

## Blue Educator in a Red State: Creating Spaces of Purple Empathy through Civil Bipartisan Discourse

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### ABSTRACT

Using personal narrative, the author describes her exploratory process as an art educator working with a large, politically divided group of non-art major students as they process their opposing views surrounding the 2016 American Presidential Election. The author reflects on her journey as a liberal educator in a conservative state, attempting to use current visual culture in order to best promote empathy for bipartisanship among students in a time of political unrest. Using visual inquiry as a vehicle for constructive civil discourse concerning insulated echo chambers, students' commonalities and differences are shared as they transpired.

KEYWORDS: civil discourse, critical consciousness, critical visual literacy, bipartisanship, bipartisan discourse, echo chamber, empathy, hashtag, memes, political images, purple empathy, social justice, social consciousness, social responsibility, visual culture, visual literacy, visual influence.

*"How can we talk about anything else -  
when it's all anyone is thinking about?"*  
- Anonymous student

The 2016 American Presidential Election conjures many opinions, debates, beliefs, emotions, and memories for those who experienced it. As a highly publicized event, American visual culture was saturated with images in the news and social media that called into question what it means to be *visually literate*. Duncum (2002) states, "the term visual culture is a reworking in contemporary terms of an earlier art education project described as visual literacy" (p. 17). To be literate is to be able to read and write, whereas visual literacy is the ability to read visual text and understand and/or produce culturally significant images (Boughton, 1986; Chung, 2013; Duncum, 2002, 2004; Felten, 2008). Chung (2013) claims, "the proliferation of visually mediated texts in our globalized culture has made visual literacy a necessary skill" (p. 4). Lankshear and McLaren (1993) asserted that *critical literacy* enables "human subjects to understand and engage the politics of daily life in the quest for a more truly democratic social order" (p. xviii, as cited in Chung, 2013). In 2013, Chung explored the processes of teaching visual literacy for social justice and cultural democracy as a critical approach to art education in order to best prepare young people to "navigate in a visually mediated society" (p. 1). Through a deep analysis of visual culture, visual literacy, cultural literacy, and

social justice, Chung (2013) defines and advocates for *critical visual literacy* as "the ability to investigate the social, cultural, and economic 'contexts' of visual texts in order to illuminate the power relationships in society" (p. 6). By experimenting with critical visual literacy skills in response to the influences of visual culture and visual imagery surrounding the 2016 United States Presidential election, I worked to create spaces where bipartisan civil discourse could inspire empathy.

The following is a personal narrative surrounding my exploratory process as an art educator working with a politically divided group of non-art major students. In the roles of professor and researcher I reflect on and grapple with how and if my political beliefs should enter the classroom - and if they are ever truly left out.

### Blue Educator

This journey began the day of the Presidential Election, November 8, 2016. I had recently returned to campus mid-semester after being on Family Medical Leave for the birth of my second daughter and immediately walked into a course I had never taught. This course was a non-art major Art Appreciation, and with over 70 students is the largest class I had ever taught. I had only returned to campus for two weeks when the election arrived, and I was just beginning to get to know my community of learners. On the day of the election, many of my students arrived wearing t-shirts and hats that promoted their political party's affiliation.

The class was a sea of blue<sup>1</sup> and red<sup>2</sup>, either proclaiming that "We are Stronger Together" or that they wanted to "Make America Great Again." When I gathered the class to begin for the day, the students in the front of the room were debating their feelings on the day's election. One student asked for my opinion and all 70 students suddenly stopped their conversations, looked directly at me, and waited for my reaction. I told them it was not my place to use my position as their professor to hold court and preach my strong feelings on the election. A student then stated, "you are the only one of my professors not trying to shove your agenda down my throat - in all of my classes every

one of my professors is ranting about both political parties." Neal, French, and Siegel (2005) state, "there are now countless stories (and large volumes of hard data) about political pressure in college

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1 For the purpose of this article, blue represents those that support the Democratic Party and liberal values in regard to voting.

2 For the purpose of this article, red represents those that support the Republican Party and conservative values in regard to voting.

classrooms, and faculty hostility to non-liberal viewpoints” (p. 30). I responded to this student’s powerful comment by saying that it is not my job to influence how my students vote, but it did cause me to pause. Later, I questioned - *was I fully doing my job?* As David Horowitz states in an interview with Steven Burg (2005), “this doesn’t mean that politics shouldn’t be discussed in the classroom, it means that professors should not be political partisans in the classroom” (p. 7). Here were 70 students all wanting to talk about the contentious election our country was consumed with, and I couldn’t help feeling that I was doing them a disservice by fully ignoring it. That night, the election was decided, and like many others around the world, I felt many emotions over the results.

I have always been a registered Democrat. I was nurtured in blue territory, born in San Francisco and raised mostly in Seattle. I grew up on the West coast, which in every election I have been of age to vote in has gone blue. As I am writing this, it is the West Coast who has made the strongest attempts to stop this administration’s current executive orders in regards to a travel ban. My only sibling worked on Secretary Hillary Clinton’s campaign in the months leading up to the election. Her stories of working with and for the first female nominated by the Democratic Party for presidential candidate were inspiring.

Each time I vote, I take both the Republican and Democratic candidate(s) into consideration. In every election I have disagreed with the issue stances of some candidates, but have always found respect for them all. This election was the first time I did not respect both candidates. I do not respect how President Trump treats people and, as a female, I am personally offended by his sexist remarks. I embrace and reflect on my position as a White privileged woman. I have been afforded the opportunity of a higher education, I was born here in the United States of America, I am not an immigrant, I am straight, and I am not a minority. I have empathy for the groups of people subjected to discrimination by this administration, and consider myself an ally to all said groups. I am also deeply troubled with this administration’s subjective handling of what they declare to be truths, or what they call *alternative facts*, and the conspiracy theories they have placed in people’s minds concerning the integrity of our media.

This was the first presidential election in which I voted in a red state with over 60 percent voting red. I recognize that many of the people I come into contact with on a daily basis have equally strong feelings toward this election as I do, but we are in stark contrast to each other. These are people I have gotten to know outside of politics and respect as good people. These people are not just strangers; they are friends, the people who care for my children – they are part of my life and I trust them as smart, kind-hearted, and well intentioned. Living in a red state has afforded me the opportunity to understand that not all

who disagree with me politically mirror the worst of our 45<sup>th</sup> president and his administration. There is much we will never agree on, but our differences and reasons for voting the way we did in this election are multi-layered. With respectful communication, similarities and understanding(s) within our differences are found. With this confessional reflection, the question is: *how - and should – I keep my views to myself when playing the role of professor?*

## Creating Spaces for Purple Empathy

With this understanding of myself as a blue art educator teaching in a red state and working with non-art major undergrad students of all backgrounds, I was left with questions: *How could I authentically address the current cultural conflicts happening? Is there a way for a blue educator to create space for purple empathy in a red state? Can we ever fully check our political intentions at the classroom door, and if non-partisan teaching is attainable and necessary, then how?*

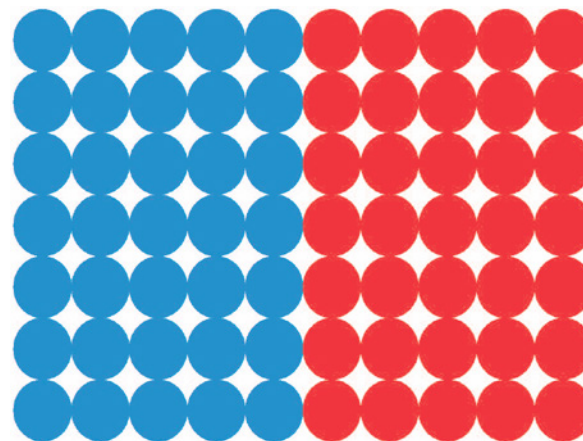


Figure 1.

On Election Day, my students were deeply divided, as visually represented in Figure 1. As an art educator teaching art appreciation to non-art majors, I decided the best way to create spaces for bipartisan discourse would be by focusing on the visual imagery and graphic nature of the election that had become a catalyst for civil – and non-civil – discourse across the political divide. My intention of creating spaces for purple empathy was not a true blending of red and blue; I did not set out to change my blue-liberal and red-conservative students all to moderate/centrist. For this experience, *purple empathy* was an *optical blending* of blue and red students coming together to engage in civil bipartisan discourse (see Figure 2). If empathy is “the action of understanding, being aware of, being

sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another” (Merriam-Webster, 2017), then *purple empathy* is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another’s political views, political experiences, political opinions, political understandings, political intentions, and political decisions.

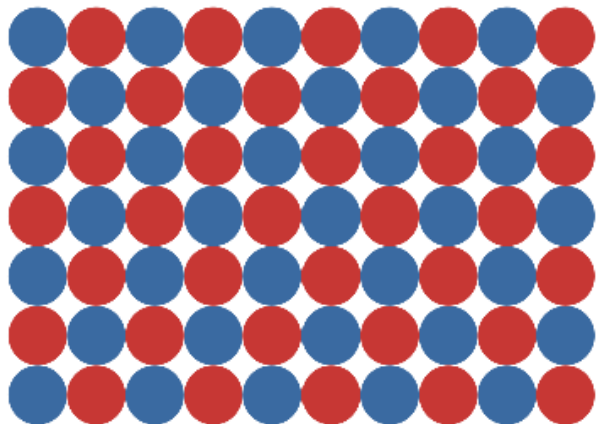


Figure 2.

Purple empathy can occur in a space of bipartisan listening and sharing, with the purpose of bridging understandings from radically different perspectives of people sharing a geographical location, a place of learning, and an important time in American history. Just as *The New York Times* writer Nicholas Kristof (2016) states, “When perspectives are unrepresented in discussions, when some kinds of thinking aren’t at the table, classrooms become echo chambers rather than sounding boards – and we all lose” (p. 2). An echo chamber is a space where our own beliefs are amplified and those with different or competing views are silenced. I reflected on the visual construction of my own blue echo chamber through my choices of media and entertainment consumption. I was compelled to understand the visual imagery within the echo chambers of red voters in order to best mediate a productive discussion. This was the best journey I could embark on in order to attempt to create a class dynamic where both red and blue students felt safe to openly engage in bipartisan discourse in order to develop purple empathy.

### The Day After Election Results

On November 10th, I stood at the front of the classroom as my students found their seats in the lecture hall. I noticed how many of them were wearing their candidates’ campaign signage, even more

than on Election Day. The classroom was full of red hats stating “Make America Great Again” and blue t-shirts stating “Stronger Together.” The room was full of energy, noise, and angry conversations. I could hear debates surrounding the election results, with words such as *racist* and *criminal* being thrown around. I took my place and quieted the room down, but a negative energy lingered in the room. A student in the front row locked eyes with me and simply asked how I was doing. I could feel my heart pounding. There was so much I wanted to say, so many thoughts and emotions packed into one question. My answer was simple:

No matter if and how you voted, we currently are a divided nation, and this class is a sample of this. Whether you are indifferent, proud, happy, sad, scared, angry, or confused in response to the election results, I believe you could find someone in this room who agrees and disagrees with you. The challenge now is trying to understand one another. How do we move forward with empathy for each other? I am not prepared to lead a discussion surrounding this today. Is this something you want to discuss here?

They responded with an overwhelming “YES.” One student asked, “how can we talk about anything else, when it’s all anyone is thinking about?” I told them I needed time in order to lead this kind of discussion and would do my research over the weekend and come prepared for Tuesday’s class. *If I came at my students using my place of power, preaching how awful I feel the administration of our 45th president is and not placing any value with those who disagree with me, then it becomes a question of whether I am better than the administration I am preaching about.* The role of an educator is to create spaces of learning and promote the sharing of opposing ideas in order to promote collective empathy. As Berg (2005) states, “the role of the teacher is to introduce students to materials that will help them to reason, not to draw conclusions” (p. 9-10). To teach with integrity and not draw my own conclusions, then, I must not silence the students I disagree with. As educators, we have a duty to develop critical consciousness and social responsibility in our students. As Nelson (2012) commented:

Socially responsible people understand that they are part of a larger social network that has interlocking communities. They are conscious of the ways in which they can be influenced by others, and in turn respond by acting with integrity because they are conscious of their influence on the social world. (p. 14)

In order to develop critically conscious and socially responsible students, I could not shut out the red section of my students or shame



them into questioning their own beliefs and have them simply repeat what I believe to be true; by doing so, I have done them no good (Osborn, 2017). It is said that the Resistance<sup>3</sup> comes in all shapes and sizes, and I chose to create spaces for constructive discourse. I was committed to helping my students see that there is more that connects us than divides us, with the hope that civil discourse would be the bridge to mutual understanding. At the very least, perhaps my red students would leave with greater empathy for the purpose and necessity of protest and disagreement. Perhaps my blue and/or purple students would leave with a fuller picture as to why the election results were not such a shock to everyone – i.e., the latent frustrations in mid-America that became apparent post-Election Day. Perhaps we can all rediscover our own personal privileges with regard to gender, race, and socio-economic standings. Perhaps it will lead us all to better understand how these privileges influence our views on politics.

As previously stated, this was an Art Appreciation course filled with non-art majors. For this body of students, this may be the only visual art course they take in their college career. I wanted to inspire purple empathy by creating spaces for civil bipartisan discourse in response to the art, in the form of visual culture, which surrounded the 2016 Presidential Election. As Freedman (2000) states, “art is a vital part and contributor to social life and students have the possibility of learning about life through art” (p. 324). In response to the visual imagery of the highly contested election we had all recently experienced, I wanted to challenge my non-art students to question how they encounter and understand the images and visual culture that have influenced them.

## Visual Solicitation

In order to lead a class discussion on November 15th, I reflected on our current course construction. Since taking over the course a few weeks earlier, I had intentionally focused on exposing this group of students to contemporary artists who speak to, create, and comment on our country’s current cultural standings. I wanted them to appreciate how art can help us become aware of issues of our time and how others are dealing with these same issues. I had recently lectured on Big Ideas, which Sydney Walker (2001) describes as “broad, important human issues – characterized by complexity, ambiguity, contradiction, and multiplicity” (p. 1). I asked my

<sup>3</sup> Created in 1967, the Resist Foundation supports people’s movements for justice and liberation. In the aftermath of the 2016 Presidential Election, the hashtags of Resist and Resistance have been used as collective social gatherings for those who disagree with the administration of the 45th president.

students to contemplate each big idea we discussed and how they could personally relate to the big idea (Walker, 2001). By asking students to first connect personally to the big idea, they could then build a deeper understanding of the artists’ meanings in their creations, and in turn attempt to understand the social situations the art is commenting on. Some of the big ideas we grappled with before the election were home, race, gender, and power.

On November 12th, I harnessed the power of social media to gather information in order to further these discussions in my course. I created this post on my personal Facebook page:

Fellow Art Educators, using art as a catalyst for discourse surrounding our current social climate what artists have you investigated? We have covered Theaster Gates, Kara Walker, Nick Cave, Cai Guo-Qia, Ida Applebroog, Krzysztof Wodiczko, Kerry James Marshall, Faith Ringgold, May Lin (to name a few)...I want to know who you have used in class so I can further expose my students and deepen the conversations. I greatly appreciate you sharing your favorite artists.<sup>4</sup>

I was honored that my fellow art and art education friends took the time to help compose an extensive and important list. With only three class sessions left until the end of the semester, I could not

<sup>4</sup> Many fellow art educators (Courtne Wolfgang, Melissa Newman, Sunny Spillane, Lillian Lewis, Mindi Rhoades, Thomas Sturgill, John Derby, Michael Kellner, Ross Schlemmer, and Melissa Crum) responded with the following artists names: Pepon Osorio, Catherine Opie, Mickalene Thoman, Kehinde Wiley, David Wojnarowicz, Felix Gonzalez Torres, Keith Harring, Shephard Fairey, Annie Leibovitz, Zoe Leonard, Kelli Connell, Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, Glenn Ligon, Fred Wilson, Thoman Hirschhorn, Michael Mararian, Ai Weiwei, Janine Antoni, Richard Misrach, Andreas Gursky, Doris Salcedo, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Noah Purifoy, Ellen Gallagher, Shazia Sikander, Sarah Sze, Nasreen Mohamedi, Stan Douglas, William Pope L, Mona Hatoum, Do Ho Suh, Mark Bradford, Theaster Gates, Rick Lowe, Carolle Schneeman, Suzanne Lacy, Hassan Elahi, Lenka Clayton, Wangechi Mutu, Latoya Ruby Frazier, Hank Willis Thomas, Judy Chicago, Annie Sprinkle, Yoko Ono, Marina Ambromovic, Tracy Emin, Michael Rakowitz, David Michael, Zanele Muholi, Jasmine Thomas-Girvan, Judith Salmon, Berette Macauley, Prudence Lovell, Amy Laskin, Miriam Hinds-Smith, Kareina Chang-Fatt, Elizabeth Garber, Jyoti Gupta, Mesma Belsare, Tejal Shah, Anuradha Chandra, Consuelo Novoa, Wangechi Mutu, Mickalene Thomas, Chitra Ganesh, Noel’te Longhaul, Wu Tsang, Shirin Neshat, Allison Lapper, Adrian Piper, Nijideka Akunyili, Alvin Baltrop, Michael Armitage, Isaac Julien, Yayoi Kusama, Ana Mendieta, Shinique Smith, Gabriel Dawe, Nick Cave, Margaret Bowland, Vaginal Davis, Phil Ferguson, Catherine Opie, and Julie Mehretu.

authentically cover this large a list of artists. Therefore, I elected to teach Art Appreciation again in Fall 2017 so that I could have adequate time to create a curriculum composed of these contemporary artists. Chung (2013) states that teachers should

raise awareness of the politics of knowledge about visual practices with respect to whose are served, who is (dis)empowered, and who is (dis)enfranchised. They should problematize the systems of visual (mis)representations to understand how the world as known today is constructed by power relations and factored by class, gender, race, and sexual orientation. (p. 18-19).

It is important that art educators teach non-art majors. We must use our privileged knowledge base to expose large groups of non-art students to contemporary artists working within societies' social issues. Art educators should use art to support and challenge students to reflect on their own privileges within class, gender, race, and sexual orientation in order to grow socially conscious and socially responsible (Nelson, 2012). As art educator Freedman (2000) claims, from her "social perspective, it is the responsibility of our field to address the issues and problems of student experience with visual culture" (p. 325). In a diverse undergrad class, there is opportunity to have many of the hard necessary conversations our society is desperately in need of. This is where change can start. With this group of students, I needed to take a different course of action in order to lead a discussion surrounding the election results. At that current moment in time there was not one single artist who could speak to the current political climate. In turn, I decided to focus solely on the visual culture and visual imagery surrounding the 2016 Presidential Election.

Freedman (2000) stated that, "highly seductive and widely distributed images with sophisticated aesthetics intricately tied to sociopolitical meaning are now seen every day by students" (p. 325). Compounding this is research finding that among Millennials, Facebook is their most common source for news about government and politics (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015). Reflecting on this and current discussions surrounding echo chambers, specifically, *what did my blue echo chamber sound and look like, in contrast to a red echo chamber?* How could I help my students make considerate efforts to become aware of their own echo chambers in order to become critically engaged with the visual culture they encounter?

I used Facebook to gather visual imagery surrounding the election in an attempt to break out of my own echo chamber. I realized that of my almost 1000 *friends* on Facebook, most of them lean liberal blue or even socialist. I teach in the College of Liberal Arts, not Conservative

Arts; just as Berg (2005) states, "our faculties are almost universally, 90 to 95% politically left" (p. 10). I have friends and family from all political backgrounds, but most of my life has been lived in blue or swing states, and therefore my Facebook feed was full of images I wanted to see and what I felt to be true. I needed to expose myself to the images from the other side, and I further realized that if I was going to mediate a fair discussion of election images, then I needed to become immersed in the visuals from all sides. In order to explore and practice my own critical visual literacy skills, I needed to place myself in multiple echo chambers and have the images reverberate as they have for my students. On November 13th, I posted to my Facebook timeline:

Trump Supporters, those that voted for him in opposition of Clinton, and those that chose not to vote...I am working on collecting images to prompt discussions in my teaching. I feel lucky to be working with a large diverse group of students at this moment, and in order to represent them all, and get them talking, I need images that represent both sides of the election. I would greatly appreciate it if you would forward me any cartoons, memes, ANY visual you have seen before and after the election that represents how you feel toward the election, Clinton(s) and DNC. I need to have an equal balance in my class of images in order to represent both sides. I will of course keep your identity private. I only want to collect the visual to prompt discourse in my class. Any images you can send my way would be greatly appreciated.

I also personally messaged those friends who I could clearly tell from their feeds were Trump supporters (or Clinton haters) to share the images they found most powerful. I had people from all moments in my life reach out to me. Some answered publicly by posting under this call, and many others with personal emails. Participants included a college friend from my undergraduate degree whom I hadn't seen in years, previous students and colleagues from the universities where I have taught (and currently teach), parents of friends whom I grew up with and old neighbors whom I had briefly known. Some were anxious and excited to share images. Others were tentative and worried that I was trying to cause trouble or that circulating the images they were sharing with me meant they were somehow connected to its meaning. The visual images ranged from election propaganda images that were created by the Democratic National Committee or Republican National Committee, memes, cartoons, photographs – both realistic and altered – and even some truly disturbing images. I also had people reach out to me sharing images

in support of what they called the Resistance, or response to, the current election results.

## Entering Other(s) Echo Chambers

In order to organize my thinking when viewing the vast amount of images shared with me, I constructed questions to ponder as I became consumed with these visual images. These questions in turn would guide the discourse I intended to lead in class. I wanted to ensure the questions focused on the influence of the visual imagery, and thematic questions of: *How does this image influence me? What is the purpose of the image's creation? Does this image offend a certain group of people? How and/or why was it created to do this? Does it build support for a group of people or one person? Does it build and spread hate, empathy, and/or understanding(s)?*

I collected images in an attempt to equally expose my students to the visual culture surrounding this polarized election in order to create spaces for bipartisan discourse that could ultimately inspire purple empathy. My intentions were for my students to gain awareness that their lives are saturated with visual imagery. I wanted them to question how visual culture influences our thinking and actions, how visual culture can influence how we view one another, and that we must use our own critical lens when reading these images in order to become self-discerning to this influence. As Duncum (2002) states, "visual culture is a focal point for many diverse concerns, but all have in common the recognition that today, more than at any time in history, we are living our everyday lives through visual imagery" (p. 15). As previously stated, many of my students are so young that social media is their main news source (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015). On November 19, I listened to a story on National Public Radio (NPR) about fake news in relation to Facebook. Folkenflick and Wertheimer (2016) discussed how fake news has been around a while, but this election season it was "finally diagnosed as the cancer it really is." Stories are created with elements of truth but no actual evidence or reference, fooling the public to believe the story is true. Google and Facebook claim they are looking into this issue and plan to take action to stop these kinds of stories in their networks, but any future action will not repair the damage done in relation to the idea of truth surrounding the 2016 Election. This report solidifies the importance of teaching non-art students not only how to appreciate art, but perhaps even more importantly at this period of time, how to become their own investigators of the visual culture they encounter every day on social media. If there is such a thing as fake news, then there can also be *fake images*. Images such as political memes are created solely to influence a person in regard to an electoral process (Shifman, 2014). A large source of the visual imagery shared with me came in the form

of memes. A meme is a picture with words placed on the image in order to make one laugh or to make a statement. Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a meme as "an amusing or interesting item (such as a captioned picture or video) or genre of items that is spread widely online especially through social media" (2017). These types of visuals are created to directly influence a person. In the 2016 commentary - *It's not about losing an election. It's about losing our humanity; Lessons in becoming a meme and taking back the message* - DeVlyder discusses how a picture of her crying on election night went viral and became an image of comedy for those happy with the election results. She shows that the words placed within the image prescribe its meaning. Without the words, the image is left open for interpretation; therefore, a meme is one of the most influential forces of imagery; *it clearly states, with carefully directed words, how one should ingest the image*. For the purpose of building purple empathy through bipartisan discourse, I decided that memes, with their prescribed meanings, would not be the best images used in these particular discussions.

After sorting through the vast amount of images shared with me, I made one last search attempt. On November 14, I performed a Google search for both parties' main slogan hashtag, #strongertogether and #makeamericagreatagain. A hashtag is a type of title, label, or metadata tag used on social media, which allows users to find visual images and/or messages within a specific theme or content area. I was searching for images collected within these hashtags to accompany the visual images people had shared with me. I searched deeper into the images grouped within each hashtag and found that many of the images people had shared with me were placed within one or the other hashtag. Therefore, I decided to select an even amount of images from each hashtag to guide our discussions.

Next I contemplated how to best present these images to my students, along with what questions I would ask them. *How would I guide the conversations in order to keep them constructive?* In my Art Education Elementary Methods course, I teach about Terry Barrett's process of critique (Barrett, 1997). With Barrett's input from previous conversations in person and on Facebook, he helped to guide the formation of two questions: *what do you see* and *what are the implications of what you see* (Barrett, 2016). These would be the two questions that led our discussions surrounding the election visual.

## Implementation

On November 15th, I welcomed my class and started by expressing my honest emotions with what was about to take place. In my PowerPoint, I stated I was - *Feeling Nervous, Anxious & Excited*. I



expressed that it was because of their interactions in class that I had been consumed with how to best address our current cultural climate in an ethical and constructive way. I reminded them that I am an art educator and not a political expert, so it would be the visual imagery surrounding the election that would drive our conversations. I discussed what it meant to take a *Respectful Pause*. I displayed the definitions of both *respect* and *pause*, and I then commented that in order to be part of civil bipartisan discourse, we needed to be conscious of the fact that there are many emotions surrounding the images of this election, and in order to not further perpetuate hate, we needed to practice a respectful pause before we responded to one another.

Next, I introduced the term visual culture as an aspect of culture expressed in visual images. “Visual culture is the visual construction of the social, not just the social construction of vision” (Mitchell, 2002, p. 170). Visual culture works toward a social theory of visibility, focusing on what is made visible, who sees what, and how seeing, knowing, and power are interrelated. It examines the act of seeing as a product of the tensions between external images and internal thought processes (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). We discussed the different forms of visual culture and visual imagery they encounter in their lives, such as advertisements, fashion, social media, news media, memes, selfies, hashtags, and what it means to go viral. As Duncum (2002) states, “if pictures have not come to replace words, then at least they have an unprecedented influence in what we know about the world, and how we think and feel about it” (p. 16).

We then unpacked what a hashtag is and who controls the imagery within it. I shared Webster’s (2017) definition of a hashtag as “a word or phrase preceded by the symbol # that classifies or categorizes the accompanying text.” I posed the following questions for my students: *when thinking about visual discourse, who is controlling the conversation within any given hashtag? If anyone can post a picture to a specific hashtag, then who guides the visual impact?* They answered with anyone. Anyone can upload an image to any hashtag of his or her choice. There is no *hash supervisor*; there is no *tag master*. We then discussed where in our lives we find these hashtags. The students quickly agreed for the purpose of visual discourse in regard to the 2016 Presidential Election, Facebook was where they reported seeing the largest amount of images marked with hashtags. I then shared with the class: “Among Millennials, Facebook is far and away the most common source for news about government and politics” (Mitchell, Gottfried, & Matsa, 2015, p. 1). I asked them what issues come with this statement. If our information about the election comes only from Facebook, then it is those with whom we are friends that are informing us. This places us in an echo chamber, a space where our political beliefs are reinforced by the reverberation received by

those we agree with. I explained that we find comfort and confidence in our political views by surrounding ourselves with what we want to see and hear. We must challenge ourselves to engage in constructive conversations with those who disagree with us politically in order to gain understandings and empathy for one another. Some students expressed that when they tried to engage in these kinds of conversations on Facebook, it was not productive. Their experiences were that people used Facebook threads to debate back and forth, and they didn’t feel anyone actually heard the other side. They said that it just became a space for people to rant about their political views with no attempts to understand those they disagree with. I used this opportunity to reinforce that *we needed to make efforts to listen and hear the perspectives of those we disagree with politically*. I expressed that my intentions were not to change their minds politically so they would agree with me, nor fully agree with one another, and reminded them that the election was decided; the votes were in. I explained that our discussions would be centered on images from the election and that all I asked of them was to make the attempt to hear each other in order to gain understandings different from their own. I reminded the students that it was their unconstructive debates I witnessed on Election Day and their desires to talk about such issues after the election results that inspired me to create spaces for us to hopefully gain empathy for one another.

With a communal knowledge base of visual culture, visual imagery, hashtags, and echo chambers, I explained my process for gathering the images we would view that day. When each image was displayed, I asked them to write their answers to two questions - *what do you see* and *what are the implications of what you see* – before we would share and discuss. These writings were done anonymously, with no names attached and no grade given. I assigned the writing portion in class so students would take the time to gather their thoughts and look deeply at what the image represented before verbally responding. I reminded them that as we began to share our thoughts, we were going to disagree with each other at times, but that we needed to take a respectful pause and try to hear what each other was saying. As Noddings (2010) states, “approaching the world through the relational ethic of caring, we are more likely to listen attentively to others” (p. 391). In order to understand our different views in relation to the current political climate, our first step is to actually hear one another. By taking steps to care about what each other has to say, we can start to rebuild and heal after this contentious election. As the students shared their writings, I had to remind the class to first describe what they saw – actually list the visual elements of the image – and not jump into what they felt the implications of the image were. As Chung (2013) proposes, “approaches to exploring texts through a critical lens to foster critical visual literacy [first] require a close analysis of the text in use” (p. 7). The students

wanted to instantly express their strong feelings and emotions, but I explained that we were visually investigating the image first before we prescribed our personal meanings to the image. Through class exploration we would “focus on a collaborative exchange of different viewpoints to detect the biases and assumptions of the text and unveil its hidden political agendas” (Chung, 2013, p. 7). This was a process we had to practice over and over, and the students soon got into the flow of using their critical lens to visually read an image before applying meaning to the image.

## Practicing Critical Visual Literacy to Create Spaces of Bipartisan Discourse

The first image viewed was found under the hashtag of *Make America Great Again*. The students visually read this image as a man named Donald Trump, in a blue suit with red tie, leaning over an American flag and pulling a string and needle with his right hand. The students read that the image had a black background, causing the viewer to focus directly on the man and his actions with the flag.

Responses to the image through students’ critical lens included:

- He is fixing our flag/our country or making a new one
- He is mending our country - but we honestly can't know the outcome until he is finished
- He is repairing the flag, just like he is going to repair our country
- He is unraveling our country, pulling at our nations core, one string at a time
- He thinks that he alone can fix America
- He is trying to take some states off the flag, or perhaps adding stars
- This shows a broken nation that he alone can fix
- I see him trying to fix America, one stitch at a time
- I see a sneaky, snide smile
- I see a confident smile
- This is condescending - he doesn't know how to sew, or how to fix our country
- I see him wanting to go back to the beginning of the US and start from scratch

The students’ bipartisan discourse surrounding this image was that of mending (red students) or unraveling (blue students) the flag. The students visually read the image differently depending on their political affiliation; therefore, they disagreed on Trump’s actions and implied intentions with the American Flag. They did agree that the flag represented our current society here in The

United States of America. As the students critically read this image, they collaboratively came to the conclusion that this image was created to promote Trump and was staged to be a flattering image of him. Even so, the blue students had a hard time seeing him in a positive light and took turns sharing why his actions leading up to the election made them feel scared and unsafe and how they felt he has the potential to unravel our nation. Some red students expressed concerns they felt had been ignored under the previous administration or politicians in general, and had confidence in their visual readings that Trump (the man in the image) was the person to mend our nation. Other red students stated that he made them a bit nervous, but as a conservative, they needed to have faith that he would do what he said he would.

The second image viewed, found under the hashtag of “Stronger Together,” was visually read by students as many brightly colored post-it notes, collectively and randomly stuck on a wall.

Responses to the image through students’ critical lenses included:

- No matter your color, purpose, or size, you are on the wall
- Shows diversity, all stuck together
- Different colors represent different races
- Wall of thoughts, opinions, ideas
- With only one you can't be seen, but with hundreds you begin to stand out
- Promoting a political bandwagon
- Looks unorganized and chaotic
- So many people have a lot to say
- Post-it-notes don't stick forever - they fall off, losing the statement
- People together are stronger
- Reminds me of 9/11, people are sorrowed by the outcome of this election
- This shows empathy
- Unity, anonymous opinions
- Stick together – stronger together
- The parts that create a whole
- One voice is difficult to hear, but a unity of voices can't be ignored
- Implies importance in the bigger picture.

As students explored their visual literary skills with this image, it became clear that many students had not seen, nor heard of, the story behind this photo. More information was needed in order to have bipartisan discourse, so I explained that this was an image of a communal art movement created by artist Matthew ‘Levee’ Chavez called Subway Therapy. Through the blue students’ critical lens, they



took turns visually reading that this image was created the day after the election in the New York City subway as a way for people to write messages of hope or express their feelings in regard to the election results. Some of the blue students felt this was a powerful image that they found comfort in. Critically reading this image together, the red and blue students agreed that this photo of a large group of messages on post-it-notes and its placement under the hashtag “Stronger Together” was created to promote the reason behind the communal artmaking. Some of the red students shared that they found this to show empathy for others and was a peaceful way to protest the election results. One red student critically read it differently by pointing out that post-it-notes fall away over time; he found the image to be chaotic with no order, and since he couldn’t read what the notes said, there was no meaning for him. A blue student responded by explaining that since none of us were in the New York subways on November 9<sup>th</sup> when this was created, the photograph we were looking at became important because here we are talking about it and learning about the reasons the artist created the communal artmaking. The class agreed that by visually reading the image together, they were all now curious to know what the post-it-notes said and to learn more about the reasons behind why people wrote such statements.

The third image, found under the hashtag of “Make America Great Again,” was visually read by students as Trump standing on a burning mound, wearing historic military attire with bullets draped across his chest, holding a very large modern machine gun in his right hand with a bald eagle, its wings spread, perched on his raised left arm. The students read that the large American flag flying in the background and staked in the mound was placed there to represent a victory in a war scenario as if the person we see is the leader and /or victor of the battle.

Responses to the image through students’ critical lenses included:

- Implies a strong leader
- Offended by this, because he is holding a gun, and how we are going through this with the Black Lives Matter issue
- Honestly...reminds me of Hitler
- I see him leading us to victory
- He’s a dictator who will deliver us to wars
- He is powerful, willing to lead the fight, the revolution to save the USA
- Implying that we are going to take over nations
- Embracing the 2<sup>nd</sup> amendment
- He will be triumphant in what ever he does, battle could be the election
- A patriot super-hero, which is ridiculous
- Ego, a disgusting power hungry man

- A representation of Americans
- Trying to portray Putin, shirtless
- Portraying George Washington, our founding father, we must go back
- I think this was created to piss the other side off
- He is fighting for America and sacrificing himself for us

With the initial reading of this image, some students found humor in what they saw and laughed together while others cringed. As the students continued to visually read the image, they debated the idea of what it means to be commander in chief and the reasons they felt Trump is or is not the best to assume the position. The students took turns expressing reasons they felt this was a critical time in our society in regard to our nation’s security and international relations. Through collaborative readings, the class agreed that this image was most likely not created nor approved by the Republican National Party, as they said it displayed Trump as almost a comic book superhero or villain. A few of the blue students expressed that this image offended them because of the reference to violence with its proud display of a gun. Some red students expressed that they thought the image was created and circulated by a supporter who was trying to promote him, but felt that it poorly represented Trump and their political party. Some blue students read that maybe the image was created by his opposition to promote hate toward him and rally those who supported a third liberal leaning party. Collectively, the students visually read this image to represent a battle or war scene and thought that it was also commenting on the society’s fear of terrorism. They were able to listen and share reasons why they felt Trump was or was not the best person to handle issues of international relations, terrorism, and national security.

The fourth image discussed, found under the hashtag of “Stronger Together,” was visually read by students as multiple black and white photos displayed on wooden poles like protest posters of different arms holding their hands together as fists.

Responses to the image through students’ critical lenses included:

- A demand to be heard, in order for a better future for generations to come
- It shows power from a group of people coming together
- Power fists, symbolizing power and strength
- We are stronger together
- Signs that would be used in protest
- White power, black power
- Empowerment, triumphant fist pump
- Not stronger together, because it is singling out one race
- People are unhappy

- Black panther power fists
- People fighting for their rights, for what they believe in
- Together is powerful, we must protest to succeed
- Fighting for rights, but the fight is static
- We all matter, we all want victory at the end of the day
- Defiant gestures
- It doesn't matter what everyone else thinks, fight for your beliefs
- We are all in this fight together
- Together we stand, divided we fall

The image is a photograph of an artwork titled *Left Right Left Right*, by Annette Lemieux<sup>5</sup>. I initially gave the class time to visually read and describe what they saw in the image without knowledge of the artwork. I then read the artwork's object label from the Whitney Museum of American Art. I explained that it was a photograph of an artwork made before the 2016 Presidential Election that was currently circulating under the hashtag of "Stronger Together." After critically reading the image together, the students debated the big idea of power and protest. Some felt this was an image of defiance and stood for the protests happening around the nation. Others critically read the image to show unity and collective strength. One red student explained that if their political party protested, they would be seen as evil, but since the liberals were protesting, it was okay. A blue student pointed out that since this artwork was created years ago, it was the image being shared that was the protest. Since the artwork is a

collection of raised fists from the 1930s-1970s, the image takes on a new life in 2016 when given the hashtag of "Stronger Together." She went on to say that this non-violent image stands for strength and power, something many people feel they have lost with the election

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5 *Left, Right, Left, Right* consists of thirty photolithographs—three copies each of ten images—which Annette Lemieux appropriated from journalistic sources dating from the 1930s to the 1970s, printed on thick museum board, and mounted on wooden sticks that lean against a wall. Each picture depicts a raised fist, some belonging to famous political and cultural figures including Martin Luther King, Jr., Richard Nixon, Jane Fonda, and Miss America. Others are anonymous—for example, the fists of a sailor or a preacher. The images and their protest-sign format suggest a demonstration. But the object of grievance remains unspecified, and even the very activity of protesting is called into question. Several of the images are flipped, so that the same fist appears raised in opposing directions, and the use of photographs from various decades injects difference into what appears on first glance to be a unified front. While demonstrations are often framed in the black-and-white terms implied by the work's title ("left, right"), Lemieux indicates that protests—and the political and ideological issues that occasion them—are more complex, encompassing contradictions and opposing views. (2017, Object Label from the Whitney Museum of American Art)

results. After critically reading the image, some of the red students were defensive about what they saw because, as one stated, they felt the power fists were aimed at them. Together the class decided that this image could be read many ways and be aimed at any one person, group, or issue stance, but since it was placed under the hashtag of "Stronger Together," the power fists were in resistance to Trump winning the election. One student critically read the image to imply that all who voted for Trump should be resisted, and she hated this feeling. She expressed that she personally didn't like the assumption that just because she voted the way she did, she automatically agrees with everything a candidate says or does. The blue students took turns critically reading the image to represent issues they felt needed to be addressed, issues they strongly felt deserved a raised fist. The red students listened and spoke up to either agree or disagree with the issues, providing the class multiple perspectives different from their own on current societal issues.

### Analysis of Purple Empathy

At the end of class, I encouraged the students to think back to each of the four images and asked them to take a few minutes to reflect and write any lingering thoughts, questions, and/or statements. I collected the anonymous writings and over the next 24 hours, I read and reread the students' responses multiple times. I then organized the students' written responses within the image that prompted it, creating a visual display of the students written and spoken words. In our next class, as I shared the power point, I read the comments and questions aloud, creating a further space for purple empathy to develop by sharing voices that did not want to speak up.

I asked the students if this exercise had caused them to question or reflect in any way. The students shared that they enjoyed the process of hearing what others visually read in an image and, even though their political votes would not change, they did gain different political perspectives and understandings from one another. A few Trump supporters said they understood the frustrations of the blue side better and now felt empathetic for how scared everyone was. Some blue students stated that this process helped them to see that not every red voter is a racist, that most red voters just have conservative values or were frustrated for different reasons and were looking for a change. The final comment came from a blue student who said, "I think we are all just tired of it all; this whole election process has been exhausting – even so, I found this to be useful - it was nice to feel heard."

The course ended a couple weeks later. After the semester was over and grades had been entered, I reached out to students in the

class asking them to further reflect on this experience. Here are two students' responses:

When I saw the picture of one of the NYC subway terminals with sticky notes all over it, it reminded me of a very large mural at the 9/11 Memorial. I thought that the pain used to create this mural was similar to the loss of Hillary Clinton's campaign. I realized that what people were feeling in that moment in time was the same as 9/11: fear, hope, pain, and the unknown. Even though I do support Trump, I can still see why Hillary supporters were hurt by this crazy election of 2016. - Anonymous male student

It was a great lecture and it really opened up a space for discussion. There was respect involved, which made it easier for everyone to voice opinions. I found the images to be one sided, more on the liberal side being positive. The political divide at that time was tough so it was nice for the conservative side to see the artistic images from the liberal side and vice versa. The lecture felt like a safe arena for discussion. There were more people than any other lectures voicing their opinions and participating. It was nice to experience new perspectives. I believe that lecture had a more interesting view on politics than any other class I was taking at the time and opened up dialogue amongst classmates that might not have ever talked had it not been for the art presented. - Anonymous female student

Purple empathy is the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another's political views, political experiences, political opinions, political understandings, political intentions, and political decisions. As my students practiced their critical visual literacy skills by attempting to visually read a small selection of timely political images, their polarized views were expected and needed in order to create spaces for bipartisan discourse. As such, the students were able to share, hear, and vicariously experience distinctly different political thoughts, opinions, and experiences in relation to images grouped within the Republican and Democratic campaign slogan hashtags of the 2016 Presidential Election. If we only look through our own lenses (i.e., blue or red in this case), we may find ways to validate our political views, but when we attempt to look through different or opposing critical lenses, we can challenge our understandings and initial assumptions and create spaces for purple empathy to occur. What we see in a political image can be the polar opposite of

another's understanding. By visually reading a political image in order to critically question its creation, purpose, and/or intentions of distribution, we can become aware of its influence(s) on us and others. Practicing these processes creates spaces where we can become empathic and learn from others' visual understandings. Experiments with critical visual literacy provided students the opportunity to engage in constructive bipartisan dialogue, which in turn created spaces for purple empathy to occur.

## Conclusion

As a blue educator who set out to create spaces of bipartisan discourse in order to inspire purple empathy in a red state, there are areas in which I succeeded and areas to improve on. The affordance of being a blue educator in a red state is that I am in the majority; as previously stated, faculty-members at most universities are predominantly liberal. Within my academic guidelines, I felt safe discussing politics in order to create spaces for purple empathy in a red state because I was surrounded and supported by my blue faculty peers. However, as a blue learner, it was my red students and red peers that afforded me the opportunity to practice purple empathy in my own life first.

In order to create spaces for purple empathy through civil bipartisan discourse, both sides need a balance of shared commonalities and differences. My red students continually challenged me. It was through our interactions that my own perceptions and intentions as a blue educator were tested. As a blue educator with integral intentions of creating purple empathy, I am limited by my own previously divulged political partisanship. Reading the comments from the female student, written after the course had ended, I realized that my selection of images was not unbiased. I chose not to show images that perpetuated hate or distaste for blue. As educators we must make choices that we believe are best at the time for the group of students we are working with. My exploratory process of how to lead critically visually literate bipartisan discussions was only a week after the election results. Emotions surrounding the 2016 Presidential election were at a high point. I did not feel I could create spaces that could build purple empathy using images that perpetuated hate. Upon further reflection, I believe it is exactly these images that would truly help build socially conscious and socially responsible students.

The bipartisan conversations I worked to lead in this class grew directly from one body of students' needs at a historically important moment in time. As one student stated, "how can we talk about anything else – when it's all anyone is thinking about?" How could I teach about anything else, when it was all my students were thinking about inside and outside the classroom? There are no easy



solutions to our current political climate. As an art educator I took a chance to address this challenging situation by exploring ways students could develop critical visual literacy to engage in a discourse toward bipartisan empathy. It was their desire to discuss what was happening in their current society that drove me to find constructive ways to address their needs. As Chung (2013) states, “in essence, critical visual literacy seeks to promote social justice as it examines the operation of texts in shaping the attitudes, beliefs, and values of the individual and group” (p. 6). This is one case study of building empathetic classroom spaces utilizing opposing student views. As students continue to increasingly digest social media as sources for their news and entertainment, opportunities to explore and practice critical visual literacy will also increase.

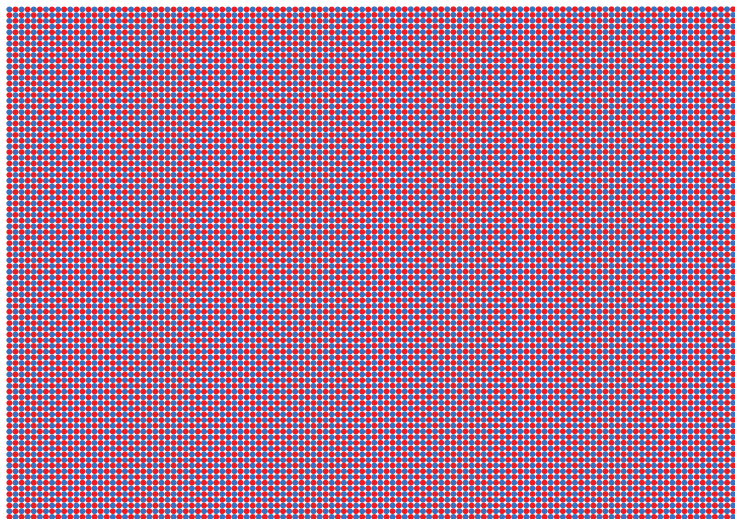


Figure 3.

As displayed in Figure 1, the 2016 Presidential Election deeply divided my students. Through collaborative investigation of (some of) the visual imagery from this moment in time, these students gained bipartisan empathy and became the optical blending of purple (see Figure 2). By providing a safe space for bipartisan discourse, the red and blue students gained purple empathy by sharing, listening, and hearing one another (see Figure 2). In order to fully validate these experiences, other educators and I must continue to reflexively attempt such processes in order to create spaces for purple empathy to grow stronger and become far reaching (see Figure 3).

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