections, the visual documentation presented here provides evidence of broader patterns across the participant group, including those not selected for interviews who also demonstrated growth during the study period.

Group Conversations: Early Patterns (September–December 2024). Group conversation transcripts from early discussions revealed initial challenges with participation and tentative involvement with difficult content. The September 20 discussion of Rita Ackermann's *If Anyone Hurts My Brother I'll Kill That…* displayed participants' uncertainty about analytical approaches and hesitation to participate publicly (see Figure 6). One student began apologetically: "I don't want this question to sound rude, but it's like the picture's not finished, wasn't it?" When encouraged to continue, the student explained: "It just looks more like doodles on a page." Another student sought basic permission: "Are we allowed to look at the title as information?"

Table 2

Student Artwork Development: Pre-Study and Post-Study Comparison

Student	Pre-Study Artwork	Post-Study Artwork
Eric		
Jay		
Zoe		

Note. Each row shows one student's artistic development from pre-study work (left) to post-study work (right). Pre-study work was created before September 2024; post-study work was created between January and June 2025. These 12 participants were selected as representative examples demonstrating the range of developmental patterns observed across all 20 participants in the study.

Table 2 (continued)

Student	Pre-Study Artwork	Post-Study Artwork
Alicia		
Julio		
Alison		

Table 2 (continued)

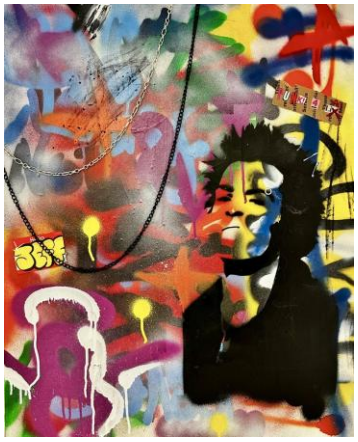
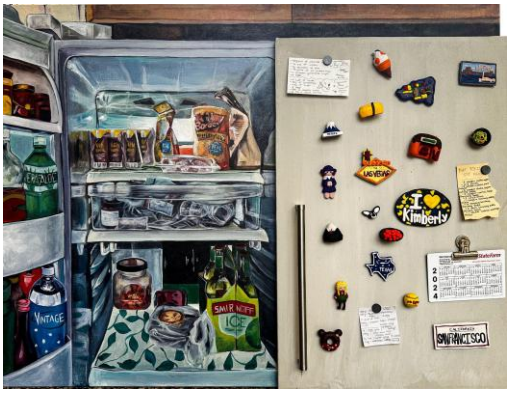
Student	Pre-Study Artwork	Post-Study Artwork
Esteban		
Jessie		
Simran		

Table 2 (continued)

Student	Pre-Study Artwork	Post-Study Artwork
Avneet		
Rocio		
Kanishka		

Figure 6

If Anyone Hurts My Brother I'll Kill That… (Rita Ackermann, 1994)

Watercolor, charcoal, and ink on paper. Hauser & Wirth Gallery, New York, NY.

Despite initial hesitation, participants revealed a capacity for analytical thinking when given support. During the same discussion of Ackermann's work, one student observed, "The rough sketches might represent all of the rough ideas in the artist's head, like they have a lot going on in their minds." Another student developed this interpretation with more refined analysis:

> Maybe he was hurt before in the past. Like, the dog is, the biggest, um, thing here. Like, the biggest, most, and the only thing in color.... And, like, and all the other, like, stuff next to it are just doodles. That stuff that could happen. But maybe the dog actually hurt the younger brother.

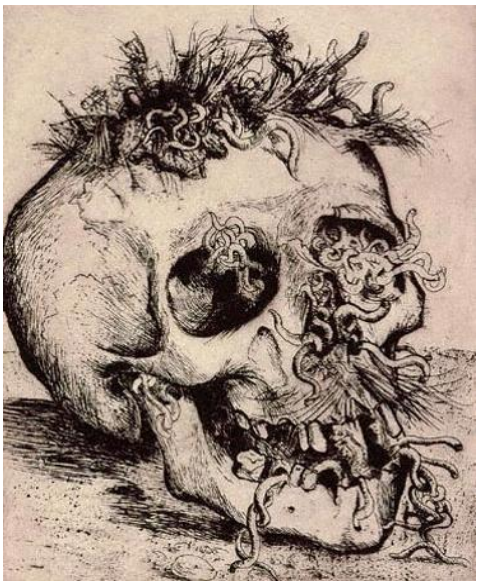
Students' responses focused on the emotional connection between the artist and their work, which was congruent with pre-study questionnaire responses.

The September 30 discussion of Otto Dix's *Skull* and Jean-Michel Basquiat's untitled work (see Figure 7) indicated some participants beginning to make connections between visual elements and historical context. Zoe displayed early analytical thinking:

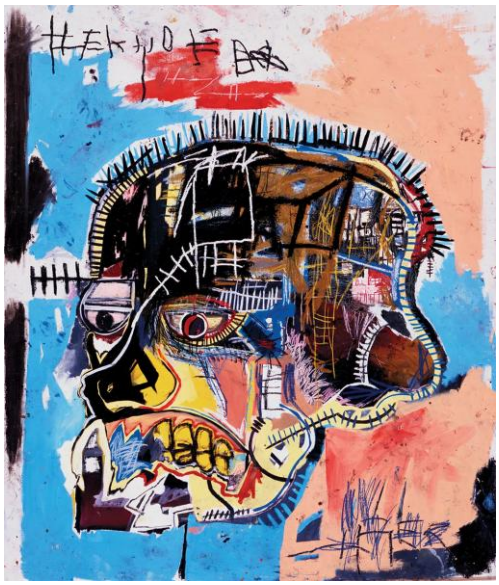
> The first thing that I tried to look for, for information, was the date. And I noticed that it was in the 1920s. And then the title, it indicated a skull from the war. And it made me think that this might be related to the First World War.

Figure 7

Skull (Schädel) from The War (Der Krieg) (Otto Dix, 1924) (left) and *Untitled* (Jean-Michel Basquiat, 1981) (right)



Etching. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY



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Acrylic and oilstick on canvas. The Broad, Los Angeles, CA

Eric connected artistic style to the time period with Basquiat's work: "The dates of these paintings change the image. It's like around the '60s and '80s, like, the punk era, where everyone was punk."

By October, participants began asking questions about artistic processes and intentions. During the October 11 discussion of Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (see Figure 5)

and Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (see Figure 2), one student attempted to articulate complex ideas about artistic value:

> I think both of them are trying to make a statement about, the first one especially, how it's trying to say art doesn't not matter, but, like they're kind of using it as, um, again, I want to say not matter, but at the same time, like, I feel like that would be, like, I don't know, the point. I don't know how to describe it, but I know what I'm thinking.

This indicated that participants were beginning to depart from the emotional focus of the individual artist and move toward the recognition of larger statements.

Continuing conversations revealed increased confidence and more nuanced analytical language. The October 25 discussion of the artist Dread Scott's *Burning the U.S. Constitution* (see Figure 8) displayed participants' growing ability to integrate historical knowledge with visual response.

Figure 8

Burning the U.S. Constitution (Dread Scott, 2011)

Note. Performance art documentation. Artist's collection.

Jay connected the artist's name to historical events:

> We learned in U.S. history who Dred Scott was.... It was like a famous case where this guy named Dred Scott, he went across state lines and he was a slave, but he wasn't a

> slave in his own territory, but when he went into other state lines, they said that he was still a slave.

Jessie built on this historical knowledge to examine artistic intention in Scott's work:

> I think some people would maybe look at it as disrespectful at first glance. But then when you really understand the back story behind it, I think he's really more so leaning towards the idea that the Constitution is flawed because it doesn't include everybody in the United States. So he's burning the Constitution because it doesn't, like, it's not representing him even though he's a citizen of the country.

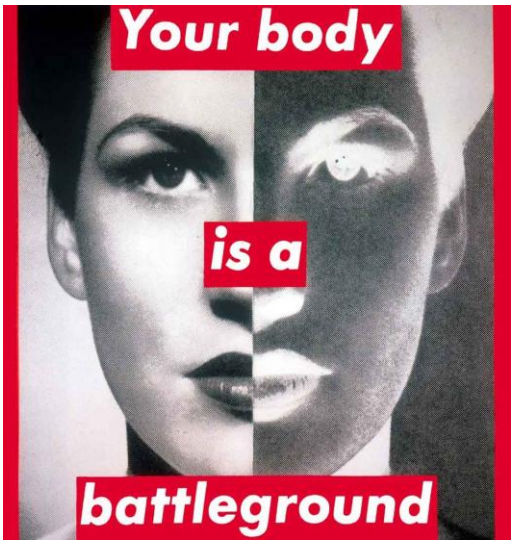
This indicated participants were first identifying connections to societal issues.

The November 15 discussion of Barbara Kruger's *Your Body Is a Battleground* and *Money Can Buy You Love* (see Figure 9) revealed participants making cross-curricular connections with greater confidence. A student connected Kruger's work to literature:

> Right now in English, I'm reading *1984*. One of the things they talk about is how they have this leader and his name is Big Brother and he's in these pictures all around...in my head it kind of seemed like it's kind of like indoctrination. Like, get into these little girls' minds and, like, tell them, like, this is how it is. And this is what you have to believe.

Figure 9

Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground) (Barbara Kruger, 1989) (left) and *Untitled (Money Can Buy You Love)* (Barbara Kruger, 1985) (right)



Photographic silkscreen on vinyl. The Broad, Los Angeles, CA.

Gelatin silver print. Mary Boone Gallery, New York, NY.

Participants began examining formal elements more systematically in Kruger's pieces. Angie observed:

> I feel like the main message that both images are trying to get across is the objectification of women.... Both images use hints of red, and I feel like that could either be symbolism for hidden anger of some kind...or representing the rage that they've held in for these issues for so long.

This also displayed a progression of participants connecting works with society.

By December, participants exhibited comfort connecting with contemporary connections. The December 5 discussion of Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* and *America* (see Figure 10) showed participants making connections to current social media:

> I think I saw a video about like the banana.... People went to a museum and they started like bidding like a ton of money for it.... What I got from it is that like people will buy anything even if it's not art or if it's considered art quote unquote.

Figure 10

Comedian (Maurizio Cattelan, 2019) (left) and *America* (Maurizio Cattelan, 2016) (right)

Banana and duct tape. Perrotin Gallery, New York, NY

18-karat gold sculpture. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY

Zoe demonstrated analytical refinement in discussing art market dynamics in relation to Cattelan's works:

> I think the first one is kind of, like, making fun of modern art, and the second one, with the title America, and the gold, it kind of reminded me of how people in America have a really big problem with overconsumption.

In this conversation, participants identified the critical qualities of the art and connected them with their current experiences to highlight contemporary issues.

Group conversation data from the early period documented participants' initial hesitation and uncertainty when engaging with difficult works, followed by gradual development of analytical confidence and sophistication. The progression from seeking permission to speak and apologetic participation toward making historical connections and recognizing art's social functions indicated growing comfort with challenging content. By December, participants had begun to identify art's critical potential and make connections between artwork and contemporary social issues.

Group Conversations: Later Patterns (January–June 2025). As the academic year progressed into the second semester, the patterns observed in early discussions evolved significantly. Group conversations revealed altered dynamics characterized by student agency and advanced critical interaction. Participants took increasing control of discussions and brought extensive outside knowledge to bear on artwork.

The January discussions indicated participants' capacity to work with challenging contemporary issues and make refined historical connections. During the discussion of Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* and Kehinde Wiley's *Judith and Holofernes* (see Figure 11), Aniyah provided historical context: "I think in the one on the left, I think she was cutting off

his head because she was trying to save a town or she's trying to like protect, I don't remember the story, but like protect a group of people."

Figure 11

Judith Slaying Holofernes (Artemisia Gentileschi, c. 1612-1617) (left) and
Judith and Holofernes (Kehinde Wiley, 2012) (right)

Oil on canvas. Museo di Capodimonte, Naples, Italy

Oil on canvas. North Carolina Museum of Art, Raleigh, NC

This historical understanding enabled participants to draw parallels to contemporary struggles, with one student observing: "So in the one on the left, it's women decapitating a man who usually oppresses women. And on the right, it's like a woman of color is holding the head of a white woman, like racial." When examining Chris Burden's *Shoot* and Marina Abramović's *Balkan Baroque* (see Figure 12), a student connected the performance pieces to current events with nuanced understanding:

> This might be a bit of a stretch, but I was gonna say going along with desensitization in times of war and possibly like mercy in war because the the time it was made was 1971 which is during you know, the Vietnam War.

Figure 12

Shoot (Chris Burden, 1971) (left) and *Balkan Baroque* (Marina Abramović, 1997) (right)

Performance art documentation. Artist's collection

Performance art documentation. 47th Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy

Participants exhibited comfort with difficult subject matter while maintaining analytical rigor, with another student noting about Burden's work:

> One thing I noticed is that the person shooting, he shot him specifically in the arm, which means he obviously didn't want to kill him.... So, I feel like that could be part of the quote-unquote mercy aspect.

The evolution continued through February, where discussions of Banksy's *Love Is in the Bin* and *Cash Machine Girl* (see Figure 13) revealed participants' complex understanding of art market dynamics and social commentary. Eric provided a thoughtful examination of the work, highlighting the dichotomy between the rich and the common people, adding, "It really shows the ignorance and greed that the rich really has." Zoe offered an intricate interpretation of Banksy's artistic motivation:

> I feel like he's saying that there's definitely a problem with the amount of money that people spend because for that one [*Love Is in the Bin*], he knew his work was extremely valuable and I feel like he might have been upset at that because it was selling for, over like five million dollars at least, and especially because he just started like a graffiti artist.

Figure 13

Love Is in the Bin (Banksy, 2018) (left) and *Cash Machine Girl* (Banksy, 2007) (right)

Spray paint and acrylic on canvas. Private collection

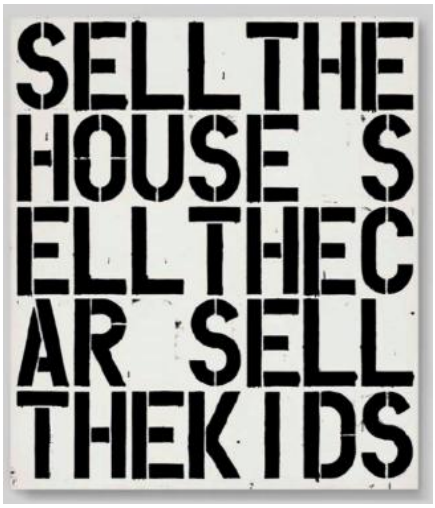
Spray paint on wall. London, England

March sessions indicated participants confidently challenging traditional definitions of art and participating in advanced debates about artistic legitimacy. During discussions comparing Christopher Wool's *Apocalypse Now* with local graffiti work (see Figure 14), one student argued: "Graffiti is supposed to be seen as a form of defiance...that's the whole driving force behind it, the genre. And it's people expressing certain things, like, through either, typography or drawings."

However, another student questioned the unnamed graffiti piece: "I feel like that could be just, like, a doodle or something, you know? I'm not saying there's no meaning behind it. No, no. I'm just saying, like, if you look at the art itself and, you know, say it's art, is it?" This indicated participants' willingness to participate in genuine intellectual debate about artistic value.

Figure 14

Apocalypse Now (Christopher Wool, 1988) (left) and Local Graffiti Work (2021) (right)



Alkyd and flashe on aluminum.
Private collection

Spray paint on wall, New York

Participants also began examining technical aspects of contemporary photography and painting with refinement. During the discussion of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled #474* and Marilyn Minter's *Tough Guy* (see Figure 15), Jay questioned medium specificity:

> For the second one [*Untitled #474]*, they're making sure that the medium says print because I would have originally [thought], looking at it, I thought it would have just been like focused on just the photo as a whole and not the print [as art].

This followed an exchange between students about the materials utilized in both works. This directly related to the student's post-questionnaire response that stated he gained new ideas of types of art and art process through the discussions.

Figure 15

Tough Guy (Marilyn Minter, 1999) (left) and *Untitled #474* (Cindy Sherman, 2008) (right)

Enamel on metal. Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO

Chromogenic print. Metro Pictures Gallery, New York, NY

The April discussions revealed that participants were bringing extensive outside knowledge to classroom conversations and making refined connections across artistic movements. During the examination of works spanning from Rembrandt's *The Slaughtered Ox* through Jenny Saville's *Torso 2* (see Figure 16), one student observed, "The idea is consistent, but the way of portraying stuff is, like, different." Participants displayed comfort with challenging contemporary art, with another building knowledge on how contemporary artists reference historical works: "Maybe they're trying to continue the trend…. They're referring to this work as they make a new one."

Figure 16

Historical Progression of Meat Paintings

Note. Clockwise from top left: *The Slaughtered Ox* (Rembrandt van Rijn, 1655), oil on panel, Musée du Louvre, Paris, France; *Carcass of Beef* (Chaïm Soutine, c. 1924), oil on canvas, Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble, France; *Figure with Meat* (Francis Bacon, 1954), oil on canvas, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL; *Torso 2* (Jenny Saville, 2004), oil on canvas, private collection.

The May 16 discussion of Banksy's *Dismaland* (see Figure 17) exemplified participants' evolved capabilities. They made intricate connections between historical and contemporary issues while examining *Dismaland*. One student provided historical context: "Walt Disney was a very known anti-Semite and racist. So, it's kind of exposing him in a way, not only with the corporations, but also his ideals and how he lived his life, hating marginalized groups." Bella connected visual elements to historical atrocities: "That boat scene very much gave the transatlantic slave trade, that's what I thought, all the people in the boat." Eric examined corporate critique in *Dismaland* with complexity:

> Very apocalyptic. It was, like, everything has been reversed. Like, all the happiness at Disney has just been sucked out of it. I don't know if this makes sense, but I feel like Banksy's trying to represent how dark it really is with these giant high corporations like Disney.

Figure 17

Dismaland (Banksy, 2015)

Installation. Weston-super-Mare, England.

Zoe connected *Dismaland* to contemporary labor conditions:

> I like how they incorporated the workers of Disneyland. They showed them all gloomy and stuff like that. They showed, like, really how people are just working in these kinds of places. They probably just don't like it at all. Yeah, the attention of it all, just everything around them is probably super overwhelming.

Jay provided detailed examination of corporate messaging in *Dismaland*:

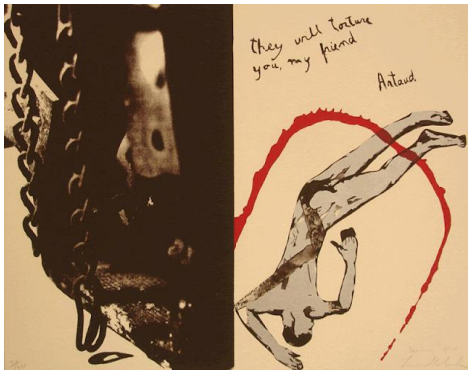
> There's so many details that show how exposing that truth of corporations and how corporations contribute to the suffering of others and how they try to appear all happy and smiley, but they aren't really, they don't actually contribute to that [happiness].

By June, participants displayed complete mastery of complex themes and seamless integration of historical and contemporary issues. During the final discussion of Leon Golub and Nancy Spero's *They Will Torture You, My Friend* (see Figure 18), Eric provided a refined historical response:

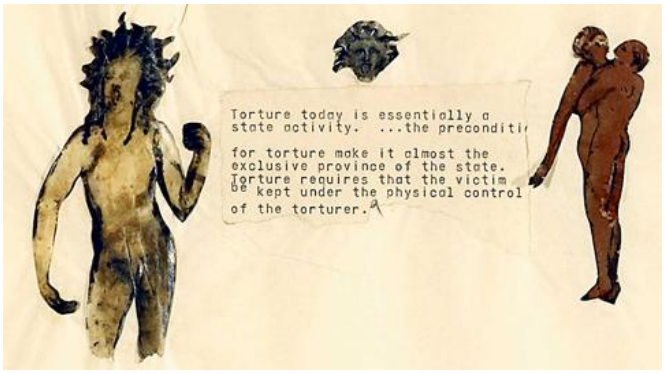
> The dates, 1971 to 1992, this was around the era of the Cold War or the Vietnam war, around those two eras and this just reminds me of the times how all of these talks about torture and stuff and it just reminds me how if you said anything against the war, anything against the CIA, or government officials, they would torture you.

Figure 18

They Will Torture You, My Friend (Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, 1971) (left) and *Torture of Women* (Nancy Spero, 2010) (right)



Screen print in color on wove paper. Private collection



Mixed media, 125-foot scroll printed into 156-page book. Artists' collection

In addition, participants revealed remarkable comfort working with extremely challenging subject matter involving torture, government oppression, and violence. They approached these difficult themes with analytical maturity, maintaining respectful discourse while examining the political and social implications of the collaborative artwork. One student directly confronted the violent imagery in the work: “There’s a woman right there that’s getting choked out by a man and stuff and I feel it’s just targeting rape...like you [government] just torture too many people, so like yeah, violence.” Participants indicated they could handle controversial contemporary issues without becoming overwhelmed or shutting down, instead using the challenging content as a springboard for deeper critical thinking about power structures and social justice.

Participants displayed comfort with complex artistic concepts throughout the later conversations. During these discussions, they shared knowledge from outside sources and built collaborative interpretations. By the final sessions, participants participated in universal involvement during small group talks and took control of large group discussions, requesting additional resources and making connections across disciplines independently. The evolution from tentative, permission-seeking interaction with Rita Ackermann’s work (see Figure 6) in September to confident, independent critical examination of complex political themes in Golub and Spero’s collaborative piece by June indicated the significant growth achieved through sustained exposure to challenging contemporary art discussions.

Group conversation data from the later period revealed transformed classroom dynamics characterized by student agency, sophisticated critical engagement, and comfort with complex themes. Participants evolved from passive recipients of content to active contributors who selected discussion topics, built collaborative interpretations, and made sophisticated connections

across historical and contemporary contexts. The progression from limited early participation to universal engagement by June indicated substantial development in both analytical capabilities and confidence in engaging with challenging contemporary art.

While group conversation transcripts captured students' verbal development, field notes provided observational data about participation patterns, nonverbal responses, and classroom dynamics throughout the study period.

Field Notes: Early Observations (September–December 2024). The challenges documented in fall observations transformed substantially during the spring semester. Early field notes documented significant challenges in participation, with consistent patterns of limited contribution and participation anxiety. September 20 notes recorded, "Few active participants in the discussion," with only three to five participants regularly contributing. I observed participation anxiety through behaviors like apologizing for speaking or seeking permission to use artwork titles in their observations.

However, early field notes also captured moments of genuine interest development, despite low participation rates. October 3 notes documented a student's disappointment when told there would be no discussion that day:

> A student asked if we were going to be discussing artwork today. When the teacher and I explained no, as we had just talked on Monday, she said she was disappointed as she was planning on talking in the discussion today. She is a student that has not spoken up yet.

October 11 notes recorded similar enthusiasm from a student: "He said it was really cool and something very unique and different, to talk about the works."

Field notes from the October 18 discussion noted that although there was participant engagement early on, conversations were led along by a smaller group who more actively participated: "One main student participant was absent today, so the conversation was not as

robust, although there were still 5 students commenting." This resulted in the conversation lasting a shorter amount of time, and the group appeared to be more hesitant starting the conversation, making the exercise more difficult to facilitate.

Student agency began to develop, with October 29 notes documenting:

> I was approached by one student, the most vocal student, suggesting an artist that might be beneficial for the class to discuss. The imagery is dark, and I asked how she knew of the artist. She explained that the artist has a following on social media.

This constituted early signs of participants taking ownership of their learning experience and contributing to curricular decisions.

Peer response development began appearing in November, with field notes documenting collaborative interaction: "Students first discussed with partners or small groups the two Kruger works. They all were talking amongst each other, noticing women's rights being what the artist might mean" (see Figure 10). This constituted the beginning of collaborative meaning-making that would become central to later discussions.

Contemporary connections became prominent as the study progressed, with participants actively linking artwork to current events and culture. December 5 notes recorded immediate recognition: "There was a lot of conversation about Cattelan's banana and toilet—immediately students began talking amongst each other, especially that *Comedian* has been all over the news" (see Figure 10). This indicated participants were making connections between classroom content and their broader cultural awareness.

Critical thinking development also appeared in field notes, with participants beginning to recognize art's social functions and displaying increasing confidence and expanding analytical refinement. December notes recorded participants' understanding that works challenge viewers to confront issues in society, with field notes documenting:

> Another student, whom I have not heard from before, talked about how the works talk about society and used the word challenge! Another one piggybacked and said that the pieces go against something in art, that they also challenged views of art.

Participation grew to approximately 10 to 12 participants regularly contributing, with notes documenting broader involvement: "Students first discussed with partners or small groups," which displayed participation across more of the classroom. The recognition of art's challenging function laid groundwork for later advanced examination.

Field Notes: Later Observations (January–June 2025). Field notes from the second semester revealed dramatic shifts in these early patterns. The January 10 session revealed significant analytical refinement as participants connected Marina Abramović and Chris Burden's works to "the Vietnam war, Paint It Black [The Rolling Stones], connection and disconnection with the works" (see Figure 12). Participants displayed increased comfort with difficult performance art, making connections to "gang violence and accidental tragedy" while asking thoughtful questions about artistic choices. Their positive response to artist video clips indicated growing interest in understanding artists' intentions and processes. Historical contextualization became more advanced during this period, with participants making specific connections to time periods, events, and social movements, while other discussions included examination of World War I trauma, propaganda, and various historical periods.

Later field notes documented dramatic evolution in classroom dynamics and participant interaction patterns. Student agency development became prominent, with February notes documenting a pivotal moment when participants began selecting discussion content. As I documented in field notes: "A student selected works for the next discussion. She wanted to participate in this way as she felt the work she chose was aligned with the work we have been discussing."

March field notes documented the results of student curatorial agency and collaborative knowledge construction. Field notes described participants discussing the student-chosen work, with participants exhibiting advanced understanding that "an artist doesn't have to be famous but if we know more about the artist we can understand it more" and recognizing "multiple ways to interpret a painting." The March 7 session on Christopher Wool and graffiti (see Figure 14) showed participants' comfort with ambiguous art forms and their ability to work with nuanced debates about what constitutes art, with some arguing that artistic intention determines legitimacy while others focused on communicative clarity.

Visual examination skills also developed significantly during later observations. April 11 notes documented participants "carefully studying the images" and noticing subtle details: "Students immediately noticed the small detail in the Rembrandt painting of the person in the shadows, something I did not think would happen, this suggests they are carefully studying the images" (see Figure 16). Students came up with multiple explanations for the shadowed figure. This represented growth from superficial observation to detailed analytical interaction.

Participants were able to both build on each other's observations as well as offer alternative thoughts when responding in the group discussions. May field notes documented refined collaborative knowledge construction: "The conversation was evolving with different students expanding their collective knowledge about the piece and the meaning." Participants were no longer passive recipients but active contributors to classroom knowledge, connecting with media in their current lives and bringing outside cultural awareness to enhance discussions.

Universal participation surfaced in final sessions, representing dramatic growth from the limited early participation. June field notes recorded this unprecedented involvement: "I was surprised to see every student talking and participating with work when we first started to turn

and talk before our larger conversation." Field notes continued: "Walking around the room I was able to ensure that students were indeed talking about the work and what they saw and thought," confirming authentic interaction rather than performative compliance.

Confidence development was documented throughout the later period, with final notes in June observing:

> Students have definitely opened up over the course of the study, with shy students participating, even if their observations did not match the typical participants' comments.... Overall students seem to be more confident in not only speaking, but looking at the works.

This confidence extended beyond verbal participation to willingness to share personal perspectives and interpretations.

Safe space creation for vulnerable disclosure surfaced as a significant finding during later observations. Final interview field notes illustrated this:

> I was very shocked to hear what some students had revealed to me in response to discussing the works and their own artwork creation. One interviewee talked about his past struggle with addiction, while another spoke about abuse she endured.

This led to the insight that "the discussion of difficult works creates a safe space for students to confront their own difficult experiences and ideas."

I documented dramatic evolution in participant interaction over the academic year. Beginning with only three to five regular contributors and significant participation anxiety in September, the classroom evolved into a space of universal involvement by June, where "every student talking and participating" became the norm. Participants progressed from seeking permission to speak to taking curatorial control of discussions and selecting their own content for examination, with collaborative meaning-making appearing as they built on each other's ideas and offered alternative interpretations. Visual examination skills developed significantly, with participants progressing from surface-level observations to carefully studying images and

making refined connections between historical contexts, contemporary culture, and personal experiences. Unexpectedly, final interviews revealed participants sharing deeply personal experiences, demonstrating that a safe space for vulnerable disclosure had emerged.

Small Group Results

While whole-class data revealed broad patterns of growth, interview data from six participants provided deeper insight into individual experiences with difficult works. This section examines commonalities across these volunteers before presenting individual case portraits.

Overview of Interview Participants

Six participants volunteered for mid-year and final interviews: Eric, Julio, Alicia, Jay, Alison, and Zoe. These participants represented diverse backgrounds and artistic interests while sharing a willingness to work deeply with challenging content. An examination of their longitudinal interview data revealed eight key commonalities that distinguished their experiences from the broader class patterns.

Limited Prior Exposure to Art Discussion. Each of the six participants reported minimal formal classroom experiences discussing any artwork before the study. Their previous exposure was sporadic and superficial, typically occurring once or twice per quarter and focusing on famous artists and basic identification rather than deeper examination. Jay described his background: “I didn’t have any set of experiences where I could talk about art”; he noted school discussions occurred infrequently and focused on basic content. Julio confirmed limited classroom exposure, stating, “I don’t think there’s really anything [I’ve experienced] talking about different pieces of art,” beyond museum field trips. Even participants with extensive art class experience, such as Alison, characterized previous discussions as primarily technical conversations about their own work creation rather than examining existing artwork. Alicia

noted her discussions were limited to family conversations when asked if she had opportunities to talk about art in school: “Personally, not me, but I do talk about art with my mom and stuff like that.” Most museum experiences, according to Julio, Alison, and Jay, were entirely aesthetic-focused, lacking analytical components. Zoe had independently sought out art examination through online channels and film coursework, representing the exception rather than the norm among the group.

Limited Prior Experience with Difficult Art Discussion. The participants’ exposure to challenging works was even more restricted than their general art discussions. Eric was the only participant who reported any informal experience with difficult works discussions outside classroom settings, stating, “Never in a classroom, but personally with other people I know or other artists I tried collaborating with, we always talk about difficult pieces of art.” Julio had encountered challenging work during a museum visit, but this was an isolated incident without structured discussion. Jay, Alicia, and Alison explicitly stated they had no prior experience discussing difficult works in educational settings. Alicia’s response was direct—“No, I haven’t done any work like that”—when asked about difficult works discussions. Alison acknowledged having encountered challenging works but lacked analytical preparation for working with such content. Zoe had some preparation through film examination that provided background in symbolic interpretation, but this transferred knowledge was unique among the group.

Changed Definition of Art from Simple Expression to Complex Social Function. The six interviewed participants evolved from basic definitions of art as individual expression to nuanced understanding of art as multifaceted social communication. Eric initially described his understanding in highly personal terms: “I always think about art like always just like a way to resemble yourself, because what you draw, what you make, it’s with you, like it describes you”;

thus, he displayed a focus on individual identity expression. Jay similarly began with constrained understanding focused on traditional approaches and materials, while Julio started with basic identification approaches. This evolution moved beyond personal emotional outlets to recognition of art's capacity for protest, social commentary, and political awareness. Alison expanded her conception from purely aesthetic appreciation to recognition that art can serve many purposes beyond visual appeal. Participants developed an understanding for art's relationship to power structures and historical contexts—namely, how art both reflects and influences societal conditions. Their expanded definitions encompassed diverse media and recognized art's presence across multiple contexts, from traditional galleries to everyday environments.

Expanded Understanding of Art's Social Function. Participants developed advanced recognition of art's capacity for social critique and political commentary, specifically understanding art's relationship to power structures and social change. Jay articulated in his interview a refined understanding of the reciprocal relationship between art and society, recognizing how historical events influence artistic production while art simultaneously impacts social discourse. Alison came to understand art as serving educational functions, describing it as providing nontraditional approaches to learning about historical events and social issues. Alicia recognized art's capacity to create productive discomfort that forces viewers to confront uncomfortable realities about contemporary social conditions. Participants recognized art's capacity to challenge established norms, provide insight into underrepresented perspectives, and create productive discomfort that encourages critical examination of social realities. Zoe consistently emphasized art's critical function in challenging societal norms and exposing underrepresented perspectives throughout history.

Universal Recognition of Educational Benefits with Minimal Negatives. The interviewed participants identified substantial educational value in working with difficult works, with remarkably few drawbacks cited. Their responses showed advanced understanding of how challenging works enhanced analytical thinking, media literacy, and critical examination skills that transferred to other academic subjects. Julio recognized in his interview that difficult works create cognitive involvement by encouraging deeper thinking and broader understanding of art's diverse forms. Zoe emphasized in her interview the transferable skills developed through this interaction, particularly in developing critical examination abilities and avoiding superficial assumptions. Representative examples of their appreciation for this exposure included Jay's emphasis on the importance of seeing works "that are not something you would look at in an art book" because "these ones are something that you wouldn't see often and looking at works like this that are equally as important as those other works." The few negatives identified focused on participation logistics rather than content appropriateness. Julio's main concern was participation levels: "The only negative of it would be, these are high school students, and only maybe five of them might talk at most," though he acknowledged this was not caused by the difficult nature of the works themselves. Alicia explicitly stated, "No, I don't think there's really any negative," when asked in her interview to identify drawbacks to looking at difficult works with secondary students.

Unanimous Agreement on Importance. The six participants emphatically endorsed the importance of working with difficult works, providing refined rationales that indicated deep understanding of their educational and personal value. Julio emphasized the growth benefits, explaining that difficult works are important "because it'll help people just like get out of their comfort zone." Eric similarly noted that "I feel like looking at difficult artists could just really

get them out of their comfort zone" and enable them to move beyond limited artistic expression. The participants recognized that comfort zones limit artistic and personal growth, while challenging content serves as essential communication about difficult realities. Jay articulated this communicative function clearly: "It's reading people's different opinions on political issues and stuff like that; this is also a form of communication." Participants valued how difficult works provided courage to address challenging topics in their own work and opened analytical thinking approaches applicable across disciplines. Alison valued how difficult works functioned on multiple levels, describing them as serving purposes beyond traditional art: "It's entertaining and it's interesting, and it makes you ask questions."

Direct Impact on Artistic Practice. The interviewed participants provided specific, detailed examples of how difficult works directly influenced their creative practice, going beyond the broader class pattern to reveal concrete artistic changes. Julio developed increased focus on symbolic integration in his work, particularly in medical-themed projects. Eric underwent profound transformation in both medium selection and subject matter, shifting from superficial content to deeply personal expression addressing trauma. Jay created socially conscious artwork intended to provoke viewer discomfort while addressing contemporary issues. Alicia expanded her approach to combine shock elements with intentional meaning-making. Alison shifted toward process-oriented creation, prioritizing meaningful expression over technical accuracy. Zoe increased her consideration of materials and symbolic content in her artistic choices. The depth and specificity of their artistic development displayed sustained integration of components of difficult work into their creative development.

Pedagogical Refinement in Final Interviews. These participants revealed remarkable refinement when asked how they would introduce difficult works to newcomers, showing

metacognitive awareness of learning processes and graduated pedagogical approaches. Eric suggested systematic progression from lighter to more challenging content, specifically recommending starting with works that contain multiple interpretive possibilities but remain accessible to novice viewers. Similarly, Jay advocated for sequential difficulty progression, suggesting easier works that still require deeper thinking as preparation for more challenging content. Alison emphasized the importance of focused examination, recommending that beginners select individual elements rather than attempting comprehensive interpretation, allowing natural curiosity to guide deeper exploration. Julio and Zoe both emphasized contextual support, with Julio highlighting the importance of artist background information and Zoe stressing the value of historical and cultural context in making difficult works accessible. These responses indicated deep understanding of how their own learning had progressed and how to scaffold similar experiences for others, revealing advanced understanding of educational theory and practice.

Individual Cases

While the preceding examination of commonalities identified patterns shared across all six interviewed participants, the following individual cases explore how these broader themes manifested uniquely in each participant's journey, providing rich narrative detail and illustrating the diverse pathways through which engagement with difficult works can facilitate growth.

Eric

Eric's journey represented a dramatic transformation documented in the study, moving from what he characterized as "goofy art" to serious work addressing personal trauma and addiction. His initial understanding focused on entertainment value: "You have comic book art where everyone reads for enjoyment." He described his work before the study as consisting of

characters and beautiful things, things he thought others wanted to see. However, the discussion of Marina Abramović's performance piece created what he described as an influential experience: "The one with the woman washing the cow bones, for some reason, that was, like, my wake-up call to look into it deeper" (see Figure 12). The visceral interaction was profound: "hearing the smell was terrible, how like everything was real too; it wasn't just painted on bones—it was real flesh and stuff, like real." This challenging content opened new possibilities: "After I saw that video, I was like, wow, I should really look more deeper into art, and that just helped me influence more of my art, especially with, like, mental illness and stuff." Eric described how this exposure fundamentally changed his approach:

> I feel like the difficult works really helped me get out of my comfort zone. Because I was always very secluded about my art and stuff. I would always make heroes or sometimes villains. But then when I saw the more difficult arts and stuff, I said, you know, I'm going to start using my past from my teen years and stuff. My difficulties, I'm going to start putting them into my art. I'm going to integrate it in my art.

This progression from superficial subject matter to deeply personal content marked a turning point in his creative development (see Table 2).

Eric's evolution was deeply personal, rooted in family trauma: "Having other people like family members getting really sick, that has really really woken up my mindset about art." He described how difficult life experiences made him receptive to challenging works:

> When I saw [difficult art] and when I started getting more into mental stuff like mental capabilities and especially now on Fridays we have very dark art. Seeing the various issues that I could relate to, it really changed my approach.

Eric's creative work underwent a complete transformation when he discovered new materials and used them to express personal meaning: "Before, I was really confused about what my medium was, but then [experimenting with] 3D work is what really helped me find

everything, when I found I had almost, like, a natural skill for 3D making stuff." This enabled Eric to express complex personal experiences:

> The bottle I made was based on my grandpa's stroke because of alcoholism and also a lot of problems I fell deeply into. I had a little substance problem that I don't really tell people about that almost took my life and stuff.

Eric's willingness to address trauma through art represented an integration of difficult personal experiences with artistic practice. He explained how seeing Yuko Tatsushima's piece, *Misato's Self-Determination* (see Figure 19), gave him permission to address personal struggles:

> Especially seeing the Misato piece talking about overdose, that immediately kicked into my head like, whoa, I don't have to hold back on my art. I can describe everything—so that's why the bottle was made because the bottle was like describing the overdose and my grandpa's stroke. It was like all my heavy shit in one bottle. (See Table 2)

Figure 19

Misato's Self-Determination (Yuko Tatsushima, date unknown)

Oil and acrylic on canvas. Private collection.

Eric's final interview description of how art should function showed exceptional growth from when he thought art was made to be simply visually pleasing for the viewer. Eric stated that art must communicate important messages: "As long as it's there [art] and it's getting its point

across, then that means it did well. That's what's doing—it's functioning as its job…if it's not getting its message or its point across, it's like 'Why did why did I even make it?'" Eric went on to explain that artists have the ability to bring up difficult work that might be hard for others to speak about, and they have been doing so across time: "In times in the past, or even now, so in different points of time, the art is dragging in these issues…it's addressing these issues in everyday life—that's what these difficult works do." Eric also emphasized the influential power of the experience: "I feel you should do it even more [discussions] because it really helped me find my medium and helped find my inspiration and helped find my moves."

Eric's case exemplified the most dramatic transformation in the study, characterized by a shift from superficial, entertainment-focused art creation to deeply personal expression addressing trauma and addiction. His journey from "goofy art" to meaningful work that integrated personal struggles with addiction and family trauma illustrated how difficult works exposure can provide permission for authentic artistic voice development and emotional vulnerability in creative practice. As noted in the commonalities examination, Eric exemplified the pattern of changed definition of art and direct impact on artistic practice, while representing the most extreme example of personal transformation among the six interviewed participants.

Julio

Julio demonstrated consistent analytical refinement while developing symbolic consciousness and tolerance for interpretive complexity. His evolution moved from basic identification—evident in his pre-questionnaire definition of art as "something made by a person"—toward complex recognition of art's multifaceted purposes. His understanding evolved dramatically: "It gets people to think...it gets a bigger understanding of art as a whole, I'd say,

like, different types." Julio recognized that difficult works "have more to it" and require "more thinking and more critical examination," compared to works created purely for "visual pleasure."

Julio's mid-study interview showed expanded understanding—"It can be about emotions, politics, or a simple concept or idea"—and recognition that art serves to "bring awareness, whether it is to an emotion or an issue." He developed systematic approaches to examining art by considering historical context and connecting works to contemporary social issues. As documented in the November group conversations, his examination of Barbara Kruger's work revealed cross-curricular connections when he linked the imagery to his English class reading of *1984*. This demonstrated his growing ability to synthesize knowledge across disciplines (see Figure 9).

Julio's creative development indicated significant progress in symbolic thinking. He explained: "With the pieces that were shown, there was a lot of symbolism and a lot of emotion...and with my future pieces, like, I really want to go more into symbolism." He described specific choices in his medical-themed sustained investigation: "The oranges were more so because in ancient Greece the [medical] drawings, the artwork colors would be orange, the potteries and the design, so I used orange" (see Table 2). His development included comfort with works that resist simple explanation and recognizing the value of underground artists:

> I really like learning about the more underground artists. With popular works, it's like, "oh, popular works." This is why it's in a museum, because they're popular. But with underground artists who are, like, unknown, or pieces that not many people know.... It kind of gets you to think more of what the piece is saying, like what the artist's statement is.

Julio's case illustrated steady analytical development from basic identification toward sophisticated symbolic thinking and interpretive complexity. His consistent growth in recognizing art's multifaceted purposes, developing cross-curricular connections, and

incorporating meaningful symbolism in his medical-themed work exemplified how sustained exposure to difficult works can enhance both critical thinking skills and intentional artistic practice. As documented in the commonalities examination, Julio's evolution represented the typical pattern of changed art definitions and pedagogical sophistication, while demonstrating how participants with emerging analytical skills could develop systematic approaches to symbolic integration.

Jay

Jay developed a nuanced understanding of art's relationship to society and history, accompanied by significant shifts toward socially conscious artistic practice. His initial understanding focused on traditional approaches: "Traditional, like, paper and pencil or, like, canvas and paint"; however, interaction with difficult works fostered recognition of art's broader social and political functions. Jay gained awareness for the reciprocal relationship between art and society: "I saw it as we were discussing art...what art does to people, because if you look at what the history and society itself does to art together, [you see it] as well."

Jay's creative work underwent significant evolution toward socially conscious practice. His homeless-themed piece exemplified this shift: "I wanted people to be uncomfortable when they look at my work.... I wanted them to see homelessness and to remind them there's [sic] other people [that are] homeless living in New York." He described this as his first meaningful artwork (see Table 2):

> That's the first art I really made because my other ones [pieces] I just had a reference picture, like cars. Before, I thought "I'm gonna draw cars and butterflies," but this time I was inspired to portray homelessness.

Jay's development included gaining confidence to address difficult topics through seeing other artists do so: "I think it gives you a little courage, too, because you're able to kind of see

other people doing it." This illustrated his personal growth in willingness to tackle challenging subjects in his own work after witnessing how other artists approached such themes.

When this work was rejected from a student exhibition at a local business, Jay's response revealed his commitment to meaningful expression:

> With the IKEA exhibition, they said, "Oh, it's kind of like, strong for us," and they actually didn't put it in, so I was like, okay, but I was also a little glad to hear that, because my artwork has a point. Maybe some people might not agree with it, but my artwork has a point, and everyone could see that.

Group conversation transcripts documented Jay's growing refinement in recognizing patterns across artwork. During the April discussion, he made connections pointing out how "it is interesting that the artwork did not look the same based on style, but the ideas were consistent, which is the opposite of van Gogh in that his style was consistent, but the subject matter varied." His understanding of difficult works evolved to recognize the analytical demands as documented in his interview: "Compared to the non-difficult ones, they just have more to it. And it requires more thinking and more critical...examination of the work." His final interview showed a refined understanding of how difficult works function throughout history: "I feel like they're everywhere in history because there is no society with no issues.... Some people now make even more creative work, like *Dismaland* [see Figure 17], and make it a whole experience as an art piece."

Jay's case demonstrated significant development in understanding art's relationship to society and history, accompanied by a shift toward socially conscious artistic practice. His evolution from traditional, imitative approaches to meaningful work addressing homelessness illustrated how exposure to difficult works can provide courage to tackle challenging subjects and create artwork with intentional social commentary, even when facing institutional resistance. Jay's experience exemplified the commonalities of expanded understanding of art's social

function and direct impact on artistic practice, while uniquely demonstrating how participants can develop sophisticated comprehension of the reciprocal relationship between art and society.

Alison

Alison's development revealed movement from technical perfectionism toward process-oriented, meaning-focused artistic practice, with particular appreciation for collaborative learning benefits. Her initial artmaking approach emphasized technical accuracy: "I was very involved in the technical standpoint of 'oh, I want this to look exactly like what my reference image is'" (see Table 2). Through interaction with difficult works, she developed a process-oriented understanding: "Now I think it's more about the process of arriving there and the actual meaning."

Alison's evolution was evident in her changing relationship with art consumption. Her initial museum experiences were purely aesthetic: "I was going because I thought I just visually like how it [art] looks, and I was thinking about it [art] in a very different way." However, through exposure to difficult works, she developed genuine enthusiasm for challenging content, as evidenced by her statement describing how the works demanded attention:

> Who wouldn't want to keep listening to something that's, like, "Oh, yeah this guy urinated in something and used that in his artwork." You would just be caught, like, "What? Like, I want to hear about this."

This progression from passive aesthetic judgment to active interaction with provocative content indicated Alison's intellectual growth.

Additionally, her description of her responses to art before the study focused on aesthetic function—"Oh, this is nice to look at"—while her post-questionnaire response revealed advanced conceptual understanding. She described the interpretive experience as puzzle-like:

“It’s really such a fun thing...it’s like a puzzle that doesn’t have an answer. But you’re just trying to dissect it, like, into every kind of little bits and pieces.”

Alison’s creative work evolved toward greater experimentation and conceptual focus: “I’m definitely more focused, there’s no genre or style that I’m like, oh, I really hate this or I don’t like this anymore. I just am now like everything kind of, always, serves a purpose.” She had developed an approach to artmaking that focused on ever-changing processes and engagement with a variety of new materials, combining them in ways that she never did before. Her work no longer emulated a photorealistic style, but rather evolved into complex, abstracted imagery imbued with personal meaning.

Her understanding of the multiple functions of difficult works was refined: “It’s entertaining and it’s interesting, and it makes you ask questions and it, you know, it could change your beliefs on something or further your thoughts on something.” She revealed academic integration by using difficult works in her AP Language essays, displaying transfer of analytical skills across disciplines: “I wrote about one of these art pieces in one of my English papers.” When asked about which piece she was referring to, she pointed to Maurizio Cattelan’s *America* (see Figure 10). Alison exhibited metacognitive awareness of her development:

> I think it [difficult works] definitely expanded what I view as art. I feel like before it had to be this definitive like, you know, “Oh, I painted this and this is meant to be viewed by the public.” But now I feel like it’s [the interpretation is] more like a personal perspective thing.

Alison’s case illustrated a transformation from technical perfectionism toward process-oriented, meaning-focused artistic practice. Her evolution from purely aesthetic museum experiences to genuine enthusiasm for challenging content, coupled with her shift from reference-based accuracy to experimental, conceptually driven work, demonstrated how difficult works exposure can redirect artistic priorities from technical skill toward meaningful expression

and interpretive engagement. Alison's development aligned with several commonalities, including changed art definitions and direct impact on artistic practice, while uniquely representing how participants can transition from product-focused to process-focused creative approaches while developing metacognitive awareness of their learning.

Alicia

Alicia revealed a consistent understanding of art's communicative power while developing increased regard for challenging content and shock value as legitimate artistic strategies. She maintained throughout the study that art serves essential communicative purposes: "It's so much easier to talk about something when you see it in a visual perspective." Her understanding evolved to appreciate how difficult works specifically serve this function through what she termed "shock art."

Her pre-questionnaire response focused on art as "a way to put your thoughts into an actual visual thing," while her post-questionnaire response indicated expanded understanding: "I think it's digging deeper into a piece and seeing what specific ideas went into those pieces." Alicia's creative development focused on expanding her use of shock elements to convey meaning (see Table 2):

> I make a lot of shock factor artwork, and not a lot of meaningful stuff. It's just, like, shock factor with some of my artwork. So, I think that's what kind of made my artwork change because I wasn't really into that [meaning-making] at first, but now it speaks more of a meaning with a shock factor.

Alicia's detailed responses showed an advanced understanding of difficult works' purpose: "It shows people what they don't want to see and that's the hard truth." She characterized difficult images as those with "more of a message than the actual artwork," and recognized their function in addressing "issues that are not really talked about." Her understanding of art's universal communicative power was particularly refined, as evidenced by

what she shared in her interview: “It’s better to look at something than read about it. Sometimes for people who can’t really understand English or something they can feel the emotions towards it without understanding the language.”

Alicia’s case demonstrated consistent understanding of art’s communicative power while developing increased appreciation for challenging content. Her maintained focus on art’s visual communication capabilities, combined with her expanded understanding of how difficult works serve confrontational purposes, illustrated how some participants build on existing strengths rather than undergo dramatic conceptual shifts when engaging with difficult works. Alicia’s development aligned with the commonalities of expanded understanding of art’s social function and unanimous agreement on importance, while uniquely representing how participants could integrate difficult elements with intentional meaning-making as a communicative strategy.

Zoe

Zoe revealed consistent analytical sophistication while developing increased acknowledgment for symbolism and conceptual depth in artistic practice. Her analytical capabilities appeared early and continued developing throughout the study. Field notes from September documented her advanced historical examination connecting Otto Dix’s work to World War I trauma: “Noting the date, 1920s and the title, and that it looked like the artist was talking about WW1, they might have been in WW1, suffered trauma, and that the growths coming out of everywhere might represent the festering thoughts of the artist about the war” (see Figure 7).

Zoe’s understanding of difficult works evolved toward appreciation for works requiring analytical interaction and connection: “With difficult work, when its message is not overtly clear, it takes a lot more deep understanding of context.” She recognized the educational function of

difficult works: “It helps develop media literacy and looking more in depth into certain things without just assuming things right off the bat.” Zoe’s creative work focused on incorporating symbolic content: “I’ve thought more about the materials that I’ve used and what that could mean in retrospective to the art. And I’ve also thought about more of what symbolism I should use.” One piece she created referenced her recent diagnosis of obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), with stylistic elements in her work symbolizing her struggle to focus on things when in the midst of satisfying a compulsion (see Table 2). Zoe explained the blurriness in the image served to “bring emphasis to the left hand which is covered in soap, showing how I can’t focus on anything else until my compulsion is fulfilled.” She also described a plan for a future piece using bronze statue patination patterns as commentary on compulsive touching behaviors, referencing how repeated touching creates wear marks on bronze. Both the completed work and the plan for her next piece revealed refined integration of conceptual meaning with visual elements.

Zoe’s film class experience also provided foundation for her analytical development: “I took a film class.... I feel like that really helped me with the way I talk about the meanings behind stuff and the symbolism.” However, the difficult works discussions expanded her capabilities beyond traditional educational experiences. Her contributions consistently revealed cross-curricular knowledge. During the November examination of Barbara Kruger’s work, she made advanced connections to literature and political themes, specifically comparing Kruger’s use of text to George Orwell’s *1984* and propaganda (see Figure 9). Zoe’s final interview showed her recommendation for expanding the program: “I would say to hold on...to look at and expand on works that are more different, like works that come from different groups of people. Like a diverse look at art from all around the world.”

Zoe's understanding of art's social function remained consistently refined: "It [difficult work] challenges certain norms that are commonplace, and it also gives an inner look into issues that maybe aren't talked about as much and especially in regards to history, like the struggles of certain groups of people." Her development represented steady analytical growth accompanied by increased confidence in incorporating meaningful content into her own artistic practice.

Zoe's case demonstrated consistent analytical sophistication while developing increased interest in symbolism and conceptual depth in artistic practice. Her early demonstration of historical examination skills, combined with her film class background and steady development in symbolic integration, illustrated how participants with existing analytical foundations can deepen and expand their critical capabilities through sustained engagement with difficult contemporary art. Zoe's development exemplified multiple commonalities including limited prior exposure to difficult works discussion, pedagogical sophistication in final interviews, and direct impact on artistic practice, while uniquely demonstrating how participants with pre-existing analytical skills can rapidly synthesize knowledge across disciplines and develop sophisticated symbolic integration strategies.

These six individual journeys, while distinct, collectively illustrated the broader patterns documented in whole-class data.

Conclusion

The results presented in this chapter documented significant changes in participants' understanding of art, approaches to artmaking, and interaction with challenging content over the 10-month study period. Whole-class data indicated consistent patterns of growth from limited, traditional conceptions of art toward advanced understanding of art's social functions and expanded possibilities.

The six interviewed participants exemplified these broader patterns while revealing unique individual journeys shaped by personal experiences and artistic interests. Their development encompassed multiple dimensions: conceptual understanding evolved from simple definitions to complex social awareness; critical consciousness developed from aesthetic appreciation to recognition of art's capacity for social change; artistic practice shifted from imitative work to meaningful, personally relevant creation; and comfort with complexity grew from anxiety about difficult content to welcoming interpretive challenge.

Key findings included the evolution of artistic understanding from personal expression focus to social consciousness, development of critical awareness about art's capacity to address societal issues, emergence of authentic artistic voices incorporating symbolism and social commentary, and creation of collaborative learning environments that supported risk-taking and vulnerability. Participants consistently developed comfort with complexity and ambiguity as well as recognition for art's diverse functions and approaches.

The longitudinal data captured both individual growth trajectories and collective classroom evolution. Early field notes documented anxiety, limited participation, and traditional artistic understanding, while later observations showed confident analytical interaction, participant-directed learning, and advanced critical consciousness with full participation in analyzing the works. There was a progression from three to five participants actively participating in early discussions to universal involvement in the final session. This shift from teacher-directed to participant-controlled learning constituted fundamental transformation in classroom dynamics.

The development of collective intelligence was evident in participants' evolution from individual examination to collaborative knowledge construction. Early discussions revealed

isolated observations, while later sessions indicated participants building on each other's ideas, sharing research, and collectively arriving at refined interpretations that exceeded individual analytical capabilities.

The interviewed participants' journeys exemplified these broader patterns while illustrating unique pathways shaped by personal connections to specific artwork and individual artistic development. Zoe's enhancement of existing analytical capabilities through symbolic integration; Julio's steady development from basic identification to advanced symbolic practice; Alison's evolution from technical perfectionism to process-oriented meaning-making; Jay's shift toward socially conscious artwork addressing contemporary issues; Alicia's deepening understanding of art's confrontational potential; and Eric's dramatic evolution from surface-level creation to deeply personal expression all indicated the diverse ways interaction with difficult works can facilitate growth.

Safe space creation appeared as an unexpected but significant finding. Final interviews indicated participants' willingness to share personal experiences with addiction, abuse, and trauma in relation to difficult works. This suggested that sustained interaction with challenging content, when appropriately scaffolded, can create environments where participants feel safe to confront and express difficult personal experiences through both discussion and artistic practice.

The next chapter interprets these findings through the study's theoretical frameworks, situates them within existing research on difficult works and emancipatory pedagogy, acknowledges limitations, and synthesizes the results to address the research questions.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Changes in how secondary students understood themselves as thinkers, makers, and social actors emerged over 10 months of engagement with difficult works. Chapter 4 presented results organized by whole class data, small group commonalities among interviewed participants, and individual case portraits. From these results, six interconnected themes emerged: expanded definitions of art, development of critical consciousness, universal participation and agency, evolution of artistic practice, safe spaces for vulnerable disclosure, and recognition of educational value. These difficult works—defined throughout this dissertation as works that subvert, challenge, and dissent from established understandings of art and the world as it exists currently—served as the catalyst for the transformations documented in Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 now moves to explain why these shifts occurred and what they signify for adolescent learning and secondary art education. Each theme section interprets the data through theoretical frameworks from Jacques Rancière, Dennis Atkinson, and Judith Burton, examining how a disobedience-based art education approach combining difficult works with emancipatory pedagogy facilitated these transformations. Also considered are their implications for understanding how students engage with difficult works over sustained periods. Following these themes, I situate the findings within relevant existing research, comparing and contrasting with prior studies conducted in museum and classroom contexts. I then acknowledge the study's limitations before concluding with a synthesis that addresses the research questions posed in Chapter 1.

Theme 1: From Simple Definitions to Complex Understanding of Art

The evolution in participants' definitions of art represents a redistribution of intellectual authority, with participants moving from accepting established definitions to generating their own conception of what constitutes art and how it functions. From initial responses focused on "expression" and "colors" to final statements embracing expansive definitions, participants developed what Rancière (1991) described as intellectual emancipation. When participant Bella evolved from defining art solely through "colors and all the ways you can use colors" to declaring "art is anything and everything," she was claiming authority to determine what counts as art without seeking expert validation.

Participant Ameena's evolution exemplified this epistemological shift. Her explicit acknowledgment that she "would think that works such as the *Comedian* weren't art" before the study, followed by her recognition that "anything can be art if it makes you think of the meaning behind it," demonstrated rejection of externally imposed aesthetic boundaries in favor of criteria based on intellectual engagement. Rancière (1991) articulated this dynamic when he argued that a student will arrive at knowledge independently, provided the teacher trusts in that capacity and creates conditions for it to be exercised rather than replacing it with explanation (p. 15).

The theoretical significance of this definitional expansion lies in understanding what enabled it. Drawing on Rancière's (Rancière & Corcoran, 2010) theory of dissensus, which described the disruption of consensual understanding, it is possible to explain why exposure to works like Duchamp's *Fountain* and Cattelan's *Comedian* catalyzed this transformation. These works intentionally rupture established definitions of art, creating what Rancière termed a redistribution of the sensible. When the participants encountered artwork that challenged expectations they held about artistic materials, processes, and purposes, they could either reject

the work as “not art” while maintaining the consensus or expand their conception to accommodate new possibilities through practicing dissensus.

The data showed that the participants moved toward expansion rather than rejection, with all 20 demonstrating more complex definitions by study’s end, compared to their initial responses. However, this choice required more than individual openness. It required pedagogical conditions that positioned students as intellectually capable of determining meaning without teacher explanation. The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS, Hailey et al., 2015) approach used throughout the study deliberately withholds expert interpretation. This created what Rancière (1991) described as conditions for emancipation, with the teacher as facilitator who “keeps them on their own route” (p. 29) rather than as someone who explains what art means.

Burton’s (2011) work on adolescent development provided an additional explanation for this definitional expansion. Adolescents naturally challenge established categories and boundaries as part of identity formation. The transformational images teenagers create for themselves—works that Burton described as “emotionally charged, for they deal with issues of identity, sexuality, ambiguity, power, loss and body vulnerability” (p.15)—already demonstrated comfort with rejection of adult-imposed categories. Difficult contemporary art validated this natural developmental tendency toward boundary questioning, providing permission to extend personal definitional authority from self-created work to art evaluation more broadly.

This expanded conception of art’s definition created the foundation for all subsequent developments found in this study. Recognition that art encompasses diverse forms, materials, and purposes enabled participants to see art’s potential for social critique (Theme 2); empowered them to participate in meaning-making without seeking correct answers (Theme 3); opened possibilities for experimenting with unconventional approaches in their own work (Theme 4);

created space for connecting difficult personal experiences to difficult artwork (Theme 5); and supported their recognition that engaging with challenging content holds educational value (Theme 6). The definitional expansion was the conceptual foundation that made subsequent developments possible.

Theme 2: Development of Critical Consciousness

The emergence of political recognition and social critique in the participants' perception of art's function represented the development of critical consciousness, the capacity to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions and to take action against oppressive elements. This consciousness emerged through sustained exposure to works that critique society.

Data showed the dominance of personal expression focus in initial understanding, with 17 of 20 participants defining art's purpose solely in terms of individual emotional communication. By the study's conclusion, 14 participants recognized art's capacity for political action and social critique. This shift from understanding art primarily as individual emotional expression to recognizing it as social intervention represented a change in the perception of art's relationship to power.

Participant Julio's evolution embodied this development. His progression from defining art as "something made by a person" to recognizing it as addressing "emotions, politics, or a simple concept or idea" and serving "to bring awareness, whether it is to an emotion or an issue" represented the development of what Atkinson (2012) described as understanding art's capacity to challenge the state, which he (2021) defined as encompassing "the state of being, the state of knowledge, and the state of political control" (p. 10).

Participant Jessie's articulation of her transformation revealed metacognitive awareness of her own consciousness development: "I had always thought of art as simply a way to express

an artist's feelings and emotions/thoughts. Now, I see art can be a statement, a protest, an emotion, and so much more." Her recognition that art "can be a statement, a protest" indicated her understanding that art functions not merely as personal expression but as a force in public discourse. Angie's post-questionnaire response echoed this same shift, moving from understanding art as existing on two paths—"profit and meaningful decoration"—to recognizing it as "a form of protest" that showcases "issues that not many know about."

Critical consciousness did not develop through lecture or instruction but through sustained engagement with problems that demand examination. The difficult works introduced in this study functioned as ruptures in consensual understanding. Works like Dread Scott's *Burning the U.S. Constitution* (see Figure 8), Barbara Kruger's *Your Body Is a Battleground* (see Figure 9), and Ai Weiwei's politically charged installations (see Figure 5) presented participants with visual arguments about power, oppression, and resistance that could not be dismissed or ignored. These works enacted Rancière's dissensus, challenging what is visible, sayable, and thinkable about art's proper subjects and purposes.

The group discussion format created conditions where participants jointly constructed understanding. As found in transcripts and field notes, the progression from early discussions where students displayed hesitancy to participate to later sessions where they brought knowledge from History, English, and Government Participation coursework and made refined cross-curricular connections demonstrated how sustained engagement with challenging content enabled consciousness development.

The sophistication of these connections appeared in the discussion of Dread Scott's work when participant Jay drew on U.S. history coursework: "We learned in U.S. history who Dred Scott was.... It was like a famous case where this guy named Dred Scott, he went across state

lines and he was a slave, but he wasn't a slave in his own territory, but when he went into other state lines, they said that he was still a slave" (see Figure 5). Jessie built on this historical knowledge to examine artistic intention:

> I think some people would maybe look at it as disrespectful at first glance. But then when you really understand the back story behind it, I think he's really more so leaning towards the idea that the Constitution is flawed because it doesn't include everybody in the United States.

During the discussion of Barbara Kruger's work (see Figure 9), a student connected visual propaganda to literature:

> Right now in English, I'm reading *1984*. One of the things they talk about is how they have this leader and his name is Big Brother and he's in these pictures all around...in my head it kind of seemed like it's kind of like indoctrination.

These examples demonstrate participants who were actively synthesizing knowledge across disciplines to construct critical awareness.

Atkinson's (2012) concept of real learning, defined as "a jolt into the new" and "the possibilities of a reshaped world," provided a theoretical explanation for why this consciousness development occurred. Atkinson argued that genuine learning requires "defiance of existing knowledge and modes of thought" (p. 10). The difficult works presented participants with images, actions, and ideas that defied their existing understanding of what art is and does, creating opportunities for real learning that transformed not merely what they knew but how they understood art's relationship to social reality.

The development of critical consciousness challenges prevailing assumptions about adolescent capability and curriculum appropriateness. In my experience as a secondary art educator, educational systems frequently protect students from controversial content under the ostensible rationale of age-appropriateness, yet the research demonstrated that sustained exposure to politically charged, socially critical artwork enabled intellectual development.

Participants did not merely tolerate difficult content. They developed analytical frameworks for understanding how art functions as social critique and political intervention.

The transfer of this consciousness beyond art evaluation appeared in the participants' own artistic practice described in Theme 4 and in their articulated understanding of contemporary social issues. When participants like Alicia recognized that difficult works "show people what they don't want to see and that's the hard truth," and Jay articulated that art functions as "a form of communication" through which people share "different opinions on political issues," both demonstrated understanding that uncomfortable revelation serves educational and political purposes. This recognition positioned the participants as potential agents of social change.

Theme 3: From Limited to Universal Participation and Agency

The transformation from three to five active participants in September to total involvement by June represented a redistribution of intellectual authority and classroom power, with participants claiming agency over their own learning and collectively constructing knowledge previously monopolized by teacher expertise. This shift from limited early participation to complete classroom engagement by study's end demonstrated fundamental transformation in participatory dynamics. The progression in participation patterns revealed movement from seeking permission and apologizing for contributions to confident, autonomous interaction with artwork and each other. Early field notes captured participants asking, "Are we allowed to look at the title as information?" and beginning with "I don't want this question to sound rude." These behaviors indicated internalized assumption that knowledge resides with the teacher, who grants permission for certain kinds of thinking and expression.

By June, field notes recorded “every student talking and participating,” with participants taking curatorial control, selecting artwork for discussion, and bringing outside knowledge from sources like social media and current news coverage to enhance collective understanding. This transformation exemplified Rancière’s (1991) concept of intellectual emancipation, which explained definitional authority redistribution in Theme 1, where students recognized their capacity to think independently of master explanation. Rancière argued that the emancipatory teacher “obliges” students to “realize their capacity” for autonomous thought (p. 15). The pedagogical approach used in the study created such emancipatory conditions. This shift appeared in individual acts of agency. Field notes from October documented an early instance of student-initiated curricular contribution: one student, the most vocal in the group, identified an artist she felt the class should discuss. When I asked how she had found the work, she noted that the artist had a significant presence on social media.

This act of curricular participation, traditionally reserved for teacher authority, signaled that participants were beginning to claim ownership over their learning experience. By the study’s conclusion, this individual act had become collective practice, with participants routinely contributing artwork, outside knowledge, making cross-curricular connections, and directing discussion flow.

Counterintuitively, the difficult nature of the artwork facilitated participation instead of inhibiting it. Works that resist immediate interpretation created moments of what Atkinson (2012) described as “real learning,” when existing comprehension proves inadequate and new modes of thinking become necessary. Unlike straightforward artwork with clear meanings, difficult works position all viewers, including teachers, as interpreters instead of knowers. This

epistemological leveling created conditions where participants recognized their interpretations held value equal to expert opinion.

Field notes suggested a pattern where participation increased as artwork proved more challenging. Early discussions of more accessible works generated limited response, while later discussions of deeply controversial pieces like Chris Burden's *Shoot* and Marina Abramović's *Balkan Baroque* generated extensive, animated conversation (see Figure 12). While this pattern may reflect both increasing comfort over time and the nature of the artwork themselves, the more challenging the work, the more participants recognized the need for collective interpretation and felt confidence contributing to the meaning-making process. This suggests that difficulty itself served a pedagogical function.

Burton's (2011) work on adolescent development, already described in Theme 1, provided additional explanation for this participation pattern. Difficult art validated participants' developmental interest in challenging content, creating classroom space where their natural inclinations toward difficult subject matter received institutional legitimacy.

The participation transformation extended beyond increased speaking frequency to shift in intellectual authority. Early discussions showed participants seeking validation, asking, "Is that right?" and looking to me for confirmation of interpretations. Later discussions revealed participants debating with each other, building on peer observations, and arriving at interpretations without seeking teacher approval. This progression indicated movement from viewing teachers as knowledge validators to recognizing collective capacity for meaning generation.

The small group commonality of limited prior experience with art discussion helped explain this transformation. Participants entered the study having rarely experienced extended

artwork examination and having never engaged systematically with difficult contemporary art. Their educational history positioned teachers as content deliverers and students as content receivers. The disobedience-based art education approach employed in the research deliberately withheld expert interpretation while facilitating student-directed inquiry through engagement with difficult works. This approach challenged the hierarchical structure, enabling participants to discover their interpretive capacity through practice.

This participation shift challenged deficit narratives about adolescent capability and engagement. Rancière (1991) described how traditional pedagogical approaches create what he termed "enforced stultification," assuming students lack capacity to learn independently without teacher explanation. Yet given appropriate conditions of challenging content, emancipatory pedagogy, and sustained exposure, the participants in this study demonstrated intellectual engagement, autonomous learning initiative, and collaborative knowledge construction. The progression from limited participation to full involvement suggested that adolescent disengagement may reflect pedagogical approaches that are stultifying rather than emancipatory.

Theme 4: Evolution of Artistic Practice

The data revealing changes in participants' artistic practice—from imitative, teacher-pleasing work to personally meaningful creation incorporating symbolism and social critique—represented integration of critical consciousness into creative action (see Table 2). This evolution demonstrated that exposure to difficult works transformed not only how participants thought about art but also how they created as artists.

Seventeen of 20 participants reported that difficult work discussions impacted their artistic practice. This widespread influence extended across symbolic integration, material experimentation, subject matter evolution, and process orientation. The significance lies not in

the fact of change but in its character. Participants moved from creating work designed to meet external expectations toward producing work imbued with personal meaning and social concern.

Participant Eric's shift exemplified this evolution. His self-described shift from "goofy art" focused on "heroes or sometimes villains" to work directly addressing personal trauma with addiction and family illness represented reconceptualization of artistic purpose. Eric directly credited difficult work exposure with this transformation, stating that seeing challenging content "helped me influence more of my art, especially with mental illness and stuff." His shift from superficial subject matter to work addressing addiction demonstrated how difficult works opened possibilities for authentic artistic voice. If professional artists can address challenging subjects, student artists can as well.

Julio's medical-themed sustained investigation incorporating symbolic color choices, Alicia's integration of shock elements with meaningful content, and Alison's shift from technical perfectionism to process-oriented meaning-making all demonstrated similar patterns. Participants developed awareness that artwork can serve purposes beyond aesthetic pleasure or technical demonstration. It can communicate complex ideas, challenge viewer assumptions, and address difficult realities.

Efland's (1976) concept of school art style explained participants' initial artistic approaches. School art emphasizes work created to meet teacher expectations while avoiding materials relevant to students' own experiences and interests, serving primarily to train students to accept authority (p. 42). Many participants entered the study creating work characterized by technical mimicry and teacher-pleasing subject matter. The progression represented movement away from school art toward more meaningful work.

Burton's (2000) work on adolescent development provided a deeper explanation for why this progression carried the weight it did. Adolescents are already grappling with the nature of realism, questioning what is actually real when the realism of the culture and their own personal experience do not match up. Burton described how teenagers come to realize that the surface of the world does not tell the whole story, that what appears to be real often masks other realities beneath it. This conflict was present in participants' work before the study began and became increasingly visible as it shifted. Eric was making heroes and villains, the kind of art that culture tells you is art. At the same time, addiction and his grandfather's stroke were part of his actual experience of the world. Both versions of reality existed in him simultaneously. When he began making work that addressed his personal experience, he was not simply picking a new subject—he was resolving that conflict. Jay grappled with the same tension. He drew vases while homelessness was something he witnessed in his daily life. The difficult works did not create this questioning but rather gave participants a framework to sit with the conflict and work through it.

Atkinson's (2012) concept of pedagogy against the state, which explained critical consciousness development in Theme 2, also explained why exposure to difficult works catalyzed this artistic evolution. Atkinson argued that real learning occurs when students create work that does not fit within teacher expectations, thereby challenging established power structures. The difficult works discussed in this study modeled such pedagogical disobedience. They subverted expectations, challenged norms, and asserted alternative visions of what art could be. Participants recognized this modeling and began incorporating similar approaches into their own practice.

Jay's statement that difficult work discussions 'taught me various types of art, which I can use in my pieces' and gave him "courage" to address difficult topics revealed how exposure

to challenging content empowered him to address difficult subjects. Adolescents may possess interest in addressing difficult subjects through their artwork but lack confidence that such work will be valued in educational settings. Burton's (2011) research demonstrated that teenagers create transformational images for themselves, in sketchbooks and doodles, but often withhold such work from formal classroom contexts where teacher evaluation determines value.

Exposure to difficult works validated the participants' interest in challenging content and provided concrete models for how artists address complex subjects. Eric explicitly credited this validation, stating that "seeing Misato's piece talking about overdose, that immediately kicked into my head like, whoa, I don't have to hold back on my art" (see Figure 19). Without exposure to professional artists addressing similar themes, participants might have continued self-censoring, creating safe work for evaluation while reserving authentic expression for private creation.

The change in artistic practice challenges assumptions about secondary art education's proper focus. Curriculum frequently emphasizes technical skill development and formal elements. This study demonstrated that when provided exposure to difficult contemporary art and emancipatory pedagogical conditions, participants developed toward meaningful, personally relevant artistic practice that integrated technical skill with conceptual depth.

The widespread reporting of artistic practice impact indicated this evolution occurred across diverse participants with varying artistic backgrounds and interests, suggesting that capacity for meaningful artistic expression exists broadly among adolescents when appropriate conditions support its development.

Theme 5: Safe Spaces for Vulnerable Disclosure

The emergence of participants sharing deeply personal experiences involving addiction, abuse, and trauma in relation to difficult artwork represented a significant finding. This challenged assumptions about appropriate boundaries between artistic discussion and personal disclosure while illuminating difficult works' capacity to create conditions for vulnerable sharing.

Despite the limited exposure secondary students typically receive to difficult works in educational settings, as documented in participant interviews, the data from the research demonstrated that sustained exposure to difficult works created conditions where participants felt safe addressing their own difficult experiences. Final interview field notes documented that participants had voluntarily shared deeply personal experiences in connection with both the works discussed and the artwork they created. Among those disclosures were a student's account of his experience with addiction and another's description of abuse she had endured. The pattern revealed that exposure to disturbing content functioned opposite to protective curriculum assumptions.

When participants encountered artwork addressing trauma, violence, addiction, and oppression during group discussions, they recognized that difficult realities could be named, examined, and represented. The works made visible subjects typically excluded from public educational discourse, challenging assumptions that certain experiences require concealment or constitute inappropriate content for adolescent examination.

The experience conflict described in Theme 4 did not stop at artmaking. The same grappling between the realism of culture and personal experience continued here, and participants resolved it the same way they had before, through their art. The difficult works

demonstrated that the other version of reality, the one that says these subjects should stay hidden, was not the whole truth. Participants resolved that conflict by making it visible in their work and by speaking about it in relation to that work.

Rancière's concept of dissensus, which disrupted consensual understanding in Themes 1 and 2, explains why this occurred. The difficult works practiced dissensus by making trauma, addiction, and oppression legitimate subjects for serious artistic and intellectual investigation. This disruption enabled participants to claim authority over naming their own experiences.

Participants' disclosures in response to difficult works suggested that the content resonated with existing concerns. The specificity of disclosed experiences matching artwork themes indicated that participants already engaged privately with these subjects and sought validation. Eric's discussion of addiction in his final interview emerged months after examining Yuko Tatsushima's work addressing overdose during group discussion (see Figure 19). Zoe's use of symbolism in her own artwork, inspired by the difficult works discussions, led her to reveal her OCD diagnosis when explaining the conceptual meaning behind one of her pieces (see Table 2). The timing and themes of these disclosures revealed the validation mechanism at work. By addressing trauma publicly in professionally exhibited work, the difficult works demonstrated that personal trauma constitutes legitimate artistic content. Participants claimed this same authority to address their own experiences.

Burton's work on transformational images, discussed in Theme 4, provided a developmental explanation for this receptivity. Recognizing professional artists treating similar themes as worthy of serious artistic investigation affirmed what adolescents already explored privately as appropriate subject matter for public examination.

The emancipatory pedagogical conditions described in Theme 3 proved essential to creating safety for disclosure. The non-evaluative positioning established through VTS (Hailey et al., 2015) extended beyond artwork interpretation to reception of personal experience. Alicia did not share her struggles with someone who would grade that disclosure or determine its appropriateness. She shared with someone who had consistently positioned her as a capable interpreter whose perspectives held value. This structural separation between a person facilitating difficult discussions and a person evaluating artistic performance may constitute necessary conditions for safe disclosure in educational contexts.

The progression from collective examination to individual disclosure revealed the layered nature of safety creation. Group discussions provided exposure to difficult works and established that challenging subjects constituted valid content for serious examination. Participants observed peers contributing interpretations, expressing confusion, and acknowledging discomfort during these collective sessions. This demonstrated that difficult content could be examined respectfully within the classroom community. The safe disclosure observed in this study did not occur immediately but emerged after months of sustained interaction with difficult works and each other. The progression from early participation anxiety to later confident disclosure in individual interviews suggested that safety developed gradually through sustained engagement with challenging content within the classroom community.

This finding challenges curricula designed to shield adolescents from difficult content under the assumption that exposure causes harm. Participants in this study did not report feeling traumatized by difficult work. Rather, they reported feeling empowered to address their own difficult experiences. Such protective approaches operate on the assumption that difficulty produces trauma. The data suggested an alternative possibility. When difficult content receives

respectful collective examination under emancipatory pedagogical conditions, it may create space for understanding and connection. This does not argue that difficult content always proves beneficial or that protective approaches lack merit. Rather, it indicates that blanket assumptions about adolescent fragility may underestimate their capacity to engage productively with challenging material when appropriate conditions exist.

Theme 6: Recognition of Educational Value and Student Endorsement

The universal positive response to difficult work discussions, combined with participants' articulation of educational benefits, represented validation of the pedagogical approach used in this study. Beyond demonstrating that difficult work discussions can occur without harm, participants actively endorsed these experiences as valuable for learning, growth, and understanding.

All 20 participants characterized the discussions positively, using descriptors like "useful," "insightful," "helpful," and "interesting." However, the specificity of benefit articulation among interviewed participants revealed depth of understanding about learning processes. Participants did not simply report enjoyment. They identified specific educational gains including analytical skill development, perspective expansion, media literacy enhancement, and transfer to other academic contexts.

Julio's recognition that discussions "helped me think outside of the box as well as teach me things about art and the world around me" demonstrated metacognitive awareness of cognitive development. Zoe emphasized transfer when noting the discussions "help develop media literacy and looking more in depth into certain things without just assuming things right off the bat," indicating understanding that skills developed through difficult works analysis apply

beyond art evaluation to broader critical thinking contexts. This articulation of learning processes suggested that participants developed new understandings of how learning occurs.

The collaborative dimension of learning surfaced repeatedly as participants articulated the value of hearing peer perspectives. This emphasis on collective interpretation challenges typical classroom structures that prioritize individual understanding over shared knowledge construction. Alison explained how group examination made challenging works more accessible, stating, “They’re lovely! It made it easier to digest [the works] because we worked on finding the meaning together.” Her recognition that difficult works became more accessible through shared examination revealed that participants valued not merely the content but the social process of interpretation itself.

The emancipatory pedagogy that enabled individual intellectual authority in earlier themes simultaneously created conditions for collective meaning-making. Participant Juan’s observation that “it was interesting seeing everyone’s takes and opinions on different pieces” and participant Simarjit’s emphasis on learning about “my peers’ thought processes which was interesting” both indicated appreciation for interpretive diversity. When multiple perspectives receive equal validity, participants recognized value in hearing how others think.

Participants also recognized how discussions of difficult work connected to contemporary issues and expanded their conceptual boundaries. Participant Esteban noted the discussions “definitely helped [reflect] on current topics like presidency, prejudice,” connecting knowledge from his Participation in Government class, where current events were part of the coursework, to his examination of the artwork, demonstrating awareness that analytical skills transfer from artwork examination to understanding current events. This transfer represented a significant educational outcome because it indicated that participants understood the discussions developed

broadly applicable critical thinking that extended beyond art-specific knowledge. Participant Aniyah articulated the cognitive demand involved when she observed that discussions "forced me to think deeply and connect prior knowledge with the pieces being shown," drawing on knowledge from her English and Social Studies classes and revealing awareness of the intellectual work involved in connecting historical knowledge to visual analysis.

The capacity to recognize and articulate such cognitive processes indicated advanced comprehension of learning itself. Kanishka, Angie, and Bella, among other participants, referenced gaining "expanded perspectives" and becoming more "open-minded," with Kanishka specifically appreciating that discussions "showed me how limitless mediums are and how extreme you can be to get certain messages across." These articulations revealed that participants developed not merely new knowledge but also metacognitive awareness of how their thinking had evolved through sustained exposure to challenging content.

By the study's conclusion, all participants endorsed the discussions. The progression from early hesitation and limited participation to confident engagement and consistent endorsement suggested that comfort with challenging content developed over time. This evolution indicated that participants came to recognize the educational value of working with difficult material.

Rancière's (1991) concept of intellectual emancipation, which explained transformations in Themes 1 and 3, predicted that students will value learning experiences where they claim intellectual authority instead of receiving predetermined knowledge. The widespread positive response supported this prediction. Participants valued difficult work discussions because these experiences positioned them as capable interpreters, not ignorant recipients. Their endorsement

validates Rancière's argument that emancipatory pedagogy produces more meaningful learning than explanatory approaches.

The absence of participant requests to discontinue the study, cease discussions, or avoid particular artwork provided counterevidence to assumptions that difficult content proves too challenging for adolescents. If participants found the experience harmful, traumatic, or educationally inappropriate, some would have exercised their right to withdraw or expressed desire to stop. Instead, field notes described disappointment when discussions were skipped and enthusiasm when they occurred.

The few negatives identified addressed logistical concerns, particularly participation levels, but not content appropriateness. Julio's concern about "only maybe five of them might talk at most" addressed participation inequality, not difficult content. This pattern suggested that when educational experiences provide genuine intellectual challenge combined with emancipatory pedagogy, adolescents recognize and value the opportunity regardless of content difficulty.

Participants' endorsement of the experience revealed that they recognized these discussions as educationally valuable, despite their challenging nature. The specificity with which participants articulated educational benefits demonstrated metacognitive awareness of their own learning processes.

The pedagogical refinement, demonstrated by individually interviewed participants when asked how they would introduce difficult works to newcomers, revealed internalization of effective teaching approaches. Participants recommended graduated difficulty progression, contextual support, focused examination, and historical framing, essentially reconstructing the pedagogical approach they experienced while articulating its effectiveness. This metacognitive

understanding of effective pedagogy represents sophisticated thinking about how learning occurs.

These six themes revealed transformations in how participants understood art, themselves, and their capacity for learning. The next section situates these findings within existing research to understand how they compare with related studies in art education.

Unexpected Findings

Two findings emerged from this study that were not anticipated at its outset. The first, discussed in depth in Theme 5, was the emergence of participants sharing deeply personal experiences involving addiction, abuse, and trauma in relation to difficult artwork. This phenomenon was unexpected because it challenged assumptions about appropriate boundaries in secondary art education and suggested a capacity for vulnerable disclosure that curricula designed to shield students from difficult content do not anticipate.

The second unexpected finding concerned how participants experienced the difficult works themselves. The works discussed in this study were not experienced by participants as difficult in the way curricula designed to shield students from difficult content assume they would be. No participant expressed distress, and several, including Alicia, explicitly stated they saw no negatives in engaging with the content. Field notes documented participants approaching works depicting torture, violence, and oppression with analytical engagement rather than overwhelm. In my experience as a secondary art educator, this lack of disturbance is worth examining more closely, and social media may play a significant role in explaining it. These participants already navigate graphic and provocative imagery daily on social media platforms. They accept or reject that content constantly, making rapid decisions about what to engage with and what to scroll past. This daily exposure to images that are far from benign likely conditions a

baseline comfort with difficult visual content that generations of adolescents before them did not have. A work that might have genuinely shocked or disturbed a high school student 20 or 30 years ago may simply not carry that same weight for students who have already encountered far more graphic material on their phones before breakfast. This does not diminish the educational value of the difficult works discussed in this study. However, it does suggest that curricula avoiding difficult content may be built on outdated assumptions about adolescent fragility—assumptions that no longer reflect contemporary adolescent experience with difficult images.

Situating Findings Within Existing Research

The transformations in this study both aligned with and extended existing research on difficult works and emancipatory pedagogies in art education while revealing differences in context, scope, and outcomes from prior investigations. Skregelid's (2020) museum-based study with Norwegian secondary students found that controversial artwork provoked dissensus enabling students to form new understandings. My study confirmed this pattern while extending it through longitudinal classroom embedding rather than isolated museum visits. Where Skregelid found students' capacity to engage with difficult content during single museum experiences, this study demonstrated how sustained exposure over 10 months produces cumulative transformation beyond immediate response.

Johansen's (2020) work with Danish fifth graders encountering ambiguous artwork that resisted immediate interpretation found that such work enabled students to generate multiple interpretations while respecting peer perspectives. My findings extended this work to adolescent populations, demonstrating that capacity for interpretive complexity continues developing through secondary years and may intensify during adolescence when identity formation heightens interest in ambiguity and questioning.

Ciampaglia's (2013) documentation of Chicago teenagers creating activist art after exposure to contemporary artists like Guerrilla Girls demonstrated how difficult works can inspire socially engaged artistic practice. My study confirmed this pattern while revealing it occurs not only in short-term afterschool programs but also through sustained classroom integration over a full academic year. Additionally, my findings showed such artistic evolution occurred alongside conceptual transformation and participation development as part of interconnected changes.

Low and Proietti's (2020) ethnographic study of Montreal high school's Urban Arts Project explored how incorporating street art and hip-hop created spaces for dissensus challenging power distributions. My research both aligned with and extended this work by demonstrating that dissensus-producing effects occur not only with youth culture art forms like street art but also with diverse contemporary art including performance, installation, and conceptual work traditionally distant from adolescent experience.

Park's (2019) ethnographic case study of kindergarten students found that even young children challenged teacher instructions during artmaking activities. My findings suggested that this capacity for challenging norms extended to adolescents engaging with difficult contemporary art. However, Park's study focused on two students aged 5 to 6 years during a single painting activity, while my sustained engagement with 20 adolescents over 10 months revealed more comprehensive transformations in understanding, agency, and artistic practice beyond immediate activity resistance.

Extending Existing Research

This study extended existing research in several ways. First, it documented sustained transformation over a full academic year within a regular classroom context rather than a special

program, demonstrating difficult work integration proves viable within typical secondary art curriculum constraints. Second, it revealed a safe disclosure phenomenon not found in prior research, suggesting that difficult works create conditions for vulnerable sharing when combined with appropriate pedagogical approaches. Third, it provided evidence of full participation development from minimal initial involvement to complete engagement, documenting specific conditions enabling such participation transformation.

The longitudinal design enabled documentation of transformation trajectories impossible to capture in shorter interventions. Prior research collected responses in museum visits, afterschool programs, or special initiatives that built dedicated spaces like galleries and studios. The progression from September permission-seeking to June curatorial agency, from simple definitions to complex critical consciousness, and from tentative participation to universal involvement required months of accumulated experience. This occurred within regular classroom instruction, not through special programs or isolated events.

The American secondary classroom context distinguishes this work from European museum-based studies. American secondary art education operates within distinctive institutional constraints including standardized curricula, high-stakes testing culture, and protective approaches to controversial content. Demonstrating successful difficult work integration within this specific context provided evidence relevant to American educators facing similar constraints. Having situated these findings within existing research, I now acknowledge the study's limitations.

Limitations

Although evidence of transformations emerged, several limitations constrained the generalizability and interpretation of findings. The single-site design focused on one advanced

art class in a specific suburban New York context limited transfer to other settings. Hicksville High School's cultural diversity, Title 1 status, and strong art program reputation represent specific conditions that are not present in all contexts. Rural, urban, or differently resourced schools might produce different outcomes.

The advanced art class context also limited generalizability. Participants had completed two prerequisite courses and demonstrated sufficient interest and skill to enroll in portfolio preparation. These selection factors suggested participants entered the study with greater artistic interest and perhaps greater openness to challenging content than typical secondary students. Findings might differ substantially with beginning art students or required general art courses where enrollment reflects scheduling, not interest.

The 10-month duration, while enabling longitudinal documentation, constrained assessment of sustained effects. Whether transformations examined here persist beyond the study period remain unknown. Participants might return to simpler art conceptions, reduced participation, or less adventurous artistic practice without continued exposure to difficult works and emancipatory pedagogy.

My dual role as teacher at the study site and researcher introduced potential bias, despite deliberate positioning as facilitator. Participants may have shaped responses toward perceived researcher expectations, despite assurances that participation would not affect grades. Additionally, my interest in difficult works and investment in demonstrating their educational value created interpretive bias requiring acknowledgment.

The specific pedagogical approach combining VTS with sustained difficult work exposure made it impossible to isolate which elements produced documented changes. The effects might result from VTS methodology, difficult work content, sustained duration, group

discussion format, emancipatory teacher positioning, or interactive combination of these factors. Controlled comparison designs would be needed to isolate specific causal mechanisms.

The sample size, while appropriate for qualitative case study, limited generalizability. Twenty participants from a single class cannot represent all American secondary art students. The six interviewed participants, while providing rich data, constituted a small subset potentially unrepresentative of broader participant experiences.

The specific difficult works selected also likely influenced outcomes. Different artwork addressing different themes through different approaches might produce different changes or encounter different resistances. The study could not determine whether the findings resulted from difficult works generally or from specific works chosen.

Finally, the absence of a control group prevented determining whether observed changes resulted from difficult works exposure specifically or from any sustained artwork discussion with emancipatory pedagogy. Comparison with classes discussing contemporary art that is not difficult or historical work would strengthen causal claims about difficult works' unique effects.

Despite these limitations, this study provided suggestive insights into how sustained exposure to difficult works within emancipatory pedagogical conditions may support transformations in adolescent understanding, participation, and artistic practice. Rather than determining outcomes, these findings raise possibilities for new pedagogical practices and point toward directions for further research

Conclusion

Sustained exposure to difficult art, combined with emancipatory pedagogy, produced significant shifts in how secondary students understood art, engaged with learning, and created their own work. These shifts resulted not from exposure alone but from specific pedagogical

conditions including VTS (Hailey et al., 2015) positioning students as capable interpreters, sustained duration enabling accumulated development, difficult content creating necessary dissensus, and teacher role as facilitator supporting autonomous thought.

The shifts addressed the research questions posed in Chapter 1. The first question asked about potential benefits and challenges of discussing difficult works with secondary art students. Taken together, the six themes point to a consistent set of outcomes: students developed broader conceptions of art, greater critical awareness, increased willingness to participate, more purposeful studio practice, a capacity for vulnerable self-disclosure, and an appreciation for the role of this kind of work in their education. The few challenges identified focused on logistical concerns such as participation levels and time constraints, not content appropriateness or student harm. All 20 participants endorsed the experience as valuable, with no requests to discontinue despite challenging content.

The second question asked how students' views of art's function might change after being introduced to difficult work. Chapter 4 showed that 17 of 20 participants initially defined art's purpose solely in terms of individual emotional expression. Of the 20 participants in this study, 14 finished the year able to articulate how art functions as a vehicle for political action and social critique, a shift that was not present in their initial questionnaire responses. This shift from defining art as a vehicle for individual emotions to recognizing it as a tool for social intervention represented a fundamental change in the perception of art's relationship to power and society.

The third question asked how discussions of challenging works might contribute to changes in how students understand themselves, make art, and are sensitive to the world around them. Participants demonstrated increased understanding of themselves as capable interpreters who could generate meaning without expert validation. Their artistic practice evolved from

imitative, prescribed work to personally meaningful creation incorporating symbolism and social critique. Their sensitivity to the world expanded through recognition of art's capacity to address difficult realities including trauma, addiction, oppression, and social injustice, with some participants sharing their own experiences in relation to artwork addressing similar themes.

Rancière's intellectual emancipation theory, Atkinson's pedagogy against the state, and Burton's adolescent development research together explained why these transformations occurred and what they signify. Participants claimed intellectual authority previously reserved for teacher expertise, recognized art's capacity for social intervention, developed authentic artistic voices, and created a community where difficult realities could be named and examined.

The safe disclosure finding challenges protective curriculum assumptions while suggesting difficult works' potential when combined with an emancipatory pedagogical approach. Difficult content created space for addressing difficult experiences. This demonstrated that what educators fear may harm adolescents may actually support their development.

The participation shift from minimal early involvement to complete June engagement validated Rancière's argument that students recognize and value intellectual emancipation when offered the opportunity to claim it. The pedagogical understanding participants demonstrated when asked how to introduce difficult works to newcomers revealed internalization of effective learning conditions, suggesting potential for student-directed pedagogical innovation.

These findings validated disobedience-based art education as a pedagogical approach that honors adolescent developmental capacities for challenging established norms while providing structured support for meaning-making and artistic growth. The approach synthesized Rancière's intellectual emancipation, Atkinson's pedagogy against the state, and Burton's understanding of adolescent artistic development into a cohesive framework for secondary art education practice.

This integration represented the study's primary theoretical contribution by demonstrating how these three frameworks work in concert when difficult artworks are paired with emancipatory pedagogical practices over sustained periods.

Situating these findings within existing research revealed both alignment with prior work on difficult art education and extensions beyond previous investigations. While limitations constrain generalizability, these findings demonstrated possibility and suggest directions for future research.

Chapter 6 examines the practical implications of these findings for art teachers, administrators, and teacher educators, offering specific recommendations for implementing disobedience-based art education approaches and identifying directions for further research on this pedagogical framework.

Chapter 6: Implications

The findings from this study revealed substantial transformations in how secondary students understood art, engaged with learning, and created their own work when exposed to difficult works over sustained periods. Participants developed expanded conceptions of art's purposes, critical consciousness, universal participation, and evolved artistic practices. Contrary to protective assumptions about adolescent fragility, no participants reported traumatization from exposure to challenging content. Instead, sustained exposure created safe spaces for addressing vulnerable personal experiences. These findings carry significant implications for art education practice and theory. This chapter explores implications for multiple stakeholders in secondary art education, including practicing teachers, school administrators, and teacher educators.

For Art Teachers

Getting Started

Art teachers seeking to incorporate difficult works into their practice can begin by understanding that this approach requires minimal additional resources while potentially transforming student engagement and learning. The primary requirements are commitment to emancipatory pedagogy, willingness to facilitate rather than explain, and sustained implementation over time.

Begin with accessible difficult works that challenge traditional definitions while remaining visually engaging. Works such as Maurizio Cattelan's *Comedian* or *America* proved effective entry points in this study because they provoked immediate interest while raising questions about artistic legitimacy and value. Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* similarly generated engagement through its challenge to material expectations and institutional critique. These works

function well as introductions because they resist immediate interpretation while remaining conceptually accessible to students with limited exposure to contemporary art.

Pedagogical Foundation

Initial discussions should employ Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS, Hailey et al., 2015). This approach proved effective because it positions students as capable interpreters rather than passive recipients of expert knowledge. Resist the temptation to provide historical context or artist statements at the outset, instead allowing students to generate initial interpretations independently. Background information can be introduced after students have developed their own readings, creating opportunities for students to refine rather than replace their thinking.

Anticipate limited participation in early discussions. The research documented only a few regular contributors in September. This pattern proved temporary, resolving as students developed confidence in their analytical capabilities. Maintain consistent weekly discussions despite low initial participation, trusting that sustained exposure will gradually increase involvement.

This approach embodies progressive education principles where students become active meaning-makers who develop critical consciousness through authentic inquiry instead of receiving predetermined knowledge. The emancipatory pedagogy underlying this study positioned students as intellectually capable of generating understanding without teacher explanation, directly challenging traditional approaches where teachers deliver knowledge and students receive it passively. When participants progressed from being hesitant to speak in September to taking curatorial control of discussions by June, they demonstrated the transformative potential of trusting student capacity.

Progressive education emphasizes learning through genuine problems rather than artificial exercises. Difficult works present authentic interpretive challenges without predetermined correct answers, creating experiences that lead to continued growth. The study documented participants developing tolerance for ambiguity, comfort with multiple valid interpretations, and capacity for independent thinking. Students learned *how* to think rather than *what* to think, developing intellectual autonomy applicable beyond art contexts.

The approach also reflected progressive education's commitment to connecting school learning with contemporary social realities. Difficult works expose students to actual contemporary art rather than limiting them to canonical examples. This study incorporated works by contemporary artists including Ai Weiwei, Banksy, Maurizio Cattelan, Barbara Kruger, Dread Scott, Kehinde Wiley, Jenny Holzer, Dana Schutz, Nicole Eisenman, Kerry James Marshall, Rita Ackermann, and others who challenge conventions and resist easy interpretation. Students also examined historical difficult works by artists including Otto Dix, George Grosz, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, Francis Bacon, Artemisia Gentileschi, and Rembrandt.

When curricula focus on Impressionism or Renaissance masters only, students receive distorted understanding of what art does in the world. Incorporating difficult works prepares students to engage with art as it actually functions in contemporary culture, where artists address political violence, discriminatory injustice, and institutional critique. This connection between school content and actual contemporary practice reflects progressive education's rejection of artificial separation between school and life.

Curricular Justification

While the pedagogical foundation of this work rests in progressive, emancipatory education, teachers needing to justify difficult works discussions within existing curricular

frameworks can draw direct connections to National Core Arts Standards (National Coalition for Core Arts Standards, 2014). While Atkinson's (2012) pedagogy against the state challenged the limitations of standardized curricula, teachers working within institutional structures may need to demonstrate alignment with existing frameworks to gain support for this work. The following connections can help advocate for difficult works discussions while maintaining the emancipatory pedagogical stance essential to their effectiveness. This approach can be aligned with several anchor standards that administrators and curriculum committees will recognize.

- **Creating (Anchor Standard 1): Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.** When students examine how artists challenge conventions through material choices and conceptual frameworks, they develop expanded understanding of artistic possibilities that inform their own work. As documented in this study, participants reported incorporating new materials and symbolic approaches directly inspired by difficult works exposure.
- **Responding (Anchor Standards 7 and 8): Perceive, analyze, and interpret artistic work.** The VTS approach (Hailey et al., 2015) develops students' capacity to observe closely, articulate what they see, and support interpretations with visual evidence. The study revealed participants developing from simple emotional responses to complex interpretations considering historical context, social critique, and multiple valid readings.
- **Connecting (Anchor Standards 10 and 11): Synthesize and relate knowledge to make art and understand context.** The widespread impact on artistic practice, with 17 of 20 participants reporting changes in their work, demonstrated these standards' fulfillment. The development of critical consciousness, where participants moved

from personal expression focus to recognition of art's political and social functions, exemplified contextual understanding. Group conversations revealed participants making sophisticated connections between artwork and historical events, contemporary issues, and cultural contexts.

Beyond arts standards, difficult works discussions support Common Core Speaking and Listening standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010), particularly collaborative discussion, integration of multiple sources, and evaluation of reasoning and evidence. When presenting this approach to administrators, emphasize that difficult works discussions provide rich contexts for achieving standards at high levels rather than replacing existing instruction.

Implementation Strategies

Weekly discussions proved effective in this study, creating rhythm and expectation while allowing sufficient time between sessions for continued artmaking. Establish predictable scheduling, such as dedicating Fridays to difficult work discussions, enabling students to anticipate and prepare for analytical engagement. Consistency matters more than duration, with discussions ranging from 10 to 20 minutes proving sufficient for meaningful interaction.

Selecting works requires attention to both difficulty level and relevance to student experience. The findings revealed that difficulty exists on a spectrum, with some works challenging primarily through unfamiliar materials and others provoking through political content or disturbing imagery. Gradually increase difficulty, beginning with works that challenge artistic conventions before introducing more emotionally demanding content. The progression from Cattelan's (see Figure 10) playful institutional critique to Golub and Spero's (see Figure 18) depiction of torture illustrated effective scaffolding.

Pairing works for comparison proved valuable for generating discussion. Comparing Ai Weiwei's *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (see Figure 5) with Duchamp's *Fountain* (see Figure 2) enabled students to identify patterns across time periods and cultural contexts. Pairing Artemisia Gentileschi's *Judith Slaying Holofernes* with Kehinde Wiley's contemporary response facilitated examination of how artists reference and transform historical works to address contemporary issues (see Figure 11). These pairings created structure for analysis while modeling how meaning emerges through relationship and context.

Connecting discussions to artmaking practice enhanced impact. Participants reported that exposure to difficult works influenced their artistic choices. Encourage students to consider how the approaches observed in difficult works might inform their own practice. Providing time for students to experiment with unfamiliar materials, challenge their own established patterns, or address personally meaningful content can extend the impact of discussions into creative production.

Social Media Connections

Adolescents today encounter difficult imagery daily through media, including social media, without structured opportunities to process what they see. This study revealed participants making spontaneous connections between classroom discussions and content they had seen online. Field notes documented immediate recognition when students saw Cattelan's *Comedian* (see Figure 10), with participants noting they had seen the work circulating in news coverage and social media.

Teachers can leverage this familiarity by beginning with works already circulating digitally rather than obscure historical pieces. Invite students to identify artwork they have encountered online that confused or intrigued them, validating their cultural knowledge while

demonstrating that serious analysis can build on popular digital engagement. Teachers might create shared digital galleries where students contribute challenging works they have found, positioning them as curators.

Social media presents artwork decontextualized from historical and cultural frameworks. Difficult works discussions can teach students to question digital framing, research beyond initial encounters, compare social media representation with primary sources, and recognize how algorithms shape exposure. However, ensure that digital integration does not create barriers for under-resourced students or distract from focused analysis.

Emancipatory Pedagogy in Practice

The emancipatory pedagogical stance proved essential to this study's outcomes. Teachers must resist explaining artwork or guiding students toward predetermined interpretations. When students asked questions such as whether they could use the title as information, responding with permission while avoiding direction about how to use that information positioned students as capable decision-makers in their own learning process.

Practice paraphrasing student contributions without adding interpretation. When a student observed that rough sketches in Rita Ackermann's work might represent ideas in the artist's head, restating this observation without validating or extending it allowed other students to build on or challenge the interpretation (see Figure 7). This technique maintains student ownership of meaning-making while demonstrating active listening.

Tolerate silence rather than filling it with teacher explanation. Early discussions included extended pauses as students formulated thoughts, but maintaining comfortable silence proved essential for developing student confidence. Over time, students began filling silences

themselves, building on each other's observations and developing collaborative knowledge construction.

Model curiosity rather than expertise. Express genuine interest in student interpretations, ask follow-up questions about their thinking, and acknowledge multiple valid readings. When students offer conflicting interpretations, validate both perspectives without declaring one correct, demonstrating that multiple readings can coexist.

Assessment Approaches

Assessing student growth in this approach presents challenges because traditional grading can undermine the emancipatory pedagogy essential to success. However, teachers need evidence of learning. Portfolio-based assessment, pre-/post-conceptual comparisons, self-directed inquiry projects, and artistic practice documentation support emancipatory principles while documenting growth.

Rather than grading individual discussion contributions, which would stultify participation, ask students to maintain portfolios documenting their developing thinking. Students can select three to five discussion moments where their thinking evolved, write reflections on how their understanding changed, and include specific artwork that influences them. This positions students as evaluators of their own growth while providing teachers with evidence of development.

At the beginning and conclusion of the year, ask students the same questions used in this study: What is art? What is art's purpose in society? How have you related to art you have seen? Comparison between initial and final responses provides powerful evidence of conceptual development. Teachers can share such evidence representing the educational value of difficult works discussions.

Invite students to identify their own questions emerging from discussions and pursue independent investigation. Students might research an artist whose work challenged them, curate works addressing a compelling theme, or investigate a social issue raised by difficult works. Assessment focuses on depth of inquiry and thoughtfulness of exploration rather than predetermined outcomes.

Establish baseline documentation early where students articulate their current artistic interests. Throughout the year, students document new approaches they experiment with, difficult works that influenced their thinking, and risks taken in their practice. Growth is measured against their own baseline rather than against external standards.

Avoid grading interpretations as correct or incorrect. Assessment should focus on whether interpretations are supported by evidence and reasoning, not whether they match teacher opinion. Assess growth over time rather than single moments. Create assessment tasks outside class time so discussions remain student-centered. Involve students in establishing criteria so they claim ownership over standards.

Addressing Concerns

Teachers will likely encounter questions or concerns from administrators, parents, or colleagues about incorporating difficult works. The research provides evidence-based responses to common objections. Concerns about age appropriateness can be addressed by noting that the participants in this study, ranging from 16 to 18 years old, demonstrated capacity for sophisticated engagement with challenging content without experiencing harm. Rather, they reported feeling empowered to address difficult themes. The finding that sustained exposure created safe spaces for vulnerable disclosure suggested that appropriate scaffolding of challenging content supports rather than threatens student well-being.

The distinction between exposure and endorsement addresses concerns about controversial content. Discussing Dread Scott's *Burning the U.S. Constitution* does not require agreement with the gesture but rather creates an opportunity for examining why an artist might choose such an action and what it communicates about constitutional exclusions (see Figure 8). Participants in this study demonstrated the ability to analyze controversial works critically without adopting the positions they depicted.

Concerns about student discomfort can be acknowledged while noting that productive discomfort differs from harm. Participants initially expressed uncertainty about works that resisted clear interpretation, but this discomfort resolved as they learned to work with uncertainty. The progression from hesitancy to confident independent analysis indicated that temporary discomfort can facilitate growth when accompanied by appropriate support.

Document student responses through questionnaires, discussion recordings, or reflection assignments. The combination of pre-questionnaires, post-questionnaires, group conversations, interviews, and artwork provides substantial evidence of growth that can address administrator questions about educational value. Teachers should maintain records of student development to support advocacy for continuing the practice.

Boundaries and Safety

The safe disclosure finding revealed that sustained exposure to difficult works created conditions in which participants shared vulnerable personal experiences. While this suggested that the approach can create psychological safety, teachers must understand appropriate boundaries. Teachers are not therapists, and classrooms are not therapy sessions.

Teachers should familiarize themselves with school protocols for responding to disclosures that may require intervention. Educational spaces can normalize difficult topics and

develop analytical skills, but teachers lack clinical training, cannot guarantee confidentiality as mandated reporters, and cannot provide therapeutic attention. When students share vulnerable experiences, listen with respect but recognize limits.

Students should understand they are never expected to make personal connections to difficult works. Some students may engage primarily intellectually with challenging content, and this constitutes equally valid participation. Inform students that teachers are mandated reporters who must disclose certain information when student safety is at risk. The goal is creating space for students to engage with difficult works, not forcing disclosure or attempting to provide therapeutic intervention.

Adapting to Context

Difficult works discussions can transform student learning, but teachers must adapt implementation to their specific contexts. What worked in a diverse suburban New York high school may require modification elsewhere. Different communities have varying cultural values, access to resources, and attitudes toward controversial content. Teachers should assess their specific contexts when planning implementation, considering community culture, how families engage with schools, and student access to museums and cultural institutions. Some contexts may require more careful work selection and sequencing, while others may enable faster progression toward challenging content.

School culture matters significantly. Strong arts programs provide support but may have established traditional approaches. Marginalized programs face justification challenges but may have more flexibility. High-achieving schools may resist unless framed as college-readiness skills. Schools serving struggling students may view difficult works discussions as unrelated to tested content priorities.

Teachers might adapt by building administrative support through documented student growth, involving families proactively, selecting works resonating with specific populations, and collaborating across disciplines. The core findings likely transfer across contexts, but specific pathways will vary based on local factors. Teachers should view contextual differences not as obstacles but as invitations to thoughtful adaptation maintaining core principles while responding to their specific students, communities, and institutional constraints.

For School Administrators

School administrators can support teachers who wish to incorporate difficult works through trust in professional judgment and minimal resource allocation. This study utilized freely available images projected during discussions, requiring no special materials or funding.

The finding that participants unanimously valued exposure suggested that blanket protective policies may underestimate adolescent capability. Administrators familiar with progressive, inquiry-based, student-centered pedagogies will recognize this approach as aligned with research-supported best practices. Professional development can prepare administrators less familiar with contemporary art education methods to understand the approach's pedagogical foundations and support teachers' professional judgment in implementation. In turn, administrators should provide professional development opportunities for teachers focusing exposure to difficult works and practice with facilitation approaches.

Administrators may receive questions or concerns from parents about exposing students to difficult or controversial content. Proactive communication proves more effective than reactive defense. Before implementation begins, administrators can support teachers in hosting parent information sessions where difficult works are shown and educational rationales are

explained. Explaining that students analyze rather than endorse controversial content can help parents understand the educational purpose.

When concerns arise despite proactive communication, administrators should emphasize the educational outcomes documented in this study. Participants reported feeling empowered to address difficult themes and demonstrated measurable growth in analytical capabilities and artistic practice.

Difficult works discussions directly support common school and district priorities including equity, critical thinking development, and college readiness. This approach provides equitable access to contemporary art and cultural capital typically reserved for students with museum access and arts education privilege. The visual nature of content and the VTS's (Hailey et al., 2015) open-ended structure create accessible entry points for English language learners. The approach develops transferable critical thinking skills that align with college and career readiness frameworks, emphasizing complex problem-solving, evaluation of evidence, and comfort with ambiguity. The self-directed inquiry component positions students as knowledge generators, modeling the independent research and critical examination expected in higher education contexts.

For Teacher Educators

Teacher preparation programs can support future art teachers by incorporating difficult works and emancipatory pedagogy into methods courses. Preservice teachers need direct exposure to challenging contemporary art to build confidence in facilitating student discussions. Methods courses should teach facilitation approaches that position students as meaning-makers, providing opportunities to practice these techniques and receive feedback.

Evidence from this study can reassure preservice teachers who fear incorporating controversial content. As documented, no administrative intervention, parent complaints, or student traumatization occurred, demonstrating that appropriate scaffolding creates safe, productive learning experiences. When teacher educators position preservice teachers as capable interpreters of educational theory and encourage independent questioning, they demonstrate the pedagogical stance that this study revealed as essential for difficult works discussions.

The practical implications outlined in this chapter addressed how art teachers, administrators, and teacher educators can support the implementation of difficult works discussions in secondary art education. Chapter 7 synthesizes the study's contributions through direct responses to the research questions and consideration of future directions.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This longitudinal case study examined the impact of sustained exposure to difficult works of art on secondary students' thinking and artmaking over a 10-month period during the 2024–2025 school year. Twenty participants enrolled in a portfolio preparation course at Hicksville High School engaged in weekly discussions of challenging artwork while I documented their evolving understanding through questionnaires, interviews, group conversations, field notes, and their artistic work.

The research addressed the following questions: What are the potential benefits and challenges of discussing difficult works of art with secondary art students in a suburban public school in New York? How might students' views of art's function change after being introduced to difficult work? How might discussions of challenging works of art contribute to changes in how students understand themselves, make art, and are sensitive to the world around them?

The findings revealed considerable benefits with minimal concerns. Participants developed expanded understanding of art's purposes, critical awareness, authentic artistic voices, and comfort with interpretive complexity. Universal participation emerged by the study's conclusion. Two unexpected findings were revealed. First, prolonged engagement created conditions where some participants addressed personal experiences with addiction, abuse, and trauma. Second, participants were not disturbed by difficult content in the way curricula designed to shield students from difficult content assume they would be, suggesting that outside exposure to graphic imagery may explain their comfort with challenging visual material.

Responding to the Research Questions

Primary Research Question: What are the potential benefits and challenges of discussing difficult works of art with secondary art students in a suburban public school in New York?

The research identified benefits across multiple dimensions. Participation transformed from limited involvement to universal engagement by the conclusion. Analytical capabilities developed from basic observation to sophisticated interpretation integrating historical context and theoretical frameworks. Across the group, students moved away from reference-based work and toward personally meaningful creation utilizing symbolic, critical themes. Additionally, prolonged engagement with challenging artwork created conditions where participants felt safe addressing their own difficult experiences, with final interviews revealing disclosures about addiction, abuse, and trauma.

Early discussions revealed participation anxiety, but this was resolved within the first semester as participants gained confidence. Initial struggles with works that resisted clear interpretation eventually subsided as participants developed a greater comfort with open-endedness. No participants reported feeling traumatized by the content, and no parents or administrators raised concerns about content appropriateness throughout the study period.

Sub-question 1: How might students' views of art's function change after being introduced to difficult work?

The students' understanding of art's function underwent dramatic expansion. As documented in Chapter 4, initial pre-questionnaire responses focused overwhelmingly on personal expression, with 17 of 20 participants defining art's purpose as individual emotional communication. Post-questionnaire responses revealed recognition of art's capacity for social

critique, political commentary, and raising awareness, with 14 of 20 identifying these functions. Students developed understanding of art's relationship to power structures, recognizing how artists challenge established norms and expose underrepresented perspectives. The evolution from art as an individual emotional outlet to art as multifaceted social communication represented a fundamental shift in how students understood art's purpose.

Sub-question 2: How might discussions of challenging works of art contribute to changes in how students understand themselves, make art, and are sensitive to the world around them?

Deeper self-understanding developed through engagement with difficult works. The unexpected finding that sustained exposure created safe spaces for addressing personal trauma indicated that challenging content enabled self-examination and vulnerable disclosure. Chapter 4 details how 17 of 20 participants reported that discussions impacted their artmaking through increased symbolism, material experimentation, and socially conscious subject matter. Process orientation developed, with participants prioritizing meaningful expression over technical perfection. Individual cases illustrated dramatic evolution, from Eric's transformation from superficial work to pieces addressing addiction and family trauma, to Alison's shift from technical perfectionism to experimental, conceptually driven practice. Sensitivity to the world developed as students drew connections between artwork and contemporary issues across media, literature, and current events.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings from this study raised questions requiring further investigation. The following recommendations outline research directions that could extend, challenge, or refine this study's conclusions.

Replication in Diverse Contexts

Future research should examine whether similar outcomes emerge in different educational contexts. Studies conducted in urban schools could reveal whether difficult works discussions prove equally transformative when addressing different student populations. Rural schools might show distinct patterns of engagement or development. International school studies could assess whether cultural contexts shape responses to difficult works, particularly in societies with different relationships to artistic freedom or social critique.

Replication with different student populations within secondary education could clarify the role of prior experience and artistic commitment. This study's focus on advanced students in a portfolio preparation course limits claims about students in introductory courses. Research examining difficult works discussions with students in required general art courses, who may have lower intrinsic motivation or artistic confidence, could determine whether the transformative effects documented here depend on students' choice to enroll in advanced coursework.

Comparative Studies

Research comparing difficult works to canonical works using similar pedagogical approaches could help isolate the specific contribution of content difficulty. A study employing VTS (Hailey et al., 2015) discussions of both difficult works and established masterworks with parallel student groups could determine whether observed outcomes result from the difficult nature of content or from the discussion-based, student-centered pedagogical approach. Such comparison would clarify whether the works themselves or the facilitation method drives transformation.

Cross-disciplinary comparisons could reveal whether difficult works function similarly across art forms. Research examining sustained exposure to difficult music, theater, dance, or literature could determine if the patterns documented in this visual art study transfer to other artistic domains.

Investigation of Safe Spaces for Vulnerable Disclosure Finding

The unexpected finding that difficult works created safe spaces for addressing personal trauma deserves focused investigation. Future research could examine why exposure to challenging content creates conditions for vulnerable disclosure. Studies might explore whether the content of works, the collaborative discussion format, the emancipatory pedagogical stance, or other factors enable such openness. Research could also investigate potential risks, examining whether such disclosures require specific teacher preparation or support structures to ensure student well-being. This investigation might be more appropriately conducted by researchers in psychology or therapeutic settings equipped to address trauma disclosure.

Investigation of Social Media and Comfort with Difficult Content

The second unexpected finding, that participants were not disturbed by difficult content, deserves investigation. Future research could examine whether and how exposure to contemporary media, including social media, influences adolescent responses to challenging artistic content. Studies comparing responses to difficult works across generations, or between adolescents with varying levels of social media exposure, could clarify whether contemporary visual culture has shifted baseline comfort with graphic imagery.

Final Reflections

This study emerged from my observation that secondary students rarely encounter the difficult works in school that have transformed my own understanding of art's possibilities.

Sixteen years of teaching revealed a pattern of students often creating imitative work focused on teacher approval, engaging primarily with canonical artists and traditional media, and rarely confronting art that challenges, disturbs, or demands intellectual struggle. I suspected adolescents' natural tendency toward questioning authority and challenging norms might find a productive outlet in exposure to difficult works.

The findings revealed outcomes I had not anticipated. Students volunteered to curate discussions, selecting works they believed would generate productive conversation. Participants developed deep connections with artists whose work challenged their assumptions. A safe space developed for addressing personal trauma, and students engaged with difficult content comfortably, despite concerns about potential disturbance. Eric's evolution from "goofy art" to work addressing family trauma, and Alison's shift from technical perfectionism to process-oriented experimentation, illustrated how difficult works can redirect artistic priorities and give students the freedom to address what matters to them. These individual journeys, while distinct, collectively illustrated adolescent capacity for sophisticated engagement when provided appropriate conditions.

Students demonstrated they can productively engage with challenging works shaping contemporary art discourse. They connected Banksy's *Dismaland* (see Figure 17) to corporate critique, recognized political dimensions of Ai Weiwei's (see Figure 5) interventions, grappled with ethical implications of Dread Scott's (see Figure 8) provocations, and analyzed Barbara Kruger's (see Figure 9) feminist critiques of consumer culture. The implications extend beyond art education, with critical thinking skills transferring to other domains.

This study contributes to research on disobedience-based art education, extending prior work conducted across diverse contexts including European museum settings, North American

afterschool programs, primary-level classroom observations, and externally developed Canadian school-based projects. The study demonstrated how difficult works can be integrated into the regular curriculum of an American secondary art classroom over a sustained period. The synthesis of Rancière's intellectual emancipation, Atkinson's pedagogy against the state, and Burton's understanding of adolescent artistic development offers frameworks for secondary art educators designing curricula incorporating difficult works.

Difficult works belong in secondary art classrooms, not as occasional supplements but as central content. They provide students with models of how artists challenge established norms, intervene in public discourse, and create space for new understanding. The 20 participants proved capable of remarkable growth when provided compelling content and ongoing engagement with challenging material. Their willingness to address difficult personal experiences through both discussion and artistic practice indicated the depth of trust and safety that developed over the study period.

At a time when adolescents confront disinformation, political polarization, and rapid social change, independent critical thinking has never been more important. This study demonstrated that disobedience-based art education develops the critical consciousness students need to understand and intervene in the world around them. Difficult works align with adolescents' developmental drive to challenge norms and question authority, channeling their natural skepticism while expanding their understanding of what art can accomplish. When students engage as capable interpreters rather than passive recipients, they develop autonomous thinking and transform their creative practice from imitative work to personally meaningful creation. All 20 participants demonstrated this transformation, with students themselves valuing the challenging content rather than avoiding it. Thoughtfully integrated difficult works do not

simply teach students about art—they develop the capacity to think critically, question deeply, and create work that addresses what matters to them. The capacity to think independently has never been more essential, and this study has clearly shown that difficult works paired with emancipatory pedagogy develop precisely that capacity.

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Appendix A: Discussion Resource

VTS Questions to ask

"What's happening in this picture?"

"What's going on here?"

"What makes you say that?"

"What do you see that makes you say that?"

"What more can we find?"

"What else is in this picture?"

Source: Hailey, D., Miller, A., & Yenawine, P. (2015). Understanding visual literacy: The visual thinking strategies approach. In D. M. Baylen & A. D'Alba (Eds.), *Essentials of teaching and integrating visual and media literacy*. Springer.

Appendix B: Questionnaire 1

Name _____ Date_____

Student Questionnaire (pre-assessment before discussion of difficult works)

Please complete as a do-now before our class discussion begins. Remember to take your time and really think about the questions. Please answer in complete sentences. Remember, all tasks done for this study are not graded and do not impact your class grade in any way.

What is art?

_____

_____

_____

What is art's purpose/function in society?

_____

_____

_____

In what ways have you related to art you have seen? In other words, what does it tell you about yourself/others/the world around you?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix C: Questionnaire 2

Name _____ Date_____

Student Questionnaire (post-assessment at conclusion of study)

Please complete this reflection activity by answering the same questions as you did for your do-now at the beginning of the study. Please note whether or not your ideas have changed, and why or why not. Remember to take your time and really think about the questions. Please answer in complete sentences. Remember, all tasks done for this study are not graded and do not impact your class grade in any way.

What is art?

_____

_____

_____

What is art's purpose/function in society?

_____

_____

_____

In what ways have you related to art you have seen during our discussions? In other words, what does it tell you about yourself/others/the world around you? Is this different from before our discussions?

_____

_____

_____

Was looking at and discussing this work beneficial in any way? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix D: Questionnaire 3

Name _____ Date_____

Student Questionnaire (post-assessment follow-up at conclusion of study)

Please answer the questions below. Remember to take your time and really think about the questions. Please answer in complete sentences. Remember, all tasks done for this study are not graded and do not impact your class grade in any way.

What are your thoughts on our weekly discussions? Were they useful? Why or why not?

_____

_____

_____

What is a difficult work of art? What does it have to be to be "difficult"?

_____

_____

_____

What do you think the purpose of difficult works are?

_____

_____

_____

Do difficult works have anything to do with society? How or how not?

_____

_____

_____

Has your artmaking been impacted by our discussions? If so, how?

_____

_____

_____

Is looking at difficult works different than looking at non-difficult pieces? How or how not?

_____

_____

_____

Any recommendations/comments/anything else I should know?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix E: Interview Questions

Tell me what you think about the works of art we have been discussing:

1. What past experiences have you had discussing works of art?
    a. What about difficult works of art?
2. How might the difficult works we have discussed impacted, or not impacted, what you think about art?
    a. In other words, can you tell me any change in what you think of art's function/purpose in society?
3. What positives and/or negatives can you identify about looking at works like these for HS art students like yourself?

Tell me about your own artmaking this year:

4. What has changed about your approach to artmaking from before you were enrolled in portfolio prep?
    a. What are some new discoveries you have made in your art?
    5. How might our discussions of difficult works of art impacted, or not impacted, your own artmaking?
    6. What else you can share about your experience in looking at difficult works of art in terms of your thinking and creating this year?

Appendix F: Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT

Protocol Title: Disrupt, Transform, Repeat:
Introducing Difficult Works Within a Secondary Art Classroom in the United States
Principal Researcher: Krista Biedenbach, Ed.D. Student, Teachers College,
klb2152@tc.columbia.edu

INTRODUCTION You are invited to participate in this research study called "Disrupt, Transform, Repeat: Introducing Difficult Works Within a Secondary Art Classroom in the United States". You may qualify to take part in this research study because you are the teacher of the advanced art class selected for this study at Hicksville High School and you are over 18 years old. Approximately 16-20 children (Hicksville HS's portfolio prep class) will participate in this study, and it will take place during class, from September 2024 to June 2025, to complete and take approximately 3.5 hours to complete.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE? This study is being done to determine how discussing difficult works of art may impact students' knowledge of art as well as the work they make themselves.

WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?
If you decide to participate, the primary researcher will individually interview you.

During the individual interview you will be asked to discuss any thoughts, observations, and/or opinions concerning the work conducted with the students included in the study. This interview will be audio-recorded. After the audio recording is written down (transcribed) the audio recording will be deleted. If you do not wish to be audio-recorded, you will not be able to participate. The interview will take approximately fifteen minutes. You will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep your identity confidential. This interview will be conducted face-to-face at Hicksville High School, in the classroom, towards the conclusion of the study. The interview will not impinge on classroom time.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that you may experience are not greater than you would ordinarily encounter in daily life while taking routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. However, there are some risks to consider. You might feel embarrassed to discuss your thoughts about discussing difficult works with students in the study. You do not have to answer any questions or share anything you do not want to talk about. You can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. You might feel concerned that things you say might get back to your supervisor. Your information will be kept confidential.

The primary researcher is taking precautions to keep your information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering or guessing your identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of your name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN I EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? There is no direct benefit to you for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the field of teacher education to better understand the best way to teach secondary art students.

WILL I BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY? You will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for taking part in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN I LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS? The study is over when you have completed the individual interview at the end of the study. However, you can leave the study at any time even if you have not finished.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CONFIDENTIALITY The primary researcher will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio-recording will be written down and the audio-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your real name with your pseudonym. For quality assurance, members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED? The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your identity will be removed from any data you provide before publication or use for educational purposes. Your name or any identifying information about you will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the researcher.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND OR VIDEO RECORDING: Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission to be recorded. If you decide that you do not wish to be recorded, **you will not be able to participate** in this research study.

_____I give my consent to be recorded _____
Signature

_____I **do not** consent to be recorded _____
Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY
(Choose the appropriate description below for your research)

___I consent to allow written, video and/or audio-recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College, Columbia University

_____

Signature

___I **do not** consent to allow written, video and/or audio-recorded materials viewed outside of Teachers College, Columbia University

_____

Signature

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?
If you have any questions about taking part in this research study, you should contact the primary researcher, you should contact the primary researcher, Krista Biedenbach, at 516-733-2201 (Hicksville High School Main office) or at klb2152@tc.columbia.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, Box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection for Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

- I have read the Informed Consent Form and have been offered the opportunity to discuss the form with the researcher.
- I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary. I may refuse to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty. The researcher may withdraw me from the research at the researcher's professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to continue my participation, the researcher will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.

- Identifiers (names) may be removed from the data. De-identified data may be used for future research studies, or distributed to another researcher for future research without additional informed consent from you (the research participant or the research participant's representative)
- I should receive a copy of the Informed Consent Form document.

My signature means that I agree to participate in this study:

Print name: _____ **Date**: _____

Signature: _____

Appendix G: Parental Permission Form

GUARDIAN and/or) PARENTAL PERMISSION FORM

Protocol Title: Disrupt, Transform, Repeat:
Introducing Difficult Works Within a Secondary Art Classroom in the United States
Principal Researcher: Krista Biedenbach, Ed.D. Student, Teachers College,
klb2152@tc.columbia.edu

INTRODUCTION Your child is invited to participate in this research study called "Disrupt, Transform, Repeat: Introducing Difficult Works Within a Secondary Art Classroom in the United States". Your child may qualify to take part in this research study because they are high school art students in an advanced art class at Hicksville High School. Approximately 16-20 children (Hicksville HS's portfolio prep class) will participate in this study, and it will take place during class, from September 2024 to June 2025, to complete.

WHY IS THIS STUDY BEING DONE? This study is being done to determine how discussing difficult works of art may impact students' knowledge of art as well as the work they make themselves.

WHAT WILL MY CHILD BE ASKED TO DO IF I AGREE THAT MY CHILD CAN TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY? If you decide to allow your child to take part in this study, the primary researcher will ask students to complete a brief questionnaire about art, participate in the beginning of class group discussions about presented artwork on Fridays, and invite students to participate in 1-on-1 interviews with the researcher. I will also be taking photographs of student artwork. This will all be conducted during class time.

The questionnaire will ask students what art is, and how one relates to art and will be given at the beginning and end of study. Next, on Fridays at the beginning of class students will be in a group discussion about art. I will ask open-ended questions such as "what's going on in this picture?" and "what makes you say this?" conversations will last 5-10 minutes and will be audio recorded. Additionally, students will be invited to participate in an approximately 20-minute interview during the course of the study which will also be audio recorded. The researcher will announce when audio recording begins and ends for both group conversations and interviews. I will also inform a participant before I photograph their artwork.

After the recorded conversations and interviews are written down, the original recording will be deleted. If you do not wish your child to be audio-recorded, your child will not be able to participate. Your child will be given a pseudonym or false name in order to keep their identity confidential. Discussions, questionnaires, and interviews will all be conducted in your child's art classroom during class time. The researcher will consult with your child's teacher to schedule the activities at a time that will not disrupt your child's typical classroom learning.

For group conversations, others in this group may know the identity of your child. The researcher cannot promise that others in the group will keep your child's participation private. The researcher will ask that your child and others respect one other in the group and keep all comments made during the group discussion private. The researcher will remind all participants to not discuss what happened during the group meeting outside of the group.

Discussions of artwork would be typical of everyday classroom activities. Questionnaires and interviews will be brief and take a minimal amount of time, with plenty of time for students to create their work. Students will not miss out on any classroom assignments and all study activities will be coordinated with the classroom teacher. I will offer additional work time for students during their study hall/lunch periods/afterschool if they would like. Students who do not wish to participate will be able to work on their artwork in the adjoining room if a group discussion is taking place. The teacher of the class will also be present to assist in any additional activities for students that are not participating.

WHAT POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS CAN MY CHILD EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? This is a minimal risk study, which means the harms or discomforts that your child may experience are not greater than your child would ordinarily encounter in daily life while taking routine physical or psychological examinations or tests. Your child might feel embarrassed to discuss works of art as a group. Your child does not have to answer any questions or share anything they do not want to talk about. Your child can stop participating in the study at any time without penalty. You might feel concerned that things your child says might get back to their teacher. Your child's information will be kept confidential.

The researcher is taking precautions to keep your child's information confidential and prevent anyone from discovering what they say or their identity, such as using a pseudonym instead of their name and keeping all information on a password protected computer and locked in a file drawer.

WHAT POSSIBLE BENEFITS CAN MY CHILD EXPECT FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY? There is no direct benefit to your child for participating in this study. Participation may benefit the field of art education to better understand the best way to teach art students.

WILL MY CHILD BE PAID FOR BEING IN THIS STUDY? Your child will not be paid to participate. There are no costs to you for your child's participation in this study.

WHEN IS THE STUDY OVER? CAN MY CHILD LEAVE THE STUDY BEFORE IT ENDS? The study is over when your child has completed the group conversations (held Sept-June), may have completed an individual interview, and filled out the beginning and ending questionnaires. However, your child can leave the study at any time even if they have not finished.

PROTECTION OF YOUR CHILD'S CONFIDENTIALITY The primary researcher will keep all written materials locked in a desk drawer in a locked office. Any electronic or digital information (including audio recordings) will be stored on a computer that is password protected. What is on the audio-recording will be written down and the audio-recording will then be destroyed. There will be no record matching your child's real name with their pseudonym. For quality assurance, members of the Teachers College Institutional Review Board (IRB) may review the data collected as part of this study. Otherwise, all information obtained from your child's participation in this study will be held strictly confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by U.S. or State law.

HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED? The results of this study will be published in journals and presented at academic conferences. Your child's identity will be removed from any data your child provides before publication or use for educational purposes. Your child's name or any identifying information about your child will not be published. This study is being conducted as part of the dissertation of the researcher.

CONSENT FOR AUDIO AND OR VIDEO RECORDING Audio recording is part of this research study. You can choose whether to give permission for your child to be recorded. If you decide that you do not wish your child to be recorded, **they will not be able to participate** in this research study.

_____I give my consent for my child to be recorded

_____

Signature

_____I **do not** consent for my child to be recorded

_____

Signature

WHO MAY VIEW MY CHILD'S PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY

___I consent to allow my child's written, painted or audio-recorded materials viewed at an educational setting or at a conference outside of Teachers College, Columbia University

_____

Signature

___I **do not** consent to allow my child's written, painted or audio-recorded materials viewed outside of Teachers College, Columbia University

_____

Signature

WHO CAN ANSWER MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS STUDY?

If you have any questions about the study or your child's taking part in this research study, you should contact the primary researcher, Krista Biedenbach, at 516-733-2201 (Hicksville High School Main office) or at klb2152@tc.columbia.edu.

If you have questions or concerns about your child's rights as a research subject, you should contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) (the human research ethics committee) at 212-678-4105 or email IRB@tc.edu or you can write to the IRB at Teachers College, Columbia University, 525 W. 120th Street, New York, NY 10027, Box 151. The IRB is the committee that oversees human research protection at Teachers College, Columbia University.

PARTICIPANT'S RIGHTS

- I have read the (Guardian) Parental Permission Form and have been offered the opportunity to discuss the form with the researcher.
- I have had ample opportunity to ask questions about the purposes, procedures, risks and benefits regarding this research study.
- I understand that my child's participation is voluntary. I may refuse to allow my child to participate or withdraw participation at any time without penalty to future student status or grades. I understand that my child may refuse to participate without penalty.
- The researcher may withdraw my child from the research at their professional discretion.
- If, during the course of the study, significant new information that has been developed becomes available which may relate to my willingness to allow my child to continue participation, the researcher will provide this information to me.
- Any information derived from the research study that personally identifies me or my child will not be voluntarily released or disclosed without my separate consent, except as specifically required by law.
- Identifiers (names) may be removed from the data. De-identified data may be used for future research studies, or distributed to another researcher for future research without additional informed consent (or permission) from you (the guardian, parent, or the research participant's representative) or your child (the research participant).
- I should receive a copy of this (Guardian) Parental Permission Form document.

My signature means that I agree to allow my child to participate in this study:

Print Parent or guardian's name: _____

Parent or guardian's signature: _____

Child's name: _____

Date: _____

Appendix H: Glossary of Terms

Artistic Disobedience: A deliberate practice that utilizes art to challenge established knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and beliefs of individuals or groups. Artistic disobedience aims to subvert prevailing ideologies through creative expression, bringing difficult works into existence.

Critical Consciousness: Awareness of social, political, and economic contradictions and the capacity to take action against oppressive elements. In this study, critical consciousness developed as students recognized art's potential to address systemic issues and social injustice.

Difficult Works: Artwork that challenges, subverts, and/or dissents from prevailing interpretations of art and/or the current state of the world. Difficult works disrupt conventional understanding through materials, concepts, presentation, or any other method of expression.

Disobedience-Based Art Education: Educational approaches associated with the practice of artistic disobedience and the inclusion of difficult works in teaching and learning.

Dissensus: A rupture in the established order of what can be seen, said, and thought; a disruption of consensus that opens possibilities for new understanding. In Rancière's framework, dissensus challenges the distribution of the sensible and creates space for previously marginalized voices and perspectives.

Emancipatory Pedagogy: An educational approach rooted in Rancière's theory of intellectual emancipation, positioning students as intellectually capable interpreters rather than passive recipients of knowledge. The teacher facilitates student inquiry without presuming intellectual inequality, supporting learners in constructing their own understanding.

School Art Style: A term coined by Arthur Efland to describe imitative, teacher-pleasing artwork created to meet perceived expectations rather than express authentic meaning. School art style prioritizes technical correctness and conventional aesthetics over personal expression or critical engagement.

Stultification: The process by which traditional education creates dependency on teacher explanation, assuming student intellectual inferiority. Stultification occurs when educators presume students cannot learn without expert explication, reinforcing hierarchies of intelligence rather than fostering independent thinking.

Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS): A facilitation method using open-ended questioning to guide discussion of visual art without providing expert interpretation. Developed by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine, VTS supports meaning-making through observation and dialogue.

Appendix I: Discussion Images

The following artworks were shown during weekly discussion sessions conducted from September 2024 through June 2025.

Discussion 1
Rita Ackermann, *If Anyone Hurts My Brother I'll Kill That…*, 1994.

Discussion 2
Jean-Michel Basquiat, *Untitled*, 1981.
Otto Dix, *Skull (Schädel) from The War (Der Krieg)*, 1924.

Discussion 3
Ai Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, 1995, printed 2017.
Marcel Duchamp, *Fountain*, 1917.

Discussion 4
Dana Schutz, *Shaking, Cooking, Peeing*, 2009.
Marlene Dumas, *Losing (her Meaning)*, 1988.

Discussion 5
Dread Scott, *Burning the US Constitution*, 2011.
Dread Scott, *If White People Didn't Invent Air (from BOOM! A series of 7 prints)*, 2001.

Discussion 6
Urs Fischer, *Historical Problem from the series Problem Paintings*, 2013.
Andy Warhol, *Mao*, 1972.

Discussion 7
Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your Body Is a Battleground)*, 1989.
Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Money Can Buy You Love)*, 1985.

Discussion 8
Jenny Holzer, *From Truisms Series*, 1982.
John Baldessari, *Tips for Artists Who Want to Sell*, 1966-1968.

Discussion 9
Maurizio Cattelan, *Comedian*, 2019.
Maurizio Cattelan, *America*, 2016.

Discussion 10
Shyglo, *Huge*, 2019.
Sabo, *Untitled*, 2024.

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Discussion 11
Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith & Holofernes*, c. 1612-1617.
Kehinde Wiley, *Judith & Holofernes*, 2012.

Discussion 12
Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971.
Marina Abramović, *Balkan Baroque*, 1997.

Discussion 13
Andres Serrano, *Piss Christ*, 1987.
Andres Serrano, *The Interpretation of Dreams (The Other Christ)*, 2001.

Discussion 14
Banksy, *Love Is in the Bin*, 2018/2006.
Banksy, *Cash Machine Girl*, 2007.

Discussion 15
Yuko Tatsushima, *Misato's Self-Determination*, date unknown.
Yuko Tatsushima, *Ikueda Coffin*, date unknown.

Discussion 16
Christopher Wool, *Apocalypse Now*, 1988.
Magic (Gospel/Keanu), *Untitled*, 2021.

Discussion 17
Marilyn Minter, *Tough Guy*, 1999.
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled #474*, 2008.

Discussion 18
George Grosz, *Stickmen Meeting Members of the Bourgeoise*, 1946.
George Grosz, *The Grey Man Dances*, 1949.

Discussion 19
Rembrandt van Rijn, *Slaughtered Ox*, 1655.
Chaïm Soutine, *Carcass of Beef*, c. 1924.
Francis Bacon, *Figure with Meat*, 1954.
Jenny Saville, *Torso 2*, 2004.

Discussion 20
Banksy, *Dismaland*, 2015.
Guy Colwell, *Bread Line*, 2008.

Discussion 21
Leon Golub and Nancy Spero, *They Will Torture You, My Friend*, 1971.
Nancy Spero, *Torture of Women*, 2010.
Nancy Spero, *We are Pro Choice*, 1992.