

Keywords: Power, Persuasion, Change

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Proposed question for independent enquiry: To what extent can we use art to change the society we live in for the better?

Dissertation Proposal

The Intent of the following proposal is to explore the three main keywords that correspond to the projected question I will select for the final year dissertation. The three keywords that will be analysed are Power, Persuasion and change. The chosen words each represent the premise of creative activism and how art can be used to construct social change. As an illustrator I am particularly interested in narrative behind a composition and the message it can convey. A range of artists will be explored along with an analysis of what their work communicates to the viewer.

Power

The first Keyword to discuss is power. 'If Art can make you happy, can it also make you good? If it can move you to ecstasy or tears, should it also move you to be a stand-up citizen?' (Schama, 2006, P.182). One of the most powerful aspects of art is the way it is capable of encouraging a particular feeling on to its audience.



Figure 1: Banksy (2004) Napalm [Print on Canvas]

Arguably one of the most powerful artists of our time, Banksy uses his popularity as a platform to send some very powerful messages despite his identity being anonymous. I have chosen the piece 'Napalm' as it is a strong example of Banksy's intention to share political messages through his artwork. 'Banksy's *Napalm* piece is strong criticism of American war culture. The imagery of the naked girl is taken from a famous Vietnam War photo. It depicts 9-year-old Kim Phuc. She was running in panic from a napalm blast.' States Michael Owens (2015). Here Banksy uses very little colour to create an eerie atmosphere, the pain within the little girls' eyes is very prominent and is contradicted by two famous symbols of America who are usually associated with a child's happiness, this strange selection of characters makes the piece exceedingly thought provoking. This powerful image has quite a harsh nature to it which makes it hard for the audience to ignore. It has the power to start a conversation, which further proves art is not just here to be aesthetically pleasing. This composition alongside many others of Banksy's masterpieces confirms the theory that the narrative behind an image can be extremely powerful in the way it communicates to the viewer.



Figure 2: *Guernica* (1937) Pablo Picasso [Oil on canvas]

'Guernica' By Pablo Picasso is another enormously powerful political piece with war at the forefront. Similar to previous image by Banksy, Picasso used a very dark colour palette to create a gloomy, negative atmosphere. The Composition represents the devastation and bloodshed of the Spanish civil war. 'Picasso drew inspiration from one of the most shocking chapters of that war: the attack by the German Condor Legion and the Italian Legionary Air Force on the Spanish city of Guernica, in the Basque Country. This bloody attack took place on market day when much of the local population was gathered in the town's streets. This plus the fact that this was the first carpet bombing to be performed during the Spanish Civil War (a progressive and systematic attack on one location, aimed at destroying it completely) are the most likely explanations of why Picasso chose to focus on Guernica as a symbol for the war in general.' (Julian, 2017) At first glance it is quite difficult to see what is really going on in the painting however with closer inspection there are some awfully upsetting scenes appertaining to death and anguish. 'There are nine characters in the painting, six humans and three animals – all of whom have been the focus of many differing theories. At the far left is a woman with her dead child in her arms; many experts see in them the figure of the *Pietà*, the Virgin Mary cradling the dead body of her son, a symbol of a Mother's love and suffering. Others go even further and describe this scene as a representation of the nation that observes in sufferance the death of its own people in this brutal war, or as the image of Madrid, the capital city of Spain, being besieged by the fascist army.' (Julian, 2017). Despite being a considerably abstract drawing of a human, Picasso captured the pain and heartbreak within the woman's expressions in abundance. 'One of the most popular interpretations of the role played by these figures in *Guernica* claims that the bull represents the cruelty of war, whereas the horse is another reminder of the suffering of people. At the bottom of the painting, lying on the floor, is a brutally

dismembered soldier, generally believed to represent the military losses of the war and the role of the army. In the centre of the painting, between the bull and the horse, there is the figure of a dove that appears to be screaming – a symbol of threatened peace in Europe.’ (Julian, 2017) Picasso uses a lot of symbolism within his work which leaves the viewer to engage and speculate what certain aspects might signify. Each and every detail has great importance and contains the power to move its audience as it represents the agonising subject matter profoundly.

So, what is the Power of art? ‘The Power of art is the power of unsettling surprise. Even when it seems imitative, art does not so much duplicate the familiarity of the seen world as replace it with a reality all of its own. Its mission beyond the delivery of beauty is the disruption of the banal.’ (Schama, 2006, p.7) Art has the capability to educate, influence, and entertain, but most importantly it has the power to make a change.

Persuasion

The second keyword I have chosen is ‘Persuasion’. ‘Attempts to change the opinions of others are as old as human speech, and down the year much thought and discussion has centred on the business of influence’. (Storey, 1997, P.1). Persuasion, the act of attempting to change or influence someone’s opinion can often be found in many artforms. It has been very commonly used within the propaganda art genre. ‘The term Propaganda is easily used to decry a work of socialist realism, a Nazi film production, or a leftist agitprop poster. But it is misleading to think that propaganda can be defined through a singular object or artwork. Propaganda is aimed not only at communicating a message but constructing reality itself.’

(Staal, 2019, P.2). One of the most iconic pieces of propaganda art is James Montgomery Flagg's 'I Want You for U.S Army' Poster.



Figure 3: James Montgomery (1917) I want you for U.S Army [Poster]

The Aim of the poster is to influence American citizens to join the army and fight for their country during the first world war. So, how is this piece persuasive? The artist cleverly draws the finger of Uncle Sam pointing directly to whoever is viewing, His stern expression and directness makes the image look like it was made specifically for the person looking at it. This pose was found extremely persuasive and turned out to be remarkably successful with its goal of raising the number of people looking for recruitment in the army.

Another piece of persuasive art, Different in nature, is that of 'You consume their terror' by Sue Coe.

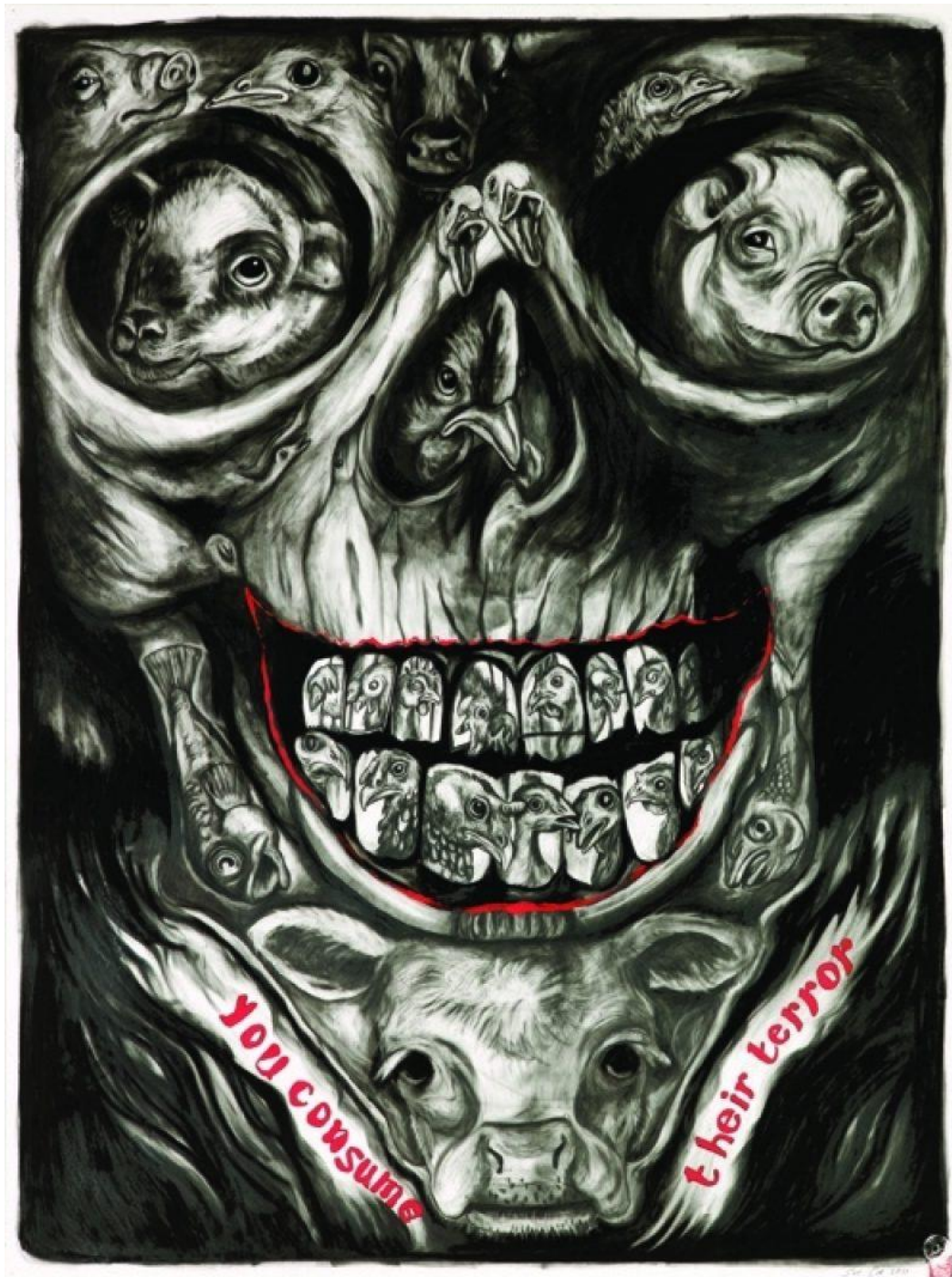


Figure 4: Sue Coe (2011) *You consume their terror* [Drawing]

Coe has produced some highly impactful imagery which has the power to influence the viewer to begin to think about their meat consumption and how they may need to make a change regarding their diet as well as the clothes they wear and products they use. A variety

of animals are assembled to create large skull signifying the death of these innocent animals for humans to eat and wear. These pitiful creatures get murdered in some of the most dreadful ways and Coe communicates that sufficiently within her work. The artist aims to educate people on animal cruelty and spread the message that a change needs to be made. Art like this has influenced me to become vegetarian and use products that have not been tested on animals which proves that it is successful in its goal to persuade people to change their diet and way of living after seeing the horrible torture that animals are subjected to.

It has been highlighted that art can be persuasive in many different ways, the narrative behind an image can persuade you to not only change an opinion or feel a particular way. It can also influence you to take action. The most successful images are those that are persuasive enough to make you do something about the feelings the image has given you, which advances us to the next keyword of 'Change' and how art can make a change to the world that we live in.

Change

It has been established that art can be an effective way to influence and evoke an emotion on to its target audience, but can art really make a change to the society we live in? 'Art does not show people what to do yet engaging with a good work of art can connect you to your senses, body, and mind. It can make the world *felt*. And this felt feeling may spur thinking, engagement, and even action.' (Eliasson, 2016) If a painting really strikes someone's emotions it can often lead to that person making a particular decision, for example a piece on animal cruelty may influence someone to go vegan and further share the message to others. 'The arts and culture represent one of the few areas in our society

where people can come together to share an experience even if they see the world in radically different ways. The important thing is not that we agree about the experience that we share, but that we consider it worthwhile sharing an experience at all. In art and other forms of cultural expression, disagreement is accepted and embraced as an essential ingredient. In this sense, the community created by arts and culture is potentially a great source of inspiration for politicians and activists who work to transcend the polarising populism and stigmatisation of other people, positions, and worldviews that is sadly so endemic in public discourse today.’ (Eliasson, 2016)

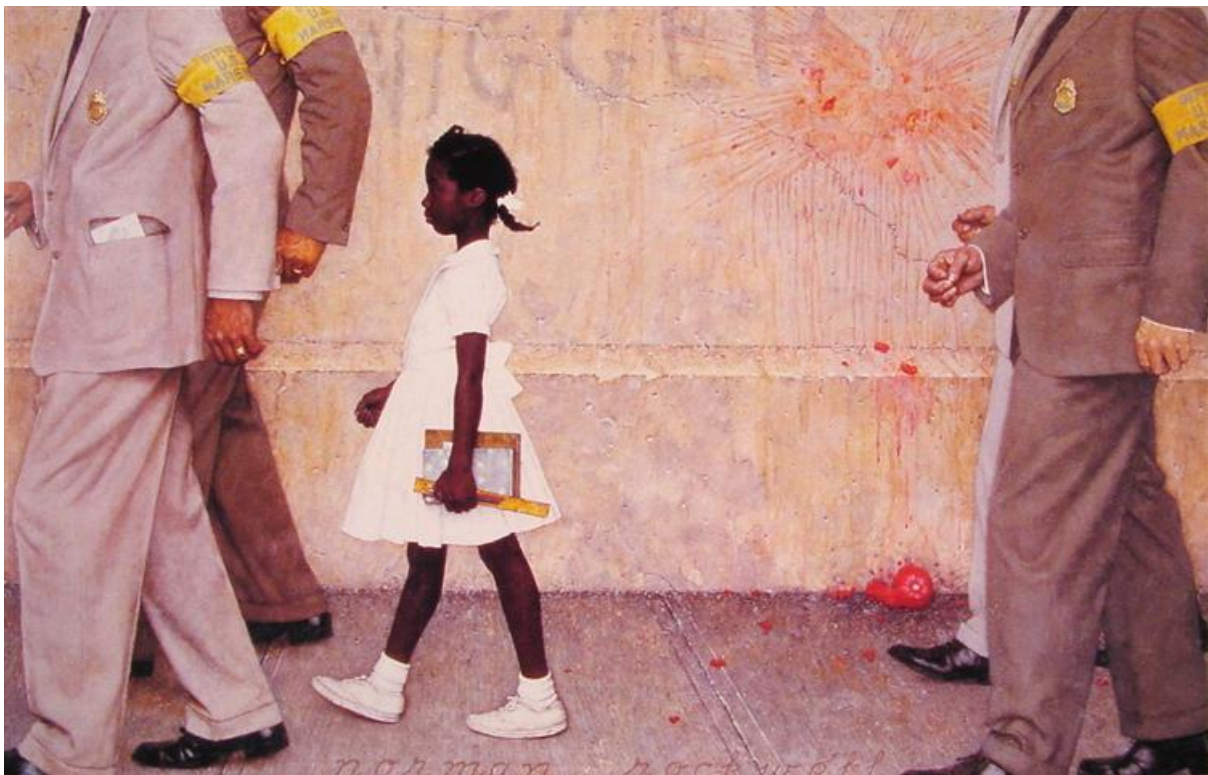


Figure 5: Norman Rockwell (1964) *The problem we all live with* [Oil on Canvas]

‘Illustrator Norman Rockwell made his career depicting the normalities of American mid-century life - both the good and the bad. Painted in 1964, the work shows a young black girl named Ruby Bridges walking down the road, on her way to attend an all-white school. She is flanked by security due to the racial hatred this incited - she walks past racial slurs written

on the walls. It became an iconic image of the Civil Rights Movement, and Barack Obama had it put on display when he invited Bridges to meet him at The White House in 2011.' (Brennan, 2019) This iconic piece of art is extremely powerful and heart wrenching. It impacted the world highlighting the issue of desegregation. An interesting aspect of this image that really stands out is the way Ruby bridges walks with her head held high despite the racism and abuse being thrown at her. The artist captures Bridges pure bravery perfectly, she takes it all in her stride and continues on no matter what is said or thrown at her. This painted helped to enlighten the world on the devastating impact of racism and inequality, Ruby Bridge was just a young child, no child deserves what she went through to get a decent education. The importance of this image is significant as it symbolises the height of the civil rights movement and how far we have come from that day, this being said we still have a significantly long way to go. Unfortunately, racist hate crimes still happen to this day, which is why it is so incredibly important to continue highlighting the importance of equality through art and communication. Each piece of art made highlighting any injustice that millions of people sadly face can help to raise awareness for what is important, the more that is out there, the better chance of gaining peace, equality and justice for all. It is important to note that when discussing the theory of how art can change the world for the better, this also suggests that it can also make a negative impact. Those with unfavourable and offensive views could also use art to express their perspective which can cause an adverse reaction to the way we perceive art and the power it beholds.

Conclusion

‘Art is a powerful thing. From the moment that humankind could, we started thinking creatively. Explaining and depicting the world around us. From the earliest cave drawings in South Africa which date back 164 thousand years to the well-known cave paintings in Europe that date 40 thousand years, humans have always been moved to art. The question of what art is, is old and tested. Art is fascinating precisely because it is subjective and contested. Art has the power to move individuals to social action, manipulate and influence, entertain, and educate. Many are afraid to approach art, viewing it from afar as an elite subject and esoteric.’ (Cultural Awareness International, 2018)

There is a large variety of evidence showing that art can be an extremely powerful tool. Art Has the power to make you feel a range of different emotions, positive or negative. It can influence you to make certain decisions or form opinions. Many people look at art as something that can be aesthetically pleasing and decorative, but it has been proven to be so much more than that. It is so important to educate others on the significant role art plays on everyone’s lives whether they know it or not. Subsequent to research in whether art can evoke emotions and change to the society we live in, I would like to further speculate...

To what extent can we use art to change society the society we live in for the better?

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