

## **Brave Space discussion**

ARTH 110: Introduction to Art History

Fall 2016

The days following the presidential election required Brave Space more than ever. While watching election results come in on Tuesday night, I was very anxious about how to approach my introductory art history classes on Wednesday. But during the long, sleepless night, I came to embrace what a gift it is to have the opportunity to get up in the morning and go do the important, meaningful work, to have the chance to work with students as we develop the skills to think deeply and create a world that reflects our shared commitments and values. The subject on the syllabus for Wednesday was art and the Civil Rights Movement. I felt a sense of relief that there was a very natural entry point for talking about the election, but I also knew I had to find the right framework to allow for the conversation we needed to have.

Due to my own response to the election, Wednesday's class became a "pre-Brave Space class session." I started out class on Wednesday by saying a variation on an opening that I planned before class. It was something like this: "I know that many of you, like me, were up late last night, or maybe you didn't sleep at all. I know that many of you, like me, are feeling strong emotions today (and I know that in this room, we are feeling many different emotions; I don't attribute to you the same emotions that I feel). I also know that some of you--unlike me--have already been feeling disengaged and not strongly invested in outcome of the election. But wherever you are at this moment, I imagine we all agree that when we've nearly evenly split the vote between two radically different presidential candidates, our nation is deeply divided. We can't hide from that, and our thoughts and actions are the future of this country. What we can do in this class is to think deeply and talk openly about the topic on our syllabus for the day (which happens to be the Civil Rights Movement)."

For that particular moment in time, this turned out to be an effective framework because it acknowledged that we all come to the conversation from different places, while at the same time we have to find some shared ground. This seemed to be what students needed at the moment. We focused on the work of Faith Ringgold, and it was a really productive conversation. I heard a lot of voices, including some students who had not spoken up before. There were some students who asked very honest questions—like one who admitted he had no idea what is meant by a micro-aggression but had heard this term and wanted to know what it meant. I could see from their faces that there were other students who had the same question and another student patiently answered this question; the moment passed without any sense of judgement. We didn't actually talk much about the students' personal feelings about the election specifically, but the topic did lend itself to drawing parallels between the current state of our nation and the era of the Civil Rights Movement. It felt productive and positive, it also felt like we were all holding back, trying to stay somewhat "safe."

That's what led me to my "Brave Space" session on Friday. I realized I needed really give students a space to express their reactions, and I decided private writing was the way to do that

during this class session. I scrapped the material on the syllabus and dedicated the day to reflective writing about art, race, and politics (fortunately this is also still in keeping with the goals of this unit of the class, so it was not a huge leap). I didn't use technology for this because I didn't have time to really research what would work best; it was very spontaneous. We watched a video interview with artist William Pope L. on his installation piece called *Trinket*. I then gave them this prompt (note that the students in one of my sections are also paired with an English course, so they've been reading Richard Wright's *Black Boy*):

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William Pope L. says "The flag has an animism about it...we bestow on it an inner life." He continues, stating that "the flag for me, it's a space—of disagreement and of agreement."

Having watched this video presentation with William Pope L., write your reflections on this work of art in the context of this moment in history. Like Richard Wright, perhaps you want to imagine that you are writing for an audience reading your reflections decades in the future. Try to articulate your own personal reflections on the state of America today. You may choose to focus on your own experiences here at St. Thomas or growing up. You may choose to write about the election or dialogues about race on campus. You may choose to talk about the meaning of the flag to you, and your response to its use in a work of art.

Like the flag for Pope L., this is a space for disagreement and agreement. Please write freely, and know that you are not being judged or graded. Your response is private and I will not share it.

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After about a 5-minute introduction and the 5-minute video, I told students they could have the rest of the class to think and to write. I told them they could talk to each other and that they could leave the room to write if they preferred, as long as they brought me back their reflections by the end of the class. Some wanted to talk with me first to get some more ideas, some talked with each other, some did leave to find another space to work. At the end of class, everyone came back and touched base with me and everyone wrote a serious reflection.

I am glad that I did this writing prompt because students had some very strong reactions to the work. Some students were very offended by it because they think it is disrespectful to the flag. From this, I can see that some voices are silenced in large group discussion, and I also recognize that it is my responsibility to engage with the students who were offended by the work of art. My intention now is to connect with everyone by responding to their reflections. The challenge is to do that in a way that is free of judgement—I am committed to that. This largely has to consist of asking follow up questions that recognize this work is meant to be provocative. After I send students some reactions to their writing, I will bring this issue up in class and see how we can get a conversation going that will allow them to engage with each other, sharing diverging perspectives.