

Life Interrupted: Art for Social Change

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Life Interrupted: Art for Social Change is a cross disciplinary project that connected the Japanese American Internment Camps of World War II to today's issues of discrimination, racial prejudice, xenophobia, and civil rights violations. This paper discusses the interactive art installation with students that engaged the public to participate in the project for a deeper understanding of the social justice issues. The goal of this project was to not only educate people about the internment camps but also to move people to be more tolerant and accepting of all persons and to give us hope for the future.

INTRODUCTION

"Art has the massive power to move people to social change."
—Katie Dupere

Art can be powerful tool to connect and cross the boundaries of time and space with social justice issues. Muslim travel bans, the Pulse nightclub shooting targeting Latinos and the LGBTQ community, the white supremacist march in Charlottesville, Virginia, desecration of Jewish cemeteries, police shootings and racial profiling of African Americans, rescinding of the Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals act remind us constantly of the divisive time in which we live. Life Interrupted was a series of events held in Springfield, Missouri, connecting proximate issues of racial prejudice, discrimination, immigration, xenophobia and civil rights violations with the remote: the Japanese American Internment Camps of World War II.

LIFE INTERRUPTED EVENTS

Life Interrupted: Art for Social Change brought together students and faculty in architecture, art, political science, humanities and history with the general public. Held on Drury University's campus in Springfield, Missouri, in February 2017, the majority of the seven events took place over the course of a week (see Figure 1).

The project kicked off with the round table discussion led by Dr. Jeff VanDenBerg, Chair of the Political Science Department and Dr. Dan Ponder, the L.E. Meador Center endowed chair of Political Science, with local leaders of the NAACP, PROMO, promoting equal rights for all Missourians, the Imam of the Islamic Society of Joplin, the rabbi of Temple Israel and a member of the Springfield City Council. The discussion looked at the local and global political, religious, racial and gender equity environment today and offered steps towards making real and positive changes.

The art exhibition and art installation were part of the monthly First Friday Artwalk and linked the Japanese American Internment Camps with social justice issues of today through an audience participation component.

CORE Performance Company of Atlanta and Houston performed, Life Interrupted, a richly layered work of contemporary dance, art, and music that drew inspiration from the experiences of the U. S. citizens of Japanese descent who were interned on American soil during WWII. While rooted in this specific story, the work ultimately created a universal experience related to post-war emigration and xenophobia as a response to historical events. CORE also led a story circle/dance workshop with community participants in the art gallery and a master dance class with Missouri State University students.

A panel discussion on Architecture and Power was led by Drury University's Dean of the Hammons School of Architecture, Dr. Robert Weddle, with panelists Dr. Panos Leventis and Nancy Chikaraishi and was held on site in the art gallery. Syrian refugee camps, Japanese American Internment Camps, immigration, the leadership role architect's need to take and the power of art and architecture were topics of the discussion.

Lastly, six semester long university courses incorporated social justice themes into their classes: Global Foundations Middle East, Introduction to Comparative Politics, Introduction to Law and Society, Congress and the Presidency, History of Modern Japan, Revolutions, and Identity and Self, a non-fiction creative writing class.

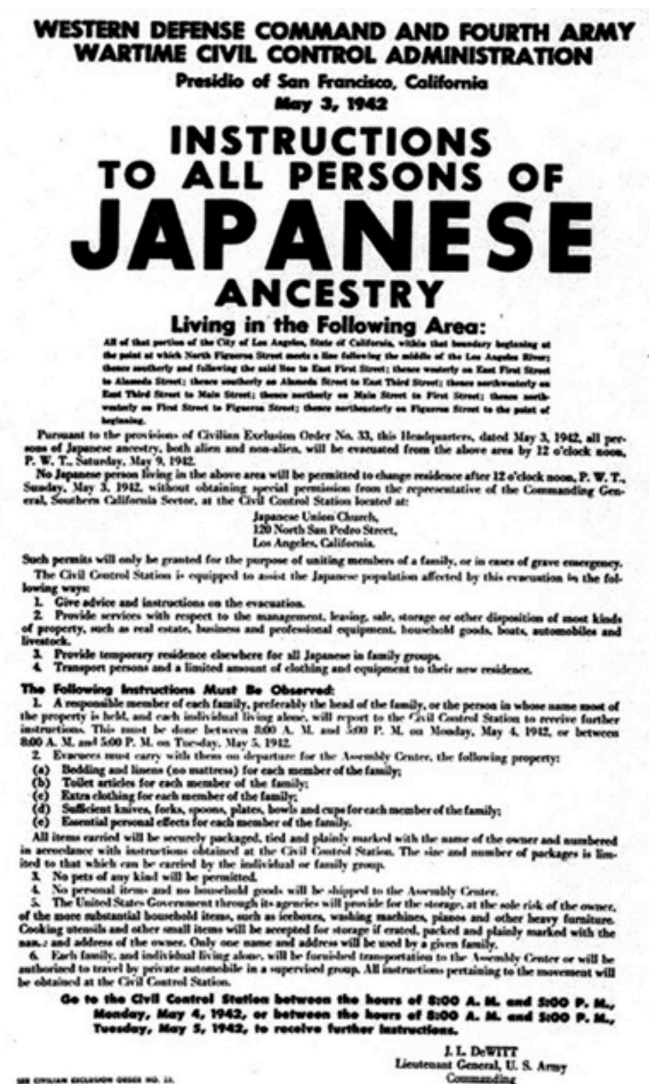
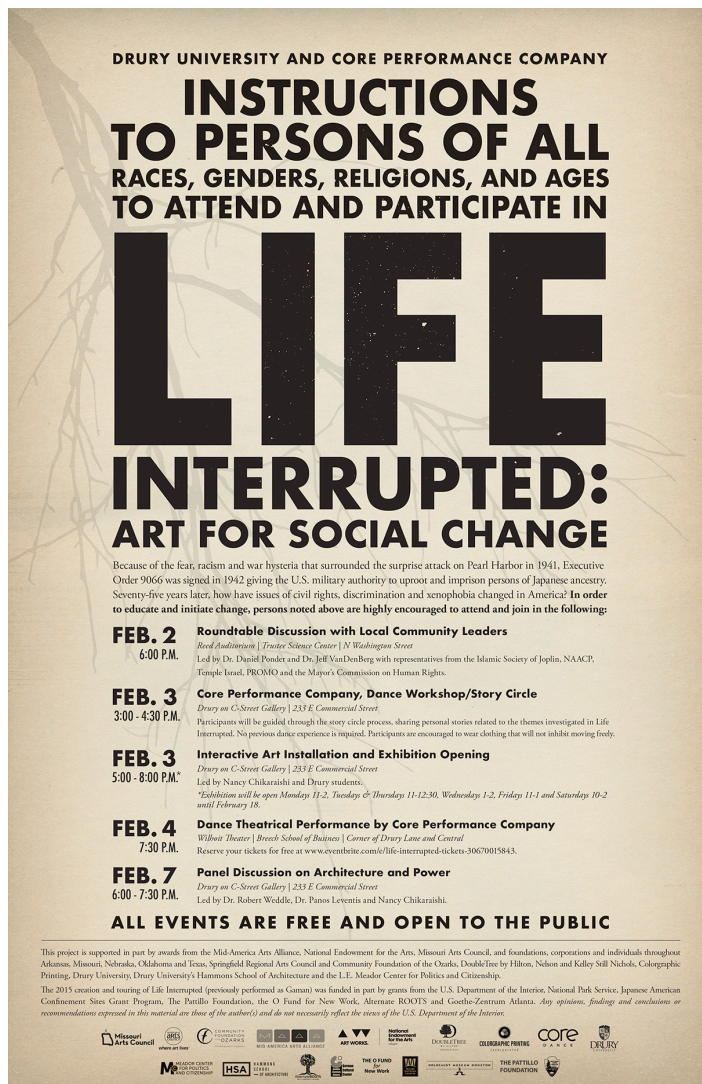


Figure 1. left, Life Interrupted promotion poster designed by Casey Dye and inspired by Evacuation Order, 2017; right, Evacuation Order, signed by J. L. DeWitt, Lieutenant General, U. S. Army, May 3, 1942.

PROJECT TIMING AND EXECUTIVE ORDERS

The connection between the proximate and remote was further heightened by the timing of the project and the signing of executive orders. Life Interrupted events occurred one week after President Trump signed the first executive order on January 27, 2017 banning refugees and people from 7 predominantly Muslim countries from entering the United States. Seventy-five years ago in 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed executive order 9066, giving the military the power to evacuate and intern 110,000 Japanese aliens and Japanese American citizens during WWII. Discrimination, religious or racial, was a key issue in both of these executive orders.

A PERSONAL CONNECTION

My grandparents came to this country from Japan. My parents were born in America and are American citizens. As young adults, they were forced to leave California along with their families to live in a Japanese American internment camp in the remote swampy south-east corner of Arkansas. They lost their homes, jobs, possessions and

sense of belonging. They experienced the pain and embarrassment of exclusion, displacement, and racial targeting because they looked like the enemy in a time of fear and war. My uncles fought in WWII while their parents were interned behind barbed wire fences. While I have a personal connection to this event, the themes and ideas are universal and resonate with all immigrant groups.

INTERACTIVE ART INSTALLATION

The art installation and art exhibit took place at the Drury Center on C-Street gallery during Springfield's monthly Artwalk. Upon entering the gallery, a timeline of the causes and history of the Japanese American Internment camps was presented. Charcoal drawings, paintings and sculpture created from research and stories my parents told me of their experiences in the camps were exhibited throughout the space.

Two large art installations were created through collaboration with more than twenty students, faculty and staff from the disciplines of architecture, art administration and physics. Planning occurred in



Figure 2. Life Interrupted-Life in limbo, wood, wire, twine, rocks, 40' long x 9' wide x 9' high, 2017, Nancy Chikaraishi and Drury University students (Nancy Chikaraishi 2017).

the fall semester with the build occurring one month prior to the opening. Students, aged 5-9 years of age, from a local Montessori school were interviewed about their hopes for the future for the video piece as part of one of the installations. Borders, boundaries, displacement, lives suspended or on hold, loyalty, disorientation and confusion were some of the themes explored in the installations. The two artworks included a hanging twine and rock sculpture and a multi-media "barrack-type" structure, both encouraged spatial movement through the pieces and interactive audience participation.

Ernest Edmonds states "art becomes interactive when audience participation becomes integral to the work." He believes that how the audience behaves and responds to the artwork is the most critical factor. "Audience engagement cannot be seen just in terms of how long they look at a work. It needs to be in terms of what they do, how they develop interactions with the piece and such questions as whether they experience pain or pleasure." (Candy and Edmonds 2011, 18)

In the first interactive art piece, hanging twine was weighted by stones hovering above the ground on a 1'x1' grid measuring 40' long x 9' wide x 9' high. Visitors were allowed to walk through the scratchy twine and suspended rocks that ran the full length of the gallery street front window. The sculpture swayed and moved and recalled the Japanese Americans whose lives were suspended and on hold while interned in the camps. This also relates to many immigrants today from all countries and especially the 800,000 Dreamers whose lives are in a state of limbo amidst possible deportation due to our changing political climate (see Figure 2).

The second interactive sculpture is a simple structure used to recall the primitive barracks in which the internees lived (see Figure 3). Creating a 2-foot border around the barrack structure were quotes written on the ground, including "Only what we could carry was the rule, so we carried Strength, Dignity and Soul" by poet Laureate and Jerome internee Lawson Fusao Inada (Cahan and Williams 2016, 1). Pairs of old shoes reinforced this edge to recall the real people imprisoned in the camps.

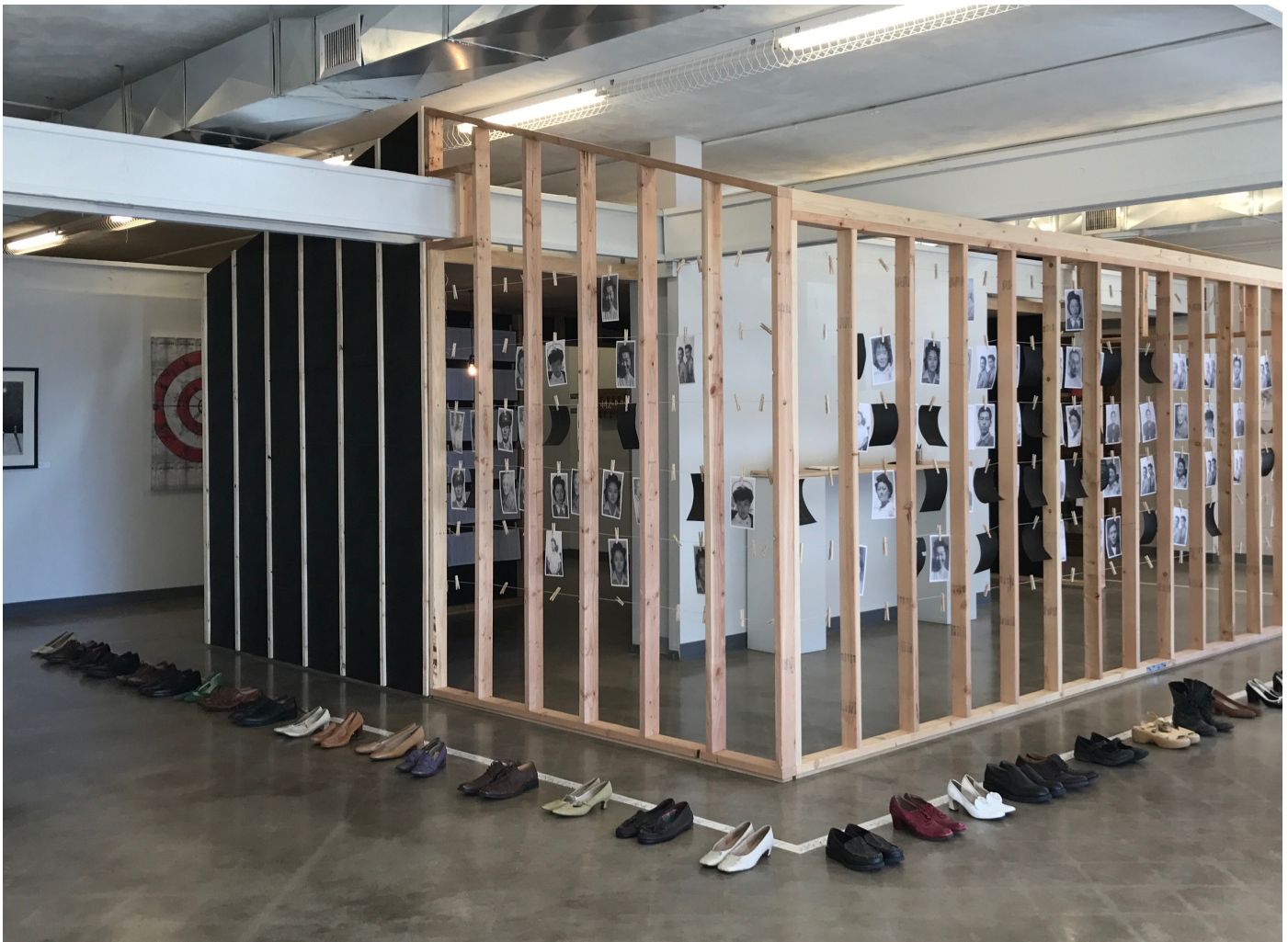


Figure 3. Barracks: Past and Future, 20' W x 24'L x 9' H, wood studs, plywood, tar paper, batten strips, twine, clothespins, paper, pens, US registry of Internees at Rohwer Internment camp, light bulb, projector, video by Nancy Chikaraishi, edited by Evan Paschke, by Nancy Chikaraishi and Drury University students, staff and faculty, (Nancy Chikaraishi 2017).

A dark versus light metaphor created an atmosphere of enclosure of the past contrasted with the openness and hope for the future. The darker half was enclosed by wood studs covered by tar paper and batten strips, the actual building material used for the walls and roofs in the camps. Lit by a single light bulb typical of each barrack, the government list of internees' names and data lined the inside of these walls. Upon entering the enclosed space, questions such as these were projected on the wall:

America is a country of Immigrants. Where did your family emigrate from?

Are all immigrants bad or just the ones you don't know?

What would our world look like without discrimination or racism?

How does your race define your identity?

As one progressed through the structure, the other half was light and open. The walls were made only of vertical wood studs with

long rows of horizontal twine wound around screws. An interactive piece allowed participants to write responses to prompts and add these incrementally to the installation. Visitors then used clothes pins to hang their responses on the twine (see Figure 4). As more people added their cards, the walls of the installation filled with the comments of over 200 participants. A video of elementary children telling their "hopes for the future" played as one exited the structure.

AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT

Audience members were asked to respond to 4 prompts. Below are some of the responses (see Figure 5).

In one word, describe what we need now in order to overcome the divisive forces in America:

Inclusion | Compassion | Acceptance | Education | Open-mindedness
Dialogue | Empathy | Impeachment | Understanding | Peace
Humility | Listening | Faith | Love | Truth



Figure 4. Architecture student Meagan Ley hanging up her response card, (Aaron Scott, 2017).

My greatest hope for the future is:

Less Hate | Our shared humanity | People to stop yelling everything they think is right and listen to what they think is wrong for a change | Peace | People standing up for one another, not just themselves | Acceptance & understanding of ALL Individuals | To end discrimination entirely | That we will recognize and respect each other, and to honor our differences as a catalyst for progress | That one day we can all stand together and celebrate our differences | Understanding for all! Tolerance for all! | People raising each other up and not putting them down | That equality will help end prejudice and bring peace | God | That we'd learn to hear everyone's opinion and perspective, Value those discussions, Don't disqualify someone's experiences

Please share a time when you experienced/witnessed discrimination of any kind:

1967 Riots in schools | Hate for color and differences | I have seen Black men harassed and picked up off the streets without having done anything | I was denied a visa to visit a country because I'm American | While in middle and high school, I was bullied pretty much daily by my classmates as they mocked me for being gay | Any time I've heard a racial slur used, and everyone was okay with it, it

wasn't offensive, it was a way of life | I'm a woman. We experience discrimination every day

A loyal American is someone who...:

Values equality, religious tolerance and social justice | Respects and understands (that) our differences make us unique and united | Accepts people different than them | Defends the ideals of the Constitution | Has respect for their fellow American, no matter what their background or circumstance | Knows the real values of liberty, justice and freedom | Stands for the ideal of freedom for ALL

Community participation contributed to an understanding of the hearts and minds of Springfield, Missourians on February 3-14, 2017. The same questions and prompts were given February 23-26 in Atlanta, Georgia. Responses from audience participants in Atlanta were focused on segregation and race. Engaging the participants to write responses to questions and prompts, gave them a voice to display and share their thoughts and hopes for the future. This interactive component was pivotal in creating a connection from the Japanese American Internment Camps closed seventy-five years ago to the current state of our local and global society, and to give our shared community hope for the future.

QUALITATIVE IMPACT

As Ernest Edmonds states, the impact of the art work is measured by whether it elicits "pain or pleasure" in the viewer (Candy and Edmonds 2011, 18). Sculpture professor, Diedre Argyle, of Missouri State University, told me that the person who came with her to the exhibit, left crying because she was so upset and appalled that this could happen in America. Below are some of the comments written by participants. These confirm the "pain and sadness" felt by some viewers and the impact of the installation.

"This is such a powerful exhibit. While walking through and reading about all of this, my heart broke. It makes me so sad to think this happened and that it can still happen today. This has such a powerful message and I am so grateful. Thank you for opening my eyes."

—Melissa Schwartz

"What an impactful and timely and moving exhibition. Thank you so much for all the time, thought and work that you put into this. It makes me so sad to see your installation and at the same time strengthens my resolve to help work against such things happening today and in the future. Thank you!"

—Allie Gassmann

"Thank you for this profound and contemplative installation and reminder of our history. It has been such a strong part of creating my identity. I have no sadness or anger, but I think often about how the stories of my family have made me who I am."

—Pam Kanagawa Rupert

GRANTS AND FUNDING

Grant funding was a critical component of this project. Funding was awarded from local and state arts councils, such as, Mid-American

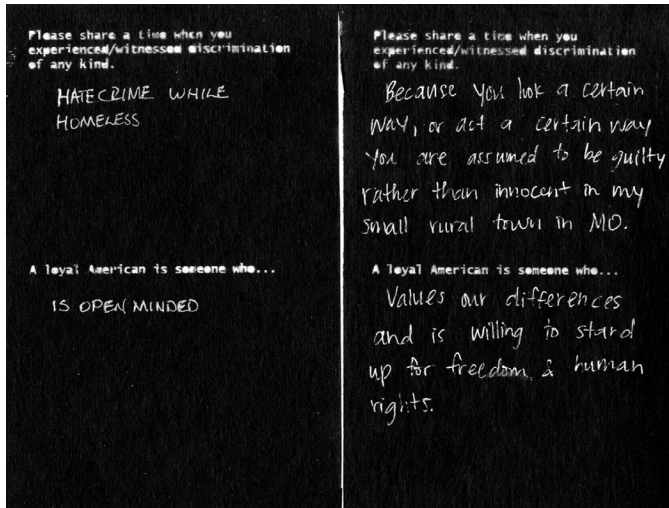


Figure 5. Tar paper response card by anonymous audience participants, 2017, (Nancy Chikaraishi 2017).

Arts Alliance, Missouri Arts Council, Community Foundation of the Ozarks, Springfield Regional Arts Council, National Endowment for the Arts and multiple private and corporate donors, Drury University Hammons School of Architecture, L.E. Meador Center for Politics and Citizenship, DoubleTree Hotel and Colorgraphics Printing.

REFLECTIONS

Art can be a powerful tool to engage in social justice issues. Art can bring awareness to critical issues, create a space for discussion and connect historical and current political events. While the conversation can sometimes be heated and intense, it is important to talk, listen and hear each other given the divisive state of our country. It is important to raise these issues and empower people to take action. Engaging people in this process takes them from being a bystander to an active participant.

Small liberal arts university allowed supportive connections across disciplines to take action together. Pulling this project together took the help of so many people. The Deans and faculty at our small university in other departments were so helpful in garnering cross disciplinary support for the project and encouraging student attendance at all the events.

Multiple disciplinary project engaged a broader audience. The Life Interrupted project created a venue for a larger more diverse group of students, faculty and staff to be involved, thus making a deeper impact on our university community and the greater local community. Often art projects, engage the local art community but rarely involves political science, history and humanities students and faculty. In the architecture department, we often engage a whole-school approach to design-build projects for a more meaningful and richer experience for all (Sooter, Chikaraishi and Hedges 2014, 554).

I was surprised to learn that people still do not know about the Japanese American Internment camps. Eight of the ten camps were located in remote places in the western part of the U. S. While some

people have heard of these camps, there are still many people who do not know about the two camps located in Arkansas: Jerome and Rohwer, where my parents were interned.

Working and listening to the students gave me hope for the future.

I worked for over 7 months with students outside of class time conceptualizing what this project could be, reactions we hoped to elicit and the many ways to design the interactive component of the project, as well as installing and de-installing the project in the gallery. Hearing the thoughts of the students, how they see the world, the injustices that they feel impassioned about, issues that are important to them gave me great hope for the future. Graduating students felt this type of hands on engagement was a unique and powerful experience in their education.

Life Interrupted was a way to bring our liberal arts university students, staff and faculty together and engage in a topic from different disciplinary lenses with people who don't normally engage with one another. The qualitative outcomes through quotes and reactions by some of the over 800 participants show the power of art to create awareness and meaningful discourse across time and space by connecting this remote event in American history with proximate issues of today.

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