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## Finding Meaning Through Art: An Analysis of Communicating Effectively to a Mass Audience

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# Finding meaning through art:

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AN ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATING EFFECTIVELY TO A MASS  
AUDIENCE

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**Finding meaning through art:****An Analysis of Communicating Effectively to a Mass Audience**

“I saw that her art spoke of healing, an intangible quality I still cannot fully articulate.”

This is what Makoto Fujimura, founder of The International Arts Movements, had to say when reviewing Pamela Alderman’s work. This statement fuels Pamela’s artwork today as she continues to provide works that attempt to reach out to those who are broken. Pamela’s largest audience for her artwork has come through her pieces being displayed in ArtPrize Grand Rapids for the past eight years. This art festival brings an audience of over 500,000 people to view and vote on approximately 1,500 entries (“ArtPrize,” 2017).

Pamela attempts to make pieces that create an impact on her viewers. For this Honors Senior Thesis paper, I will utilize communication theory and practices to explore concepts for effective communication to a mass audience. Accompanying this, the ideas behind what makes an event have a lasting impact will be explained and demonstrated through a comparison of two of Pamela’s competition entries. Lastly, I will include a recommendation to artists about how to make their future work effective.

***About the Artwork***

Pamela Alderman has entered all eight ArtPrize competitions with her most recent work in year eight titled *Color me orange – Color me kind*. This piece of work encouraged using kindness in order to end bullying. The main art piece was a Plexiglas and acrylic depiction of koi fish swimming against the current (*Figure 1*) representing that it is not always easy to be kind, but we can still persist. As inspiration for the piece, Pamela used a story of a child who was bullied, but then chose to treat the bully with kindness. This kindness resulted in a friendship

when it was least expected. Pamela invited her audience to tie orange ribbons on the surrounding mesh structure as a way of showing that they will exhibit the “Golden Rule” and spread kindness (Figure 2).

*Figure 1 Focus Point of Color me orange – Color me kind*



*Figure 2 Ribbons Tied Onto the Piece*





I worked alongside Pamela during ArtPrize Eight. Pamela did not know much about performing public relations tasks and therefore this was the focus of both myself and another intern, Elena. While working with Pamela I helped her gather stories from children and teenagers that had been bullied, participated in a radio interview, wrote press releases, and volunteered during the exhibit, handing out ribbons and interacting with the audience.

I was originally interested in Pamela's work after a presentation of another series of her artwork titled *The Scarlet Cord* (Figure 3). This piece focused on human trafficking shown through a forty-foot storage bin filled with thirty weathered doors and a series of pieces of artwork using a variety of materials. These were all connected by scarlet cords that ran throughout the exhibit to represent the trauma bond that children have to their trafficker. I was intrigued by the way that Pamela was not afraid to put a sizable social justice issues at the forefront of her work. Therefore, I was very excited about working with Pamela on the *Color me orange – Color me kind* piece, thinking it would have a similar impact as *The Scarlet Cord*.



Figure 3 *The Scarlet Cord* ArtPrize 2014

In my experience, this was not the case, and I have been left with a series of questions that I have been wrestling with ever since.

### *Communication Studies*

The purpose of an event, such as ArtPrize, is to make an impact. Artists within ArtPrize have the opportunity to display their work to a mass audience upward of half a million people. With this opportunity comes the challenge of communicating the message an artist is attempting to make through their artwork to a vast number of people with different perspectives, demographics, upbringing, and overall diversity. There are five communication theories and practices that can be discussed and applied to these circumstances. These are included within the interpretation of the artwork, interference when receiving messages, interactivity, newsworthiness, and persuasiveness.

### *Interpretation of Artwork*

Artists face an interesting challenge when they put their artwork on display. At a young age individuals are taught to read and write but what gets lost in the mix is how to interpret visual messages effectively (Kempka, 2012). ArtPrize has the ability to use social media, the most popular form of media today, to bring the visual aspects of the event to life, but does not necessarily support interpretation of the art. Interpretation is still only supported by traditional means; the artists competing in ArtPrize each have the title of their piece displayed and a written description of what the piece means or is inspired by. Or the artist needs to design into their piece other communication components. However, communication scholars also recognize that with the shortening of each human's attention span to less than that of a goldfish and the dawn of the era of social media, messages need to be short, concise, and direct (Laudau, 2015).

*Interference When Receiving Messages*

The Shannon Weaver Model within communication emphasizes the different aspects when sending and receiving messages. In this case, Pamela is the sender, the visitor is the receiver, and the artwork is the channel. However, there can be interference between the sender and receiver in the form of noise. This noise, in an atmosphere similar to ArtPrize, can take the form of other people, other artwork, the literal noise and of course, people constantly engaging with their smart phones (Shannon, Weaver, 7).

Technology has increased the amount of noise when sending and receiving messages, leading to difficulties in focusing on just one thing. Communication scholars often analyze commercials when doing studies on visual media and as of late are recognizing that commercials have adapted to today's short attention span shifting from 120 seconds to now only 15 seconds (Landau, 2015). Commercials are similar to artwork as they are trying to instantaneously get a message across, and even more similar to Pamela's work because they are trying to persuade the audience to do something. The question is: how to attract, and then keep the attention of a mass audience to get your message across? In the ArtPrize atmosphere, there is no way to eliminate all distractors and have the audience simply focus on the one piece of work. Therefore, considering this question is paramount to an artist being noticed and having impact, particularly at this venue.

*Interactivity*

The answer to keeping the audience interested may be bringing an interactive element to the piece (Rieser, 2011). Individuals have a wide variety of learning styles they use to consume information in different ways. Kolb's learning style inventory shows four different orientations: concrete experience, reflective observation, active experimentation, and abstract

conceptualization. Concrete experience learners enjoy a hands-on approach through which they can have an experience. The other orientations are based more upon visual learning or tactile learning. The visual learners best comprehend through looking at the art and reading the description, while the tactile learners will take what they learned and put it into practice, whether that be through being kind to others or talking to others about human trafficking (Kolb, 2005). To reach out to all learning styles, especially concrete experience, adding interactivity to the pieces creates a memorable and transformative experience.

### *Newsworthiness*

Similar to mass media, Pamela's art is another medium through which newsworthy stories are told. Topic choice, and the way which Pamela selects her stories can be related back to how journalists choose and write their stories. There are a few different elements that make a story newsworthy. The first of these is proxemics. This is the idea of localizing a story to make it relevant to the audience that will be seeing the story, in order for them to feel a direct relation to that story. This usually means interviewing or telling how this topic effects someone within the geographic region where it is presented or published. Another element of newsworthiness is timeliness. This is the notion that the story being covered is something new or recent. A story should not be overused or beaten down but rather the storyteller, whether it be a journalist or an artist, should constantly be trying to depict a story in a new and updated format. Stories involving crimes or negative vocabulary tend to get more publicity and readership as well and can be classified under newsworthy (Bednarik, Cable, 2017).

### *Persuasiveness*

Pamela's artwork, along with most pieces of art, is trying to convey a message. Pamela's work goes one step further, and is trying to persuade her audience to do something. A wide



variety of mediums are used to persuade an audience to act or change their mind on a topic. Studies have revealed that media can influence the public through agenda. It has been found that if the audience has a high interest along with high uncertainty about a subject then their opinions will be easier to sway (Weaver, 1977). An issue is obtrusive if the audience has had personal experience with the topic and less obtrusive if the audience has had no direct experience with the topic. An audience will be easily persuaded on an unobtrusive topic because they are relying on the media to teach them about the subject (Zucker, 1978). Since human trafficking is just beginning to be talked about in the news, it would be considered nonobtrusive when compared to bullying and kindness. These topics have been studied and are often spoken about making the issue obtrusive.

### ***Comparison of Pamela's ArtPrize Entries***

After hearing the success of *The Scarlet Cord*, it left me questioning why *Color me orange – Color me kind* did not appear to have a similar impact. ArtPrize has been a showcase for eight of Pamela's works and it has been clear that the past two entries have grabbed the audiences' attention with 100,000 ribbons being tied on *Color me orange – Color me kind* and 30,000 scarlet cords being distributed at *The Scarlet Cord* exhibit. However, it also was apparent to me that *Color me orange – Color me kind* did not have the same **impact** as *The Scarlet Cord* even though more guests interacted with the piece. *The Scarlet Cord* received national acclaim through ArtPrize, and was subsequently showcased at Super Bowl 2015, and since has been exhibited in eleven other venues. Pamela has continued to expand this work through creating a video and adding a new series of artwork to the exhibit. *The Scarlet Cord* is known as Pamela's signature piece to date, and is how many people have come to know her. The piece has touched

many lives, and informed individuals about the facts of human trafficking; that it happens locally, and is flourishing within the United States.

Following is an evaluation of these two pieces and how they were similar and different in order to better understand how these pieces communicated their intended messages.

### *Similarities*

To begin, there are some very strong similarities between these two artworks due to their foundation in Pamela's aesthetic, focusing on social justice issues. Social justice focuses on equality for all individuals, and addresses the challenges of some individuals who, based on their demographics are at a higher risk. Human trafficking and bullying both fall under this social justice category. For example, young, single-parent, lower-class children are at a higher risk for bullying (Borowsky, Taliaferro, McMorris, 2013). While human trafficking often targets young, females who may be homeless or runaways (Mostajabian, Bocchini, Wiemann, Maria, 2017).

The next step that Pamela uses to bring meaning to her artwork is to tell a story. She had specific stories that were told to frame her artwork for each of the pieces in this comparison, but also within each piece many stories are told and brought to life. *Color me orange – Color me kind* was framed by the story about the boy who chose to be kind to his bully. Additional stories that I collected to put into her blog were added to the "story" of the piece and presented at a pre-ArtPrize event. *The Scarlet Cord* was made up of multiple pieces each having their own story all being connected by a scarlet cord weaving around the work ("Scarlet Cord," 2017). These stories help to show the audience the real-life application of the causes these pieces are working to highlight.

Lastly, both works had an interactive element. Pamela's artwork overall has set itself apart within the ArtPrize competition because of this component. The buzz of having interactive

opportunities with her work may be what ultimately helps her to be a sought-out, competitive artist the past several years of ArtPrize.

Pamela offered a way for the audience to help her make the artwork in *Color me orange-Color me kind* by tying orange ribbons to the piece (Figure 4) and (Figure 5). As I was working ArtPrize, I saw people automatically intrigued that others were engaged with this artwork. There seemed to be a sense of curiosity that came from the fact that others were touching the artwork. This led to many questions and more ribbons eventually being added to the piece. The total count of ribbons added and left at the piece at the close of ArtPrize was 100,000. Pamela's work was completely transformed by the audience.



Figure 4 & 5 Individuals Interacting with the Artwork

*The Scarlet Cord* also had an interactive element through having a scarlet cord tied on individual's wrist after viewing as a way of reminding them of the pain of human trafficking, and challenging them to share the message and information with others. The bracelet served as a similar purpose as the bracelets individuals wear to support other causes such as breast cancer awareness or "Live Strong." Bracelets like these have been shown to be a powerful marketing tool, not only as a reminder of the cause to the individual wearing the band, but also as an especially effective conversation starter (Braveman, 2004).

### *Differences*

There are several other differences that set these two pieces apart. First, the choice of topic made a difference in these two works. Bullying has become a buzz word that many people easily dismiss as being part of anyone's life. The public is aware that this is a problem but often do not see how it affects them or how they can prevent it. In *Color me orange – Color me kind*, Pamela was encouraging kindness. Interestingly, I found that attendees were not afraid to admit to me, a total stranger that they were *not* kind and therefore would not interact with the art piece by tying an orange ribbon. I also question the "staying power" of the kindness promise people took when tying a ribbon which was left at the piece. I am guessing many people forgot about it the moment they walked away from the piece. Human trafficking, however, is perceived as a new domestic phenomenon that is just starting to gain public attention even though it has been present in the United States for years (Mostajabian et al., 2017). Many attendees were unaware of the issue or never had talked about it before unless they had personal experience with this tragedy (Zucker, 1978). Therefore, this piece had a "shock factor" to it that made it more memorable, and the scarlet cord reminder on their wrist begged for conversations outside the

event (Braveman, 2004), and ultimately, the nature of human trafficking made it more effective and newsworthy.

Secondly, Pamela's approach to interpretative support for *The Scarlet Cord* and *Color Me orange- Color me kind* was very different. Pamela happened to have a one very lengthy description, including the story that inspired her artwork, attached to the *Color me orange- Color me kind* piece. *The Scarlet Cord* exhibit had very short descriptions attached to multiple components of the exhibit providing narrative throughout the exhibit. I think this difference in how information was disseminated reflects the findings of communication scholars for today's audience; many shorter descriptions versus one lengthy one has more impact. The potential impact of *Color Me orange- Color me kind* was partially lost due to Pamela's approach to description.

Part of making something newsworthy is localizing it. A third difference between the two pieces is location of the stories. In *Color me orange – Color me kind*, Pamela chose to tell a story of a boy from another state. With *The Scarlet Cord* she stayed local, emphasizing statistics from Grand Rapids along with trafficking stories that happened within the city. When bringing this piece to Grand Valley State University, Pamela invited a local judge and the mother of a child who was trafficked in Grand Rapids to speak. The judge presented statistics for Grand Rapids and informed the audience on the laws of human trafficking. The mother shared a very detailed account of her special needs daughter being trafficked near a Grand Rapids school. The localization of human trafficking made it more real, harder to forget, and more difficult to just move on without thinking about what you could do to address the problem.

The last difference between the pieces is the level of emotional response invoked. The choice of topic and localization in *The Scarlet Cord* led to an overwhelming emotional response

by viewers. Pamela recalls women weeping into her shoulder at the exhibit or others confessing that they or someone they know had been trafficked. The piece did not tell a “happy ending” and strongly elicited action from viewers. For *Color me orange- Color me kind*, the viewer response was not nearly as intense. Maybe this is because society tells those who have been bullied that their experience is “normal” because everyone goes through it. Pamela also decided to focus on a happy ending to the story about bullying rather than one that resulted in tragedy (*The Scarlet Cord* ends in suicide). This was meant to extract a happier emotion with the positivity of kindness. However, as seen in the news and through the definition of newsworthiness, society is much more interested in tragedies and crimes rather than stories with happy endings (Bednarik et al., 2017). This was completely opposite of *The Scarlet Cord* that brought many tears but those tears led to healing and action which ultimately made the exhibit more powerful.

### ***Recommendations***

After doing this research and working on *Color me orange- Color me kind* with Pamela, I wanted to end this paper with my recommendation to any artist who wishes to take on the task of communicating to mass audiences. I would first tell them to consider their topic and the newsworthiness of it. Is there any way to localize it or make it timely to your audience? Also, consider if they are trying to persuade the audience. If so, consider if their topic is obtrusive or unobtrusive or how to make it less obtrusive. Next, engage the audience through allowing them to interact with the piece in some way or give them something to take home with them to remind them of the piece. For ArtPrize, the artist is not going to be able to control the environment and atmosphere surrounding the piece, but they can provide the audience with a short and concise description of the artwork. This may help keep the audience’s attention and help them to better



understand the message. Social media can also be used to share the audience reactions both through the audiences post and through the artist sharing their interaction with individuals.

If you apply all these techniques, from my experience and research, the art will have a greater impact upon the audience.

### ***Conclusion***

I came into this internship with very little appreciation for art and oblivious to all that went into submitting a piece to ArtPrize. Pamela's work inspired me to take another look at the power that art can have when the right topic and message is conveyed. Through this research and my experiences, I have gained a better understanding of what helps artwork to stand alone and have a lasting impact upon the audience long after then leave the venue.

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### **Annotated Bibliography**

Alderman, P. (2017). The Scarlet Cord. Retrieved February 20, 2017, from

<http://watercolorbypamela.com/scarletcord.htm>

This website is produced by the artist Pamela Alderman. It includes information pertaining to all of her art pieces and the inspirations behind them. This was a useful source in order to get testimonies from the artist and the audience as well as a source for the pictures of the artwork included within the paper. Getting direct information from the artist ensured that the information was accurate and not an interpretation of the artwork.

ArtPrize. (2017). Retrieved February 15, 2017, from <http://www.artprize.org/about>

This is the official ArtPrize website with all of the numbers and statistics from every year of ArtPrize. This website is updated on a regular basis and provides further information about the nature of the event. This was a good resource for this research because it provided information on the scope and atmosphere of the event to the reader.

Bednarek, M., Caple, H., & Ebooks Corporation. (2017). The discourse of news values: How news organizations create newsworthiness. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

This book provides information on how news organizations choose and create newsworthy stories. They provided some history on this subject along with how it has changed throughout the years. This source was helpful in order to recognize what a mass audience finds interesting and what stories get the most attention. The art is also trying to get the attention of a mass audience so their ideas can then transfer to the ArtPrize atmosphere.

Braverman, B. (2004, September 16). Jewelry shines with good intentions: Lance Armstrong's ubiquitous "Live Strong" bracelets boost other cause-oriented jewelry. *National Jeweler*, 98(18), 22+. Retrieved from

[http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GRGM&sw=w&u=lom\\_gvalleysu&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA122662355&sid=summon&asid=d2742d7e7ae92af3128470c1ca53b6cb](http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?p=GRGM&sw=w&u=lom_gvalleysu&v=2.1&it=r&id=GALE%7CA122662355&sid=summon&asid=d2742d7e7ae92af3128470c1ca53b6cb)

This article analyzed the increased use of bracelets for a cause. Pamela adopted this technique by handing out scarlet cords to her audience. This is a marketing technique used to increase word of mouth. This was helpful to explain why the conversation surrounding *The Scarlet Cord* has continued.

Borowsky, I., Taliaferro, L., & McMorris, B. (2013). Suicidal thinking and behavior among youth involved in verbal and social bullying: Risk and protective factors. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 53(1), S4-S12. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2012.10.280

This article describes bullying and the risk factors along with the consequences of bullying. It defined the children who were more likely to get bullied or be the bully. This was applicable to this research because of the prevalence that bullying played in Pamela's artwork *Color me orange – Color me kind*.

Kempka, D. S. (2012). *Visual resistance: How to challenge brand messages visually* (Order No. 1515618). Available from ProQuest Business Collection. (1034429692). Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/docview/1034429692?accountid=39473>

This study focused on advertisements and the use of a visual medium to explain a message. The author included information about how individuals are taught to interpret

writing but sometimes lack the skills to interpret visual messages. This was important to bring up within this research because it portrays a major challenge for artist when trying to spread a message.

Kolb, A. Y. (2005). The Kolb learning style inventory-version 3.1 2005 technical specifications. *Boston, MA: Hay Resource Direct*, 200, 72.

This study outlines the Kolb learning style inventory including what the inventory includes and what it means. The four orientations are further defined and discussed. This is a well-known and highly accepted way of measuring and understanding learning styles. This plays a role within this research as Pamela was attempting to teach a lesson through her art along with many other artists and the understanding of learning styles can help to execute this teaching properly to all individuals within the audience.

Landau, J. (2015). Today's shorter attention spans scream for memorable response tools. *Response: Multi - Channel Direct Advertising*, 23(10), 44. Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.ezproxy.gvsu.edu/docview/1697515520?accountid=39473>

This article outlined how attention spans are getting shorter. It focused mainly on the effects of social media on advertisements. This is relevant to this research as art is a visual medium that is comparable to advertisements.

Mostajabian, S., Bocchini, C., Wiemann, C. M., & Maria, D. S. (2017). If you ask, they will tell: Identifying risk for human trafficking among homeless youth. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 60(2), S63-S64. doi:10.1016/j.jadohealth.2016.10.309



This article focused on the risk factors for human trafficking. It outlined the fact that those who are homeless and young have an increased risk of being trafficked. This was important to mention as it was the story Pamela attempted to tell through her artwork in *The Scarlet Cord*.

Rieser, M., & ebrary, I. (2011). *The mobile audience: Media art and mobile technologies*. Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi.

This source focused on the prominence of social media and its effects as well as where communication research is headed. The most valuable point in this article was that interactivity is effective in gaining an audiences' attention. This supported the argument that Pamela's work gains attention based on the interactive elements included.

Shannon, C. E., & Weaver, W. (1962). *The mathematical theory of communication*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

This study discussed in this book is one of the fundamentals of communications studies. It shows how one communicates to another and describes what can interfere with those messages. Understanding the interference that occurs is crucial for artists at festivals in order to send their messages effectively and for the audience to receive the correct message.

Weaver, D. H. (1977). Political issues and voter need for orientation. In D. L. Shaw & M. E. McCombs (Eds.), *The emergence of American political issues: The agenda-setting function of the press* (pp. 107-119). St. Paul, MN: West.

This part of the book outlines the study of agenda-setting theories. This is important because it shows how an audience can be persuaded in favor of or against certain topics. This is a highly proven and well-accepted theory within communication theory. Pamela attempts to persuade her audience through a call to action with her art pieces and this theory explains why some topics are easier to persuade individuals about over others.

Zucker, H. G. (1978). The variable nature of news media influence. In B. Ruben (Ed.), *Communication yearbook 2* (pp. 225-246). New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books

Zucker's theories explain obtrusive and nonobtrusive issues which relates to Weaver's agenda setting theories. This article explains why certain topics might lead to greater persuasion. In this research these concepts are intertwined in order to show why different topics used for the artwork may have had a different impact.