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Dialogic Intentions: Social Practice and Moral Character in Contemporary Arts and Education

ABSTRACT

The decades-long surge of artistic interest in social practice finds a potential confluence in the recent rise of moral character as an object of psychological study, with both ideas filtering downstream into contemporary arts education philosophy and practices. Although much has been written about the social turn in the arts and the cultivation of character in education, few investigators have analyzed the relationship between them. This conceptual essay contributes to a possible convergence by examining the tensions and opportunities inherent in the integration of experimental art-making with the traditions of social science and moral theory. Its purpose is to take a personality-based approach to socially engaged art-making: to understand why some artists engage in social practice and the implications for arts education. This inquiry draws from a series of public interviews that examine the works and values, thoughts and feelings, practices and perspectives of contemporary artists working in higher education.

Keywords: *Arts Education, Moral Character, Psychology of the Arts, Social Practice.*

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I. Introduction

What my work is about is how people find their best selves when they're under crisis, and how the least among us often have the most in terms of moral courage and the capacity for love and the generosity to share with others. — Jennifer Maytorena Taylor, Documentary Filmmaker

It seems like artists today are different than they were when I was growing up. In the irreverent 1980s, artwork became a commodity and the artist a brand. Today, many if not most contemporary artists want their art to do something quite different. As someone who has invited such artists into the academy over the past decade, I have witnessed how they seek to speak truth to power, to be compellingly relevant, to respond fiercely to what they deem the rent in our social fabric. They reject the folk belief in creative artists as remote geniuses in gilded isolation: groundbreaking and glamorous independents free of social, economic, and political ties. Instead, these self-described "social practice" artists embrace the messy interpersonal space created through collaboration. This social space has become the focus, and medium, of collective artistic vision and investigation (Finkelpearl, 2001). Some social practitioners consider arts production and arts education that fail to engage intentionally with social and environmental issues as not just out of touch, but as suspect and irrelevant (Macneill, 2014).

To be sure, there are skeptics who bemoan the imperative of socially engaged art and education (Perl, 2022). For them, the contemporary focus on relevancy yokes art-making to social, economic and political ties that bind. The social practice movement is not new, though. Social practice is a term that shares kinship with a number of movements in experimental art and performance dating from at least the 1930s onward: activist art, community art, performance ethnography, relational aesthetics, and other terms that signal a social turn in art practice that embrace representational dimensions of social, economic, and political formations (Franko, 2002). Social practice is also embedded in a history of terms that are not so admired: consumable art, functionalist

art, social realist art and related terms that have been coined to lament the acquiescence to accessibility that can occur when combining art and politics (Bishop, 2006).

But this paper is neither about the history of a movement, a methodological comparison, nor a treatise on society's preoccupation with images. As important and engaging as these issues are, this is well-worn terrain, traveled by artists, educators, and scholars who have gone before me (Sholette & Bass, 2018). Rather than chronicling the evolving role of, and expectations for, arts and social practice, the purpose of this paper is to take a personality-based approach to socially engage art-making: to explore why artists engage in social practices and the implications for arts education. What ethical sensibilities or moral motivations inform the behaviors, thoughts, and emotions of those who see value in the idea of using the talents of contemporary artists to social ends; for example, by helping individual communities define their own voice and give it public expression (Jackson, 2008)?

The goal of this essay is thus to provide a conceptual framework for understanding the nature and role of "moral character" in the arts and social practice milieu. My premise is that socially engaged artist's value an intersubjectivity that "tightens the space of relations" (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 15). These artists create so as to share what John Dewey (1934) called felt experiences that can produce a specific sociability through the arts. This perspective recognizes that social practice is an embodied emotional experience rooted in relationships. It is embodied in the sense that emotions provide the brain with a sensory bodily image, or feeling condition that becomes cognitively mediated as a mental image or feeling state (Damasio, 1999). It is rooted in relationships in the sense that the arts are radical to, and not remote from, the rest of our social and cultural lives (Kester, 2004).

But why moral "character"? In the theater, character refers to a person in a novel, play, or movie; it is dramatis persona that develops throughout the performance. Dance, for example, has its share of characters. The role of Giselle is one of the earliest and most famous characters in all of ballet. But character also refers to the mental and moral qualities distinctive to an individual. Giselle is a dramatic role with a mental character that leads her to go mad when terribly wronged. Then she dies. In contrast, I use character as an umbrella term that covers aspects of a person's awareness of self, like body ownership and self-agency that guides human behavior to do more than survive. It helps us thrive.

There are several reasons to investigate social practice in the arts from a personality perspective. First, the question of what drives and determines human behavior has occupied thinkers for thousands of years, originally in the field of philosophy, relatively recently in psychology. In the field of social cognition, researchers are particularly interested in the question of how children's identities—how their emotional and moral experiences in the learning environments that they are exposed to—are influencing what they are capable of doing (Dixson et al., 2016). A second reason to study the arts from a personality perspective is that cognitive science requires it, and is, in fact, incomplete without it. Why do arts educators ask students to express felt experiences? Because it is literally neurobiologically impossible to think about things deeply, to be inspired, or to remember things about which you have had no emotional connection (Varela et al., 1991). Our feelings and our relationships and our cultural experiences in the social world change brain networks for memory, cognition, and emotion that will not be recruited any other way. This is the conclusion of the cognitive and neuroscientific literature (Immordino-Yang, 2015), and it is the theoretical basis for my argument about moral character.

I understand my task, therefore, to be primarily critical and exploratory as it aims to articulate and evaluate the added unique value that a personality approach can bring to the study of artistic behavior. In what follows, I examine evidence bearing on the value of this approach and provide a conceptual foundation for such an approach. Along the way, I unpack the idea of character and its relationship to personality that results from an individual's specific history. My inquiry draws on a series of public interviews that examine the works and values, thoughts and feelings, practices and perspectives of contemporary artists working in higher education. Ideas about dialogic practices and examples of ethical trolling are considered in light of the development of "moral character" as dispositional in nature; that is, as an underlying organizer of behavior beyond ability. I conclude by considering the implications for the arts in higher education. If I am successful in arguing for giving moral character a place at our table, I hope it will lead to future research that informs and potentially

challenges what we currently know, or think we know, about artistic development, personality, and education.

II. Methodology

The foundation of this theoretical investigation is a concept of character based on the notion that the brain, body, and environment are dynamically coupled and that they influence each other. This widely held assumption has led to the systematic study of mind-body-environment correspondences and in particular how abstract thought and metacognitive processes are grounded in embodied learning (Donald, 2006). The investigation of such "embodied" correspondences has relied largely on experimental testing, and we have learned a great deal about the human mind from empirical research by cognitive scientists. I examine and draw inferences from this literature to bolster claims for the conceptual foundation of a characterological approach to personality, artistic creation, and moral development.

In addition to critical review, I employ what I consider to be a philosopher's approach. Philosophy, as is well known, encompasses a wide variety of approaches, and it is sometimes difficult to find even a family resemblance among them. One philosophical approach I favor is to see just about everything as open to question. What I primarily question in this essay, and ultimately reject, is the maxim "art for art's sake." The usual English rendering of l'art pour l'art, a French slogan from the early 19th century, is a phrase that expresses the philosophy that the intrinsic value of art, and the only "true" art, is divorced from any didactic, moral, political, or utilitarian function (Bell-Villada, 1986). Although for some purists, philosophy is and ought to be an entirely a priori pursuit, it should be apparent my argument is, in that sense, impure, for not only do I rely on published empirical research to support my view, but also ideas, themes and anecdotes gleaned from public interviews play a role in the larger argument.

As described in the following section, the public interviews referenced above were conducted as part of a lecture series that promoted in-depth conversations with self-described socially-engaged contemporary artists. These unstructured, open-ended interviews lasted between 40-60 minutes. For the purposes of exploring possible themes, the interviews were transcribed verbatim using transcription software and content analysis using NVivo8, a software organizing system used in qualitative research. Interview transcripts were then imported into the software and lower level meaning units (free nodes) were identified and coded, in bottom-up fashion, into emerging categories (tree nodes) (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Top-level themes emerged inductively from the process of hierarchical sorting. Final stage analysis occurred as the findings were interpreted and written up.

Clearly, ideas, themes, and anecdotes are not reasons, logics, and arguments. But there are many moves in philosophy that do not involve a set of reasons or logics or arguments intended to persuade. For instance, philosophers are often happy to countenance theory construction. Many of the great philosophers from Immanuel Kant to Suzanne Langer to Maurice Merleau-Ponty were theory builders who used their intuitions and experience as grounds for original ideas (Coole, 1984). As long as such theories are internally coherent and do not contradict current scientific knowledge, most contemporary philosophers see theory construction as a worthwhile endeavor. Moreover, akin to how case studies can be relevant to medical research and the social sciences (George & Bennett, 2005), I use public interviews to provide an in-depth look at this particular phenomenon. I contend that individual cases can be employed usefully to probe theoretical claims and may also provide inspiration for further research. Thus, I ask the reader to accept the following methodological principle: First person reports of what goes on in one's own mind should be accepted as (defeasible) evidence for the truth of the report unless you have good reason to question them.

The Art of Change

In 2020, eight artists spoke about their philosophies and practices as part of the Arts Dean's Lecture Series The Art of Change at the University of California at Santa Cruz (UCSC). As one of ten schools in the state's research university system, UCSC is recognized for its ranking among top universities for social mobility—the extent to which a university educates economically disadvantaged students—and its reputation for attracting faculty who share an uncommon commitment to social and environmental justice. Participants in this interview series included a wide

range of artist-educators who discussed work and shared stories that revealed the personal values that can shape a creative life dedicated to social change. They included conceptual artists, curators, documentary filmmakers, dramaturgs, game designers, installation and performance artists.

No doubt it is these kinds of creators that trouble art critic Jed Perl. In his book "Authority and Freedom: A Defense of the Arts," Perl (2022) begins and ends with urgent warnings about contemporary artists' obsessions with social and political concerns. His thesis is that the arts, rather than being obliged to convey "utilitarian" messaging, must instead remain the products of a process that stands apart from society. And, because the arts reside beyond ordinary concerns, Perl contends that they move and excite us unlike anything else in our lives. By making the mistake, no matter how well intentioned, of linking works of art to politics or demanding that they address issues of social or economic justice, he argues that artists and critics have failed to account for their "free- standing value."

I believe in art's free-standing value. But I contend that the Authority and Freedom of Perl's title represent two morally-inflected poles of artists' ways of world-making. They reflect the aforementioned folk ideas about genius as well as the prevailing paradigm within studies of creativity. Perl tells us that, by embracing "authority," artists absorb the lessons and models of the past, its knowledge of traditions and conventions; by asserting "freedom," artists can then engage in the act of breaking with those same traditions and conventions in order to make it new. Anyone who has been to a conservative art school exhibition will recognize the received recipe for creativity: learn the rules and then break them, if you can.

Throughout the ages, authority and freedom have been recurring and dominant themes in Western notions of individualism and privilege, talent and giftedness (not to mention race and gender). Most modern theories of creativity have assumed that raw talent, a special innate set of skills and abilities, accounts for a significant proportion of the variance in creative behavior (Sternberg, 1988). The tacit assumption seems to be that, if we wish to nurture the next generation of creative artists, our first task is to identify children who have a certain set of abilities and then to isolate them in the best conditions we can provide so they can make the art that endures, transcending the time and place of its conception. This art will be recognized as the product of an alchemical union of technical command, knowledge of precedent, and a concomitant determination to break with that standard and create a new one.

Perl's defense fits neatly within the maxim, l'art pour l'art. Contrary to his concerns about the demise of the idea, however, several theorists argue that American society at large regards artists generally as art-for-art's-sake Romantics who hope to avoid the conventional constraints of working life (Gerber & Childress, 2017). Over time, this view has shaped the types of questions we ask about art, influences how we seek to evaluate (and fund) it, and determines how we try to make it. We are so steeped in the paradigm of exceptionalism that we hardly notice it. But this view is easily challenged if we allow ourselves to step back and consider art-making in light of life experiences, changing social mores, and evolving states of personal development (Jackson, 2011).

Revealing Character

To appreciate the possibility that art can reveal one's character, one must acknowledge the resurgence of interest in the study of character and personality, as can be seen by the growing number of articles and books on the topic (e.g., Baehr, 2013; Hill & Roberts, 2010; Miller, 2013). One important distinction in the broad term "character" is between characters as equivalent to personality in general and character as personality evaluated. Definitions that equate character to personality exclude biological or innate characteristics, and thus add little to the study of personality because it is considered more or less the same thing (Fleeson et al., 2014). The remaining definitions select out for investigation a subset of personality characteristics because of their evaluative significance, such as an individual's characteristic "patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior, together with the psychological mechanisms—hidden or not—behind those patterns" (Funder & Fast, 2010, p. 669). Because selected characteristics can be evaluated, individuals can be said to have better or worse character based on them, unlike the first definition that does not consider any given character better than any other.

Two widely researched concepts, intelligence and morality, are relevant to a personality perspective on character. Our view of intelligence has been shaped largely by the use of testing instruments, such as IQ, used to sort and classify students. General intelligence (g), according to the standard psychometric view, is a single (and singular) property of the human mind. This long-held assumption views intelligence as a bounded entity immune to context, measurable through a small set of carefully identified questions that objectively predict ability (Nyborg, 2003).

In contrast to the evaluation of intelligence, cultural standards take precedence in assessment of right and wrong conduct. The question of what makes a person behave honestly, fairly, or compassionately has a long history in the fields of ethics and moral theory (Hartshorne & May, 1928). The recent focus has been on how an individual defines what is right and what is wrong, how someone will behave in any given situation, and how that behavior is perceived by others (Narváez & Lapsley, 2009). For example, psychological studies have found that my evaluation of your moral character is central to social inference, outweighing my assessments of your competence or warmth (Goodwin et al., 2014).

By emphasizing objective and contextual predictors at individual and cultural levels, the explanations of intellectual and moral character confirm some essential truths. On the one hand, personality characteristics are evaluated not only on what people do behaviorally but also on cultural norms. A person is said to have good character if her actions, cognitions, emotions, or motivations are right as judged against relevant standards. On the other hand, for definitions that emphasize agency, the content behind an intention is less relevant than is the individual's ability to carry out that intention.

Two psychological factors are missing from these accounts of character and identity, however: relationality and subjectivity. The different social settings and types of relationships in which we find ourselves can make different motivations salient at different times. The same intelligent person will make very different decisions depending on what she sees as a worthwhile outcome (Kagan, 1989). The same moral person will act very differently when group-based moral motives, such as loyalty, are activated, as compared to when interpersonal moral motives, such as reciprocity, are activated (Cohen et al., 2006). This logic has led social psychologists and educational researchers to consider individual differences and the role of dispositions as acquired patterns of behavior that are under one's control as opposed to being automatically activated by biology or culture (Perkins et al., 1993).

Dispositions

Dispositions concern not only what people can do but how they tend to invest their capabilities, what they are disposed to do, hence the term dispositions. This attitudinal and characterological dimension, although not captured in traditional views of art-making, is well represented in our everyday vocabulary of creativity. We regularly use words such as curious, imaginative, inquisitive, inventive, original, and reflective to describe artistic individuals. In doing so, we acknowledge not just an ability but the consistent deployment of that ability. John Dewey (1933, p. 44) recognized these as, "the body of habits, of active dispositions which makes a man do what he does." Since Dewey, the idea of dispositions as the underlying organizers of behavior has been conceived as one's sensitivity to subtle occasions for thinking and their inclination to follow through. In recent years, a growing number of scholars have posited the central role of attitude in our everyday thinking by reconceiving intelligence and morality as dispositional in nature (Baehr, 2013).

To appreciate the power of this perspective, we can move beyond everyday use of dispositional language to examine how distinct elements operate to motivate behavior. In the examples provided below—of dialogic intentions and ethical trolling—we find moral character unfolding in context. First, there's awareness. The artists became aware of an occasion for a certain type of action and response. They spot the opportunity, for example, to begin or sustain a conversation about something that matters: i.e., to realize a dialogic intention through their art practices. When I say that an occasion presented itself, I do not mean that it announced itself. The occasion had to be detected. It is quite possible that many other artists would not identify the opportunity as such. Many things, like boredom or diffidence, can influence our detection of occasions. Recognition is a subtle

endeavor. It is often more like an inkling of something notable, prompted by prior experience. Awareness is not automatic; it must be developed and nurtured.

Other elements at work in the following scenarios are the inclination and motivation to act. These are closely related but with important differences. Artists' tendency to seek and enjoy dialogue as a metacognitive tool, for instance, may heighten their awareness of the possibilities inherent in art. Unless one sees the value of detecting this opportunity, one might be disinclined to follow through even when one recognizes it. Conversely, if an individual places a premium on dialogue, then she might find herself more inclined, more apt to spot opportunities for creating it.

At once aware and inclined, having recognized and seen value in the opportunity, these artists make the decision to act, to do something. Other people, or even themselves at another time, might have recognized and been inclined but chose not to act. Just as with awareness and inclination, many things can influence our motivation: time, energy, resources. For people disposed to bring others into dialogue, however, they engage in challenging activities that others might think are a chore, something to get done mostly when some incentive or reason is given, such as a sponsor's requirement that the director participate in a "talk back" after a performance. Internal motivation becomes the driver that propels action.

The last component at work is ability. Having made the decision to act, at least at some level of consciousness, these artists have the requisite ability to apply a dialogic intention in their practice. This ability brings about behaviors that others, like the audience or collaborators, generally recognize as demonstrating dialogic skills: that is, the ability to make others aware, explicitly and regularly, of the need to employ "core elements" of spoken dialogue: asking questions, presenting reasons, providing evidence where appropriate, giving justifications, elaborating on points made, summarizing, and interpreting, responding to and building on the views of others. Without such abilities, an artist's awareness, inclination, and motivation to act would have been for naught. Of course, these dispositional components interact and feed upon one another. The better developed and refined one's abilities, the more likely one is to spot opportunities for their use and transfer across a variety of situations. A lack of motivation or paucity of skills might make it more difficult to recognize occasions for the limited abilities one does have. Successful dispositional behavior is the robust combination of awareness, inclination, motivation, and ability.

In what follows, I offer two candidate dispositions that constitute what I conceptualize as the moral character of social practice artists. I make no claim that these are the only, or even most important, dispositions one must have to display character in the arts. Instead, I argue that we can recognize socially engaged artists who find ways to consistently deploy their abilities so that patterns of behavior are established over time, which is what the word "character" implies. In the individuals below, those patterns derive from what I consider their moral character: an overarching term to describe a set of dispositions that not only shape but also motivate expressive felt experience: that is, art-making grounded in relationship and guided by a strong ethical compass.

Dialogic Intentions

The animated short documentary, Last Day of Freedom (Hibbert-Jones & Talisman, 2015), tells the story of Bill Babbitt whose brother, Manny, was a houseless Vietnam veteran who Bill decided to bring home. After some time, Bill realized his brother was behaving erratically. Then a local woman was beaten up and killed after someone broke into her house. Bill started finding odd souvenirs in Manny's room, and he thought perhaps his brother was connected to the crime. As Filmmaker and Visual Artist, Dee Hibbert-Jones synopsized her work for The Art of Change as follows:

> *So he [Bill] went to the police and turned his brother in. He had two young kids and was really not sure what to do to protect his own family, and he felt (inaudible) the safety for the community. When the police … He helped the police arrest his brother Manny. And when the police arrested him, after that he was accused of a capital crime. Bill was … given a Purple Heart and executed on his 50th birthday. So Last Day of Freedom is the story of Bill, remembering that story of what happened with his brother and trying to come to terms with it and the fact that his family still didn't talk to him. And so it really kind of is rehashing whether or not that was the right decision.*

Together with co-director and producer, Nomi Talisman, Hibbert-Jones' film is a portrait of a

man at the nexus of some of the most pressing social issues in America: veterans' care, mental health access, and criminal justice. Initially, they became aware of these issues as outsiders. Hibbert-Jones is from the United Kingdom, where the death penalty was abolished in 1965, and Talisman is from Israel where the death penalty is extremely rare. For several years, they did media work for death penalty advocacy, organizations and nonprofits, including witness interviews for appeals. They kept hearing stories about the criminal justice system and mental health, and its impact on families. The idea of giving voice to these stories began as a proposal to devise an installation piece with several family stories. And then they met Bill. As Hibbert-Jones tells it, "Scarlet Nerad, who is the head of the Community Resource Initiative that we work with directly, kept saying you've got to talk to Bill … that's how he came to the story."

The past several decades have seen artists, community partners, curators, public art administrators, and funders increasingly engaging the public directly in creative initiatives and exchange. Suzanne Lacy (1995) initially envisioned a new genre of public art; its scope has since expanded to encompass art that is dialogue-based, dialogical, participatory, and involves arts-based civic dialogue. The literature on so-called "dialogic art"—art characterized by dialogue in its conception, practice and (oftentimes but not always) outcome—covers a wide spectrum, from theoretical to practical application of dialogic principles (Barndt, 2011).

At its core, I suggest that what activates dialogic art is what educational psychologists have termed "dialogic intentions," where the focus has been on the development of dialogue as a metacognitive tool for learning and self-regulation (Warwick et al., 2020). As described in the previous section, the disposition toward dialogic intentions brings to the fore core elements of conversational exchange. It seems unlikely that a simple statement by an artist of her dialogic intentions—whether a question about a specific event or an awareness of larger structures at play—will, of itself, prove particularly effective for making art. Something more seems necessary and this "something more" is indicated by educational researchers who consider the importance of "ethos" in classroom environments. Ethos is a Greek word meaning "character" used to describe the guiding beliefs or ideals that characterize a community. A healthy classroom ethos reveals the instructional imperative of developing a mutually supportive learning environment (Barron, 2003).

In Hibbert-Jones, one finds a dialogic intention that stems from an ethos of care for her community and society at large:

> *This film kind of deals with so many other issues, failures of infrastructure, which was really kind of how we became hooked into it. Not that I'm not totally happier for it to be an advocacy piece for that. It wasn't intended to be an advocacy piece, it was supposed to be like what would you do if it was you kind of situation … But yeah, I mean, obviously we know Bill, we still know him and thinking about where he is and what he's facing still, and the fact that, despite the fact that the film actually had a pretty major impact, the situations that we had kind of dealt with are very much still present.*

Many, if not most, contemporary artists embrace dialogue as a part or occasional by-product of their work. We want our work to generate buzz. But several participants in The Art of Change talked about it as a specific intention: to create an ethical community dialogue replete with the kind of ambiguity and uncertainty one might typically associate with art-making itself. For instance, in For the Love of Rutland, Jennifer Maytorena Taylor (2020) found her former hometown in just such a moment:

> *The town's mayor announced that the town was going to become a resettlement site for Syrian refugees. I thought, well, that's a really interesting catalyst for a story that could let us unpack what life is like in one of these towns … just what kind of dialogue is this event going to generate. What I didn't anticipate was that it was the summer of 2016, and that our national politics were about to take a really exceedingly dramatic turn, particularly around questions of immigration and xenophobia and the rise of white nationalism that's becoming normalized, and the extreme demagoguery that's engaging in these ideas of who is a "real American," who's not.*

Initially, the film takes a straightforward observational approach, using images and voice-overs to record the town's conflicts. Then Maytorena Taylor zeros in on a compelling protagonist whose family, like many in this town, struggles with the opioid epidemic. Her inclination as a director is to ask questions from behind the camera. To tell their story accurately, she is motivated to listen closely and follow their lead. In the process, Maytorena Taylor implicates the viewer in a long-form

conversation about poverty in small town America. She shows how the intersection of collaborative production practices and point of view storytelling can be a means to foreground dialogue as something creative and generative. As Maytorena Taylor suggests, one comes to appreciate how the documentary genre itself can become a worthy "something more" that an artist can contribute to a community:

> *I think a lot of people right now, I think there's a lot of discussion in that documentary space about what do you put on the line yourself? How deeply do you engage? What's at stake for you, and how do you particularly ensure that the work you're doing isn't just taking away, extracting? I think that the model of engagement that I have is not unique.*

Ethical Trolling

Trolling. Cyberstalking. Online bullying. Once words that conjured scenes from science fiction are now the norm: the norm in the media, the norm in everyday vernacular, the norm in daily life. Many of us have likely witnessed some form of bullying that uses influence, power, or strength to intimate. Trolling, on the other hand, has been described as the art of deliberately, cleverly, and secretly pissing people off. Online it can be a game about identity deception, albeit one that is played without the consent of most of the players (Donath, 2002) or a playful mastery of Internet lore and practice that outstrips that of a target (Fuller et al., 2013). These definitions reflect a spectrum of perspectives on trolling behaviors, from an act of deviance to a form of modish commedia dell'arte. Some definitions reflect acceptance of these behaviors, but most scholarly definitions are condemnatory (Buckels et al., 2014). Even as scholarly and public discourse includes disagreement about applicability of the term, trolling can be described broadly as a set of diverse pseudo-sincere behaviors that draw attention, ranging from anger at provocation to appreciation of humor to recognition of serious opinions communicated (DiFranco, 2020).

For artist, activist, and game designer, A.M. Darke, the troll can take on a more genuine, albeit unconventional, role. Darke's work explores identity, the foundation about which she argues is maximizing agency for marginalized bodies. In her The Art of Change interview, Darke discusses the game called 'Ye or Nay? The game delivers a compelling twist to the classic game Guess Who?: a two player game where opponents attempt to guess which character out of twenty-four possibilities their opponent has picked. Guess Who? was originally designed in the 1980s and is yoked to a binary-identity perspective. To play the game effectively, the first question typically asks, is this a man or a woman? 'Ye or Nay? plays similarly to Guess Who? with each player logging into a (JackBox style) browser-based shared game room then asking questions to help eliminate people from their line- up. The twist is that all the characters in the line-up are famous black men and half of them are Kanye West (hence the 'Ye). This means that everyone's first question will be "is it Kanye West?" Narrowing down which Kanye the card represents can also be tricky.

As Darke describes it, 'Ye or Nay? aims to explore the language we use to describe black men, intentionally forgoing the binary-identity assumption to examine how American society differentiates Black men. What does it mean to say "brown skin" when all of the subjects are Black? Darke explains:

> *Like it's all about, for me, how to get free. And so I think a lot about how representation in society, and not just representation, but sort of like the presentation of blackness and black people informs our ability to move through the world with more or less agency. And so 'Ye or Nay? becomes this sort of play space where we have to think about the language that we use to describe the other. And I mean, it's one of those games that it's going to play differently depending on the group. And so I definitely have, for me, I think about non-black people playing this game and wondering how are they going to talk about black folks? Like, especially thinking about fitting the description, like, how do you talk about the black male when your default reference is not whiteness, right? When it's not comparing to a white standard, how do you talk about skin tone?*

Like all professional game designers, Darke spends a great deal of time play-testing. What seemingly began as her dialogical intention to engage players in a conversation about identity, expectation, and language-use evolved over time to become a more pressing and disruptive urge. During game testing, Darke became increasingly aware of the opportunities to probe players' implicit assumptions. As her curiosity grew, Darke found herself inclined to poke and probe, saying "so it's really funny because, you know, we see those moments and, you know, they're sometimes innocent

mistakes, and it's funny to sort of laugh like, oh, ha ha. But then it's like, no, these things play out in our lives. And people who think that they see blackness do not always see blackness, right?"

The use of celebrity images in the game, in particular, suggests that players should have more familiarity with them. But Darke suspects that is not the case: "I often describe myself as an ethical troll. And so nothing about my games is ever easy. It's not, oh, I'm just using celebrities because you know who they are, I'm using celebrities because, when you don't know who Samuel L. Jackson is, that tells me something." As Darke describes it, the disposition to be an ethical troll motivates her to poke and snicker, which prompts a delicate, potentially upsetting moment for the players. Rather than a pseudo-sincere behavior, however, she frames frank laughter as legitimated by experience and grounded in an ethical stance:

> *I want to make one statement about the idea of pointing and laughing. I think that there's a lot of conversation going on about civility right now and how we need to be more civil and how it's sort of a bad thing to point and laugh, or to just make fun of people for screwing up or messing up. And I actually think that there is a really important catharsis in that. And even the point and laugh, like it seems like it's mean, I think if you're only reading it at a surface level, but for so many marginalized communities, it is one of the few moments where you get to take a sort of collective exhale, right? You always feel like … especially if you're talking about a more powerful or privileged group, especially a group that is responsible for your oppression, being able to say, ha- ha, you do think all black people look alike. Even if that's not totally true, or even if it's more complicated than that, it's just moment thinking about all the oppression that you withstand in large ways, but in interpersonal ways, daily.*

The edge that Darke acknowledges traversing as an ethical troll is distinct from a dialogic intention. It could be read by some as taking a positive disposition to an extreme, as incredulity turns into cynicism or disruption devolves into demonization. Instead, what she seems to be saying is that trolling can be situational and intentional in its moral concerns. Most trolls laugh simply to draw attention to themselves, often with someone (or something) else as collateral damage. The ethical troll, on the other hand, laughs to draw attention to a teachable moment, with an ethos of inclusion at its core. One way to interpret 'Ye or Nay is to realize the double standard that Darke is communicating to non-Black players: she's saying, in effect, American society demands that I as a Black person see you, but I have to teach you to see me.

Socially engaged artists who act on their disposition to be an ethical troll are acutely aware of commonly accepted social mores, are inclined to challenge them, and are motivated to muddy the waters of their audience's cultural consciousness. They intend to disturb implicitly held beliefs in disarming and sometimes revealing ways. This is not to say that the ethical troll should go to extremes to trouble one's sense of right or wrong, however. The dramaturg Michael Chemers (2008) knows something about extremes, and he has examined the kinds of forces that extraordinary theatrical devices can unleash on an audience. During his Art of Change interview, Chemers uses the example of immersive theater, wherein the audience participates within the performance itself, to assert the main responsibility of an ethical troll. Chemers argues it is to know how and when to govern one's behavior:

> *I'm all for innovation. I'm all for risk. I'm all for breaking boundaries. But I'm against hurting people to do that in any way. I think if a piece of art hurts someone, not challenges them, not disturbs them, not makes them uncomfortable … uncomfortable is great … but to be hurt by a piece of art is the opposite of what we want. There are many examples of art that hurts people. I did some research on the most evil dramaturg who ever lived, Rainer Schlösser, who was the Reich's dramaturg. It was his job to get German theater on board with the Total War project of Nazi Germany. He eventually wound up using theaters as ways of corralling Jewish citizens in Germany and then, eventually, the theaters became deportation centers … art can hurt people. It's a constant tightrope that we have to walk, I think, between innovation and harm, we do it by being careful and being really thoughtful about what we do next, and understanding the history, how we got to this point, and then making thoughtful decisions about what's next.*

Implications

Socially engaged art and education are practices that can benefit from the added unique value that a personality approach brings to it. The concept of "character" may be especially helpful. In this conceptual exploration, I have theorized "moral character" as a psychological construct and provided

a dispositional framework for understanding it. My argument in a nutshell is that, together, one's personality, experience of intersubjectivity, and socio-cultural milieu may determine how one understands right versus wrong and what one believes is ethical behavior, but it is one's moral character that determines whether, when, and where one is predisposed to share the felt experiences necessary for becoming a socially engaged artist.

Growing up, teachers inspired me with stories about the most gifted artists, the sharpest minds, the visionaries, the groundbreakers, the innovators, those who truly contributed to human progress, individuals who changed the course of art history. In the non-controversial sense, these people were clearly talented. I never thought to ask if they were also simply superior human beings. Were their lives and artworks worth more than the lives and artworks of others, and if so, what follows from this? As postsecondary educators, we recognize natural differences but, in the moral sense, we must also respect the fact that the lives of our colleagues and of our students are of equal value. All people should have the same rights and the same responsibilities as one another. None can be superior or worth more than another.

That said, if we grant the obvious truth that we are not born with the same abilities or advantages, then in a purely factual sense, we are not all equal. But what if we viewed art-making as a goal that everyone can work toward rather than as a talent or privilege that one either has or doesn't? What if learning to make art was less about acquiring skills and recognitions and more about cultivating dispositions that young artists could deploy across a lifetime of learning and producing art in society? For me, these are questions of moral character. To answer them, we must focus more on the arts as an enculturative process: one that emphasizes the attitudinal and characterological dimensions of artistry.

Historically, learning in the arts has always placed great emphasis on the identification, scope, and sequence of skills and knowledge to be acquired and accomplished. Across all arts disciplines, practitioners promulgate instructional frameworks and charts to organize teaching and learning around explicit long-term goals. But habits of embodiment, intellectual and moral character, and artistry develop largely through the implicit curriculum (Eisner 1994). They do not denote inborn and immutable attributes. Through the daily routines, expectations, encouragement, and relationships of the classroom, students develop ideas about ways of being an artist. They learn what is expected of them, the nature of subject-object, the role of intersubjectivity, and what it might mean to deploy one's abilities toward social ends. Character is something that students "catch" from the way adults in the environment set it up for them (Comer 2003). These expectations can encourage (or discourage) the necessary dispositions needed for the accurate appraisal, expression, and regulation of behavior in oneself and in others. They can teach us how to use our feelings and beliefs to inspire, plan, and achieve success in life.

Ultimately, successful artists find ways to consistently deploy their abilities so that patterns of behavior are established over time. If distinct patterns of behavior, such as my candidates for the social practice dispositions of dialogic intentions and ethical trolling define a few aspects of the moral character of contemporary artists, must it work in unison with other aspects? What if I'm motivated to talk about my work, but not so much to have a dialogic intention? Can dispositions work separately? These prospects for research raise an important theoretical point about what counts as success and how much is required of a social practice artist to be successful. Hard questions such as these needs to be theorized and debated. We advance our fields by digging into the details and forging forward with facts.

The journey that this essay has taken is a more modest one. I began by arguing for a possible convergence between the decades-long surge of artistic interest in social practice and the recent rise of moral character as an object of psychological study, with both ideas filtering downstream into contemporary arts education philosophy and practices. I argued against a dominant view of social practice as something less than legitimate art-making. At the same time, by valuing skill and ability disproportionately and viewing artistry as something that should reside solely inside the individual, I suggested that abiding beliefs in the artworld and academia have distorted our view of what it means to train and develop creative artists.

In its place, I offered a new view where shared felt experiences and personal dispositions

should be considered more seriously. Ability is one part of performance. Of equal importance are the spotting of occasions for the use of those abilities and the inclination to put those abilities into play. We recognize social practice in the patterns of one's exhibited behavior over time. Those patterns derive from what I call moral character: an overarching term to describe a set of dispositions that not only shape but also motivate expressive felt experience grounded in relationship and guided by a strong ethical compass.

My purpose has been to take a personality-based approach to socially engaged art-making: to understand why some artists engage in social practice and the implications for arts education. The turn from an abilities-centric artistry toward developing social practice is certainly in the air, from the rise in somatic studies to the democratization of performance across the globe (Kirakosyan & Stephenson, 2019). The educational implications of moral character can thus move us in new and different directions. For instance, I believe it should be possible for those in higher education to identify the profile (or proclivities) of young artists' dispositions at an earlier stage and then draw upon this knowledge to support their paths to becoming social practitioners. I hope that the perspective that I articulate here may prove of genuine utility to those charged with the development of other individuals and to the prospects of personality research in the arts.

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