

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE  
FILM AND TELEVISION FACULTY

# **BACHELOR'S THESIS**

Prague, 2022

Madison Sable

ACADEMY OF PERFORMING ARTS IN PRAGUE

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Film, Television, Photography, and New Media

Photography

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**Identity in Contemporary Art: Trap or Tool for  
Empowerment?**

**Madison Sable**

Thesis advisor: Mgr. Tereza Stejskalová, Ph.D.

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**Keywords:**

identity politics; otherness; representation; marginalized groups; contemporary art; identity trap; identity tool; western and eastern politics; labels

**Klíčová slova:**

politika identity; jinakost; reprezentace; marginalizované skupiny; současné umění; identitní past; nástroj identity; západní a východní politika; nálepky

## **Abstract**

The goal of this thesis is to better understand the nuances of identity politics in contemporary art by exploring the ways in which labels and identity can be a form of representation but can also trap artists in a cycle of constant and continuous marginalization. By understanding the power structures within contemporary art and how these manifest in the form of dominate, hegemonic groups that have declared themselves the authority for what constitutes art, we can see how marginalized communities have been pushed into otherness. It is important to understand this relationship between dominate hegemonies and others as a relationship between those who label and those who are labelled, a power imbalance that continues to effect artists of marginalized communities to this day. As we attempt to move forward toward diversity and representation, it is imperative that artists recognize this dynamic and its possible consequences as they claim identities or allow others to label them since greater representation is not always the outcome of embracing an identity or label. We will look at historical references of otherness and examine how anyone outside of the Western white male is at a disadvantage, even if it may seem that we in the art world are making strides in creating a more diverse community.



## **Abstrakt**

Cílem této práce je lépe porozumět nuancím politiky identity v současném umění. Práce zkoumá, kdy jsou odkazy k identitě umělce/umělkyně vhodnou formou umělecké reprezentace a kdy umělce/umělkyně jen dále vězní v cyklu neustálé marginalizace. Díky pochopení mocenských struktur v současném umění, které rozhodují, co je a co není umění, můžeme vidět, jak byly marginalizované komunity vytlačeny do jinakosti. Je důležité chápat tento vztah mezi dominantními skupinami a ostatními jako vztah mezi těmi, kdo druhým přisuzují různá identitární označení, a těmi, kteří jsou takto označeni. Tento vztah definuje mocenskou nerovnováhu, která dodnes ovlivňuje umělce z marginalizovaných komunit. Když se snažíme pokročit směrem k rozmanitosti a reprezentaci, je nezbytné, aby umělci a umělkyně, nárokují-li si nějakou identitu nebo dovolují ostatním, aby je takto označili, chápali tuto dynamiku a její možné důsledky, protože větší zastoupení není vždy výsledkem přijetí identity nebo nálepky. Podíváme se na historické příklady zacházení s jinakostí a prozkoumáme, jak je dodnes kdokoli mimo bílého muže ze Západu znevýhodněn, i když se může zdát, že svět umění je čím dál rozmanitější a různorodější.

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## Introduction

As a person who comes from the United States but lives in the Czech Republic, having had the opportunity to compare and contrast the different cultures, the divide between Eastern and Western perspectives has become clear to me. Coming from a Western point of view to a country that has been influenced by both Eastern and Western societies has allowed me to explore what otherness is and how incredibly complex identity conflicts are due to the variety of factors that influence them. By working with local artists and researching identity conflicts outside of the Western bubble, it has become clear that the theory of the other is not limited to cultures, but rather, it is ingrained throughout all identities. While identities and labels often go hand-in-hand with the representation of marginalized communities, it is important to look at the social structures built around identity politics to understand how they affect artists today. And in today's world, any discussion of social structures must necessarily include the homogenizing effect of globalization.

As the world continues to head in a more globalized direction and identity politics become increasingly ubiquitous, we must stop to consider the harm that both globalization and identity politics have the potential to create. The domination of the art scene for years (if not centuries) by white Western white males has created a considerable number of marginalized groups. These groups can be seen on a global level through their respective cultures but also within the Western world when talking about race, gender, class, etc. This marginalization is caused by stereotypes and generalizations that push these communities into otherness. Through the use of labels, we can see the power structure between those who label and those who are labelled and how that relates to identity becoming a trap for marginalized communities. On the other hand, these identities also open the door for opportunity to these marginalized

communities, which suggests that said identities can also be a tool. In order to understand whether or not identity politics can be a tool or if they are always a trap, it is important to look at how artists work within these social structures to see both how they are empowered and how they are constrained.

*Identity in Contemporary Art: Trap or Tool for Empowerment?* is an exploration of the creation of otherness within the context of contemporary art and its effects on marginalized communities. It is through this otherness that questions of representation and ideas of labels being used as a trap or tool emerge. While labels encourage representation in communities that have lacked diversity, they also have a tendency to hinder artists by keeping them in their perspective otherness. It is imperative that artists recognize the existing power structures around identity conflicts when being labelled or claiming labels as their own.

## **The Theory of the Other**

In order to understand how contemporary art has been primarily shaped by Western culture, we can look to Slovenian art historian, Igor Zabel's text, "We and the Others", which discusses cultural identities and how individuals get trapped into becoming representatives of their own countries by the perspective of a dominating Western force.<sup>1</sup> Although this article was published in 1998, it still stands as a key text detailing how we are still shaped by otherness within the world of contemporary art.

Zabel explains how the world of art is determined by people's experience of "otherness," and that the balance between who is "we" and who is "the other" is incredibly unequal. While every person can find themselves in a position of being an "other" to someone of a different culture, Zabel explains that the larger factor at play is

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<sup>1</sup> Zabel, Igor. "We And The Others". Atlas Of Transformation, 2011

the existence of one special “Other”-the West. One special “Other” meaning one entity that holds more power than any of the other “others.” Zabel states:

*Within the global network of art, Western art seems to hold the position of a “commanding point.” Institutions, capital, markets, and concepts are based in the Western world or essentially connected with it. One could say without too much exaggeration that it is the West which actually determines what art is and what it is not.<sup>2</sup>*

It is crucial to understand that while the West may be an “other” for Eastern countries, a matter of even greater importance is that Eastern countries are the “others” for the West. Since the Western powers are the ones that hold the dominant point of view and determine what contemporary art is, it makes for an imbalanced power dynamic between the Eastern and Western art scene wherein everything in the East is seen through a Western lens. Not only is contemporary art seen through a Western lens, but it is also delocalized by Western interpretations and markets, then re-localized back to its original sector.<sup>3</sup>

With this lens comes an inherent representation of one’s own culture. If the West sees Western art as what is contemporary, then any Eastern artist is representing what “Eastern” art is; or they are seen as practicing “Western” art by doing something contemporary, as if there is no such thing as contemporary art in the Eastern world.

When discussing how contemporary art is seen through a Western lens, it becomes problematic for Eastern nations that are forced to look at themselves as *The Other’s* other; they are constantly looking at themselves through a Western lens. Their own identities are being tangled, distorted, and shaped by a Western perspective, which, for many, is not a chosen identity. If the Western perspective is considered “the perspective” then it forces every other culture to examine their works in relation to the

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<sup>2</sup> Zabel, Igor. "We And The Others". Atlas Of Transformation, 2011

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

West.<sup>4</sup> This is a major conflict when it comes to identity and representation because anyone who cannot identify as Western automatically put in the position of identifying as a representation of their own culture (or their own culture as the West perceives it)—whether it be accurate or not, or whether it be a chosen identity vs. a given identity. When Western cultures position themselves as the de facto arbiters of contemporary art (i.e., they see their own culture as contemporary art), they state themselves to be the representation and embodiment of what contemporary art is. Everyone else is an “other.” Everyone else is deemed, a “Russian artist” or a “Japanese artist” etc. This conflict stems from the fact that artists from every “other” culture are forced to see themselves in relation to the West, not simply as an individual artist but as one of the “other” different ones.

They become representations of their own cultural essence because The West goes searching for this representation in their work. Since they are the ones that need to be explained to the West, the West goes looking for clues that might provide insight into their culture through their work. Therefore, the artist has become a representation of their own culture, sometimes without even knowing it. This is especially problematic when Eastern nations are already forced to look at themselves through the Western lens. So, they try to create works that will appeal to the Western institutions and capitals, but often come up short since the West is looking for what they view as an Eastern artist—someone who is showing their culture through their work. This relationship is a constant back-and-forth of trying to appease the other party and playing a political game that is not even always played on a conscious level.

Zabel uses the example, “Western Curators in Africa” to show the complex dynamic between Western and Eastern cultures when it comes to trying to create and understand/represent contemporary art. He states:

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

*The world of “others,” or better, the world of the Other (the West) and (its) others therefore demands “interpretation” and “explanation,” and only these can be the basis for a possible “dialogue.” This relationship implies the construction of a system of identities and representations; the “explanatory” relationship with “another” culture means that all the products of this culture have to be understood as “representing” it and its “identity.”*<sup>5</sup>

In his example, he uses a scenario in which Western curators traveled to Africa in search of artists to contribute to an international show. After the selection, they were met with backlash from experts in the local art community who said that many important artists had been left out, and the ones that were picked were, “horrible African kitsch.”<sup>6</sup> It is Zabel’s belief that these curators probably encountered two different types of art during their travels. The first would have been one in which the artist’s work had been heavily influenced by the world of contemporary art because of a more global view about what contemporary art is, wherein it is a universal sector and not just a space reserved for Western civilization. The second would have been artists who incorporated more native traditions and values in their work. Zabel’s contention is that the curators looking for African art were unable to perceive the contemporary art as anything more than a copy of what they can already find throughout Western civilization. The contemporary artists were lacking some “authenticity” that the curators were in search of—that is to say a lack of authenticity, traditions, and identity the West had envisioned would be there. The curators came looking for an explanation of African culture through the art, something that made it clear they were *African* artists. Therefore, they picked the more “kitsch” art because they felt it symbolized native

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

traditions and genuine African art that, although produced by locals, was not an accurate representation of what modern Africa is anymore.<sup>7</sup>

This is how artists get trapped into either being a Western artist or inherently representing their own culture through a very specific and distorted perception. In this example, the art was either not African enough, or a too hyperbolic caricature of African culture (what many deem to be kitsch). In either case, Africa was being viewed through a Western lens in which this “other” culture was one that needed “interpretation and explanation.”<sup>8</sup> In Eastern countries, being a contemporary artist means representing the West while the West, by contrast, is searching for a deeper understanding of Eastern culture, and thus, looks for artists that practice those values. This is one of the major problems with a single lens approach, it wrongly and inaccurately assigns identity and leaves a space wherein people become representatives of their culture just because they are not Western.

## **The Others within the West**

After recognizing the power structure between the East and the West in relation to contemporary art and understanding the historical context of how we got here, we can now look at the nuances of what it means to be an “other” and how gender plays a key role in this otherness. By breaking the structure of “Western Identity” down further, we realize that there is no one single identity within the Western world. The West is heterogeneous and includes many different cultures and norms. Therefore, there cannot be one single “Western Identity,” and it is my contention that the Western viewpoint, the viewpoint that holds power and maintains a dominant position (as mentioned above) is a specifically Western *male* viewpoint.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.



This is easily proven through a cursory examination of what is, by general consensus, “great” art. When we think of some of the greatest artists throughout history, a list of universally famous people comes to mind—Van Gogh, da Vinci, Michelangelo, and Picasso to name a few—and rarely are there any women mentioned. In Linda Nochlin’s essay, “Why have there been no great female artists,” she attributes this to a lack of representation as well as the fact that women have not historically had the same access to the art scene that men have had.<sup>9</sup> Historically, art has been an object produced for the commercial consumption of the bourgeoisie, something only enjoyed by those of a certain socio-economic status. In order to enjoy the work, one merely had to be from a certain part of society while in order to produce art, to be an artist, there was a certain requisite level of training and education that was necessary.<sup>10</sup>

There is a question of who makes up the “Western Identity” when it comes to who holds the commanding point of view and determines what is or is not contemporary art. When examining this question from a broad, cultural, viewpoint, it is easy to classify things by geographic locations and social structures, but, if we narrow things down to the level of identity, it is safe to say that women and men are not (and have never been) in an equal position in the arts, regardless of the social structures in place. Nochlin explains how women have, in fact, never had an equal footing in this community. The essay questions the social and institutional structures that have historically been responsible for the production of art and how they have been largely geared towards men. She discusses how, throughout time, women have never been given the same opportunities as men when it comes to art. It is not that they are less capable or have not yet achieved anything of significance, but rather, that they have

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<sup>9</sup> Nochlin, Linda. *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*. 1971

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

not been accorded the same opportunities as their male counterparts while also being largely misrepresented.<sup>11</sup>

Many artists grew up in artistic environments; fathers, who were painters, taught their sons how to paint. The sons went on to institutions that could help fine-tune their skills and facilitate proper training. Since women were not allowed in most art academies until the late 1800s, women did not have access to those same institutions where they could have likewise perfected their skills. Even when women were eventually allowed into the academies, they were denied the same treatment as the male students. As late as 1893, women, at the academy, were not allowed to participate in life drawings, and if they were given an opportunity to participate, the model would have to be partially covered.<sup>12</sup> Nochlin states:

*To be deprived of this ultimate state of training meant to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art—or simply, as with most of the few women aspiring to be painters, to be restricted to the "minor" and less highly regarded fields of portraiture, genre, landscape, or still-life.*<sup>13</sup>

Since women were not considered to be part of the world of art for such a long period of time, the concept of Western society ‘determining what contemporary art is or is not’ means that it is not limited to only Western society, but even more specifically limited to Western *male* society that has, and still does, determine what constitutes contemporary art. This means female artists always have, and still are, representing females in the Western world; they have been made, by default, representatives of a female otherness.

As discussed previously, when it comes to the West’s “others” there is an inherent representation of one’s own culture simply because it is not a Western culture.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

By deconstructing the West into its concomitant, identifiable characteristics such as men and women, we can see it remains true that Western men are *The Other*, which would consequently make women The Other's *other*. With this notion that women as a group of people who require "interpretation and explanation"<sup>14</sup> comes a given identity that they are forced to represent. Whether a woman wants to claim themselves as a female artist or not is irrelevant because, by societal standards, they are automatically categorized as "female" artists rather than simply artists; it is an identity given to their work, heedless of whether or not such a qualifier is necessary; women are constantly referred to as, "female artists" while men are rarely referred to as, "male artists." Assigning the word, "female" to the word "artist" brings with it the connotation that the work one is observing is an implicit representation of what "female art" is (as if the rest of art requires no further explanation because it is a given that it is "male art"). The idea of "male art" is one that is not used because art produced by a male is considered the norm-a standard. It does not require explanation. The forced representation of women stems from a lack of equal opportunity as well as a lack of equal footing in the art community, and it can be seen across a plethora of marginalized groups; the problem of the "other" is not exclusive to gender.

Indeed, the theory of "the other" is one that spans across multiple sectors within the Western world and can be prevalent within any community that sits outside of the Western white male, as historically they have held the dominant position. Because political powers and institutions have been run by white men for centuries, it is a given that any marginalized group found themselves with a lack of representation and lack of opportunity in many fields. Without adequate access to the same education and opportunities as white men, anyone from a different social sector is put in a position of being further behind than their white counterparts. When looking at who are considered

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<sup>14</sup> Zabel, Igor. "We And The Others". Atlas Of Transformation, 2011

the renowned artists throughout history, not only are women rarely (if ever) mentioned, but none of them are people of color.

By breaking down the theory of “the other” and recognizing that, within the Western world, it is the Western white male who holds the commanding point of view, we can further understand just how many “others” there are. Nochlin’s essay confronts the power structures of the male gaze, but her essay can be compared to any group of people that do not hold a dominant position within society. With a dominant position comes power and influence and a sense of authority over what should be accepted as a universal truth. Visual artist, JooYoung Choi, discusses how this issue is still very prevalent in today’s society with her essay, “The Theory of the Other and its Effects on Artists of Color.”<sup>15</sup> Choi acknowledges that, throughout history, the world of art has been dominated by Western culture. She describes this not just as a historical issue but a contemporary one that continues to this day due to the lack of education around art outside of a Eurocentric lens.

Choi describes the situation in which marginalized groups have historically been underrepresented, but that the same cycle is continuing through the education system we have today. Art universities continuously feed into this idea of otherness by teaching art through the Western lens. By making European art history the mandatory history class and all the others courses optional, these institutions perpetuate the idea that, “European art is fundamental, but all other art histories are merely optional accessories.”<sup>16</sup> By only requiring European art history courses, institutions are reinforcing the idea that the West should be the authority on what is considered a major work of art. By only being provided with critical theory classes from a Western

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<sup>15</sup> Choi, JooYoung. "The Theory Of The Other And Its Effects On Artists Of Color" 2011

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

perspective, students are left with the idea that other cultures do not have critical theory, an assertion that is grossly misinformed.

Choi describes the same problems artists of color have with inherent representation as Zabel described in his essay. Artists of color are constantly having to look at themselves and their work through the eyes of who will be judging it (i.e., Western white males). This leads to many artists having to become spokespeople for what it means to be an artist of color because of, “racial generalizations and cultural misinformation.” Since there is only one dominant group that holds a position of authority, all other groups of people are forced to represent some identity given to them by said dominant group. It is also quite often seen that, when a marginalized group of people have been fighting for representation for so long, there is also pressure from within their own communities to be representatives by taking a stance on political and racial issues.

When artists of color use their platform to take a stance on racial injustice, it can be powerful. However, it becomes a problem when their work *must* reflect those concepts simply because they have been defined by this one aspect of their identity. The author, Hannah Giorgis, wrote, “The beauty of black art lies in its ability (perhaps even its mandate) to marry the personal and political.”<sup>17</sup> The idea that art works created by artists of color must be politically charged can stem from pressures within their communities. Although the lack of diversity and representation within art makes this compulsion understandable, it essentially forces artists to represent the very thing that makes them marginalized if they are expected to make political art as representatives of their communities, which, in turn, inevitably perpetuates and reinforces the cycle of marginalization. This cycle blurs the lines between artists being able to create works that are personal vs. works that are political. This becomes

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<sup>17</sup> Giorgis, Hannah. "Black Art Is Dangerous, Because It Marries The Personal And Political" 2015

especially problematic if the curators or gallery owners are white people looking for “authentic black voices.” This is the same “authentic” voice Zabel describes when Westerners went searching for “authentic” African art.<sup>18</sup> It puts the artist in a position where they are forced to look at themselves in relation to what the curator or gallery owner is looking for and attempt to emulate that rather than create something that is genuinely their own. It is this conflict that is an unescapable trap for artists as they are forced to identify with the very thing that continues to marginalize them.

While Zabel’s text explains the theory of “the other” in a cultural sense dating back years ago, it can still be applied to any group of marginalized people today. With marginalized groups of people still fighting discrimination and searching for representation to this day, it is by no means surprising to realize or discover that these power structures still exist. These problems arise because of an imbalance in power dynamics between groups of people. With power comes authority, and with authority comes a sense of entitlement to declare universal truths. In the context of contemporary art, it is a universal truth of what constitutes art, or rather what major works of art are worthy of being recognized in a historical context. When this scenario invariably generates otherness, it creates other problems as well such as a lack of opportunity and forced representation. Nochlin and Choi’s essays reflect that further otherness that is seen within the cultural context. This otherness is not restricted to these few examples but rather can be seen throughout any group of people that find themselves in a position with *The Other*.

## **Current Representation of Marginalized Groups**

It is tempting to think that we have achieved some gender parity, especially compared to where we were 50 years ago when Nochlin published her essay, but we

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<sup>18</sup> Zabel, Igor. "We And The Others". Atlas Of Transformation, 2011

are not quite there yet. Although there have been massive strides towards diversity and gender equality within the community, the dominate hegemonic force is still that of the Western white male. A 2019 study of over 40,000 works of art held in the online catalogs of 18 major museums throughout the United States showed that 85% of the artists represented are white and 87% of the artists are male. In the same study, the Association of Art Museum Directors found that 72% of their staff identify as white, while 60% of their museum staff are women, and of those women, only 43% of them are in a leadership role.<sup>19</sup> These numbers clearly show what a significant disparity still exists within the art community and that much work still needs to be done in order for marginalized groups to have equal footing in the community.

In 2020, Art Basel hosted online viewing rooms in which they presented 281 contemporary art galleries from around the world. Among these galleries, not a single one was owned by an African American.<sup>20</sup> While galleries and institutions have been shifting some of their focus more towards black artists, the impetus for this shift often comes from white owned galleries. Black gallerists do not get included in art fairs because they do not have the right track record to be admitted (due to systemic biases that have historically held people of color back), but the only way to gain this requisite exposure is to be admitted into these art fairs. There are systemic problems within the structure of how the art world is run that locks marginalized people into a vicious cycle all but guaranteeing that they will be marginalized even further.

This is not to say that there have not been major recent successes recently moving the art scene toward a more diverse and inclusive community. In 2021, Art Basel Miami adjusted their eligibility requirements that allowed for marginalized galleries, who were not previously eligible, to apply. This opened the door for several

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<sup>19</sup> Topaz, Chad M. et al. "Diversity Of Artists In Major U.S. Museums" 2019

<sup>20</sup> Pogrebin, Robin. "Black Gallerists Press Forward Despite A Market That Holds Them Back (Published 2020)"

people of color to participate, “including four galleries owned by Black Americans, three from Africa, eight from Latin America, and one from Korea.”<sup>21</sup> By allowing more access into the spaces that facilitate major works of art and networking communities, we are chipping away at the white male hegemonic foundations of the art world; by changing how the art world is run and who it includes, we can see its framework beginning to crack.

However, in order to facilitate adequate change, it is not enough to simply recognize more artists; it is also necessary to make sure that the leaders and influencers of art are representations of the whole community and not just an assemblage of white men. Meaningful change needs to manifest first from the top and filter down to the rest of the community; and there have been definite steps this direction. In June of 2017, Maria Balshaw became the first female director of the Tate art galleries.<sup>22</sup> In September of 2021, Laurence des Cars was appointed president-director of the Louvre; this marks the first time in history that the Louvre has been led by a woman.<sup>23</sup> By allowing the “others” a seat at the table and changing rules that previously locked people into marginalized positions, we have been (and are) able to take steps towards equality of opportunity. This represents a positive push towards diversification throughout the art community, to include growing diversity within leadership positions. But these are only initial steps, leaving much more work to be done. The question then becomes, ‘how do we continue to change the system? Representation is not enough when there are systemic problems at play and identities are multifaceted. The question of class also comes into play when discussing privileged people who, while ostensibly part of an “othered” minority have the opportunity to enter and succeed in these spaces. This being the case, are they true

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<sup>21</sup> Pogrebin, Robin. "Signs Of Sea Change At Art Basel Miami: More Galleries Of Color" 2021

<sup>22</sup> Youngs, Ian. "Maria Balshaw: Manchester Gallery Boss To Be Tate's First Female Director" 2017

<sup>23</sup> Noce, Vincent. "Laurence Des Cars Will Be The First Woman To Lead The Louvre In Its History" 2021



representatives of a marginalized community if their socio economic background varies so much from that of the disadvantaged other.

## **Reconsidering Representation**

Although these steps towards inclusion and diversity are incredibly positive and allow for marginalized groups of people to finally have a voice, there are other factors to consider as well. With certain labels come both certain associations and judgements from people who are not a part of these marginalized communities. While it may look as though there is more representation of a single community, one must ask what that means for the people involved. We cannot discount the politics around identity and how labels have the ability to keep people in their perspective otherness. Additionally, such labels force people to become representatives of a group based upon one shared, identifiable characteristic. This may seem positive at first, but it quickly becomes problematic if the people involved do not actually share similar experiences. How then can they be representatives of the community?

These labels can have a tendency to put and keep people in a box, limiting their possibilities and horizons, especially within a society that forces them into otherness. It is understandable that people are still fighting intensely for representation and equal opportunity considering we have yet to achieve it for all marginalized groups. But is the answer to continuously feed into a system that oppresses otherness with these labels and identifiable characteristics though? Or perhaps, is the answer to continue to fight for representation until there is a level playing field and, hopefully, a drastic top-down reform of the system? Maybe. One has to wonder though how much those labels hinder artists and pigeonhole them into further marginalization. This can be seen especially when the label is not only for representation (albeit a positive outcome) but

for further explanation of one's otherness within a system still dominated by the Western white male.

Also worth noting is fact that identities are not singular but intersectional with room to grow and change. Putting an artist in a box creates the impression that they, as a person, are only *one* thing. In a situation where an artist is introduced by their sexual orientation, gender identity, or race (e.g., gay artist, female artist, or Asian artist) they are immediately reduced to one single aspect of their identity. Does the label bring us closer to equality because it visibly demonstrates more representation within the community, or does it further separate someone based on one shared, identifiable characteristic that is irrelevant to their artistic work? Labels do not explain anything about a person's qualifications or education, but rather they express something that is often completely separate from the work of the artist. This being the case, why are those labels necessary to explain who a person is as an artist? The answer to this is simple: These labels are not necessary. Labels are reductive, bringing with them the stereotypes and associations people reflexively think about upon hearing said labels, however hard people may try to resist those subconscious associations. While it has already been stated in the paper, it bears repeating: Labels have an active tendency to pigeonhole artists into other people's associations and biases. So, why is this label given? It could be argued that it is a tool to further separate marginalized groups of people in order to keep them trapped within their perspective otherness. What may look like adequate representation, is often a trap, and we must look at identity as a whole, not a singular label.

However, the above statement does not represent a universal feeling with regard to labels or how people's identities can be tied to them. Many people feel empowered by labels and find them necessary in a community that still lacks representation. It can be tempting to think that this feeling of empowerment indicates

that positive steps are being taken towards inclusion, and that equal footing and adequate representation may not be possible without owning these labels (in which case, we still have a long way to go). It is exciting to live in a time where people can express themselves more freely (granted this is not the case everywhere in the world). Many artists use their works as a way to celebrate these labels and claim from them certain parts of their identities, which, in and of itself, is beautiful. The problem, however, comes when artists are given labels that force them to identify themselves in a way that has potential to hold them back as a result of general stereotypes and biases. Perhaps if prejudice could be jettisoned as a concept, the labels could work as purely informational identifiers without any other connotation or signification attached to them, but that is not the world we live in.

In Olúfemi Táíwò's essay, "Being-in-the-Room Privilege: Elite Capture and Epistemic Deference" he presents a situation in which his coworker passes a pitch to him because she feels that she is not the right person to tell the story since she, "has no idea what it's like to be black."<sup>24</sup> While he knows her intentions are pure, he cannot help but feel it is an unintentional trap. While he dives deeper into the problems surrounding standpoint epistemology, he also gives attention to the fact that he did not grow up in the kind of "low-income, redlined community she was imagining." Her thoughts were that she did not have the same experiences as the people being discussed in the pitch, therefore, she thought she could not adequately represent them. A noble intention but also a problematic one considering it was his racial category that made it seem he had more "authentic" ties to this experience when in fact he also had not had those experiences at all and, thus, could not adequately represent the people involved.<sup>25</sup> This is an example of a person falling into someone else's subconscious

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<sup>24</sup> Táíwò, Olúfemi. "Being-In-The-Room Privilege: Elite Capture And Epistemic Deference" 2021

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

categorization. While the intention behind the assumption is good, it still uses one shared, identifiable characteristic to turn one person into a representative of a whole community based on this assumption that everyone from this community shares similar experiences *because* of this characteristic.

In this instance, Táíwò, becomes a representative of a community because of his racial heritage, however, it is his socio-economic background that made it possible for him to gain entry into this space.<sup>26</sup> By reducing him to one part of his identity, it has negated another, equally important part of his identity—the part of his identity that does not allow him to properly represent the community because he is not from the same background and has very different experiences, regardless of the one shared, identifiable characteristic that connects him to others. This then does nothing to increase representation of the marginalized, but instead further marginalizes the already marginalized. Their representatives are chosen (and not by them) based solely on their racial background and no other identifiable characteristics. It is these multiple identities that have allowed Táíwò into these spaces when other marginalized communities have not been granted access. Failing to look at more than one identifiable characteristic will lead to continued marginalization, for there is not actual equal access and opportunity.

Taking into account its historical context and the origins of contemporary art, it becomes very clear how the concept of otherness came to be within cultural terms. The breakdown of otherness within the West stems from the mistreatment and lack of opportunity given to marginalized groups of people. Throughout the years, these groups of people have been fighting for opportunities to get access to the same education and representation that would grant them equal access to those spaces occupied by their more dominant and/or privileged counterparts. While some people

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

have used labels to stereotype groups of people and place them in boxes, others have used them as a tool for identity and self-expression. Although we are not living in a society where everyone has equal opportunities or rights, we do live in one that is seeing massive strides toward diversity and representation for marginalized groups. With this shift in society comes a chance to think critically about the way in which we use labels and how they affect artists of a marginalized community. We must look at identity as something fluid, something that is not singular. Otherwise, we run the risk of misrepresentation of already marginalized communities.

### **Identity: A Trap or Tool**

The question of whether or not identity is a trap or tool is one that is subject to each individual experience. As mentioned above, many artists find identities to be a source of inspiration and use it as a means of self-exploration and a way to fight for emancipation. While labels and identity can be powerful tools for artists to express themselves, there are artists who find themselves in difficult situations because of society's stereotypes and the negative associations that come with certain identities. Consequently, problems arise when there are systemic issues throughout the art scene that force artists to identify in certain ways or impose identities upon the artists that they do not necessarily claim for themselves (e.g., labeling someone as a "female artist" or a "Russian artist"). These imposed identities come with a multitude of associations and representations for communities solely because they break away from what is considered a standard. If we want to focus on inclusion in art, it is important to do so by looking at the work itself and how the work impacts the conversation instead of focusing on inclusion based upon someone's label. Although the question of identity being a trap or tool is ultimately up to the individual, one must consider the social and political situation surrounding identity issues before capitulating with a label for a

chance at inclusion or representation, as it is often symptomatic of a more complex situation. We must look to artists dealing with this subject in order to understand the perspective of those most impacted by labels and their attendant ramifications, thereby discovering how artists from marginalized communities engage with this conflict.

The artist, Christina Quarles, works with the topic of identity through her paintings of ambiguous figures. She uses ambiguity in her work to take comfort in her own identity and also potentially open others up to the possibility of questioning their own identity by allowing them to participate in conversations they never thought to explore or be invited into.<sup>27</sup> She uses the figures in her paintings almost as representatives of how her own identity is not fixed, but dynamically fluid and multifaceted. Quarles engages with her work from the position of a “queer, cis-woman born to a black father and a white mother.”<sup>28</sup> Within the biography on her website she states, “Fixed categories of identity can be used to marginalize but, paradoxically, can be used by the marginalized to gain visibility and political power. This paradox is the central focus of my practice.”<sup>29</sup> As much as she recognizes this paradox within the community and works between these lines, she also uses it to her advantage. By claiming these labels as her own when describing herself as an artist, she is choosing to use those labels as a tool, as opposed to not claiming them for fear of being further marginalized.

In the artist, Minh Thang Pham’s, polemic, “Are you interested in our work or our skin?” he discusses a couple instances where he felt subject to being trapped by identity politics.<sup>30</sup> In one instance, he describes his response to an open call for Artyčok.tv. In his introductory sentences he labels himself as a Vietnamese artist living

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<sup>27</sup> Hill, Eli. "15 Young LGBTQ Artists Driving Contemporary Art Forward" 2019

<sup>28</sup> Quarles, Christina. "About - Christina Quarles"

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Pham, Minh. "Zajímají Vás Naše Práce, Nebo Naše Kůže?" 2022

in the Czech Republic. He admits that this is a calculated move considering the atmosphere of identity politics in contemporary art. At first, it seems that he is using his identity as a tool since, "It also looks good at the exhibition: a foreign name has an attractive exotic scent and also allows you to talk about the representation of diversity, minority voice, etc." but later states that it is actually a trap he fell into.<sup>31</sup> Rather than seeing this as an opportunity for representation, it seems clear he realized that his identity might be the very reason he was chosen, which could lead to his being placed in a box due to that identity.

In another instance, he describes the time he was nominated for the Jindřich Chalupický Award by a curator who had not seen his work in person and whom he had met only once. When he asked why she nominated him, she admitted it was a political act and that she, "wanted to vote unprivileged."<sup>32</sup> His hesitation with this nomination came from the fear that his origins, not his work, were what got him nominated, and that his authentic voice would not be heard again. He asks, "Would my identity in the media also be reduced to my origins? Wouldn't I be labeled as different, like the one who doesn't belong here? Is there nothing more than an identity sticker in our statement?"<sup>33</sup> In this instance, there was a very real risk that he would be pigeonholed by his identity. He would be reduced to one single aspect of himself as opposed to the work he created. He very well could have used that identity to his advantage, but it would mean becoming a representative of a community on the assumption that everyone with the same identity held similar experiences.

The above example illustrates why it is important for an artist to take a step back when asked to participate in a show of "all females" or, "all Vietnamese artists." For while it might seem to be a positive thing, it can also be a façade that only looks like

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

diversity from the outside. One's work should be considered because of what their work brings to the conversation, not be reduced by their identity under the guise of celebrating it. It would be different if the artist's work included themes of gender inequality, or identity conflicts, etc. and worked closely with these topics, but to invite someone to a show based solely on one aspect of their identity is problematic as it continues to show otherness and brings a connotation of the "different ones" while reducing them to one single attribute. The labels alone create a position where the one labeling has some sense of authority, and the one being labeled is being put into a marginalized position. We use labels as a form of explanation, a way to explain something different from the standard. This situation means labels are there to marginalize people and show the difference between two people (e.g., "I do not have a label, therefore I am already understood as a norm and don't need explanation").

Regardless of how an artist intends to use certain labels, whether for self-expression or a means to further representation of a community, it is important for them to understand the societal views around the labels and that their intention as an artist is not always reflective of the outcome. Because identity is incredibly politicized, labels have the ability to harm artists because of their inherent potential to marginalize them further.

It is, therefore, imperative that artists understand the politics around labels and identity before claiming them. There will always be stereotypes and associations that come with certain labels, and we may not be able to influence these views, given their often global reach. As an artist, it is important to understand this when deciding to claim an identity, as it can immediately put them in a box when interacting with curators, institutions, or prospective buyers of their work. These identities have the potential to, and often do, push artists further into otherness.



## Conclusion

Throughout history, Western society has held the commanding point of view when it comes to determining what constitutes contemporary art. With this sense of authority, they have been able to decide which works of art will be classified as major and which ones will be classified as minor. It is this authority that has governed all institutions, markets, and capital and made it possible for the West to consider itself as the “norm” or what is standard. Because the West has been a dominating force, it has, whether inadvertently or by design, made all other cultures an “other.” It has created a space where anyone who differs from the Eurocentric view becomes a culture that needs explanation. The notion that everyone else needs explanation because they differ from the “norm” forces any artist outside of that “norm” (i.e., an artist from any other background) to then become representatives of their own culture.

While this can be seen on a global scale between the West and the East, it can also be seen within Western society. Because, the West is an incredibly heterogeneous place, it is important to distinguish who has actually been the dominating force. It is not simply the West, but it is, specifically, the Western white male who has held the commanding point of view in contemporary art. This demographic has historically held all authority; it has forced any “others” into marginalized positions creating stereotypes and generalizations of these groups. This is seen throughout the history of women in contemporary art and can be tied to any other group of people that have not had equal access and representation within the community. Although there have made major strides to diversify the community and allow everyone the same opportunities, there is still a long way to go.

As we continue to fight for diversity and representation within the art scene, it is important to remember the position between the Western white male and “others.” For marginalized groups, the answer is not as simple as providing increased

representation. Artists must consider the politics around identity as well as the effects that claiming certain identities will have on them and their peers. Marginalized artists have been the subject of many stereotypes and associations; claiming identities tied to those stereotypes and associations has the potential to further divide groups of people by keeping them in their otherness due to societal stereotypes. With the inclusion of marginalized voices in the conversation, it is important to look at identity politics more closely.

The question of identity being a trap or a tool is, in itself, a paradox as Christina Quarles, mentioned, and it is one that cannot be ignored. In order to have adequate change and create equal opportunities for marginalized groups, the extant, hegemonic power structures of the white Western male must be broken down. One must understand the relationship between the ones who label and the ones who are labelled. It is these labels that perpetuate otherness and show which communities are considered a standard and which require explanation. Creating spaces where marginalized groups get more representation seems like a tool in theory, but it is often a trap to pigeonhole artists into a single identity. It reduces artists down to one aspect of their identity as opposed to recognizing that identities are intersectional and multifaceted and therefore cannot have representatives based on one label. While it is up to each individual artist to decide how to work within the constraints of identity politics, it is imperative that we, as a collective, continue to bring awareness to these issues moving forward.

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