

Do Artists Have a Social Responsibility?

I'm gonna put aside discussions of minoritized artists actively working to dismantle systems of oppression in their life/work/practice and instead address my thoughts to artists who do not often have their work/practice discussed in terms of social inequality.

To the artist wondering if they have a social responsibility to dismantle systems of oppression they may not be directly targeted by*:

1. Yes! You do!

And

2. Surprise! Your work is already dealing with inequality.

Artist to Wolfie: Whaaaat? Hoooooow?

Ok, lemme Wolfsplain something to you:

3. Having the ability to turn away from realities of oppression is a comfort many don't have.
4. This "turning away from" is in and of itself, an *active position*.
5. By not working to dismantle systems of oppression, you uphold and perpetuate them.

Huh?

6. Here's a quote that may help: "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." - Desmond Tutu

But Wolfie! I swear I'm not *actually* racist/cis supremacist/ableist/classist/misogynist!

7. Don't care.

7b. I don't care what you *are*, I care what you *do*. A cis person who is personally a wildly transphobic cis supremacist but actively works to make their workplace/school/etc trans-inclusive is about a million times more valuable to me than an allied and personally well meaning cis person who does nothing to tangibly and logistically make their spheres of influence more trans-inclusive.

8. "Yes, racism looks like hate, but hate is just one manifestation. Privilege is another. Access is another. Ignorance is another. Apathy is another. And so on. So while I agree with people who say no one is born racist, it remains a powerful system that we're immediately born into. It's like being born into air: you take it in as soon as you breathe. It's not a cold that you can get over. There is no anti-racist certification class. It's a set of socioeconomic traps and cultural values that are fired up every time we interact with the world. It is a thing you have to keep scooping out of the boat of your life to keep from drowning in it." - Scott Woods
9. We don't all get the comfort of starting out in the same kind of boat. Maybe it's that there's more than one boat here, or that they're taking on water at different rates. Maybe your boat's fine but your friend's hull's been breached. Then again, it could be that *you're* the person whose boat is compromised. And though you earnestly scoop out as much water as you can, you're alone in this task, and you find yourself in real peril of drowning. Hell, maybe you aren't even privileged enough to have a damn boat to scoop water out of and you're way the fuck up the shit creek of oppression without a paddle and are just concentrating on staying above the undertow. And yes, it's a

metaphor. But it's one I take to heart on a very practical, pragmatic level. Dismantling oppression can be (and is) literally life-saving. We only need to look at the consequences of holding various oppressed identities to see that. In terms of life-expectancy, rates of graduation, earnings, suicide, overall net wealth, generational wealth, access to culturally competent healthcare and education, right to bodily-autonomy, and freedom from colonization, torture, harassment and state sanctioned murder, the discrepancies between various privileged and oppressed realities are very real. So as I see it, in the face of these realities of inequality, it is an *active choice* to remain apathetic. To use ones privileged identities to distance oneself from the realities of oppression is perhaps metaphorically like watching someone drown in a leaking boat while you're laying on the deck of your yacht slurping on a daiquiri and using a life preserver as a foot rest. But in all fairness, maybe your yacht's taking on water also (you too have a minoritized identity), but the hole's so small, and the leak's so slow (you have many more privileged identities than minoritized ones), that you're sure the lifeboats will get to you in time. >I'm looking at all you non-allied cis, white, rich, abled, gay folks out there!< So if you don't actually want to be sitting pretty all by yourself as the rest of your friends, family and lovers go down in the tidal waves of oppression, then grab a dinghy, paddle over, and get to scooping. I'll even give you a title. First mate of oppression scoopage.

10. If you're not *actually* _____, then I dare you to *actually* do something about it!

But Wolfie! I am but one measly little artiste, what can I do to sever the ties of the huge, interlocking, macrame knot of oppression?

11. Learn about the histories and present day realities of social inequalities and how they intersect and uphold each other.

10b. do not rely on minoritized people to provide you with this, remember, we're too busy surviving the daily tidal waves of oppression to be anyone's personal tutors!

10c. Cast a wide net: When learning about realities of oppression, make the connections between various forms of inequality. What do realities of human sex trafficking, the relentless killing of black and brown folks by police, the forced sterilizations of disabled, trans and native people, the mass reproductive assault of non-human animals in the meat and dairy industry all have in common? They are all methods of denying beings their bodily autonomy. They are all different ways of saying "There is that much less vitality, consciousness, and, perhaps, joy in the universe." When wielded, they all exclaim, "I am the spirit that denies."

12. Listen to those who are targeted by oppressive systems.

13. Listen harder.

14. Listen longer.

15. Listen quieter. And gently-ier.

16. Read bell hooks and Julia Serano and Janet Mock and Joseph Shapiro.

17. If you have \$\$\$: donate it to groups working to dismantle oppression *that are led and staffed by* the people and communities that are directly affected by those systems of oppression. Par Example, FIERCE!, The Sylvia Rivera Law Project, The Trans Life Center, Physicians Committee for Responsible Medicine.

18. If you don't have money but do have time, donate that.

19. If you have a job: talk to the people in charge of hiring at your workplace to see that the demographics of new hires match the demographics of the community it's situated in. i.e., are there many minoritized people in supervisory positions? why not? how could that be fixed? What programs are in place to retain and support them?

19b. Are you cis? Inquire as to whether there's trans-inclusive health insurance at your workplace. Really. I triple dog dare you. Feel any discomfort at the mere thought? Now imagine you're a trans person

approaching your cis boss or HR person in this conversation. How much more uncomfortable might that be? Who might have more on the line by starting this conversation?

20. Look at the materials you use to make your work, where are they made? by whom? how much are they paid? what are they made out of? what kind of by-products are produced by them?
21. If you are a curator, what kinds of work do you feel is important? what kind of representation of minoritized artists do you have in your shows? Have you used/framed minoritized artists as tokens? How might you genuinely and wholistically address systems of inequality through your work as a curator?
22. Start talking about your art work in terms of social inequality.

But Wolfie! Gaaaahhhiiiiii don't wanna! That sounds like a lotta work, I'm getting exhausted just thinking about it!

23. See point #7.
24. Just imagine what it would be like to live it!

Sincerely, Wolfie

*(institutionalized and interpersonal forms of inequality such as ableism, cis supremacy, classism, colonization, genocide, misogyny, queerphobia, racism, speciesism and xenophobia to name a few)

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