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Yay or Neigh? Frederic Remington's *Bronco Buster*, Public Art, and Socially-Engaged Art History Pedagogy

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In the fall of 2016, we embarked upon a collaborative pedagogical project involving two art history classes at Oklahoma State University: History of American Art, taught by Americanist Louise Siddons, and Art History Survey II, taught by medievalist Jennifer Borland. Our goal was to connect our students' classroom learning to their experiences of art in the public sphere, and we focused on Frederic Remington's 1894-95 sculpture, the *Bronco Buster*. We hoped that investigations into the appearance of the *Bronco Buster* might translate into powerful learning experiences for our art history students, connecting the critical skills and historical knowledge that we teach in the classroom to their real-world, local experiences. Our choice of subject, as well as our pursuit of active and locally engaged learning strategies, foregrounded opportunities and challenges posed by our regionally, politically, and racially diverse student body.¹



Figure 1

¹ Although we did not have access to student demographic data, many of our students self-identified over the course of the semester. As a result, we know that within our group of 70 students, we had a wide variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds, several national origins, and diverse gender and sexual identities—as well as students representing a relatively wide socioeconomic range, from first-generation students supported by the “Oklahoma’s Promise” program, to students from wealthy Dallas suburbs. Their experience in higher education also ranged widely; unsurprisingly, the survey course had a relatively high number of first- and second-year students, while the American Art course primarily attracted students in their third and fourth years of undergraduate study.

In October 2015, an enlarged replica of Remington's sculpture was installed at the intersection of 10th and Main Streets in our town (Stillwater, Oklahoma), in the center of a new roundabout (Figure 1). The sudden appearance of the sculpture—a large bronze image of a cowboy whipping a bucking bronco with the goal of taming it—prompted a number of questions. How was it selected, and who paid for it? Why were citizens not more aware of, and involved in, the selection process? Stillwater, a city with a population of about 45,000, is home to Oklahoma State University, a land grant institution with about 24,000 students. The university contributes to a rich creative environment, and we have many excellent local artists, several of whom are known for their public projects. Why did the city choose not to have a competitive call for proposals and commission an original artwork rather than installing a replica of an historic one?² Perhaps most of all, we wondered why the City had chosen this particular sculpture. What messages, we asked our students, does this sculpture convey about Stillwater? And are they ones with which community members identify?

The social role of public art is one of the core conversations of art history, and we regularly introduce students at every level to specific examples of public art, its uses (and misuses), and controversies. Whether it's the Arch of Constantine, the Culture Wars controversies epitomized by reactions to Richard Serra's *Tilted Arc* or Maya Lin's *Vietnam Veterans Memorial*, the Second Wave feminist art-as-activism of the Guerrilla Girls, or more recent conversations about graffiti and street art, public art is one of the primary modes of civic communication, and a key way in which communities define themselves. The installation of the *Bronco Buster* made those in-class conversations newly relevant to us and our students: we had immediate questions about its patronage, its audience, and its iconography.

In this essay, we describe and evaluate the semester-long collaborative learning experience that we designed and implemented, framing it in terms of pedagogical theories of engaged scholarship and community interaction, and explicitly considering the relevance of art history to contemporary life and politics. Putting theory into practice, our implementation of each element of the project was transformed by student involvement in the evolution of its overall design. We hope that this overview of our successes begins to generate a model for others invested in the connections between academic and everyday life.

Active Learning and Civic Engagement

Throughout this project, our pedagogical goals were twofold: first, to create an active learning environment in which students were empowered to relate historical material to their lived experience; and second, to invite our students to see themselves as knowledgeable actors and

² To this point, guidelines for public art released by Americans for the Arts take for granted that communities will select a contemporary artist, rather than an historic piece: Americans for the Arts/Public Art Network, "Public Art Project: Artist Selection Resource Guide," 2013, <http://www.americansforthearts.org/PAN/>.

responsible participants in the public sphere. Broadly speaking, we achieved these goals by “flipping the classroom”—asking students to teach each other using active learning strategies.³ As practitioners often acknowledge (and even celebrate), active learning requires educators to replace traditional categories of knowledge—in art history, facts such as names, dates, stylistic periods, etc.—with “big ideas.” Ellery E. Foutch, for example, has cited in this journal the distance between “remembering” and “meaningful learning,” in her analysis of how she used tableaux vivants in the classroom.⁴ Active learning is a pedagogical strategy that, as Marie Gasper-Hulvat has noted, frames the instructor as “a collaborator and facilitator of [student] interactions [with course material], rather than an authoritative deliverer of material.”⁵ To this end, although we began with questions of our own, we asked students to generate their own research paths through the material we introduced, and created settings in which we, as instructors, worked alongside student collaborators to prioritize “student agency, autonomy, and self-regulation.”⁶ Students took us up on this intellectual offer both inside and outside the ostensible course material: they continually evaluated and challenged our pedagogical methods, as well as the material with which we asked them to engage. Their actions prompted us to alter our teaching strategies and, ultimately, strengthen our outcomes.

As scholars invested in the critiques offered by feminist, postcolonial, and critical race theory, as well as considerations of geography, class, and the rural-urban divide, we hoped to design a project that invited the wide variety of our students’ voices and experiences to speak to the material history at hand. Such theories, put into practice, evince our desire to expand conversations about active art history pedagogy beyond the urban, museum-rich, culturally diverse environments so different from the one in which we were teaching.⁷ How, we asked ourselves, might we expand our concept of art history teaching and learning in a way that

³ C. Brame, “Flipping the classroom,” 2013, <http://cft.vanderbilt.edu/guides-sub-pages/flipping-the-classroom/>.

⁴ Ellery E. Foutch, “Bringing Students into the Picture: Teaching with Tableaux Vivants,” *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, no. 2 (2017): <https://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol2/iss2/3/>; Richard E. Mayer, “Rote Versus Meaningful Learning,” *Theory Into Practice* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 2002): 226-232.

⁵ Marie Gasper-Hulvat, “Active Learning in Art History: A Review of Formal Literature,” *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2017): <http://AcademicWorks.cuny.edu/happy/vol2/iss1/2>

⁶ Rodney Carr, Stuart Palmer, and Pauline Hagel, “Active Learning: The Importance of Developing a Comprehensive Measure,” *Active Learning in Higher Education* 16, no. 3 (2015): 174. Cited in Gasper-Hulvat, (2017).

⁷ Foutch (op.cit.) offers a profoundly mobile and responsive model of project-based active learning that invites students to connect their experience to historic material; see also Jennifer Borland, “Encountering the Inauthentic,” in *Transparent Things: A Cabinet*, ed. Karen Eileen Overbey and Maggie M. Williams (New York: punctum books, 2013), 17-38, in which Borland suggests ways in which a wide variety of local experiences can generate provocative discussions of course material that is temporally, culturally, and geographically distant from students. In contrast, despite the fascinating and valuable insights presented in the 2016 *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* feature, “Looking Beyond the Canon,” all of the authors still look to major urban centers and canonical national traditions for alternatives to the Western canon—and their pedagogy makes use of resources available primarily in major urban centers. Aditi Chandra, Leda Cempellin, Kristen Chiem, Abigail Lapin Dardashti, Radha J. Dalal, Ellen Kenney, Sadia Pasha Kamran, Nina Murayama, and James P. Elkins, “Looking Beyond the Canon: Localized and Globalized Perspectives in Art History Pedagogy,” *Art History Pedagogy & Practice* 1, no. 1 (2016): <http://academicworks.cuny.edu/ahpp/vol1/iss1/2>.

validates our students' life experiences, rather than implicitly characterizing them as marginal and culturally insignificant?

Indeed, one fact stands out in Gasper-Hulvat's survey: the strategies and projects she cites do not extend beyond the classroom. Our initial enthusiasm for this project, in contrast, was inspired by recent scholarly discussions within our discipline around socially engaged art history, which strives to make activities in the classroom relevant to students' lived experiences as people in the world.⁸ Although it is informed by recent work in community-engaged scholarship across disciplines, which creates research through intense collaboration with community groups, socially engaged art history is specific in its attempt to redirect an historically elitist field of study to social and political engagement.⁹ While we, along with most of our colleagues, have long engaged students outside the classroom through museum visits and other activities, with the *Bronco Buster* project we sought to have our students engage more directly in the civic ramifications of public art. Public art is an accessible arena in which the historical study of visual and material culture can be directly connected to the immediate environments and communities in which we and our students live.

⁸ There has been a pronounced movement to forward engaged art history over the last several years. Art History That (also known as AHT) is a project created by art historians Karen J. Leader and Amy K. Hamlin to curate, crowdsource, and collaborate on the future of art history (begun in 2014; Art History That, <https://sites.google.com/site/arthistorythat/art-history-that-manifesto>). We collaborated with Hamlin and Leader to unveil #arthistoryengaged at SECAC (the Southeastern College Art Conference) in Pittsburgh in Fall 2015. Shaped in conjunction with the SECAC session "Socially Engaged Art History," the hashtag promoted community building and consciousness raising by imagining an art history that engages with issues outside of the ivory tower. That session "Socially Engaged Art History" was co-chaired by Cindy Persinger (California University of Pennsylvania) and Azar Rejaie (University of Houston-Downtown). Persinger and Rejaie recently announced the CFP for an edited volume on Socially Engaged Art History. Additional collaborations and sessions around this topic have taken place at several other conferences, including at the College Art Association Conference in 2016 and 2017. Laura Holzman, one of the SECAC session participants, has published extensively on this topic: Modupe Labode, Laura Holzman, and Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, "Hybrid Discourse: Exploring Art, Race, and Space in Indianapolis" *Public* 1.1-2 (2013); Laura Holzman, "A Question of Stature: Restoring and Ignoring Rocky," *Public Art Dialogue*, 4:2 (2014): 249-265; and Laura Holzman, Elizabeth (Elee) Wood, Holly Cusack McVeigh, Elizabeth Kryder-Reid, Modupe Labode, Larry Zimmerman, "A Random Walk to Public Scholarship? Exploring our Convergent Paths," *Public* 2.2 (2014). The journal *Public* (<http://public.imaginingamerica.org/welcome/>) is published by the organization Imagining America (<http://imaginingamerica.org>).

⁹ Our university has been classified as a Community-Engaged university by the Carnegie Foundation: http://nerche.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=341&Itemid=618. Jennifer has served as the OSU College of Arts & Sciences Faculty Fellow for Community Engagement, and has participated in a number of initiatives on campus as well as national conferences related to this university mission. Louise's engaged work has revolved around her role as the founding curator and co-director of the Oklahoma State University Museum of Art. The museum developed a series of collaborations with students and faculty as well as with visiting artists Yatika Starr Fields and Jorge Bachman. The OSU Museum of Art's engagement with its publics, both students and community members, was informed by participation in the 2013 Mountain-Plains Museums Association annual conference, for which Museum registrar Carla Shelton chaired a panel on engagement entitled "Multifaceted University Museums: Engaging Campuses and Beyond."

Outreach and extension learning are core components of land-grant university missions, which have long pioneered service learning and other forms of civic learning and engagement.¹⁰ Our own experiences with community engagement are diverse, and inspired our desire to create a classroom research project that was relevant, timely, and responsive.¹¹ Our resistance to creating a fixed research plan meant we could not collect quantitative student data, but the benefit of this choice was that we could be dynamic teachers. In other words, our students' ownership of the project design was our priority, and this decision allowed us to engage our students in a timely, real-world civic action. Rather than aiming for concrete, measurable "products" by the end of the semester, we intended to provoke a spirit of inquiry and a sense of civic entitlement.¹² Would our students begin to feel ownership over their public landscape? Would they take opposing viewpoints on board, and learn to articulate richer responses to their visual field?

This was the first time we had tried to incorporate public engagement, collaboratively, into the syllabi of two courses whose primary goals were well-established and fairly traditional. It seemed evident to us, however, that the material was a natural fit for both classes. When Jennifer teaches the second-semester art history survey, she routinely stresses public reception as a theme throughout the course, and includes a unit on public art controversies. Louise structures her History of American Art as an extended conversation about the definition of "American" and the ways in which art has been used to articulate competing constructions of American identity over the past 500 years. From the outset, we embraced the fact that the project would be an experiment, recognizing that our process would evolve as it unfolded, and that our goals and outcomes needed to be flexible and open-ended.¹³

One aspect of pre-semester planning that we had no control over was our two courses' meeting times: they didn't overlap at all, and as a result, we faced challenges when it came to getting all the students in a room together. In the moment, we partially met the challenge by scheduling

¹⁰ For an overview of this literature, see Donna Heiland and Mary Taylor Huber, "The Role of the Arts and Humanities in Civic Learning and Engagement: The US Debate," *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 14, no. 3 (2015): 231-238; Donna Heiland and Mary Taylor Huber, "Building Capacity for Civic Learning and Engagement: An Emerging Infrastructure in the Academic Arts and Humanities in the United States," *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 14, no. 3 (2015): 260-273, and George Kuh, *High-Impact Educational Practices: What They Are, Who Has Access to Them, and Why They Matter* (Washington, DC: Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2008)

¹¹ As an example of recent scholarship that demonstrates the value of such art historical practice focused on visual thinking, Foutch is again relevant here; see also Jennifer L. Roberts, "The Power of Patience: Teaching Students the Value of Deceleration and Immersive Attention," *Harvard Magazine* (November/December 2013): <https://harvardmagazine.com/2013/11/the-power-of-patience>.

¹² Art educator Adetty Pérez de Miles has deplored the continuing emphasis on measurable outcomes, to the detriment of dialogic learning: Adetty Pérez de Miles, "Dialogic Encounters as Art Education," *Studies in Art Education* 51, no. 4, "Debating the Field of Art Education and its Disciplinary Territories" (Summer 2010): 375-379.

¹³ For a thoughtful discussion of the social and civic role of humanities education, see Caryn McTighe Musil, "'A Step Away from Complacent Knowing': Reinvigorating Democracy Through the Humanities," *Arts & Humanities in Higher Education* 14.3 (2015): 239-259.

several major group assignments outside of regular class time, and expecting a lot of collaborative homework. This aspect of the course design and planning prompted pushback from some students throughout the semester, as they felt like they were being asked to make too many commitments outside class time. Especially at a public university where many students work close to full-time alongside their coursework, this was a valid complaint.

Such pragmatic concerns highlight some of the challenges of bringing critical pedagogy into the real world of the classroom: our negotiations with students gave different meaning to art educator David Darts' observation that "everyday experiences [are] sites for ideological struggle and resistance."¹⁴ Being confronted with the political reality of our students' lives and priorities paradoxically reinvigorated our commitment to the pedagogical project: after all, the narratives of rugged individualism and triumph through suffering embodied by the *Bronco Buster* were also informing the students' experiences of being working class in higher education. Thus, although we take on board recent revisionist critiques of critical pedagogy, we remain compelled by its position that all education is inherently politicized.¹⁵ In this project, we felt it was our responsibility as educators to bring our students into conversations not simply about the facts of art history, but about how those facts, and that history, are manipulated in our contemporary, local environment in order to make claims about civic identity.

Creating a Critical and Pedagogical Framework for Civic Engagement

As we began teaching, our goals for our students were straightforward. We wanted them to apply concepts regarding public art to a local, contemporary example, increasing their awareness of art in the public sphere; to generate rigorous, research-based interpretations of the *Bronco Buster* and its installation in downtown Stillwater, encouraging them to connect art history to real-world issues and to understand the role of the city/citizen in art production and patronage; and to use those interpretations as a jumping-off point for engaging the public in a dialogue about the future of public art in Stillwater.¹⁶ We also had civic goals: we hoped to cross the town-gown divide, connecting student research with City officials and business leaders; to have substantive dialogue with Stillwater residents; and to collaborate with the broader regional arts community on how to reform Stillwater's public art program.

¹⁴ David Darts, "Visual Culture Jam: Art, Pedagogy, and Creative Resistance," *Studies in Art Education* 45, no. 4 (Summer 2004): 316.

¹⁵ See, for example, Willem L. Wardekker and Siebren Miedema, "Critical Pedagogy: An Evaluation and a Direction for Reformulation," *Curriculum Inquiry* 27, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 45-61.

¹⁶ For example, see the Winter 1989 issue of *Art Journal* on "Critical Issues on Public Art," especially Harriet Senie and Sally Webster, "Critical Issues in Public Art," *Art Journal* 48.4 (Winter, 1989): 287-290; Harriet Senie, "Richard Serra's 'Tilted Arc': Art and Non-Art Issues," 298-302; and Patricia C. Phillips, "Temporality and Public Art," 331-335. See also Harriet Senie, "Reframing Public Art: Audience Use, Interpretation, and Appreciation," *Art and its Publics: Museum Studies at the Millenium*, Andrew McClellan, ed. (Malden, MA and Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 185-200.

Before we got our students involved, we did some groundwork research of our own—for example, contacting the city to ask how the selection was made and funded. In response to our inquiry, we promptly received a fact sheet stating that it was funded by the Business Improvement District (BID; a private organization run by select downtown business and property owners) for \$13,500.¹⁷ The BID's mission was to improve and promote Stillwater's downtown commercial district.¹⁸ We learned that the plan for installing this sculpture was presented by BID members at a City Council meeting without significant public notice, and was accepted by the City of Stillwater Councilors at that meeting. Although it was unintentional, the lack of transparency in this process seemed to violate public trust—many members of the public, interviewed by our students, were unaware of the BID's participation in the development of the roundabout upon which the *Bronco Buster* stands.

In a political climate that increasingly threatens public funding for the arts at the federal and state level, it is more vital than ever to educate students about the opportunities and pitfalls of the genre, as well as its social and ideological ramifications. Our public art speaks about us as well as to us; what do we want it to say? Who gets the authority to make that decision, and why? Many of our students are artists themselves, and although they frequently interrogate their choices of media, venue, and iconography, they are less likely to consider the complexities of patronage, audience, history, or accessibility. Raised in an environment that celebrates private philanthropy, students rarely consider the relative ramifications of private versus public funding. Similarly, in a visual field so completely saturated with cowboys, cowhide, and horses, it was hard to get students to see the particular significance of Remington's iconography.

Meanwhile, as residents of Stillwater ourselves, we queried the implication that a retrogressive and violent image was an accurate representation of our city, which has recently experienced significant and progressive downtown development. As art historians, we are all too familiar with the myth of the American West and the role that it continues to play in perpetuating structures of inequality and invisibility.¹⁹ Moreover, the romantic vision of the West that Remington, an east-coast artist, produced for urban audiences, had no direct connection to

¹⁷ City of Stillwater fact sheet, provided by email to the authors.

¹⁸ The BID had a ten-year mandate that expired in August 2017.

¹⁹ This legacy is particularly paradoxical in Oklahoma, where the mythic West is often deployed defensively against negative regional stereotypes and where the cowboy is the face of innumerable mascots, including Oklahoma State University's own Pistol Pete. Wallace Stegner's now-classic critique of the Western myth (Stegner, "Who Are The Westerners?" *American Heritage Magazine* 38.8 (December 1987), available online at <http://www.americanheritage.com/content/who-are-westerners/>) was recently augmented, from a Native American perspective, by LeeAnne Howe, "Imagine There's No Cowboy," *This Land* (July 26, 2016), published online at <http://thislandpress.com/2016/07/26/imagine-theres-no-cowboy/> and excerpted from LeeAnne Howe, "Imagine There's No Cowboy: It's Easy if You Try," in *Branding the American West: Paintings and Films, 1900-1950*, Marian Wardle and Sarah E. Boehme, eds. (University of Oklahoma Press, 2016), 162-182. The most canonical art-historical critique of this mythology is the 1991 exhibition (and accompanying catalogue), *The West as America: Reinterpreting Images of the Frontier, 1820-1920* (Washington, DC: National Museum of American Art (now Smithsonian American Art Museum), 1991).

Stillwater's history.²⁰ The selection of the *Bronco Buster* struck us as lazy, replicating a stereotypical vision of our history while avoiding the critical work necessary for the commission of a unique, contemporary work.²¹ But as we privately deplored the *Bronco Buster*, we began to realize that we had in fact identified a significant gap in disciplinary practice. We challenged ourselves to carve out new pedagogical space by asking our students to consider the city's installation of an historic piece as a commentary on contemporary civic identity. And although we had no way of anticipating it at the time, these questions have acquired a new urgency in the wake of recent debates over Civil War memorial statues.²²



Figure 2

²⁰As background on Remington, students in History of American Art were assigned Margaretta Lovell, “Dashing for America: Frederic Remington, National Myths, and Art-Historical Narratives,” *Panorama* 1.2 (Fall 2015), published online at <http://journalpanorama.org/dashing-for-america-frederic-remington-national-myths-and-art-historical-narratives/>.

²¹For an inspirational counterexample, see Frances E. Thurber, “A Site to Behold: Creating Curricula about Local Urban Environmental Art,” *Art Education* 50, no. 6, “Art and Ecology” (November 1997): 33-39.

²²“Tear Down the Confederate Monuments—But What Next? 12 Art Historians and Scholars on the Way Forward,” *artnet News*, August 23, 2017 <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/confederate-monuments-experts-1058411>

As our pedagogical thoughts about the *Bronco Buster* coalesced, we thought about the recent humorous activities of art world provocateur Max Geller, who in the fall of 2015 began a series of public protests against the abundance of Auguste Renoir paintings at major museums (Figure 2).²³ Although, as in other public protests, Geller's collaborators carried pun-filled signs and proclaimed clever chants, much of the humor of the protests came from the initial sense that their target was absurd. Who is bold enough to protest an acknowledged master—and why even bother protesting someone who died a century ago? The power of Geller's protests was precisely in these questions: curatorial decisions are contemporary, after all, and standards of excellence are subjective. Why, the protesters implicitly asked, do we not question the prominence of works by European men in major museums? Why are we reluctant to question the quality of work granted institutional imprimatur? Embedded in the latter question is a concern about expertise and elitism that is especially relevant to our mid-America, red-state, land-grant students. The idea of students engaging the community in conversation about local public art via Geller-esque, tongue-in-cheek demonstrations about the *Bronco Buster*, supported by the type of research that has characterized the Guerrilla Girls' activism for decades, was intriguing.

Our Geller-style protest and public survey was to be a playful initial intervention; the students' presentation at the Oklahoma Arts Conference—a statewide conference sponsored by the Arts Council that addresses all aspects of art and art history—was its academic counterpart and the project's culmination. In preparation for and interspersed with these two major public events, students completed individual and group assignments that were both research- and reflection-based. In-class presentations of their research informed the students' creation of survey questions as well as slogans for the picket signs and chants that were deployed at the site of the *Bronco Buster* itself. The students then analyzed the survey results, and volunteers from each class presented our preliminary results and attempted to get more feedback from the community at a forum at the Stillwater Public Library. The students presented more finalized results, along with their analysis of the sculpture and its selection, at the Arts Conference. Students who had not volunteered to speak at one of the public events completed the project by writing a final paper.

In the Classroom

From the beginning of the semester, it was clear that there would be more opportunity for in-depth historical discussion in American Art than there would be in the Survey course. We hoped that we could use this to our advantage, asking Survey students to think about the big picture,

²³ Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, "Haters of Pierre-Auguste Renoir Rally Outside Boston Museum of Fine Arts," *artnet News* October 6, 2015 <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/renoir-haters-boston-museum-of-fine-arts-337800>; Katharine Q. Seelye, "Protests Target Renoir at Boston's Museum of Fine Arts," *New York Times* October 7, 2015 http://artsbeat.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/10/07/protests-target-renoir-at-bostons-museum-of-fine-arts/?_r=0; and Brian Boucher, "Renoir Haters Clash with Counter-Protesters at the Metropolitan Museum of Art," *artnet News* October 19, 2015 <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/renoir-protests-metropolitan-museum-art-342338>

exploring the role played by public art generally in communities, and relying on the students in American Art to generate more in-depth research about the *Bronco Buster* and Frederic Remington. As a result, Louise devoted a couple more class meetings to group research than Jennifer did in her Survey—but in the Survey, students were introduced to a wider variety of public art, as well as controversies surrounding public art in recent history.



Figure 3

Although History of American Art is an upper-division class, it is also a General Education option and thus has no prerequisites, so most students have no background in visual analysis. As a class, they explored how Americans have represented their nation—and, by extension, themselves—over the course of their history. It started with a First World War propaganda poster whose symbolism was straightforward and familiar (Figure 3): a young, flag-draped white woman, gesturing from an overflowing pedestal toward a militarized, yet picturesque, river valley. The class compared the imagery of this poster with their own experiences of the American landscape, flag, and people, deconstructing its idealized iconography. In subsequent meetings, they considered images of indigenous people and nations, representations of “American” values produced by artists in the North and South during the Civil War, and the work of contemporary photographer Robert Turney, whose series, *The Real History of the*

American Civil War, offers a parodic, revisionist history of that conflict's major battles, in order to talk about the relationship between history, memory, journalism, and propaganda (Figure 4).²⁴ All of this prefaced a lecture on Remington and the nostalgic value of the American West for eastern audiences at the turn of the twentieth century. Based on these early conversations, students generated research questions for themselves about the *Bronco Buster*.



Figure 4

Although Jennifer often includes discussion of the art controversies of the 1980s and 1990s in her version of Art History Survey II, including those around artists like Robert Mapplethorpe and Andre Serrano as well as the public art projects by Richard Serra (*Tilted Arc*) and Maya Lin (*Vietnam Veterans Memorial*), these conversations usually took place towards the end of the semester and in the context of contemporary art. However, with our *Bronco Buster* project in mind, they embarked on this discussion much earlier in the semester in order to think through the particular issues that circulate around public art, and the controversy and debates around Serra's *Tilted Arc* (1981-1986) are especially productive for highlighting these issues. Serra's piece, a 120-foot-long, 12-foot-tall arc of steel, was installed across the plaza of the Javitz Federal Building in New York in 1981. Once installed, it became a lightning rod for controversy, with citizens complaining about its rusted appearance and interference with their uses of the plaza. It was eventually removed and destroyed, after great protest from the artist and the art world. It raises excellent questions about the role of communities in the selection of artwork, as well as

²⁴ *The Real History of the American Civil War* has been exhibited at the Moon Gallery, Berry College (Rome, GA, October 19 - November 20, 2015) and Oklahoma State University's Gardiner Gallery (Stillwater, OK, August 17 - November 23, 2016). Robert Turney, <http://robertturney.com/>

the rights of the artist after a work is completed. The students read newspaper reports of the controversy, as well as excerpts from the public hearing that took place at the time, and were asked to examine the relevant constituencies, the rights and responsibilities of artists, and the obligations for those who fund and commission art. Finally, they were asked to decide whether they thought the removal of *Tilted Arc* was the right decision or not, and why. The next goal was to get the students to consider these questions in relation to the *Bronco Buster*.

Student Group Research

In both courses, students began conducting research into public art, Remington, and the *Bronco Buster* in small groups. We began with a discussion of the components of a strong research question, emphasizing preliminary research, fact-based inquiry, open-ended starting points, and the importance of interpretation in making sense of research results. Some groups explored the artist himself, looking into Remington's biography, working process, audience, and iconography. Others examined the broader history of Western settlement and the local history of Stillwater, finding historic photographs and descriptions of turn-of-the-century cowboy life. Some students also researched specifics regarding of the subject depicted, exploring the differences between wild and domesticated horses, and what goes into the breaking of a mustang. Finally, some groups investigated the recent acquisition and installation of Stillwater's own *Bronco Buster* replica. In their presentations to the class, students had to conclude with arguments both in favor of and critical of the sculpture's selection, justified by their research results.

Students' individual responses to Remington's iconography were initially both positive and negative. For many of our students, cowboy culture feels vital and contemporary, and is often a source of regional pride. This sensibility is underscored by their experience at OSU, where they are encouraged to identify as "Cowboys," and to celebrate the achievements of the OSU rodeo, livestock and equine judging, animal science quadrathlon, and equestrian teams alongside the more nationally known football and basketball teams.²⁵ Cowboys are, according to the Oklahoma State alma mater, "Loyal and True." The cowboy iconography on campus echoes lessons students have been learning all their lives about so-called cowboy values.²⁶

²⁵ According to the 2010 census, 33.8% of Oklahomans lived in rural areas. The US Census definitions of urban and rural were changed in 2000; "Rural" is defined as "all territory, population, and housing units located outside" Urbanized Areas and Urban Clusters, which are defined as "densely developed territory" containing at least 2500 people. 2010 Census of Population and Housing, Issued June 2012, Selected Appendixes: 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau), <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/cph-2-a.pdf>. The median population density per square mile in Oklahoma is just 55 (<http://www.areavibes.com/stillwater-ok/demographics/>).

²⁶ Oklahoman students are impressed with these values in contexts ranging from grade-school field trips to the National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum to the Oklahoma Fellowship of Cowboy Churches, which seeks to "reconnect the working roots of Oklahoma back with God," and which claims that 85% of Oklahomans have some connection with the "Western lifestyle" <http://www.ofccranch.com/>.

Although many students perceived Remington's sculpture as in keeping with this set of values, and therefore viewed it very positively, other students questioned the ideological implications of the sculpture—particularly when it was explicitly connected to “Historic” Stillwater. Several Native and African American students, for example, pointed out that narratives of Oklahoma history that begin with the 1889 Land Run explicitly erase the longer history of Oklahoma—one that includes the displacement and relocation of indigenous people.²⁷ Euroamerican settlement in Stillwater, specifically, was the result of complex and often fraught land purchases from Creek and Seminole inhabitants—a history that, as our students pointed out, was entirely absent from the image of a triumphant cowboy conquering nature. Stillwater's demographic history is likewise informed by post-Civil War patterns of settlement that produced its neighboring historically all-Black towns Langston and Liberty.²⁸ The whiteness of Remington's sculpture, even cast in bronze, is rendered extremely legible thanks to the figure's flamboyant mustache and other details. That mustache also reminds us that the *Bronco Buster* offers a gender-specific definition of history. Several students were tenacious in presenting these nuanced versions of Stillwater's history—and their resulting critical readings of the *Bronco Buster* itself—to their peers, connecting their critiques to the diversity of the city today.²⁹

Student research into the circumstances of the commission and installation of the sculpture was especially productive. Students investigated the decision-making process; they found the minutes of the City Council meeting where the decision was made, confirming that the BID proposed the sculpture, and the Council approved it, without citizen involvement. They also considered the BID's self-description as a “formal organization of property owners and commercial tenants who have a vested interest and recognize that they are reinventing downtown as a business, cultural and entertainment destination, and *not trying to recapture a downtown of the past.*”³⁰ This

²⁷ This includes Native occupation, from ancient Mississippian cultures and tribes indigenous to the area such as the Wichita, Caddo, Plains Apache, and Quapaw, to early migrants including the Osage, Pawnee, Kiowa, and Comanche tribes, as well as forced migrants such as the Delawares, Shawnees, and Kickapoos, and most famously the eastern tribes who walked the Trail of Tears (including Choctaws, Cherokees, Creeks, Chickasaws, and Seminoles) after the Indian Removal Act of 1830. And although we did not explicitly engage border pedagogies with students during this project, such strategies informed our approach to the overarching discussion of regional history. See, for example, Claudia G. Cervantes-Soon and Juan F. Carillo, “Toward a Pedagogy of Border Thinking: Building on Latin@ Students' Subaltern Knowledge,” *The High School Journal* 99, no. 4 (Summer 2016): 282-301.

²⁸ Although Liberty and dozens of other towns no longer have local governments, Langston is still an incorporated town, along with twelve others across the state. Langston is also home to Langston University, an historically black public institution that was founded by an amendment of the Morrill Act (which established Oklahoma State as a land-grant college) that required all such institutions to either admit African Americans or provide an alternative school as a condition of receiving federal funds. Langston, both the town and the university, are thus also a vital part of OSU and Stillwater history.

²⁹ In 2015, Stillwater was just over 77% white, 5% black, 3% Native American, almost 7% Asian, almost 5% Hispanic, and 8% multiracial or “other.” (“Stillwater, Oklahoma 2015 Demographics,” Stillwater Chamber of Commerce Economic Development Organization, 2015). Oklahoma overall is 65% white, 10% black, 6% Native, 2% Asian, 11% Hispanic of any race (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demographics_of_Oklahoma)

³⁰ Our emphasis. This quote is from a screen shot taken by the students in September 2016, but the statement has since been changed: <http://stillwater.org/page/home/government/departments-divisions/business-improvement-district/bid-advisory-board>

statement seemed to contradict the plaque on the *Bronco Buster* that focuses on the sculpture as a representation of “the spirit of Historical Downtown Stillwater.”³¹ The City’s own ambivalence about the relationship between past, present, and future in their self-image is ironically evident in the recently adopted slogan, “Still Pioneering,” which celebrates innovation while continuing to honor a racist and exploitative past. Several productive conversations took place in both of our classes about representation, focused not only on those who are left out of the City’s version of history/memory, but also the conflicting messages of moving Stillwater into the future while depicting something from its past.

Engaging the Community: Creating a Survey

The goal of the students’ in-class research was to prepare a survey they could distribute in the community in order to gather opinions about the *Bronco Buster* and raise awareness about public art more broadly. Based on their research, each student came up with three survey questions, which we collated and combined to generate a short survey that encapsulated the students’ ideas (Figure 5).

Survey About Public Art in Stillwater

Are you an OSU student? Y / N

Are you a Stillwater resident? Y / N

What do you know about this sculpture and/or about its installation?

What meanings come to mind when you look at the sculpture?

Do you think the sculpture brings people or business downtown?

If yes, do you think it helps downtown businesses?

What kind of involvement do you think community members should have in public art in Stillwater?

Figure 5

Each student also came up with a rhyming chant and/or slogan that could be used on signs at the site of the sculpture. Our intent was to use our Geller-style demonstration to attract the attention of passers-by, who could then be solicited to answer our survey questions. We encouraged students to have fun with these; humor, punning, and other creative modes of expression were received enthusiastically by everyone involved. In contrast to Geller’s wholesale (and humorous) rejection of Renoir, however, we encouraged students to use the proliferation of signs to express the complexity of their own attitudes and to raise questions rather than offer opinions. The survey questions we developed were open-ended and conversational rather than quantitative or evaluative; as with the signs, our goal was to generate dialogue with the people we encountered

³¹ City of Stillwater fact sheet.

on the street, rather than assess their concurrence with a specific viewpoint or their awareness of particular facts. As the final survey makes clear, students wanted to ask questions that highlighted the sculpture's relationship to the contemporary life of downtown Stillwater, including its economic development and touristic appeal, as well as inviting people to reflect on the sculpture's iconography on its own terms.

Although most of the students were curious to find out what the general public thought of the *Bronco Buster*, several began to express concern about their participation in the public aspects of the project as the survey came together. As the day approached, the signs and slogans that were to accompany the survey collection began increasingly to feel uncomfortably confrontational. Students brought their concerns to us in a variety of ways, both directly and through institutional mechanisms.³² As a result of those conversations, we both had in-class discussions about the upcoming demonstration in which we more carefully framed it in terms of “dialogue” rather than “protest.” The latter word is one that Geller uses for his Renoir events, and it had leaked into our language in class despite our overt desire for the students to communicate the full range of their opinions, from celebratory to skeptical. In those clarifying discussions, we interrogated our motivation for using an aesthetics of protest as a tool for producing nuanced responses to the *Bronco Buster*. We acknowledged how intimidated some students felt as they contemplated confronting strangers, and strategized about how to use that vulnerability as an opportunity to engage people in civil discourse, moving conversations quickly from simplistic reactions to more complicated ideas about public engagement. We encouraged students to work in teams, and to choose roles that felt comfortable to them, whether that was chanting loudly, holding contradictory signs near one another, or taking surveys out to passersby and starting low-key conversations with them. As both students and faculty, we reminded ourselves that our ultimate goal was to hear other people's opinions, not to announce our own.

Context matters, too—and it would have been impossible for us to have anticipated fully how the extraordinarily controversial Presidential election, the rise of Black Lives Matter and its community-activist strategy of highly visible public protests, and the general heightening of antagonistic political rhetoric would impact our students' response to the project during this particular semester of Fall 2016. Oklahoma State University is diverse in many ways, and our students were no exception: it was therefore notable when a cross-section of students expressed

³² Some of these students spoke to our graduate teaching assistants, who were particularly accessible, but three students also brought their concerns to other administrators: their advisor, our department head, and even the provost. The conversations students prompted with their GTAs were more constructive than the one-sided mandates with which administrators, constrained by the expectation that they maintain student privacy, were able to respond to complaints. In order to protect students' privacy and academic freedom, all the details of complaints made by students to administrators were kept from us, as instructors. Administrators addressed the complaints by requesting specific changes to our syllabi and assignments: in this case, that we make any public activity optional and ungraded. As a result of those mandates, we clarified for students that their degree of participation in public events was up to them. Notably, almost all of the students whose schedules allowed it did choose to participate in the public events.

concern that our activity downtown would be perceived as a political protest, and thus was inappropriate as a coursework component regardless of specific content. Although we thought we had carefully framed the event for our students in terms of gathering input rather than presenting opinions, we hadn't adequately considered the overarching impression the event would make on the general public, who would see it from a distance and without any background information. In calling this oversight to our attention and prompting us to think through potential public reactions and how we might respond in ways that supported the students, each other, and our goal of public dialogue, the students played a key role in the success of the demonstration day itself.

The Demonstration

Students had a variety of expectations for the demonstration, and although some expressed trepidation, many were excited about sharing what they had learned about the *Bronco Buster* with the general public. A sign-making workshop the week before had generated laughter along with speculation, as students transferred witty slogans to colorful posters. Clear favorites—including “Yay or Neigh?”—emerged from the list of dozens of suggestions the students had submitted. At last, the day of the demonstration arrived! A popular breakfast spot regularly creates a lot of activity on weekend mornings at that particular intersection, and the City had suggested that there would be even more people than usual downtown if we chose a game day. The date we selected had an early game start; in an effort to make the early hour as fun and jovial as possible, we brought lots of doughnuts and coffee to the roundabout, and encouraged a light-hearted and relaxed atmosphere. Students came in shifts, which meant that while many voluntarily stayed much longer, they only had to be present for a 30-minute interval.



Figure 6

While the more outgoing students were happy to talk with strangers and ask them the survey questions, most were content to hold signs that they had created together. Both classes had come up with some excellent contributions to the chant list that included supportive viewpoints (“Cowboy Spirit is what we got; the *Bronco Buster* means a lot!”) as well as critical ones (“Remi’s art is from the past; take down the *Buster*, don’t be daft!”). The messages students created on their picket signs likewise ran the gamut, ranging from “We Are More Than Just Cowboys” to “Cowboys for the *Bronco Buster*.” Many students took advantage of the extensive opportunity for punning (“Giddy-Up or Roll Out?”), and others created straightforward messages (“No vote, no statue”). Overall, the signs offered a balanced range of perspectives, and invited viewers to make their own decision about the value of the sculpture. Two primary themes emerged in both signs and chants: the iconography of the *Bronco Buster*, especially in terms of its relationship to Stillwater’s history and contemporary population, and the lack of transparency in the decision-making process.



Figure 7

Students who wanted to hold up signs could select any of the posters made by the class. As the photographs accompanying this essay demonstrate, the preference tended to be for the funny, colorful, and witty signs—but also for messages that invited thoughtful consideration of the sculpture. “Yay or Neigh,” “Quit Horsing Around with Public Votes,” “No One Got A Say,” and “Public Art is Public,” all directly invite passers-by to consider their own role (or lack thereof) in choosing the sculpture. Related chants included “Only 9 want the *Buster*, 30,000 want another!,” referencing the size of the BID board versus the voting population of the town, and “Where’s our say? That’s not okay!” These were also some of the more overtly critical signs—not coincidentally, perhaps, a student holding the “*Bronco BUSTER*” sign attracted the only aggressively negative response of the day.



Figure 8

The signs that questioned the iconography of the *Bronco Buster* were more varied in terms of their critical edge. Some, like “Bronco Buster? Pioneer? Pistol Pete?” simply asked people to reflect on the intended audience of the sculpture—was it an historical reference, a generic cowboy reference, or a more specific appeal to Stillwater residents, either the Pioneers (our high school mascot) or the OSU Cowboys? Others implied the potential conflict between town and gown (“(OSU) Cowboy or (Stillwater) Pioneer?”), or added an overt critique (“Pistol Pete, Pioneer, or Preposterous?”). Chants that critiqued the content of the sculpture ranged from “Hey hey ho ho this is a copy, didn’t you know?” to “Cowboys do not run this town; *Bronco Buster* must go down!” One student held a sign for over an hour that read, “Still Excluding,” pointedly juxtaposing the white masculinity displayed by the sculpture with her own identity as a black student and Stillwater resident (the sign was a play on the City of Stillwater’s tagline, “Still Pioneering”).



Figure 9

Attracted by the coffee and doughnuts, and by the eagerness of students to engage in conversation, a couple of buskers who spend most of their time downtown discussed the sculpture, its relationship to the city and the area, and its politics at length, although at least one of the men carried a worldview that was marked by conspiracy theories and paranoia. As the morning progressed, students processed this experience in terms of contradiction: what did it mean that the people most engaged and passionate about the role of public art in downtown Stillwater were also some of the city's least enfranchised citizens? How were they to understand compelling opinions and arguments about the *Bronco Buster* when they were made by someone who also claimed that the City Council was using mind control on its citizens? The students' real-time processing, and the accompanying chatter and laughter, was one of the most rewarding aspects of the project so far.



Figure 10

The Response of the Public

In total, about 140 surveys were collected; about 37 of those were collected on the day of the demonstration, and the others were collected independently by students who were unable to be at the demonstration. Based on survey comments and the conversations that took place around them, most members of the public knew very little about the sculpture and did not have a strong opinion about it. The themes that they associated with it focused on OSU's mascot (The Cowboys, or Pistol Pete), pioneers and the land rush, or "history" (comments included "the past," "the wild west" or "the old west," and even "Manifest Destiny"). For the last question about what kind of involvement citizens should have in the selection of public art, the responses were overwhelmingly in support of involvement, through voting or a committee of some kind. Naturally, a few also expressed their skepticism about that, saying that they thought people were too busy and probably do not care that much about this issue.

Several business owners around the intersection resolved their curiosity about our activity by initiating open, supportive conversations with the students. And many of the people who were willing to have survey conversations with the students were impressed by their curiosity and effort, if admittedly confused as to why we cared so much about a horse sculpture that, for many viewers, blends seamlessly and largely invisibly into the backdrop of Oklahoma's visual culture. Meanwhile, initial responses from the students were largely focused on their surprise at the lack of response. Others were struck by the unwillingness of a lot of passers-by to talk to them at all. And for those members of the public who did engage with the students and answer the questions, a remarkable number of those surveyed demonstrated a lack of knowledge as well as a lack of interest in the sculpture. Many looked up at the sculpture in that moment and saw it for the first time, despite having passed through the roundabout many times before.

There were a couple of encounters that suggested confusion on the part of the public about what issues the demonstration was raising, and an inclination to make assumptions about such public rallies. One business owner, without reading any of the signs, was concerned that we might be advocating for medical marijuana (which has since been approved by Oklahoma voters). Another reaction was based on presumed associations with Black Lives Matter and the disruptive politics of college students' activism. This middle-aged man confronted a student holding the sign saying "*Bronco BUSTER*," accusing him and the group as a whole of being troublemakers who should stay on campus. For him, the form of the picket line was all the information he needed about our political intent. Although in retrospect we might understand this as an ironic and educational experience for our students, as they explored the role of public art in defining community identity, in the moment it was uncomfortable and even a little frightening. Luckily, the student who was the most direct target of the altercation maintained a bemused good humor throughout the incident, as did a number of the students who witnessed it. Many of them were surprised by the level of the man's vitriol, which made it clear that what we were doing was important,

fostering a conversation of significance—and the students were able to interact calmly and with confidence in large part because of the in-class conversations they had initiated before the demonstration. The risks they had then been willing to take and their successful negotiation of the conflict as a result of those conversations augmented their sense of accomplishment.



Figure 11

Student Self-Evaluation

A couple of weeks later, we presented our findings and invited further community conversation at the Stillwater Public Library. Unfortunately, the same lack of interest the students witnessed in their interviews was on display: only two members of the public attended the event. This poor turnout may have been in part a failure of publicity, but it was also characteristic of the stakeholders' lack of concern for student opinion. We were all somewhat surprised by the lack of engagement of the BID representatives, for instance. We, as professors, had contacted them before the semester began, and the students had also reached out to them as part of their research.

City officials and council members likewise chose not to attend, even though we had alerted them to the event.

The impact of the small audience was not lost on the students, who had a wide range of suggestions for how to garner better engagement. Some of their suggestions were practical, suggesting different days or times that might reach more people—and specifically citizens of Stillwater. Others thought that tying it in with a downtown event or festival, or creating some other kind of performance, would garner less resistance; according to one student, “the project should seem less antagonistic when trying to survey for public input...[i]nstead of protest signs, post an event around campus for a performance or a festival celebrating the work as to attract and invite people without making them feel personally attacked in some way.”³³ For that student and several others, a teach-in, rather than a demonstration, would have been a more productive activist model of engagement. Despite these suggestions, the vast majority of students—over 85%, based on written response papers and end-of-semester surveys—felt that it was a successful experiment, citing the opportunity to educate members of the public, the inspiration they felt to get more involved, and the engagement of long-term community members in particular as positive outcomes of the day.³⁴ Many credited the high visibility of the demonstration with garnering public attention long enough to collect meaningful survey data.

The work that students put into engaging the public at the event prompted them to reevaluate their own relationships to the sculpture and to public art in general. “I should be more involved in the art that is being put up around me,” admitted one student, when asked to reflect on the experience. “I learned to get my views out in the open and speak my mind about art.” Students also discovered that the project led them to reevaluate their own status as Stillwater citizens. As one student pointed out, “[m]any people – or at least quite a few – in the process quite strongly stated that we shouldn’t be concerned because as college students travelling from various places, we weren’t a part of the community... I disagree. I think we are a part of the community no matter how long or briefly we are here.” Others noted that it caused them to think about their surroundings in new ways, and to think about their environment beyond campus: “I really liked the involvement with the community... [o]ften students get stuck in the world that occurs on campus, so I believe this project helped give us a look at the inner workings of the community.” If we are to encourage this inclusive sense of community and enfranchisement, we as faculty must take a long view of student engagement, regularly creating individual class projects in a framework of sustained commitment to student-community interaction.

Sharing Their Research at the Oklahoma Arts Conference

³³ All of the direct quotes from students included in this essay come from their responses to that end-of-semester survey.

³⁴ Fifty-two student responses were evaluated: 45 were entirely positive, 4 were ambivalent or mixed, and 3 were negative.

Having connected the classroom to the public, we now wanted to give students an experience of connecting that civic engagement back to academic outcomes. Peter Scott Brown and Jace Hargis have underscored the value of asking students to produce original research, using the classroom to generate “authentic scholarly problems that are scaled to students’ abilities to understand and resolve them.”³⁵ In our case, the Oklahoma Arts Conference presented a perfect opportunity for students to formalize their conclusions about the *Bronco Buster* and public art, as well as to keep the project in the public sphere—this time with an expert, rather than general, audience.

After the demonstration and Public Library forum, students selected the three most important things they learned from their research. Our most outgoing students from each class, as well as some who had developed passionate opinions about the project, volunteered to present those results at the Oklahoma Arts Conference. As professors, we had some concern about their last-minute coordination, but the overwhelming success of the result was a solid reminder that sometimes you have to relinquish control so that students can complete the work on their own terms. The rest of the students wrote analysis papers and were encouraged to attend the conference session—and despite the fact that the session was scheduled during class hours, in the middle of the afternoon, many of our students did make the time to support their colleagues and hear the two additional panelists.

The Oklahoma Arts Conference is a regional conference organized by the Oklahoma Arts Council, held annually in different cities around the state. Its mission is to bring together “hundreds of people involved in the arts in one location where participants get equipped for success, gain and share ideas, and celebrate our vibrant and growing creative industry,” providing “professional development and networking opportunities for arts managers and organizations, artists, community and economic development professionals, students, educators, and others working in the arts and cultural industry in Oklahoma.”³⁶ We developed a session, “A Reflection of People, Place, and Culture: A Mindful Approach to Public Art Projects,” with the goal of connecting the students’ work to a broader spectrum of public art programs in our state, and to explore how artists, community members, and civic organizations might develop innovative public art projects that have a meaningful connection with their local community. With that in mind, we invited two artists with experience in public art projects, Adam Lanman and Jonathan Hils, to present alongside the student participants and to discuss how they have initiated and incorporated community dialogue and input into their public art projects. Hils is an associate professor of sculpture at the University of Oklahoma, where he has spearheaded several very successful collaborations with the city of Norman to install semi-permanent sculpture by

³⁵ Quoted in Gasper-Hulvat, cited from Peter Scott Brown and Jace Hargis, “Undergraduate Research in Art History Using Project-Based Learning,” *Journal of Faculty Development* 22, no. 2 (2008): 153.

³⁶ Oklahoma Arts Conference, http://www.arts.ok.gov/Our_Programs/Oklahoma_Arts_Conference.html

students in public parks. An impressive example of town-gown cooperation, public pedagogy, and community engagement, Hils's public art course offers students practical and conceptual lessons while making a significant contribution to civic life. Oklahoma City-based artist and architect Lanman likewise consistently engages the built environment, often blurring the line between public art and architecture. We were excited by Lanman's work because its conceptual innovation stands out in the Oklahoma public art landscape, but also because he has a consistent practice of involving community members at every stage of his work, from fundraising, to conceptual development, to fabrication and installation. In addition to our overarching goals for the panel, we wanted our students, specifically, to become more aware that public art speaks to people about a community beyond its immediate environs.



Figure 12

The students prepared a well-organized, eloquent presentation, representing the project and its concerns in a sophisticated and thoughtful way. Over 80 people were present for our Arts Conference session, making it standing-room only. That turnout was a gratifying demonstration

of the passion felt for public art across the state in the arts community.³⁷ Audience members asked questions that ranged from logistical to speculative, and pushed our students to articulate thoughtful critical responses to the data they had gathered as well as to their own experience of engaging with community members. The discussion also explicitly made connections between experiences in Norman, Oklahoma City, and Stillwater, identifying structural and institutional differences between the three cities that contributed to their different public art programs. Distinctions between public and private funding, consideration of the strength and visibility of local arts councils, and the importance of catalysts like new businesses or institutions in generating support for public art were all vibrant topics of conversation. The Arts Conference session was an especially wonderful way to conclude the project—for our students, whose pride in their work over the course of the semester was palpable, as well as for us.

Student Feedback on The Project

Throughout the semester, we had been making changes to upcoming elements of the project based on real-time student responses. At the end of the semester, about a month after the project had ended, we asked students to reflect on the experience as a whole. We were looking for big-picture responses, rather than more thoughts about the *Bronco Buster*: how had the students' understanding of art history, as a discipline, changed? How had their own relationship to art, and particularly public art, evolved or altered over the course of the semester? To that end, we both included a brief survey in our final exam materials, offering students some extra credit for revisiting the project that had dominated the first two thirds of the semester. As with the rest of the project, we were aware of the limitations of this qualitative feedback—but regardless of its potential biases, the level of student insight shared is revealing in itself.

In both classes, students were surprised by the structure, interactivity, and contemporary relevance of the project. One student wrote enthusiastically that “my first impressions of art history were that we would learn about paintings and sculptures from the past and that was it. I had no idea that public works and controversy of choices would be involved. I enjoyed the surprise!” Another noted that “I didn’t realize we could be so involved in the process of choosing artwork. It changed my view [of art history] in a positive way.” Repeatedly, students returned to the theme of real-world relevance and the relationship between the history of art and our contemporary experience of public art and visual culture. “We spend all of our time looking back to see why art was placed where, and how it was perceived or accepted by the audience,” noted one student. “It is a fascinating juxtaposition to turn that on its head and ask, ‘how is art affecting us right now, in our own backyard?’ Today’s art is tomorrow’s art history.”

³⁷ This is characteristic of the strong and supportive arts community in the state, which has been fostered by state arts organizations like the Oklahoma Arts Council (sponsor of the Arts Conference and many statewide programs) as well as NGOs like the Oklahoma Visual Arts Coalition, Oklahomans for the Arts, and the many community-conscious galleries and museums.

Students were likewise struck by the extent to which their research into the *Bronco Buster* highlighted their own sense of agency. “The *Bronco Buster* changed my view of art history because I realized people need to have more of a say in the arts and learn about the art that is around them,” observed one student. “People need to get involved and learn about the history and meaning of art, and they also need to get involved in the [installation] of public art around them.” Many of the students had “never thought about the process of getting a piece of public art installed and who decides that”; over the course of the semester, they learned about that process and, more significantly, began to feel that they had a right as citizens to participate in it.

Part of understanding their agency in relation to public art was students’ new recognition of their responsibility to think critically about it. “Before this project, I assumed that if art was installed in a public place then it therefore must be good, because it cost a lot of money and obviously the people would have taken the time and effort to make such a decision,” admitted a student who continued, “I don’t just assume anymore that people who pay for art or choose it to be displayed know what they’re doing — I think about the why behind it, and how this piece of art fits in with American history.” Another student wrote of their realization that “every artwork in a public place may not be pleasing to all. Some people may hate it and not think it represents the place it is installed.” Summarizing many students’ point of view, one wrote: “The *Bronco Buster* caused me to start to question the history behind artwork, such as where it came from, what was the intention behind it and who contributed to it. These were things I never considered before.” Similarly, another wrote that “I had previously only appreciated a majority of art for its blatant ‘eye-appeal’ and this project allowed me to truly explore how a piece of art can affect the ‘story’ of an area.”

Some of the students demonstrated an impressive subtlety in their understanding of art history. “Being able to research the *Bronco Buster* has shown me that art history can tie into anything, i.e. politics, social living, and even the views of culture that still exist in some places,” wrote one student, concluding that, “It has shown me that historical art can change meaning depending on the place.” Similarly, one of their colleagues observed that, “art’s position in time and place significantly influence interpretation.” This realization had expansive implications; as another student pointed out, “these pieces we learn about in class aren’t just old and in the past...they occur in our everyday lives [and] can be seen all around us.” Complicating such realizations was the recognition that “us” is a productively diverse group of audiences: “Art history is not an entirely insular endeavor,” concluded a student who enjoyed that “I heard and discussed thoughts with my classmates that I would never have come to myself—even with the same facts. To successfully search for a solution or truth it really was important to hear multiple perspectives.”

Reflecting on Our Findings

By the end of the process we already had ideas about improving the project, including changes to both the logistical and conceptual aspects of the assignments. Some of our adjustments would have to do with the timing of the activities, including allowing for more time for each step and stretching everything out over the semester. Despite the success of each phase, we felt we had asked too much of the students too soon, in part because we were constrained by the dates of the Arts Conference. Spreading everything out would help us incorporate the project more effectively into overarching learning outcomes, improving students' critical approach to the *Bronco Buster* as well as their overall experience of each course. Outside the classroom, meanwhile, we were surprised by the limited engagement of the BID board and City Council members; we expected participation, if not enthusiasm, from these groups. Next time we will reach out directly and in person, with clear requests or suggestions for how they might be involved. For both us and our students, email was largely ineffective; as recent political advocacy movements have demonstrated, face-to-face conversation works best. In future, we might invite representatives into our classrooms, in preparation for a public forum to which they might likewise be invited as presenters rather than (or in addition to) as audience members. More direct conversation and collaboration with city officials and BID members might also facilitate public involvement and attention.

One challenge that arose midway through the project was the different levels of academic preparedness demonstrated by students in our two courses. Student research in American Art went really well; they engaged with primary sources, outreach to community members, and more. As a result, the class learned much about the sculpture and the history of Stillwater, considered a variety of critical viewpoints, and had lively debate about each presentation. In contrast, the presentations in Survey II were disappointing, as less experienced students were not ready for this level of independent research so early in the semester. This reflects trends against independent research and writing throughout secondary public education, and suggests that in future we should devote more in-class time to learning skills, strategies, and goals. Our original desire to bring the two classes together, which was prevented by the course scheduling, would have offered us the opportunity to create peer mentoring relationships for this stage of the project, and is worth pursuing in the future.

Our own participation in the project merited some reflection and revision, both during and after the semester. By the time we presented the project to our students, we had discussed the sculpture at length, and had firm opinions of our own—opinions that were, moreover, informed by decades of study of art history, including in both our cases extensive graduate-level coursework in American art history. Complex, nuanced analyses of the sculpture's many problematic connotations could be—and were—communicated between the two of us with quick shorthand comments. Such comments, overheard by our students without the benefit of the

underlying scholarly scaffolding, were sometimes perceived as unfairly dismissive of the sculpture's value. We thus inadvertently—and probably somewhat justifiably—made some students skeptical of our neutrality, and thus of the learning experience as a whole. Although we carefully and intentionally solicited divergent opinions in our assignments, we needed to be more rigorous about keeping our own opinions under wraps—or expressing them with more nuance. This lesson was underscored by our own continuing education during the process, as students' research made the sculpture more intellectually interesting for all involved, even as we retained our conviction that its selection for downtown Stillwater was an extremely poor model of public art process and messaging.

Overall, getting students to think critically about the sculpture's iconographic significance to Stillwater, specifically, was a challenge we consider only partially met in the project. And as we took ourselves out of that conversation, another problem also emerged: minority voices and opinions among the students were put under increasing pressure to represent diverse viewpoints. At the beginning of the semester, Native American students were vocal about their frustration with the sculpture's version of Stillwater "history," but their critiques were largely dismissed by the rest of the class. Similarly, students from outside Oklahoma (including international students) experienced the sculpture radically different from locals, but were likewise sometimes dismissed by their peers out of hand. Having removed ourselves from the debate, we had unintentionally put these students in the awkward position of taking on responsibility for acting as a critical voice without much apparent support from us as authority figures. In future, we hope that spending more time in the research and discussion phases will encourage a broader cross-section of students to understand the serious implications of such erasure and become allies to their peers.

A more fundamental question is whether we would do the demonstration portion of the project again. We believe that the benefit of talking with people in person on the street outweighs the discomfort or limited audience that inevitably results from the general format of public outreach—and with distance, reviewing students' responses and engagement, it is clear that most of them felt the same way. But student and public reactions to the specific form of the protest have prompted us to consider how we might give students more agency in developing that form, rather than just its content. We could, for example, engage the two in tandem: we might discuss the *Bronco Buster* in contrast with other sculptures or public art in town, or provide more examples of how other artists have engaged the public, from the Guerrilla Girls to street art, or local artists like Lanman and Hils, and then let students design an action of their own. We would also like to see the students develop their own ideas about how to become involved in their communities, perhaps by creating a final assignment where they have to propose a selection process for a new public sculpture in town, based on a set of criteria (message, cost, location, etc.). Regardless of how we reinvent this element of the project, it is once again clear that context will matter: in the spring of 2018, the public school teachers of Oklahoma engaged in walkouts

and demonstrations at the state capitol building, lobbying legislators to fund the destitute statewide education system. Local support for this action was immense, with fundraisers, sympathy demonstrations, and lively social media exchanges joining with calls and emails to state legislators.³⁸ The social meaning of the aesthetic of protest had, once again, changed.

Art History and the Public Sphere

By the end of the project, it was clear that the students' most powerful pedagogical experiences happen in real-world contexts. As if to confirm that feeling, the Dean of our college—who, earlier in the semester, had fielded a student complaint—expressed his support and excitement, encouraging us to write the essay you are reading now. With distance, it became increasingly plain to us that although we were never going to reach every student or get all of them to a high critical level in the discipline, they all gained some sort of new perspective on the material. Or, in their words: “I’m not sure if I’ll ever be able to casually walk past another piece in the public sphere and merely glance at it without thinking about the social contexts and the community’s intentions for the work.” And for many students, this was a clearly positive outcome of the experiment. “Part of the fun of art history ... is thinking about the calculated purposes of art,” wrote one. Other students applied the lessons they learned to their own studio practice: “Now I am thinking bigger picture,” commented one of our Native students, explaining “I want to see how I can help build/create public art (inclusive) in my community, both tribal and non-tribal.” Throughout the spring semester, we discovered students now enrolled in other classes who continued to raise questions about audience, patronage, site-specificity, and community-based meaning that had originated in this project.

It seems unlikely that either of us would have taken on such an ambitious plan on our own, and it was only the promise of collaboration that made either of us agree to take the leap. It is worth noting that both of us are tenured faculty, and we’ve also been research collaborators for nearly twenty years. In other words, we trust each other and know how to work together effectively—but despite our long association, this was our first co-teaching experience. While there were unforeseen hiccups, the benefits of working together, from brainstorming the initial idea to troubleshooting glitches along the way to sharing our sense of accomplishment once it was done, far outweighed the complications. Collaborative work—whether writing an article or co-teaching—always takes longer and requires more effort. But the reward of sharing in the process is immeasurable. Most of us rarely have the opportunity for consistent, regular conversations about the why and how we do art history; having to talk through each piece of this project

³⁸ This action came on the heels of the nationwide walkouts in opposition to gun violence. See “Education Supporters Line Streets of Stillwater for Candlelight Vigil,” *Stillwater NewsPress*, April 9, 2018: http://www.stwnewspress.com/news/education-supporters-line-streets-of-stillwater-for-candlelight-vigil/article_aebe5c14-3b9d-11e8-9e0a-3b114cfb8688.html

provided a context in which we had these important disciplinary conversations, about what we do and why we do it, nearly every day.

Moreover, the collaboration required us to refresh and revise courses that we have taught a dozen times before, and which had, to some extent, stagnated. Both we and our students benefited from the reminder that our passion for the discipline is rooted in socially-conscious understandings of its contemporary relevance, as well as a more conventionally academic love of history. Although we've offered some detail about specific assignment design, we would like our experience to be inspirational rather than offering a direct model, and to provoke new collaborative, community-engaged teaching projects that have local significance and global implications. As others have observed, the field of art history teaching and learning scholarship is dominated by “anecdotal discussions that are important to sharing teaching techniques in the field”—and for good reason.³⁹ The diversity of individual instructors' situations makes any kind of programmatic curriculum design challenging to adapt to specific contexts, and descriptive analyses allow readers to make nuanced assessments of the transferability of course design, content, and learning outcomes to their own classroom.

The core of this project was an attempt to build bridges: between the real world and the classroom, the local and the canonical/global, the university and the town, and the past and the present. It also strengthened existing connections: between ourselves, our students, and our areas of study within the broader discipline of art history. It succeeded because we were willing to adapt as we went along—we created an environment in which we could acknowledge failure and work with our students to do better. Perhaps most importantly, we didn't equate connection or community with consensus. Students and community members alike expressed a variety of opinions throughout the semester about all aspects of the project, and while individual opinions often changed, that variety never did. By enfranchising our students, we encouraged them to invest not only in their own academic success, but in the idea of public art as a community practice. That investment was dependent upon a local object of inquiry, and on the students' ability (with our help) to connect local issues with much broader cultural and philosophical conversations.

³⁹ Gasper-Hulvat, citing Virginia Spivey et al., “White Paper on the Need for a Journal of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Art History,” (2015), <http://arthistoryteachingresources.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/AHTR-White-Paper-2.pdf>

Figures

Figure 1: *Bronco Buster* in situ, Stillwater, OK (Photo credit: Jennifer Borland)

Figure 2: Max Geller, Renoir protest (<http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2015/10/06/446365314/3-questions-with-the-guy-who-hates-renoir>)

Figure 3: I. B. Co. (New York), *Allegory of the United States of America*, 1918, color offset lithograph, Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico, Rome, Italy (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/allegory-of-united-states-of-america>)

Figure 4: Robert Turney, *The Real History of the American Civil War*, 2014 (Photograph courtesy Robert Turney)

Figure 5: Survey

Figure 6: Students conducting survey (Photo credit: Megan Wilson)

Figure 7: Student Demonstration (Photo credit: Jennifer Borland)

Figure 8: Student Demonstration (Photo credit: Jennifer Borland)

Figure 9: Student Demonstration (Photo credit: Megan Wilson)

Figure 10: Student Demonstration (Photo credit: Megan Wilson)

Figure 11: Students conducting survey (Photo credit: Megan Wilson)

Figure 12: Speakers and audience at Oklahoma Arts Conference (Photo credit: Jennifer Borland)

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