
AN INEVITABLE QUESTION:

Exploring the Defining Features
of Social Justice Art Education

By: Marit Dewhurst

“What do you really mean by social justice art education?” It is an inevitable question. In fact, I would be shocked if no one tentatively raised his or her hand in any of my art and social justice education professional development workshops in museums or graduate-level education classes to earnestly ask, “Sorry, but just what do you really *mean* by social justice art education?”

I am not surprised because this question constantly causes confusion among not only the students, but also the educators, researchers, and artists working at the intersection of art, education, and social justice. The labels for this work come in many shapes, among them, activist art (Felshin, 1995), community-based arts (Knight & Schwarzman, 2005), new public art (Lacy, 1995), art for social change (O'Brien & Little, 1990), and community cultural development (Adams & Goldbard, 2001). Despite these various names, this work often shares a commitment to create art that draws attention to, mobilizes action towards, or attempts to intervene in systems of inequality or injustice. And yet, in a field with growing numbers of social justice arts organizations

and the accompanying conferences, special journal issues, and edited books, the very definition of what is meant by social justice art education remains elusive. Some variation in nomenclature can be attributed to the multiple disciplinary lenses—from art history and anthropology to community development and public policy—that have been used to analyze this work. However, hidden in this tenuous terminology are competing visions about the very nature of social justice art education. Such differences appear to hinge on three main debates: (1) how strategic the artistic and activist decisions are in relation to their potential to effectively change policy; (2) what constitutes activism or social change; and (3) if emphasis is placed on the process or the product of artmaking. These big, often philosophical debates require us to unpack the purposes, expectations, and perspectives that compel us to mix art and social justice work.

And so I am not startled each time a student hesitantly asks, with a hint of frustration or even exasperation, “What do you really mean by social justice art education?” In responding to this inevitable question, those of us engaged in this work must parse out exactly what it means to do *social justice art education*. If we fail to rise to this challenge we risk losing the clarity required to advocate for our work, to train future educators, and perhaps most importantly, to separate out art practices that truly impact injustice and those that may

