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Globalization and Me, Spring 2012

Kony 2012, Art for Social Change

As an artist, an educator and an empathetic human, I have sought to make work that transforms the rejected, exposes mistreatment, and reveals beauty or grace in unexpected places. Art can and does play an important role in seeking to inform and transform public opinions towards local and global issues. “Art for Social Change” was one of the main tactics used by *Invisible Children’s Kony 2012* campaign, which began as a viral video on March 5th 2012. The artistic approach and personal narrative weaved throughout the video tugged at the public’s heartstrings and gained strong initial support. In response people felt called to make “Never Again” pledges, share the video, write to policy makers, purchase Action Kits, and make financial contributions. The video also promoted an activity called *Cover the Night*, which took place on April 20th. Both the video and the *Cover the Night* collaboration were a self-proclaimed social experiment with complex results.

Mission of Invisible Children:

To many the *Invisible Children* organization seemed to appear out of thin air with the emergence of the viral video, but in reality they have been a well established, San Diego based, non-profit since 2006. *Invisible Children* began in 2003 as a group of young filmmakers, storytellers, activists. Since 2005, their rough cut video has raised awareness of the “invisible children” in Africa and touched millions to raise support and contribute to their efforts. They use film, creativity and social action to inspire young people to help end the longest running armed conflict in Africa (*Invisible Children, 2012*). Their recent videos focus on raising awareness and gathering forces to bring Joseph Kony (leader of the Lord’s Resistance Army, LRA) to justice. With the purpose of ending the use of child soldiers, and restoring to peace and prosperity the LRA-affected communities in East and Central Africa. *Invisible Children* has already developed post-conflict reconstruction efforts through education programs, economic initiatives, rebuilding programs, and support systems for victims affected by the LRA and civil war (*Invisible Children, 2012*).

Critiques and Concerns:

Shortly after the first video went viral, a backlash of critique flooded the media and distracted followers from the issues at hand. Controversy arose when the campaign leader and co-founder had a public breakdown in San Diego, California. Many initial cohorts withdrew their support and even began to criticize the efforts of the organization; calling the project “a patronizing oversimplification of a complex issue, and a dangerous call for militarization” (Zaki, 2012). The project’s social media platform quickly became a venue for critical voices and public opinions (often uninformed and unsupported). *Invisible Children* attempted to address these accusations, questions, and misrepresentations by creating a *Questions & Answers* page on their website (Invisible Children, 2012).

Unfortunately as a result of negative media attention the public, including some of my students, became confused by the disparity of opposing reactions. Public interest waned and by the time April 20th came around many supporters had lost their initial drive (Trujillo, 2012). Although the turnout was less than anticipated, I don’t believe that this experiment in “Art for Social Change” was a failure. Instead, I feel this discrepancy points to the shortcomings of online activism (it’s much easier to click “like” than to actually make a stand for something). The confusion created by opinion driven social platforms lead to feelings of apathy by many initial followers. An overemphasis on the means (rather than the message) also distracted followers from the main mission of the campaign. Cole (2012), and other social scientists feel this lack of follow-through exemplifies the gap between the potential for online activism and the reality of actual participation. Other social media analysts conclude that confusion and doubts about the organization and its mission clouded people’s response and lead to apathy.

Globalization and Me Project:

For this Globalization and Me project, my students were my medium. With less than two weeks to prepare, I set out first to inform myself about the history of the civil war in Uganda, as well as the critiques raised against the organization and the *Kony 2012* campaign. As a teacher, I aimed to consider multiple sides of the human rights violations attributed to the LRA and Joseph Kony, weigh the value of various arguments, and lead my students through a balanced, engaging discussion. My students generally identified the *Kony 2012* video as persuasive but felt that although they may disagree with some of the tactics they supported the efforts to raise awareness

and activate social change. As a group we agreed this would be a good opportunity to collaborate and be involved in raising awareness through creating “Art for Social Change.” Students had the option to choose another cause but only one student elected to do an independent project.

Within the context of my classroom at Los Alamitos High School, 55 printmaking students each produced 1 T-shirt and 5 flyers to spread around campus and throughout their community. Within a very limited amount of time these students formed collaborative groups, organized themselves and helped each other through the basic steps of screen-printing.

Goals of the Project:

- Learn about and discuss the human rights issues of child soldiers in Africa and the campaign efforts of *Invisible Children* through watching and discussing the video(s) at Kony2012.com
- See examples and discuss the role of “Art for Social Change”
- Work together to learn the basic techniques of screen-printing
- Collaborate on the execution of Kony 2012 posters/flyers/T-shirt(s) based on the open-source designs downloadable on the website.
- Reflect on your experience both as artists involved in a collaborative effort for social change and the process of sharing opinions/thoughts on the issues presented by *Invisible Children*.
- (Optional) Participate beyond the classroom by sharing the video with friends and family, wearing the T-shirts, making shirts for friends or family, temporarily posting their flyers around campus (with permission) and sharing those postings on social media.

Personal Reflection:

Overall I feel it was a really beneficial opportunity for these young people to see a need (beyond themselves and their local community) and respond by taking action. I was so inspired to see all of my students busily working together and devoting their lunchtime and after school to the success of this project. In that regard, the project was a triumph. However, I wish I had more time to document students putting up flyers around their neighborhoods, wearing their T-shirts, posting on social media, and reflecting on their involvement in a larger scale issue.

As a result of this project I think students' views of art expanded to include aspects of action, participation, and collaboration, as well as established the role of art as an agent for social change. The dialogue and discussion around this issue was unfolding as I prepared for the project and therefore it was quite challenging to anticipate students' responses. This project forced me out of my comfort zone as an educator, as an artist, and as an empathetic human. At this time it is difficult to see the larger impact but I am hopeful that support, discussion, and involvement will not end here.

The following video is a documentation of the creation process:



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