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Independent Research Proposal

Subculture, Self-Expression, Curiosity

For a brief overview of my writing, I will be researching specific fields of interest in order to create a research proposal for future research in practice. Upon my research I will explore three keywords: Subculture, Self-Expression, Curiosity. I will aim to define and contextualise to understand their meaning, explore contrasting theories, link to artistic practices then see how they could fuel further exploration for me in future. I will link each key word to an artist Jim Goldberg for Subculture, Jean Michelle Basquiat for Self-Expression and Olafur Eliason for curiosity.

Subculture

Subculture is a culture that sits within the wider mainstream culture of society, subcultures have separate values, beliefs, interests and practices. The foundations of a subculture may consist of ethnicity, where people live, age, profession and many more. Subcultures are found in all walks of life around the world, everyone is part of a subculture whether they're aware or not. Subculture is misconceived as to be fighting against something or responding to mainstream culture, 'They do not need to stand for something or even against something. 'They just need to stand apart, separating themselves from the mainstream' (D. Barnett, 2012) The perception that subculture is solely rebellious, and deviant comes from widely acknowledged counterculture movements such as Punk rock. In this case, "punk was a site of resistance and rebellion that was in value conflict with mainstream society" (Dumoulin, 2019) Subculture and counterculture are two different things. Subculture is set apart from dominant culture however it doesn't *challenge* certain aspects of the dominant

culture. On the other hand, “counter cultures are said not merely to be different but to actively reject or deliberately and consciously oppose certain aspects of the dominant culture” (Dowd and Dowd, 2003, P.22) Hippies are considered a counterculture, the Hippie movement was a response to social turmoil of the 1960s. Rejecting mainstream society, the intention of war from the US government, they retreated from the dominant culture by living in rural communities. It could be argued that the Amish people are a counterculture as like the hippies they had “chosen to live apart from the world in rural communal settlements” (Dowd, P.22, 2003) However they don’t challenge mainstream beliefs they sit aside the mainstream.

Subcultural theory was explored by Chicago School during the 1920s, they used subculture to explain crime. Their research focused on the working class, immigrants and African Americans. They concluded that subcultures are an ingredient of crime made up of deviant frameworks. Functionalist, Albert Cohen later added to this perception. In his book *Delinquent boys: the culture of the gang* Cohen states that subcultures are the result of status frustration among young working-class males. Stating, the working class are less likely to achieve in education than middle class students due to cultural deprivation, meaning that working class attitudes to work and school is the reason for their failure as opposed to material deprivation relating to issues surrounding resources and capitalism. Their lack of achievement means they lack the status they crave, so they turn to subgroups with their own values and beliefs, characterised by delinquent behaviour. It’s easier for them to gain status here. Today this seems a narrow and outdated view however they were some of the first sociologists to carry out research about and theorize subcultures.

Sociologist Keith Khan-Harris looks at subcultures in a positive light preaching their importance in the modern world we live in. In his TED X talk: *scenes, subcultures, groups – obscure but outstanding* he talks about Dunbar's number, Anthropologist Robin Dunbar found "the number of people we know personally, who we can trust whom we feel some emotional affinity for is 150" (Dunbar, 2010, P.4) Khan-Harris concluded our mental capacity to maintain relationships with other people is only a tiny fraction of the world's population, yet cultural hegemony dominates our lives, eroding meaning and heterogeneity along with it. Subcultures can offer an escape from the overwhelming mainstream.

Louis Theroux documents subculture well. In his BBC series *weird weekends*, he visits various group in the USA, all of which holding vastly different beliefs, practices and outlooks of life from each other. He affectively emersed himself in these small worlds, collecting qualitative information about how they live their lives, giving the viewer an insight into subcultures that unless you are a part of, would have little prior knowledge about them due to the lack of their representation in mainstream media. Theroux presents diversity in society, educating us on the different viewpoints of others which is an important step towards equality and understanding each other.

In terms of artistic practice, I admire Jim Goldberg's documentation of subculture. Goldberg specialises in documentary photography; he has released several books each of which focusing on a certain group of society. My favourites are *Raised by Wolves* and *Rich and Poor*. In *Raised by Wolves* he emersed himself in youth subcultures, capturing "the lives of people living on the fringes of society" (Magnum Photos, 2022) including young people living in poverty, many of whom addicted to drugs and or homeless. Next to the

photographs in the book is handwritten text by the person featured in the photo, a few comments about their life, often dark and depressing. There's something so authentic about Goldberg's work which I find very inspiring. An idea for my third-year practice would be to document subculture, to shine the light on a culture people don't usually see, this could involve meeting new people and documenting their lives.

Sleazy old men
Jack'n off in front of me
you have to get high to do it



Figure 1 – Jim Goldberg, *Raised by Wolves*, 1995

Self-Expression

“We define self-expression as expressing one's thoughts and feelings and these expressions can be accomplished through words, choices or actions” (Kim & Ko 2007)

Self-expression can appear in numerous forms, the more obvious are speech, body language and action. More passive means of expression include art, music and writing. Self-expression is essentially communicating one's point of view, originating from the authentic self, not echoing the voice of others. In Kim and Ko's book *culture and self-expression* they explore the cultural context in which self-expression can be perceived. In western culture, substantial value is placed on individuality and the freedom of the self, any derailment of this outlook is seen as a negative, having a herd mentality is seen as unauthentic. Western culture presents self-expression as a key to happiness, empowering the individual, "to distinguish themselves from others, to reflect their own beliefs and needs and validate their own self concepts" (Kim and Ko 2007). In East Asian cultures they're focused less on internal influence from the individual, they view self-behaviour as guided by the individual's social surroundings conforming to shared beliefs, norms and social expectations. In cultures such as these "the practice of expressing one's thoughts feelings is either discouraged or simply considered trivial and consequential" (Kim and Ko, 2007) These differing attitudes towards self-expression has pros and cons, on the one hand, East Asian countries such as Japan "Suicide is the leading cause of death in men between the ages of 20-44" review (Suicide Rate by Country 2022, 2022) This may be because sharing one's feelings isn't encouraged in their culture, therefore leaving people to bottle up their emotions causing mental health problems. On the contrary comparing crime rates between Japan and the USA, the USA has higher levels of violent crime, this may be because encouragement of individual free will and are less conforming to shared norms.

Some say we're most authentic when we are young, thus more expressive of the self because "when you're a kid you don't know how to disguise, your differences" (McHugh 2013) As we mature, layers of expectations, norms and conformities change us as a person. Self-expression runs parallel to art; it is said we're more creative as young children. Frank Cizek "sometimes credited as the discoverer of child art" (Malvern 1995) demonstrates this statement. Austrian painter, Cizek ran art schools for children in the 1920s. He nurtured the child's thought process, "Cizek saw his role as art educator, not in terms of instruction but as a gardener" (Duncum 1982) removing outside influences of adult made art, so that the children could rely solely on their own thoughts ideas rather than imitate what's already been done. Cizek publicly exhibited the children's work and people were extremely impressed by how much certainty and expression was within their work.

In Mitchell Green's book *self-expression*, he states that "an artist might create a work without expressing his or her own feelings; Beethoven is said to have brought audiences to tears while smirking through his performances" (Green 2007) This implies that art is not necessarily fuelled by self-expression, neither does it hinder artistry.

Self-expression is a distinct part of Jean Michelle Basquiat's work; Basquiat was part of the neo-expressionist movement which mainly portrayed the human body. Figure 2 shows Basquiat's 1982 self-portrait, *Self Portrait as a Heel*. This painting presents himself wearing a mask, with depicting squinting eyes and gritting teeth. One would imagine he's hiding his suffering with a mask. There's also a blue collar round his neck attached to a leash,

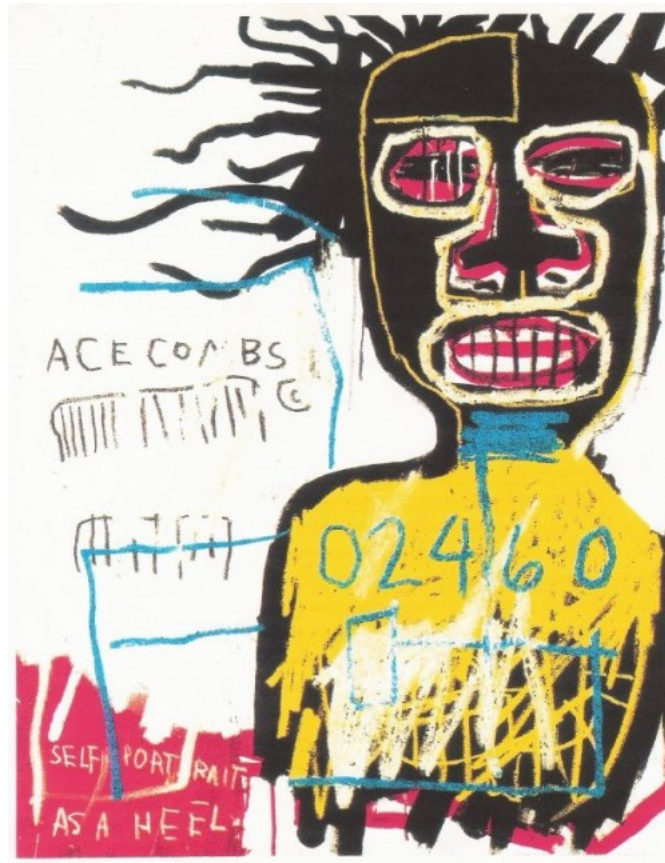


Figure 2 – Jean Michelle Basquiat, *Self Portrait as Heel*, 1982

also numbers across his chest like a prisoner. The markings are rough and abrasive. Overall, this self-portrait is suggestive that he is angry, suffering and under control. I admire how abstract he communicates his feelings, its mysterious, leading the viewer to make their own interpretation. This is a release of feeling rather than clear communication. My interpretation may be different from what he's expressing, I'll never know what he truly felt. When interpreting Basquiat's work, I notice recognisable elements which relate to my life in order to solve the meaning, due to the abstract nature. In doing so there's moment of self-

reflection, in which I feel connected to the artist, self-reflecting in their self-expression.

Which makes me wonder how we can understand someone else's self-expression without tapping into our own thoughts, beliefs and feelings, elements that make up the self, enabling us to connect on a deeper level with others. This is a powerful aspect of abstract art; it creates space for the viewer to think.

Basquiat's my approach to practice, thinking how can I intrigue the viewer to be curious about the meaning of something? How can I get the viewer to think rather than the design does the thinking for them? How can I encourage self-discovery whilst they're in that headspace?

Basquiat has previously inspired my practice. Figure 3 shows a monoprint in response to a



music album. Basquiat inspired me to use the human body as a form of expression. I have an idea to revisit this theme of work for my third-year practice, I would like to explore the idea of self-expression and how we all express ourselves in different ways as everyone has unique personalities. This head figure as seen

Figure 3 – *Huw Edwards, Album Rebrand, 2021*

in figure 3 could become a series, depicting a range of people's emotions or the same person depicting a range of emotions. Graphic Design isn't typically self-expressed base, it would be interesting to play around with that idea.

Curiosity

"Curiosity is an ambiguous passion: the virtuous impulse behind the search for knowledge and at the same time a disreputable desire for novelty and strangeness" (Southbank centre)

Curiosity can be defined as the desire to learn or know something, curiosity is characterized by inquisitive thinking, observing and exploration. "Curiosity is an innate human trait" (Wire, 2014) assigned to us since birth. Young children express curiosity the most, "research shows that 4-year-olds ask 300 questions every day" (Cohen and Harrison, 2018) As we mature, we think less inquisitively and ask less questions, because of our increased involvement in systems and institutions as we mature, conditioning us to think a certain way. There's a trend in psychological research, outlining children to have an abundance of self-expression,

curiosity and creativity. However, as we mature, we lose our inner child. Picasso once said, “every child is an artist, the problems is staying an artist when you grow up” (Quote investigator) It’s a similar concept to Cizek’s approach to teaching children, he intended to keep outside influences away from students as he believed that the artist was already within them, he just needed to nurture it. As a creative, I think it’s important to tap into the inner child genius, in order to come up with original ideas, we must explore, experiment, imagine and question things. These fundamental behaviours of the creative process can promote change in the world.



Figure 4 – Olafur Eliasson, *The Weather Project*, 2003

<https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/art/jim-goldberg-raised-by-wolves/>

An artist who I admire for their outstanding curiosity is Olafur Eliasson. Olafur is widely recognized for creating interactive spaces and experiences for his audience. He experiments with light, space and colour to play with how humans perceive the world. “My work is completely dependent on the spectator turning ideas into art” (Eliasson 2019) Olafur’s work is of a two-way nature, he engineers the environment for the spectator to be completely physically and mentally emerged in his work, relying on the spectators to connect with the work. In 2003, Olafur’s *The weather project* exhibited in the Tate shown in figure 4. He

recreated the sun in the sky, he used monochromatic light suppressing all colour apart from black and yellow tricking people's perception of colour. The monochromatic light suppressed the individual's aesthetics, so people became more aware of their collective bond as humans, as everyone looked the same. It also makes people think about global warming, the proximity of the sun can be seen as a metaphor for the earth getting hotter. "The weather project marked a certain paradigm change on how people perceive contemporary art, something that's relevant to how you see the world" (Biesenbach 2019)

Olafur has no limits to his curiosity, his inquisitiveness drives his work. He is constantly building on what he knows by asking questions but also putting the spectator in the position to be curious about lots of things. I find this very inspiring, makes believe that anything is possible in my practice. It has inspired me to think how I can use larger spaces and interact with the public, inspiring curiosity in others. For my third-year practice I could produce a large-scale project using public space in Swansea.

From exploring these three words, I have broadened my knowledge of each field, making connections from philosophers' theories about the general subject to how it fits in with the creative sphere by exploring the work of different artists. There's a lot that distinguishes subculture, self-expression and curiosity. Research around subculture takes a sociological and political standpoint. Subculture is vaguer in art as artists within those subcultures are usually unaware, they're immersed in it. This is different to self-expression which is widely associated with art and easier to contextualise in that sphere, curiosity on the other hand is

such a broad topic that it requires specializing certain facets of the subject. These subjects are also interconnected with each other, subcultures stand apart from dominant culture in order to manifest a collective viewpoint, they express a shared identity with certain characteristics. This links in with self-expression being the idea of manifesting the individual's viewpoint, often an individual's viewpoint has come from a shared belief such as a subculture they've emerged in. I would describe subculture to be third person form of expression and self-expression to be first person. Subcultures such as the skateboarding scene, are characterised by self-expression, high value is placed on style via the way one skates or their fashion sense. It could be argued that self-expression is fuelled by external influences such as the subculture ones emerged in, as depicted in Goldberg's work the comments made by the people documented are usually about things, they have witnessed around them. Curiosity could be considered a form of self-expression, an impulse or desire of similar nature to expression. Curiosity about one another drives understanding among people thus we learn about different parts of society other subcultures. If it wasn't for curiosity we'd lack an open mind. I think my preferred areas to research into for third year would be self-expression and subculture. Exploring the notion of the self and the idea we're all unique, originating from all sorts of contexts and groups. Do we see others in our selves or ourselves in others, are we made from external factors or internal?

Research Question

Outline the differences between how dominant culture and subculture is represented in the media and how this affects graphic design practices

Figures

Figure 1 – Jim Goldberg (1995) *Raised by Wolves*. Available at: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/art/jim-goldberg-raised-by-wolves/> (accessed: 4/05/2022)

Figure 2- Jean Michelle Basquiat (1982) *Self Portrait as Heel*. Available at: <https://medium.com/@lexxbeknown/root-of-self-portraits-basquiat-meets-lam-698ab830deeb> (accessed: 04/05/2022)

Figure 3 – Huw Edwards (2022) *Album Rebrand*

Figure 4 – Olafur Eliasson (2003) *The Weather Project*. Available at: <https://publicdelivery.org/olafur-eliasson-the-weather-project/> (accessed: 04/05/2022)

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