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Résumé de l'article

L'utilisation d'activités créatives comme méthode et procédé d'enseignement et d'exercice du travail social suscite un intérêt grandissant pour enrichir l'apprentissage des étudiants et contribuer aux pratiques ciblées sur les questions de justice sociale et de lutte contre l'oppression. Le présent article s'insère dans le discours sur l'intersection entre l'art et le travail social et fait valoir l'importance des considérations éthiques pour guider notre exercice. À partir d'exemples d'initiatives artistiques et guidées par l'art qui abordent le capacitisme et le racisme, l'article s'attarde à la nécessité de tenir compte des questions de consentement, de représentation, d'appropriation et de potentiel d'action. Au moyen d'une métaphore avec la photographie, il propose trois principes éthiques pour orienter les pratiques artistiques et guidées par l'art en travail social.

ETHICS, ART, AND SOCIAL WORK

A Necessary Conversation

Samantha Wehbi

Abstract: There has been a growing interest in bringing creative arts as methods and processes into social work education and practice to enhance student learning and contribute to practices tackling issues of social justice and anti-oppression. This paper builds on the current conversation about the intersection of art and social work to propose the need for engagement with ethical considerations to guide our practice. Relying on examples of arts-informed and arts-based projects that tackle issues of ableism and racism, the discussion focuses on the need to consider issues of consent, representation, appropriation and agency of participants in these projects. Borrowing from the metaphor of photographic practice, the article concludes by proposing three ethical principles to guide arts-informed and arts-based practices in social work.

Keywords: Creative arts, ethics, representation, consent, agency

Abstré : L'utilisation d'activités créatives comme méthode et procédé d'enseignement et d'exercice du travail social suscite un intérêt grandissant pour enrichir l'apprentissage des étudiants et contribuer aux pratiques ciblées sur les questions de justice sociale et de lutte contre l'oppression. Le présent article s'insère dans le discours sur l'intersection entre l'art et le travail social et fait valoir l'importance des considérations éthiques pour guider notre exercice. À partir d'exemples d'initiatives artistiques et guidées par l'art qui abordent le capacitisme et le racisme, l'article s'attarde à la nécessité de tenir compte des questions de consentement, de représentation, d'appropriation et de potentiel d'action. Au moyen d'une métaphore avec la photographie, il propose trois principes éthiques pour orienter les pratiques artistiques et guidées par l'art en travail social.

Mots-clés : Activités créatives, éthique, représentation, consentement, potentiel d'action

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MY INVOLVEMENT WITH CREATIVE processes has informed how and what I teach. My most recent course development and teaching practices have infused arts-informed and arts-based approaches not only in the content but also in the methods and approaches upon which I rely. In doing so, I join a group of educators bringing an interest in creative arts to bear on anti-oppressive, decolonizing, and social justice oriented social work education and practice (Bonnycastle & Bonnycastle, 2015; Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014; McPherson & Mazza, 2014; Moffatt, 2009; Recollet, Coholic, & Cote-Meek, 2009). In a Forum on art and social work in this journal (2009), the authors provide key arguments about the contributions of art to social work thereby opening an important dialogue about the intersections between disciplines. Similarly, a special issue of *Social Work Education* (2012) discusses the contributions of art to social work through several case examples. Among many highlighted benefits, the scholarship points to the potential of arts-informed and arts-based approaches to help students better understand their role in working with marginalized communities locally and globally; as well as becoming more emotionally invested in social justice, decolonizing, and anti-oppressive material about which they are learning.

However, what would enrich this discussion about the intersections and deepen it further is not only asking how art can contribute to social work, but also how social work can contribute to creative practices and specifically a consideration of the ethical dimensions of practice with people and communities. The impetus for this article arises from this background discussion about the potential benefits of the arts for social work with a focus on the seemingly invisible question of the importance of ethical considerations that may be engendered by bringing the arts and social work into conversation. This question is perhaps bolstered by the tenuous relationship between ethics and art-making (Kester, 2011; Wilson, 2007). In an interview with Grant Kester, the art critic notes that one critique leveled against activist and socially engaged art projects is their engagement with questions of ethics which “tends to be taboo in the art world, where open talk of ethics is anathema” (Wilson, 2007, p. 112). Questions of ethics are at times seen to be inconsistent with the symbolic nature of art and to impose on artistic freedom, making the artist accountable to forces greater than their own creativity and truth.

Adding to this uneasy relationship between art and ethics is the fact that social work codes of ethics in western contexts do not typically address such concerns and in fact have been critiqued for an overemphasis on social work practice with individuals and families, as opposed to a broader perspective that encompasses community (Hardina, 2004; Reisch & Lowe, 2000), which is a key site and sets of relationships where activist art plays out. Notably, as social workers, we need to have a conversation about how ethics, which are at the heart of our practice, need to continue to guide our arts-informed and arts-based methods and approaches (referred

to hereafter as “arts-inspired” to encompass the various degrees of engagement with the arts from arts-informed approaches that use art as a tool to arts-based approaches where art-production is an intended part of the process and outcome).

Elsewhere, I have briefly alluded to the issues that I have contended with as a social worker with a professional photography background while working in international development, and specifically issues of reproducing colonialism through the camera (Wehbi & Taylor, 2013). Here, I explore how ethics relate to our arts-inspired social work practice and suggest that we need to be guided with an examination of the following areas of focus: what we reveal and what we conceal through our engagement with artistic practices. I illustrate this discussion with arts-inspired examples from a variety of sources and on a diverse range of social issues focusing mainly on racism and ableism to highlight key tensions from a social work perspective, especially in terms of issues of agency and representation. The paper ends with a discussion of ethical principles to guide our engagement with the arts.

What We Reveal: Issues of Consent, Appropriation, and Representation

From the extreme to the subtle, ethical tensions arise in how we choose to show or reveal our subject matter or issues we aim to highlight. These tensions touch upon concerns regarding issues of representation, consent and agency. Several examples come to mind to illustrate the complexity of this concern. To situate these examples, a brief return to the historical phenomenon of “human zoos” is in order. The nexus of colonialism, racism, whiteness, and ableism operated in these “performances” to construct a relationship between the viewer and the performer. Perhaps one of the most well-known examples is that of Sara (Saartjie) Baartman, a Khoikhoi woman who was kidnapped in 1810 from what is now South Africa and transported to England and later to France to be exhibited as part of a showcase of “exotic” humans (Gordon, 2000; Lloyd, 2013). Lest the reader think this is a story that belongs in distant history, it is galling that France only agreed to cede Sara’s remains to South Africa in 2002 (eight years after the original request) at the behest of Nelson Mandela and a national anti-colonial movement for her repatriation (“Sara ‘Saartjie’ Baartman,” 2013).

Of direct relevance in Sara’s story are the conflicting accounts about whether she was paid for her performances and whether she had signed a contract, thereby bringing to the forefront issues of consent, agency, and resistance (Lloyd, 2013). Similar issues have been raised in discussions of “freak shows” where historical accounts and analyses debate whether disabled performers exercised their agency and were remunerated for their work (Clare, 2009). I raise these debates not to justify exploitation

in any form, but to highlight the complexity of notions of agency and consent that are brought up when we think critically about the people involved in structures of oppression. Lloyd (2013) argues that thinking about the agency of the colonized pushes us to “consider whether binaristic, particularly alterist, paradigms concerning relations between ruler and ruled need reconsidering” (p. 226). Put differently, when considered in the abstract, the example of human zoos provides us with an undeniable and inexcusable manifestation of exploitative practices; however, our understanding of exploitation is challenged to go deeper when we pause to hear the accounts of those involved in this history through a lens of agency and consent. Doing so is a step in the direction of challenging disempowering discourses that render people as victims or pawns in the oppression they are experiencing, not allowing us to see acts of agency and resistance. Two contemporary activist art examples, that are somewhat more subtle, serve to illustrate this complexity of consent and agency but also issues of appropriation.

The phenomenon of human zoos has inspired the work of contemporary artists who have sought to highlight similar issues of oppression. “La Familia Obrera” (“The Worker’s Family” or “The Working Class Family”) by Argentinean artist Oscar Bony in 1968 sought to highlight issues of class division, and labour relations (Bishop, 2012; also see <http://www.moma.org/collection/works/187729?locale=en> for an image from the exhibition). The artist paid a worker’s family composed of the male worker, his wife, and child to sit on a pedestal on display in a gallery setting during the opening hours. Considering that the wages Bony paid the worker for this performance were twice the wages he made as a die-caster, the performance was used by the artist to highlight social relations of power along class lines. Moreover, having the worker and his family on display further highlighted relations of power between performer and spectator pushing both to engage on a subtle level in reproducing social divisions at a symbolic level (Bishop, 2012).

Bony was aware of the tensions inherent in his work and indeed commented that it was obvious to him that “the work was based on ethics, for exposing them [the worker’s family] to ridicule made me uncomfortable” (cited in Bishop, 2012, p. 117). In this example, we can see the tension between paying consenting performers to enact oppressive relations and the role of the artist who orchestrates this display. From a critical social work perspective, we might wonder if it matters that the worker and his family were compensated well for their performance in order to “showcase” class oppression and unjust labour relations. We might also consider the subject position of the artist in relation to the work and whether his staging of this performance amounts to appropriation of the worker’s experiences of oppression. We might also consider the question of agency and how we would want to come to terms with the tension inherent in the exploitative act of displaying

someone as an exhibit; an act that harkens back to the phenomenon of human zoos while attempting to highlight relations of power. Indeed, the success of this performance in achieving its goal of highlighting oppressive social relations could have been a contributing factor in the show being shut down for being “subversive.” The 1968 performance was part of a group exhibit by artists seeking to highlight political relations of power and when one artist (Roberto Plate) was targeted for censoring by the authorities, the other artists including Bony pulled out of the show (Bishop, 2012).

A more recent example that also ended in the show being terminated due to protest is Brett Bailey’s “The Exhibit Series” (2010-2014) that also highlights for us issues of consent, agency, and appropriation (Krueger, 2013; for some of the exhibition images see <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2736721/Art-exhibition-London-gallery-branded-racist-using-black-actors-dressed-slaves.html>). Through various living tableaux, the artist puts on display paid performers enacting forms of exploitation ranging from historical manifestations of slavery to current day refugee detention centres. The work was charged with racism and protests led to it being cancelled when it opened in London in 2014, one day after its opening (Muir, 2014). In speaking about his work, the artist argues that: “Exhibit B has been lauded by white, black and brown audiences and critics for the powerful stance it takes against racism, the dehumanisation and objectification of black people, and the sanitisation of the brutalities of European colonialism” (Bailey, 2014, para 5). In fact, the artist sought to highlight the continuities of relations of power engendered through colonialism by presenting the historical context of contemporary forms of racism and neocolonialism. Part of the backlash the show received centred on the exploitation of the performers who as a response issued a public statement denouncing the petition to shut the exhibition down and asserting their agency as performers and as people:

This petition assumes we can’t think for ourselves. None of us have been forced to do this, and all of us can leave at any time. No one brainwashed us into taking part, and the more we do, the more proud we become of our performances. (Nuuyoma, cited in “Exhibit B,” 2014, para 11)

How are we to understand this work from our critical social work ethics vantage point? On the one hand, we understand the exploitative nature of putting people on display, but we also hold dear the notion of agency and supporting the rights of people to self-determination. The performers quite clearly indicated they did not wish to be “victimized” or portrayed as powerless by the protesters; while the protesters highlighted the racist nature of the performance. Again, the tension between the role of the artist who directs an artistic performance meant to enlighten about issues of oppression and colonialism is sharply contrasted with issues of ethics

not only in reproducing exploitation but also in how the participants are silenced and denied agency.

I have presented this example in class and only reveal at the end that the artist is a white South African, at which point student reaction highlights the importance of context and history in shaping how we understand appropriation, representation, and ethics when attempting to illustrate issues of oppression. Interestingly, while students are able to contend with the political ramifications and symbolic nature of the project in terms of racism, colonialism, and the operation of whiteness, they seem to shy away from grappling with issues of agency and consent. When I ask (repeatedly) if it matters that the performers agreed to be part of the exhibit and I bring their public statement to the attention of students, they typically divert my questionings to a familiar territory about how a white artist (and from a context with South Africa's history of race relations) should not take on representation of issues of racism. Their reflections in this regard are important as they speak to the notion and practice of "speaking for the other" (Alcoff, 1991) that I encourage my students to challenge and question. However, I also wish them to move deeper from reflection to a more complex critical reflexivity that makes room for discomfort and uncertainty (Trevelyan, Crath, & Chambon, 2014) about how they might simultaneously resist and accept holding together notions of exploitation, appropriation, consent, and agency.

A final example is the 2012 "Living in 10 Easy Lessons" by Canadian artists Linda Duvall and Peter Kingstone (see [https://gallery44.org/sites/default/files/attachments/exhibitions /%5Btitle%5D/living_in_10_easy_lessons_pdf.pdf](https://gallery44.org/sites/default/files/attachments/exhibitions/%5Btitle%5D/living_in_10_easy_lessons_pdf.pdf) for images and description of the project). Unlike the other examples presented so far, this work does not attempt to reproduce the trope of human zoos but also highlights for us issues of consent, agency, and appropriation. Admittedly, my own reaction to seeing the work firsthand brought up feelings that reminded me of my reactions to human zoos, as I felt the participants in this artwork were put on display. The work consists of recorded interviews and posters of street-involved cis and trans women. The concept behind the work is that each one of the women would teach the artists a skill essential for her survival on the street; these lessons were recorded into short videos and key phrases were made into posters illustrating the artists in conversation with the participants; an instructional booklet was also created.

During a joint artist/social work panel discussion on the artwork, the artists explained that one of their central aims was to revalue the skills these women possessed. However, reaction at the panel evolved into questions of ethics that sharply divided the room. Participants who included artists, community workers, street workers, curators, as well as social work academics debated issues of consent and agency. Workers practising with street-involved women noted how some of the content of the interviews revealed potentially incriminating information as well as

confidential details that could jeopardize the safety of the women involved, especially since the posters were hung throughout the community at locations where street-involved women lived. For example, some of the women shared their business skills dealing drugs or shared safety tips on how to deal with potentially violent “johns.”

One of the contentious responses from the artists was that women consented to being part of the project and they knew how the material from the interviews would be used (the issue of consent is again brought up as a set of unanswered questions in an essay about the exhibition: see Turions, 2012). Other artists and curators in the room discussed how art pushes boundaries and unsettles audiences; and functions at a symbolic level, and as such should not have to contend with issues of ethics, lest we trample artistic freedom. However, adding complexity to this view, Helguera (2011) an artist educator involved in socially engaged art, discusses how while working towards social change, art could adopt confrontational tactics that could unsettle audiences, but this is done typically with the aim of starting a dialogue or opening up a space to discuss difficult issues. Far from disengagement with ethics, the author argues for the need to consider how our work impacts communities and our relationships with them.

Hence, in the case of this project with street-involved women, as social workers, we would want to explore issues beyond consent, to ask what the purpose of the project was and in what type of dialogue it aimed to engage audiences. We might also consider what happened after the project was terminated; for example, if women were provided with follow up supports to deal with any potential fallout from their involvement in the project. While it is important to bear in mind that art functions at a symbolic level, projects that engage communities, marginalized and otherwise, need to consider impacts that cannot be mitigated with participants signing a release form. Moreover, as highlighted by several participants at the panel presentation, displaying the experiences of street-involved women in this almost mundane way acts to normalize, not challenge experiences of oppression. This project highlights not only the tensions inherent in what we reveal through art but also what we render invisible through processes of normalization, a topic I turn to next.

What We Conceal: Myth and Normativity

So far, the discussion has provided examples of projects where ethical issues of consent, agency, and representation are highlighted in what artists choose to show through performance or images. A more subtle set of ethical issues arises when we consider what artworks conceal. Here, I am reminded of Barthes' (1982) idea of myth not as a story, but as a type of speech that conveys discourse. Myth advances discourses that naturalize dominant social norms and ideologies (Penn, 2000). In this sense, we can

develop this idea to propose that artwork (and many of Barthes's examples revolve around photography) can be used to present a myth as a "natural" reality as opposed to a normatively constructed set of social values and ideologies perpetuated through discourse to serve political ends. Within a critical conception of social work, reinforcing normativity is problematic as it contributes to maintaining marginalization and exclusion. Hence, it is important to consider when our involvement in artworks seeking to highlight community issues and social change as consistent with our ethical principles has an opposite effect of reinforcing oppression.

An illustrative example of myth can be seen in international development organizations' works about disability issues and specifically inclusion where we can see normativity being reproduced. Indeed, Vehmas and Watson (2016, p. 2) argue that discussions of normativity applied to disability need to be seen through a lens of ethics and that:

...disability both as a phenomenon and as a concept is in its essence normative; it expresses normative ideas and assumptions concerning what kinds of capacities or possibilities people should have or be afforded in order to lead a good life, and/or how society ought to be organised in order to treat its members equally and fairly.

As an example, Dingo (2007) critiques the reproduction of normativity in videos produced by the World Bank in support of the inclusion of people with disabilities in employment or education and that seek to highlight the World Bank's contributions to such programs. Similar critiques can be levelled against some of the understandings of inclusion portrayed in videos by United Nations' agencies. One such video follows a young woman with Down Syndrome in Lebanon in the format of a "day in the life of" short documentary (see https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_2ZEwhh9WQ&feature=youtu.be). The young woman, Mia, is shown participating in art classes, exercise groups, and generally speaking in English about her experiences at school.

On the surface, one would wish to commend the World Health Organization for highlighting the story of this young woman and for seeking to tackle issues of exclusion and inclusion. Having worked with grassroots disability organizations, I know that one of the greatest challenges is shining the light on disability issues and fighting the battle for inclusion, as institutionalization is still the norm in many countries. Moreover, any critiques that follow are obviously not about Mia herself. However, it is important to note that implicit in such portrayals of people with disabilities being included in "normal" day-to-day activities is the assumption that all people with disabilities need to be able to participate in society is the right set of skills and resources. Absent is a recognition of ableist structures that perpetuate exclusion or more profoundly a critique of capitalism that measures worth through narrow definitions

of productivity and contributions to society; or indeed a postcolonial critique of how at the centre of the video is a young woman who speaks English (in an Arabic-speaking country) and can afford the resources shown in the video.

Moreover, such portrayals also do not take into account that in fact people's impairments also create barriers for inclusion within normative understandings of what it means to be part of society. In an effort to move away from medical models of disabilities, the adoption of social model theories have decentred the body as a site of analysis and understanding of experiences of disability (Garland-Thomson, 2005; Vehmas & Watson, 2016). Indeed, critiques of social model theories of disability allow us to see how the body and embodied experiences are eschewed from the analysis in an effort to locate barriers in societal structures:

Fatigue, the gradual loss of muscular functioning, loss of memory, sight or hearing are central to the experience of impairment effects to many disabled people, and to ignore these experiences would be one way to produce skewed accounts of disability that fail to do justice to disabled people's experiences. (Vehmas & Watson, 2016, p. 13-14)

Another example of an advocacy campaign using photography highlights impairment but also contributes to mythmaking. During the Sochi Special Olympics in 2014, the Canadian Paralympic Committee created a visual documentary-style public awareness campaign highlighting several disabled athletes (see http://cdnparalympics.photoshelter.com/gallery/WHATSTHERE-print-ads-annonces-imprimees-CEQUIESTLA/G0000n8g3koJ_D5c/ for the posters). Each campaign poster featured the slogan: "It's not what's missing, it's what's there." Unwittingly, the text and images make specific impairments visible while also working to negate their impacts. Even more telling is the French-language slogan: "Ce qui manque n'a aucune importance" ("What is missing has no importance").

From a social work perspective, we need to examine not only what we are shown through these images (after all, what's wrong with celebrating people's strengths?), but also what is concealed. In their study of media images of disability sports, Hardin and Hardin (2005) argue that photographs operate with a guise of objectivity and are powerful means of cultural communication conveying as much ideology as text, and as such merit critical study. Embedded under the veneer of these images of strength and the call to focus on "what's there" in the Sochi Olympics posters are discourses of normativity that work to "neutralize" or conceal the effects of impairment. They do so through taking the emphasis away from what the impairment prevents an athlete from doing. As critical disability scholars argue, such discourses reinforce understandings of disability as being the opposite of disability (Vehmas & Watson, 2014; Withers, 2012). Put differently, the images and text

work to emphasize that in order to “perform,” a person with a disability needs to overcome impairment: the impairment bears “no importance.” Adding to this embedded assumption, is the notion that somehow by overcoming impairments, these athletes provide us with an example of what a “supercrip” would look like and how they would perform (Clare, 2009). Indeed, a previous campaign by the same organization featured athletes with the tagline “superathletes” (an active link for this campaign is no longer available online so it is only mentioned here briefly).

In short, whether working with photographic images, video, or performance, arts-inspired responses to social issues need to be seen through a lens of ethics. I have invited us so far to consider how we might examine and understand these works as critical social workers. I have proposed that when we engage with art as social workers, we need to heed ethical issues and tensions that may arise and that we need to act according to our professional responsibilities. In what follows, I take some of these ideas and see how they can be applied in practice through ethical principles.

Engaging with the Arts Through the Lens of Ethics: Some Suggested Principles

Concluding the discussion presented so far in this paper, I would like to suggest three principles I believe would help guide our engagement with the creative arts in our practice. These suggested principles draw metaphorically on my work as a photographer to frame the issues at hand: enlarging our scope of vision; seeing what is in the frame and what’s missing; and considering what happens after we have turned our lens away.

I am fond of close-up shots that block out what I feel are extraneous elements from the frame. While this may work as a photographic technique to draw attention to the essence of a subject matter, if we limit our scope of vision when we engage in social work practice through the arts, we risk missing an important element of the picture. As noted through several examples in this paper, seeing issues of consent and agency through a narrow scope does not allow us to consider factors that may have shaped these issues. What brings a participant to our project and what keeps them involved? How are issues of participation shaped by subjectivity? Reflecting on these questions allows us to move beyond simplistic notions of agency to a deeper consideration of how we are implicated in the work we are undertaking in relation to the participants in our projects.

Stepping back from the close-up and enlarging our scope of vision also allows us to see what’s in the frame and what’s missing. This is the act of seeing what’s not visible which could differentiate between projects that reproduce normativity and those that seek to challenge and disrupt

it. As proposed throughout this paper, what we show and what we hide are equally as important to consider if we wish to engage ethically in arts-inspired social work practice. I have been in situations in international development work where I was asked to photograph children who look sad and omit from the frame children playing. This exclusion from the frame is rife with the potential to reproduce neo-colonial practices that reinforce the “Northern saviour complex.” When I am faced with such situations, I reflect upon questions such as: who does our project involve and who is excluded? How are the people or communities included being represented? A deeper question also considers why we have chosen to exclude or include specific participants, which requires us to consider our own subject positions, ideas, values, and assumptions about practice.

Finally, unlike work that is created with no consideration of what happens after we have packed up our gear and gone home, engaging ethically in arts-inspired social work practice requires us to consider the impacts of our work beyond the relatively immediate time frame of our practice. Put differently, what happens after our project or practice has wrapped up is as important as what has transpired during our practice. This principle requires a commitment on our part to be responsible for any potential repercussions of our work with people and communities. I usually have participants sign a release form for photo work I undertake, which permits me to share the products of our work together in various venues. However, if I have the opportunity to show the work elsewhere than where it was originally intended to be shown, I ask for permission again even though the release form covers this eventuality. This may seem cumbersome and unnecessary but is consistent with questions I ask myself: how will this person feel if they come across representations of themselves in places they did not expect? What is the impact of involvement in this arts-inspired project on the person’s relationships to others in the community? How is our relationship to others in the community impacted by this project? The latter question allows us to move to a vision of ourselves as deeply implicated in the work we do on multiple levels and beyond the immediacy of our interventions, which is consistent with a value-based (as opposed to a technocratic) approach to our profession.

When I teach about the intersections of art and social work, students typically enter the discussion believing that the introduction of the creative arts allows them a certain degree of freedom in terms of how they can express themselves in relation to issues of oppression. As noted in the scholarship, this is certainly true in the sense that students are afforded the possibility of expressing deeper or more nuanced parts of themselves and their ideas than they are able to do through text alone (Desyllas & Sinclair, 2014). However, as argued in this paper, the missing element in this discussion has been how to temper this newfound sense of freedom from constraints with ethical responsibilities. This is not to

say that students and social work practitioners discount the importance of ethics in their arts-inspired responses, but rather that they have not necessarily been systematically and consistently invited to take part in this conversation in a critically reflexive manner that implicates them. My hope in writing this piece is to encourage us as social workers, educators, and lifelong learners to grapple with issues of ethics to further enrich our engagement with the arts, as we continue to rely on creative methods in our classrooms and practice settings.

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