

## Educating Diversely: The Artist Talk Platform

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### ABSTRACT

Artist-teachers can inspire diverse audiences to adopt innovative teaching practices through artist talks fueled by a social justice and awareness-raising agenda. This article presents ways to incorporate social problematics like mass displacement and pressing international immigration policies into diverse art classrooms and unconventional pedagogical platforms (in this case, through artist talks). It focuses on an artist talk given in collaboration with the Immigrant Workers Centre, a non-profit organization of newly arrived immigrants and refugees located in Montreal, Canada, and explores how the artist-talk platform reaches communities outside the traditional classroom and creates space for an exchange of ideas, artistic intervention, and learning from diverse participants. Additionally, I discuss my observations on potential pedagogical exchanges based on experiences from the event, concluding by further exploring the relevance and potential development in personal artistic and teaching practices for and with this specific community.

**KEYWORDS:** artist talks, social justice, pedagogical platforms, diverse audiences

Within the current North American political climate, polarized opinions on immigration policies and laws have created an atmosphere of fear and distrust, especially for displaced persons. Immigrant populations are regularly subject to hate and violence and are at risk of becoming further segregated. McClure (2013) observes, “Amid a swell of forceful, partisan rhetoric, accusations, fear and suspicion flood border cities and towns, threaten to erode tightly woven social networks and communities” (p. 220). In this climate, we need to work harder to listen to and connect with diverse communities to foster inclusivity and accessibility of human rights and to guarantee future wellbeing for all. Recently, I have become increasingly convinced that through art education, we can powerfully and effectively support this goal. Socially engaged artists can and should question the possibility of art’s influence reaching beyond gallery contexts and making an influential impact in the larger social arena. I continuously find myself asking whether art can serve as a tool in raising awareness of social concerns and, similarly, whether artists have any social responsibilities. As I explore these questions further throughout my research, I see the importance of artists’

engagement with society and social issues, and I have begun to conceive of the artist as a socially engaged (Kester, 2013) “border crosser”<sup>1</sup> (Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2008).

I have worked closely on several artistic projects<sup>2</sup> over the past few years with various groups of newly arrived immigrants and refugees. Through this work, I have seen art open up a productive space for narratives in which immigrants were able to explore their evolving identities in unfamiliar and productive ways. From this stance, I advocate for art and artistic practices in programming for displaced persons because of art’s power to reach beyond the capabilities of speech and oral language or idiom. Art can positively affect the conversations we need to be having about immigrants’ integration into a new culture by making space in which diverse members of society, including immigrants, can exchange opinions on these topics, which involve conflicting world views and competing cultural values and belief systems. As an immigrant artist from Mexico, a developing researcher, and a teacher working and studying in Montreal, Canada, the topic of diversity and offering diverse, accessible pedagogical platforms to disenfranchised demographics is of particular interest to me. By diverse pedagogical platforms, I mean specifically structured and organized encounters that take place within informal, non-academic community settings, such as coffee shops, hookah lounges, and restaurants. This includes but is not limited to artist talks, workshops and/or working group meetings held in community centers or in non-profit organization common rooms, potluck/meal-sharing events, commemoration group gatherings, and discussions. My own evolving migration story and the experiences I have informally been subjected to while engaged in artmaking and creative exchange in this specific type of setting have convinced me of art’s extensive reach over barriers. Some of these barriers are associated with language, culture, and education, and they can limit a newcomer’s ability to articulate complex ideas. Throughout this paper, I explore the potential for an immigrant artist-teacher to inform audiences outside the boundaries of a mainstream classroom setting by addressing how art and art education are implicated in our shifting cultural landscape. By teaching from unorthodox platforms such as artist talks, artists as educators can practice and cultivate arts with diverse and potentially disenfranchised learners and community

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1 Writer, academic, and musician Ruben Gaztambide-Fernandez identifies the artist through the concepts of “border crosser” from the context of vigorously intervening and holding a self-beneficial position regarding influential institutions in a critical, engaged, and challenging manner.

2 These include but are not limited to introductory drawing, collage, mixed media, mask, and stencil-making workshops. All my projects were conducted within the context of advocating for member-driven activist campaigns that fight for fair working conditions and wages for migrant workers and citizens.

members. In so doing, these artists have a better chance to address and more openly discuss cultural conflicts as well as local and global issues, such as violations of human rights, newcomers’ rights to basic social services, and their encounters with racism, gender inequality, and injustice.

I am interested in the many potential conversations that artistic narratives inspire – in the form of artist talks – among the artistic community and diverse multi-cultural groups with different levels of artistic background and knowledge. These creative investigations and interactions between artists, immigrants, and many other members of society (for example, social workers, government agents, law enforcers, NGO representatives), excite contemplation, raise questions, and confront subjectivities and information that may not be easily accessible while exploring social problems or larger conflicts such as racism, inclusion, diversity, hate crimes, etc. These processes of research for both artists and the audience they are engaging in dialogue with (Sullivan & Gu, 2017) construct and arrange educational mechanisms and methods to create new knowledge that can change and influence our perception of human experience. Sullivan and Gu (2017) believe that if communicated widely and made more accessible, these new perceptions and newly acquired knowledge of human experience can result in offering individuals and communities new spaces, prospects, and objectives for making positive changes and making sense of the worlds we live in. By doing this, we begin to “draw on personal knowledge and life experience” (Sullivan & Gu, 2017, p. 50) in order to achieve positive changes both individually and as a community.

By the same token, Rolling (2013) points out that arts-based research – in this case in the form of artist talks – is a cultural process and “a form of interdisciplinary inquiry because it opens up spaces within and across art, culture, research and teaching” (p. 54). Artist talks can therefore, in turn, be seen as methods of creative interrogation and forms of research. This implies that artist-practitioners not only share their work, but in so doing also obtain valuable input. The creative experiences artist-practitioners facilitate within distinct spaces often generate profound responses. I think it is also worth mentioning that to this point, I acknowledge Garber’s (2010) perspective on participatory democracy and social justice as well as the need for educators and artists to contribute to the learner’s educational well-being and growth as an important and direct influence on my current thinking and articulation of this matter of collaborating and engaging artistically and socially with marginalized demographics.

Relevant figures in the field like Suzanne Lacy and Kerry Freedman discuss artistic narratives and discourse as significant pedagogical moments. Lacy (1995) offers a possible suitable approach to address

heavy, controversial issues through art. Using a new genre public art lens (Irish, 2010), Lacy explores social themes and urban issues by entering into conversations with diverse communities (Lacy, 1995). On the other hand, Freedman (2000), from a much more pedagogical and theoretical perspective, seems to focus on inquiries into community and social perspectives on art education, including a concern with issues of ethnicity, body identities, cultures, communities, and political conditions. She concentrates on a common thread shared by these diverse perspectives that the visual arts are fundamental to all populations, stating that “representations of education should seek to reveal its complexity, diversity, and integral cultural location” (Freedman, 2000, p. 314). Freedman (2000) goes on to suggest that:

these perspectives represent the lived meanings of arts communities through...collaborative instructional methods and community action. Social reconstructionist versions of these perspectives are also founded on the belief that education can make a difference in student understanding of action in the world and that difference can enrich and improve social life. (p. 314)

I have begun to investigate this argument in my developing research on the notion of unusual environments and settings for learning and teaching.

I have been collaborating for several years with a non-profit organization called the Artist Bloc through the Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC),<sup>3</sup> which has a collective vision of artistically sharing members’ experiences and realities of migration with larger audiences. My artistic background, fluency, and visual art skill set help the organization achieve and artistically express its visions and goals with specific project campaigns. For example, I helped the participants design their own posters, banners, infographics, and tool kits; develop drawing and painting techniques; and create marionettes and masks. In September 2016, a member of the Artist Bloc invited me to deliver an artist talk to a group of adult newcomers originating from places around Latin America and North and Central Africa that had arrived in Canada within the previous few months or year. During the event, I saw that the talk for this specific group served as a way to informally educate the participants outside the usual classroom environment. This exciting and unforeseen event

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<sup>3</sup> The Immigrant Workers Centre (IWC) is a non-profit organization whose mandate stands to defend the rights of immigrants in their workplaces and fight for dignity, justice, and respect ([iwc-cti.ca/information/about-us](http://iwc-cti.ca/information/about-us)). Some of their principal objectives include fostering and advocating for popular education on workers’ rights, improving living and working conditions, and providing resources and referrals for immigrant workers.

of community-based art education inspired me to consider further developing these informal artist talks with this specific demographic as a form of empowering outreach for the community.

Ulbricht (2005) argues that focusing on local art and culture helps enrich learning by making art more accessible. Artist talks by socially engaged artists are able to focus on local art and culture, start a discussion with the community, and thus make art *with* them rather than merely *about* them. More precisely, it became clear to me that this group of newcomers would not have easy access to art education in a conventional classroom or lecture setting due to their socio-economic realities, nor would that type of setting necessarily be comfortable or inclusive for many of them.

## Community and Affiliation

The IWC in Montreal seeks economic and social justice for newly arrived immigrants entering the Canadian workplace. Throughout my collaboration with the IWC, I have engaged in creative and artistic projects with large groups of newly arrived immigrants for over two years.

A small art collective within the IWC, called the Artist Bloc (AB), uses art as a tool to advocate for social change. The AB hosts artistic interventions, actions, and campaigns through various mediums such as painting, sculpture, mixed media creations, theatre, and music. You can find them on Facebook at [www.facebook.com/blocartistesCTI/?ref=page\\_internal](http://www.facebook.com/blocartistesCTI/?ref=page_internal). Most members and participants involved with the IWC and the Artist Bloc have migrated from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa and hold status in Canada as refugees, temporary migrant workers, and, at times, undocumented citizens. They have one thing in common: all members have been forced out of their countries of origin, many leaving behind most, if not all, of their personal belongings and loved ones. The change in environment – a new place, a new language, and a new culture – often leads to their feeling shocked and overwhelmed. The members in this group form a diverse cultural audience. They often have little experience with art making and can be skeptical about the power of art to influence, empower, and, at times, heal disenfranchised communities.

My main artistic role at the AB has been to apply my technical, studio-based visual arts expertise and background to art projects that support the group’s visions. I have facilitated workshops for drawing and sketching, painting, collage, mixed media, and ephemeral murals. Throughout my time there, I have presented artist talks regarding art practices that advocate for human rights issues. These talks addressed diverse socio-political realities and human rights violations around

the world that directly affect a large portion of the population of immigrants entering Canada. The talks covered the importance of advocating for basic human rights and raising awareness of these realities to bring injustice to a halt through the artmaking process and sharing of artworks.<sup>4</sup>

Through my relationship with the Artist Bloc, I have been able to help the group express diverse narratives through art, bring the difficult realities faced by members of the IWC to the art research sphere in Canada, and use my position as an artist to teach and learn in a more inclusive setting. Additionally, it allows me the opportunity to appeal to a more heterogeneous audience that rarely has access to pedagogical exchange that raises social awareness and promotes participatory democracy (Garber, 2010).

### ***Artist Talk as an Alternative Pedagogical Platform***

In September 2016, I delivered an artist talk through the IWC and a sister organization by the name of Mexicanxs Unidos por la Regularizacion that served as a vehicle for sharing artistic narratives at the commemoration of the disappearance of 43 university students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico two years before. I prepared a presentation that showcased visual examples of the print media and paint work I have done related to similar issues, and I was asked to prepare a work of art to memorialize this important date. The work of art served as the backdrop during my presentation. Diverse cultural backgrounds were represented at the event, with participants from Mexico, Haiti, Colombia, Chile, Venezuela, and Canada. During a previous workshop, members were asked to read some of the letters that family members of the 43 disappeared university students left on their make-do memorial graves in the region of Ayotzinapa. Participants made large drawing portraits of the missing students that included some of the heartfelt messages from nostalgic letters left behind. These drawings were hung around the event venue to put faces to each of the 43 “missing”<sup>5</sup> students. The work of art I was commissioned to

4 My artistic work over the past 10 years in paint and print media has dealt with issues raising awareness of gender-based violence and social change. More recently, I have explored the conditions of women from the margins. In many ways, my work serves as a direct comment on the social realities I study (formally and informally). My current artistic work focuses on storytelling in the form of portraits and large-scale murals that humanize and represent socio-political experiences while expressing my own perspective as a form of activism on diverse situations. Examples of the works shown throughout the artist talk presentation are included in Figures 1-6.

5 The Inter-American Commission of Human Rights and other organizations unrelated to the Mexican government fear that the students were in fact murdered and their bodies later disposed of. As a result, any attempt at finding any of the bodies has been hindered by the Mexican government.

make for the event was propped up next to the large overhead screen. As the public walked in and took their seats, the lights were dimmed and I began my presentation:

Mexicans and global citizens around the world gather together on the 26th and 27th of September to commemorate the forced disappearance of 43 university students in Iguala, Mexico, since 2014. The disappearances were provoked by a series of violent episodes caused by Iguala’s municipal police force, where they chased and attacked students from the Normal Rural School of Ayotzinapa, in the state of Guerrero near Mexico City. In this confrontation, journalists and civilians were injured – fewer than 10 people reported dead and 43 students disappeared to this day. Despite countless attempts from family and citizens demanding justice and thorough investigation towards finding the students, not one has been reported found, dead or alive.

As an immigrant Mexican woman, being asked to speak through my artwork specifically on this subject is a great privilege, possible in large part due to my new geographical whereabouts. I am grateful for the opportunity to continue building awareness through my art on the important and growing theme of violence, which affects us all in a very real way, universally. As an immigrant, I constantly analyze the reasons behind choosing to leave my country. The analysis seems to consistently return to the idea of the search for safety and harmony. My country of origin continues to be plagued by impunity, corruption, gender inequality, and organized crime. This is an important reality to face that continues to fuel my artistic drive and work for various years now, and prompts me to make artwork that denounces the fact that this reality in Mexico has existed for far too long.

A large part of my artwork examines my country of origin and the current social challenges it faces, where for over 20 years there has continued to be an uncontrollable loss of small girls, teenagers, and grown women as part of the phenomenon universally



known as Femicide.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout the research that goes into informing my art practice, it has become increasingly clear that the Mexican government has failed to do what is needed to keep more girls and women from disappearing and dying due to gender inequality and misogyny. The same can be argued in this specific case marked by the date commemorating the missing students of Ayotzinapa, but applies in this instance to men and women alike. Impunity continues to defeat justice. My artwork aims to call universal attention to this global problem and raise awareness to inform and start ensuring a real change in upholding human rights.

The artist talk ended here. The following images are visual examples of the artworks that accompanied the presentation.



Figure 1. *Desaparecidos, The disappeared*. Artist: Garcia-Fialdini  
Example of works displayed throughout the artist talk.



Figure 2. *Sin titulo, Untitled*. Artist: Garcia-Fialdini  
Example of works displayed throughout the artist talk.



Figure 3. *Madre en espera, Mother awaits*. Artist: Garcia-Fialdini  
Example of works displayed throughout the artist talk.

<sup>6</sup> Femicide fits into the larger sphere of violence against women and as a concept has been redefined since 1990 as the killing of women by men, motivated by hate, contempt, pleasure or possessiveness be it due to race, nationality, religion, ethnic background, or sexual orientation (World Health Organization, 2012).



Figure 4. *Discriminate*. Artist: Garcia-Fialdini  
Example of works displayed throughout the artist talk.



Figure 5. *Encapsulada, Cornered*. Artist: Garcia-Fialdini  
Example of works displayed throughout the artist talk.



Figure 6. *Justicia, Justice*. Artist: Garcia-Fialdini  
Example of works displayed throughout the artist talk.

Comments and questions followed the presentation. An intimate, spontaneous space for concerns and opinions opened up. The experience of sharing artistic narratives through this platform (in the context of this specific event) had indirectly and unintentionally brought to life a very real and powerful pedagogical stage.

The reactions from the audience included aesthetic suggestions as well as many others related to context depiction. One audience member, for example, suggested incorporating some of the text from the relatives' letters to further personalize and remind the viewer of the direct and deep impact that this terrible situation brought on specific members of a large community. A different audience member talked about how the size of each work brought intimacy to the subject matter, allowing them to engage with the difficult context of the situation without necessarily imposing or forcing these atrocities down their throats. This observation was followed by the remark that this ensured a welcoming approach into learning more about a sensitive and difficult subject matter that can encourage larger groups of people to hear or learn more about it. On a separate note, another member of the audience continued to suggest working on future imagery that denounced the impunity and terror that the government cast upon the citizens of this region and the country as a whole, as opposed to only concentrating on the people it directly affected.

One audience member addressed the notion of incorporating more explicit symbolism or imagery in the artworks to catch larger audience attention in denouncing the real violence of the situation. To this, another audience member seemingly intuitively reacted, expressing their opinion in considering the importance of tact and

sensitivity when approaching these issues, as opposed to imposing violent images onto viewers.

As I shared with the audience that day, I have heard these arguments before, but I struggle artistically with the notion of adding to the violent imagery repertoire of our consistently oversaturated visual culture. I disclosed that I feel a real responsibility toward the images I produce and put out into the world, and I fear that a more explicit use of imagery might repel viewers from engaging with the work and learning more about the subject matter, forcing them to look away for lack of sensitivity or tact on these already difficult topics. I continually struggle with these dilemmas in my developing art practice, especially when visualizing my smaller drawings or works as maquettes for large, potentially imposing, future murals in community settings.

## Conclusion and Questions

As an immigrant artist-teacher, sharing this body of work and experiences with a culturally diverse demographic outside the potentially excluding restrictions of a mainstream classroom setting, allowed me to participate in today's shifting cultural debate and conversation. The artist-talk platform acted as a powerful mechanism to raise awareness about the social and political issues addressed in my talk, and it created space for the participants to discuss social justice more generally. By making these artistic narratives and inclusive conversations more accessible, artists as art educators can reach diverse and potentially disenfranchised audiences.

Exchanges like these are valuable in opening further discussions and conversations around the notion of education through art and artmaking, specifically when dealing with diverse audiences in atypical settings. Garber (1995) articulates this idea further, affirming that "we can start with a work of art or with the thematic approach." She explains, "I will begin with learning *about* the other by searching for meanings and nutrient experiences and move to developing new ways of thinking and valuing" (p. 224).

Similarly, participating in and witnessing the artist talk prompted me to begin a more thorough exploration of the notion of social justice education and how it can compile the objectives and mindset of multicultural, feminist, post-colonialist, and community-based art educative practices (Garber, 2004). These practices appear to strongly relate to substantial visual culture and socially conscious contemporary art (Garber, 2004). My experience with this artist talk has inspired me to research and explore social justice in educational theories further and examine its respective characteristics and the potential uncertainties that could be encountered when implementing

those theories. This profound breach of traditional ideas challenges conventional notions of power and language, which I am still exploring.

As I begin to delve further into the power of discourse, I become more aware of the political and ethical commitment of challenging "traditional ideas" (Wandel, 2001), viewing them as almost historically complicit with the exercise of power. This seems imperative specifically when exploring the construction of oppression, in this case particularly in the context of "othered" groups, such as migrant workers, refugees, and immigrants.

My personal, informal reflection on the reactions and comments from both participants and attendees helped reinforce my belief in the importance of art reaching large groups of people to help facilitate and encourage growth and raise awareness of social issues like diversity. As the audience engaged with the material and connected the aesthetic to the topic, it reinforced my consideration that there are far more possibilities and potentials to explore in the power of images and art when used as tools for social awareness and change. As McClure (2010) suggests, "through this collaborative experience... educators are able to re-envision themselves and their future teaching practice as they collaborate with one another and with community-based educators to serve populations with whom they may previously have had little contact" (p. 222). In addition, this highlights the importance of celebrating the genuine idea that pedagogy should allude to the approach and process of teaching as an analytical perception or theory and a scholarly subject (Sawada, 1972).

Fewer than half the audience members, according to a prompted show of hands, had heard about the missing students in Ayotzinapa before the talk. Many audience members' feedback and comments, given informally during a post-talk conversation, reflected that the talk had been a dynamic, transferable, rich, communicative, and promising pedagogical experience. The audience members similarly reported to have successfully felt part of a safe creative exchange environment where they could in turn share their own thoughts on the topic and work presented, exchange differences in opinion, and relate experiences pertaining to similar themes of human rights violations.

This type of event would likely translate well to a university setting. The university would benefit by opening its academic doors and offering access to resources and information to communities such as these of newly arrived immigrants. Recording and analyzing the ways in which the community is affected by having access to this resource and exchange would be a promising, valuable, and profitable one for the IWC, the Artist Bloc, and for future research developments

and possibilities in the field of community-based art education.

Academia needs to prioritize integrating conversations of accessibility and exchange of information to marginalized communities and individuals into scholarly dialogues and discourses. Through my position as a socially engaged artist and art educator, I feel a responsibility to integrate these exchanges into the larger conversation of art education in the academy to further expose some of the many audiences – temporal workers, newcomers, refugee claimants – and the abounding effects and reactions that art can have in prompting and influencing change, for instance, the potential that artist talks have to empower, inform, raise awareness, cultivate personal growth, and make accessible basic citizen rights.

The act of recording my participation in the artist talk in the form of this article has motivated me to continue to share these perspectives. A wide range of disenfranchised audiences like the ones previously mentioned can benefit from collaborations through art and artmaking. I intend to build on the privileged exchange I hold with the IWC/ Artist Bloc and report on future collaborations, results, and promises to the academic community and beyond. Perhaps reporting in the form of other future articles and experiences with artist talk lectures or workshops can serve to highlight the effect that education through art and artmaking has on individuals outside of the conventional classroom and the many unknown or unheard of experiences of newly arrived adult immigrants in Canada.

Through this project, I was able not only to directly engage an audience outside the traditional classroom, but also to explore how unusual pedagogical spaces and opportunities such as an artist talk can serve to teach vulnerable groups or collectivities about the power of art to create social change and empower people. Furthermore, it seems worthwhile to explore ways of educating diverse audiences around art and the subjects it represents and develop ways of using art to empower and advocate for social change.

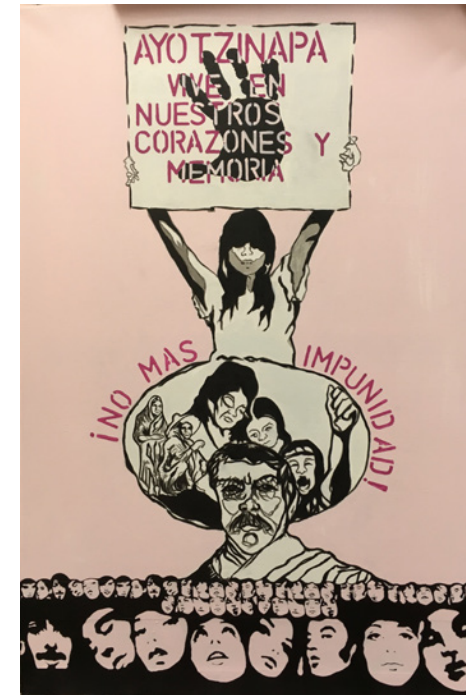


Figure 7. *Ayotzinapa, Corazon y Memoria, Atoyzinapa, Heart and Mind*  
Artist: Garcia-Fialdini  
Commissioned work for the event.



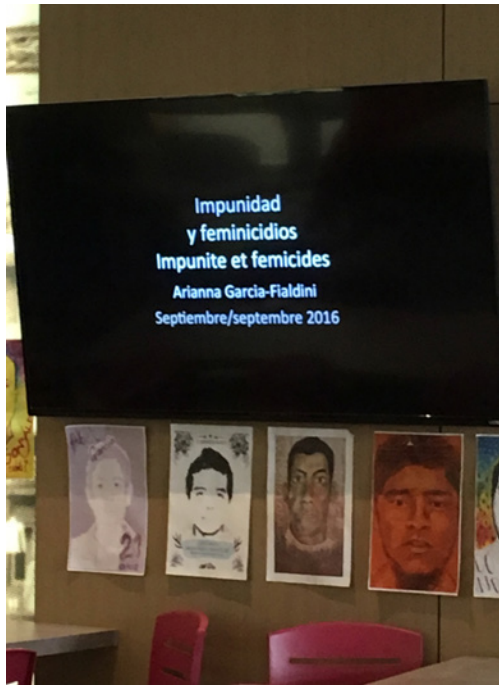


Figure 8. Event Documentation



Figure 10. Event Documentation



Figure 9. Event Documentation



Figure 11. Event Documentation



Figure 12. Event Documentation

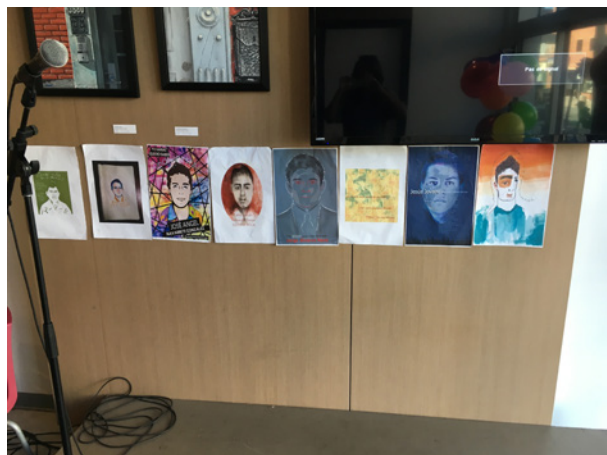


Figure 13. Event Documentation



Figure 14. Event Documentation

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