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BEYOND AN IDEA IN PAINTING

A CREATIVE PROJECT
by
Raúl Manzano

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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BEYOND AN IDEA IN PAINTING

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Master of Arts

Empire State College

ABSTRACT

The purpose of my studies was to explore multiple meanings of art as a form of communication. My final creative project, "Beyond an Idea in Painting", consisted of a series of transformative paintings depicting multifaceted aspects of society. My research included the work of three artists whose philosophies have an affinity with my own work. They are Pablo Picasso, Diego Rivera and Judy Chicago. Their work aspires to promote the value of art for social change. Social changes bring awareness to people's rights, self-empowerment, and education. In addition to my readings of art history and postmodernism theories, I interacted with professionals in the field, the public, produced and designed exhibitions at the school's gallery, attended lectures, and viewed exhibitions. This exposure taught me a new perspective about art and history in relation to the time, place, circumstances and people involved in the process.

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Beyond an Idea in Painting

Have you ever wondered, what is the meaning behind a painting? Why an artist paints what he/she paints? Why an institution exhibits what they exhibit, referred to as a work of art? Who set up the aesthetics for which art is valued and defined? Is it the artist, the critic, the curator, the art establishment, the public or the art market that determines what art is? The answer could be simple or complex, depending upon whom you ask.

For example, when the public visits museums, galleries or alternative art venues, they often see the final product of an artwork --a depicted image, an installation or a performance. In this scenario, a visual interaction, connection, or sensation takes place between the viewer and the artwork, leaving an impression about the exhibition or event. People think of circumstances, a historic moment, an artist's struggle or a societal commentary. The viewer is exposed to vast information implied or ambiguous that lives in their memories or their subconscious. It is a notion that takes people from a feeling to an emotion and from an idea to an interpretation. I refer to this notion as the power of visual language to create awareness and raise consciousness. In this Master of Arts in Liberal Studies program, I have drawn from my own artistic practice and professional experience, and from the breadth of interdisciplinary research and professional critique in an attempt to answer those questions and present a broader view of this fascinating discipline. Thus, my creative project, "Beyond an Idea in Painting", a series of transformative paintings of the Statue of Liberty and the American flag, explores these multifaceted aspects of art as a form of communication.

Defining art has been a dilemma since the times of Socrates. “Philosophers of mind have sought the defining properties of knowledge; moral philosophers have sought the defining properties of good life; and philosophers of art have sought to discover the defining properties of art, beauty, and the aesthetic response.”¹ During each time period, these thinkers have established new parameters to define art, rejecting previous established conditions, thus adding to the argument that art is an ever-expandable discipline and should not be limited to a fixed set of properties; art has developed according to the evolution of civilizations and taken on new forms. Curator and writer on contemporary art, Linda Weintraub, explained that: “visual languages, like verbal ones, have never been static constructions. Imagine, for instance, if we had only Ben Franklin’s vocabulary to describe scud missiles, cyberspace, and satellite transmissions. Artists respond to change by inventing new art syntax and grammar that are capable of conveying their experiences. Necessity motivates them to tease and stretch the vocabulary that has traditionally sufficed in art, sometimes going ‘to the edge,’ sometimes ‘going over.’”² Historically, painting has been used in many different forms of expression. The caveman depicted life by drawing images on cave walls, providing the first clues about the world humans lived in and the world that surrounded them at the time. Or, perhaps, “the paintings were done not simply to be contemplated but to engender luck and bravery among hunters.”³ In the Renaissance period, artists

¹ Ellen Winner, *Invented Worlds: The Psychology of the Arts* (Harvard University Press, 1982), 5.

² Linda Weintraub, *Art on the Edge and Over* (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, Inc., 1996), 10-11.

³ Winner, 3.

interpreted life by depicting religious domains, elevating painting to a platform for divinity and glory. Or, perhaps, these monumental works of art were done to exert the psychological power of the church over the values and principles that people believed and often held sacred. And in the Modern era, artists have been exploring individualism, the mind and technology, to offer multiple possibilities of meaning and expression. This has staged on-going debates among scholars, critics and the art establishments throughout the second-half of the twentieth century, challenging the canon and leading to new ways of seeing and interpreting art.

But what exactly is painting, what is an idea, and what is meant by beyond? In simple terms, painting is the application of colors onto a surface; idea is the representation of what is on the artist's mind; and beyond is an intellectual interpretation of an idea that varies among individuals. These definitions, however, require a different understanding of art, where the artist, as the creator of art, is challenged by rhetorical discourse as to whether or not the artist determines what is art. Major events in the twentieth century: the effects of the Industrial Revolution, First and Second World Wars, Communism, The Great Depression, the influx of European intellectuals and artists who emigrated to the United States, the student uprising of 1968 in Europe, The Vietnam War, and Postmodernism, have played key roles in the development of art movements and intellectual thinking. Artists like Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Diego Rivera (1886-1957), and Judy Chicago (b. 1939), expressed specifics about social concerns. These artists took art beyond conventional forms of expression, setting up standards and opening up new possibilities. They challenged the art establishments, educational institutions and

themselves by defining the role of the artist and art in society. Their teachings and artistic legacies have shaped my ideas and concepts and this is reflected in my artworks.

Pablo Picasso, recognized as one of the greatest artists of modern times, revolutionized art by changing the way people see art. He oversimplified complex structures to alter the view by exaggerating the pose of the model. Picasso took previously accepted notions of reality and broke all the rules of esthetics, proportion, perspective, and color with overlapping lines and geometrical forms, creating a new art movement known as Cubism. Although I do not practice Cubism, the notion of transforming an image to convey a different meaning has been an influence in my work. In doing so, I engage the viewer's perception to question why the painted subject looks the way it looks. This psycho-physiological interaction, viewer-artwork, becomes an active relationship in which the viewer is an integral part of the artwork. This interplay was essential in the works of minimalist artists decades later. For Picasso, "paintings are but research and experiment. I never do a painting as a work of art. All of them are researches. I search constantly and there is a logical sequence in all this research."⁴ In my own practice, I research my subjects to understand the purpose and intention of what I want to depict. Like Picasso, I do not paint to create a work of art; I do not believe that is the mission of the artist. Instead, it is an expression of an innate energy that is transformed into a visual form. The "artwork" becomes an artwork afterward, not before.

⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, The Genesis of a Painting: Picasso's Guernica (University of California Press, 1962), 13.

Even though Picasso avoided politics and political art, the genocidal atrocities at the Basque village of Guernica, in northern Spain, by fascist Generalissimo Francisco Franco and Hitler's war machine, could not keep him from creating a testimony of war and a powerful antiwar statement. The mural, *Guernica*, 1937, illustrates the "notion of creative process that serves to analyze how an artist's idea develops, evolves and grows."⁵ This painting is a complex interpretation of sketches, arrangements and symbols, in which the artist involves the viewer to participate in the interpretation of the work of art. The concept moves beyond pictorial representation to a state of mind and the sub-conscious. Picasso took a subject and transformed it into a visual language. The painting, stated Arnheim, "is not a statement about Picasso but about a condition of the world."⁶ The painting, created for the 1933 World's Fair, in Paris, toured Europe, North America and Brazil and was used to raise consciousness about the threat of fascism and the calamities of war. "Although Picasso intended for the mural to be owned by the Spanish people, he [refused] to allow it to travel to Spain until the country [enjoyed] public liberties and democratic institutions."⁷ By so stating, Picasso took a giant step, voicing artistic authority and redefining the role of the artist, not only artistically and socially, but also internationally. The artist was no longer seen as a "decorator of interiors" but someone with political influence. "Picasso's apocalyptic vision has served

⁵ Ibid., Arnheim, 5.

⁶ Ibid., 5.

⁷ PBS, "Guernica: Testimony of War," [article on-line]; available from <http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/guernica/gmain.html>; Internet; accessed 11 January 2005.

as a banner for a nation on its path toward freedom and democracy.”⁸ This powerful and poignant painting brings together an interdisciplinary range that addresses all concepts of art and intellect as no other painting had ever done before.

In contrast to Picasso, Mexican muralist Diego Rivera identified himself with the working class and the poor and painted for the masses; educated in Europe and influenced by Marxist ideologies, his works were drawn from both European and ancient Mexican art. Rivera’s virtuosity craftsmanship positioned him among the greatest artists of his generation and “played a pivotal role in leading Mexican art into the forefront of 20th century modernism. He aspired to create not merely public art, but truly populist art [that possesses] the visual and rhetorical power to change the world.”⁹ Rivera taught his fellow citizens about both “their own history and the new government’s dreams for their future.”¹⁰ From religious to family themes, and from racial and human exploitation to life and death, he communicated with the viewer. People saw a portrait of themselves through his works, thereby raising their morality and dignity as well as establishing a cultural dialogue. His works are a reflection of his understanding of life and society. Like Rivera’s paintings, I also like to paint for the masses. During my lifetime, I have been concerned about issues that affect society and the world. I believe that as a global civilization, human beings have much to learn from each other in order to live in harmony. History has shown that wars, disease and pollution are not accidents. They are

⁸ Ibid., PBS.

⁹ William Robinson, “Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution,” [article on-line]; available from <http://www.clevelandart.org/exhibit/rivera/curator.html>; Internet; accessed 11 January 2005.

¹⁰ The Museum of Modern Art, MOMA Highlights (New York, 1999, 2004), 173.

the byproduct of conflicts among people, nations, and corporations and are bound to a complex global socio-political spectrum. As an immigrant from Colombia, South America, I have seen marked social inequalities between the rich and poor, and a politically divided society that has led that country into a civil war for more than fifty years. My analytical thinking, artistic development and the philosophical process of my artwork have been influenced and shaped by my personal and professional experiences.

In the United States, Rivera's work, in particular *The Detroit Murals*, 1932-1933, painted during the Great Depression, connected with the American audience in spite of criticisms by the media about his communist affiliation. Linda Bank Downs, author of the book, *The Detroit Industry Murals*, said that...

[Rivera] aspired to broaden interest in industrial design and promote a greater understanding, acceptance and celebration of the working class as well as American engineering genius...The Detroit murals include the concept of the continuity of the ancient indigenous American culture. The meeting of the ancient past of North and South America in the artist's eyes represented a common Pan-American culture.¹¹

What Downs conveys about Rivera's work is that they have a universal appeal and promoted the value of art for social change, a notion which I apply to my own work. Social change brings awareness of people's rights, self-empowerment, and education. Painting for the masses is not only about illustrating a human or social condition but of

¹¹ Linda Bank Downs, *The Detroit Industry Murals* (The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1999), 22.

depicting the history and heritage of a culture at a specific time and place. It is a historical narrative that transcends beyond an idea in painting; much in the same way the caveman left the first signs of early human existence and life on cave walls.

Judy Chicago, a first generation feminist artist, brought awareness about women's work to the art community and academic institutions in the late 1960s and 1970s. Since then, she has been committed to the power of art as a vehicle for intellectual transformation and social change. Her work has contributed to an enlarged definition of art and an expanded role for the artist. In her autobiography, Beyond the Flower, she said: "I wanted to change my ideas, first outlined in *Through the Flower*, about establishing a term that did not exist until I invented it. My intention was to see if such an educational process might lead to a new kind of art, that is, Feminist Art. I defined this as art in which distinctly female subject matter would be both central and unabashedly expressed."¹² In the process, Chicago redefined art by creating a new visual vocabulary, a new way of thinking, and a new sense of women's acknowledgement.

Chicago's most important work, which brought together centuries of legacy of women's accomplishments, is celebrated in *The Dinner Party*, 1973-1979, an installation "[encompassing] the prehistory and history of women celebrating their worldly, spiritual, and cultural achievements on a monumental scale; emphasized the biological distinctiveness of women; and employed crafts historically associated with women.

¹² Judy Chicago, Beyond the Flower: The Autobiography of a Feminist Artist (New York: Penguin Group, 1996), 22-23.

Above all, in bringing together representations of great women of past and present in one piece.”¹³

The feminist movement opened new aesthetic options to women, created a sense of community by the proliferation of feminist art organizations, and gained recognition in the art world. Feminist artists used personal narrative experiences to raise consciousness about social, political and cultural issues related to the female role in art and society. Likewise, they used the historical association of handicrafts to create awareness about women’s work and to express themselves. Hand crafted work, which had been considered a “low” art form by elitists, emerged as a new form and content. Chicago and other artists combined craft materials with techniques and painting to create a new form of “high” art. This new decorative style was labeled Pattern and Decoration painting. Its popularity expanded throughout social levels and commercial venues.

After taking cues from Picasso’s image transformations and Rivera’s socio-political messages, I felt that my work still needed a new direction as well as an audience. This resulted in the exploration of Chicago’s intellectual academic approach. That opportunity presented itself when I was invited to give a slide lecture at New York University’s Academic Achievement Program of the College of Art and Sciences, on November 18, 1998, in celebration of Hispanic Heritage month.¹⁴ I realized the potential

¹³ Irving Sandler, Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 133.

¹⁴ Raul Manzano, “Academic Achievement Program of the College of Arts and Sciences” (slide/lectures presented at New York University, New York, 19 November 1998, 18 November 1999 and 30 November 2000).

for this expansion to my work. This presentation showed new ways to capture the attention of a younger audience as well as to define my works in terms of my Latin American roots and my devotion to my adopted country. In sum, the mix of the two Americas came together in terms of arts, culture, language, history and their relation to one another as the two oldest democracies in the Western hemisphere. Over the next two years, I was a guest speaker at N.Y.U. and subsequently at Fairleigh Dickinson University, on June 12, 2004, in Hackensack, New Jersey.¹⁵ This experience, from artist to guest speaker, played a significant role in my approach to art, my personal experiences and my life.

While this new form of expression by artists like Picasso, Rivera and later Chicago, opposition continues through the century. Formalist Clement Greenberg, the most influential art critic of the postwar period, stated that “artwork was an autonomous object and that the critics ought to focus on its formal properties and ignore extra formal issues. Art should not be relegated to illustration of social history or critical theory.”¹⁶ I obviously disagree with Greenberg’s position. Art has been such an integral part of every culture whether in the visual, oral, written or architectural disciplines that even today one can find comfort in the remains of monuments, frescos, or architectural ornamentation of past generations. These treasures can be found in hidden corners, plazas, churches or ruins in almost any place. This notion of experiencing living with the past can “change

¹⁵ Raúl Manzano, (lecture presentation at Fairleigh Dickinson University, Hackensack, NJ, 12 June 2004).

¹⁶ Sandler, 333.

your sense of time and your place in the world, making the ups and downs of the present seem smaller, while also making you feel a part of a much larger continuum.”¹⁷ Counter to Greenberg’s position, these extra-formal issues are what make art significant to the majority and not just to an elite group.

Greenberg, a defender of aesthetics, further rejected art as a commercial or political product and referred to mass art as anti-academic, for it lacked technique and style. In his 1939 essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, he defined the difference between fine art and mass art as follows: “fine art is based on aesthetic quality and generally appeals to the elite audience, and mass produced art, which is based on marketability and generally appeals to a less-educated audience.”¹⁸ He also established standards for which art is evaluated and perceived, that is, art as an esthetic experience, which aims for “the desire for purity, clarity, and order.”¹⁹ Here, I differ strongly: the alienation of art for the pleasure of the elite; while I don’t dispute aesthetics in art, there is no reason why “mass intended” art has no aesthetic of its own.

Greenberg championed the importance of color field painting and abstract expressionism and associated this movement with music. “Music lay chiefly in the fact that it was an ‘abstract’ art, an art of ‘pure form.’ It was such because it was incapable, objectively, of communicating anything else than a sensation, and, because this sensation could not be conceived in any other terms than those of the sense through which it

¹⁷ Alexander Stille, *The Future of the Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), ix.

¹⁸ Paul F. Fabozzi, “The Arts and the Mass Media,” *Artists, Critics, Context: Reading in and Around American Art Since 1945* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 115.

¹⁹ Tim Woods, *Beginning Postmodernism* (Manchester University Press, 1999), 126-127.

entered consciousness.”²⁰ While this may be true, I question whether or not those were the intention of the artist when making art and to what degree one can call it “a pure form” of art. If creating an abstract painting, which is referred as a “spontaneous use of gesture and color to evoke emotional responses,”²¹ can be called “pure”, then what can one call other practices or studies of painting? To Greenberg, “Art may provide other things as well, but if it does so at the cost of esthetic value, it deprives humanity of what is uniquely art’s to give. Art that does this is not forgiven in the end, and the refusal to forgive asserts and confirms the autonomy of art or the autonomy of esthetic value.”²² However firm to his formalist theories and philosophy, he found himself challenged not only by his peers, but also by a newer generation of artists and movements that were to redefine art into the new millennium.

Twenty years later (1958) critic Lawrence Alloway claimed “that it was no longer possible or necessary to maintain these divisions, largely because of the explosion in both the population and the method for the reproduction and distribution of images.”²³ He felt the need to establish a new vocabulary that represented and identified contemporary life in the art world. Contrary to Greenberg, he championed the arts of the mass media, an art of the minorities that is urban and democratic as opposed to élite. Henry Geldzahler, Assistant Curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, at the 1963 symposium on Pop art,

²⁰ Fabozzi, “Clement Greenberg: Towards a New Laocoon,” 17.

²¹ The Museum of Modern Art, *MOMA Highlights*, 232.

²² Clement Greenberg, “The Language of Esthetic Discourse,” Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1999), 65.

²³ Fabozzi, “The Arts and the Mass Media,” 115.

expressed that “it is the artist who defines the limits of art, not the critic or the curator. Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968) and Jasper Johns (b. 1930) have taught us that it is the artist who decides what is art, and they have been convincing philosophically and aesthetically.”²⁴

Duchamp, in his readymade art objects such as *Bicycle Wheel*, 1913, and *Fountain*, 1917, “challenged the prestige in our aesthetic thinking of the notion of work as an essential ingredient in art. He assigned aesthetic value to purely functional objects by a simple mental choice rather than through any exercise of manual skill. What he wanted to demonstrate was that art-making could be based on other terms than the arbitrary, tasteful arrangement of forms.”²⁵ Duchamp demonstrated the act of redefining art, and the role of the artist no longer seen as a practitioner, but someone in charge of art in general, above and beyond. I visited the Museum of Modern Art to experience for myself how this idea of being in charge of art applies. As I stood in front of Duchamp’s assemblage, *Bicycle Wheel*,²⁶ I could not help but think of the state of mind of the audience in 1913 trying to interpret the meaning of a bicycle wheel attached to a wooden stool. I could almost hear their voices and visualize their facial expressions asking the question: Is this art? That same thought, however, crossed my mind as I observed the audience walking around this object and leaning forward to get a closer look, trying to interpret the meaning of the artwork, perhaps desiring to touch it and spin the wheel. It is

²⁴ Ibid., “A Symposium on Pop Art,” 120.

²⁵ Thames & Hudson World of Art, “Minimalism” by Suzi Gablik, Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism (New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 1974, Revised edition 1994), 248.

²⁶ Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, assemblage, 1913, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

not about the meaning of the object but how an artist can determine what art is. It is the artist who is gathering information, painting what he/she feels and sees or assembling what he/she finds; in a sense, “the artist [responds] specifically to [his/her] visual environment,”²⁷ said Geldzahler.

On the other hand, Jasper Johns allowed “the paint to become something, rather than forced to depict something; the image is, so to speak, inherent in the paint, but it is on the paint that we chiefly concentrate our attention.”²⁸ In his flag and target paintings of the 1950s, Johns confronts the spectator with images of recognizable objects as the “thing the mind already knows” and leaves the viewer to resolve the meaning of the painting and to question whether these images are art or not, the flag representing a nation and the target a universal symbol. Here, too, I stood in front of Johns’ painting, *Flag*,²⁹ and observed how a simple subject becomes an object and has such a powerful impact on the viewer. Our preconceived learned associations of a symbolic icon inform us about the significance of the painting one is viewing.

During my recent visit to the reopening of the Museum of Modern Art, in New York City, I reacquainted myself with the diverse art movements and artists that have made an impact on the evolution of art in our time. It was intellectually invigorating and visually stimulating to see history before my eyes through the works of these pioneers. From the post-impressionist works of Paul Cézanne and Vincent Van Gogh, who

²⁷ Fabozzi, “A Symposium on Pop Art,” 121.

²⁸ Thames & Hudson World of Art, “Pop Art” by Edward Lucie-Smith, 234.

²⁹ Jasper Johns, *Flag*, encaustic, 1954, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

“abandoned historical subject matter”³⁰ and realism for a more populist subject matter and spontaneous approach to painting, to the “use of pure color and exaggeration of drawing and perspective”³¹ in the Fauvist style of Henry Matisse. He and his fellow practitioners earned “the name Les Fauves (wild beasts).”³² From the abstractionists Vasily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, who “embraced spiritualism to offset the secularism of the modern,”³³ to surrealist artists like Paul Klee and Joan Miró, who “employed childlike imagery that embodies the yearning to escape childhood and all its responsibilities”³⁴; they changed the way one sees and perceives art. While the museum itself hosts such precious collections, it also serves as a link to the past that informs our present with a vision to the future.

Stemming from an interdisciplinary framework of studies, “Beyond an Idea in Painting” explores boundaries that transcend painting. From an historical perspective, a painting explores historical consciousness; it is a powerful source of information that gives the viewer a sense of time and space at some point in time, whether past, present or future, by means of metaphor. For example, historian John L. Gaddis, in his book, The Landscape of History, compares the painting by Caspar David Friedrich, *The Wanderer above the Sea of Fog*, 1818, as a plethora of metaphors. The painting illustrates the

³⁰ Terry Barnet, “Modernist Aesthetics and Criticism,” Criticizing Art (Mountain View: Mayfield Pub. Co., 1994) 33.

³¹ Thames & Hudson, World of Art, “Fauvism by Sarah Whitfield,” 11.

³² Ibid., “Fauvism,” 11.

³³ Barnet, 33.

³⁴ Barnet, 33.

power of suggestion, representation and contradiction as the painting leads the viewer to interpret the context of its meaning, a narrative that can have multiple interpretations. To illustrate, the viewer wonders what the character in the painting looks like when we can not see the face and his back is towards the viewer. We cannot tell how the person feels in relation to the distant landscape, blurred by clouds and mist. For Gaddis, “the posture of Friedrich’s wanderer is like that of historians”³⁵ to turn their back and “speculate as to their significance,”³⁶ much in the same way a painting does. Historians use the techniques of artists to represent what they can never duplicate; historians take their audience into a historical journey with imagination.

I also see the function of art as one that transcends a social event. Painting is art; art is culture; and culture is the essence of a community. Communities that actively engage in the arts benefit more than those that do not. They can get financial support from the government, local businesses and, more importantly, they involve neighborhood participation. This civic engagement benefits everyone; it encourages positive and constructive use of leisure time for youngsters, adults and the elderly alike; it provides a place for social activity, neighborhood rehabilitation and community development. Plus, it helps expand the knowledge and appreciation of each other’s cultures. For example, in the exhibition, “The American Dream,” October 1 – November 29, 2002, where I was guest curator, Manhattan Borough President, C. Virginia Fields, said: “The American

³⁵ John Lewis Gaddis, *The Landscape of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 2002), 2.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 3.

dream means different things to different people. This exhibition of immigrant artists from around the world illustrates the creative expressions of what the American dream means to them.”³⁷

At an international level, art also serves to bring cultures together, promotes cultural heritage and establishes a cultural dialog; much in the same way Rivera did with his work. In my article for the West Side Arts Coalition monthly newsletter, for the exhibition, I also coordinated, “West Side Arts Coalition Salutes Ashkelon”, at the Khan Museun, May 16 – June 5, 2000, in Ashkelon, Israel, United States Cultural Attaché to Israel, Julie G. Connor attested: “I believe this exhibition is a symbol of the diversity and strength of the United States because our culture can absorb so many people from so many cultures and give them room for expression.”³⁸ This interaction helped me understand the sociological relationship among different ethnic groups and observe human behavior when placed in a multicultural context in which artists, communities and political leaders interact with one another.

As a healing source, art has been able to convey the impact of contemporary crisis. As co-curator of the art exhibition “AIDS Awareness”, May 29 – June 30, 1996, at the Broadway Mall Gallery, in New York City, I developed a theme on the importance of knowing about this disease, the impact it has on the communities, by invoking changes in our values and our lives, to provide emotional support and spiritual relief to those

³⁷ Virginia Fields, “Press Release,” New York, 16 November 2002.

³⁸ Raul Manzano, “Ashkelon, Israel Welcomes West Side Arts Coalition with Open Arms,” *West Side Arts Coalition*, September 2000, 3.

affected by this disease and to the families who have lost loved ones to AIDS. While the focus of the exhibition was to embrace life rather than death, it also sent a message of healing and hope, compassion and caring. This project brought together a group of artists from different walks of life, challenging the existence of a contemporary crisis, the need for social awareness, as the community came to support our event, and the response of leadership, as our political leaders embraced a noble cause. In a letter of support, State Senator, and an advocate for the arts, Catherine M. Abate, wrote: "It is always gratifying to see the arts community rallying to raise money and awareness in the fight against HIV/AIDS. The exhibition's message of healing, hope, compassion and caring for those affected by the HIV virus is a critical one all New Yorkers need to hear. This exhibition will help spread this important message."³⁹

In the aftermath of the events of September 11th, people were in total shock and disbelief as to what happened. To ease the pain and uneasiness, people turned to art institutions by attending exhibitions. According to statistics, the attendance at those institutions doubled during the days following the tragedy. At the New York Historical Society "attendance more than double in late 2001 to 88,000 for the year and jumped to 130,000 in 2002."⁴⁰ This demonstrates the function of art as social interaction and as a healing source. In the New York Times article, "The Expression of Grief and the Power

³⁹ Catherine M. Abate, "Letter to the author," New York, 22 March 1996.

⁴⁰ Tracy Connor, "9/11 History a Big Draw," 09 September 2003, [article on-line]; available from <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/local/v-pfriendly/story/116005p-104666c.html>; Internet; accessed 25 March 2004.

of Art”, Bruce Weber wrote: “Nothing provokes the artistic sensibility like grief. In the artist, events like those of [the morning of September 11th] bring about a meeting of universal emotions and an individual will to unearth them, expose them, understand them and accept if not outlast them.”⁴¹ It is this psychological synergy that elevates and transforms the human soul and spirit to a higher level of consciousness. This transformation helps create better societies and communities, allowing future generations to understand our past so we can make conscious decisions about our present and a better future. Art can help us diminish tensions while inspiring us to look beyond the mundane. In this sense, art becomes a powerful instrument that seems to emerge from a community role to an integral part of our lives.

Whether this social interaction is motivated by a tragic event or a celebration, it converts art into a social structure. Berger and Luckmann call this communal interaction “an essential element of the reality of everyday life.”⁴² While it is important to understand the meaning of this type of gathering, two things take place: one is the social meeting while the other is the reflection on the artworks on display. The reality of an exposure to social and cultural encounters is more likely to influence a person; people begin to see art and life from different perspectives. These encounters enhance the quality of life. “Visiting a museum [or an art event] does not assure that you will get a

⁴¹ Bruce Weber, “The Expression of Grief and the Power of Art,” *The New York Times*, 13 September 2001.

⁴² Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (New York: Anchor Books, 1966), 33.

better job, raise your salary, or simplify your life.”⁴³ In fact, this can be achieved by doing other types of social activities. However, the experience of a museum visit or an art event can connect the person with something that is not part of their everyday life. It provides a link to the immediate and remote past; it becomes a visual experience that stimulates the senses to think about how others lived, what they experienced and what circumstances they confronted, or just for the pleasure that it affords.

For instance, *The Gates, Central Park, New York, 1979-2005*, a public art display this past February by artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. “*The Gates* is a work of pure joy, a vast populist spectacle of good will and simple eloquence, the first great public art event of the 21st century.”⁴⁴ This outdoor installation is not only a display of art, but also a multicultural phenomenon where people from all social backgrounds and cultures had the opportunity to enjoy art as accessible as if it were in one’s own backyard. Walking through *The Gates*, I experienced emotions and sensations that felt magical. The reflections of sunlight on each piece, the movement of the fabric as the wind blew them in the same and different directions, the feeling of taking a journey and forgetting about city life made me remember the simple moments of my life. I reflected on my life—from childhood to adulthood—and how time changes the appearance of all living things. Walking through *The Gates* was a return to innocence and to a time of child’s play. It

⁴³ Andrew Pekarik, “Museum Consumerism,” *Curator, The Museum Journal*. V.46, No 1, January 2003: 16-18.

⁴⁴ Michael Kimmelman, “In a Saffron Ribbon, a Billowy Gift to the City,” 13 February 2005 [newspaper on-line]; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/13/arts/13kimmelman.html>; Internet; accessed 13 February 2005.

was enjoyable to discover a new experience that, though simple, is complex and raises the heart and soul to another level.

New Yorkers are a notoriously tough crowd. But I was struck by what I overheard a stranger say. She was a doubter won over yesterday. 'It will be fascinating when they're gone,' she mused. It took me a second to realize what she meant: that *The Gates*, by ravishing the eye, have already impressed an image of the park on the memories of everyone who has seen them. And like all vivid memories, that image can take a place in the imagination, like a smell or some notes of music or a breeze, waiting to be rekindled.⁴⁵

In recent years, never has an art event drawn so many people as *The Gates* installation did. The excitement and high expectations created by this couple, which had challenged the definition of art throughout their careers, left no doubt as to what the role of an artist is. "Innovative works of art provoke debate, spark our imaginations and help us redefine the space we live in, and *The Gates* will bring that experience to those who come to see it,"⁴⁶ said Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg. But even within the art community there was some skepticism about this project. Artist Antonia Perez spoke about her experience visiting *The Gates* as "a kind of circus atmosphere and, though they are nice to look at (I like the color, but it is not "saffron"), and I certainly don't think they destroy the landscape of the park (as some visitors were heard to say), they might better have

⁴⁵ Ibid., Kimmelman, newspaper on-line.

⁴⁶ Stephanie Rosenbloom, "Mayor Hails Central Park 'Gates' as Art and Tourist Lure," 11 February 2005 [newspaper on-line]; available from <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/02/11/nyregion/11cnd-gates.html>; Internet; accessed 13 February 2005.

been placed thirty years ago, when their idea was first conceived. Then their meaning might have been significant. Now, I can only hope their path doesn't lead to an Olympic Stadium."⁴⁷ Perhaps, she is right; perhaps it was a coincidence that *The Gates* were placed during the Olympic committee visit to New York. If one analyzes at some of the motivations behind the scenes, or beyond an idea, one may ask, why Mayor Bloomberg was such a key player on this project, especially in a reelection year. For sure, art has entered the political scenario and Picasso and Rivera have taught us what a powerful statement and mass driven audiences art can make.

Art has expanded a new range of interpretation led by radicals, critics, artists, and intellectuals that influenced newer generations and cultural practices under one term: Postmodernism, a plethora of artistic issues, which have challenged established theories of modern art. Postmodernism has been frequently used but not defined in terms of its meaning, contextual association, and historical existence; a term that moves back and forth in time and can develop from the most simple intimate forms of expression to the most conceptual practices. Its ambiguity and inclusive characteristics could be loosely compared to the expression "one for all and all for one". Even today its circular, non-linear aspects are still debatable among scholars, historians and art institutions alike.

To understand why Postmodernism is so complex and how my work connects to this period in history, some scholastic definitions about Postmodernism follow:

⁴⁷ Antonia Perez, "Seminar Issues in Contemporary Art," (Seminar presentation at Empire State College, New York, 23 February 2005).

“There is not an exact date when Postmodernism started. One of the reasons is because it overlaps with other disciplines, literature, film, performing arts, visual arts, philosophy, social sciences, fashion, communication and technology.”⁴⁸

“The difference between Modernism and Postmodernism is therefore best seen as a difference in mood or attitude, rather than a chronological difference, or a difference set of aesthetic practices.”⁴⁹

“Postmodernism wanted art to engage in specific social context. Instead of stressing the purely visual, they focused on topical subjects.”⁵⁰

Through my studies at the seminar, “Issues in Contemporary Art,” at Empire State College, my class defined postmodernism as follows:

Postmodernism in art is a rebellion against formalism, giving birth to pluralism, where subjectivity is the main characteristic as opposed to objectivity. The movement allowed artists to pull from all of art history rather than reacting to the previous period. The artwork generally emphasized the personal over the impersonal and eclecticism versus uniformity. Examples of these include issues such as: gay culture, religion, race, and gender. It also references previous periods, combining “high” and “low” art. Although defined as a reaction to modernism, the exact dates when postmodernism began in art and as broader cultural movement are ambiguous. This attempt to place a concept that, by definition, is circular, within a linear framework, creates a paradox.

⁴⁸ Mary Klages, “Postmodernism,” [article on-line]; available from <http://www.colorado.edu/English/ENGL2012Klages/2003pomo.html>; Internet; accessed 01 February 2004.

⁴⁹ Woods, 9.

⁵⁰ Sandler, 3.

Contradictions and elusive language are major components, making the definition open for interpretations and debate.⁵¹

The socio-political instability of the 1960s in the United States --the Vietnam War, and the student uprising of 1968 in Europe, and tensions of the Cold War influenced a younger generation of critics, scholars, and intellectuals who no longer saw art as merely an object, but saw beyond its meaning and context. Marginalized groups such as artists of color and minorities emerged as a social-political and cultural force. Theoreticians focused on these issues and “insisted that what counted most in art was what it represented.”⁵² “Representation was defined as the complex of images and text through which a society represents itself –images and texts that have become so ingrained as to be accepted without question.”⁵³ Art took a new approach and shifted from object oriented and formal properties to a socially defined context and its relationship to popular culture; art theoreticians focused on art as a multiple representation of culture and acknowledged art as a condition that represented the possibility of change. Its growing support, as a social practice and the emerging of feminist art theory as a radical movement, highlighted the transformation of art criticism. Greenberg’s formalist theory was rejected and a sociological approach to art was born.

⁵¹ “Issues in Contemporary Art” (Class definition, Empire State College, New York, Spring 2004).

⁵² Sandler, 333.

⁵³ Ibid., 334.

In 1976, prominent art critics and editors who had opposed formalist theories and practices founded the magazine *October*. The magazine was named in celebration of the Russian Revolution of October, 1917. Their goal was to emulate the Bolshevik artists' attempt to fuse avant-garde art and Marxist ideological practice by envisioning "that moment in our century when revolutionary practice, theoretical inquiry and artistic innovation were joined in a manner exemplary and unique."⁵⁴ The name, *October*, also made reference to Sergei Eisenstein's film, "October," to memorialize the revolution. Film became a major area of inquiry in the magazine.

October magazine's objective was to "challenge art institutions and their aesthetic canons, to feature artists whose content was "political" and who worked in a mechanical media and to reject any type of handmade media such as painting that represented bourgeois content. They embraced photography, film, typography, and poster design which lent themselves to propaganda and its wide dissemination."⁵⁵ Postminimalism became an important movement that practically explained art theory itself. Rosalind Krauss, a former pupil of Greenberg's, who had rejected formalist theories, championed postminimalist artists. The popularity of the magazine, of alternative ideologies, however, had its own postmodernist and poststructuralist setbacks. Their intentions to create a revolution that resembled the constructivists and productivists in Russia, calling for a radical change, failed to persuade a middle-class educated America.

⁵⁴ Sandler, 335.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 335-336.

French theoreticians, Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes “who had analyzed the ideological assumptions and implications of signs and language, literature and literary criticism [saw those] assumptions that were once agreed on became controversial.”⁵⁶ Their intellectual meaning no longer prevailed. As a result, the editors of *October* felt obliged to analyze their own manifesto’s forms and categories, which had defined its practice. Quality, originality, authenticity, and transcendence were questioned; “[Annette] Michelson called for the critical analysis of postmodernism and the support of theoretically significant contemporary art.”⁵⁷

This critical analysis let theorists focus on decentering; that is, removing anything that implied a center or hierarchy. They achieved this by using deconstruction. “The primary purpose of deconstruction was to probe a text for its conflicting assumptions, premises, and self-deceptions with the intention of revealing that the text does not necessarily mean what it claims to.”⁵⁸ For example, deconstructionists, by the act of inverting or placing the opposite of an assumption, claimed their theory to be equal or more important than modernist theory. Artists and art theory supporters fought to deconstruct and demystify “social agencies such as the mass media, public schools, ruling class, whose purpose it is to safeguard the status quo”⁵⁹ and control public opinion. Deconstruction became important because it made people aware and conscious about

⁵⁶ Sandler, 335-336.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 337.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Sandler, 340.

conceptions such as class, gender, religion, race, family, society, and representation.

The magazine, which had rejected the concept of the artist as a creative genius, sparked a new reaction by artist Eric Fischl, who claimed that “[critics] would love nothing more than to replace the word artist with the word critic.”⁶⁰ Additionally, their practice of promoting artists who were theoretically minded and favoring text over the physical properties of art created a new wave of attacks by critic Robert Pincus-Witten and Robert Storr who condemned art theory for focusing on discourse rather than art.

In spite of criticisms, *October* continued championing its art theories and engaging intellectual discourse across the United States. Postminimalist art, among the movements of this time, contributed to the birth of photography as an important medium. It allowed artists to document their work that had no physical presence such as performance art or was subject to change such as earth art or body art. Krauss went on to declare that: “photography had replaced painting as the relevant art.”⁶¹ Captions and indexes were used to describe the content of the photos. This appropriation of text brought together visual and verbal elements, thereby, adding a new meaning to the medium. Photography, as a medium that allowed fast production and consumption of images, became important in the advancement of art and society, especially in industrialized countries. Krauss “considered photography to be the medium of postmodernism.”⁶²

⁶⁰ Sandler, 342.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 344.

⁶² Sandler, 345.

Walter Benjamin, who wrote the essay, "Photography in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in 1936, asserted that a work of art exists in a space and time that provides the artwork its own aura of authenticity and the right to call the artist a genius. Photography, on the other hand, could be reproduced and placed anywhere, thereby, having no aura. This proliferation of reproductions "demystified the original work of art and deflated its aura."⁶³ Critics opposed to Benjamin's theory argued that an original could not be replaced. Often, a layman cannot distinguish between an original photo and a reproduction of the same. Yet, a reproduction of a painting contributes to enhance the "aura" of its original, as has been the case with reproductions of the Mona Lisa; "it caused masses of people to yearn for the real thing and crowd to view it."⁶⁴ The loss of originality and authorship was a major concern by critics but it did not affect the contributors of *October* who were very much influenced by Benjamin's theory of photography as an "art of mechanical reproduction and, hence, the fitting medium of contemporary culture."⁶⁵

Concerns with the commercialization of art, the manipulation by art institutions and the consumer society, which was to reach its climax in the 1980s, prompted radical and left-leaning artists to react to it. The Marxist bohemians or situationists were the most influential group of the 1960s. They targeted capitalism, consumerism, and mass production. Their purpose was to "confront the spectacle; [that is,] to provoke the

⁶³ Sandler, 346.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 347.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

passive masses into rejecting false desires and regaining their true selves.”⁶⁶ They used appropriation of images and text from art and advertisement to raise consciousness about social and cultural regeneration. In spite of their mission and international support, the group did not spread in mass numbers and failed to achieve their goals. However, they engaged in political action where their influence was felt in other left-wing movements, the student uprising of 1968, the bad painting movement in the 1970s, punk music, and the political art of the 1980s. “Situationist ideology was also a catalyst for the theories of Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida.”⁶⁷ The group disbanded in 1972, but had a profound influence on artists such as Daniel Buren and Hans Haacke who became proactive in deconstructing art institutions.

Throughout the 1980s, artists took an active role and began to deconstruct consumerism and the mass media by using the media’s own techniques to get their message across. As a result, appropriation emerged. Artists used text, images and photographs to engage society into the cultural mainstream. Political art became a form of discourse by artists as a way to oppose consumerism and raise consciousness. But it soon, too, raised questions as to what kind of audience political artists ought to reach: the general public or the art world? Should the works be exhibited in a public space or a commercial gallery? There is no easy solution to this as Haacke stated: “as to selling the works, let’s not forget that we are not living in an ideal society.”⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Sandler, 376.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 377.

⁶⁸ Yve-Alain, Bois, Douglas Crimp, and Rosalind Krauss, “A Conversation with Hans Haacke,” October 30 (Fall 1984): 42-43, quoted in Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 383.

In the academic field, a wave of protests by activists and scholars brought awareness at university campuses, urging changes in the canon that govern liberal arts education. Distinguished professor E.D. Hirsch felt that members of minority groups have not been given the same opportunity to obtain a quality education, as have other privileged groups. Henry A. Giroux points out, in his book, Border Crossings, the importance of “viewing curriculum as historical specific narrative and pedagogy as a form of cultural politics”⁶⁹ and to ask ourselves if these narratives “enable or silence the differentiated human capacities that allow students to speak from their own experiences, locate themselves in history, and act so as to create liberatory social forms that expand the possibility of democratic public life.”⁷⁰ With the acceptance of more minority groups into liberal arts programs, it helped a new group of marginalized artists called “other” to gain recognition. They were African-Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, Asians, and homosexuals. These artists brought attention to issues such as their own culture, religion, AIDS, discrimination, sexism, political correctness, and mutual respect. Multiculturalism was embraced.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, this socially oriented art that had gained momentum as a mainstream movement suddenly lost art-world interest with the events of the time: the fall of communism in Russia, the fall of the Berlin Wall in Germany, and

⁶⁹ Henry Giroux, “Decentering the Canon: Refiguring Disciplinary and Pedagogical Boundaries,” Ch. 4, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York, 1993), 90.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

the return to democracy in eastern European countries. This signified the end of the Cold War era. In 1993, in the United States, Elizabeth Sussaman, the curator of the Whitney Biennial, focused on multiculturalism and received negative reviews. Socially oriented art was no longer news. By the mid 1990s, the art-world interest shifted once again, with no specifics, seeking the next sign of a “new” movement. Instead, thoughts focused on the end and beginning of a new millennium with pluralism as common practice or as Woods attested, “an increased awareness of identity politics within postmodern theory”.⁷¹

Contemporary practitioners, such as Curator Robert Storr, in his lecture at the Empire State College seminar, “Issues in Contemporary Art and studio critique/visits”, welcomed the idea “that art exhibits and artworks should be pluralistic.”⁷² While Polish guest Curator Milda Slizinska⁷³ felt that my work was not “fashionable” for its political approach (I sensed that her past background under communist Poland had something to do with her negative views about socio-political art.) In dialogs with my mentor and advisor, Professor Betty Wilde-Biasiny, she “believes socio-cultural-political views in art are very current in today’s multicultural society.”⁷⁴ We also discussed new ways of artistic expression to present those issues with the idea in mind that “everything” in art counts. Integration and diversification have become standard philosophies and practices

⁷¹ Tim Woods, Beginning Postmodernism (Manchester University Press, 1999), 137.

⁷² Robert Storr, “Studio Semester Program: Studio Visits series” (Lecture presented at Empire State College, New York, 17 March 2004).

⁷³ Milda Slizinska, “Studio Semester Program: Studio Visits series” (Lecture presented at Empire State College, New York, 15 October 2003).

⁷⁴ Betty Wilde-Biasiny, “Issues in Contemporary Art” (Lecture presented at Empire State College, New York, Spring 2004).

in today's rapidly changing world. Artist Laurie Anderson expressed "...most of my work and the art I aspire to make helps people live this life as well as possible."⁷⁵ Within this concept, I explore the multifaceted aspects of art as a form of communication.

For this creative project, "Beyond an Idea in Painting," I developed conceptual ideas based on the Statue of Liberty and the American flag as a source of reference for my work. I am drawn to these icons for what they represent to many people: freedom and democracy. In each of these works, I altered the images of these symbols to provoke the viewer's responses while at the same time exploring the relationship between the viewer and the artwork and between the artwork and its meaning. In my research for this series of works, I analyzed the relationship between these symbolic icons, the United States flag and the Statue of Liberty, to the words freedom, hope and progress. These words represent for many what they wish in life: opportunities. I defined these symbols as follows: *Freedom* is such a desirable human condition that many people are willing to sacrifice their lives, and leave their homelands and loved ones in search for a better life somewhere else. Those who came to America came in search of ideals and opportunities. *Hope* is a condition that is vivid in the soul; it is an expectation of fulfillment that creates in many of us a desired realization of our dreams and ideas. And *progress* is the end result of freedom and hope --the realization of that dream. Freedom, hope and progress are basic conditions of human life, yet they have become an expensive and sometimes privileged commodity.

⁷⁵ Anderson, "In High & Low: Modern Art and Contemporary Culture," as quoted in Irvin Sandler, Art of the Postmodern Era: From the late 1960s to the Early 1990s (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 418.

As an immigrant, I imagined the likeness of the Statue of Liberty and the myth of this legend as one of a fairytale: everything will be fine at the end. Unlike many immigrants, I had the fortune to arrive in America as a legal resident, a holder of a “Green Card” document, an immigrant status that facilitated my adjusting to the American way of life. But for others, that fairytale became an illusionary hope, more like a veil. This notion of having a privileged immigrant status led me to create the diptych, *Myth or True Icon* (Fig. 1); this diptych presents opposite meanings about the Statue of Liberty, as I have perceived it. In one image, the Statue of Liberty is seen as if it were out of focus or as if it were a haze. In the other painting, the image looks bold, solid and unshakable. The images make reference to two views: the blurry or distant image suggests the dream that many cannot reach, an elusive reality, while the other suggests what this icon means for others --hope. While the diptych addresses socio-political instability and cultural issues, it also addresses the belief of faith. The Statue of Liberty becomes “a-modern-times” icon with a religious connotation. This idea serves to illustrate the concept of how time influences people’s perceptions and transforms social values into people’s needs. From a symbol of liberty and equality, “conceived by sculptor Frederic-Auguste Bartholdi and professor of law, historian and defender of democracy in France Edouard-Rene Lefebure de Laboulaye, the man who became Liberty’s patron,”⁷⁶ to a symbol of “Mother of Exiles”, after the sonnet by Emma

⁷⁶ Elizabeth Koed, “A Symbol Transformed: How ‘Liberty Enlightening the World’ became ‘The Mother of Exiles,’” Spring 1992, [journal on-line], available from, <http://www.thesocialcontract.com/pdf/two-three/Liberty.pdf>, accessed 02 February 2005.

Lazarus. This noble gift from the French nation to the new American republic has become a symbol of tolerance, peace, and political asylum.

In the painting, *America India* (Fig. 2), I addressed the notion of displacement, ownership, race and freedom among native cultures. The face of a South-American Indian painted in ochre and earth tones over an umber background has replaced the face of the Statue of Liberty. The image pays tribute to the Native Indians of my homeland and the Indians of the Americas, the first inhabitants of the American continent and the victims of European colonization. This land once harvested by native ancestors has changed ownership often through time. “Unless you’re Native American, you’re either an immigrant or a descendant of immigrants.”⁷⁷ While most Native American Indians do not identify with the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of freedom, I thus explored the thought of: “What if she had been a Native American Indian?” As Beverly Singer, guest speaker and video artist, attested at the exhibition and lecture, “Lady Liberty as Native American Icon”, at the American Indian Community House: “I have never identified with the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of freedom. She was a gift to the immigrants and not to our native people. Besides, we already have mythological figures that represent freedom, hope and wisdom.”⁷⁸ Art consultant Claire Machaver, in her essay, in the catalog from my solo exhibition, “Evolving Symbols of American 2000”, October 1-29,

⁷⁷ Madeline S. Bergstrom, “Immigrant Nation”, [article on-line], available from, <http://www.horizonmag.com/poverty/tnt0500.asp>, accessed 27 February 2005.

⁷⁸ Beverly Singer, “Art Talk: Lady Liberty as Native American Icon” (Lecture presented at the American Indian Community House, Inc., New York, 10 October 2003).

2000, at the Paterson Museum, in Paterson, NJ, wrote: “What if the model for the Statue of Liberty had been African-American instead of European?” “How would the impact of the Statue remain the same or differ?” “How would this change affect the black minority?” “How would other minorities react?”⁷⁹ While Wilde-Biasiny in her evaluation of my elective class, “Symbols of Freedom, Hope and Progress”, for my degree program, added to my research question: “to what extent is this a symbol of freedom, hope and progress; and to what degree are all [cultures] included (or excluded).”⁸⁰

The painting, *You!* (Fig. 3), is a celebratory portrait of “Uncle Sam”, based upon the 1917 poster, “I want you for U.S. Army” by James Montgomery Flagg (1877–1960), here depicted in the image of the Statue of Liberty. This painting addresses the viewer, with eye contact and body language, conveying several points: first, it addresses awareness and alertness by the use of the red background color. It implies discrimination, in which new immigrants are pre-selected for granted visas to migrate to the United States in view of the current state of political turmoil generated by the events of September 11th and the war in Iraq. And, it derides the very same values and principle of freedom on which this country was founded: the principle that all men are created equal, or shall I say, in our multicultural society, that all humans are created equal. As a multicultural society that is influenced by the migration of ethnic groups that have

⁷⁹ The Paterson Museum, “Evolving Symbols of America 2000” (New York: Athens Printing, 2000), 7.

⁸⁰ Wilde-Biasiny, “Symbols of Freedom, Hope and Progress” (Contract evaluation of elective class, Empire State College, New York, 08 January 2004).

reshaped and changed the American way of living, it has become a challenge to determine which groups will be allowed to immigrate and “the role of the immigration policy as *de facto* population policy in the United States.”⁸¹ And as to whether or not Bartholdi’s original dream of *Liberty Enlightening the World* remains a symbol of freedom and equality.

In the Spirit (Fig. 4) is a painting based upon the 1942 image, *We Can Do It! - Rosie the Riveter*, by J. Howard Miller (birth/death not available). The painting not only observes historical content, in which women played a significant role during World War II, that also began the rupture of an existing suppression: women were able to work, go out and help the country in a time of need. They filled the jobs of their fellow countrymen who were called to fight the war. Today, women’s roles are different. Even though many changes have occurred, women still continue to fight for equal opportunities, particularly in the work force where equal work still does not mean equal pay. This resembles the principle the Feminists artists fought and continue to fight for. The painting, which is an appropriation of images, is meant to provoke the viewer, create awareness and raise consciousness about women’s role in today’s society.

Artist Nancy Chunn, at her lecture at the Ronald Feldman Gallery, talked about the importance of ideas in art, content and the technique of rearranging existing images; “they retell the story of the times while allowing you to invent a new pictorial

⁸¹ John H. Tanton, Editor, “Images, Pejoratives and Connections,” *The Social Contract*, Spring 2002, [journal on-line], available from, <http://www.thesocialcontract.com>, accessed 27 February 2005.

language.”⁸² Chunn critiqued my work at the Empire State College Studio Semester, commenting: “icons are great visual elements to make a statement and be political. They work as metaphors for political and social commentary. I became political through my work. I encourage students to do works that have personal interest. If you do not care about fruit, why make a still life? Find out your obsession. Art is not separate from what you are.”⁸³

In the flag series, I depicted a body of work of nine paintings where the American flag is a common denominator for multicultural groups; it addresses the idea of unity, patriotism, and equal rights for all. Eight of the nine paintings (Fig. 6-13) depict portraits of people with and without their traditional costumes, which identify them from a particular social class, culture, or both. The portraits, which face the viewer, are cropped to minimize facial features, leaving only enough information for minimal identification; they addressed the issue of identity allowing the viewer to interpret or identify the person by the clothing they wear. In each of the characters, I painted a pin in the shape of the American flag. This wearable object has been used to identify the user as a believer in democracy, love and respect for their fellow citizens. The idea behind these paintings is to explore the principle that America welcomes everyone, regardless of their political,

⁸² Nancy Chunn, “Nancy Chunn: Paintings 1982-2004,” (Lecture presented at Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York, 13 October 2004).

⁸³ Chunn, “Studio Semester Program: Studio Visits series” (Lecture presented at Empire State College, New York, 20 October 2004).

religious beliefs, ethnicity or gender and to question the viewer as to who they are, where they come from, and how they position themselves in relation to this country. Installation Artist Pepón Osorio refers to this relationship as “connecting with the artwork by encouraging the audience to take an active role in the art world and with the public at large. He wants to provoke change not only socially, but also physically and spiritually.”⁸⁴

I used the portrait concept for this series because it allowed me to identify with the audience and the audience with the artwork. In my recent visit to El Museo del Barrio’s exhibition, “Retratos,” December 3, 2004 – March 20, 2005. I was pleased to revalidate the concepts of portraiture I have applied to this creative project. The text panel displayed at the entrance, introducing the exhibition, addresses the history of Latin American portraits but also traces the importance of this tradition that flourishes in almost every culture. The panel reads:

“...For more than 2000 years, portraits have preserved the likeness of individuals both living and dead, bolstered the social standing of the aristocracy, marked the deeds of the mighty, recorded rites of passage, and established and preserved a historical record. Portraits have also connected the individual to the family and the family to the community, bound together disparate populations, and helped establish national identity. Portraiture provides valuable insights into the lives and minds of the artist and the sitter as well as their time and place.”⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Pepón Osorio, “Art:21, Art in the Twenty First Century,” series created by Susan Solling and Susan Dowling [DVD video], PBS, 2003

⁸⁵ El Museo del Barrio, “Retratos: 2,000 years of Latin American Portraits,” December 3, 2004 – March 20, 2005, El Museo del Barrio, New York. 06 March 2005.

One of the artworks that caught my attention was *Untitled Figure*,⁸⁶ by Salomon Huerta. The artist engages the viewer, providing a limited amount of information about the sitter, creating a sense of mystery and ambiguity. He also addresses the issue of the self, identity, emotion and state of mind of the sitter whose back is towards the viewer. However, the difference between Huerta's work and mine is in the way we both address the sitter or figure; yet, we both create a psychological condition and speculation about the meaning of the painting. Guest speaker Jonathan Santlofer, at the Studio Semester Program, critiqued my work by pointing out the significance of confronting the viewer while allowing the individual to participate in the interpretation of the painting. "The cropped format creates the illusion of a larger than life portrait giving the viewer equal importance as the person depicted in the painting."⁸⁷

The ninth painting, of the flag series, depicts the image of the American flag (Fig. 5) painted with agitated brush and palette stroke patterns, giving the feeling of a waving flag in the wind, commanding a salute. The painting not only conveys the emotion in perception, but also all this symbolic icon represents.

Viewing the flag paintings, one can perceive an historical content derived from two areas. On one hand, they engage minimalist and postminimalist theories where the viewer is seen as an integral part of the artwork, i.e., the viewer responses are important

⁸⁶ Salomon Huerta, *Untitled Figure*, oil on canvas, 2000, "Retratos: 2,000 years of Latin American Portraits," El Museo del Barrio, New York.

⁸⁷ Jonathan Santlofer, "Studio Semester Program: Studio Critique/Visits series" (Lecture presented at Empire State College, New York, 03 March 2005).

to complement the depicted works. The audience plays the most important role: the reaction that they experience in front of the artwork and their relationship to it.

Formalist Michael Fried referred to “minimal art as theatrical, as it depends on the audience to be meaningful. The work becomes a stage and the audience the actor.”⁸⁸ Postminimalist artists, however, “embraced Fried’s idea of theatricality,”⁸⁹ as their work moved towards process and performance oriented work dealing with time, or as Fried wrote, “with the duration of the experience.”⁹⁰ On the other hand, my work also addresses contemporary theories of art where the formal aesthetic is no longer a concern. The concept of aesthetic becomes a process of perception in which the viewer is left to examine and decipher the transformed image; every person has a different way of perceiving information and processing it. Rudolf Arnheim, in his book, Art and Visual Perception, explains this as being a dynamic visual experience.

What a person perceives is not only an arrangement of objects, colors and shapes [but], also of movement and size. [They are] an interplay of direct tensions. These tensions are not something the observer adds, for reason of his own, to static images. Rather, these tensions are as inherent in any percept as size, shape, location, or color. Because they have magnitude and direction, these tensions can be described as psychological forces.⁹¹

⁸⁸ Sandler, 10.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 11.

⁹¹ Arnheim, Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye (University of California Press, 1954, 1974), 11.

In Paul Fabozzi, Artists, Critics, Context, Roy Lichtenstein said, “organized perception is what art is all about...It is a process [that] has nothing to do with any external form the painting takes, it has to do with a way of building a unified pattern of seeing.”⁹²

Perception plays a psychological role in people’s lives; I had the opportunity to observe that during my curatorial projects at Empire State College, at the Empire Gallery with the exhibitions “Selections from the Studio Semester Program,” and “Nature Revisited,” as well as the Studio Semester Open Studio events. Professor Wilde-Biasiny emphasized the importance of presenting “cohesive bodies of work which convey a strong sense of artistic statement and vision.”⁹³ By incorporating theoretical aspects and the practice of museum and curatorial studies, I designed the space in ways that encouraged the audience to relate to the artwork, question its purpose, and engage in dialog. For example, in the flag paintings with portraits, the audience became part of that scenario; that is, feeling included as opposed to excluded from the experience. A group of people from different backgrounds, cultures, traditions and language became socially interactive with one another. This sociological interaction showed me that art *can* work as a catalyst for change. It helps people blend without hostility, understanding people’s different views and experiences when presented with artworks that stimulate their minds and spirit. Through open dialog, we engaged and discussed my views expressed through my art as well hearing from each person what they felt and thought of the experience.

⁹² Fabozzi. “Mass Culture, Mass Media, Pop Art,”104.

⁹³ Wilde-Biasiny, “Selections from the Studio Semester Program,” Empire Gallery, Empire State College, September 2003 through January 2004.

We discussed current topics such as living in a time where people's lives are affected by political, religious and cultural differences. This insightful dialog provided an intellectual and educational synergy, a spiritual bond and understanding of our ethnic differences and similarities. Artist Juan Sanchez "believes that art can change society."⁹⁴ Through his work, "he wants to connect with people in a very direct and personal way, transcending formal barriers to find the emotive experience."⁹⁵ This curatorial experience allowed me to design the exhibition with the viewer in mind at all times.

My scholastic journey began with the idea of finding my own voice through my artwork and defining what kind of artist I am and my role in society. As I approach the closure of this artistic journey, I not only discovered an interdisciplinary wealth of knowledge throughout my research, discussion of issues with my mentor and professors, interaction with guest speakers and the public, my creative process and "happenings" along this journey, but I also closely examined my own intellectual abilities and critical inquiry. Edward Said's, Representations of the Intellectual, sparked my intellectual self-awareness when he said: "the intellectual is an individual with a specific public role in society and cannot be reduced simply to being a faceless professional,"⁹⁶ while reflecting on bell hooks' views: "the practice of freedom is to liberate one's mind from the concepts

⁹⁴ Juan Sanchez, "Studio Semester Program: Studio Critique/Visits series" (Lecture presented at Empire State College, New York, 16 March 2005).

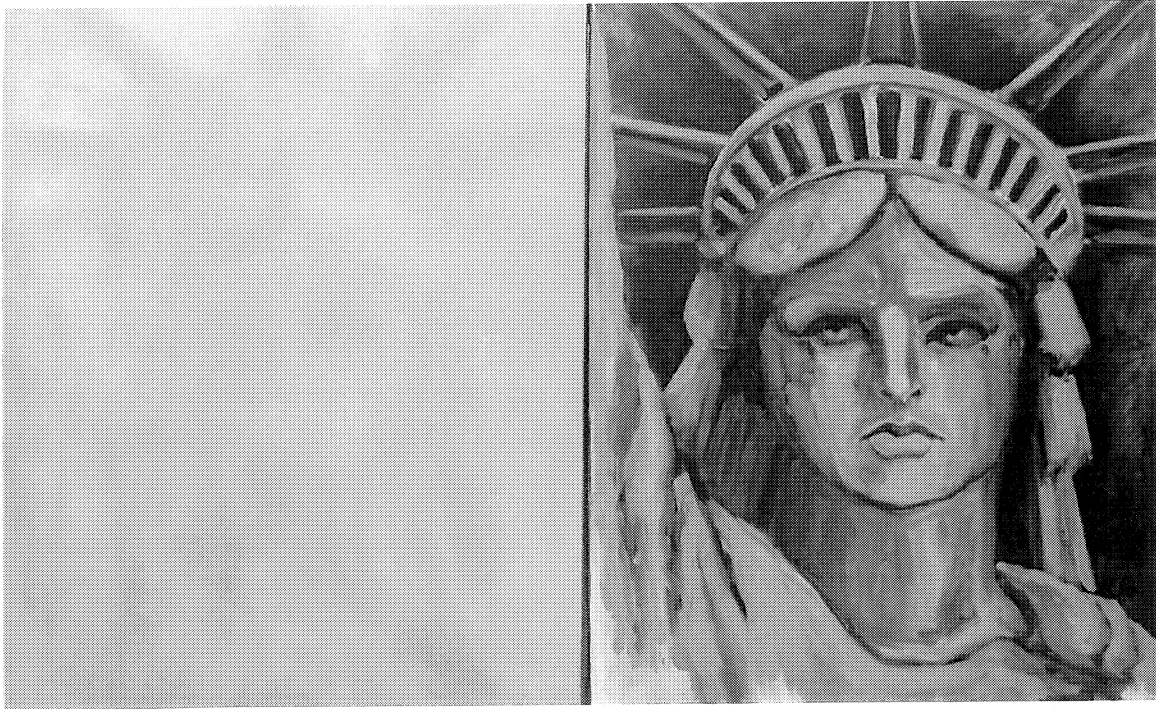
⁹⁵ Juan Sanchez, "Juan Sanchez: Ricanstruction," [article on-line], available from, <http://www.ps1.org/cut/press/sanchez.html>, accessed on 26 February 2005.

⁹⁶ Edward Said, Representations of the Intellectual (New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 11.

of neutral position and to take a radical view on issues and voice one's own opinion on likes and dislikes."⁹⁷ Indeed, I feel in control about the artworks I want to create and the messages I wish to convey.

The Master of Arts in Liberal Studies has offered me the opportunity to bring theory and practice together while reaching a higher level of personal and artistic growth. It has giving me a stronger foundation in art history, artistic styles, new approaches to painting, as well as understanding my artistic thinking. The process inspired me to utilize and develop a variety of styles akin to those artists of the past while allowing me to grow and develop my own creative pictorial narratives. It also helped me develop skills of process-management by documenting an idea from thumbnail sketches, note taking, inner dialogs, readings and reflections, to a final work of art. The curatorial and museum practice studies gave me insightful knowledge about the mission of art establishments, educational institutions and their relationship to their communities. Moreover, the experience of critiquing while being critiqued showed me a different perspective about art and history in relation to the time, place, circumstances, and people involved in the process. Finally, the program helped me define and articulate my own artistic ideas and gain a deeper understanding of change and adaptation.

⁹⁷ bell hooks, Talking Back: Thinking Feminist, Thinking Black, (Boston: South End Press, 1989).



1. *Myth or True Icon*, 2004, diptych, oil on canvas 30" x 48"



2. *America India*, 2004, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"



3. *You!*, 2004, oil on canvas, 30" x 24"



4. *In the Spirit*, 2004, oil on canvas 30" x 24"



5. *Always* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 40" x 60"



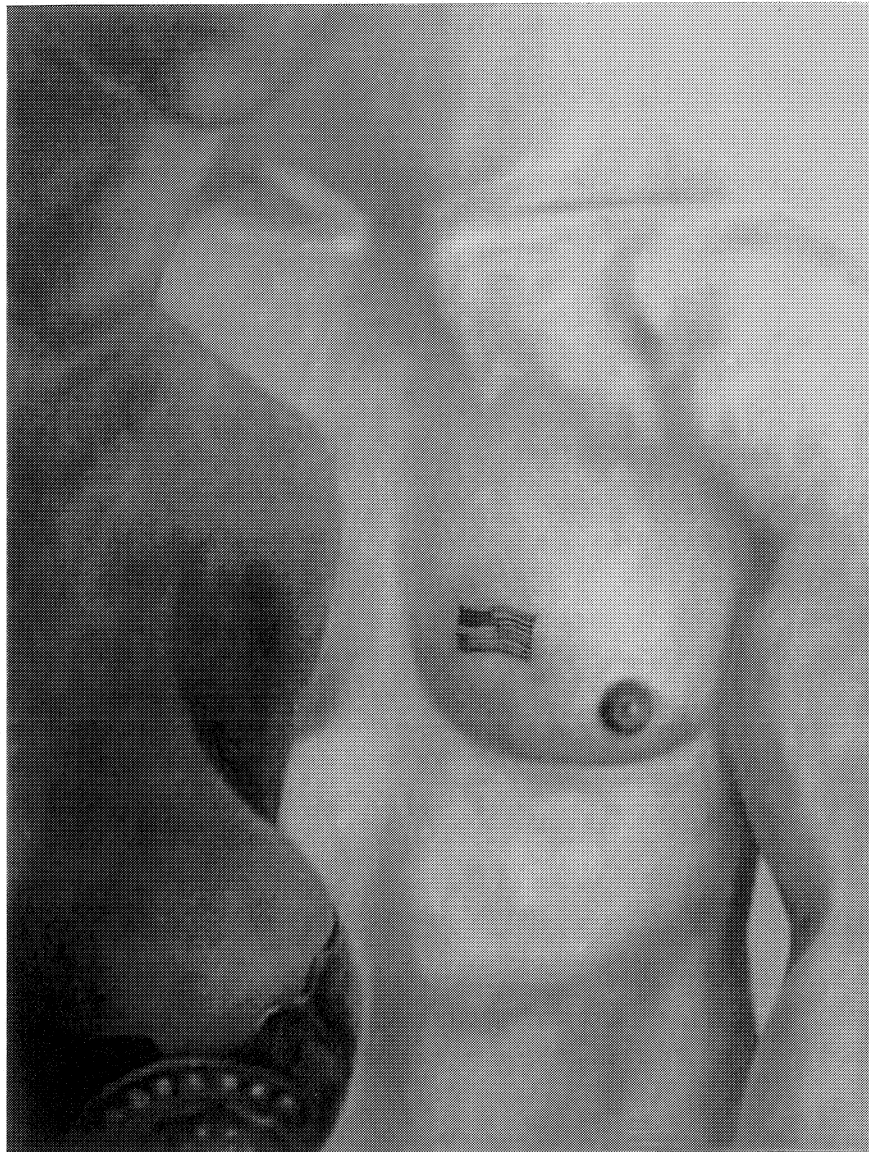
6. *Untitled 1* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 28" x 20"



7. *Untitled 2* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 28" x 20"



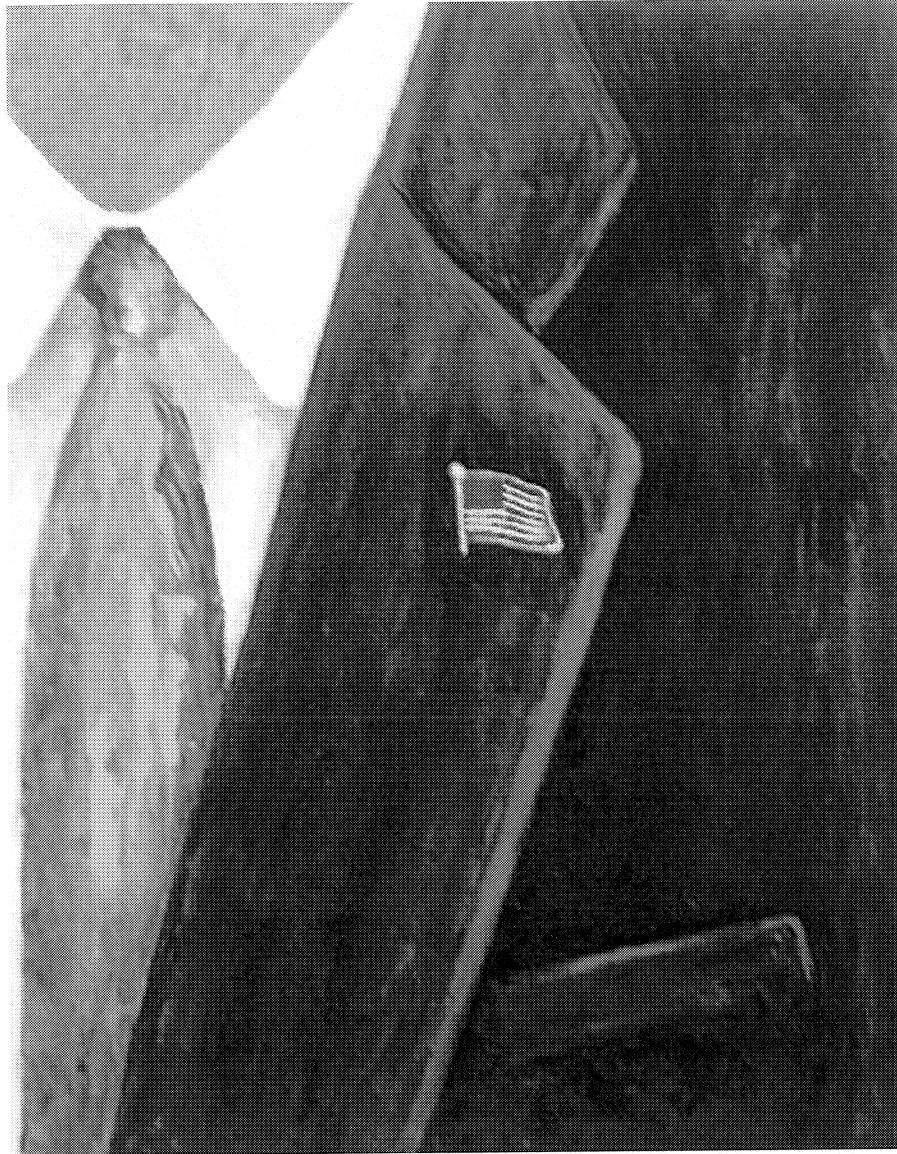
8. *Untitled 3* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 28" x 20"



9. *Untitled 4* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 28" x 20"



10. *Untitled 5* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 28" x 20"



11. *Untitled 6* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 28" x 20"



12. *Untitled 7* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 28" x 20"



13. *Untitled 8* (from the flag series), 2004, oil on canvas, 28" x 20"

Notes

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- ² Linda Weintraub, Art on the Edge and Over (Litchfield, CT: Art Insights, Inc., 1996), 10-11.
- ³ Winner, 3.
- ⁴ Rudolf Arnheim, The Genesis of a Painting: Picasso's Guernica (University of California Press, 1962), 13.
- ⁵ *Ibid.*, Arnheim, 5.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.
- ⁷ PBS, "Guernica: Testimony of War," [article on-line]; available from <http://www.pbs.org/treasuresoftheworld/guernica/gmain.html>; Internet; accessed 11 January 2005.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ William Robinson, "Diego Rivera: Art and Revolution," [article on-line]; available from <http://www.clevelandart.org/exhibit/rivera/curator.html>; Internet; accessed 11 January 2005.
- ¹⁰ The Museum of Modern Art, MOMA Highlights (New York, 1999, 2004), 173.
- ¹¹ Linda Bank Downs, The Detroit Industry Murals (The Detroit Institute of Arts, 1999), 22.
- ¹² Judy Chicago, Beyond the Flower: The autobiography of a Feminist Artist (New York: Penguin Group, 1996), 22-23.
- ¹³ Irving Sandler, Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 133.
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- ¹⁷ Alexander Stille, The Future of the Past (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), ix.
- ¹⁸ Paul F. Fabozzi, "The Arts and the Mass Media," Artists, Critics, Context: Reading in and Around American Art Since 1945 (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2002), 115.
- ¹⁹ Tim Woods, Beginning Postmodernism (Manchester University Press, 1999), 126-127.
- ²⁰ Fabozzi, "Clement Greenberg: Towards a New Laocoon," 17.
- ²¹ The Museum of Modern Art, MOMA Highlights, 232.

- ²² Clement Greenberg, "The Language of Esthetic Discourse," Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste (New York: Oxford University Press, Inc., 1999), 65.
- ²³ Fabozzi, "The Arts and the Mass Media," 115.
- ²⁴ Ibid., "A Symposium on Pop Art," 120.
- ²⁵ Thames & Hudson World of Art, "Minimalism" by Suzi Gablik, Concepts of Modern Art: From Fauvism to Postmodernism (New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc., 1974, Revised edition 1994), 248.
- ²⁶ Marcel Duchamp, *Bicycle Wheel*, assemblage, 1917, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
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- ²⁹ Jasper Johns, *Flag*, encaustic, 1954, Museum of Modern Art, New York.
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- ³³ Barnett, 33.
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- ³⁶ Ibid., 3.
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- ³⁹ Catherine M. Abate, "Letter to the author," New York, 22 March 1996.
- ⁴⁰ Tracy Connor, "9/11 History a Big Draw," 09 September 2003, [article on-line]; available from <http://www.nydailynews.com/news/local/v-pfriendly/story/116005p-104666c.html>; Internet; accessed 25 March 2004.
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⁴⁹ Woods. 9.

⁵⁰ Sandler, 3.

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⁵² Sandler, 333.

⁵³ Ibid., 334.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 335.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 335-336.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 337.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 340.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 342.

⁶¹ Ibid., 344.

⁶² Ibid., 345.

⁶³ Ibid., 346.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 347.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 376.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 377.

⁶⁸ Yve-Alain Bois, Douglas Crimp, and Rosalind Krauss, "A Conversation with Hans Haacke," October 30 (Fall 1984): 42-43, quoted in Irving Sandler, *Art of the Postmodern Era: From the Late 1960s to the Early 1990s* (Colorado: Westview Press, 1998), 383.

⁶⁹ Henry Giroux, "Decentering the Canon: Refiguring Disciplinary and Pedagogical Boundaries," Ch. 4, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York, 1993), 90.

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⁸⁰ Wilde-Biasiny, "Symbols of Freedom, Hope and Progress" (Contract evaluation of elective class, Empire State College, New York, 08 January 2004).

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- ⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ⁹⁰ *Ibid.*
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