Human Cost

Art comes from the deepest sentiments of the artist, which often involve a desire for change. Pablo Picasso’s *Guernica* gravely pleads for an end to the violence of the Spanish Civil War. Jacob Lawrence’s collection *Migration Series* and Judy Chicago’s feminist piece *The Dinner Table* willfully communicate dissent with problematic social values. The anti-capitalist murals of Mexican artist Diego Rivera reflected his courage and stubborn belief in what he felt was right. Each of these artists utilized their creativity as a mode of rebellion. Protest art is a response to an undesirable condition: it must be persuasive and convene a large enough audience to make a change. Thus, it makes a perfect rhetorical situation.

Rhetorical situations are often only used in an academic context such as a writing class, however, these situations are much more applicable than just for scholarly use. They appear in everyday life, often going unnoticed. Lloyd Bitzer, an American writer, goes into thorough detail about rhetorical situations and each component part of them. He defines them as “a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence which can be completely or partially removed if discourse, introduced into the situation, can so constrain human decision or action as to bring about the significant modification of the exigence” (Bitzer, 1992). Broken down more simply, this is a communicative event that requires an exigence, audience, and constraints. Exigence is essentially the context in which an event occurs. The audience is the component that can make a change to a rhetorical situation. Finally, the constraints are anything that may prevent the audience from being active to change the exigence. Embodied rhetoric is an impactful form which wields the human body. This application helps us
empathize and connect with pieces of rhetoric much more effectively. Situations involving the body can be used to powerfully inspire the audience and truly make a change in the exigence.

Performance art is a common example of embodied rhetorical situations. These displays are often a form of activism, as is the case with the Liberate Tate movement at the Tate art museum. In 1990, the oil company BP began a sponsorship with the Tate (BBC, 2015) which was part of a ten million dollar grant towards arts institutions and included several other museums such as the National Portrait Gallery, The British Museum, the Royal Shakespeare Company, and the Royal Opera House (Khomami, 2016). BP has been a controversial corporation due to the known human and environmental costs of fossil fuel use, and after the 2010 Deepwater Horizon oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico, the corporation was under especially heavy fire. For these reasons, museum-goers found BP’s advertising and sponsorship in the Tate ethically problematic and inappropriate. Many were questioning what place a corporation had in an institution meant for freedom of expression. There was worry about the influence BP could potentially exert over Tate since they were providing such a large sum of money. Liberate Tate was a movement initiated by Tate members to end the sponsorship with BP and eventually grew to be in collaboration with public artists who wanted to give voice to the cause. BP’s sponsorship eventually led to the performance art piece “Human Cost” by the group, one of the many actions in protest. The work displays a nude body lying curled in a fetal position on the museum floor. Two performers dressed in black use oil canisters marked with the BP logo to pour a black oil-resembling solution over the nude body. The body lays still and silent in that position saturated in the black liquid for 87 minutes. This performance occurred in 2011, on the first anniversary of the Deepwater Horizon oil spill, in which 11 workers died and 4.9 million barrels of oil were
spilled at the fault of BP. The 87 minutes represents the 87 days it took to clean up the oil from the Gulf (Blackler, 2011).

The exigence of “Human Cost” is the Deepwater Horizon oil spill that occurred in the Gulf of Mexico. This work was a response to that event and the impact it had on human lives and the environment. The audience they were targeting with this display were the leaders in charge of the sponsorship. In this case, the director of the Tate museum, Nicholas Serota, had a letter sent to him directly by Liberate Tate members. It is likely that BP leaders were also intended as an audience because they had the power to back out of the sponsorship, which was eventually what occurred. A constraint of this work would be the motives of the director of the Tate. A spokeswoman for the institution expressed gratitude for the sponsorship stating it was an “outstanding example of patronage and collaboration over nearly 30 years” (Khomami, 2016). These words brazenly conveyed their regret for the end of the sponsorship. It’s likely the director would have continued the agreement if BP was also on board, indicating that profit was a priority over moral concern for Tate. This would have acted as a constraint to what “Human Cost” stood for because the audience aimed to make the director feel guilty about his involvement with BP. The basis of the performance was meant to inspire empathy for those who had suffered in the oil spill. However, when the director chose to ignore these emotions and focus instead on the benefits of the money
by continuing with BP, the audience lost some of their influence. They were constrained from modifying the exigence because the motives of the director inhibited it. Despite this, the audience certainly had an impact in other ways as evidenced by their achievement in ending the sponsorship. They clearly caused enough disruption that it was brought to the attention of BP and they were losing business from it.

An important part of the rhetorical situation is whether or not the response to the exigence is fitting. In this situation, the response was indeed successful. Liberate Tate developed a series of works including “Human Cost” that attracted substantial attention from news agencies and the internet. This rightfully polluted the image of BP, making the public more aware of the controversies that saturated the corporation. By 2017, BP decided to back out of the sponsorship, claiming their abandonment of the deal was due to a “challenging business environment”, but not crediting the protests in any part of the decision (Khomami, 2016). This reasoning is questionable, but in the end the sponsorship was terminated and Liberate Tate was ultimately successful in their purpose.

An aspect of this work that makes it ingenious is the use of the human body. The use of a real human body in the nude is what brought so much attention to this piece. It surprises you, interests you, and draws you in. The naked human body represents vulnerability, and the presentation of it soaking in the disgusting black liquid has a disturbing effect over its audience. The fetal position contributes to the idea of vulnerability since it’s a position often taken by those who are under attack, presenting the image that the oil is attacking them. Additionally, using a real person in the performance made it easier for viewers to empathize than if it were just a drawing or a sculpture. This might encourage viewers to really think about and empathize with the victims and costs of this incident.
As demonstrated by Liberate Tate’s “Human Cost”, embodied rhetoric can have a major influence on audiences largely due to the application of pathos—an appeal to the emotions. This is a powerful tool because oftentimes emotions overrule other methods of decision making. Embodied rhetoric was cleverly used as the form of persuasion in this case due to the emotional impact of the oil spill, and it would reflect very poorly on Tate’s director if he chose to ignore it. The techniques used by the creators of “Human Cost” and other artists involved in Liberate Tate inspired many to speak out against the BP sponsorship and, although up for debate, appeared to sway the oil company’s decision to back out.
Works Cited


http://www.jstor.org/stable/40237697


Dear Reader,

The main purpose of my essay was to demonstrate my understanding of rhetorical situations and show their application in everyday life. I highlighted performance protest art as the situation and explained how my artwork selection fit into each aspect of a rhetorical situation such as the exigence, audience, and constraints. In doing this I also wanted to bring attention to the oil spill crisis that the protest was about and how “Human Cost” powerfully got a message across about the ethical immoralities of the BP-Tate sponsorship.

I think my essay has a good topic because it’s something that I’m passionate about and I enjoyed researching and writing about it. The topic I chose made the analysis of it in the context of a rhetorical situation very easy. I had no trouble identifying the exigence, audience, and constraints for the most part. I also like my opening paragraph after working on it. I think it guides the reader more gracefully into the analysis and definition of rhetorical situations than what I had before which was more abrupt. Weaknesses I would note would be some of the phrasing of my sentences and vocabulary. I tend to write repetitively which is something I had to adjust in multiple parts of my paper. In places, the concept could have been paraphrased or condensed better. I also struggled to achieve an adequate introduction that tied the paper together and connected the topic to the rhetorical situation smoothly. I think after working with it I managed a pretty good intro.

As mentioned, one challenge I had was my repetitive writing. I addressed this by combining sentences, removing redundant words, and taking out irrelevant sentences. I also struggled with the introduction and tying my topic to the prompt. In order to fix this I discussed protest art more generally and how this can easily be identified as a rhetorical situation before going into my specific artwork selection. A lot of the peer and teacher feedback had to do with
the redundancy and my abrupt introduction. I followed the suggestions of my peers and edited much of my sentences and phrasing, and I also added another intro paragraph before discussing and defining rhetorical situations to help ease the reader into the essay.

Overall I’m happy with my essay, but if I had a little more time to edit it I think I would add more about the constraints since I really only discuss one, and I’d continue rephrasing sentences to give it better flow.