The Poison of Polarizing Art:
Why America Is Sick and How We Nurse It Back to Health

by Spencer Caldwell

In a nation that boasts freedom of expression as a fundamental pillar of our republic, it's only natural that we Americans be heavily opinionated regarding occurrences in the public square. Whether this is reflected by lauding a public figure for possessing high-minded ideals or calling attention to injustices in our country, US citizens cherish their right to make their voices heard, and often choose to do so through their artwork. From both the left-wing and the right-wing we've seen countless examples of this, with songs such as Lil Nas X's "MONTERO (Call Me by Your Name)" and Jason Aldean's "Try That in a Small Town," respectively, perhaps being perfect embodiments of recent controversial art that speak to socio-political concerns. We speak out against that which we perceive as unjust – whether that be intolerance for LGBTQ+ people, as in Lil Nas X's song, or the impropriety of urbanites, as in Aldean's song – and it's understandable why most Americans believe we should have the right to do so. However, retainment of that right ultimately rests on the people's shoulders. Our First Amendment freedoms are protected, yes, by the Bill of Rights, but more crucially because our people support the proposed freedoms contained therein. If factions within those masses begin to devalue other groups' right to speak, however, the way we conduct ourselves regarding free speech will inevitably shift, regardless of what a 300-year-old document says we should do. Especially when inspired by influencers and popular artists – who serve as cultural leaders the masses strive to emulate – the trend in the direction of insularity can be inexorable. Disturbingly, we're witnessing precisely such a trend – or at least, the initial stirrings of it – as calls to "cancel" offensive books, plays, drawings, and other art forms, resound throughout a sea of partisans, resulting at times in serious, tangible consequences. It's true that controversial artwork is necessary in advancing issue-based conversations in our country; by expressing perspectives that clash with those of the opposing – and even dominant – political voice, artists challenge the public to think in a more nuanced fashion about socio-political issues. However, if we are reckless in expressing these beliefs, we risk deepening social divisions and exacerbating polarization more than we allow solutions to blossom. Though artists and influencers alone can't be blamed for our national disharmony – as government

legislatures, educational boards, and cultural institutions have been complicit in contributing to it as well – they have undoubtedly helped administer the poison of polarization to our now sickly nation, and they have both the power and the responsibility to join us in reviving its withering form. It may be cathartic to express our most unfiltered, vitriolic emotions when we create works concerning sensitive subjects, but we are ethically obligated to be mindful of the ways in which we discuss such issues to ensure healthier, more productive standards of debate in our nation.

There is, as some might argue, a problem inherent in the suggestion that artists should carefully monitor their speech to avoid contributing to disunity and polarization in our nation. After all, if my primary concern is that some art encourages the devaluation of alternate viewpoints, which eventually leads to the normalization of intolerance and censorship, isn't it paradoxical to insinuate artists should censor themselves to prevent that? "You can't just say you stand for free expression and speech, only to ask us to filter our speech so we don't polarize others," the agitated creator might retort. Admittedly, this is a tricky situation to navigate; it's understandable why some might conflate my proposed solution with self-censorship. For most Americans, filtering how you express yourself is antithetical to democratic debate; by doing this you're engaging in precisely the activity authoritarian figures want. Art Spiegelman, in particular, might decry my suggestion, claiming this is exactly what the McMinn County school board implied he should do when they banned his comic about the Holocaust, Maus, for being too violent, too dark, and too vulgar (Chute, 2022). They "[wanted] a kinder, gentler Holocaust they can stand," Spiegelman accused, and if he had genuflected before such entitled whitewashers of history, he would have compromised all that's meaningful about his message. Condemnation might also come from the likes of Ashley Powell, whose artwork – consisting of signs at various locations on her school's campus displaying the words "White Only" or "Black Only" – was met with outrage and was eventually removed by the school due to its provocative, discomfiting effect on students (Foran, 2015). Similar to Spiegelman (Chute, 2022), she accused the student body and school of being reluctant to face the harsh reality of racism, which attacks its victims unexpectedly and without a care for their feelings of safety – much like her art. To these two artists, then, I am utilizing the rhetoric of their censors; the only difference is I'm recommending we make the censors' jobs easier by regulating ourselves.

There's certainly merit in such an argument, and the intensely emotional place it comes from is understandable, especially for those like Powell and Spiegelman – who have actually been censored by local school boards and institutions for raising their voices about serious societal issues (Chute, 2022; Foran, 2015). However, there is one major difference between what censors do and what I'm proposing we do. Simply put, cen-

sors repress speech forcibly, in violation of the speaker's will; I, however, am suggesting we willingly redefine artistic ethics and elect to embody them. We shouldn't be coerced into doing so by, say, the law, as this treads a razor thin line between peacekeeping and totalitarianism. However, we can all agree there are certain things you simply don't do, regardless of whether the law discourages you from doing it or not. If we were to witness a revoltingly entitled customer furiously hurling expletives at a cowering, teenage waitress because their fries weren't salted properly, for example, we would view them as a deplorable person. While their actions would be perfectly legal, our issue wouldn't be with their legality, but with the despicable character reflected by them. No sane person watches such an entitled customer with compassion, thinking to themselves, "This is someone I can relate to. That ridiculous little waitress got her comeuppance." The vast majority spurn them as they would if they'd seen a creeping, crawling cockroach in the restaurant. I am merely suggesting, then, that we raise our standards of communication with one another. Just as we see the despicable "Karen-esque" behavior as unacceptable in a civilized society, we should see unnecessarily divisive political overtones in art as the same and scorn those who engage in it. We should come to a consensus that such behavior is primitive and contemptible, vilify those who deliberately employ polarizing rhetoric, and refuse to applaud those who advance it inadvertently. And should we adopt such a cultural standard, it only follows that our behavior should adhere to it. Adopting this cultural standard, however, begins with the artist; somebody must initiate this trend, and who better to do it than those the public already looks up to and strives to emulate the most?

What exactly are the cultural standards artistic trendsetters should emphasize, then? When studying rhetoric, one of the first things we're taught about expressing ourselves through the spoken word, literature, or visual art is to keep our audiences at the forefront of our minds. Doing so shapes the intent wrapped in the words or images we relay, which influences how those to whom we're speaking perceive us. We're intrinsically inclined to become absorbed in focusing on a niche audience who always agrees with us. Thus, it can be tempting to direct ill-will and hostile sentiments towards a rival audience who often clashes with ours to develop rapport with the latter. However, when your rhetoric is presented in the public square, you must consider all other audiences who will view or listen to it – not solely those who favor you. Failing to do so, unfortunately, is a vice to which both sides of the political aisle – right and left – succumb. Such a vice typically manifests as a result of apathy – or even outright belligerence – towards audiences holding alternate perspectives. Because of how common this failure is in the public forum, artists often only succeed in strengthening audiences' convictions in the worst of ways, convincing their in-group that their mode of thought is impeccable and persuading outsiders to rally even more defiantly against them.

Conservative journalist Jonah Goldberg (2015) calls attention to this failure as embodied by those to his political left; he subtly accuses them of expressing foul and malicious intentions through controversial artwork they both create and support. He places a lesser significance on the controversial themes themselves – such as in Andreas Serrano's "Piss Christ," a photograph of a plastic crucifix submerged in urine – insisting the most divisive aspect of this art is the intent conveyed through it, which is evident in the behaviors of the liberal institutions supporting it. Remaining a staunch proponent for freedom of speech, he maintains artists expressing either, in his words, "anti-Christian" or "anti-Muslim" sentiments – referring specifically to Serrano's work and Pamela Geller's work, the latter of whom hosted a "draw Muhammad" exhibition, respectively – should not be censored. Even so, he indicates an intense distrust for liberals' intentions behind the anti-Christian art to which he refers. Underscoring their actions as proof of their maliciousness, he draws attention to the hypocrisy evinced by liberal talking heads' – like Chris Cuomo's – calls to categorize Geller's exhibits as hate speech, contrasting these with their support of the National Endowment for the Arts' – or NEA's – funding of artists like Serrano with public tax dollars. Thus, for Goldberg, the intent of liberals and the artists they uplift is indubitable, which they indicate jointly by their partiality for art that offends an audience they find contemptible and their refusal to grant funding to art they find offensive. Goldberg subtly implies, then, that the liberal intent is to silence their opposition, all while giving a wink and a nod to their ilk, and their artwork serves as a symbol of this.

Left-leaning journalist Jeet Heer (2015) grapples with the issue of intention by focusing less on underlying, tacit designs abstractly represented in controversial artwork; instead, he focuses considerably on the themes themselves. Like Goldberg (2015), however, he notices the impact spiteful intent has on making an artist's work unnecessarily divisive. In particular, Heer analyzes drawings of the Islamic Prophet Muhammad – and the intentions evidently encapsulated within them – in his The New Republic article. Drawing Muhammad, he alleges, requires an intentional act of irreverence, sneering, and desire to insult Muslims. This is partially because drawing Muhammad is in and of itself an intentional act; since there's no widely agreed-upon, canonical appearance of Muhammad, an image can only be understood to be representing him if the artist indicates – through a title or textual description – that this is precisely what they intend to do. It's true Heer states this sacrilegious act doesn't convey malicious intent by itself, as ex-Muslims – such as Salman Rushdie, who authored The Satanic Verses – often blaspheme against Islam to symbolize their independence from the religion and as a form of emotional catharsis. As for which artists he determines are expressing malicious intentions, then, he claims Westerners in particular, like the publishers of the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten – who published twelve pictures of the prophet (Rose, 2006) – exemplify this most conspic-

uously. Because the Westerners who engage in such an act frequently have no emotional or otherwise personal connection to Islam, there's no catharsis attached to blasphemous drawings of Muhammad (Heer, 2015). Their intentions, therefore, are clearly to express irreverence and mock, insult, or offend Muslims.

What's interesting about both Goldberg (2015) and Heer (2015) is, despite the fact that, in many ways, they represent entirely converse views and scopes of focus in their articles, they come to a remarkably similar conclusion. As we can see, the former leans to the ideological right (Goldberg, 2015), whereas the latter leans towards the ideological left (Heer, 2015). While the former ignores controversial themes, he maintains his focus on an ideological force's covert desire to enforce a tyrannical censorship regime – as symbolized by the art they actively support and that which they frequently denounce (Goldberg, 2015). The latter conversely makes no allusion to a particular ideological force, instead denouncing specific themes contained within artwork and the ignorance, prejudices, and perhaps even hostility directly represented by it (Heer, 2015). Yet, both acknowledge – whether tacitly or explicitly – the core of their issue with each collection of works: the intentions of those producing them (Goldberg, 2015; Heer, 2015). Interestingly then, both the political right and left – often portrayed as diametrically opposed and holding fundamentally irreconcilable positions – establish common ground in these two articles, decrying artists' malicious intent to elevate their own groups and crush their opponents. Both sides agree, then, that intent of such a character is devoid of productive value, only serving to exacerbate tensions and divisions between political factions. So, why do we keep engaging in such toxic behavior if it provides us with no value? Simply put, it's refreshing to receive validation from those you already agree with, and when you get a chance to blow off some steam concerning the other side through your art – especially when you know they'll see it – you temporarily diffuse emotional tension that has accumulated over an extended period. However, as Goldberg and Heer show us, while this may be relieving for the artist in the short-term, in the long-term it breeds distrust, diminishing our ability to engage in productive discourse with our so-called enemies.

It's not at all uncommon to hear in response to this point, however, that acrimonious intentions are natural in reaction to actors who support noxious ideologies and policies or align themselves with despicable people. To some, expressing your rawest, most sincere emotions is what art is all about. One who espouses such ideas might even point to my previous statements as buttressing this argument; if I acknowledge that vitriolic forms of expression can alleviate emotional tension and be cathartic, why would I suggest it's an artist's ethical obligation to suppress that? Doesn't such a suggestion equate to encouraging artists to bottle up their emotions, which benefits nobody but their adversaries? How does this make any kind of sense? To further bolster this line of argumentation, they

might cite journalists like Beatriz Limon (2023), who discuss artistic expression's role as a necessary psychological coping mechanism for trauma. Limon particularly discusses the healing effect art has had on immigrant children who have experienced the trauma of racial profiling and faced the constant threat of deportation. "Children feel safe expressing their emotions through art; creative expression reduces cortisol levels and lowers stress," Limon informs us, and this is the case especially when they're given the opportunity to depict controversial, potentially divisive topics that have personally affected them. The topics DACA children often choose to portray include the inhumane treatment in immigrant detainment centers or their fear of leaving home because of the police. These depictions clearly don't come from a place of flowery intentions; child immigrants, rightfully so, must harbor sentiments of fury and even hatred towards those they deem responsible for the injustices inflicted upon them. Though the artwork Limon references merely conveys the trauma these children have experienced rather than their disdain towards Sheriff Arpaio or those who support stricter border policies, when they become adults and learn how to articulate their righteous rage towards those responsible for their plight, their artwork will reflect those sentiments accordingly. When this becomes the case, who would we be to imply their artistic outlet for such sentiments is unethical, especially when failing to find such an outlet can result in destructive consequences like "toxic stress" that impairs their judgment, affects their mental health, and even degrades their physical vitality (Limon, 2023)?

Even removing adverse psychological effects from the equation, some might argue it's unfair to deny anyone a way to express the purest form of their emotions when they have every right to. Art Spiegelman, after all, vicariously experienced the horrors of the Holocaust through his father and felt understandably compelled to tell the story of the horrific damage hateful dogma caused during the World War II era (Chute, 2022). Likewise, Ashley Powell, being a black woman, wanted to spread awareness of the sickness of racism that has continued to infect our nation, and felt an urge to denounce this evil in her own artistic way (Foran, 2015). It's true neither of them may have done so gently or handled their message overly tactfully – with Spiegelman harshly depicting Gentile Poles as pigs (Chute, 2022) and Powell crassly erecting signs with the shocking words "White Only" and "Black Only" (Foran, 2015) – but is that not their right? Generational trauma often inspires intense and emotionally charged outlooks on the world, and there's no doubt the art produced by traumatized people will be raw and genuine. Of course Art Spiegelman would portray Polish Gentiles as pigs; he and many other Jews felt completely betrayed by them during the unspeakable horrors of the Holocaust (Chute, 2022). And one could argue no sane person could accuse Ashley Powell of being unreasonable for her approach in dispersing her artwork; if racists give their victims no warnings when they commit hate

crimes, why should she tiptoe around the delicate sensibilities of university students to alert them to the reality black people are continually experiencing (Foran, 2015)?

To bottle up these outlooks and emotions is of course unhealthy and harmful for one's physical and mental state, and once again, we're well aware of the catharsis artwork can provide for an individual, serving to "detoxify" their mind (Limon, 2023). The issue, however, is when it comes to public discourse, catharsis shouldn't be the ultimate objective. Public discourse is meant to benefit the public, which includes members of factions with whom you may be disgusted – like Polish Gentiles (Chute, 2022) – or those whose emotional triggers you might disregard – such as the university students who complained about Powell's exhibits (Foran, 2015). Venting your emotions in a completely unfiltered way is best for therapy or private groups – much like the Aliento organization's Art and Healing group, whose purpose is to build a sense of community among DACA youth – who express through art their frustrations that their value as a person is conflated with their undocumented status (Limon, 2023). Such a group would of course benefit from unfiltered conversation and artistic depictions – perhaps with derogatory caricatures of Sheriff Arpaio or his supporters – as the members within it are communicating with those who understand them due to firsthand experience; even the most intense of emotional themes in their art would likely be relatable to members of this group.

Herein lies the difference between art in private groups and in the public square, however: the former is primarily visible to understanding and like-minded acquaintances, whereas the latter is accessible to every audience comprising the populace. You wouldn't broadcast your therapy sessions live on Facebook for all to see. It simply doesn't make sense; people will judge you, and some may even hate you for the innermost thoughts you express before your psychologist – who, conversely, understands you because they know you personally. When you vent to your therapist and say you wish your roommate would just die, for example, they know you well enough to understand whether you're being sincere or hyperbolic; you wouldn't say this to a passing stranger, however, as there would be no purpose in doing so other than attempting to frighten or confuse them. Likewise, if Art Spiegelman, for example, had equated Polish Gentiles to pigs before a private audience of Holocaust survivors, it would be easy for them to interpret this as an expression of his frustrations concerning those of whom he felt betrayed him – because chances are, there would be many of them who felt the same way (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022). However, because Maus is publicly accessible, Spiegelman's audience shifts, so his intentions must likewise shift by necessity. It becomes clear to whoever analyzes his work – when directed towards a public audience consisting of both Jews and non-Jews, Poles and non-Poles – that such a depiction isn't solely an outlet for Spiegelman to vent his frustrations and generational trauma, but serves partly as an expression of disdain and spite towards non-Jew-

ish Poles as well – a public shaming for their treachery (Hellerstein, 2022). Spiegelman thus evinces flawed intentions behind his art and alienates average Polish people – who were similarly hated and viewed as subhuman by the Nazis – pushing away those in the public forum who might have otherwise allied with him (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022). Ashley Powell similarly demonstrates flawed intentions in her public exhibitions of "White Only" and "Black Only" signs, though in a slightly different way (Foran, 2015). If she had openly created these signs in front of the Black Student Union, she would have had a chance to explain her intentions to her peers – who would have been understanding of her desire to force students to face racism unexpectedly in the same way they do daily. They likely would have discouraged her from doing this, but they would have related to her intentions. However, because she chose to erect her signs publicly with no explanation – knowing her art had the potential to trigger her classmates and inspire fear throughout campus – it becomes evident that her intentions weren't merely to vent her frustrations either, but to express an initially unclear political message with blatant disregard for her classmates' mental well-being. Artistic works that are present in the public square should uplift and enlighten the populace, not berate them and inflame tensions between or among various demographic groups. Spiegelman's and Powell's art can neither be said to solely uplift nor enlighten; though their intention may be to inform, it is accompanied by another, emotionally manipulative intention to polarize their audience into two groups, such that they "either completely agree with everything I have to say or completely disagree with everything I have to say." (Chute, 2022; Foran, 2015; Hellerstein, 2022) This is an ineffective way of communicating your message to the public; it's highly doubtful their works caused a single person to agree with them who didn't already – and, in Powell's case, her art actually managed to alienate people who were on her side (Foran, 2015). When an artist's intentions are to be offensive and shocking, their art accomplishes no goal beyond a therapeutic one – which is certainly valuable, but doesn't suit the needs of public discourse. The rules in the public square differ from those in a group of your peers. There's an unspoken rule that we must treat and speak to strangers courteously in public, with consideration for their needs and respect for their emotions; this should be no different when we're creating art to be displayed in the public square.

Just as an artist's actual intentions are crucial to consider, intentions perceived by their audience demand equal consideration. Sometimes, an audience's interpretation of what an artist means to convey through their work deviates drastically from its true purpose, which contributes to confusion, ire, and division. Often, this is the result of failing to properly communicate your artwork's purpose to your audience; this can cause your message to fall flat on its face. We've seen precisely such phenomena in some previously mentioned instances, such as how separate Ashley Powell's actual intention – to spread aware-

ness of racism in the modern world – was from the intention initially perceived by the audience – to disturb and retraumatize people, especially racial minorities (Foran, 2015). Powell's fellow classmates received her "White Only" and "Black Only" signs with outrage, disturbed by their unexplained appearance throughout campus, with many experiencing fear and reinvigorated trauma – perhaps because the art provided no indication whether this was the work of a racist individual or group in the area. Even after students identified the artist behind the work, the damage had unfortunately been inflicted, and it was impossible for even Powell's allies to perceive her work as being anything beyond insensitive and traumatizing. Similarly, Polish Gentiles received Art Spiegelman's Maus incredibly poorly, subjecting the book to burnings all throughout their country (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022). While Hillary Chute never specifically alludes to the intent Poles believed characterized Spiegelman's work, it doesn't take a genius to realize they weren't thrilled about their portrayal as anthropomorphic pigs in the comic – as anyone wouldn't be, with comparisons to this animal carrying the connotation that one is either unclean, repulsive, or treacherous in some way. They likely perceived Spiegelman's intention as to equate Poles with the enemy, and specifically, with an evil so repugnant that merely uttering the name of its poster boy can render a once jubilant room somber and uncomfortable. While this assumption isn't entirely misguided – as Art Spiegelman did portray Poles in such a way to convey his frustrations with the fact that "some actions of Polish characters" led to his father's detainment in Auschwitz (Hellerstein, 2022) – it clearly doesn't tell the whole story. This perceived intention differs greatly from Spiegelman's actual intention: to convey to his audience the horrors of antisemitism so they can confront it in the modern era (Chute, 2022). But when you neglect to define the purpose of your art – or simply fail to clarify it – you allow your audience to insert their own interpretation into that vacant slot. Even if your audience might typically receive your message well – as Powell's fellow black students might have, or as Polish Gentiles might have, the latter often being survivors of the same horrors as their Jewish brethren – being haphazard in conveying your intentions as an artist can alienate them, contribute to schism, and reduce the potency of your art's message.

Putting the audience first, then, should be the cornerstone of creating art for public consumption – if the artist, that is, desires to contribute to constructive, ethical discourse. If we contrast Powell's (Foran, 2015) and Spiegelman's (Chute, 2022) situations with other artists who do prioritize an audience-centered approach, it becomes evident how effective this is in eliciting more productive responses from aesthetes. Experiments focusing on how contextual details, when associated with artwork depicting controversial socio-political themes, affect the consumer of such art, evince a highly intriguing trend: there is a direct correlation between an audience's receptivity and understanding of an artistic

message and the contextual information they are provided with (Szubielska & Imbir, 2021). Not only were participants in these experiments more likely to exhibit manageable emotional reactions to the art with which they were presented (pp. 11-12), but there was a higher probability they would develop a greater liking for the works to which they were exposed if such works were accompanied by contextual information (p. 13, 17). While it's true these experiments were conducted in Poland – whose culture differs considerably from ours in the US – it's nevertheless a compelling finding that calls into question whether artists conduct themselves in the most effective manner possible here. Especially since so much of the outrage surrounding works like those created by Ashley Powell (Foran, 2015) and Art Spiegelman (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022) came from those they'd consider their comrades, it gives one pause; this should cause artists to question whether the tactics they're employing are even effective in furthering the goals they hope to realize. If you can't even get your allies on the same page as you, what makes you think you'll be able to sway the public in the desired direction?

In response to this, one might exclaim, "It's not my fault if the audience is incapable of processing my message! Why should I have to hold their hand and be responsible for how they interpret my art?" They might go on to cite numerous cases wherein the audience was bigoted towards, prejudiced to, or willfully ignorant of a message contained within the art in question. Some people, after all, are predisposed to reject an artist or their message, regardless of how much effort the creator puts into clarifying it, right? And sometimes, there are themes within art that wouldn't even be considered – by most reasonable people – to be divisive or controversial, by any stretch of the word. When board members of Ohio's Cardinal High School prevented students and their music teacher from performing The 25th Annual Putnam County Spelling Bee, for example, the only explanations given by the board members were that the show was littered with vulgarity and themes that were inappropriate for a general audience (Blair, 2023). Frankly, these claims were bogus, deployed as a shameless cover-up of what was likely the real reason – allegedly confided in private – for their cancelation of the show; board members were uncomfortable with the fact that the protagonist had gay fathers. It wasn't as if the themes of the play were particularly controversial either, with the chief intent of the artist – both according to the original creators of the show and those starring in this iteration of it – being to portray characters who are relatable to high school teenagers, depict them as coming to love and accept themselves, and help students empathize with one another. The innocuous and wholesome themes within this play don't justify a certain segment of the audience's overreaction, which calls into question their integrity and moral character, not just their ability to accurately discern the artist's intent. Additionally, one might recall the instance wherein a community art center in Phoenix, Arizona prevented immigrant children from painting a mural limning

Sheriff Joe Arpaio shaking the hand of a Mexican farm worker named Pancho (Limon, 2023). The justification for this rejection was they found the subject matter of said mural excessively "controversial," but what could be less controversial than the depiction of peace and unity between two parties – law enforcement officers and immigrants from beyond the Southern border – who have constantly clashed in recent years? While the community center's cries of "controversy" didn't necessarily reflect bigotry, they were irrational, given the fact that the community it supposedly represented – southern Phoenix – is a majority Latino region of Arizona. "So," the aggravated creator might wonder, "are you suggesting we should be responsible for the prejudice or willful ignorance of our audience?" What could those high school kids have possibly done to avoid the overreactions of the Cardinal High School board members, after all (Blair, 2023)? And what could those DACA children have possibly done to be more responsible artistic rhetors (Limon, 2023)? Am I not imposing a burden on both these parties that's undue and unreasonable?

These are entirely understandable issues to raise with my earlier proclamations; some people are driven and consumed by dogma and ideology, and this informs their interpretation of an artist's intent. Sometimes, this is true even if an artist has clearly indicated the intentions of their controversial artwork. Some might observe the effect of Art Spiegelman's work on audiences like the McMinn County school board and fail to see how he could have been clearer about his intentions (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022). He didn't make it a secret, after all, that he intended to make audiences aware of the visceral horrors of the Holocaust – as doing so would serve as a cautionary tale to not follow in the footsteps of our elders, who blindly conform to hateful political movements in the US (Chute, 2022). Even so, the McMinn County board members reacted with hysteria, condemning Maus as a vulgar and inappropriate literary journey unsuitable for eighth grade students (Chute, 2022) – a seemingly disingenuous critique, perhaps masking the all-too-familiar campaign to declare cultural warfare on anything deemed "woke." Other times, however, emotional overreactions remain even if the artwork produced by the creator couldn't be classified as controversial by any sane, rational person. It's true it would be ludicrous to expect high schoolers or literal eight-year-old children to bear the responsibility of adopting an audience-centered perspective – especially when the portion of their audience censoring their work is so obstinate, unwilling to compromise, and set in their ways (Blair, 2023; Limon, 2023). These children couldn't have been clearer about their intentions. In the case of the Cardinal High School students and their performance, there couldn't be an iota of doubt as to what their intentions were unless the audience members in question were the extreme type, who classify the sheer existence of gay people as child grooming (Blair, 2023). And as for the elementary school students – who merely wished to paint an image conveying their hopes for peace and unity after having been frequently stricken by domes-

tic terror – there's absolutely nothing they could have done to make their artwork more palatable to the community center that rejected their work (Limon, 2023) – who may have simply done so to avoid public relations issues. It might seem to the confused aesthete, then, that I am misguided in asserting that, to evade misunderstandings, artists need to clearly communicate their intentions; what does it matter if artists are clear and communicative with their audience if they will be irrational or hyperreactive regardless?

Not only are some audiences seemingly unable – or unwilling – to understand an artist's lack of ill-will, but some of them – as with the previously mentioned Cardinal High School board (Blair, 2023) and the community center in southern Phoenix (Limon, 2023) – possess considerable authority, and are those who must see reason if an artist's work is to see the light of day. Despite clinging to beliefs that, as far as anyone can tell, are in the minority, they wield an enormous amount of cultural power, being able to deliberate on what may or may not be consumed by the public (Blair, 2023; Limon, 2023). Because of this, they both have a disproportionate amount of influence over political and social outcomes and over the very fabric of US culture. The proposition that we be mindful of our intentions and our communication with our audience, then, seems to be an ineffective suggestion – one that only limits what an artist is allowed to depict while doing nothing to undermine the power of authoritarian cry-babies. At the same time, however, this concern misses the point; such a focus is on political entities, not a general audience, and it is the latter who we need to appeal to as artists. The former will never be appeased by reason and solely seek to advance their ideological agenda (Blair, 2023) or maintain a professional image (Limon, 2023), as has been previously discussed. Artists will indeed never be able to directly control such entities' influence in the political system. They can, however, impact how the vast majority perceives their work. As an artist, therefore, your focus should be on average members of your audience – not political entities or ideologues.

To bring this full circle and respond directly to the annoyed creator who might object to the idea that it's their fault if their audience misconstrues their message, I would say that such an obfuscation of responsibility is precisely what is holding them back as an artist. It is your responsibility to communicate with your audience properly. Your audience members aren't mind-readers – as unfortunate as that is. They are purely consumers of the work you have created, and as the one who has something valuable to contribute to the national conversation, you are responsible for communicating your message in a clear manner that's understandable to your target audience. Especially when your art is displayed in a public venue, you must be mindful of the intentions you convey through it, as your audience – whether you like it or not – is the entire public square. Being negligent in this regard, as we've seen, has the potential to lead to confusion and misunderstandings, which can contribute to division – even among those on your side – unhelpful, destruc-

tive dialogue, and polarization (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022; Foran, 2015). As a creator of public art, then, who is in a position of peculiar power and influence, you are ethically obliged to do everything you can to prevent this if possible. The chief ways you can ensure this are by creating art that reflects positive, constructive intentions, and by communicating such intentions effectively to your audience.

There are some, however, who might disagree entirely with my reasoning; while I may have addressed the agitated aesthete's concerns, who agrees with the premise that harmful consequences result when the audience misunderstands the artist, some might totally refute this premise. The point of controversial art, after all, is to perturb and unsettle viewers, isn't it? Doesn't preventing it from doing that effectively neuter and defeat the purpose of such art? By explaining the intentions and context of artwork, which tends to render an audience's emotions tamer (Szubielska & Imbir, 2021, pp. 11-12), some might suggest the artist is only reducing their artwork to a hollow imitation of what it was meant to be. If, for example, Ashley Powell explained her work by posting a plaque underneath her signs, saying, "These pieces are meant to force my audience to confront the horrific prevalence racism has, even in the modern US," would her art still accomplish the goals she meant to achieve (Foran, 2015)? Or, would Art Spiegelman's comic have impacted his audience in the same way if he prefaced it by writing, "All depictions of Polish Gentiles in this book are merely symbolic of how some Poles, but not all, betrayed my father. After all, not all of you were responsible for the Holocaust, so I can't blame you all directly?" (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022). While either scenario might eliminate any potential for these works to be misconstrued by the intended audience, you could argue these serve as excessive explanation. And when you overly explain something, doesn't that reduce its emotional impact? We've all been in a situation, for example, where we don't understand the punchline of a joke, and a friend must step in to belabor its context and the play on words that was supposed to make us laugh. By the time they've finished doing so, however, everyone in the room has become exhausted and annoyed, so the joke scarcely elicits a chuckle. Though creating controversial artwork is far different from explaining a joke, might a similar concept apply? Doesn't the very act of overly explaining art – whether it's a silly joke or controversial art – detract from the originally intended experience? And isn't that originally intended experience crucial to the artwork itself?

Such questions address an incredibly human concern, one that posits that an emotional response is a necessary outcome artists must pursue – especially when the subject matter they address is controversial, shocking, or disturbing in nature. Visceral human emotions, after all – such as wrath, fear, tragedy, and shame – have historically been effective impetuses for inducing socio-political change. Therefore, some might argue that while the Rational, Intellectual Self deliberates, follows in the footsteps of Reason, weighs

arguments based on merit, and plots a course of action that follows from such activities, it is the Emotional Self that motivates the former to engage in these activities to begin with. You might be convinced, for example, that – based on a preponderance of evidence – a candidate running for public office will significantly degrade the rights of a certain racial group, but you might not be as emotionally impacted and motivated to rally against this candidate as those who are members of the racial group in question. When one contemplates the core of human motivation, it seems we are emotional beings; our sentiments often fuel and inform our decisions and actions. If this is the case, it might be difficult for one to justify my assertion that artists are responsible for contextualizing their work, especially if they believe overly explaining art deprives a work of emotional depth – which is also arguably what Magdalena Szubielska's and Kamil Imbir's (2021, pp. 11-12) research suggests. By diminishing the emotions a piece would normally inspire in their audience, an artist might fail to call the masses to appropriate action. If Ashley Powell's work hadn't inspired fury in her audience (Foran, 2015), would they be discussing modern racism at all? More generally, would people be fighting racism everyday if they weren't constantly outraged at the reminder of segregation in not-so-distant US history? Likewise, would Art Spiegelman's work have caused some Polish Gentiles to consider their complicity during the Holocaust if it hadn't limned Poles in such a blatantly offensive manner (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022)? Perhaps it was necessary for Poles to be confronted by the son of a Holocaust survivor in an offensive, emotionally charged way for them to discuss their role enabling the unspeakable horrors of Hitler's regime. Perhaps the visceral emotions sparked a conversation that wouldn't have otherwise been sparked – one that induced Polish people to ask, "How can we be positive such a tragedy will never occur again on our watch?" Separating emotion from artwork, therefore, might be considered by some to be even more dangerous than appealing to it; by disabling a piece's potential to rile up its audience, some might argue we're removing a critical human property from it, thus dulling our sensibilities and preventing us from appropriately responding to injustice.

Certainly, these concerns are understandable, and they should give one pause. We are emotional beings, after all, and as such, emotional appeals – whether they come from within ourselves or from external influences – do a great deal to inspire us, cause us to decide what our values are, and motivate us to take action so we can realize such values. Removing emotion from artwork, therefore, might make the aesthetic experience purely an intellectual, rational one, which in turn minimizes the soul of the work, disconnects us from the artist and their message, and makes us little more than tepid spectators, indifferent towards incidences with extremely severe consequences. At the same time, however, these concerns ignore how over-indulgence in emotion has contributed to the general decay of rationale. When we're confronted with circumstances such as book burnings of

massive scale in Poland in response to Art Spiegelman's portrayal of Poles as pigs, for example, we're witnessing the inability of either side to entertain a rational response (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022). Spiegelman broadly generalizes non-Jewish Poles as treacherous to Polish Jews during the Holocaust with his derogatory drawings – an understandable, yet purely emotional reaction to the situation (Hellerstein, 2022). On the other hand, by igniting a book-consuming conflagration, many Poles demonstrated their own emotional hyperreactivity; rather than engage in civilized discussion and refute Spiegelman's generalizations at a rational, intellectual level, they chose to silence and censor the voice of the opposition by attempting to snuff out the existence of Maus. The harmful effects of emotional over-indulgence are even more evident when analyzing the Muhammad drawings the Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, published, and the public reaction to them (Heer, 2015). When the newspaper published images of the Islamic prophet, they were, yes, raising awareness about self-censorship in Danish media – with many newspaper employees being reluctant to criticize Islam out of fear for personal consequences (Rose, 2006). However, they were also evincing their own over-indulgence in emotion, conveying through such a depiction their intention to, at best, disregard the feelings and values of Muslims, and at worst, offend them (Heer, 2015; Rose, 2006). Rather than discuss their issues with the religion itself by engaging in intellectual conversation about the very real extremist elements and terrorist groups associated with Islam, they chose to publish drawings they knew would be offensive and insulting to Muslims in general (Heer, 2015). Their handling of this topic, which was emotional in nature and treated all Muslims as the objects of their scorn, inspired yet another overly emotional – yet far more chaotic – response. In reaction to the newspaper's publishing of these blasphemous Muhammad drawings, Islamic extremists incited fatal riots throughout both the Muslim world and Europe (Heer, 2015). Instead of engaging in rational debate, these extremists chose to react in a violently visceral, purely emotional fashion, resulting in unnecessary deaths and senseless chaos.

Neither side of an issue, as we can see with these previous two examples, benefits by indulging their base emotive instincts (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022; Heer, 2015; Rose, 2006). Doing so only further convinces one side to demonize the other, which further entrenches us in ideologies whose dogmas have no room for independent thought, and, in some cases, lead to censorship (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022) and mass violence (Heer, 2015; Rose, 2006). Contrast this with Ephrat Huss's (2016) work, however, and we can see there are means for us to incorporate emotion and rationale together to a constructive end. We need not remove either emotion or rationale completely from artistic creations, which cause responses to either be lukewarm and uninspired or excessively impassioned and uncontrollable, respectively. Ephrat Huss observed through his experiments the effects artistic expression can have on conflict mitigation and bridging the gap between

ideological or otherwise polarizing divides. Reaching out to several Jewish and Arab graduate students in southern Israel, he asked them to discuss two stirring issues in the public discourse: whether Arab-Bedouins should be allowed to construct "illegal" settlements and villages in the traditional nomadic fashion and whether public transportation should be available on the Sabbath (p. 7). As was perhaps expected, this resulted in intensely heated debate, as these discussions struck at deeply held values for the Jewish and Arab participants (pp. 9-11). Notably, this culminated in shouting matches between the Jewish and Arab participants, who accused each other directly of impinging on one another's rights (pp. 9-10). Even though it's highly unlikely these particular Jews and Arabs were personally responsible for "pulling [Arabs'] house[s] down" in illegal settlements, or "just build[ing] anywhere" and contributing to a lawless country (pp. 9-10), respectively, it didn't stop each group from employing accusatory language as if that were the case.

Through this transcribed exchange, we witness precisely what can be expected from engaging in irrational, hyper-emotional debates (Huss, 2016, pp. 9-11). However, after a period wherein Huss asks the participants to draw, in the form of a fish, representations of personal conflicts they're experiencing, their attitudes noticeably shifted (pp. 11-15). One Arab participant drew a fish with a red car as a tail – conveying his desire to live a modern life and obtain a beautiful, red car – and a pale, yellow fish "holding the whole village on my back" – symbolizing his conflicting desire to please his family and remain in his traditional Arab village (p. 12). Similarly, one of the Israeli Jews drew a fish in a jar and a fish in the turbulent seas, the former depicting his desire to pursue a secure career with low pay and the latter portraying his conflicting hope for a more exciting, risky career that will ultimately be more rewarding (p. 12). As we can see, then, there were indeed emotional qualities present in the art the participants created, as they were relaying deeply personal values they held and conflicts they were experiencing. The participants were then encouraged by Huss to relate these personal conflicts and symbolism in their drawings back to the original debate (pp. 13-14). As Huss noted, participants demonstrated a significant increase in their desire to understand each other, a marked rise in empathetic attitudes, a decrease in hostile and accusatory rhetoric, and even a notable effort to reach more integrative solutions to the previously mentioned socio-political issues (pp. 12-13, 15). The participants were able to identify relevancies of one another's personal conflicts as they applied to these issues (pp. 13-14). For example, a Jewish participant noted the previously mentioned Arab's wish to live a modern life, saying, "in the end you will all move to towns; you can't stop progress" (p. 14). In response, an Arab woman acknowledged this to be true, but added that such progress must not be enforced – with the State forcing them out of their traditional nomadic villages – and must occur naturally (p. 14). We can clearly see, then, that while the emotional aspect of the art wasn't removed, the ability of

the participants to reason and discuss a controversial topic rationally increased, improving the receptivity of both sides to each other's ideas (pp. 11-15). The most intriguing characteristic of these experiments is the fact that the artwork created during them was unlike most politically inspired art we see in the US. Unlike Ashley Powell's (Foran, 2015), Art Spiegelman's (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022), or Jyllands-Posten's (Heer, 2015) artwork, which incorporated inflammatory messaging and possessed monologic qualities, the artwork of the participants in Ephrat Huss's experiment wasn't accusatory, allowed them to relate to one another on a human level – despite their political differences – and possessed a dialogic, collaborative, solutions-oriented focus (pp. 11-15). The participants in this experiment didn't need to aim scathing criticisms at the other side to reach truly transformative solutions; if anything, the scathing accusations the participants initially tossed at each other were counterproductive to finding common ground (Huss, 2016, pp. 9-10). And while they still didn't quite reach total agreement by the end of the experiment – with the Arabs and Jews still somewhat disagreeing on the matter of whether the former should be allowed to live nomadic lifestyles – it was clear overall progress was made (pp. 11-15). Overall, Huss's observations allow us to reach a striking conclusion: while balancing emotion and rationale through political art and the discussion thereof may not immediately solve all our problems, it has the potential to make people more receptive to alternative viewpoints and perspectives and can considerably increase our empathy for members on the other side of an issue (pp. 11-15).

When we keep in mind the results of both Huss's (2016), as well as Szubielska's and Imbir's (2021), experiments, it becomes incredibly clear that the more we communicate with our audiences, refrain from alienating them, and keep constructive aims within our purview, the more likely we are to manifest solutions to the issues we so wish to solve. For activist-artists like Ashley Powell and Art Spiegelman, these issues are the evils of racism and antisemitism in the modern US, which they evidently aim to raise awareness about (Chute, 2022; Foran, 2015). If we are to ponder controversial art from an entirely utilitarian perspective, however, it doesn't make sense to employ vitriolic criticisms, shocking displays, and overly emotional themes to achieve these socio-political goals. Doing so consistently fails to convert opposing or undecided sides to support your cause, and often resonates only with those you already agree with – and sometimes, not even (Chute, 2022; Heer, 2015; Hellerstein, 2022; Foran, 2015). You cannot effectively inspire a call for change while you utilize speech that alienates and turns people against you. Instead, there is evidence to suggest that by explaining the context behind your artwork to your political rivals, appealing to their Rational Selves, and doing your best to find common ground with them, you are much more likely to encourage harmony, constructive debate, and solutions-oriented thinking that appeals to as many people as possible (Huss, 2016; Szu-

bielska & Imbir, 2021). Again, this isn't to say emotionally-charged and vitriolic artwork isn't warranted anywhere. As previously discussed, such art forms could be highly useful in private groups who already agree with you; they could be invaluable for venting toxic emotions, expressing your frustrations more fully – even if they aren't rational – and abandoning decorum in favor of catharsis (Limon, 2023). All of this is acceptable when you're surrounded by a group of your peers, who understand exactly where you're coming from. However, if your goal is to change the public's attitudes towards a certain set of issues or to garner sympathy for your cause, it makes far more sense to do so in a manner that is based in reason and is inclusive of alternative viewpoints rather than to be belligerent and hostile in your artistic rhetoric.

Maybe, however, you view this issue from a completely distinct perspective. My assumption, after all, when discussing the ethical or practical merits of correct intention or adequate communication with your audience, is polarization is a negative outcome, and we should strive to avoid it at all costs. There's a chance, however, you disagree with this assumption and find the notion that we should prevent further division quaint or naive. Some people might express perspectives you find deplorable and irreconcilable with your own. To you, perhaps this is best exemplified by that liberal senator who's preying upon children by rhetorically supporting transgender people, or by that conservative official who's sympathizing with mass murderers by staunchly supporting the right to bear arms. "Why would I want to be united with such awful people?" you might question. After all, isn't schism only natural in response to the most repellent of people?

It's true there's disagreement – depending upon who you ask – whether Republicans or Democrats, for example, hold reasonable, morally defensible positions. Left-wingers will tell you Republicans embody all the negative characteristics you could possibly think of, including prejudice, discrimination, homophobia, Christo-fascism, and warmongering. Authors like Hillary Chute or Elizabeth Blair might agree with this in particular, attributing the rise in antisemitism, racism, and homophobia to conservative politicians – like those on the McMinn County school board (Chute, 2022) or the board in charge of Cardinal High School (Blair, 2023). On the other hand, right-wingers denounce the Democrats for exemplifying all that's wrong with our nation, characterizing them as condescending, classist, child-grooming, godless, and authoritarian. Jonah Goldberg (2015) might particularly classify them as "authoritarian," highlighting the hypocrisy liberal elites evince by censoring whichever views happen to discomfit them – as juxtaposed with their bolstering of whichever views they favor. Regardless of which side you're on, then, it's an almost logical progression to distance yourself from members of the opposition, ingrain yourself into an echo chamber of like-minded voices, and develop a "collective identity rather than a personal identity" (Huss, 2016, p. 10), where every member of the opposing team is loath-

some and worthy of disdain. At the end of the day, it only makes sense to mark supporters of specific ideologies as supporters of the repugnant consequences that result from them. How could they not be aware of the tangible results of their ideology, after all?

The problem with this mindset is it's both counterproductive and lacking in nuance. If the goal of drawing hard red lines between political camps – which create nearly insurmountable divisions – is to delineate between who's "good" and who's "bad," we are grossly oversimplifying the human condition. There are more complex explanations as to why one might fervently support one party or another. It might be easy to view conservatives as the impetus behind rising bigotry and extremism in the US as they "[whitewash] racist and anti-Semitic violence," as they seemingly did when the McMinn County school board in Tennessee banned Maus (Chute, 2022) – a state that's known to lean rightward politically. However, those who supported the ban might genuinely have seen it as necessary to protect younger, more impressionable children from vulgarity and the brutally dark themes contained within the book – an understandable concern for any parent. Similarly, conservatives might accuse liberals of being hypocritical when calling for censorship of "anti-Muslim" speech since they, on the other hand, actively support "anti-Christian" themes in artwork (Goldberg, 2015). Liberals themselves, however, might justify the different treatment of these ideas by asserting blasphemous artwork against Islam is irresponsible and leads to otherwise avoidable bloodshed (Heer, 2015) – a thoughtful concern, to be sure. There's no black and white dichotomy between supporters of liberal or conservative ideologies, clearly; you can't, in good conscience, simply classify one side as "racist" and the other as "not racist" (Chute, 2022), or one side as "anti-Christian" and the other as "pro-Christian" (Goldberg, 2015). People are more complex than this, and assuming otherwise can cause us to dehumanize those who don't really deserve it. When these people are treated as "the enemy" – even if they're only tangentially connected to the political opposition – it justifies horrific actions to be taken against them,

Exemplifying this trend most glaringly, perhaps, are the experiences of Emmanuel Cafferty and David Shor, both of whom were deprived of their livelihoods because they were deemed by capricious online activists to be serving the enemy (Friedersdorf, 2022; Mounk, 2020). The former was a California utility worker, accused of making the "white power" hand gesture – also known as the "okay" sign (Mounk, 2020). Though Cafferty never expressed any allegiance to white supremacist groups whatsoever, online activists and histrionic ideologues forced that affiliation upon him when he dangled his hand out of his truck's window and accidentally formed an "okay" symbol while doing so. This hysterical overreaction led to a loss of his job, thus depriving him of the means to provide for himself or his family. David Shor, previously a "data analyst at a progressive consulting firm," experienced a similar forced affiliation when he Tweeted an academic paper proving

peaceful protests did more to increase Democratic turnout than did violent riots – such as those in 2020 over George Floyd's murder (Mounk, 2020). This could mean the difference between winning or losing the next election. Despite being a progressive himself and citing the work of a black professor, he was accused by the online left of feigning concern for the progressive cause and the BLM movement, leading to his eventual termination. Neither person could be seen by any reasonable, thinking person as being an instrument of anti-progressive movements. Because the requirements for being a political ally are often so counter-intuitive, however – employing purity-of-heart tests that would put those in a medieval fairy tale to shame – they were persecuted when they couldn't have violated their devout assailants' political Commandments less. Such consequences are a natural extension, unfortunately, of removing nuance from the political discussion. Categorizing complex people into overly simplified groups breeds stringent, dogmatic standards that can impel us to ostracize those who couldn't deserve it less. By indulging in group-think and encouraging polarization and partisanism, then, we enable egregiously inexcusable consequences for innocent people.

We have dwelled on the defects of artistry and rhetoric as expressed through public works, and have discussed at length what we as artists should avoid doing to prevent schism among ourselves. On the other hand, we haven't concerned ourselves much with the solution to these defects yet, so we should narrow our focus and specify what we should do as well. It would be prudent first, however, to recapitulate the major tenets we've decided artists should embody in their work to avoid division. Firstly, maintain correct intention. Be mindful of your artwork's purpose, project good-will, and ensure you are respectful, compassionate, and empathetic towards those who might come from alternate backgrounds or hold disparate viewpoints. Secondly, communicate thoroughly with your audience. You should be judicious when designing your artwork and its message to ensure the intention perceived by your audience doesn't veer significantly from your actual intention (Goldberg, 2015; Heer, 2015). Provide your viewers with ample contextual information to ensure there can be no doubts as to what your intent is. And thirdly, fight for equal representation of ideas. As someone who helps shape the culture in the US, you are in a position of power and influence that's idiosyncratic to artists. People look up to you, so use the standing you have to fight for representation of all views – even those opposed to yours. To normalize these three things is to help reverse the cultural trend we've been witnessing progress in this country for decades now. If we elevate this kind of behavior above all others in modern art, we are sure to see a reduction in offense taken at controversial artwork (Szubielska & Imbir, 2021), an increased understanding of one another, a mitigation of the polarization endemic to this nation, and an increase in the conception of integrated solutions (Huss, 2016) – rather than an endless argument that pits fellow

citizens against each other, like ravenous wolves from rival packs.

But how do we elevate this behavior? How are we to incorporate these “tenets” into our artwork most efficiently? We do so by doing what any artist does best: thinking outside of the box. A means to our solution doesn’t necessarily exist in our current system, so the greatest thing we can do to embody these tenets is to normalize groundbreaking standards for public artistic displays. To do this, we would do well to replicate on a much larger scale the processes demonstrated in the experiments conducted by Magdalena Szubielska and Kamil Imbir (2021), as well as Ephrat Huss (2016). The former two scientists demonstrated the efficacy of providing the audience with sufficient contextual information about an art piece in maximizing emotional “dominance” – one’s ability to regulate their emotions when confronting unfavorable stimuli – as well as increasing their understanding of and even liking for controversial artwork (Szubielska & Imbir, 2021, pp. 11-13, 17). We’ve also discussed the latter’s demonstration of how allowing diametrically opposed factions to express their personal conflicts through artwork, then relating this back to a socio-political conflict in question, led all parties involved to become less hostile towards each other, be more empathetic to their political nemeses, abandon a collective mentality in favor of a more personal one, and pursue constructive, integrative solutions (Huss, 2016, pp. 11-15). If we were to combine these two experiments into one, imagine the positive results that could follow! If we provided all who encountered public, controversial art with detailed contextual information, gave all sides of an issue equal opportunities to express their concerns, and related to one another by connecting personal conflicts with the socio-political issues at hand, we could eliminate any iota of doubt regarding an artist’s intentions, ensure everyone feels fairly represented in art, and reach consensus regarding those issues faster than ever before (Huss, 2016; Szubielska & Imbir, 2021). The goal, then, should be to create art that doesn’t serve as a force-fed broadcast of one’s opinions to a massive audience with diverse perspectives, but to change the dynamic of how we create art completely. We should seek to transform art into a dialogue – or a debate, if you prefer – to give the public a more well-rounded understanding of distinct perspectives, encourage audiences to understand and empathize with one another more deeply, and propel ourselves towards pragmatic, integrated solutions instead of endless antagonization of the opposing political faction.

To accomplish this on a societal scale, we should dedicate public spaces to collaborative artistic projects between such opposing factions. By this I mean that, given a certain socio-political exigence, when artists of a variety of ideological alignments feel impelled to respond by creating works, we should select physical spaces or media platforms that will provide each artist with equal publicity. We could select the side of a large building to host a mural, or a widely used social media platform like TikTok to showcase a song

on a channel formed by local collaborators, in response to such an exigence. Artists could then recruit a team comprised of Republicans, Democrats, independents, and every faction with a sizable following to deliberate upon the themes the collaborative art should contain. Members of these parties and factions could engage in a similar experiment as that conducted by Ephrat Huss (2016), relating the issue at hand to their own personal conflicts and putting their heads together to arrive at a common solution. By engaging in such an exercise, they would work towards understanding one another as individuals and appreciating alternate viewpoints, thus allowing them to overcome typical emotional or partisan divides. They could then create a work of art that is inclusive of all their perspectives, unifying them into one cohesive message that encapsulates their common solution to the issue at hand. Once the artists finish conceptualizing and creating the work itself, they should provide a description to accompany it that captures their intentions and the background for their artwork. Doing so would reduce the possibility of their audience misunderstanding their intentions and would enable the public to more deeply understand, appreciate, and benefit from their collective artwork (Szubielska & Imbir, 2021).

Of course, this process must be entirely voluntary. Legally mandating that certain spaces be dedicated only to collaborative, dialogic art would, if anything, detract from this solution completely. If we instate a compulsory means to unite creators and mend the wounds of our nation, we risk harming ourselves further; forcing artists to create in a certain manner is essentially the same thing as censoring artists with dissenting views. Therefore, uniting creators with this solution must be a voluntary and cultural, not legal, shift. Public art covering controversial topics must be as free and unrestrained as the voices in public debate, because restricting the voices of the artists further will only breed bitterness, further alienation, and a dogmatic standard that merely replaces the current one. Still, increasing our ethical standards in the creation of public art is essential to our nation's well-being. The change we require begins with the cultural trend-setters – the artists – who should actively invite those from opposing ends of the ideological spectrum to collaborate with them and conceive of unifying artwork. This way, much like how Arab-Bedouins and Israeli Jews were able to use artistic expression to mostly overcome their differences (Huss, 2016), Republicans and Democrats, conservatives and liberals, leftists and rightists, etc., can overcome the seemingly insurmountable divide that separates them and synthesize ideas, beliefs, and solutions that transcend the traditional political dichotomy. This is not to say this will be a path of zero resistance, however. It's likely it will initially be difficult to enlist the assistance of opposing factions to produce unifying works of art. Our trust in one another has already eroded over a long period within the US, and it will take time and effort to heal the wounds the media ecosystem, social commentators, and irresponsible political artists have inflicted upon us. But eventually, if artists hold them-

selves to higher ethical standards, we may see a day where art no longer divides us into camps that resist logic and reason, but where art compels us to think truly rationally – without compromising emotionality – and establishes a more wholesome culture of unity and brotherhood.

Whether your desire to change socio-political realities materializes in the form of a comic book detailing the horrors of WWII Germany (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022), shocking signs that hearken back to the Segregation Era (Foran, 2015), or images that blaspheme against almighty powers (Heer, 2015), neglecting to reflect on your intent or to focus on your audience can actually radicalize your political rivals and, if anything, impede real change. From a utilitarian perspective, this is foolish and unproductive. If your goal is to sway public opinion in one direction or another by raising awareness of the evils of antisemitism (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022) and racism (Foran, 2015), or by denouncing Westerners' indefensible mockery of cultures they don't understand (Heer, 2015), it makes no sense to alienate the audience members who are crucial to win over when combatting the plagues of antisemitism, racism, and bigotry. More importantly, from an ethical perspective, this isn't morally right. Alienating audiences and antagonizing perceived mortal enemies deprives us of something we are withering from want of: interpersonal harmony and a sense of common humanity. By polarizing audiences with divisive intentions and themes, we participate in a grotesque practice that has become increasingly prominent: we roughly hurl others into two boxes – friend or foe – deifying those we agree with and dehumanizing those with alternative perspectives – which justifies life-altering punishments for even the most modest of dissension (Friedersdorf, 2022; Mounk, 2020). This current course of action we unquestioningly conform to is much like ingesting junk food, in that it is easy to do but harmful to our health. Much like consuming a salad might be uncomfortable for those accustomed to sweet foods, it can be uncomfortable to train ourselves to be more accepting of alternate viewpoints and to refrain from producing messages offensive to those holding them. Still, at the end of the day, if creating controversial art in a more ethical, inclusive manner is more conducive to our collective well-being, why are we settling for less when we could have it so much better? Once again, this isn't to say it will be an effortless task to reverse the decades of damage done to our nation's integrity, and there's a tangled mess of factors – like political alignments (Goldberg, 2015), powerful institutions (Chute, 2022; Hellerstein, 2022), and seemingly unbreachable ideologies (Friedersdorf, 2022; Mounk, 2020) – that makes it difficult for us to heal culturally. But healing culturally begins with those who create the culture to begin with: the artists. The responsibility is theirs to take initiative, adhere to ethical standards in their work, and begin to rebuild from the rubble that is our collapsed, dilapidated culture. By setting trends that will encourage mutual understanding, equal representation of ideas, and true

tolerance for all, artists have the power to administer the antidote to our poisoned nation, allowing for healthier standards of artistic debate and setting us back on track for an atmosphere of cooperation, collaboration, and coordination in our neighborhoods, schools, institutions, and government.

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