

Cultivating democratic classrooms through Socially Conscious Art creates an atmosphere that fosters awareness and lowers barriers to understanding.



“I Have Never Witnessed
Students So Engaged”:

The Art of Democracy in Schools

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As artist Ramón Esono Ebalé entered the art classroom adorned with “welcome” banners, a hush came over the 75 high school students who were crammed together to view his work and hear him speak. The day before, students learned about Esono Ebalé’s native Equatorial Guinea, including an overview of the country’s history, geography, economy, and political system. Students were somber as they heard about the social issues facing the African nation, including vast income disparity, poor health and sanitation, human rights abuses, and a government considered to be among the 12 most corrupt in the world (Amnesty International, 2013; Human Rights Watch, 2013; World Bank, 2014). Students viewed Esono Ebalé’s art: Bold in both style and content, it exposes the graft and injustice pervasive in government policies. **They also learned that Esono Ebalé is currently living in exile in Paraguay because of his criticism of the government and involvement with political dissidents.**

Accompanied and assisted by international human rights attorney Tutu Alicante of EG Justice,¹ Esono Ebalé occasionally shifted from English into Spanish as he shared his culture and story (see Figure 1). Bilingual students quietly interpreted for peers seated near them, helping them understand the nuances of Esono Ebalé’s remarks. As he projected images of his work (see Figure 2), students were immediately drawn to the colorful, graphic novel-like technique,

above: Figure 1. Ramón Esono Ebalé and Tutu Alicante at Jefferson High School, Tampa, Florida. Photo by Robert Bailey. Used with permission.

but were also silenced by the pain often evidenced in the works. Students hung on the artist's every word, as he told the "back stories" of each piece. Some of the students' questions had to do with Equatorial Guinea, a country some had only recently learned even existed. Others asked about artistic technique and media. All engaged and learned from the guests and each other. Students asked questions like: When did you know you wanted to be an artist? Is it difficult to live in exile? Are other artists being repressed in your home country? The students' social studies teacher observed:

The questions my students raised and fears they expressed for Ramón and his fellow citizens were mature beyond their years. Despite lacking a formal education in art history, many of their questions and comments about Ramón's pieces could have come from a seasoned curator. In all of my thirteen years teaching at the high school level, I have never witnessed students so engaged. (Bailey, personal communication, June 11, 2014)

When the bell rang for lunch, over half of the students remained, declaring they would rather stay, making statements such as, "When would we have another chance to do something like this again?" Their teacher assured them he was involved in an innovative social studies/visual arts project and that bringing the arts into their lives is a priority of his. The teacher said, "Ramón not only revealed a world once unknown to my class, he also instilled in me a desire to expose my students to Socially Conscious Art as often as I can" (Bailey, personal communication, June 11, 2014).

In this article, we describe a collaborative visual arts project that has brought together social studies and art educators in our school district. Using symbolically based Socially Conscious Art (SCA) in secondary social studies and art education classrooms, teachers can incorporate available online lessons that not only offer arts instruction, but also inform students about social issues and motivate them to investigate topics of concern in their communities—while simultaneously promoting a democratic classroom environment.

Figure 2. Ramón Esono Ebalé, *Bozales (Muzzles)*, 2011. Composition board with colored markers, 16" x 11 3/4". Photo by Will Lytch. Used with permission, USF Contemporary Art Museum.



Socially Conscious Art: Art's Power to Engage Social Issues

Art has an incredible power to highlight problems in society, politics, and culture and suggest needs for recognition, change, or remediation. Social studies and art education have many curricular interconnections. In our state of Florida, for example, the visual arts curriculum standards call for the examination of historical and cultural influences that inspire artists and shape their work (Florida Department of Education, 2011). Concomitantly, the social studies curriculum standards ask students to consider artistic response to social issues across cultures (Florida Department of Education, 2008). Both the National Visual Arts Standards (National Art Education Association, 2012) and the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010) underscore the importance of an integrated and interrelated course of study for students. Clearly, each subject area can contribute content and skills that can facilitate analysis, interpretation, and appreciation of the other.

SCA is among various approaches that reflect the nexus of social studies and art education. Visual culture and material culture studies focus on the visual image of any provenance—applying disciplines such as philosophy, critical theory, and anthropology, as well as art history—and “also assumes that the processes and products of culture are studied in relation to multiple contexts such as politics, economics, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age and power relations, among others” (Bolin & Blandy, 2003, p. 246). Media literacy studies are a “pedagogical approach promoting the use of diverse types of media and information communication technology (from crayons to webcams) to question the roles of media and society and the multiple meanings of all types of messages” (Daly, 2009, para. 8). SCA overlaps with these approaches in its focus on the visual image and its critical analysis based on the incorporation of many disciplines and study of multiple contexts. However, SCA emphasizes the art (e.g., as object, installation, performance, or action), and the artist’s intention, which distinguishes it from the broader applications inherent in visual culture and material culture studies and media literacy studies. Because this artistic approach focuses on problems in society, government, and culture, the social studies curricula becomes a natural vehicle to heighten awareness, consciousness, and social action. Further, the incorporation of SCA in curricula can support many of the features of a democratic classroom, a learning environment that promotes collaboration and civic action.

Editor Note: There was brief discussion about the appropriateness of the image titled *Bozales* (Muzzles) for this journal. However, these images are the work of Ramón Esono Ebalé, an artist who has made a career of highlighting the muzzles of censorship that accompany a litany of long-standing political atrocities commonplace in Equatorial Guinea, an obscure nation in Central Africa that has one of the worst human rights records in the world. Given the lifetime of abuses, corruption, gender violence, and brutal retribution for any criticism of the authoritarian government that Ebalé has had to endure growing up there, he is now in a position to bear witness to the brutality. Ebalé’s work boldly reveals that the “emperor” in his nation has no clothes. Given the theme of this issue, opposing silences, I decided it was more appropriate to give these images their proper context and allow art educators to decide for themselves if they wish to share them with high school students in the successful manner described in this article.

An SCA curriculum becomes democratic when students have access to forms of art that extend beyond the Western tradition, while engaging in the examination of critical and important social issues. Because SCA involves the examination and discussion of controversial topics that often hold personal relevance for students, this can lead to the “open intellectual climate... associated with higher levels of political interest, efficacy, and knowledge” (Freedman, 2003, p. 107) that is prized in democratic education.

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Cultivating Democratic High School Classrooms Through Socially Conscious Art

Educational settings where students can practice active and engaged citizenship are a purported cornerstone of public education in the United States (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013). The National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies lists civic ideals and practices, including opportunities for students to learn how to apply civic ideals, as one of the 10 themes of social studies education (National Council for the Social Studies, 2010). The cultivation of a democratic classroom that aims to support civic ideals entails a classroom where multiple perspectives are valued and expressed; decision making is shared; creative and critical thought is encouraged; and discussions on social transformation, injustice, and the common good are encouraged and frequently lead to what scholars refer to as citizen action (Newmann, 1975; Parker, 2003).

SCA, at its most basic level, is democratic—freedom to explore and express personal attitudes, opinions, and positions on real-world problems through art. SCA has the potential to foster an increased sense of cultural competence and sociopolitical consciousness as artists explore their social consciousness most visibly through the subject matter of their work; furthermore, their selection and use of materials can highlight a social issue (Cline, 2013). As an example, Brian Collier, in his work *Some Properties of Water* (2003), uses materials and objects from daily life to explore real-world social issues related to water via social and symbolic meanings (Cornelius, Sherow, & Carpenter, 2010). Through assemblage and installation, Collier’s work evokes consideration of place, natural resources, and human interaction with the environment.

In the classroom, SCA has the potential to foster a stronger sense of cultural competence as students engage in dialogue on artwork that may evoke the need to critically explore and reflect on their personal attitudes, beliefs, and lived experiences. For example, after students examined the work of Esono Ebalé, they created their own cartoons or comics that highlighted an important social issue in their community, while reflecting the techniques and approaches used by the artist. Students were invited to share their work with their classmates by either displaying their work in the classroom or having a Walking Gallery. Other teachers used a document camera to project student work to the rest of the class and encouraged the group to ask questions and engage in discourse with one another. SCA also has the potential to spur students' sociopolitical consciousness, as students are often moved to action as a result of interpreting deep social and political meanings perceived in each work of art. In the case of Esono Ebalé's work, students conducted individual research on the political oppression in Equatorial Guinea and learned more about the human rights organization, EG Justice.

Inside Art: Collaborative High School Social Studies/Arts Instruction

For the past 4 years, we have used SCA to create a high school curriculum called Inside Art that fosters democracy in the classroom while furthering social studies and arts education goals. Inside Art is a Web-based visual literacy program that utilizes contemporary visual art to examine and discuss critical societal issues.² Based on exhibitions at the Contemporary Art Museum at the University of South Florida (USFCAM), Inside Art showcases a university-school partnership that promotes rich learning experiences on a variety of topics that are relevant and dynamic.

The project was developed in collaboration with curriculum developers, museum curators and educators, and artists.

The fourth curricular installment of Inside Art was based on the USFCAM exhibition, SubRosa: The Language of Resistance (August 26–December 7, 2013), that examined the language of art across continents and cultures in response to social, political, and environmental repression. Often covertly and dangerously, the seven artists chosen for the SubRosa exhibition had shared through their artwork a desire to question dominant political systems and cultural status quo. Ramón Esono Ebalé's work focuses on disastrous conditions in his country and is designed to reach a wide audience through vernacular-style drawings and language. Ai Weiwei's (China), Cover Book series are three small and discreet volumes documenting seminal Western art and artists for the growing underground Chinese contemporary art; they were surreptitiously created when the artist returned home after 10 years in New York City. Barbad Golshiri (Iran), with his sculpture/print *Distribution of the Sacred System*, indicts the Iranian government's policies on mass media and prisons. Khaled Jarrar's (Palestine) videos and sculptures deal with the wall (both physical and metaphorical) erected between Israel and the West Bank and the problems of Palestine. Zanele Muholi (South Africa) extensively photographs the LGBTQ community in South Africa and campaigns for equality. In sculptures and paintings, José Toirac and Meira Marrero (Cuba) focus on lingering racism and the lack of historical political teaching in Cuba (see Figures 3, 4, and 5).

Using the SubRosa exhibition, students examined issues of repression while simultaneously learning more about the artists and their techniques. For example, as they studied the history and politics of Esono Ebalé's Equatorial Guinea, students also learned



Figure 3. José Angel Toirac and Meira Marrero, *Cuba 1869-2006* (2006). Oil on canvas, wood frame and metal identification, nail. Thirty-nine individual paintings each framed, 30 3/4" x 22 1/8"; one frame, 29 15/16" x 37 13/16". Photo by Will Lytch. Used with permission, USF Contemporary Art Museum.



Figure 4. José Angel Toirac and Meira Marrero, *Ave Maria* (2010). Figures of Nuestra Señora de la Caridad, table with inscription, saw horses, carpet dimensions variable. Photo by Will Lytch. Used with permission, USF Contemporary Art Museum.



Figure 5. Installation view of José Angel Toirac and Meira Marrero, *Ave Maria* (2010). Photo by Will Lytch. Used with permission, USF Contemporary Art Museum.

Figure 6. Khaled Jarrar, *Football* (2012).
Cement sculpture, 23 cm. diameter.
Photo by Will Lytch. Used with
permission, USF Contemporary Art
Museum.



*This inspirational work
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about caricature and political cartoons. Similarly, they examined the impact of Barbad Golshiri's political convictions on his installation and performance art and Khaled Jarrar's specific use of cement referencing the Israeli wall (see Figure 6). Each lesson had dual purposes that were self-reinforcing.

Lessons Learned

Working on Inside Art for the past 4 years has resulted in insights used to strengthen the program. Specifically, close collaboration among stakeholders, the direct involvement of artists, and understanding adolescent learners' capabilities are essential to the success of any social studies/art education project.

■ *Importance of Museum/University/School Partnerships*

We advocate a close working relationship between art museums and school districts, with colleges and universities playing a critical role in bridging and forging these relationships.

■ *Art Museums Are Often Considered Too Removed From K-12 Schools and Students*

Contemporary art in particular can be very difficult to appreciate and understand, as it often covers new frontiers (subject matter, materials, techniques)—even as contemporary artists are vitally involved in the social, political, environmental, and economic circumstances of our times. How then, can art museums contribute to the education of children, introduce them to the importance of contemporary art to their understanding of the world, and mold a new generation of curious and unafraid museum goers? Conversely, how can educators tap into this valuable resource?

■ *Inside Art Provides Opportunities for Working Relationships on a Number of Levels*

The program starts at the level of interdisciplinary collaboration between the USFCAM and the USF College of Education, for the creation of the curriculum and its publication on the museum website, and the planning and implementation of teacher workshops. The local school district provides professional development opportunities by funding teacher release days for an all-day workshop, encouraging teachers to actively participate by using the curriculum in the classroom, and by taking students to museum exhibitions when possible. In addition, faculty from the museum and the College of Education actively pursue grants—e.g., for programs to further involve teachers in professional development and finance buses for taking the students to the museum. Such a program requires an understanding of the possibilities and limitations of all partners.

■ *Artist Interaction Is Vital*

When possible, the direct interaction of artists with both teachers and students results in learning outcomes that are impossible to achieve any other way. While contemporary art may sometimes seem inaccessible or forbidding, informal give-and-take conversations with artists can create an atmosphere that fosters familiarity and lowers barriers to understanding, as the opening vignette about Ramón Esono Ebalé reveals.

■ *Cooperative Learning Is a Vital Component of a Democratic Classroom*

Democratic classrooms are cooperative classrooms; therefore, it seems obvious that cooperative learning would be a prominent instructional strategy in classrooms where teachers and students both have a voice. According to Johnson, Johnson, and Holubec (2009) "cooperative learning is the instructional use of small groups so that students work together to maximize their own and each other's learning" (p. 5). SCA often evokes strong emotions that may be

difficult for many adolescents to express in a classroom full of their peers. Cooperative learning helps to establish a sense of belongingness and safety, and supports the development of the skills necessary for students to engage in discussions and collaborative group-based activities.

■ Provide Opportunities for Students to Critically Analyze Mature Artwork

The ability of students to think abstractly, wrestle with controversial topics, and engage in rich discourse about themselves and the world increases as they move through the adolescent years. Contemporary art can provide an opportunity for students to critically analyze their lives and the world around them. “Just as our students are looking at the worlds around them and wondering what their role might be, what events mean, or what difference they can make, today’s artists are wondering the same questions through their art” (Leake, 2014, p. 24). Further, their skills in analyzing and critiquing works of art, including technique, can be quite advanced. Guided by a skilled facilitator, adolescents are well positioned to utilize the 4 Cs of 21st-century skills: think Critically and Creatively about art, Communicate with one another about deep and often controversial topics represented in artworks, and Collaborate on activities that revolve around artistic themes (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2011). Through SCA, students can become lifelong learners who gain a deeper understanding of themselves and the world around them, value art in its own right,

contribute to the ongoing discourse about the social and political messages represented in artworks, and seek to take action based on such messages.

Concluding Thoughts

Students must understand it is incumbent for them to exercise their skills as citizens even as they are developing them. Socially Conscious Art is a powerful means of teaching democratic ideals to today’s youth by providing graphic examples of past and current social issues. SCA serves as a visual representation of the journey that citizens around the world undertake to improve their societies. This inspirational work can serve as a powerful motivator for today’s youth in the promotion of a democratic world. As educators and fellow citizens, it is our job to equip students with the knowledge and skills as well as experiences necessary to carry out this important work. ■

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Endnotes

- ¹ www.egjustice.org
- ² www.ira.usf.edu/InsideART