

Virtual Reality Art As a Pathway to Social Justice and Humanity

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The pedagogy of the oppressed is

“the pedagogy of people engaged in the fight for their own liberation.”¹

Seldom do we arrive at an opportunity to create a project that has personal, social, political, and academic value. However, when the occasion does arise, it can have significant transformative potential. Applied ethics and art activism are both pathways that can foster such occasions, and are thus threats to the status-quo, conformity, and systems of power.

A little over 10 years ago, at age 14, she was accused of committing a sexual offense against a younger family member. Thankfully, her lawyer was able to make a deal with the prosecution to only charge her with battery. It wasn't until recently that she realized how fortunate this was. As her lawyer put it, “once an accusation of a sexual offense is made, that person's life is over, before a single question is asked.” If she had been charged with a sexual offense, she would have immediately become a lifelong registered Tier III sex offender, which is the worst level of sex offender with the harshest punishments. She would have been considered Tier III, solely based upon the fact that the alleged victim was younger than 12. Incidentally, if she'd been about 9 months younger, nothing would have happened at all. The courts by law must take action when the accused is 14 years or older.

She was “strongly encouraged” to take a plea deal instead of pleading not guilty and having a trial. Her lawyer assured her that no jury would side with someone accused of a sexual offense. Taking the plea was the only chance she'd have at eventually getting my record expunged. (Sex offenses are the only criminal act that juveniles cannot have removed from their record.) So,

¹ Freire, pp. 53

she pled guilty. And even though the charges were for battery, the punishment was designed for a sex offender. She had to fulfill community service. She was required to attend weekly “counseling” sessions for six months, where she memorized the Sexual Assault Cycle and completed daily logs charting any and all sexual thoughts or actions (i.e. sexual fantasies, masturbation). She was required to complete and pass a polygraph (lie detector) examination at the end of her counseling. These polygraph tests are federally required of all convicted sex offenders to determine if there are any undisclosed victims or persistent illegal behavior. Additionally, she was not allowed to be unsupervised while using the computer or around kids two or more years younger than herself. She had to ask permission anytime she wished to leave the county, and her school was notified “for security reasons.” Also, she could not receive a single mark on my record for the following 4 years if she wished to have my record expunged, so she didn’t learn how to drive until she was 18, and never attended parties or after-school activities.

She was treated like a disgusting, disgraceful, shameful being, so she inevitably began to see herself this way. The shame and fear still run so deep within her family that few know of these circumstances. However, throughout it all, she was convinced deep down that she still deserved a basic level of human respect and dignity. As the years progressed, she became convinced of this for all humans. Social and environmental injustices seem to plague our planet, and to her, a lack of basic humanity and respect seemed to be at the core of it all.

She went on a long journey to find self-love and worth, but confusion and alienation persisted. Eventually I learned that she wasn’t alone, and that in fact, the age with the highest number of cases of sexual offenses in the country is age 14. Patterns and trends of injustice are linked to greater structural forces that must be addressed for change to be possible. These realizations

led me down a path of philosophical and theoretical examination of topics including development, colonization, imperialism, structural and institutional oppression, domination and power, the criminal justice system, identity, and human capabilities. While all vast and complex topics, they are interrelated as processes of dehumanization that perpetuate injustice.

Art became an essential way for me to explore, expose, and express these complex and difficult but vastly important subjects. Studying other artists and art activists provided insight into the social changes that have been made possible through art, as well as the gaps that remain. Experimenting with a variety of different mediums not only helped me grasp these subjects and experiences, but also gave me the opportunity to see what mediums were affective for fighting injustice, and in what ways. Eventually I was exposed to an art program within virtual reality technology that allows me to draw and animate my ideas, and then turn them into a fully immersive viewer experiences. This creative avenue has the potential to reach a wide range of audiences, as well as allow people to “walk in her shoes” unlike any medium has ever provided before. The culmination of personal experiences, and academic, and artistic pursuits, arrives at a completely unique project that has the potential to expose, explore, ignite, and break silence, and arrive at deeper levels of empathy and basic humanity.

While I had no intention of using my academic career in Applied Ethics for these explorations and transformation, this is what has evolved (philosophy and art often demand this of us). I found my work truly applying in my life and to the lives of those around me, allowing for the new and profound opportunity to apply my work within the world. I have been able to explore and perhaps expose injustices that most in our society refuse to address. My project’s intent is the break silence and create space for dialogue. It also works to reveal the desperate need for basic

unconditional respect and dignity for all individuals, in order to achieve a truer level of social justice.

ABSTRACT

This paper contains a review of the literature that inspired and informed my final Master's art project for Applied Ethics, as well as an explanation and analysis of the art project itself. The review of literature begins with a lens into modern development, and how a history of colonization and exploitation to support development have led to modern systems of oppression and dehumanization. To explain these ideas, the literature then explores concepts of colonization through education, as well as the connection between oppression and the material values of development. Concepts of oppression and dehumanization are analyzed to understand oppressor and oppressed, and ideas of humanity are explained to make sense of what it means to dehumanize. The Culture of Silence is presented as an explanation for reenforced societal conformity, and creativity presented as an avenue for breaking silence and opening spaces for change. An analysis is also provided regarding the work of artists and art activists that challenge norms and form critical new spaces, as well as an example of how sex offenders within the prison system is still a gap in activism and art activism. Throughout the literature review, I use the criminal justice system, and in particular sex offenders, as an example of a system of structural oppression and dehumanization. This example demonstrates the connection between oppression and material values, and modern society's perpetual dehumanization of the body and mind of those portrayed as "criminal". The literature review ends with an analysis of the project born from these ideas, and its mission to create space for transformation toward a greater level of social justice.

INTRODUCTION

Artists and art activists are often the ones to first explore and expose complex and undressed topics within our society and cultures. Art, in its many forms, has the power to break silence, engage audiences, as well as ignite questions, critical dialogue, and action². There is a wide spectrum of art activism movements in the United States today that address environmental and social concerns and potential injustices. A specific area that artists and art activists have targeted in recent decades is the U.S. prison system, or what activists have named the Prison Industrial Complex (PIC). The system received this umbrella term by activists in order to encompass an interconnected array of exploitative and oppressive relationships among corporations, media, the government, and correctional facilities and operations (5). Activists have been trying to raise awareness about the Complex, and its link to the United States as the nation the largest rate of incarceration in the world (4). The U.S. is 5% of the world's population, and yet holds 25% of the world's prisoners (5). This means that 1 out of ever 4 people in the world are incarcerated, and within the U.S. (7). The PIC has been expanding, along with rates of incarceration. In 1972, 300,000 people were incarcerated, while present day there are over 2.3 million. This is a point of contention for activists, since crime rates have been falling since the 1990s, and yet the number of incarcerated continues to increase (5). Many argue that this is due to the increasing privatization of prisons by for-profit corporations, which has been increasing since the 1980s under President Reagan (7). The more bodies in prison, the more money made. The incarcerated are treated as less-than human disposable objects, and are at the mercy of corporate gain under the veil of 'justice.'

² Essential steps to Freire's concept of liberation and transformation.

Artists such as Laurie Jo Reynolds, Nigel Poor, Lorenzo Triburgo, Andrew Burton, Bruce Jackson, Isadora Kosofsky, and many more are working to expose the injustice, inhumanity, and monetarily driven system, most of which is hidden behind the barbed wire and doors, away from public view (25). Many of these artists and art activists use photography as a medium to expose aspects of life behind bars, as well as to capture the forgotten and neglected humanity of the prisoners through portraits. These photographs are often accompanied by brief contextual explanations or narratives behind the faces. However, artists like Laurie Jo Reynolds and Nigel Poor take their art further, using multiple mediums to assist their activist missions against the Illinois Tamms “supermax” prison and San Quentin prison, representatively. Despite recent artist and art activist efforts to break silence and expose the hidden truths surrounding the Prison Industrial Complex and incarceration as a whole, there are still subjects within the system that even artists do not, or will not address. One of these avoided topics is of accused sex offenders within the PIC. Without artist and art activist engagement on the subject, it is also been left highly undressed by society as a whole (29).

The avoidance of the topic of sex offenders is understandable. A sexual offense is culturally accepted as a horrendous act, and a severe violation of bodily integrity. A sexual offense can lead to lifelong trauma, pain, and destruction of identity. Also, as a whole, sex is a particularly taboo topic in our society. Sex education is limited in public schools, trending toward abstinence only and selective or biased information distribution. To complicate matters more, in the U.S. about 1 in every 3 women are predicted to experience forms of sexual assault and harassment in their lifetime. This can make the subject difficult and uncomfortable for most people, for both cultural and deeply personal reasons.

In making the following arguments and claims, I am in no way condoning or diminishing such behavior. I wish also not to distract from the necessity for action to prevent, overcome, and recover from such acts. Additionally, I will not go into detail about what these acts may constitute, as it is not relevant to the following discussion.

However, I will argue that

1. Our society and culture may perpetuate some crimes through silence and shame (and a commercial over sexualization, and false portrayal of sexual behavior).
2. No human should be subjected to “less-than human” treatment, no matter the act/crime.
3. Our modern institutions are dehumanizing and oppressive, due to being built upon a foundation of colonization, exploitation, oppression, and monetary/material ideology.
4. Due to our historical past, adopting a mentality of colonization, domination, power, and exploitation, those who fall outside of the dominant culture, such as criminals, are given a less-than human status and are treated as such.
5. Justice cannot exist within our current societal structure. As long as we dehumanize others, we dehumanize ourselves. As long as we treat ourselves as less-than-human, justice cannot exist, (oppressor - oppressed/dehumanization paradox).
6. Art, other creative means, can be used to break the silence of this/these forbidden subject(s), through the abstracted level of exploration, exposure, and engagement.

I understand the brevity of this subject on an intellectual and emotional level. Because of this, I believe I also have the ability to approach and discuss these topics in ways many who have been affected cannot, or will not. This is a topic that should not be avoided by artists and activists working against the PIC, mass incarceration, and dehumanizing treatment within these institu-

tions. Nor should this be avoided by our society and politics if we wish to achieve a state of true justice and humanity. Due to the socially “untouchable” nature of this topic, but it’s relevance to modern institutional oppression, injustice, colonization and dehumanization, I use art’s capacity for exploration and exposure to break silence and create space for dialogue and transformation.

DEVELOPMENT

To unravel these complex topics, it is important to understand how we arrived at our modern society, culture, and institutions. To do this, I will briefly outline Western development and modernization through material growth and values. While simplified, this review of literature on development will touch on essential topics of exploitation and colonization, which allowed for the Industrial Revolution and the modern concept of development. Trends of development were made possible through processes of colonization and exploitation, which have shaped and entrenched understandings and consciousness of how development is achieved, and that development is “*the way*”. Oppression, through the exploitation of natural and social resources and labor, imperialism, and colonization are at the very foundation of which our modern society was built, and made possible (37).

Several hundred years ago, the “West” began to explore and colonize new lands, giving way to new environmental and human resources, giving birth to our modern conception of development. Much of our modern thinking on development, and categorization of the world based on means of development, came from a shift in religion and science as Western exploration and colonization dominated the 1400-1900s (33). As explorers “discovered” new lands and peoples, there was a need to explain and categorize the unexpected differences encountered. God’s

will became a way to interpret and order society and human life, separating the ‘righteous’ and ‘saved’ from the ‘barbaric’ and of those ‘needing saving’ (33). In this way, religion was able to maintain its power as scientific reasoning picked up speed during that time. Western science and religion shared the vision of societies advancing consistently ‘up’, away from poverty, ignorance, and barbarism, to riches, democracy, rationality, and civilization, creating a justification for exploitation, colonization, and widespread oppression of nature and peoples based on God’s will and the pursuit of science. This was a movement from ‘badness to goodness, mindlessness to knowledge,’ which is where the idea of progress began to penetrate all strata of Western society, becoming “popular common sense” (33). Science in particular became a way to reform and explain the human world through knowledge and objectivity, as a means of orientation in the world that became more complex through the discoveries and colonization of new worlds. This form of society became widespread and accepted consciousness, and has since informed much of our modern Western schools of thought and ideologies.

As the Industrial Revolution set in, human happiness became oriented around the production and consumption of material goods, most of the resources for these goods coming from the colonized countries. The idea of progress was born out of this process of colonialism, urbanization, and then the Industrial Revolution, because the natural resource and human labor from colonization and exploitation allowed for inexpensive development by Western powers (33). The Industrial Revolution was the key point of development that still defines what develop and progress looks like today. A sense of ‘divine entitlement’ over resources and labor, fueled by shifts in religion and science, propelled progress and development. The ‘advanced’ people of the ‘developed’ world guiding the way of those in less advanced societies, measured by the standard

set by the dominant West, controlling the resources of the world. The idea of progress became an ideology of its own, and part of the collective cognition of dominant Western society (33). This created a deep-rooted ideology of superiority *over* the Other, those who fall out of or fail to conform to the dominant narrative of the West.

WWII indicated another important reinforcement of these ideals of conformity (suppressing creativity), and adherence to the material consumer lifestyle. At the end of WWII, in 1944, the Bretton Woods conference was held with a goal of establishing a means of rebuilding Europe, and preventing future war and conflict (28). A strong market economy, by creating a free flowing and stable international trading environment, was determined as the ultimate solution.

The Marshall Plan was enacted to reestablish capitalism and promote reconstruction in Western Europe. This was the inaugurate growth phase which would set into effect the creation of programs throughout the late 1940s, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which would later become the World Trade Organization (WTO). Initially the primary goal of the institutes was the reconstruction of Europe after the war. However, all of these institutes are still in effect today and have contributed greatly to spreading and regulating ideals of development and capitalism around the world. The mission of the organizations and ideals established out of Bretton Woods were aimed to diffuse ideas of a material, consumer lifestyle throughout the world, to sustain the free market global economy (27).

The modern Neoclassical economic model is formed from ideas taken from Adam Smith, David Ricardo, and Thomas Malthus about the free market system and individual liberty to achieve economic success (28). The belief is that in the pursuit of individual material self-inter-

est, society as a whole will benefit. In this, the State/government's role is to defend national sovereignty, protect citizen's rights, and provide the public and collective goods that the free market cannot provide. In other words, the State's roles are to fill in the gaps that the free market is not designed to fill. Other than this, the goal is for the market to be completely self-regulating, which is what Adam Smith famously termed the "invisible hand" (28).

Serge Latouche argues that the trickle-down effect is actually a "euphoria of mythos of modernity," promising the false hope of development as the key to human success and happiness. It is "through the creation of psychological tensions and frustrations that economic growth claims to satisfy the basic needs of humanity" (13). In other words, development, and the modern conception of progress through production and consumption, is a need and a myth that was crafted. As people are put to work to produce more goods to maintain economic growth, new needs are produced in order to justify consumption, perpetuating the cycle.

A shift in social consciousness was necessary to establish material consumption and conformity through colonization as 'common-sense' and 'natural' (27). The first principle of this process established economics as more important than politics, that capitalism is more stable than politics, and that economics is an even more natural and self-regulating state for society the democracy. The second principle established the market system as an idol, so that the social consciousness would accept the "invisible hand" as the corrector of system influxes, that competition stimulates business for permanent and beneficial modernization and progress, and that the globalization of material production and international free exchange benefits development, and that deregulation, privatization and liberalization are best for the economy and thus society as a whole (27).

Arturo Escobar names this movement of the 1940s and 50s the development discourse, where industrialization and urbanization became accepted as inevitable and necessary for societal success. Material advancement became socially acknowledged as a clear way to lead social, cultural, and political progress. Capital investment became the discourse of economic growth and development, penetrating all strata of society as true and commonsense. Arturo Escobar argues that the ideologies and discourse of development exclude people, where social life is seen as a technical problem. Stating that it's a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach, which treats people and cultures as statistical figures to "be moved up and down in the charts of 'progress' (8)

EDUCATION AS COLONIZATION

Paulo Freire contends that due to the multi-generational nature of the oppressor lifestyle, being taught generation after generation, many oppressors are not even aware of their oppressive behavior. The "banking education concept", as Freire calls it, demands conformity and maintains a perpetual cycle of material reliance (37). This education model ensures a deep-rooted self-perpetuated model of consumption, to maintain the ideal market economy.

This concept of the banking education model resembles the oppressor-oppressed model I'll review later, which perpetuates the system by teaching our society's youth of consumer ideas and their place within the system. Here, he argues that the teacher is treated as the all-knowing (oppressor), who fills the un-knowlegeable students with information. The students who are "filled" more meekly, are most successful in society because they are accepted to the standards of conformity. The students who are not as meek, are often labeled as "trouble causers" or "lazy"

or “disobedient,” and are disciplined or outcast. This system of conformity is argued as being necessarily repressive to creativity, oppressive in nature, and important for maintaining material and market or consumer ideals (37).

Western school system has a monopoly on formal education, which is deeply rooted in the world market. Pupils are taught to specialize in skills that are marketable in the producer-consumer global economy, creating a system of standardization and conformity focused on the end marketability of the obtained skills and knowledge (12). Ignacio Ramonet argues that conformity, or the ‘one and only way of thinking,’ is penetrated through all aspects of society for sustained authority of the status-quo. constant repetition through media and education have enforced *the* one way of thinking, stifling all attempts at free thinking. creativity must be stifled and conformity at all strata of society enforced (27).

The steps to conforming to a set criteria of what society ought to be around the world, is a form of modern colonialism. Ashis Nandy argues that modern colonialism explains a “world-view which believes in the absolute superiority of the human over non-human, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical, and the modern or progressive over the traditional or the savage” (19). A deeply rooted and long evolved colonial consciousness in the West makes colonialism as a state of mind a norm, even natural. This mindset, which came into full force around the Industrial Revolution and the colonization of lands for resources, establishes in the mindset that there are the colonizers (the dominant and “superior”, and the colonized (the “inferior”, “less-than-human”). It also is built on a structural need to make economic and political profits at the center of society and as the measure of success, and all those who do not contribute to the market system as Others and outsiders, vulnerable to exploitation

and marginalization. These systems are still perpetuated today through systems of oppression and dominance, and from the continuation of colonialism not being seen as an absolute evil, because it provides improved material lifestyles for the dominant (19).

SEX EDUCATION

The United State's education system exhibits many facets of Freire's banking education concept. Sexual education in public schools around the country is one particular area that should be examined due to its relevancy for this literature review and discussion.

The type and level of sex education in public schools is decided on a State level, rather than Federally. Less than half of the States in the country require comprehensive sex education, while more than half promote abstinence-only. Comprehensive programs teach that "sexuality is a natural, normal, healthy part of life" and include "accurate, factual information on abortion, masturbation, and sexual orientation" (31). They also discuss contraception, condoms, pregnancy, and overall relationships, sexual health, and human development. Abstinence-only programs teach that "sexuality outside of marriage will have harmful social, psychological, and physical consequences," and that abstinence is the only acceptable behavior. "Contraception is generally discussed in terms of failure rates and STIs are discussed as being the inevitable result of pre-marital sexual behavior" (31).

Sex, sexuality, sexual conduct etc are highly avoided topics in our society. While sex and sexuality is portrayed, and often glorified through films, televisions shows, and advertisements, open dialogue about sex is taboo, even shameful. While public schools are required to have some form of sex education for their students, the approach is left open to the state's discretion. This

leads conservative states to promoting a more conservative and limited sex education, while progressive states promote more progressive liberal sex education standards. However, since sex is a culturally taboo topic, even the most progressive states still have limit discussions, centered around statistics and pregnancy and disease prevention above emotional and psychological attributes. This may be due to our nation's Puritan roots, and the continued widespread religious values of today.

Whatever the reasons may be, silence and shame about the topic of sex (unless through media portrayals) are deeply rooted in our society and perpetuated through the education of our youth. While these are overly simplified thoughts that deserve further consideration and analysis, I will not directly address them again in this paper. However, I have briefly mentioned sex education and cultural taboos here, due to their importance and relevance. These considerations can provide insight as to why sex and sexual offenses/offenders are unapproachable topics to most people, including artists and activists, as well as why this is a perpetual, currently unsolvable problem within our society. It also raises potential insights into why sex related crimes and sex offenders are treated as they are, as well as points to concerning questions about potential correlations between levels of sexual education and rates of sex related crimes.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

Now the literature is going to examine a specific example of material power, domination, oppression, and dehumanization through the criminal justice system, the treatment of criminals in general, and the specific treatment of convicted sex offenders.

Once incarcerated, people convicted receive the title “criminal” and become culturally categorized as “less-than-human”. Criminals that commit sex related crimes receive an even harsher title for life, “sex offender.” Society believes that they have given up their basic rights as a result of committing the criminal act, which then justifies the system’s treatment of them (collateral civil consequences). Criminals, by law (depending on offense) can be prohibited from carrying or possessing weapons, from driving, voting, and from participating in jury duty. Sentencing can vary, though in past decades sentencing has become much harsher in the United States. Minor drug related offenses (such as possessing marijuana can result in several years in prison. Discrimination upon wealth, race and gender have led to disproportionate numbers of poor, non-white, males in prison. However, numbers of females incarcerated has been increasing as well. Once in prison, those incarcerated experience far harsher conditions and treatment than are visible on paper and set forth by law. Prisoners are frequently subjected to many forms of physical, verbal, and emotional/psychological violence. Prisoners often do not receive the medical treatment needed, resulting in high rates of death (particularly in private prisons) (30).

Once out of prison, dehumanizing treatment from society and the system do not stop. Many prisoners still cannot vote after release from prison, and obtaining work can be difficult (do to social judgements). Sex offenders in particular are forced to adhere to strict rules outside of prison for the remainder of their lives (even though their sentence is over). Sex offenders by law, established from the Adam Walsh Act, are required to be registered on a public sex offender database (16). The database contains information about their identity and address, and can be searched by anyone.³ The Adam Walsh Act says that “any sex offender required to register will,

³ This is a clear example of public shaming of the labeled “offender”, and fear on part of society.

at a minimum, have to provide the registering authority with the following: his or her name, social security number, home, work, and school addresses, as well his or her license plate number and a description of any vehicle the offender owns or operates” (16).

Additionally, the Adam Walsh Act requires all neighbors to be notified by law enforcement when a sex offender moves into the neighborhood.⁴ Because of this, sex offenders can have difficulty finding employment and housing once out of prison.⁵ These statutes apply to juveniles as well, as long as they are 14 years or older, and are convicted of a crime similar or more severe than federal aggravated sexual assault (if the “perpetrator” is younger than 14, the law is not required to press charges). The statute also apply to *any* offense against a victim younger than 12 years of age (16).⁶

Media and society have formed a stereotypical image of a sex offender. To be fair, stereotypes are not always born without reason or cause. However, alarming statistics debunk these stereotypes and give evidence of a larger, systemic issue at play. “In general, the detailed age profile of offenders in sexual assault crimes shows that the single age with the greatest number of offenders from the perspective of law enforcement was age 14” (16). That’s all sex offenders, not just juveniles. This means that the highest number of accused sex offenders are young teenagers, in the middle or just beginning puberty, at the height of curiosity and exploration, without a fully developed brain for distinguishing/determining consequences. A sex offense is also the only criminal act a juvenile can never have expunged from their record (16).

⁴ All states that don’t adhere to such rules, like Idaho, don’t receive federal funds for programs like sex education.

⁵ And often move in large numbers to states like Idaho, that don’t enforce the notification policy.

⁶ If the victim is younger than 12, the offender automatically receives the status of a Tier III offender, which is the worst level of offense possible.

There is no direct link between an increase in punishment and a decrease in crime (30). However, society and institutions react as if harsher punishments did decrease crime. Even if there was evidence of harsh treatment reducing crime, I argue that stripping criminals of their basic humanity and dignity is inhumane and unjust. As Immanuel Kant, Paulo Freire, Martha Nussbaum, and Iris Marion Young argue, without meeting all human's basic capabilities by treating them with basic respect and dignity, they become victims of oppression and dehumanization. Freire argues that those who oppress or dehumanize, in turn oppress and dehumanize themselves. One cannot become truly liberated and fully human if they subject inhumane treatment upon others (whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously). Thus, true justice and humanity within our society cannot be met until all humans' basic capabilities are met and are treated with basic human dignity and respect. This even includes those accused of sexual offenses.

MATERIAL OPPRESSOR

Development has led to the advancement in, and creation of the material society we live in today. Development has provided increased material prosperity and opportunity for many, but also promotes and perpetuates a mentality of conscious and unconscious domination, power, and control over Others (nature and humans). An inexpensive and accessible material lifestyle is good for the market economy. But resources and labor for a material lifestyle must then, also be inexpensive. To ensure this, human and natural resources are exploited.

Consumerism demands that there always be material consumption in order to maintain exponential economic growth, and thus sustain our current societal model and lifestyle.

However, consumerism creates a dependency on the need for non-essential material goods, often without solving essential humanitarian issues at their core (12). Current solutions often act as bandaids, because true change in social and environmental injustices would likely require a change in society, away from materialism. Nancy Fraser argues that distribution “corresponds with economic subordination, rooted in structural features of the economic system” (10).

This brings of two key points: Some must be always oppressed in order to sustain the material lifestyle of some, and all those who do not fit into the dominant narrative become viewed as less-than-human, compared to the dominant group. As Freire argues, material needs are directly correlated to systems of oppression, because they require exploitation, domination over Others, domination, power, etc. Development supports an oppressor-oppressed system, as well as subjects particular humans/groups to forms of oppression including marginalization, exploitation, cultural imperialism, powerlessness, and violence (37).

The Prison Industrial Complex is an example of the material oppressor, and oppression for material gain. As was mentioned in the introduction, the U.S. prison system has undergone increasing corporate privatization for economic success. These prison systems profit from high numbers of incarcerated bodies. So even though the nation’s crime rate is decreasing, incarceration rates are increasing. This is arguably directly related to corporate monetary gain. Once incarcerated, the human body becomes an object for material growth and maintained systems of power (for maintained material growth). To makes this possible, those incarcerated must be seen as in-human objects available for disposal and gain, thus are granted less-than-human statuses and are subjected to dehumanizing treatment by the system and by society.

DEHUMANIZATION & OPPRESSION

Paulo Freire argues that “an act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human...deny the majority their right to be human” (37). Oppression is the act of dehumanizing an individual, or a group of individuals. To dehumanize is to prevent or restrict a person/group from being fully human.

Freire discusses oppression as being an act such injustice or violence that dehumanizes another person or group of persons. Dehumanization is seen as a process of denying or depriving another their full humanity, in other words, treating the “other” as less-than-human. In Freire’s eyes, the oppressor is tied to the material world, which sees exploitative behavior of nature and people for material gain as acceptable and essential for maintain the material lifestyle. Human life is available for purchase and can also be discarded like an object if not adhering to the norms of the dominant culture. Humans, that are justified as being ‘less-than-humans’, are “things” for material gain (37).

Dehumanization is a process of alienation and stolen humanity or identity (37). The dehumanized individuals/groups are not recognized by another individual/group, as being human, or as equals to those of a dominant, more powerful group. An example of how this may occur is through the exploitation of resources and labor. A dominant group/individual often maintains power and control over the “other” through exploitation of resources and labor. These resources are necessary for the dominant group to maintain a state power, and create a material division between groups. The exploited individual/group is treated or seen as ‘less-than-human,’ below or ‘lesser than’ the dominant individual or group. The oppressed begin to internalize their situation

and the opinion the oppressor has of them, and long to be like their oppressor, their model of humanity (37).

The oppressor is often the one who depends on material goods to sustain their lifestyle. This lifestyle relies on the oppression of others to maintain the oppressors material life. Freire argues that “this violence, as a process, is perpetuated from generation to generation of oppressors, who become its heirs and are shaped in its climate. This climate creates in the oppressor a strong possessive consciousness - possessive of the world and of men and women. Apart from direct, concrete, material possessions of the world and of people, the oppressor consciousness could not understand itself - could not even exist. The oppressor consciousness tends to transform everything surrounding it into an object of its domination. The earth, property, production, the creations of people, people themselves, time - everything is reduced to the status of objects at its disposal” (37). In the oppressor way of life, everything is seen as being purchasable, including people, which generates this “materialistic concept of existence.” People, the environment, everything can be used to benefit and sustain the materialistic lifestyle of the oppressor, and without this, the oppressor could not exist. “Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal” (37). For an oppressor to be happy, they must always have more and more, “even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, *to be is to have* and to be the class of the ‘haves’” (37). For the oppressor, *having* is directly connected to their idea of *being*. Even humanity is a “thing” that can be controlled and manipulated for their gain.

“The oppressors do not perceive their monopoly on *having more* as a privilege which dehumanizes others and themselves. They cannot see that, in the egoistic pursuit of *having* as a possessing class, they suffocate in their own possessions and no longer *are*; they

merely *have*. For them, *having more* is an inalienable right, a right they acquired through their own ‘effort,’ with their ‘courage to take risks.’ If others do not have more, it is because they are incompetent and lazy, and worst of all is their unjustifiable ingratitude towards the ‘generous gestures’ of the dominant class. Precisely because they are ‘ungrateful’ and ‘envious,’ the oppressed are regarded as potential enemies who must be watched...If the humanization of the oppressed signifies subversion, so also does their freedom; hence the necessity for constant control” (37).

If the oppressed were liberated, it would disrupt the material lifestyle of the oppressors. Thus, ‘generosity’ from the oppressors to the oppressed cannot be genuine, or it would disrupt the comforts of the oppressors. In order to maintain the status quo, materials/resources must be cheap, which means cheap labor. This requires the exploitation of “others” and natural resources.

As Freire explains, those who oppress are also oppressed, because those who dehumanize, in effect dehumanize themselves. Recognizing that dehumanization exists, means that humanization must also exist, since one cannot exist without the other. For Freire, “[Dehumanization] is thwarted by injustice, exploitation, oppression, and the violence of the oppressors; it is affirmed by the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (37). A person who dehumanizes another, whether conscious of it or not, is prohibiting him/herself from also being fully human. If a person acts against another, they are also acting against themselves.⁷

Oppression is a complex and difficult subject to unravel and maintain a dialogue around. This may be due to the heaviness and discomfort of the subject, and/or the lack of language and

⁷ Footnote: When the dehumanized struggle against their oppression, in order to become fully human, they must not only liberate themselves but also their oppressor, for they too are no longer fully human.

knowledge about the subject. It could also be due to the multi-layered and complex facets of oppression in our society today, which look different than understandings of traditional oppressive structures seen throughout history. Additionally, one clear identifiable definition of oppression is nearly impossible to reach, due to the varying forms and faces oppression and its complicated interweaving nature throughout cultures, social groups, and individuals.

Oppression was often thought of as being a dictator or political power controlling or restricting a group of people (38). Acts of oppression that are commonly thought of are slavery, and the repression of certain racial or gender groups from voting or owning property. As a society we tend to think of the end of a dictatorship, and the end of slavery and property/voting biases, as the end of oppression. Unfortunately, oppression is not this simple. The understanding of the term and concept itself has altered in recent decades due to movements in the 1960s and 70s, that exposed complex systems of oppression deeply rooted into institutions and societal structures (38).

While historical ideas of oppressors involve clear oppressive rulers or governments, modern day oppression is seems different, more complicated, and less obvious. Modern structural and institutional oppression have in part, been formed due to Western history of colonialism, exploitation, and imperialism as the means for modern development. Structural oppression is explained as when the *structure* or foundation of a system, institution, or society is oppressive and restrictive to particular social groups or individuals. The people within the system can be perfectly well-intentioned, and unaware of oppressive behaviors and structures because the institution or society itself is oppressive (38).

Iris Marion Young dives into the meaning of oppression, who is affected, who is complacent, and what the different forms of oppression and oppressed groups can look like. In “Five Faces of Oppression,” Young examines the shift in the concept and understanding of oppression through history, as well as modern day forms of oppression seen through: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. These categories are not exclusive, nor extensive, and Young emphasizes that members of these oppressed groups can be subjected to multiple groups, as well as be members of different groups, at different times, and to varying degrees. The complexity of the issue and of different persons and situations should not be diminished or simplified. However, in order to understand structural patterns of oppression, the discussion is broken down in a methodical way to examine the parts (38).

Any of the five conditions she addresses are enough to classify an individual or group as oppressed. Young explains *exploitation* as a structural relation between social groups, where the labor or engeries of one group go unacknowledged or under compensated, creating an unequal distribution. Often this means more powerful, dominant, or wealthy groups profiting off, or unequally benefitting from the labor of others. *Marginalization* is explained as the individuals or groups that the system of labor cannot, or will not use. They are no longer viewed as useful participants in social life. *Cultural imperialism* is when the dominant group or culture in a society forces all others to accept the norms and conform, or be marked as the Other. As the ‘Other’, one can be invisible and marked as different at the same time. *Violence* is described as a social practice, often systemic, where the context surrounding the actions make them possible or even acceptable. Violent actions are directed at group members simply because they are part of that group, and group members live knowing their bodies or property may be subjected to such be-

havior at any time. *Powerlessness* is explained as group member who are not given the right to their own bodies, lives, and choices, and are exposed to disrespectful treatment based on their status (38).

Nancy Fraser argues that Young's analysis is somewhat limited and simplified. Fraser contends that, based on Young's analysis, exploitation, marginalization, and powerlessness are rooted in political economy, while cultural imperialism and violence are rooted in culture. Fraser argues that Young's categorizations are broken into distinct 'faces', but these groups can stand in tension with one another, complicating Young's seemingly simplified solutions. When coming up with solutions to systems of oppression through economic or cultural restructuring, there are places where the economic-based oppression crosses into the cultural-based oppression boundaries, and visa versa (10).

Young also does not mention criminals in her essay, so it's difficult to know whether or not she would consider them as an oppressed group and oppressed individuals as "criminals". However, they can meet her criteria in many different ways, which would suggest that they are indeed an oppressed group. Criminals are subjected to most, if not all five faces of oppression. They are met with forms of powerlessness, violence, cultural imperialism, marginalization and exploitation within prison. Outside of prison, different people receive different treatment by society based on the severity and type of crime, as well as factors such as race and gender. Sex offenders in particular are met by society with marginalization and powerlessness, and perhaps other faces of oppression depending on person and circumstance. It is undoubtedly difficult to consider criminals as oppressed, since they were convicted of breaking laws and potentially hurting others.

However, Young states that justice “should refer not only to distribution, but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development and exercise of individual capacities and collective communication and cooperation” (38). With dehumanization and oppression, justice cannot exist. Because criminals as a group are met with clearly dehumanizing and oppressive behavior and conditions, true justice in our society is impossible until this issue is addressed.

HUMANITY & JUSTICE

Martha Nussbaum argues there are basic human functions essential that can define a human life. If any of these basic functions are missing, then a human cannot live a full human life, thus cannot be fully human. In other words, a deprivation of these functions, is an act of dehumanization. Nussbaum also argues that true justice cannot be met if these functions are also not met. While Nussbaum emphasizes that the list is neither conclusive nor exclusive, the identified functions that shape a human life include: mortality, the human body, cognitive capability: perceiving, imagining, thinking, early infant development, practical reason, affiliation with other human beings, relatedness to other species and to nature, humor and play, separateness, and strong separateness (22).

Nussbaum then describes what she considers the second level of the central functionalities that define what it means to be “fully human,” and have the opportunity to live a flourishing life. The ten *central human functional capabilities* that she describes are: life, bodily health, bodily integrity, senses, imagination and thought, emotions, practical reason, affiliation, other species, play, and control over one’s environment. If any of these capabilities are hindered or restricted, or even the opposite - forced upon, then one cannot reach full humanity/human capaci-

ties to flourish. Without these essential capabilities and basic human features to a good life, the individual or group comes to exist at a “less-than-human” status (22).

Level 2

1. Being able to live out a complete human life, as far as is possible; not dying prematurely or before one's life is so reduced as to be not worth living
2. Being able to have good health, adequate nourishment, adequate shelter, opportunities for sexual satisfaction; being able to move from place to place
3. Being able to avoid unnecessary and non-beneficial pain and to have pleasurable experiences
4. Being able to use the five senses; being able to imagine, think, and reason
5. Being able to have attachments to things and persons outside our-selves; to love those who love and care for us, to grieve at their absence; in general, to love, to grieve, to feel longing and gratitude
6. Being able to form a conception of the good and to engage in critical reflection about the planning of one's own life
7. Being able to live for and to others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings, to engage in various forms of familial and social interaction
8. Being able to live with concern for and in relation to animals, plants, and the world of nature
9. Being able to laugh, to play, to enjoy recreational activities
10. Being able to live one's own life and nobody else's
- 10a. Being able to live one's own life in one's very own surroundings and context

Nussbaum argues, that based on an Aristotelian essentialist claim, a human life that lacks *any* of these basic life functions or capabilities, “will be lacking in humanness” (22).

Similarly, Immanuel Kant’s second formulation of the categorical imperative, or the *principle of humanity*, states that no rational human being (yourself included) can ever, under any circumstance, be treated as a means to an ends. They must always be treated as an ends-in-themselves. Treating someone as an *end* is treating a person with the respect they deserve, and a *means* is treating a person as tool to achieve a goal (32). Kant argued that humanity’s deserving of such respect and dignity is due to our individual rationality and autonomy (self-legislation), which separate our species from others and enable moral reasoning. This makes humanity, and

human life, unique, valuable, and priceless. “No matter how valuable the object, the value of a human life exceeds it by an infinite amount” (32). Kant claims that everyone is owed a level of respect and dignity because of this status.

While Kant’s principle argues that all rational beings must be treated as ends in themselves, he does give an interesting justification for punishment. Because humans are capable of rationality and autonomy, they may deserve punishment after choosing wrong, or immoral actions. Kant addressed this through *lex talionis* (the law of retaliation), or the eye-for-an-eye principle. This tells us that to achieve justice, criminals ought to be treated the way they treated their victims. Punishment is justified (for rational humans) when the criminal acts against the law of universality. They then, according to Kant, can be treated as they treated others (32).

Nevertheless, a basic level of respect and dignity is required of a criminal’s autonomy. Because of this, torture, brainwashing, and drugging criminals is objectionable. However, according to Kant’s argument, any treatment of a criminal that is not punishment based from the criminal’s immoral actions (or maxim broken), is objectionable and violates their autonomy and uses them as a means to an end. Also does not account to structures in place that may influence or pre-determine one’s actions. There is also no way to determine the intentions behind the criminal’s actions, which is where Kant claims morality as the only controllable force originates (32).

Whatever the flaws with Kant’s claims on punishment, our criminal justice system/prison system *still* seems to inflict punishment far beyond Kant’s concept of just punishment. Thus, based off Kant’s categorical imperative and principle of humanity, our criminal justice system/prison system is not, in fact, just. Our system treats people who have committed crimes as a

means to an end. Our systems treatment of criminals breaks the Universal Law, making us unjust and immoral in our actions.

IDENTITY & HUMANITY

Nancy Fraser, in “Rethinking Recognition” defines identity as the making and remaking of a subject, where one becomes an individual subject by being recognized by other subjects. If one is denied recognition, or ‘misrecognized’, “is to suffer both a distortion of one’s relation to one’s self and an injury to one’s identity.” If not recognized, or misrecognized, the subject lacks the “being seen” that allows “being”, thus results in forms of identity loss or identity distortion. Fraser argues that the redistribution of recognition is occurring due to the acceleration of economic globalization. As the demands of capitalism increase, economic inequality is also increasing. She contends that questions of recognition do not serve to solve these injustices, but rather work to further marginalize and displace individuals whose identities do not adhere to the dominant ‘recognizable’ identities (10).

As globalization and modernization expands, instead of cultures becoming more multicultural, group identities are divided and simplified. As economic demands take over society and culture, class is taking priority over gender, sexuality, ‘race’, ethnicity, etc, requiring non-dominant groups to assimilate to the majority norms of the dominant groups. As identity shifts and becomes distorted, the “disesteemed groups internalize negative self-images and are prevented from developing a healthy cultural identity of their own,” internalizing the dominant demands, and conforming to a given group culture. (10). These distortions of recognition are often caused by institutionalized patterns of cultural values that determine which societal constructs are ‘nor-

mal' and which are deficient or inferior. This interaction denies the less-dominant members from achieving full status, unless they conform and give up images of their own identity. Ideas of 'authentic' identity by dominant groups actually enforce "separatism, conformism and intolerance" (10).

As long as society continues to view and treat incarcerated individuals as "criminals" or "offenders" or "perpetrators", those individuals will likely embody these images. The internalization of the identity "criminal" maintains cycles of criminal acts and behavior by the "criminals" themselves. Because of this, they come to perpetuate their own self-oppression and dehumanization.

CULTURE OF SILENCE

Accusations of a sexual offense are intentionally isolating, due to the cultural and societal shame and fear attached. Silence of such subjects are perpetuated by this shame and fear, becoming a hidden cycle that Paulo calls the "culture of silence." The culture of silence is a fear of speaking out, or even the inability to know that you should or can speak out, or even that there is something worthy of speaking out against. This silence becomes the norm, and speaking out or asking questions is discouraged. The culture of silence allows for the maintenance of the system, acting as a blinding agent to the oppressive society, as well as to the oppressed. If silence is broken, it must be done so in pre-defined culturally and systemically accepted channels. If it is broken in unacceptable ways, it will be rejected by society (37). If silence regarding the topic itself is enforced, then breaking the silence can be very difficult and risky, if not dangerous.

However, the culture of silence is problematic, because it reenforces conformity and suppresses creativity, limiting the search for deeper knowledge, broader perspectives, and the pursuit of critical questioning. Freire argues that “in order to dominate, [oppression] tries to deter the drive to search, the restlessness, and the creative power which characterize life, it kills life” (37). Silence allows for stagnation and prevents change. Those that are silenced must also be the ones to break the silence, because they maintain an insider knowledge and perspective.⁸ Using creativity to break silence, creating space for dialogue, is what can allow change.⁹

CREATIVITY

Freire argues that suppression of creativity is essential for maintaining systems of power and preventing change. As Nussbaum, Young, and Freire have demonstrated, transformation from dehumanizing and oppressive treatment of individuals/groups, of which has been influenced by our history of colonial and exploitative control, is necessary for a truly humane and just society. Igniting transformation to achieve this more desirable end requires a breaking of silence and conformity, allowing space for reflection and dialogue. Creativity is key to the formation of this necessary space.

However, “creativity” in itself has many different meanings and definitions. The aspect of creativity I focus on for this literature review and project, is that which is found and utilized through artistic processes. Artistic mediums to enhance or unleash creativity include, but are by

⁸ Freire argues that liberation from being oppressed, and from an oppressive system can only happen from within, and by the oppressed.

⁹ “To no longer be prey to [oppression’s] force, one must emerge from it turn upon it. This can be done only by means of the praxis: reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” (Freire, pp. 51).

no means limited to photography, photomontage, illustration, installation, collage, painting, etc. I studied several artists who have used a variety of art mediums to creatively engage with difficult social and political material.

Laurie Jo Reynolds is a well known art activist working to fight inhumane treatment of the Prison Industrial Complex. She led an initiative to raise awareness about the Tamms solitary confinement prison in Illinois, which eventually was closed in 2013. The prison is infamous for its 24/7 solitary confinement policies, where no cell phones, activities, or visits were allowed. The prisoners were fed through a slot in the door (most supermax prisons still do this). Many of the prisoners lived in isolation for over a decade. Reynolds practiced relational art by working with prisoners in solitary confinement through the project Photo Requests from Solitary. She also engaged and provoked politics through “Legislative Art”, encouraging legislators and community members to take action in closing the prison. She argues that it’s an artists responsibility to take these risks, because there is no divide between art and politics (29).

While not directly prison related, Martha Rosler is a particular inspiration to me. Rosler is an American conceptual artist who uses video, photography, text, installation, and performance to expose and critique American ideals masterfully built on a foundation of oppression (18). Her main focuses are on the public sphere, exploring how women are affected by everything from media to the built environment to war. Some of her most famous and powerful works, in the *Home Beautiful: Bringing the War Home*, are photomontages (photo-collages and photo-texts) that explore war abroad and life at home (17). Her work contrasts domestic lives of women with international war, repression and politics, and mass media and architectural structures (18).

Shirin Neshat has also been an inspiration and example for how she provokes the public while also maintaining the dignity of her photographed subjects. Her art (primarily photography) explores issues of gender, identity, and politics in Islamic states, as well as the relationship between the personal and political (36). Some of Neshat's recent works explore "the hardship experienced by individuals living under tumultuous regimes," by interviewing and photographing elderly and low-income Egyptian workers (35). Through all her art forms she aims to address specific and universal conditions, central themes being religion, violence, madness, and gender. She hopes that her art can help explore, challenge, and question Iranian identity (36).

Bastardilla differs from Rosler and Neshat in many ways, but is also a strong female who uses art to start conversation and make social, political, and environmental statements. Bastardilla is a female street artist from Bogota, Colombia (2). Even though her work is internationally recognized now, she prefers to remain anonymous. In a rare interview, she said this is to fight the modern day need to promote one's own self image. Her street art focuses on feminist arguments and questions. She hopes to shine light on the struggles of Latin American women and the fight to end violence in South America. Her art uses vivid colors, and often tells stories of women and nature interconnectedness, as well as the oppression and voicelessness of women and nature. In many of her pieces, women's mouths are covered by bandanas. Lines are blurred between women and the environment, each a piece of the other. She draws the connection of women's bodies to nature, and the oppression of Latin American women and to oppression of nature. Her art articulates both oppression and empowerment of women. She uses thick lines and sparkles, so the street art will catch night light in a beautiful and unique way, "shedding light on the plight of

women” (2). She uses street art to build connections between people, and to challenge socio-political themes, hoping they can become part of our everyday dialogue.

The *Beehive Design Collective* is a great example of how individuals with similar social justice goals can unite to use art as a means for activism and change. It’s an all volunteer-based, activist arts collective that focus on communicating and demonstrating the intersections of complex local and global issues through art narratives. They are active in the United States, Colombia, Spain, and Canada, gathering stories from every angle, and then connecting them through integrated graphic depictions. They sell the graphics to sustain the collective’s movement, sharing stories of change and challenge around the world. “Our goal is always to move back and forth between the little and big pictures, connecting the dots between “single issues” and the bigger systems they exist within” (39).

These artists demonstrate that creativity has the power to ask forbidden questions, explore silenced topics, expose injustices, and ignite action. Because of this, creativity is the ultimate threat to conformity and systems of power. As Freire argues, creativity must be stamped out or else it becomes a threat to the dominant norms of society (37). In order to discuss difficult, often never discussed topics, and attempt to expose them for what they are, creativity is essential.¹⁰

However one may define creativity, “creativity” is arguably what allowed me to do this project and to ask these questions. Creativity provided space and fuel for the process of transformation, exploration, and self-liberation. Creativity was the process of freeing myself from the

¹⁰ The crucial components of liberation include: reflection - true reflection, dialogue within the oppressed group, which will naturally lead to action, and then transformation. But there is no end point. The cycle of resistance and right for liberation is always continuing, both on an individual and a group level.

self-perpetuated trap of silence and shame, through the avenue of art as an anchor and springboard, which enabled me to work toward a previously unimaginable alternative. Creativity is also what ignited and assisted the process of transformation, so that the reflection in the mirror had the chance to transform into a more self-dignified and humane image.

VIRTUAL REALITY PROJECT

After experimenting with written narrative and creative non-fiction storytelling, photography, installation, audio narrative, paint, collage, and video, I was not satisfied with any one medium's capacity for audience immersion and engagement. However, I believed that breaking the silence of such a difficult topic required strong immersion and engagement to evoke reflection and create space for dialogue. Only after space reflection and dialogue is created, is action and transformation possible.

I was fortunate enough to come into contact with Oculus' Virtual Reality technology, and the VR Google application Tilt Brush. Tilt Brush is a painting program where the user can paint in 3D, while insider the virtual world. After using this program, and watching Dear Angelica (a 3D, 360 VR film made from the paint program Quill), I saw the potential the technology has to meet my project goals. I chose this medium for my project due to its capacity for an immersive and engaging experience, in hopes of provoking empathy, triggering curiosity, and even igniting action.

Virtual Reality still has many limitations due to its relatively new status. However, VR and in particular, VR film has the potential to create immersive experiences unlike any humanity has experienced before. Unlike traditional films, VR films give the viewer the ability to become

an interactive participant in the story. The ability for the viewer to walk in another person's shoes allows for a level of empathy, perspective, and engagement unmatched to any other medium. The viewer is no longer simply a viewer beyond the screen. In VR, the viewer is *inside* the screen. The camera *is* the viewer, giving the viewer a role and position within the virtual world.

This is a Virtual Reality (VR) film inspired by my graduate studies of social justice and art activism, and in particular the juvenile justice system and institutional/structural oppression. The VR film places the viewer into the shoes of the main character, which is an immersive experience unique to this new technology. The goal in using VR is to create a level of empathy and compassion around subjects and people often culturally silenced, due to fear and shame. The short film takes the viewer on a journey, in the shoes of the main character, as she struggles to cope with her teenage experiences in the juvenile justice system, and to overcome the subsequent traumas. To do this, she is forced as an adult, to return to and confront her memories, as well as her teenage self, and learn to accept how these circumstances changed her life forever. The story and VR experience will give the viewer a unique opportunity to understand the perspective and position of a type of person society intuitively labels as "criminal."

I use Tilt Brush to draw scenes depicting a visual narrative of a girl's 10 year journey, after being accused as a sex offender at age 14. The drawings are exported from Tilt Brush, and then imported into Unity, a cross-platform game engine. The film is configured within Unity and then imported back into Tilt Brush as a VR video.¹¹

At its core, this project is an embodiment of myself and my process to liberation through creative and philosophical pursuits, while also being an attempt at understanding, exposing, and

¹¹ I recognize that the very development process that I have questioned here, made Virtual Reality technology possible.

communicating complex injustices to audiences beyond my academic institution. Modern systems of oppression and acts of injustice toward humanity (and the natural environment) are deeply rooted in our society. As a result, quick solutions will never fix injustices and inhumanity at their core. In fact, a complete undoing and recreation of our society would probably be necessary, though envisioning what this could look like is nearly impossible, since the only form of modern society we know has been measured by the success of *one* model of development. This model of development is materially driven, and a material lifestyles can be contributed to the types of systemic oppression defining our society today.

However, this does not mean attempting change and imagining transformation is futile. Indeed, it is essential. Creative explorations are an avenues that can allow us to explore ‘what has been,’ ‘what is’ and ‘what could be.’ Without engaging in these explorations, we may never stray from conformity, ensuring change as impossible. And even if change from deeply embedded systems of oppression, injustice, and inhumanity were impossible, but individual or group transformation and liberation were possible, wouldn’t this at least be of value and worth striving for?

The treatment of incarcerated individuals, and in particularly those accused of sexual offenses, is a process of shaming and dehumanization. Shame sustains the culture of silence and justifies dehumanization. Dehumanization maintains and justifies oppressive systems. With oppression and dehumanization, a state of true social justice and humanity, where all humans are treated with basic respect and dignity, is not possible. However, my project places the viewer into the life of an accused sex offender and breaks silence from shame to create space for conversation. The project experience inspires the empathy and compassion of the viewer, enabling the process of re-humanization, and thus justice.

Finisterre: A Screenplay

Haley Egan

Film Synopsis

This is a Virtual Reality (VR) film inspired by my graduate studies of social justice and art activism, and in particular the juvenile justice system and institutional/structural oppression. The VR film places the viewer into the shoes of the main character, which is an immersive experience unique to this new technology. The goal in using VR is to create a level of empathy and compassion around subjects and people often culturally silenced, due to fear and shame. The short film takes the viewer on a journey, in the shoes of the main character, as she struggles to cope with her teenage experiences in the juvenile justice system, and to overcome the subsequent traumas. To do this, she is forced as an adult, to return to and confront her memories, as well as her teenage self, and learn to accept how these circumstances changed her life forever. The story and VR experience will give the viewer a unique opportunity to understand the perspective and position of a type of person society intuitively labels as “criminal.”

Scene 1: The Journey

Transition into scene:

Dialogue:

I hate you. I really do.

I'm ashamed of you.

I can only see the monster that you are when I look into the mirror.

You deserve to feel broken.

You deserve to carry the weight of your family's hurt for the rest of your life.

You'll never be worth of love and happiness.

I hate you.

Scene Description (foreground and background): Viewer is in beautiful places around world, but every time viewer turns around, they see the teenage girl (she looks physically neglected, wounded, broken, dirty). When viewer sees her, it cues girl to talk at viewer.

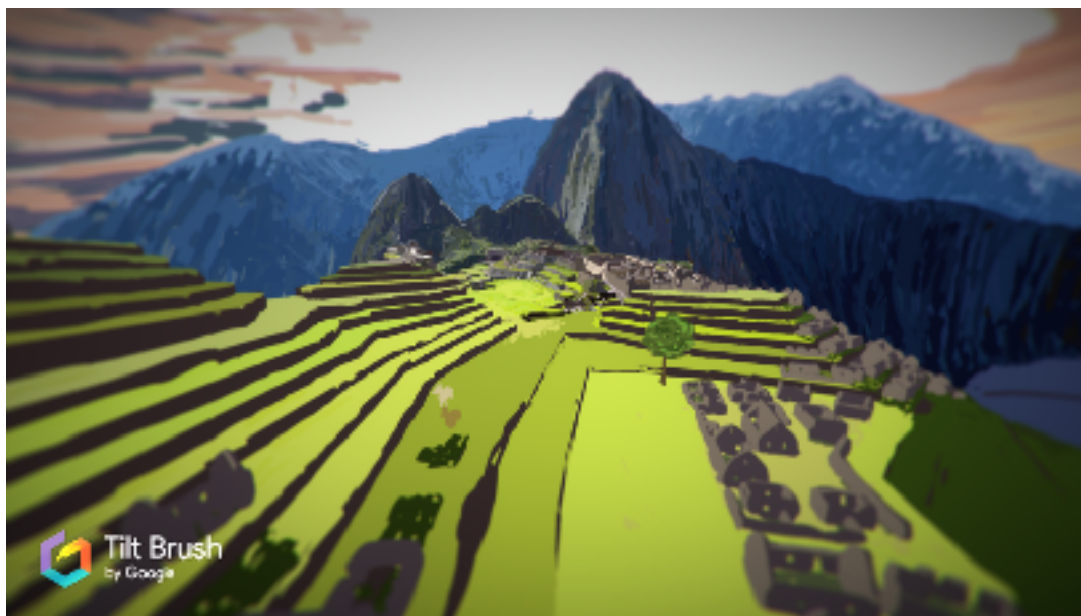
Teenage Girl Character Description

This girl was living a normal, small town, 14 year old life -gossiping about boys with her friends, riding her horses, and reading princess fantasy novels- until the day she was accused of being a sex offender. With one phone call, her life abruptly and traumatically changed forever. Without many questions or clarification, she was subjected to the Juvenile Justice System. In the film, this 14 year old version of the main character continues surfacing (in the adult character's subconscious) as the traumatized and tortured version of herself. She demands attention of the main character, no matter where she goes or what she does to escape. The 14 year old exemplifies the pesky version of ourselves that we wish to ignore, because we hate that version of ourselves. The little girl begs for attention by throwing insults and accusations at her older self. She continually reminds her adult self of the part of her life/version of herself she's ignoring because of shame, pain, and fear.

Machu Picchu: The background is a backdrop of the famous mountain view with some ruins toward the bottom. the foreground are 3D ruins. **Viewer/camera** is positioned in grass on lower/biggest terrace, near tree. Girl appears/follows behind, saying:

“I hate you. I really do.

I'm ashamed of you.”



San Francisco: Backdrop is of sunset and SF hills. Foreground is of golden gate bridge. Even more foreground is a pier/dock across the Bay, going out across the water. **Viewer/camera** is positioned on dock, looking toward golden gate. Girl appears/follows behind, saying:

“I can only see the monster that you are when I look into the mirror.

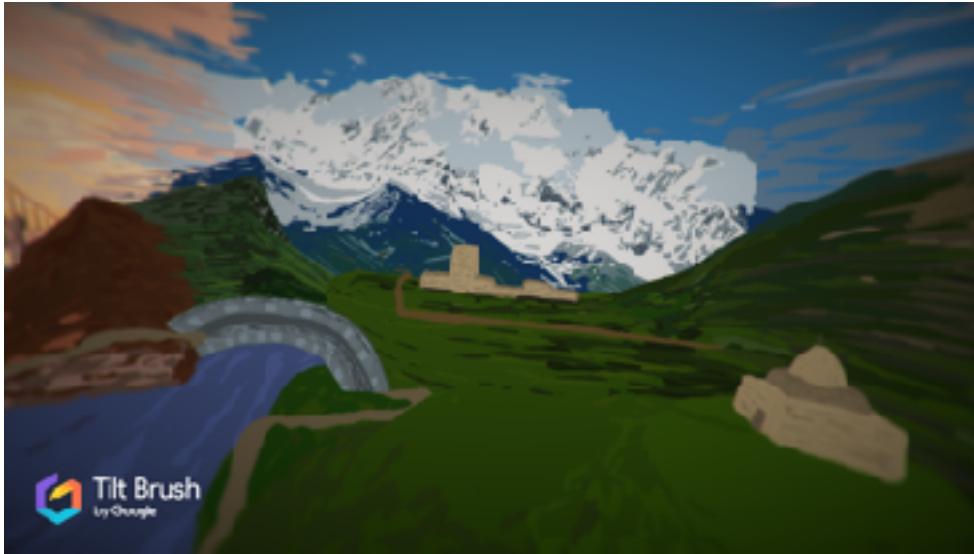
You deserve to feel broken.”



Georgia: Backdrop is caucasus mountain range, and tower on hill. Foreground is 3D hills and Ushguli village. **Viewer/camera** is positioned inside the village (for now might only be a couple buildings), next to river, looking up at mountains. Girl appears/follows behind, saying:

“You deserve to carry the weight of your family’s hurt for the rest of your life.

You’ll never be worth of love and happiness.”



Spain: Backdrop is of lighthouse is the distance on top of hill/cliffs, with sunrise and ocean in distance. (clouds in distance?) Foreground is trail and hillside/rocks. **Viewer/camera** is positioned on trail, so viewer can look up at lighthouse and remaining trail. Girl appears/follows behind, saying:

“I hate you.”



Lighting: bright, daytime (light overhead, especially since drawings have some shading to them)

Camera (Viewer) positioning & freedom: Viewer is placed at center of all landscapes, and can move around at beginning of scene. then is positioned *into* each landscape, which is where girl appears. Last stop is the lighthouse landscape, on the trail.

Animation: little girl talking

Transition out of scene: From (while in) lighthouse landscape, entire scene fades out (bright)

Scene Themes/Messages:

Scene 2: The Lighthouse

Transition into scene: fades into close-up lighthouse scene (as if arriving at lighthouse after climbing trail).

Dialogue: “you’ve traveled all around the world. you’ve tried to prove your worth, all along ignoring me. But now you have nowhere else to go/hide. It’s time to confront me...” you’re going to drown if you don’t confront me.” *you’ve traveled around the world and now it’s time for you to confront me if you ever want any peace

Scene Description (foreground and background): The lighthouse is positioned at the very end of a landmass, jutting out over, and into the water. The landmass is mostly cliffs, with large stones, but has some soil and vegetation. The lighthouse tower is brick, with a red roof, which is attached to a lighthouse building. The building is white, with green window trimming, and a red roof. The sky in the distance is blue and cloudless, but off on the ocean/sky horizon are emerging storm clouds (or else the storm clouds are already there). Little girl is behind/beside viewer, talking to them.

The clouds move toward lighthouse as girl is talking

Lighting: dark and foggy/stormy

Camera (Viewer) positioning & freedom: positioned on the edge of the cliff in front of the lighthouse, with lighthouse looming overhead.

Animation: moving/incoming clouds?

Transition out of scene: fades out dark/black

Scene Themes/Messages:



Scene 3: The Bedroom

Transition into scene: dark fades out and becomes bedroom

Dialogue: no dialogue

Scene Description (foreground and background): Viewer becomes observer of past. little girl is clean/whole/perfect, in bedroom playing with dolls/dollhouse and stuffed animals. flowers and pink everywhere.

Lighting: bright

Camera (Viewer) positioning & freedom: viewer is free to move around, “godlike” ability adds to sense that this is the past or a memory

Animation: little girl?

Transition out of scene: fades out dark

Scene Themes/Messages:

***or maybe the viewer goes to the little girl’s room, where there are toys everywhere, but the little girl isn’t there. Then the scene transitions to the interrogation room scene, and that’s where the viewer finds girl.



Scene 4: The Interrogation Room

Transition into scene: bedroom suddenly/dramatically shifts into interrogation room.

Dialogue: no dialogue from little girl. dialogue only from interrogators

Scene Description (foreground and background): The room is a dark gray color, with very few things on the walls (clock/mirror/whiteboard with assault cycle). No windows. In each corner of the room are some desks/chairs, and a vacuum (?) in the last corner.

Lighting: the room is dark, and light coming from fixed lamp sources

Camera (Viewer) positioning & freedom:

Animation: ticking clock on wall. dialogue of interrogators

Scene Themes/Messages:

**talking starts from behind viewer. viewer turns around and sees polygrapher talking to little girl. viewer now confined to directly behind little girls chair here

Scene 4.1 - The Polygrapher:

Transition into scene:

Dialogue: Polygraph examiner talks *at* viewer. there may be some cues, so that when then viewer looks away from the officer, he responds to this, making the viewer uncomfortable and feel unable to look away or leave.

Polygraph Examiner Character Description

Middle aged caucasian male. Aggressive, frustrated, annoyed. He works solely as a Post-Conviction Sex Offender Polygraph Examiner, because it's a lucrative niche. Since he deals with sex offenders daily (5 per day), he knows the patterns. Most offenders have multiple victims, and it's

his job to find out if there are any other victims the offender has confessed about, or whether or not the offender is continuing with such behavior. Because his experience, he knows this particular person is lying (even before he begins polygraph test) because the person claims there's only been one incident and one victim. Interrogation is part of process to get confessions before or after polygraph examinations. Since he knows the person is likely lying, he proceeds with his interrogation and threats, to try to reach a confession.

Dialogue:

“Okay stop. Listen, it’s not a game. The tears and stuff, I feel bad for you, I feel bad for your family, okay? But just because you say it didn’t happen and continue to tell people it didn’t happen, doesn’t mean it’s the truth. You’re lying to yourself and you know it.

You’ve failed the test, which means you could go to jail now. I can’t help you if you don’t tell me the truth. It’s very unusual for there to be only one victim. Who else is there? Who are you protecting? Who are your other victims?”

****Dialogue adapted from original audio files of polygraph examination**

Scene Description (foreground and background): Polygrapher sits behind desk. the desk has computer, paper/pen, and polygraph equipment. chair across desk (for viewer). nothing on walls but a mirror and a clock

Lighting: the room is dark, and light coming from fixed lamp sources

Camera (Viewer) positioning & freedom: viewer confined to directly beside or behind little girl

Animation: ticking clock, talking polygraphed

Transition out of scene: scene fades dark

Scene Themes/Messages:

Scene 4.2 - The Psycho-Sexual Assessor:

Dialogue: Assessor talks *at* viewer and little girl. there may be some cues, so that when then viewer looks away from the assessor, he responds to this, making the viewer uncomfortable and feel unable to look away or leave.

Psycho-Sexual Assessor Character Description

Upper - middle aged caucasian male. Aggressive, disgusted, frustrated. His job is to assess accused sex offenders and create an analysis statement about the perpetrator, and their potential risk for the prosecution. He threatens and embarrasses this person to provoke a confession, because the person seems unwilling to provide details.

Dialogue:

“You turned 15 in October, yes? If you aren’t completely honest with me, you could be taken away from your parents.

Are there any other victims? Have you done this to anyone else?

Has anyone does this to you?

Have you ever masturbated? Have you used pornography? Have you participated in voyeurism, exhibitionism, use of fetish objects, making sexually explicit phone calls, engaged in homosexual or lesbian behavior with another female, or bestiality?

Do you understand what happens to people like you, who lie and who hurt Others? People like you go to jail.”

**This dialogue is adapted from original text files

Scene Description (foreground and background): The assessor is sitting at a chair in front of a desk, in front of viewer, who is also in chair. There’s a plant in the corner and a clock on the wall, but no windows and nothing else on the walls. Both viewer and girl are unable to move/ confined. Interrogators respond to viewer’s movements (when they move or look away), because girl and viewer are same person.. (reliving past).

Lighting: the room is dark, and light coming from fixed lamp sources

Camera (Viewer) positioning & freedom: The viewer is confined to the chair beside, or directly behind little girl.

Animation: clock on wall, talking assessor

Transition out of scene:

Scene Themes/Messages: trapped, under attack, powerless

Scene 5: The Confrontation

Transition into scene:

Dialogue: Little girl begs viewer to love her, forgive her, and protect her. maybe she says it over and over until viewer actually responds:

“Just love me and protect me! Please forgive me! Say you love me!”

Scene Description (foreground and background): Return to lighthouse. Storm is still raging on. Little girl yells at viewer until viewer responds. Once viewer responds, little girl fades and the clouds go away and sky clears up to reveal rising sun/dawn.

Lighting: Dark and stormy until transition, then dawn.

Camera (Viewer) positioning & freedom: Viewer is confined to spot on cliff in front of lighthouse

Animation: clouds and little girl talking

Transition out of scene:***Scene Themes/Messages:*****Scene 6: The Arrival*****Transition into scene:***

Dialogue: Poem reading by adult girl:

I find myself arriving, at my own door, in my own mirror.

Each smiles at the other's welcome, saying, sit here. eat.

I give bread, I give wine. I give my heart back to itself,

to the stranger who has loved me all my life,
 who knows me by heart.
 I peel my own image from the mirror
 and sit
 feasting on my life.

Adult Girl Character Description

The adult girl is successful in her academic and professional careers. She has traveled the world, and worked to create an image for herself that isn't tied to her teenage experiences. Most of her friends, and even some of her family are unaware of what happened when she was younger (and she tries to keep it this way). She tries to forget and move on, but everywhere she goes and no matter what she does, the wounded teenage version of herself resurfaces.

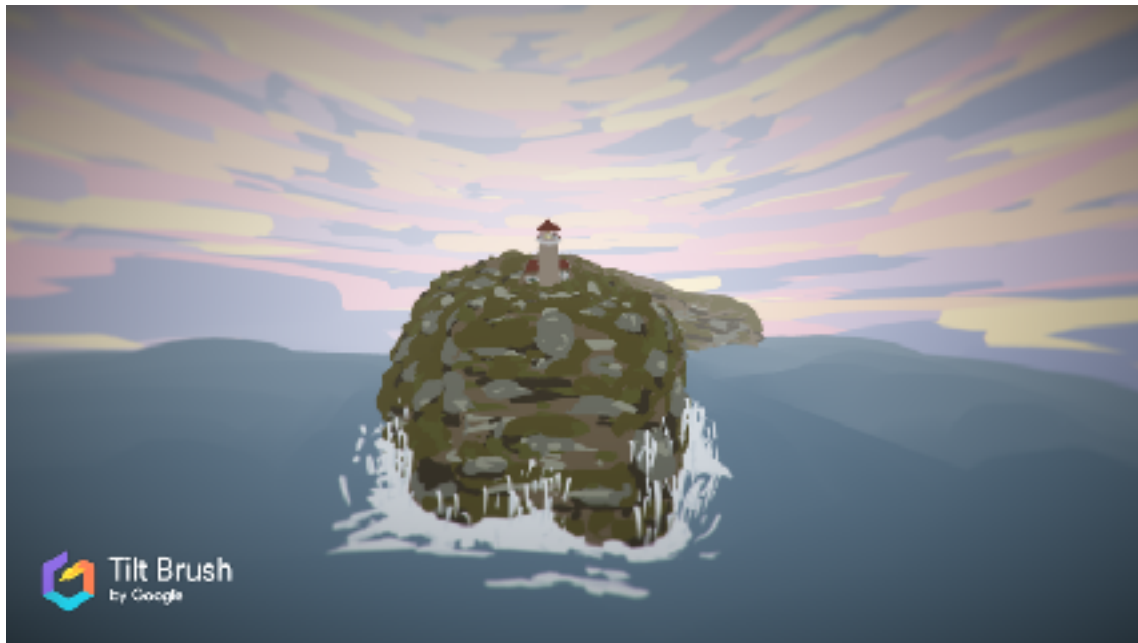
Eventually, near the end of the story, the two versions of herself find peace. After this happens, the adult version of the girl reads part of this poem out loud, as a way to demonstrate this personal resolution.

“I find myself arriving, at my own door, in my own mirror.
 Each smiles at the other's welcome, saying, sit here. eat.
 I give bread, I give wine. I give my heart back to itself,
 to the stranger who has loved me all my life,
 who knows me by heart.
 I peel my own image from the mirror
 and sit
 feasting on my life.”

Scene Description (foreground and background): Once viewer responds to little girl she fades away along with the clouds. The lighthouse is surrounded by rising sun/dawn sky. The reading of the poem begins after some silence/peace

Lighting: dawn

Camera (Viewer) positioning & freedom: Viewer is no longer confined.



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