
ART IS MY WEAPON

MIKE KLEIN

We must envision our work as a creative act, more akin to the artistic endeavor than the technical (Lederach, 2005)

During Panel 5C “Peacebuilding and the Arts” at the 2023 PJSA Conference, participants explored integrating art pedagogies into peacebuilding by making art together. The session began with these instructions:

- Create a swarm of insects for an art installation with .38 caliber shells, wire, pliers, cutters.
- Use wire to explore different sizes, forms, variations on the theme with legs, wings, stinger/proboscis.
- Express emotion, meaning, intentions, impressions



As participants were busy making art, I presented a case study – Art is My Weapon – and an approach to integrating art pedagogies by considering tensions between structure and freedom.

Case study description:

Art is My Weapon MN is a 501(c)3 that aims to use art and creativity to spark social change. We hosted a gun buy-back in the Twin Cities. Supported by the Minneapolis Police Department and The City of Minneapolis the weapons were decommissioned and distributed to Minnesota artists to create statements about the impact of gun violence in our community. We have been able to engage the public, community leaders, organizations, elected officials, the media, etc. in respectful nonpartisan conversations around gun violence that ultimately lead to greater public awareness, conscientious community action, and responsible solutions to reducing gun violence (Art is My Weapon, 2023).

Addressing art pedagogies, we examined a broad concept related to creating the conditions for collaborative art, the tension between pedagogical structure and freedom. When there is less time for the art intervention and/or less artistic experience in participants background, more structure in the activity is required. In our session, we had only fifteen minutes and limited knowledge about the artistic background of participants, so the activity was highly structured. The instructions were very prescriptive, the context for the project explicit, and the end result carefully defined. With more time for artwork and more experienced artists, structure might be minimized, and freedom expanded to allow for more creative expressions within a theme or development of a shared vision.

For the PJSA Conference session, the end result was a collaborative installation or assemblage addressing guns as a root cause of a public health issue, grounded in the seemingly sacrosanct second amendment of the US Constitution.

The number 2 is constructed of solid steel and bolted together in a rather permanent form. Yet it suggests that the constructed might be deconstructed or otherwise constructed as is the case with even foundational legal precedence. Suspended from the 2 is a handgun, reconstructed to convey the form of an insect. Around it hang



Disease Vectors from 2, Mike Klein and peace studies collaborators © 2023

smaller insects made of .38 caliber shells created during the PJSA Conference and during an undergraduate Justice and Peace Studies course at the University of St. Thomas. These insects and the title of the piece reference the public health concept of disease vectors:

Disease vectors are organisms that can transmit infectious diseases between humans... Many of these vectors are bloodsucking insects, which ingest disease-producing microorganisms during a blood meal from an infected host and later inject it into a new host during their subsequent

blood meal. The burden of these diseases is highest in [urban] areas and they disproportionately affect the poorest populations. Major outbreaks have afflicted populations, claimed lives and overwhelmed health systems in many [communities]... Distribution of vector-borne diseases is determined by complex demographic, environmental and social factors... re-alignment of vector control programmes is required, supported by increased technical capacity, improved infrastructure, strengthened monitoring and surveillance systems, and greater community mobilization. (World Health Organization, 2020)

This work was exhibited in an Art is My Weapon group exhibition called "Beauty from Ashes" on November 4-11, 2023 at Nine Mile Gallery in Edina, Minnesota. Typically our exhibitions happen in the predominantly Black and economically struggling neighborhood of North Minneapolis that is plagued by gun violence. This time the show was in a predominantly white and wealthy suburb, bringing the conversation to a new audience, through an approach I have heard described as "inclusion through disruption" (Rea-Fisher, 2020). Due to the tireless work of curator and Art is My Weapon Executive Director Nikki McComb, the exhibit was covered by five local news outlets, expanding the audience significantly.

To follow up on this work, Mike and Nikki will teach an undergraduate seminar in Spring 2024, "Making Art for Social Justice." This topics course in Justice and Peace Studies will focus on making and reflecting on art as the primary learning assessment, complemented by the writings of scholars, activists, and artists. It will conclude with a student-constructed art installation exhibited on our campus, and in an Art is My Weapon exhibition in June 2024.

I am grateful to all who participated in our PJSA session, to Justice and Peace Studies students, and for the peace studies practitioners who make room for creative peacebuilding through the arts.

What we cannot imagine cannot come into being (hooks, 2018)

References

Art is My Weapon (2023). About Us.
<https://www.artismyweapon.org/about-us>

hooks, bell. (2018). All about love: new visions.
 William Morrow, an imprint of HarperCollins
 Publishers.

Lederach, J. Paul. (2005). The moral imagination:
 the art and soul of building peace. Oxford
 University Press.

Rea-Fisher, T. (2020). Unpublished interview.

World Health Organization (2020, March 2).
 Vector-borne Diseases.
<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/factsheets/fs387/en/>

B E A U T Y
from
ASHES

NOV 4TH
3-6PM

9 Mile
 gallery

Food and Open Bar
 First Come First Serve

7777 Washington Ave S
 Edina, MN 55439

THE DISTRICT
 EDINA

EYBL URBAN
 CHANGING COMMUNITIES

Allina Health Minneapolis Children's Hennepin Healthcare WellSpring EYBL URBAN ywca