

Art as a Social Change Agent:

Getting Students Excited About Social Justice and Activism

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Personal Disclosures & Positionality Statement

- I am white, cisgender, middle class, native English speaking, able-bodied male of European decent.
- I also identify as a human with invisible stigmatized social identities.
- I am intimate committed partner, a father and musician.
- I am currently an Associate Professor at a PWI and private psychotherapy practitioner.
- Due to my intersectional identities, I am the beneficiary of countless unearned privileges, some of which I am unaware.
- I am indebted to my countless teachers, colleagues, friends, and family as well as strangers and cultures for their knowledge, labor and any wisdom I may have to share today.

Objectives

- Identify historical and contemporary examples of art rooted in anger, discrimination, and oppression.
- Understand how art can raise audience consciousness and bring about societal change.
- Consider how art can function as both resistance and a call to action.
- Apply insights from the workshop to teach students about intersection of art, activism, and social justice.

*“Anger is loaded with
information and energy.”*

Audre Lorde

“ What do you think an artist is? An imbecile who has only his eyes if he is a painter, or ears if he is a musician or a lyre at every level of his heart if he’s a poet....? On the contrary, he’s at the same time a political being, constantly alive to heart rendering fiery or happy events, to which he responds in every way.... No, painting is not done to decorate apartments. It is an instrument of war for attack and defense against the enemy.”

- Picasso, 1937



What is Art?

- **Visual Arts** - Painting, Sculpture, Photography, Architecture, Fashion
- **Performing Arts**
- **Literary Arts**
- **Other Art Forms**

Sublimation

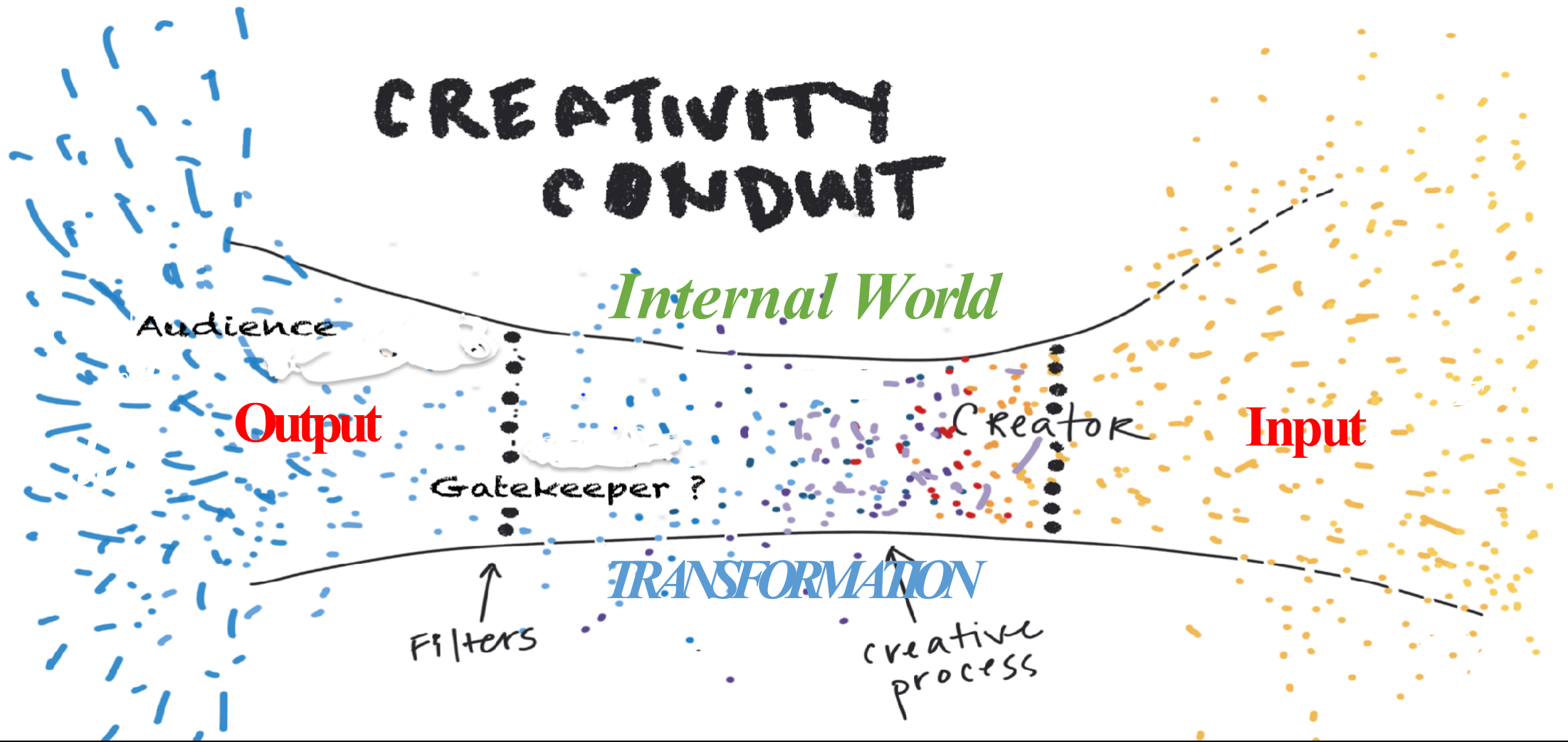
- In Latin, *sublimare* means “to raise up”.
- (Ego) Defense Mechanisms often happen out of our awareness to protect us from unpleasant feelings by transforming them into more tolerable forms.
- We need these defenses –they help us cope with strong feelings.
- Socially unacceptable impulses or idealizations are transformed into socially acceptable actions or behavior.
- Take a feeling and turn it into something productive. A creation or work of art.
- “...it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an 'important' part in civilized life.” (Freud, 1930).

What is Creativity? (...psychoanalytically speaking)

Creativity is theorized to be the result of the working out of a psychic conflict that derives from our unacceptable desires or wishes that become changed and expressed in socially acceptable form (Freud, 1958).

In theory, the forbidden and the suppressed get moved down to the unconscious, where they incubate and then percolate up to consciousness in an altered, rearranged, loosely associated, but socially appropriate form.

CREATIVITY CONDUIT



The works of art that follow are intended to draw attention to social injustice, raise the consciousness of individuals, and promote the need for societal change.

DISCLAIMER: The following content may be upsetting and/or

Strange Fruit
(B. Holiday,
1939)



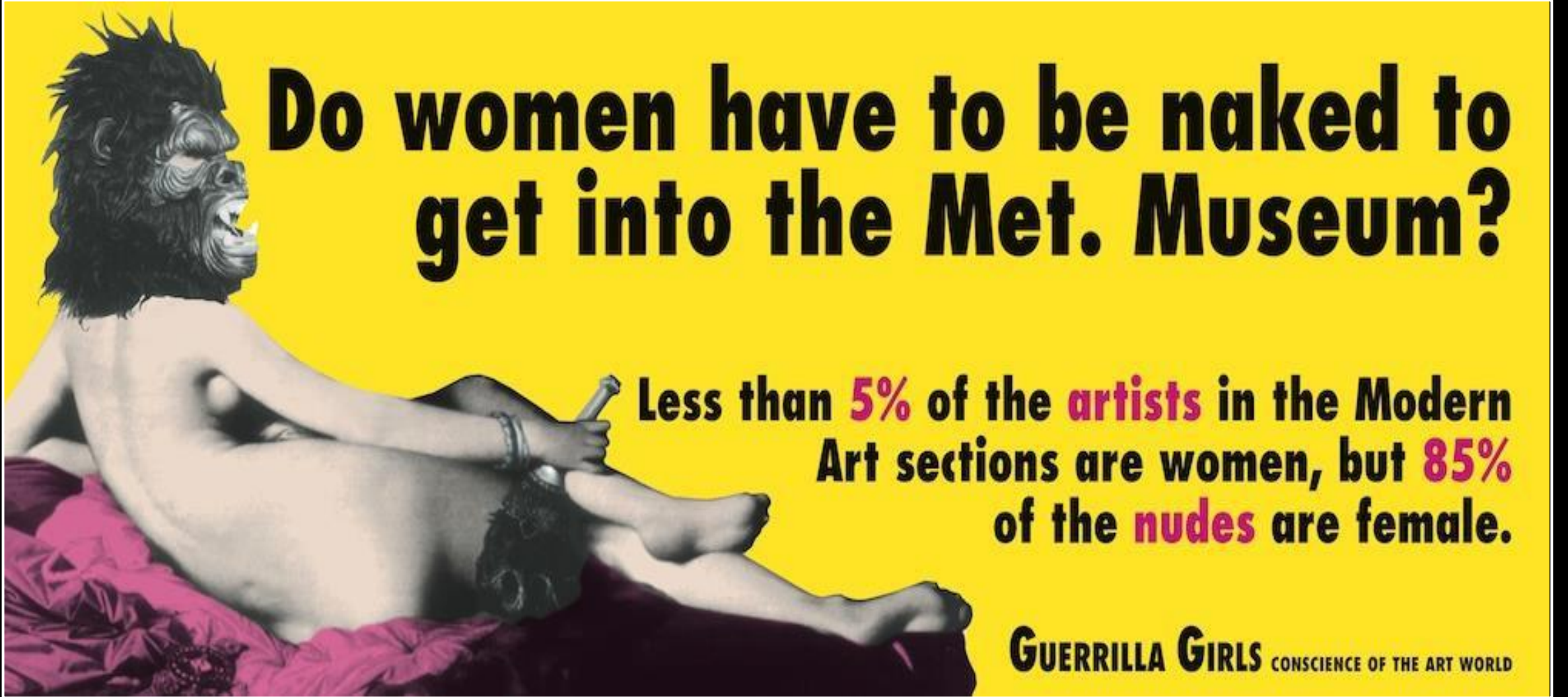
Ohio
(N. Young,
1970)



Defacement

(J.M. Basquiat, 1983)



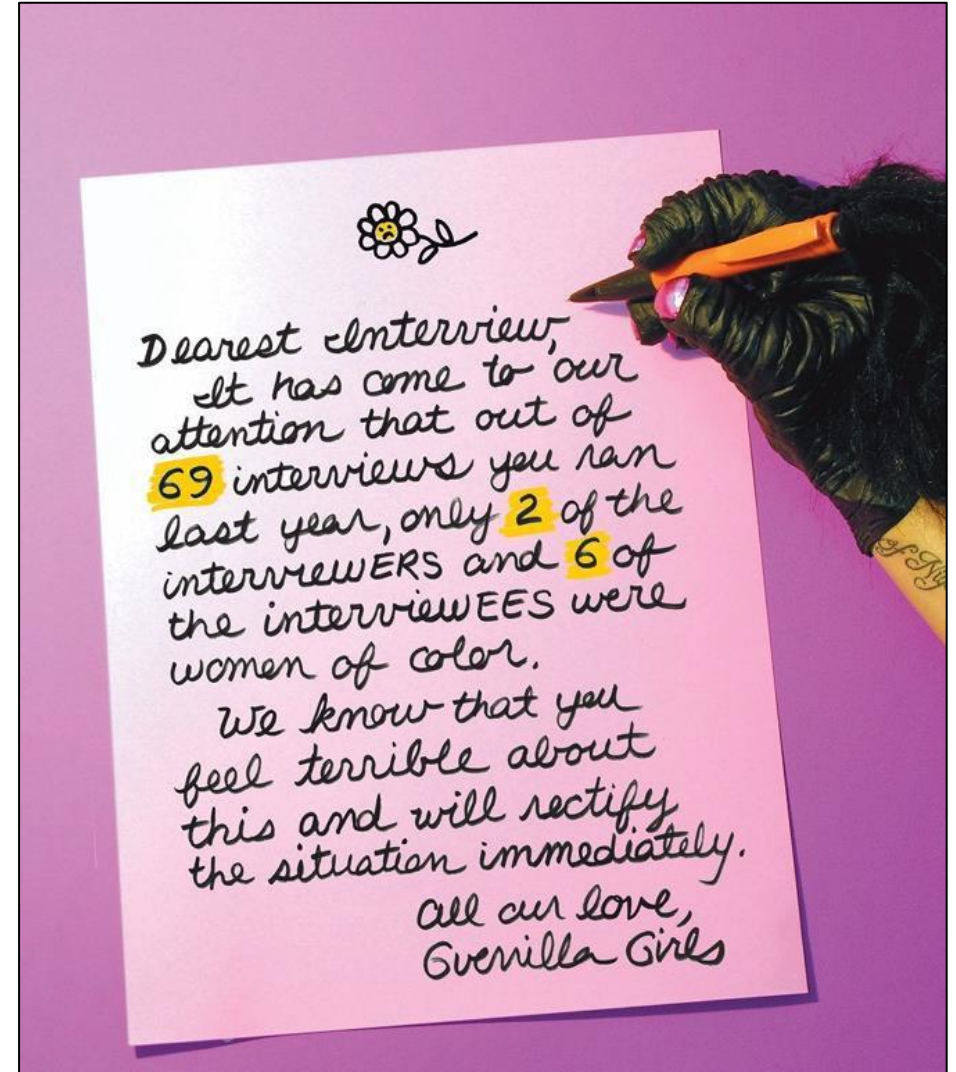
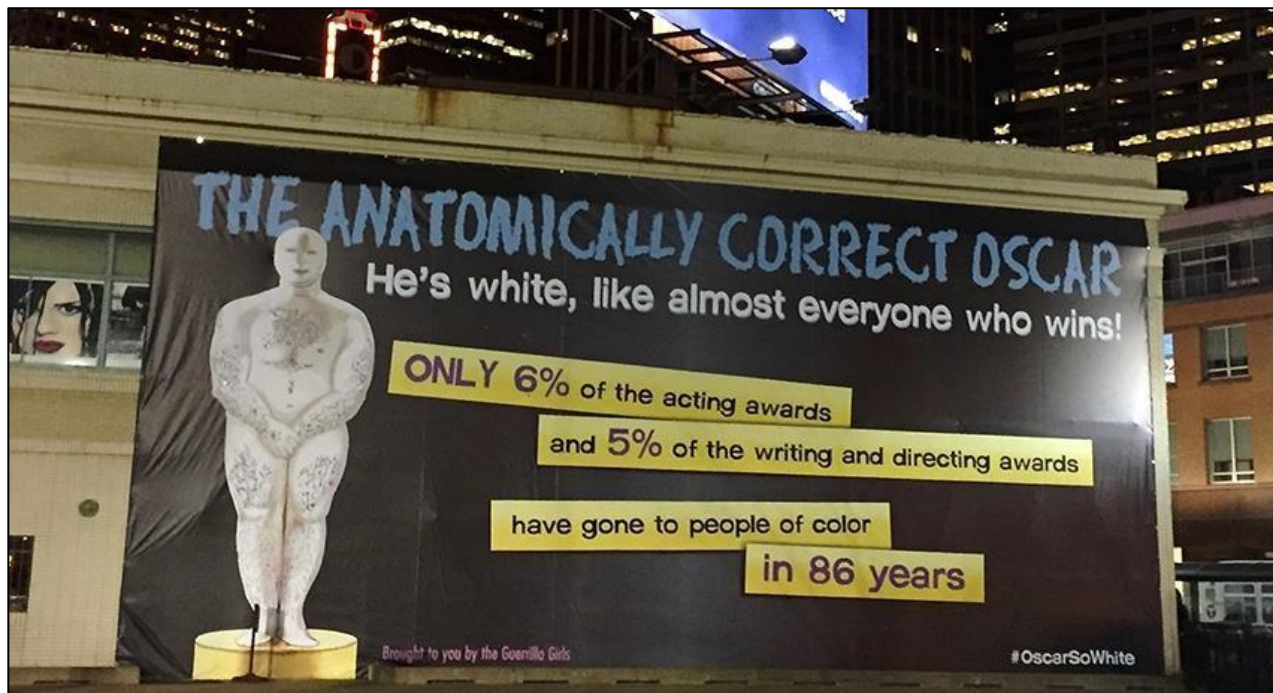


**Do women have to be naked to
get into the Met. Museum?**

**Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern
Art sections are women, but 85%
of the nudes are female.**

GUERRILLA GIRLS CONSCIENCE OF THE ART WORLD

Naked (Guerrilla Girls, 1989)

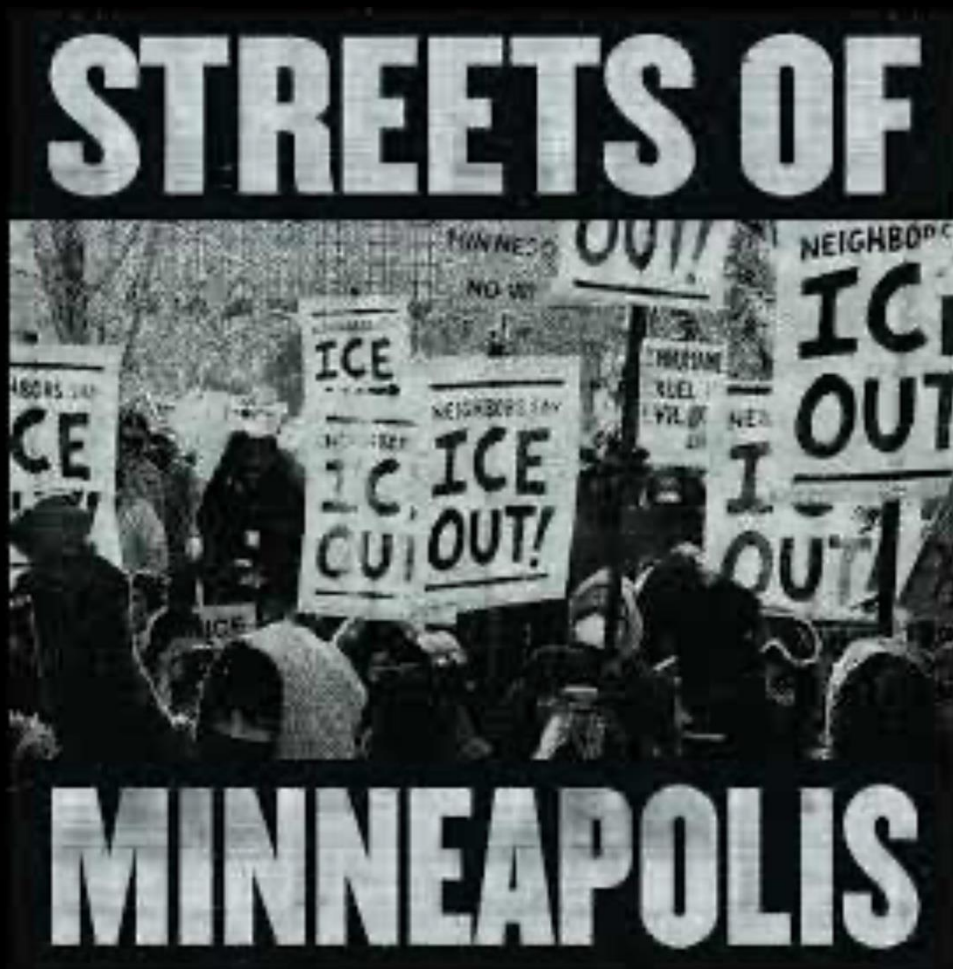


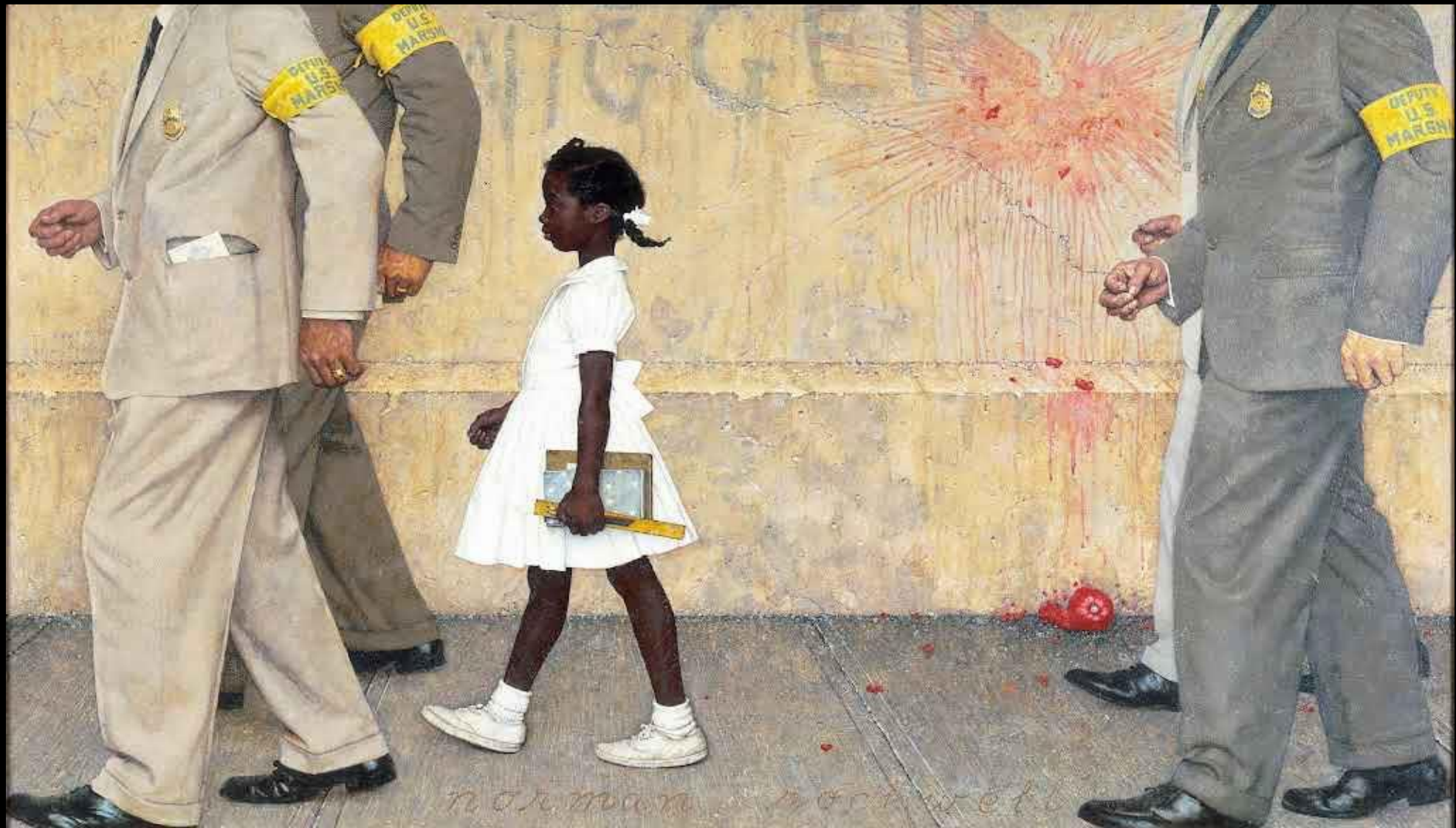


BLM Murals

Streets of
Minneapolis

(B. Springsteen,
2026)





N. Rockwell (1964), "The Problem We All Live With"

Instructions

In a small group, discuss *The Problem We All Live With*. Use the questions below to guide your discussion.

1. Context What was happening in society when this work was created?

- What injustices or inequalities does it respond to?

2. Emotion & Anger

- What feelings does the work evoke?
- Where do you see anger expressed—directly or indirectly?
- How is that anger transformed into creativity?

3. Audience Impact

- Who was the intended audience?
- What reactions might it have provoked at the time?
- How does it resonate with you today?

4. Social Work Connections

- How could art like this be used in advocacy and/or education?
- How might this work inform your understanding of clients' experiences?

References

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