

“Picturing Power and Privilege” Interview Transcript

Jim O’Donnell and Genevieve Wagner

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Genevieve Wagner

Hello and welcome to a conversation with Jim O’Donnell. I am joined by Jim O’Donnell. He is a Ph.D. student in the school of Arts Administration, Education, and Policy. His new exhibition, “Picturing Power and Privilege,” will be on view at Urban Arts Space coming up soon; you can access this exhibition by heading to uas.osu.edu/events for more information. Thank you so much for joining me today Jim.

Jim O’Donnell

Yeah, absolutely. Thanks for having me.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah. And to begin can you give viewers a brief overview of your exhibition?

Jim O’Donnell

Sure. So, the exhibition features the photography and text from a group of undergraduate that I teach at Ohio State University and there in my visual culture investigating social justice and diversity class. So, this is a show of – these aren’t photography students, by any means – these are just everyday folks, who’ve been tasked with finding images or creating images of privilege, oppression, power, and social justice out in their daily lives basically.

Genevieve Wagner

Thank you. And a bit more on the structure of this project and how this came to be: I know that in creating the class project, you looked to Kristen McCann’s study on multicultural competency and social justice curriculum, so the study explores the use of photography, does it spark discussions of privilege, and oppression, and social justice. So, how did this structure operate in your classroom?

Jim O’Donnell

So, that McCann study was really, really influential to me because what struck me about that was this idea that people often lack the visual vocabulary – they often – they might like the visual vocabulary to talk about certain topics, especially controversial ones, or ones that can be more kind of abstract, so that really made me think about how I could have my students, we could all be talking about the same term but be talking about very different things. It’s kind of like the word love, y’know?

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah.

Jim O'Donnell

It can just be profound, it can be so all encompassing, but also so family specific to each person that oftentimes we can be talking about the same thing, but not really be talking about the same thing. So, the really nice thing about incorporating photograph is that it brings in the concrete element, where each person can, can not only hear the words via the other person, but also see what they're seeing and folks can help each other notice things that they may not notice otherwise. So, it's this cool sort of individual, but also social kind of interaction that, for me, is really interesting because it just helps, I found that it helps students notice things more. And that's sort of my objective as an art educator, is just helping folks notice things.

Genevieve Wagner

Right, so yeah, so after the class is over, they will have these tools of noticing these things in their everyday life as well --

Jim O'Donnell

Yeah, that...

Genevieve Wagner

-- which is a great thing to give your students, yeah.

Jim O'Donnell

Thank you. That's the idea, you know, is once you -- once they have done this before, y'know they've used their camera phone every day, but once they've used it for this particular purpose I wonder how much of that memory might stick with them whenever they're out and about taking photos and things.

Genevieve Wagner

And so, after photographs, the students were tasked with answering some questions as a reflection and these questions include questions like "what was most interesting and meaningful thing to you about this task?" or "how do you think your photographs relate to your social identity, if at all?" among other questions. Were there questions that prompted particularly intriguing responses from your students?

Jim O'Donnell

As far as the... so many of the responses had really intriguing bits where, y'know, folks were, there was a lot of realization as far as folks seeing things that they don't normally see. So, there's so much about the idea of power for example, there's so much about privilege, and power, and social justice that is often invisible to people or, y'know, they just don't think about maybe in their daily lives or many of my students might be privileged enough to not have to think about these ideas in their daily lives.

The prompt of them looking for these things elicited a lot of different strategies or how they were going to notice these things, or find these things, or look for these things. In responding to the questions, it really helped students sort of communicate their point of view, what they

were seeing, and then elaborating on that for each other. Where folks were helping each other notice things, like “oh, y’know, I would have walked by that a hundred times and never even seen that,” or one, or one in particular that struck me as personal but also profound was a student who took a photo of her friend in a haircare aisle -- or in a cosmetic section of a department store -- talking about how its, its very difficult as a black women to find products that are appropriate for her, or work for her.

And this was something that for a lot of my students, uh, for several of the student in the class who were white, who have never experienced that difficulty, even something that maybe everyday that was something that for them I thought really profound, just as far as how they, y’know, we see the world and we forget it’s often easier to think about how we see the world as opposed to how other people see the world and that was a really good question, that um, where they’re asked to actually think about like, do other people see – would other people see what you’re seeing? Y’know a lot of people were like “no, I think they need that explanation, so it’s an interesting kind of balancing of text and image that they’re thinking about there.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah totally, and these are conversations that you wouldn’t really have in a classroom, so it’s great that you’re providing like a way for people to have these conversation and realize these little differences in their experience of like everyday life and how that compares to their -- [clears throat] pardon me – their fellow students, yeah its great. And a bit more on the discussion element: so, I know you have done this project in the past, but you’re doing it at the moment as well. So how do these discussions operate normally as compared to virtually?

Jim O’Donnell

So, um, it’s really interesting to do it virtually versus online. I find, they both have their pros and cons with doing it online if it was I think students were, as far as, as far as, their responses to each other it’s not as an intense period of discussion, we’re not looking at all the images together and were not, so it’s not necessarily as centralized as an experience in the classroom so it was really chose your own adventure as far as looking at whatever they wanted to, responding to whichever one they wanted to too, sort of picking and choosing, but I did find that everyone, I found that online that I heard from, more people also, and that way was kind of more democratic or egalitarian in this sense that everybody got to put in their two cents regardless.

Whereas, in an in class discussion you often don’t have time or space for every single person to offer as much input as they might want, so those are kind of the balancing act, where it’s like you can get a lot more content doing it online, a lot more response, but you don’t necessarily all have that same shared experience because different folks aren’t looking at what you’re looking at, y’know? it’s the same, but different.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah, yeah, and I know like right now, doing a lot of virtual conversation , especially on like discussion boards, and it can be nice for people who are super comfortable speaking in a large

lecture hall or in large group, um, we're all pretty comfortable typing and responding via discussion boards or texting. It is kind of a democratic way of like conversing and having discussions these days, which is interesting I hadn't really noticed that until we have been doing so many virtual things, so it's interesting to hear how it's operating for you.

Jim O'Donnell

Yeah, it's something that I would like to maybe continue, I would like to continue that maybe more in the future, regardless of how things shake out, just in the sense that, y'know, when you're in person, there's that interesting dynamic of whether someone who's silent or who might dominate the conversation, that's this whole other dynamic to this discussion of justice, and power, and privilege, but when you do it online y'know, folks might not necessarily see the person, or know exactly their background when they are responding to them, its black and white text, and I haven't had anyone necessarily dominate a conversation online, so that's kind of, I think I like that actually. [laughs]

Genevieve Wagner

I know! Yeah, I think I, I really savor in-person conversations, but there are tools that we are all learning about and figuring out that are good and having conversations virtually is a plus.

Jim O'Donnell

Yeah especially around topics that some folks might be, umm, part of a big private class is being part of this comfort and leaning into these conversations that might be otherwise uncomfortable and so, I think to a certain extent, even though there is a permanence to what you say online, y'know when you type something out and publish it, as the same time there may be more openness as far as not feeling like you're in the spotlight when you're speaking perhaps. I think some good things can come out of this as well.

Genevieve Wagner

I agree, yeah.

Jim O'Donnell

Yeah.

Genevieve Wagner

And a final question for you Jim, a question about the learning outcomes of this project, the class was prompted, the class is like the visual culture investing diversity and social justice, that's the name of the course you have created, so how did you observe this project enrich your class discussion on privilege, oppression, and social justice?

Jim O'Donnell

Yes, it's a class that I teach through the department of arts administration, education and policy. They've been doing it for years, and so they do allow the students who teach it to include assignments that they create and, so that's what this assignment was, was one that I created to, along, that fits the topic, y'know, a big part of the class when you're talking about

visual culture, y'know that such a big domain, pretty much anything material or anything you can see essentially, bringing it back home to these, sort of personal, y'know, art doesn't have to be something outside for your everyday experience.

In a lot of ways, we think of art making as sort of a privilege and I think that part of this assignment is bringing it back to the everyday kind of common experience, almost everybody's got a smart phone now, almost everybody's snapping pictures with these things, you can also use these things for art-making and that's just something that the everyday person maybe thinks about, so. I do have students who after that, do continue to take photos or think about an artful way of looking at the world and noticing these things, students do refer back to their photos, and refer back to that discussion as far as y'know remember when I took this photo, what I was showing.

I think there's a lot to be said about taking these like a mentioned before these sorts of abstract ideas, I mean, personally I have had so many interactions over the years where, y'know, I been talking to someone about something and only, y'know, only 15 minutes into the conversation, or maybe a couple of meetings later we realize we are talking around each other, we are using the same words but different language. For my students they often have a more abstract idealistic of what social justice is and so part of what is good about this assignment is the takeaway that it can be something that, y'know, they talk about, "now, I notice things more." And that is really the first step, just kind of tapping the fish on the shoulder and saying, have you noticed all this water around you? It's just something they don't think about necessarily without.

So, to hear them talk about that after the fact and say like "I'm really noticing these things more, these things I never really thought about." That's kind of the seed you want to plant as far as you know, I think just art in general for me is just that the idea of noticing something and y'know regardless of whether you write, draw, paint, dance, or perform, it's all about sort of that, just noticing something that you hadn't noticed before and sharing that with other people. I just really like that idea of sort of the, kind of like the citizen journal: you have the tools, you have everything you need right now to be creative, y'know, like to, maybe not address these issues directly right away, but to at least start thinking about these things that are affecting your life and other people's lives all the time. So, that, yeah, sorry for the long answer.

Genevieve Wagner

No, it's wonderful.

Jim O'Donnell

So, after the fact, I do hear these kinds of comments and that's really gratifying.

Genevieve Wagner

Yeah teaching your students how to observe and how to like be observant citizens is a great, is a great thing to teach them. Wonderful. Thank you so much Jim for diving into your project and expounding upon the things your students have learned and the discussion that you've had. It's

really inspiring. I am really excited for viewers to see your exhibition. Once again, the exhibition is called "Picturing Power and Privilege" and it will be on view at Urban Arts Space you can head to uas.osu.edu/events to learn more. Thank you so much, Jim!

Jim O'Donnell

Thanks, Genevieve!

Genevieve Wagner

Alright, have a great day.

Jim O'Donnell

Yeah, you too.