PROFESSOR: This idea of social practice is one that a lot of theorists and critics have talked about and tried to frame. I think of social practice as an engagement in art-making within a more recent contemporary moment, although there are historical antecedents perhaps many decades prior to now. We might think, in, relatively speaking, last 30 to 50 years, some of these pieces start to come together. But one person who I've looked at to help theorize this notion of social practice is educator and artist Pablo Helguera.

Helguera says-- unlike social work that aims for betterment of humanity, defending human dignity, and strengthening human relationships, a socially engaged artist may subscribe to those same values but make work that ironizes, problematizes, and even enhances the tensions around those subjects in order to provoke reflection. So it's that end part of the phrase-- to provoke reflection-- that I bring into the classroom or that I try to center some of my work around this idea of-- what might we do to provoke reflection, not only in other people, but also in myself? Perhaps the work becomes a provocation in that sense.

And why would we want to do that? Well, Helguera says we want to do that perhaps to discover something in the process. These artists, he considers them-- renames them-- free agents, if you will. They insert themselves into the most unexpected social environments.

And they do so in ways that break away from disciplinary boundaries, hoping to discover something new in the process. So the idea of inserting oneself into an unexpected place or to perform a certain behavior or certain interaction when it's not expected, we would do that hoping to discover something in the process. So these two terms-- socially engaged art and social practice-- are connected.

Helguera prefers socially engaged art because it still has that word art in it. He shortens it to be SEA. But this idea of social practice is a wider range, is a term that seems to be a bit more widely encompassing of the range of practices that might fit those definitions.

So to go on, just a couple of more bits from Helguera. Again, there are other folks like Claire Bishop and Grant Kester and other folks who theorize and talk about socially engaged art. But I find Helguera's approach quite useful.

So he talks about socially engaged art or social practice as a multi-layered and a participatory

engagement. He says that there are these structures-- multiple structures or multiple layers-- among which are nominal participation, directed participation, creative participation, and collaborative. So there might be multiple ways to participate or engage the public or other individuals within this practice.

Helguera also talks about the idea of how these practices are linked to other disciplines. Specifically, we find tension between art practice and sociology, or social practice. But that trying to make sense of those tensions and say it's more art, it's like 85% this, or 16% of this something-- that's not what he's talking about. He says we want to stay in that unresolved space. It comes at us perhaps through a sense of art practices and disciplinary considerations. But that we want to remain in that unresolved space. We want it to be a bit messy.

So here's a bit of a longer one, and then we'll move beyond some of the theorizing. Helguera says social interaction occupies a central and inextricable part of any socially engaged artwork. You've got to have the social interaction. Just doing something and then hang it up and not having other people become participants at one of those layers is not enough.

Although one might argue that any artwork is a socially engaged practice. Once you put, let's say, a painting or a sculpture out to be seen, at least one person is seeing it. It's already an engaged in a social relationship. But Helguera goes further. He says socially engaged art is a hybrid, multidisciplinary activity that exists somewhere between art and non-art. And what has to happen is, you have to have actual-- and not hypothetical, not imagined-- social action. You actually have to engage with other people.

So last week outside in front of the building, we created ceramic water filters. We mixed clay and sawdust, and we had several people stop by to see what we were up to, get their hands dirty. We brought that mixture of clay and sawdust back upstairs. And we made ceramic water filters.

And these water filters will render contaminated water with microbes and pathogens, it will render it potable. And so this practice of performing the construction and the production of ceramic water filters fits within Helguera's notion of socially engaged art. So I'm telling you that is kind of a back step to what we did last week, but also to give you a specific example.

But then I want to give you some other examples. And some of the examples that I want to share with you push this idea of telling stories that might not be told otherwise. I was in a course. I was teaching a course a few years ago to undergraduate art education students.

We're trying to make sense of-- what is it that art does? Why are we teaching art? What is the central importance, or what seems to be at the core? Not that there might be a singular core. But there could be multiple cores.

And one of the students said, you know what? I think art allows us to tell stories that we would not be able to tell otherwise. In some ways, we might not be able to tell them, or we probably shouldn't tell them otherwise as completely through art practice. And so I kind of latch onto that.

But I'd like to add the difficult stories. The work that I try to do is interested in those difficult stories that might not be told otherwise. Not that they're not told, but they wouldn't be told in the same ways that socially engaged art would do that. So as I think about this approach to telling difficult stories, I think of the word double-take-- when you see something and then you have to look again. This is a double-take, right?

You see it once, but it caused you to stop and take a second look. We might think of research in the same way. We can search. But when we research, we search again. It's to look again, to do this double-take.

I also appreciate the idea of making trouble. Not only the idea of troubling something through the making of objects or the making of experiences or making of social actions, but the making of trouble in the idea of troubling things that others have made, whether they be objects or social constructs or ideologies. So it's this idea of trouble making and making trouble that I like to play with. And there's still images from one of the Marx Brothers films where Harpo and Groucho, essentially the mirror breaks, and they're mirroring each other.

So there's all this double-take going on. They're looking and looking again. And so you have this idea of visuality happening, the perspective of the viewer.

But it's through this social interaction. And there a number of iterations of that Marx Brothers mirror scene that play out in cartoons, that play out in other stories. So other ways that I've made trouble in the past was-- and to think about what we're seeing and how we're seeing it-- was to take a look at February. Quite often, I have been invited to give talks at schools or at other institutions. And they like to bring me in in February. I guess it's because February is the month of Valentine's Day, and they know that I'm a very passionate person.

But if they look more closely at my work, they say I deal with some difficult issues, and not the least of which is the construct of racism. And that's also the month where you have Black History Month. And so I'm pretty sure that's why they bring me in.

So if we look at February a bit differently, if we engage with that month, not only is it the month where we-- let's look at a specific group of others, which suggests there is another construct against which we are situating African-Americans. But also the idea of February being the month for Valentine's Day, is it's shortest month of the year.

And the shortest month of the year is the year we say-- go tell other people how much you love them. I mean, you would think a month with 31 days would be a better choice for that. Or maybe all year long we should think in more passionate and considerate ways.

So this is the work I did a number of years ago that revolved around those two concepts. I also am interested in this idea of disruption. I mentioned this briefly last week. And I think disruption happens in a number of ways-- pushing back, questioning. I'm interested in questioning answers rather than answering questions.

One of the ways I've done that is, I've looked at barber shops as pedagogical spaces, as curriculum spaces. What can we learn in a barber shop? And I wrote an article about Pat's Barber Shop in Norfolk, Virginia.

And I tried to make the case that what happens in a barbershop is a hyper-textual, multi-layered, multifaceted, learner-centered space of inquiry. That you might go in trying to get a haircut, but you come out with an education. And this happens in all sorts of service locations-- hair salons and other places where conversation becomes essential to those locations.

I've also written about digital technology. When my wife and I learned we were expecting our birth of our daughter, I started to think-- well, that's fantastic. And I thought-- oh, my goodness I'm going to be someone's parent. And, oh, I need to think this through now. This is a big deal.

So I started writing myself a series of emails to explain to our unborn child who I thought I was and what I was working through. And so that series of emails became an article, or a chapter, an email from a digital daddy. And I was trying to make sense of how her future existence and identity would be mediated through digital technology. But what came through in the process of that was her multi-ethnic identity and the ways that I imagined camera technology, surveillance technology, being scrutinized at airports-- among other approaches-- would

render her body the object of examination.

I want to shift now to tell you a story about Henry Brown. I'm not sure if you're familiar with the Henry Brown who I think about quite often. Henry Brown lived in Virginia outside of Richmond in Henrico County.

And there's Henry in the middle. He's inside this box, and there's some people outside the box. So I guess they're thinking outside the box.

And the story of Henry Brown was told by himself. He narrated this story of himself. And there are many versions, or at least it was published in a number of different contexts, in a number of different formats.

And so Henry Brown earned the name Henry Box Brown. He was in that box for a reason. I'm going to let you know why in just a second.

I brought-- I didn't bring them in. We have obtained a couple of pallets. And I put the wooden pallets on the floor here. So you have these two wooden pallets on the floor. And I want to read you a story. It's not a story that I wrote. Henry wrote it. But it's been retold and is retold by Ellen Levine.

And the story is "Henry's Freedom Box: A True Story from the Underground Railroad." The reason that I'm reading this to you on these pallets-- what you see are two pallets and this book that I put on a sidewalk in the middle of campus last year. And I let it sit there for 10 minutes or so. And then I sat on the pallets, and I read this story the way I'm going to read it to you. And people walked by. Some of them stopped and listened, and others did not.

Henry's Freedom Box-- Henry Brown wasn't sure how old he was. Henry was a slave, and slaves weren't allowed to know their birthdays. Henry and his brothers and sisters worked in the big house where the master lived. Henry's master had been good to Henry and his family.

But Henry's mother knew things could change. Do you see those leaves blowing in the wind? They're from the trees like the slave children are torn from their families.

One morning, the master called for Henry and his mother. They climbed the wide staircase. The master lay in the bed with only his head above the quilt. He was very ill. He beckoned them to come closer.

Some slaves were freed by their owners. Henry's heart beat fast. Maybe the master would set him free. But the master said, you're a good worker Henry. I'm giving you to my son. You must obey him and never tell a lie.

I will mail myself to a place where there are no slaves, he said. Henry, are you all right in there? All right, he answered. The cover was pried open. Henry stretched and stood up. Four men smiled at him. Welcome to Philadelphia.

At last, Henry had a birthday-- March 30, 1849, his first day of freedom. And from that day on, he also had a middle name. Everyone called him Henry Box Brown.

So this is the story of Henry Box Brown as told in a children's book by Ellen Levine. And it was illustrated by Kadir Nelson. Why did I read that story to you?

Well, I wanted you to hear the story of Henry Box Brown not the way that he told it, but the way that it was retold for children. That's a children's book. It's meant to be a children's book. It's meant for children to hear that story.

And it's a story that I've read as a bedtime story to our daughter. There are different versions of *Henry's Freedom Box,* different children's versions and different adult versions of telling this story. There are art approaches too. There's a monument to Henry Brown in Richmond, Virginia.

And this is a sculpture made out of metal. The same dimensions as that box that Henry was in. And etched in the ground, it says, "In a wooden crate similar to this one, Henry Brown, a Richmond tobacco worker, made the journey from slavery to freedom in 1849."

And that box is interesting because the lid is off, as you saw in that previous image, but one side is open. And it's open with a silhouette of a man crouched down. Now, Henry Brown was 5'8. I'm 5'8. And I was compelled to get inside that box.

And this idea of-- from Henry, thinking outside of the box meant literally to think inside the box and to put himself into a situation that was disrupting the current practices. But he was at a point at which he was willing to try anything. Now, this story of Henry Brown can be retold and can be recreated and be reproduced.

And there are some folks who-- you know, I make these connections. The image on the left is actually someone who is trying to get themselves out of this particular situation putting

themselves inside a suitcase and mailing oneself out of a horrible situation. The image on the right is actually a white student in black face as a Halloween costume going as Henry Box Brown. Now, both of these images relate directly to the Henry Box Brown story for me, but in different ways. They can be unpacked-- no pun intended-- to deal with various levels of class, of identity, of social situation, of systems of oppression, and expectations.

This idea of reading in public places-- just like I did with the Henry Brown work last year and also here-- I think is an important piece to consider. And the way in which we read to children, I think, is important. Words are very important. Words are powerful.

There are games that we play through social media in public spaces like Words with Friends. I play this game quite often. But there are some words that are unacceptable. You think-- what? There are some words that aren't-- well, if you misspell it, it's probably unacceptable.

Negro is an unacceptable term in Words with Friends. Really? Because that's a term I think people need to deal with and address and unpack. Asian is also an unacceptable term in Words with Friends. Now, I find these two examples interesting for the kind of work that I'm doing.

But there are some other words that are acceptable. And really big words matter. And just like socially engaged art that moves away from the materiality and more to the conceptual and the experiential, moving from specific labels to larger concepts and constructs seems to be of more value to Words with Friends as well.

For example, "conceptualizing" can earn you 1,469 points. That's a lot of points. So maybe there's something in conceptualizing that we need to do. So how do we conceptualize telling difficult stories?

Another children's book, *Goodnight Moon,* you might be familiar with this. Goodnight, moon. Goodnight, cow jumping over the moon. There's this interesting repetition.

Well, Larry Wilmore created a version of *Goodnight Moon.* He called it *Goodnight Slavery.* Larry Wilmore was a talk show spin-off from *The Jon Stewart Show.*

And so this show with Larry Wilmore, he decided that one of the skits that he did was to create a children's book called *Goodnight Slavery* inspired by the Texas legislature and the Texas Education board changing the curriculum. And changing certain terms, moving the term the transatlantic slave trade and renaming it the transatlantic triangular trade.

And so he has this entire piece where he pulls apart that movement, the essentially whitewashing of history. And so what you see there are lines from the book. "In a big red state, there was a textbook in a debate and too many knaves in one big cave and a book that is shut and a past full of smut and a cranky conservative with a stick up his butt. Good night, slavery. Good night, bravery. Good night to things we find unsavory."

Well, what are some of the things that they might find unsavory? Well, I'll get to that in a second. But this book *Goodnight Moon* has been told in different ways. It's a fixture within children's book culture that gets repurposed and reimagined.

Some of the ways that Wilmore understands what is being erased-- Goodnight KKK, Goodnight to the decimation of indigenous people on this continent. So these are all the things that the Texas curriculum was erasing or modifying or eliminating or renaming to make them seem less unsavory. And in one more skit, he reads this book to a classroom of kindergarten children. And their reactions are wonderful. But it's also-- you can tell it's kind of coached for the skit.

Reading public places-- different than reading *in* public places. We could also *read* public places. For example, in the summer-- for the past three summers-- I've had the opportunity to teach at Vermont College of Fine Arts.

And one of the courses that I teach looks at participatory inquiry in the public sphere. One of the assignments is for us to go to the State House, the State Capitol, which is just a mile and a half, two miles away from campus. And it's the smallest state capitol in the country. It's very accessible.

We sign up for a guided tour. And before the tour, I give each student a little figurine that I bought at the toy store, these little busts of US presidents. And I ask the students to go on the tour, to be polite on the tour. But I would like you to read the state capitol in conversation with the tiny president.

So on our walk down, in our mile and a half walk down, they're on their phones, and they're googling Theodore Roosevelt or Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln. And then they take cell phone shots. There's a close-up of tiny George, and in the back is big George. Or please keep off, and they put one of the presidents-- I think that's Buchanan-- inside the cannon.

Or they end up reading other people. And it's with this tiny president, this tiny object, that they're able to construct stories that couldn't be told otherwise. Putting that situation, that context, history, and related information that they have either brought to that space or that they learn on the tour in conversation with what they know about that president.