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The Intersections of Art and Activism

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Lee Honors College Thesis

Marisa Lin Forsyth Weller

The Intersections of Art and Activism

I began studying arabic language and culture when I arrived at Western Michigan University in 2016. I was interested in specializing in Middle Eastern and Islamic art history, with the goal of working as a museum curator someday. Throughout my studies, I met many people who were actively involved with the arabic speaking community in Kalamazoo. In order to improve my language studies, I began tutoring middle school and high school students who spoke arabic as a first language. I found this opportunity through Refugee Outreach Collective's Family Partnership Program. Refugee Outreach Collective (ROC) is a registered 501(c) 3 nonprofit organization based in Kalamazoo, with registered student organizations at colleges and universities all over Michigan. After joining the organization, I learned far more about the refugee crisis and how Kalamazoo community members were helping on a much larger scale than I thought possible for a grassroots organization. Not only was ROC providing volunteer services for refugee families in Michigan, but they also had a partnership with Dzaleka Refugee Camp in Malawi. They collected old phones, women's' hygiene products, and funds to donate to

Dzaleka, as well as establish a Pen Pal program between Kalamazoo and Dzaleka residents to further connect our communities. I quickly became involved and later ran the organization as ROC's Western Michigan University Chapter president in 2019.

In 2018, I went on a study abroad trip to Amman, Jordan to further my arabic language studies with Sydney Fernandez and Mackenzie King. Both of my companions were also Western Michigan University students who were active humanitarians working with refugees. While we studied together, we began talking about how we could create a program to bring Western students abroad to work with refugees. This was the birth of the Global Leaders Program. Sydney had previously volunteered in Greece at Moria Camp in 2016, and had friends and connections there that could help us create a stable operation. Our program was developed with the ethos of "Compassion for your community allows you to develop as a leader." Our core values are also included in our ethos statement, compassion, community, development, and leadership. Our goal was to do what we could to provide aid, labor, and relief to the communities living in the camp, while also building important leadership skills within our team of Western students. We selected 12 students who interviewed for the position. My personal goal for the team was to have a healthy balance of younger and older students and a well-rounded collection

of majors and experience. In addition to gaining official Western Michigan Study Abroad status, we also recruited Dr. Jessica Gladden for the College of Social work at Western to advise and oversee our program. Dr. Gladden founded Thrive: A Refugee Support Program that provides volunteer support to refugee families in the Grand Rapids area. Her experience working with refugees gave her the ability to mentor our students with greater insight and accuracy. We also created a training curriculum and meeting schedule for the academic year leading up to our May 2018 trip. Our training included cultural sensitivity education, safety and security information specific to our destination, and in-depth education about the refugee crisis. Additionally, we were able to utilize our connections with other humanitarian aid workers in the area to also help provide further insight into what our work abroad would entail.

Each of our 12 students were required to submit a project proposal outlining a project idea that could be implemented in the camp and community centers nearby the camp. Not all projects could feasibly be implemented, but we wanted a large selection of ideas to offer the community centers. Part of our program involved a needs assessment, where we visited nonprofits and organizations on the island to see where our volunteers and programs would be most beneficial. Our main partners included Starfish and Stand By Me Lesvos, both are Greek

organizations that provide Moria Camp residents with games and toys for children, English classes, sewing machines, and many other enrichment programs. Some Global Leaders taught music to unaccompanied minors, worked alongside asylum seekers in the greenhouse, and even designed and built an office for lawyers to use while working through important asylum paperwork, but the greatest need was for english teachers. Anyone that could speak fluent english was asked to help teach if they could, basics such as numbers and travel language. Crash-course training on the spot was not an uncommon occurrence, often I found out I would be leading or helping a class only minutes before the class began, due to a volunteer shortage or unexpected class numbers.

The program that Melanie Mackew and I designed was to provide art supplies and teach basic art classes to Afghani students within the camp. We were connected with a refugee run school within the camp that needed extra teachers and could use school supplies. Four days a week for 8 weeks, we lead dozens of kids a day through different basic art skills, such as mixing primary colors and drawing three dimensional shapes. Our original plan was to teach the same lessons to different groups of children everyday, with the same students returning at the same times throughout the week. The reality of the situation was not so organized, and our lessons

turned into children coming and going at different times everyday, some staying and seeking guidance, others came to just freely paint. We taught when we had an audience, with refugees that could speak some english to help translate most of the lesson, and used Google Translate to help during conversations with the children one on one during the lessons. Gesturing also helps far more than one would expect. The disorganization showed us how badly these children needed more enrichment and education programs to provide structure and help maintain their schooling while displaced.

The current disaster in Moria Camp is a constantly shifting situation. The camp is located on the Greek island of Lesbos, in the Northern Aegean Sea. The camp was formerly a military barracks, built to house around 3,000 (Bigg). The number of asylum seekers living there was 13,000 while we were working on the island, and that number has now grown to 18,000 as of February 2020 (Bigg). Old shipping containers, tarps, and rotting wood pallets are what the majority of asylum seekers use to construct their dwellings. Adjacent to the camp is a large olive grove where many asylum seekers are now squatting and building structures to house themselves. Greek police often tear down these temporary camps at random. An estimated 45% of the asylum seekers in Moria are from Afghanistan, fleeing from the current drought and unrest

that is plaguing their country (UNHCR). The other 15% are a mix of Syrian, Somalian, Congolese, and Iranian asylum seekers (UNHCR). 40% of these asylum seekers are under the age of 18, and there are an estimated 2,000 unaccompanied minors in the camp, mostly males ranging from ages 12-17 (UNHCR). As of 2020, mass riots and protests have been occurring due to the inhumane conditions of the camp.

Faced with the reality of the situation, I was further inspired to bring a piece of this experience back to Western Michigan University. I find that the power of art is more evocative of emotion than any other form of communication. I wanted to raise awareness for the refugee crisis that is happening all over the world, bringing attention to an issue that cannot be ignored. I remember while I was working on outlining the Global Leaders Program, pulling up a document on my laptop that I had written for my Honors Thesis How-To class. The document was an outline of how to bring this issue to light in at my university, in a gallery format. I was fully prepared to use our program not only to help refugees by working in the camp, but by also creating an event to advocate for the refugee crisis. My original plan was to find adult refugee artists and collect art that was relevant to the crisis. Using children's art instead of adult art was a difficult change in my plans, but I was unable to spare time away from the classes to work with

adults during our time in Moria Camp. We were able to take photos of our work to display both as part of our exhibition and on social media. A controversial aspect of advocacy work is the usage of photos and video of crisis situations in order to garner an emotional reaction from the viewer. This is a helpful tool in advocacy work, but can quickly turn into trauma porn, a term used to describe the exploitative use of sensitive and graphic images for shock purposes.

Drawing the line between effective photos and exploitive photos is difficult and imprecise. We were sure to show photos that accurately portrayed our day to day within the camp, and in order to protect the identity of those pictured, all faces were blurred.

Activist art is a global movement, inspiring artists to use their talents and passion to promote issues that need more support. Organizations like Micro Galleries, a virtual social impact project to share ideas and create positive change. Their goal is *“to demonstrate that art is for everyone and can have a positive impact on a community; that art does not have to only be presented in galleries and theaters, but can break out of these spaces and ingrain itself into the public; that everyone can have ownership and involvement in the creation and appreciation of art work, and that art can help makes lives richer, facilitate deeper conversations and can invite a range of perspectives into our social, political and environmental conversations”* (“Micro

Galleries”). They also host festivals to create a community space to partake in music and activities, as well as create a forum to discuss and advocate for global issues and inspire change. My partner and fellow founder of the Global Leaders Program, Mackenzie King, was introduced to the Micro Gallery movement through another participant. The Micro Galleries are disseminating information, collaborating with artists around the world, and organizing large movements and events all virtually, many of these artists and collaborators have never actually met. Organizations like Micro Galleries are paving the way towards more accessible art projects and activism projects that reach millions through the internet and social media.

Other artists are also making waves in the art activism world, like artist Ai Weiwei. He created a large art installation to commemorate the thousands of children who died due to the Sichuan Earthquake. He led an online investigation into the deaths of the children, attempting to catalogue how many lives were lost and who they were. The Chinese government shut down the website Weiwei was using, but his efforts to bring awareness to the situation were not halted (Kirshner). In 2009, he installed nine thousand school backpacks on the building exterior of the Haus der Kunst in Munich, Germany (Kirshner). The backpacks spelled “she lived happily for seven years in this world” in Chinese characters, a quote from a mother who lost her daughter in

the earthquake. The artist said, *“Thousands of young students lost their lives, and you could see bags and study material everywhere. Then you realize individual life, media, and the lives of the students are serving very different purposes. The lives of the students disappeared within the state propaganda, and very soon everybody will forget everything”* (Khan). The controversy over these deaths were due to the improperly built schools that collapsed after the earthquake. The Chinese government reportedly attempted to cover up the building issues and censor news of the deaths of the children (Kirshner). Weiwei was in considerable trouble with the Chinese government following his interest in investigating the deaths of the children. He was hospitalized and underwent brain surgery after being beaten by Chinese police (Kirshner).

My personal activism project was not as controversial as Weiwei’s. The art that is shown in my exhibition was all created during our art classes, and the children either gifted the art to us or left it behind at the end of the day. I chose the art that I remember watching the kids create. All of the art on the wall was painted or drawn as I sat next to the artist. I also wanted to arrange the art in a compelling manner, using the emotive properties of the art and photos to my full advantage. I began with the color mixing paintings, introducing the viewer to how we began our lessons. I displayed our large range of age, experience and creativity in the class. The next

few sections were grouped by subject, such as butterflies or houses, using the similar subject matter to more easily see the individuality each student had. The refugee crisis is one that is often only talked about in numbers. I wanted to help the viewer see the individuals within the crisis, removing the headlines and staggering figures. This makes the issue feel more tangible, which in turn can also give the viewer a desire to help promote change. The last section of student art was representations of home. I remember sitting and drawing my pale yellow suburban home while two of my students drew with me. We then talked about our homes, and what they looked like. Some kids talked about their homes that they left; others described their Moria Camp home. Home is a powerful value in our lives, the desire and the need for a place to call home is innate. The refugee crisis is a complex problem with many issues attached to it, but in the simplest way, the refugee crisis is the loss of homes. I hoped that compassion for that loss would further inspire the viewer to take action and to advocate for change. Following the paintings were photos (both printed and digital displays) of the volunteers working both during the art classes and volunteering in other areas of the camp and island. Showing the team in action with the kids and doing our day-to-day work helped create a whole understanding of why we went and what we did in Moria Camp. Paired with information on how to get involved, the photos and video ended the exhibition with a call to action. With my experience running the Western Michigan branch of

Refugee Outreach Collective showed me that the best way to gain more volunteers was to host an event, whether it is a special guest lecture or something similar to my exhibition. My future goals are to continue to work with refugees resettled in the United States, and ideally collaborate with Micro Galleries to host an event to bring people together to promote and make change.

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Below I have included exhibition information and photos.

Didactic Label #1

Refugee Art Students ages 2-12

2019

Tempura paint and colored pencil on paper

The Afghani School is located in “The Jungle,” the name the refugees have given the olive grove next to Moria Refugee Camp. This is where some refugees live, constructing tents out of rotting wood pallets and UNHCR tarps. The Afghani schoolroom was constructed in a similar manner, but we held our art classes on a large tarp covering the ground right next to it. This caused our paint to mix with mud and olive tree blossom most days. While we did teach them basic art lessons, such as how to combine paint to make secondary colors and how to draw three-dimensionally, my favorite time was when they could create whatever they wanted. Being able to just paint and talk with the students was truly rewarding.

“My time volunteering during the art lessons on Lesbos, Greece illustrated the importance of the resilience and compassion that displaced children represent. It was inspiring to see the ways in which the children were sharing their lives through art, pictures, and stories, and the ways in which art became a universal language. The bridges that once seemed so long between myself and refugees displaced in Europe became smaller as I saw the faces of those displaced by

conflict instead of just hearing about the numbers. This was an experience that taught me about the importance of compassion, education, and empowerment.”

-Ava Strasser (2019 Global Leader)

Didactic Label #2

I asked the students to paint me what they love and what they had seen of the world so far.

When they painted things that they had seen, they made pictures of rainbows, flowers, and butterflies, as well as beautiful landscapes of the island where we were all temporarily living. Some painted more violent versions of the world. Crying families and boats shooting at others. When they painted what they loved, they made pictures of their family and friends, their homes, and lots and lots of hearts. When I asked them to show me home, many times I was given quaint pictures of sunny yards and simple houses, with little people holding hands. Some drew me pictures of Moria Camp, where they live in a shipping containers. I was also given mountain ranges stretching across the paper and the flag of Afghanistan waving in the wind.

“In Arabic, there is a word called “Wōtun” which roughly translates to “homeland” but this word’s meaning runs much deeper than the surface connotation. For Americans, a similar word might invoke thoughts of baseball, apple pie, the white picket fence, and mom. For Syrians and Iraqis, the word “Wōtun” invokes the sights, sounds, and familiar smells of home. All these mementos of home are fragile. Shrapnel, the smell of sulfur, the implosion of the very air in one’s

lungs, and all the things that accompany a bomb can erase one's wōtun in the blink of an eye. Refugees often let go at the last second, holding onto home until the searing heat of war was far too much to bear and their desire to live outwilled their desire to belong. Now, they face an uncertain future in an increasingly unwelcoming Europe, and they still bear the painful memories of a home which they may never see again.” -Sydney Fernandez, Founder of the Global Leaders Program

Didactic Label #3

Photos taken by Cory Matkovich and Marisa Weller

2019

Images have been altered to protect the identity of those on camera.

I struggled to blur the faces of the kids. I felt like I was removing their individuality and taking away who they were. It felt like I erased the time we all spent getting to know each other. I hate that the reason I had to blur their faces was to protect them, and that many of those kids are still at Moria Camp, incredibly vulnerable. I am tremendously fortunate to be able to share a part of their stories.

“I was able to run with the refugees again. I want to be careful not to pity them. It's very easy to get bogged down with the gravity of their situation but I'm afraid that when I begin to pity I begin to remove their humanity. Of course, pity does not make me want to help them less, but it

does create the illusion that they are unable to help themselves. And that's simply not the case. No one here that I've met is a weak, defenseless creature. They're all strong and resilient, because they have to be. And when I begin to pity, I remove hope. And hope is the one thing a place like this desperately needs."

-Haley Ritsema (2019 Global Leader)

Exhibitionist Statement

My exhibition focuses on the intersections of Art and Activism, and how artists can combine passion with purpose. Art has always been a method of communication, a platform to express intrinsic values, and a way for free thinkers to shock and awe the public. Using the emotive properties of art to raise awareness about refugee crises will hopefully stir people to promote change. Art and Activism are both naturally progressive and barrier-breaking fields that pair perfectly together. My exhibition pulls the two fields together for one purpose.

During the summer of 2018, Sydney Fernandez, Mackenzie King, and I created a study abroad experience called the Global Leaders Program. This program was designed to prepare students to volunteer at Moria Refugee Camp in Lesvos, Greece. Doctors Without Borders describes this place as the worst refugee camp on Earth. Our 12 students came together to create several different enrichment programs to implement in the refugee camp and community centers nearby. The program that Melanie Mackew and I designed was to teach basic art classes to Afghani students within the camp. Four days a week for 8 weeks we taught dozens of kids a day

on various different art techniques. My favorite part of the day was letting the children freely paint. This was when we saw their most creative side, and when I was able to sit and talk to them one on one. I find that the power of art is more evocative of emotion than any other form of communication. I would like this exhibition to raise awareness for the refugee crisis that is happening all over the world, bringing attention to an issue that should be talked about far more.

Thank you.

Slideshow video link on Youtube:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cF7DaMN2qNc>

