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Other Matters Always Matter: A Critical Reading of Humanitarian and Socially Engaged Art Education Practices

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Socially engaged art, or social practice art education, has increased in recent years, with a growing number of cases taking the form of interdisciplinary humanitarian responses to basic human needs—i.e. water, shelter, food, energy. Examples of this approach to art education are often lauded for their interdisciplinary collaborations with scientific and engineering partners. Art education at the intersection of socially engaged art and interdisciplinary humanitarian work offers a rich space for critical consideration of their ethical and artistic practices and assumptions about equity and agency. Many humanitarian efforts globally are arguably grounded within a “white savior” narrative that positions racial and cultural dominance as the source of technical knowledge in response to human needs. Research and reports of arts-based humanitarian efforts globally have neglected to consider the ways in which they reflect “white savior” practices. Through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens, this presentation will offer a critical reading of assumptions and practices that characterize interdisciplinary humanitarian efforts that often materialize as a result of artistic and scientific collaborations. The critical reading of socially engaged art education in this paper extends from research on art education in Western societies that considers curriculum, policy, and practices as implicit enactments of racism and white supremacy. Such a reading can be transferred to the humanitarian intentions and practices of some socially engaged art educators working in non-Western communities. As a CRT reading of socially engaged art education, this presentation will conclude with recommendations for interdisciplinary arts and science based humanitarian interventions.