

Sketchy Confessions

Ava Maken Ali

This creative piece of mine — I mean these handwritten sketches you are about to see (yes, I know this is also handwritten) — is about my work called “Incomplete Toy”. This work is a socially engaged art practice because it goes beyond just being an art object and lets me “break away, at least temporarily from self-referentiality” (Halguera, 2011). Whatever, I birthed them (are you shocked? Yes, of course, my works are my babies) during a class, ARTE 501 taught by Dr. Jennifer Bergmark, a professor in the Art Education program at UIUC whose research interests include community art education. [If you are reading this Jennifer, thank you!]

These handwritten sketches show the real relationship between me and my papers (which basically means my paper is kind of an extension of me), where I can confess how much I hate certain things (and trust me, I really do)! Like when William Powhida expresses in his handwritten notes on “Artist’s Statement (No One Here Gets Out Alive)” (2019) how much he hates artists’ Statement (Jaffe, 2013) or when Dr. Jorge Lucero created his “APA-Style drawing” in an email format to reject traditional academic papers (Lucero, 2017).

So do NOT please go looking for happy endings or solutions or a mistaken-free article in my paper because all I show and talk about are me and my struggles — with my life and with traditional methods. It is about my way of expressing my true self, feelings, and mostly painful experiences (OMG, I love them) beyond the traditional scholarly stuff (it does not mean I am against it. It is more of a mixed feeling, like I am in an academic relationship that has its ups and downs. You know what I mean?). And this is exactly what

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radical imagination is about: to look down deep for the problem rather than finding a shallow solution (Haiven & Khasnabish, 2014)

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Incomplete Toy

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Once upon a time in our Socially Engaged Art practice class, what I initially thought constituted socially engaged art was creating many art with happy, happy endings... But I was wrong... This paper explores the meaning of Socially Engaged Art practice through the lens of my final project

in this class, which involves engaging with the practice and also being against it at the same time.

My project entitled, “Incomplete Toy,” is a piece in a larger socially engaged art box. Crafted within this collection is a shopping box that resembles parts of a camel, each piece having a unique barcode. This broken camel symbolizes a family crisis and my own heart break from a broken relationship over the past year. Each barcode represents a piece of these difficult moments, showing how life can shatter into fragments.

A symbolic receipt accompanies the bag, signifying the unfulfilled debts owed to people by society. It's a reminder of the emotional, mental, and social costs of these tough times. This receipt is a sign of what's been lost — things like missed chances, emotional pain, and a sense of belonging that was broken.

The disconnected camel parts show how these experiences leave a lasting impact. Even as time goes on and wounds start to heal, the camel can't be put back together. It shows how some things are lost forever, no matter how much healing happens.

My artwork aims to make people think about how hard times and unfairness affect us. It shows that healing doesn't always fully happen, leaving us feeling empty after difficult experiences. I want viewers to interact with the pieces, try to rebuild the camel, and realize it's impossible. This reflects the emptiness we feel after tough times. By asking viewers to connect this feeling with their own experiences from the past year, the project encourages them to think about how tough events might make them feel incomplete. It's about recognizing the impact of difficult times,

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pushing for healing, both personally and in society. This explanation connects to an article I read about Socially Engaged Art (Helguera, 2011). It talks about creating a community where people actively talk and learn from each other. This participation lets people own their experiences and share them, making art that affects everyone and strengthens community bonds. Each project's goals in engaging a community can differ based on the project and the artist's intentions. So, if my artwork allows participants to touch it and by answering my questions, they can think about their lives, then I believe I've created a place of socially engaged art.

I have confusion about Socially Engaged Art practice, especially after reading an article discussing its characteristics and principles. According to Schlemmer (2017), socially engaged artistic practices focus more on social interaction, participation, and collaboration than the artwork itself. These practices prioritize context over the art object and involve various forms such as events, conceptual art, performances. They aim to empower individuals and communities, promoting integrity, personal pride, and community identity while challenging traditional art norms. These principles emphasize spectator involvement, encourage dialogue, and contribute to a better quality of life. As an artist, it's challenging for me to shift focus from the final product and welcome strangers into my creative world! Yet, if my project encourages participants to engage by reading and touching the artwork and reflecting on their life experiences, they might be considered as "Directed Participants," a concept discussed in Helguera's article "Education for socially engaged art" (2011).

In this article, different levels of participation in socially engaged art are outlined:

- a. Nominal participation: visitors have a minimal role, perhaps serving as instruments for the work's completion.

- b. Directed participation: visitors perform specific tasks guided by the artist, allowing for more agency.
- c. Creative participation: visitors contribute content within a structure set by the artist, becoming part of the artwork.
- d. Collaborative participation: visitors engage in dialogue and collaborate directly with the artist, sharing responsibility for developing the artwork.

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Each level represents varying degrees of involvement, with collaborative participation involving deeper engagement and contribution to the artwork.

When I considered creating socially engaged art, it led me to the idea of the “Incomplete Toy.” Balancing my concepts and final creations was challenging, and I remained uncertain about the true essence of socially engaged art. Some examples, like the “Code 33” project (Roth, 2001) didn’t align with what I was seeking as they directly addressed controversial issues.

This project aimed to improve relations between young people and the police in Oakland, California. It facilitated dialogues between youth and officers, creating a safe space for open conversations. Culminating in a public debate in 1999, this initiative allowed both groups to share their perspectives. While the explicit impact of the project isn't detailed, its aim appeared to foster positive change in their relationship.

However, it was not the end of the story, as I learned from Duncombe’s article “Does it work?:the effect of Activist Art” (2016). I found socially engaged art practices that shifted my perspective. “Gift Horse,” an installation by Hans Haacke, impacted me greatly. This artwork

features a horse skeleton with a stock ticker displaying live stock prices. It comments on the connection between power, money, and history. Haacke contrasts the horse skeleton with the stock ticker to reveal how money influences our perception of history. The artwork challenges dominant power structures and encourages critical thinking about contemporary issues.

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Socially Engaged Art challenges our perception of democracy, as seen in Thomas Hirshhorn's "Swiss Swiss Democracy." This example is discussed in the article by Anthon Gardner titled "De-idealizing Democracy: On Thomas Hirshhorn's Postsocialist Projects" (Gardner, 2012).

Hirshhorn employs everyday materials to depict the harsh realities of war and the misinterpretation of democracy. Instead of simply involving the audience, he encourages critical thinking, making them active participants. Influenced by Joseph Beuys, his work evaluates the political aspect of art history. The exhibition "Swiss Swiss Democracy" particularly critiqued democracy, notably in connection to the (...redacted...) invasion in 2003. This led to controversy, with Swiss politicians calling for the resignation of the exhibition's director and cutting his funding. Hirshhorn's art deeply engaged the audience, provoking contemplation on democracy's abuse, war, and violence.

As a woman, discussing unusual topics was hindered by challenges like language barriers, cultural differences, and (...redacted...). However, my friend Umar often highlights projects like "Swiss Swiss Democracy", providing that there's space for unconventional ideas. "Incomplete Toy" allowed me to express my darker thoughts while still finding happiness and connecting with others facing similar issues.

“Incomplete Toy” serves as a clarion call to recognize and deal with the lasting effects of difficult times collectively. It encourages discussions about healing and change. The instructions — open the gift, read the receipt, play with the toy, and relate it to your own life — invites viewers to engage with empathy and reflect on how fragments resonate within all of us.

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