

Political Bodies: Agency and Intention

The jurors of this exhibition chose works that challenge long-held beliefs, ideas, and ideals that contribute to the social justice issues we face in society today. Changing the conversation requires constant vigilance because of the cyclical tendency for those beliefs, ideals and ideas to drift toward extremism. We often think of physical violence when we think of extremism, but it often begins with seemingly innocuous thoughts and actions. Extremism begins when we believe that our well-being requires some kind of negative act against another group or individual. It starts with the need to compete for what it is that we think we have a tenuous hold on, whether it's resources, access, favor, etc. – anything that we think we'll lose unless this thing is denied to someone else. Examples of negative acts of extremism include verbal attacks, discriminatory behavior, embracing of stereotypes, bias, and sabotage. Those thoughts and actions are believed to be necessary and justified. J.M. Berger, an expert on extremist movements and terrorism, explains that extremism arises from a perception of “us versus them,” intensified by the conviction that the success of “us” is inseparable from the diminishment of “them.”

Artists' books are inclusive, even when the subject is specific to a particular group. The most esoteric experiences invite viewer participation. The tactile nature of the book has the power to steer conversations in positive and meaningful ways. Artists' books are tools for communication, and are perfect vehicles for initiating conversations. The artist book is approachable and has the ability to draw the audience in, possibly presenting an alternate view that can potentially ignite the spark that spurs change. Each of the works in this exhibition offers a view that could initiate or contribute to a conversation. Through sharing stories, they speak about our world and the way we move about within it – how we treat ourselves, our resources, and each other. Our actions can be inclusive and respectful, but they can also be negative. Negative actions are often spurred by deep-seated, long-held beliefs that have real-life consequences for those who are targeted. These negative actions touch on many ways in which we are “othered” and that we participate in “othering.”

For several years, my husband, daughter, and I spent Thanksgiving Day with a friend - a transplanted New Yorker - and her family and friends. We arrived each year with dish in hand, contributing offerings to the grand feast. Lively discussions of the latest happenings in music, politics, and culture were the usual accompaniments to the turkey, ham, sweet potatoes, peas and rice, appetizers, and desserts. During one Thanksgiving conversation, my friend presented impassioned instructions for activism for a cause I no longer remember. What I do remember, however, is feeling overwhelmed by her instructions and instinctively blurting out, “I'm just not political!” Time slowed as that last “I” lingered before it escaped my lips. My eyes widened. I immediately realized my error.

Sometimes all it takes is the slightest shift of perspective to change the conversation. That shift can be spurred by an image, or word, a color, or a shape, a smell – just a tiny something that makes a person consider or reconsider an emotion, event, situation, or belief. Even slowing down can spur a shift. Such was the case when I responded to my friend's suggestions for change. In my quiet, introverted mind, to be political meant to be loud. In fact, being political can be loud, but that is not always the case.

We are political bodies. We who are or have been othered, whether by race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, culture, etc.; we are political bodies. For us, simply breathing is a political act. Existence is a political act. To thrive, to stand up, to call out and to push back – these are all political acts. Society tends toward the binary of either/or. When popular or political dialog emphasizes either/or decisions, it is often at the expense of those at the margins. The works in this exhibition highlight stories of marginalization.

7-year old Lamya Cammon sat in her first-grade classroom at a Milwaukee elementary school. As her teacher spoke to the class, Lamya absentmindedly played with her beaded braids. The teacher instructed Lamya to stop playing with her braids. She stopped, but became distracted and began playing with them again. The teacher called Lamya to the front of the class, where instead of tying Lamya's hair back, she cut one of the child's braids off with a pair of scissors and threw it in the trash can. The first grader, humiliated and terrified, returned to her desk and cried as her classmates laughed.

You may be familiar with a video widely circulated on social media of Diamond Campbell encircled by several young women fervently removing beads from her hair. Diamond, a powerlifter, attends high school in Mississippi. During her competition in the state championship, a judge informed one of her coaches that Diamond would be disqualified, unless she removed the beads from her braids. Diamond sat on a bench in the locker room while her teammates and members of a competing team frantically helped her remove the beads from her hair. Diamond finished the competition, recording a personal best in the deadlift and finished fourth in her weight class. The video was often cited as a positive example of support. What was not mentioned was trauma. Diamond stated that though the actions of her fellow teammates and competitors lifted her mentally and emotionally, she was ashamed and humiliated to be called out by the judges for her hairstyle.

Andrew "Drew" Johnson, a New Jersey high school student was informed by a referee after the start of his wrestling match that he had 90 seconds to cut his hair before competing, citing his locs as "unnatural." Drew stepped to the sidelines and his trainer lopped off his braids with a pair of scissors as the audience watched and gasped from the bleachers. The 16-year old's hair was deemed acceptable once half of the locs were removed, and though visibly shaken, competed his match. Drew, described as a shy being, continues to be haunted by the experience to this day.

These are but a few fairly recent incidents, variations of which occur daily. They underscore the relevance of the *Creating a Respectful and Open World for Natural Hair*, or CROWN, Act. The CROWN Act prohibits race-based hair discrimination, including the denial of employment or educational opportunities based on one's hair texture or wearing of protective hairstyles such as braids, locs, twists or Bantu knots. The bill was passed into law in 17 states, has been adopted by several municipalities across the country, and was passed by the US House of Representatives. It is currently before several legislative bodies, including the US Senate. The CROWN Act ensures that persons of African ancestry maintain agency over their bodies, in this case the right to wear natural hairstyles, free of discrimination.

There are several definitions of agency and each differs slightly. Social agency is the ability or capacity of individuals, institutions, or organizations to act, have influence or transform. A

university that opens enrollment previously denied to a group of persons is exercising social agency, for example. Historical agency refers to the power of individuals, groups, and institutions to resist, blunt, or alter historical conditions. Affirmative Action was put into place to alter historical conditions, particularly denial of employment of people of color, because of the tendency for employers not to consider candidates from marginalized groups. Finally, there is political agency, which is the capacity of individuals to act independently and to make their own free choices. Political agency refers to the feeling of control over one's actions and their consequences, and this is the type of agency I am particularly interested in exploring.

Some time ago, I began using hair in my artist books as a response to an impulsive decision to chemically straighten my hair after having worn it in natural styles for years. I questioned my decision immediately after leaving the salon – not because I was unhappy with the outcome, but because of the political implications of my actions and because I had been down the road of regular salon visits required for upkeep, and I understood the potential for hair breakage. Chemical straighteners are hard on both the hair and the scalp. It was a time of intense introspection, and I sought out articles and essays about hair to help me examine my actions and the positive comments and attention I received after straightening it. My hair was and is political, whether intended or not.

I am honored that *Wrongful Termination* is included in this exhibition. It is an altered law book that addresses race-based discriminatory practices against persons of African descent who wore their hair in styles featuring its natural texture. Unfortunately, Lamya, Diamond, and Drew's hair discrimination experiences are shared by many who have been targeted for wearing styles featuring their natural hair texture. Lawsuits continue to be filed against employers, schools, and businesses by people of color who have experienced discrimination for wearing their naturally textured hair.

Lamya, Diamond, and Drew's stories are examples of children who have had experiences which forced them to navigate the humiliation, shame, anger, and confusion of random discrimination based on hair texture. Post event, they are left to deal with stress, embarrassment, and rejection, which may have long-lasting effects. They are forced to cope with adults telling them, through action and words, that they are defective in some way. When hair is handled without permission, they must come to terms with the lack of control over their own bodies and of being touched by strangers or near-strangers. In this time of social media, they also have to deal with their personal rejection replayed widely, repeatedly, and forever.

Many more examples of this type of discrimination exist, including adults who were fired from their jobs regardless of how conservative their hairstyles may have been. Challenges to one's hair texture are challenges to one's identity. Such incidents often coincide with interpretations of discriminatory and arbitrary rules, and send a message to the wearer that they themselves are not acceptable. Hair discrimination strips the wearer of natural hair styles of their right to exercise agency over their bodies. Most practices that aim to marginalize strip the individual of control over their body.

In *Wrongful Termination*, the viewer is invited to participate in the hair care ritual by slowly turning plastic hair rollers. As the rollers are turned, narrow scrolls unfurl to reveal selections taken from newspaper editorials that feature negative comments about natural hair. For example:

- Wear your hair straight because natural hair will limit your opportunities. No one will hire you. No one will want you.
- In a civilized culture, there are norms. The majority wins.

The tightly rolled text forces the reader to slow down and to contemplate. Hair is also attached to the bottom of the book away from the text, almost out of sight and protected. Hair is body, and one's agency over it must be maintained.

Books containing hair, such as *Wrongful Termination*, offer an opportunity to expand the conversation about practices that are not mainstream – in this case hair culture similarities – and how marginalized persons can suffer based on common assumptions. The materials used in the book facilitate the ability to understand something more meaningful in the ritual. They present another point of view, that of imagining hair and the act of grooming it as a site of resistance against Westernized beauty norms that insist that “other” equals something bad/unattractive/worth less/worthless.

Some artists' books enter conversations in response to current events. Such works may initially be created as a personal protest or to examine some aspect of the event. In my practice, it usually takes a significant amount of time, often years, to examine and gain a clear perspective in order to respond to an event. For example, my mother passed away unexpectedly around the time of the contentious 2016 presidential election. The weekend before the election, we buried her, and very early the Wednesday morning after the election, we made the long drive back home. I was unmoored both by my mother's death and the random instances of violence against persons of color that resulted directly from the election. I remember returning home, being so rattled, and going through my boxes of supplies, which helped to calm my spirit. I came across four round wooden boxes that had been in my stash for several years, just waiting to become a book, but up until that time I had no specific plans for them. About two years later, I picked up a small frame that held a square of linen that I'd knotted hair onto for another project. I removed the linen from the frame and stretched it over a circle of padded board, and affixed additional hair to cover the circle. After cutting down the bottom of the round box and inserting the hair-covered pad, I closed the lid. The next day, I opened the box and was shocked and surprised at how much the padded hair base looked like the top of an actual head. That sensation of shock, sadness, and anger exactly expressed the emotions I experienced during that time.

In writing about racism, Audre Lorde's words easily expand to the anger and despair that marginalized persons feel. She speaks of anger as a response to exclusion, of unquestioned privilege, of distortions, of silence, ill-use, stereotyping, defensiveness, mis-naming, betrayal, and co-option. She encourages us to use anger as an agent for growth. At the same time, Lorde acknowledges guilt and goes on to say that guilt and defensiveness are bricks in a wall in which we all flounder. As a marginalized person, Lorde cautions against comparing levels of oppression between marginalized groups, which has the effect of further marginalization. Artists create books featuring subjects that they care about. Such books portray a vulnerability that can

provide insight into emotional landscapes that have the potential to grab the viewer in unique ways. Anger is an emotion that can be used with intention; it can be the spark that engages a conversation.

Artists whose work is featured in this exhibition made books with intention. An intention is an aim, plan, or determination to act in a certain way. Whether it is beforehand or during creation, the artist determines the tone, how the viewer should move through the work, and how the scale, imagery, and words will help to relay the story. Some may have considered beforehand how they wanted or hoped the work would participate in a conversation. For some, the intent is to help with healing, which is a medical definition of intention.

My first intention when creating a book is to share an experience or story or thought. Sometimes the theme runs counter to a negative event. This is not a defensive measure, rather it is a consequence of the systemic nature of racism in our society. Creating books is my way of ordering, of figuring out, of working through.

A book about joy has a bit of pain as an undercurrent. For example, a book can be both a celebration of Black haircare and a statement against natural hair bias. A book that features hair straightening stories from a conversation between a group of women can be lively and restorative, even when some of the experiences were unpleasant (traumatic, even), or loaded with negative subliminal messages. Such a book can tell someone they are not alone.

Artists' books can provide spaces for understanding by investigating individual actions with compassion. A book in the form of a shrine can document a ritual for bad weather and serve as witness to the fear and helplessness of being upended by violent storms. Those who have been visited by deadly natural events can appreciate the magnitude of the fear that comes through in the ritual. At the same time, artists' books welcome readers without those experiences, reaching out in solidarity. Because at their heart, human experiences are human. So those who may not have witnessed deadly storms might be able to catch a kernel of the fear of lightning, strong wind, or other weather events they may have experienced. All that's needed is a spark to initiate a moment of understanding.

Why is changing the conversation important and how might we do this? Or perhaps a better question to ask is, "is changing the conversation even possible, given the long history of ill-doings of humans over the millennia?" We want to change the conversation in order to make ourselves and our communities whole. We must remember our past and current struggles in order to fashion our futures and to stop the cycle of societies and governments repeating the same transgressions over and over. We need lots of stories of all kinds. We need stories that challenge us, but also relevant are stories about love and joy, because they speak to our multi-dimensionality as marginalized persons and communities. Stories about joy are as politically valid as stories about pain.

Every story is an invitation. It's necessary to have stories that speak to various experiences within marginalized communities, as well as those that speak from outside. Works of solidarity from the mainstream are needed, particularly when they are centered on healing and support because the mainstream is also affected by the marginalization of others.

In her essay, *Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness*, bell hooks writes, “In much new, exciting cultural practice and cultural texts...there is an effort to remember that is expressive of the need to create spaces where one is able to redeem and reclaim the past, legacies of pain, suffering, and triumph in ways that transform present reality.”

Books help us to order and make sense of experiences, particularly when those experiences are negative. They allow us to move past discrimination, stereotype, bias, and racism and on to healing, inclusiveness, justice, and understanding. As artists we make books to underscore what truly matters. We are able to spark or contribute to conversations through works, for example, that feature stories of the transformative power of action, understanding, and experience. We can get to the kernel of life and speak to the unboundedness of love.

We must focus on the big stories and the small stories, because systems meant to marginalize are woven into every aspect of our culture. A wide variety of stories help us to see commonalities with those for whom we may think to have nothing in common. They help us as individuals reconsider views that humans tend to make, based on our limited personal experience or the experience within our limited circles. Each community and each person that populates this Earth has experiences that are unique. Our limitations, or our limited experience, can trick us into thinking that we know it all. Changing a conversation is akin to changing the gaze - looking inward as well as outward, centering self, centering community. It's also about how we respect and nurture ourselves because a society cannot heal, or even consider others, without first respecting ourselves. This is hard work. It's hard to intentionally turn inward. It's hard to consider that we ourselves might be inadvertently contributing to an issue; that we are unintentionally supporting the machine that is deeply entrenched in systemic racism by othering, stereotyping, sabotaging, ghosting, co-opting. But self-examination is required for fundamental change, and the process can be initiated when one comes into contact with a story that, though different, feels vaguely familiar.

Recently, I created a book that began as an exercise of self-examination. It started by focusing on negative thoughts and reactions that I expressed in response to situations beyond my control. I realized that there are many ways in which I might respond to or consider events and information. The book contains an inventory, or arsenal, of responses. It places the reader in the central position to consider multiple ways in which one can internalize stimuli, data, events, and information, and come to conclusions based on one's analysis of or interaction with them. How should I be? What is my approach and why? Do I really want to respond this way? Why do I think that? In the end, we cannot force others to change, but we have the power within us to decide how we react and perhaps that reaction can change a conversation.

In the late 1940's, leaders from several nations gathered to create protocols with the intent of avoiding repeat instances of genocide, torture, and other inhumane actions that marked a devastating war. One of the documents created was the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which outlines a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations. The Declaration was signed just after the end of World War II on December 10, 1948 at the UN General Assembly in Paris. The document contains language of the time, binary and at times patriarchal, but it underscores the need to acknowledge the right of every human to live freely

with dignity, a life of liberty and security. The Declaration, signed unanimously so many years ago, bears witness to the harm that we do to each other as countries, communities, and individuals. It is aspirational. Each of the signees had issues going on in their respective countries at the time of signing, and none of the countries were truly in alignment with The Declaration. For example, in the US, at the time this document was signed:

- Racial violence continued against Black Americans across the country. In the South, Jim Crow statutes maintained a program of terror through harassment, night raids, and lynching.
- Over a million Black Americans served in World War II, yet upon returning home, many suffered harassment, physical violence, and in some cases, were slain, particularly if they asserted their rights or wore their uniform. Many were also denied GI Bill benefits promised to them upon enlistment.
- Also in the US, women had gained the right to vote in 1920, but Black men and women across the South risked harassment, imprisonment, or death for attempting to vote and would not be able to do so safely until after the passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1965.
- Women and persons of color, earned substantially lower wages for equal work.
- Over 200,000 Filipino men were recruited into the US Army to fight in World War II with the promise of US citizenship and full GI benefits. In 1946, Congress passed the Rescission Act, which classified their service as inactive, rendering them ineligible for GI benefits.
- A second wave of the eugenics movement was taking hold. While encouraging members of the clergy, college graduates, and middle-class citizens to have more children, proponents of eugenics justified sterilization for poor people on the basis of their assumed inability to care for their children. In North Carolina for example, 60% of those sterilized were in mental institutions and 40% were non-institutionalized poor.
- Six hundred indigent Black men in Macon County, Alabama, 399 with syphilis, were enrolled in the *Tuskegee Study of Untreated Syphilis in the Negro Male* (now referred to as the *US Public Health Service Syphilis Study at Tuskegee*). The goal of the study was to investigate, through autopsy, the effects of untreated syphilis. The men were enrolled without informed consent and with the promise of free medical care and insurance. Penicillin had just become the standard treatment of choice for syphilis. Congress passed the Henderson Act requiring tests and treatments for venereal diseases to be publicly funded yet the men enrolled in the study were denied access to treatment. A list was distributed to doctors in the community, identifying enrollees and instructing providers to refuse treatment. By the time the Declaration was signed, many of the subjects had died and their wives and children were infected. The study would continue for another 30 years until it was leaked to the press by a whistle-blower.

This is just a snapshot. Many more transgressions were occurring in the United States at the time the Declaration was signed. So why did the delegates sign the document knowing full well their countries were not in alignment with the goals outlined within it? The Declaration is a beacon. It's a "gold standard." The leaders signed because they understood that societies are continually in flux and can move far away from the framework of the Declaration. We are required to periodically recalibrate to move closer into alignment with the standard.

The Declaration is a living document in that it is ever relevant. And it is incumbent upon each of us to work towards making it a reality. Can we expect to reach the gold standard? No, because we are human. However, we each possess the choice to work toward the standard. As humans, we are also social creatures, meaning we live in communities and we are affected by our actions within the community. Each of us is called to do our part, whatever that might be, to attend to the health of our community. This includes turning the tide toward humane and equal treatment for all. The breadth of topics covered in the Declaration underscore the need to change the conversation on many levels.

How might artists' books steer the conversation toward realizing the ideals signed by the Declaration? Seeing ourselves in another's story can help us to consider another view, and can help eliminate the need for our views to be validated and approved. We become less apt to immediately think, "I'd never do this" or "I don't see how people do/think that." Those responses melt away as we become more aware of ourselves and considerate of others. This isn't absolution from critique or from pushing back, but it can open the way for thoughtful conversations and solutions. When we sincerely consider other ways of being and thinking, and our reactions to them, possibilities open. We can become braver and more confident. We can use resources respectfully and creatively. We can accept and appreciate ourselves and others. We can celebrate diversity of thought and of being. We can strive for an inclusiveness that does not negate or stratify, but for an inclusiveness that recognizes and accepts. We fight for it because we realize diversity is our strength. In this way, we can change the conversation.

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