

The Art World of Lego

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Introduction and Abstract

If children's toys were organized into a monarchical society, LEGO would be king. This is not an exaggeration; in 2000, LEGO was named Toy of the Century by both Fortune and the British Association of Toy Retailers.¹ Of all the toys made in the 20th century, Danish brand LEGO came out on top, with its colorful, interlocking plastic block-building sets! Since 1958, over 400 billion LEGO bricks have been sold, averaging out to approximately 86 per person on Earth.² With these billions of bricks in hundreds of colors, shapes, and styles, LEGO offers users limitless creative possibilities. While LEGO has been historically marketed to children, recently some adults have begun to embrace LEGO as a hobby.

As the casual definition of LEGO has broadened from child's toy to hobby for all ages, individuals have begun to bring LEGO creations into the art realm. These LEGO art creations have been faced with challenges, mostly stemming from the brand identity LEGO has built for itself. After all, the LEGO brand screams "TOY" not "artistic medium". Even so, the past 20 years have seen an increased incorporation of LEGO into art. This paper explores the incorporation of LEGO into art from the perspective of Howard Becker's theory of Art Worlds. Becker contends that art exists within a network of "people whose cooperative activity, organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things," results in art.³

This paper will explore the intersection of Art Worlds and LEGO art. For the sake of argument, in the following pages, "art" refers to anything given recognition by leaders within the

¹ LEGO. (n.d.). Retrieved June 1, 2016, from <http://www.toyhalloffame.org/toys/lego>

² LEGO® Education. (n.d.). Retrieved June 1, 2016, from <https://education.lego.com/en-au/about-us/lego-education-worldwide/lego-facts>

³ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.) 2. Berkeley: University of California Press.

art world. Simply put: if it is in a museum, it is art. If it goes for public auction in a public forum, it is art. If an established art critic reviews it, positively or negatively, it is art. This paper works within the framework that Art is only what is collectively defined as such. If artistic thought leaders or the public *en masse* recognize such a thing as art, then it is such. There are (and have been) countless pieces of artistic value and worth have escaped the classification of “Art” by collective definition.

LEGO art faces unique challenges within the Art World because of how LEGO conflicts with definitions of what qualifies as art or artistic medium. Indeed, authorities within the Art World diverge on whether or not LEGO art is actual “art.” Critical reactions to LEGO art will be explored later on in this thesis, but it is important to note that LEGO art has not immediately been accepted into the Art World. By studying the introduction (and gradual acceptance) of LEGO art into the Art World, we can see what is important when working towards cultural acceptance of something not presently defined as art. It should be noted that the argument of this paper deals with Western and North American definitions and acceptance of art; further areas of research could include multi-national or global perspectives on this topic.

The acceptance of LEGO art in the Western world depends two factors. The first involving compliance to artistic norms and rules (as defined by the Art World) and the second involving mediation between LEGO as branded commodity and LEGO as artistic medium. If a LEGO artwork complies with artistic norms and standards while also distancing itself from the cultural influence of LEGO as a brand, it will be considered art by the Art World. Failure of LEGO art acceptance will be related to how badly it performs on both of these measures.

Why *Art Worlds*?

Becker's theory of Art Worlds has been chosen as the framework with which to analyze LEGO art because, like all things, art is a socio-cultural construct. Art is only whatever we (as a society or Art World) define as art. This understanding of context is useful in the analysis of why or how things become art. Becker wrote *Art Worlds* in 1982. Inspired by his experiences as a working professional photographer, Becker came to realize that art is not a solitary experience, but is rather "a social enterprise in which a huge range of people played equally essential roles in order to produce an artifact that a social group decided to dignify as art."⁴ When Becker realized that Art does not exist in a vacuum, the notion of Art Worlds was born.

Thus, Art can only exist through a process of collective activity, where various people playing different roles contribute to the process known as art. Becker writes:

All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the artwork we eventually see or hear comes to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world. The existence of art worlds, as well as the way their existence affects both the production and consumption of art works, suggests a sociological approach to the arts. It is not an approach that produces aesthetic judgments [...] it produces, instead, an understanding of the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens [...]⁵

⁴ Gopnik, A. (2015, January 05). The Outside Game. Retrieved June 09, 2016, from <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/01/12/outside-game>

⁵ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.). 1. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Unlike previous art theories that defined art as the work created by geniuses empowered with unique and special “gifts,” Becker’s theory sheds light on the many moving, often invisible parts necessary for art to be. He explains that for a “symphony orchestra to give a concert, for instance, instruments must have been invented, manufactured, and maintained, a notation must have been devised and music composed using that notation, people must have learned to play the notated notes on the instruments, times and places for rehearsal must have been provided, ads for the concert must have been placed, publicity must have been arranged and tickets sold, and an audience capable of listening to and in some way understanding and responding to the performance must have been recruited.”⁶ This list can be procured for any art form, and reveals the almost exhausting amount of coordination and communication necessary for an artwork to come to life.

These tasks necessary to produce art are often times accomplished by individuals who fill specific social roles. These distinct roles are of “artist, dealer, curator, critic, collector, or auction-house expert”⁷ however members of the art world can be as removed as the newspapers who publish art reviews or the artisans who craft the paintbrushes necessary for painting. Again, an individual who contributes to any of the processes necessary for art to come to life is part of the art world. The art world enables a division of labor that, like all other “human activities we know” mandates that art cannot be without “the cooperation of others.”⁸ As humans are social

⁶ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.). 2. Berkeley: University of California Press.

⁷ Thornton, S. (2008). *Seven Days in the Art World*. XI. New York: W.W. Norton.

⁸ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.). 7. Berkeley: University of California Press.

beings, this interdependence is logical; considering the existence of art in the economic framework of our capitalist system, this collaborative nature also ensures that many individuals can profit from the creation, distribution, and enjoyment of art. Works of “rare” or “valuable” art can go for auction for millions and millions of dollars; in certain circles the importance of art is not a reflection of artistic merit, but of monetary worth. Within the Art World, monetary worth can be tied to one specific work, or to a famous artist’s entire oeuvre. It is for this reason that rough sketches by Picasso or Dali are considerably valuable; both artists have impressive and valuable collections of art that add value to anything else they have created. The economy of the Art World is constantly evolving. Obviously, aesthetic rules of beauty and taste are also constantly evolving. This is seen historically, in differences between art from the Renaissance and Surrealism. With this background, let us examine the first (and only) example of an exhibit dedicated purely to LEGO Art.

The Art of the Brick & Artistic Conventions

The Art of the Brick is a global, traveling exhibit featuring LEGO art made by artist Nathan Sawaya. It features over 100 sculptures made of LEGOs and has been touring museums and galleries worldwide since 2007. Some of the pieces in the exhibits are LEGO replicas of famous pieces of art, such as Van Gogh’s “Starry Night” and Vermeer’s “Girl With a Pearl

Earring.”⁹ Other works, such as “Blue Guy Sitting” and “Swimmer” are Sawaya’s original designs. “Blue Guy Sitting” is a 21,054 brick sculpture of a blue figure sitting on chair, legs crossed, while “Swimmer” portrays a woman freestyle swimming using 10,980 bricks.¹⁰ The massive success of *The Art of the Brick* can be attributed in part to how *The Art of the Brick* follows the rules laid out by artistic conventions.

First, what are artistic conventions? Becker notes that conventions “place strong constraints on artists” because they exist in “complexly interdependent systems.”¹¹ In the example of musical composition, there is a system of musical notation that is almost universally followed, called Modern Staff Notation. This universal system of notation allows musicians from all over the world to read and play the same music. A composer who strays from this standard notation risks limiting the number of musicians who can bring their creation to life, since these players will need to be taught to read this new notation. Audiences are also bound to conventions in how they experience art. When watching a staged play, it is expected that spectators silently watch and only applaud at the end of each act. Audiences at pop concerts, on the other hand, can talk during the performance or even sing along; it is expected that the audience clap and cheer after each song is played.

In art museums and galleries, there are complexly interconnected conventions for how art is laid out, discussed, and experienced. Art museums, for example, arrange works of art together

⁹ Rothstein, E. (2013, June 14). A Vision That’s Not Quite a Snap. Retrieved May 28, 2016, from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/arts/design/in-art-of-the-brick-nathan-sawaya-works-with-lego.html?_r=0

¹⁰ Can LEGO Be Art? Nathan Sawaya Thinks So. (2013, May 31). Retrieved June 2, 2016, from <http://www.angloitalianfollowus.com/can-lego-be-art-nathan-sawaya-thinks-so>

¹¹ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.). 32. Berkeley: University of California Press.

by period, subject, artist, medium, or any other logical category. We can see this convention taken for granted when visitors peruse museums without the use of a map; the artwork is organized in a logical manner so maps are not needed to give context to the art. Conventions of artistic layout also inform how we discuss art. Paintings and sculptures are often accompanied with labels that indicate the artist, name of the piece, artistic medium used, and year it was created. Some of these labels will also include a paragraph going into the historical context of the art, or a short biography of the artist. These labels “tell” the average spectator what is important about the art. In Museums of Modern art, spectators struggling to analyze a piece will go to the label, read the blurb and exclaim a short “ah!” of understanding. This convention in the art world leads us to *expect* this label, and when we see this label, we assume that whatever it is labeling *is* art. This idea came to life recently when two boys played a prank at visitors of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art by placing a pair of glasses on the ground in a modern art exhibit. Within minutes, visitors were seeing the glasses as art, “with some even taking photos of the fake installation.”¹² Examples such as this illustrate how we use artistic conventions to define what is (and isn’t) art!

In *The Art of the Brick*, choices for the layout, structure, and design of the exhibit work to ensure it fits the parameters set by the Art World. First, Sawaya has followed an organizational structure that uses a narrative to guide visitors through the exhibit. A user on a LEGO fan forum describes the layout of the exhibit in Amsterdam as:

¹² Mele, C. (2016, May 31). Is It Art? Eyeglasses on Museum Floor Began as Teenagers’ Prank. Retrieved June 05, 2016, from http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/31/arts/sfmoma-glasses-prank.html?_r=0

... [the] first thing you see is a short video of Nathan explaining how he became a Lego artist after first qualifying as a lawyer but eventually after getting commissions from friends etc for Lego sculptures he decided to follow his dream and become a full time artist. This "follow your dream" idea is a bit of a recurring theme in the exhibition. [...] The main exhibition is divided into sections that also act as a kind of timeline for Nathan's evolution as an artist. The first room is mainly interpretations of famous artworks, rendered as flat mosaic-type pictures, or textured, or as 3D sculptures. Next to each one is a description of the original artwork, and a little description from Nathan about how he approached his interpretation.¹³

The inclusion of a theme and narrative structure makes the exhibit accessible and easy-to-follow for visitors. From the above paragraph, we can deduce the obvious (and not-so-obvious) conventions followed in the exhibit. First, the pieces are shown together in a room, arranged in a cohesive manner so audiences can see the work from many angles.

Next, the sculptures are illuminated by small focused lights, so visitors and patrons can *see* the work on display. These "art display" lights are meant to go so as not to take away from the piece they are illuminating. These lighting systems aren't just plain hardware store bulbs hanging from a wire above the art as that would go against the norms of the fine art world. While unclear who is responsible for the lighting in this exhibit, it is clear that the "professional" Art World lighting was chosen to add legitimacy and credibility to the work.

Early into the exhibit, Sawaya faced a unique LEGO-related roadblock in the process of shipping his pieces. For "traditional" art, there are art transport companies and art handlers specifically trained in packing, moving, and installing art. Such companies have differing

¹³ Art of the Brick exhibition - General LEGO Discussion. (n.d.). Retrieved May 15, 2016, from <http://www.eurobricks.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=97465>

protocols for packing Picasso paintings than they do for, say, shipping Rodin's massive bronze statues. Over time, the collective knowledge of these professionals has grown so that the protocols have been established for every "traditional" art medium. Sawaya's work didn't fit into these protocols since LEGO art had never needed to be shipped before! He was faced with a challenge in how he assembled and packed his works, saying in a TED talk,:

I find that gluing is very important, mostly because of the shipping. Museums get very grumpy if they get a box full of pieces and sign that says, "Some assembly is required."¹⁴

This shipping snafu, if left unsolved, could have damaged Sawaya's professional reputation as an artist; within the Art World, knowing how to properly transport and ship your work distinguishes you from amateurs. Luckily, Sawaya found gluing as a solution to the transportation issue, and now ships his work according to the standards expected by the Art World. With so many moving parts, pieces, and people necessary for the "collective action" of art, the ability to seamlessly incorporate yourself into these processes is crucial for the credibility of an artist.¹⁵

Once the LEGO pieces have been transported and arranged to create *The Art of the Brick*, informative labels corresponding to each piece are made and hung. In most art museums, these contain the year the piece was made, the materials, and any other information the curator or artist wishes to convey; in *The Art of the Brick*, these labels share a description of "how [Sawaya] approached his interpretation."¹⁶ These labels are a continuation of the artistic conventions of the

¹⁴ Nathan Sawaya, Brick Artist. (2012, September 28). Retrieved June 09, 2016, from <https://www.artsicle.com/blog/nathan-sawaya-brick-artist>

¹⁵ Becker, H. S. (1982). Art Worlds (25th Anniversary ed.). 228. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁶ Art of the Brick exhibition - General LEGO Discussion. (n.d.). Retrieved May 15, 2016, from <http://www.eurobricks.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=97465>

Art World, but also serve the role of rationale. In Becker's framework, a rationale is a "kind of aesthetic argument, a philosophical justification which identifies what is being made as art, as good art, and explain how art does something that needs to be done for people and society."¹⁷ As participants in a society that has learned to expect art to be accompanied by a well thought-out and logical rationale, we look for this rationale to inform what we think about the art.

A broad rationale for *The Art of the Brick* can be found on Sawaya's website. The blurb praises his ability "to transform this common toy into something meaningful, his devotion to spatial perfection and the way he conceptualizes action, enables him to elevate what almost every child has played with into the status of contemporary art."¹⁸ Using rhetoric like "spacial perfection" and "the way he conceptualizes action" emphasizes that Sawaya's oeuvre is more than an adult playing with toys; it explains what effect the LEGO is meant to have on audiences, and the meaning that should be deduced from Sawaya's work. When artists are asked to explain their work, they can't simply shrug their shoulders and say "I dunno." There must be a reason or intention behind the work created, since art doesn't happen at random. As the first LEGO artist, it is especially important for Sawaya to assert himself as a true "contemporary" artist with an effective artistic rationale.

The reason for this analysis of ways LEGO art has been legitimized within artistic conventions is because Sawaya's work has received harsh words from some art critics. Critics play a very important role in adding legitimacy to artists in the Art World. The reactions of

¹⁷ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.). 4. Berkeley: University of California Press.

¹⁸ About Exhibition. (n.d.). Retrieved May 3, 2016, from <http://www.brickartist.com/about-exhibition.html>

critics can make or break an artist's success; in the film industry, audiences will flock to films they wouldn't have seen otherwise simply because the film was "critically acclaimed." Becker emphasizes that critics help to lay the groundwork in how to appreciate all artistic work; without critics and aestheticians, there is no tastemaker to decide which is "legitimate art."¹⁹ Sometimes, as in Sawaya's case, artists make great strides in artistic innovations, but are then not accepted by the authorities in the art world. This lack of acceptance reflects "both the judgments of artistic quality made by contemporary art worlds and the perhaps chance operations of a variety of other factors."²⁰

As for LEGO art, there are various perspectives on the judgment of its artistic quality. Guardian critic Jonathan Jones wrote in a September 2014 piece that "Nathan Sawaya's Lego statues are interesting, but the people calling them art are missing the point. Lego doesn't need to be art."²¹ Jones contends that LEGO is a fun toy, that captivates children and adults alike, but to him it's not art. The idea that a toy cannot be art recurs in his conclusion where Jones shares:

When your child makes something out of Lego, would it be sane to insist it was a work of art that belonged in the Tate? What kind of bizarre attitude to play would that be? Lego is not art. It does not need to be art. Being awesome is surely enough.

¹⁹ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.). 111. Berkeley: University of California Press.

²⁰ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.). 36. Berkeley: University of California Press.

²¹ Jones, J. (2014, September 23). Bricking it: Is Lego art? Retrieved June 5, 2016, from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2014/sep/23/is-lego-art-creative-play-sculpture-nathan-sawaya>

New York Times critic Edward Rothstein is kinder to Sawaya, describing the exhibit “playful,” “alluring,” and “pure [of] form.”²² Rothstein, in his review, notes the restrictions and freedoms of choosing LEGO as an art medium, reflecting on how the “limitations are part of the appeal.”²³ One of the more harsh reactions to *The Art of the Brick*, written by Jay Merrick of the Independent, calls Sawaya “an American ex-bank wonk so obsessed with the dinky acrylonitrile butadiene styrene bricks that he decided to create Lego sculptures.”²⁴ Merrick’s review, using snooty and patronizing language, aggressively condemns *The Art of the Brick* as “not art.” This approach to artistic critique is not lost on Becker in his analysis of *Art Worlds*. He writes that, for critics, reviewing art takes on:

...a moralistic tone. [Critics] take for granted that their job is to find a foolproof formula which will distinguish things which do not *deserve* to be called art from works which have *earned* that honorific title. [Becker emphasizes] “deserve” and “earn” because aesthetic writing insists on a real moral difference between art and non art. Aestheticians [...] do not want to take an inclusive approach to art, counting in everything that might have some interest or value. They look, instead, for a defensible way to leave some things out.²⁵

Many published reviews of *The Art of the Brick* have excluded, either implicitly or explicitly, LEGO art from the designation of “legitimate art.” This designation is different than a simple negative review. It’s natural and expected for artists to get bad reviews sometime in their careers; even if a critic destroys an exhibit or piece, however, they will not usually discredit the work’s

²²Rothstein, E. (2013, June 14). A Vision That’s Not Quite a Snap. Retrieved May 28, 2016, from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/arts/design/in-art-of-the-brick-nathan-sawaya-works-with-lego.html?_r=0

²³ Ibid

²⁴ Merrick, J. (2014, September 26). Sculptor defends Lego show 'the Art of the Brick' Retrieved June 1, 2016, from <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/art/news/legitimate-art-or-a-silly-toy-sculptor-defends-lego-show-the-art-of-the-brick-9758653.html>

²⁵ Becker, H. S. (1982). *Art Worlds* (25th Anniversary ed.). 136-137. Berkeley: University of California Press.

artistic merit completely. Abstract works by established artists such as Jackson Pollock have been written off by groups of people who offhandedly comment, “I don’t get the big deal... My kid could do that!” These remarks overlook many aspects of the cultural significance given to Pollock’s work, yet they do not dispute its place as art. This does not hold true for critiques of LEGO art. Reviewers of LEGO art seem to be held back by the fact that it is made of LEGO.

The LEGO Brand

It must be acknowledged that Sawaya is not the first artist to incorporate LEGO into art. He is indeed the first artist to have an oeuvre and travelling exhibit with art purely made of LEGO, but he is not the only artist to use LEGO to contribute to the art world. One piece made headlines the late nineties as “The World’s Most Controversial LEGO Model.”²⁶ Polish artist Zbigniew Libera, in his piece entitled *Konzentrationslager*, depicts “with childlike innocence the horrors of a concentration camp.”²⁷ The work comes in the form of boxed packaging for seven LEGO sets, each realistically depicting the concentration camp that can be created from the loose

²⁶ The world's most controversial Lego model. (2011, October 25). Retrieved May 3, 2016, from <http://boingboing.net/2011/10/25/the-worlds-most-controversial-lego-model.html>

²⁷ Murphy, D. E. (1997, May 19). An Artist's Volatile Toy Story. Retrieved May 09, 2016, from http://articles.latimes.com/1997-05-19/news/mn-60350_1_lego-toys

bricks inside. Among many disturbing images included in the piece is the portrayal of the prisoners as skeletons, taken from the LEGO Pirate Set.²⁸

In 1997, Libera was invited to showcase his work at the 1997 Venice Biennale exposition with the condition that he leave his LEGO work behind. This condition was established by Polish sculptor Jan Stanislaw Wojciechowski, whose objections to the work stemmed from the juxtaposition of the horrors of the Holocaust with “the world’s most beloved playthings.”²⁹ He argued that LEGO as an artistic medium lacked the seriousness necessary to approach and explore such a serious topic. Libera, who had spent a year of in prison under communism for “sketching unauthorized political cartoons,” decided to boycott the exposition as the dispute incited issues of free speech and censorship. In another level of controversy, the LEGO group, who had donated LEGO for the piece, asserted that Libera had not fully disclosed his intentions for the donated LEGO materials. The LEGO group moved to sue Libera, but eventually dropped the suit³⁰.

Even with the negative commentary surrounding Libera’s *Konzentrationslager*, the piece has also incited positive reactions. Dr. Stephen Feinstein, a scholar on Russian art and Jewish art from the Holocaust, praised Libera on using LEGO to push the boundaries of art regarding potentially disturbing subjects. Feinstein saw the incorporation of the uber-commercial LEGO product as an intentional artistic statement, writing:

²⁸ Rice, K. (n.d.). Konzentrationslager. Retrieved May 09, 2016, from <http://users.erols.com/kennrice/lego-kz.htm>

²⁹ IBID

³⁰ Zbigniew Libera. (n.d.). Retrieved June 16, 2016, from <http://chgs.umn.edu/museum/exhibitions/absence/artists/zLibera/>

The idea of corporate logo, identifiability of product, and product reliability can easily be identified with some of the perpetrators of the Holocaust. The most advanced German corporations—I.G. Farben, Krupp, Siemens, Bayer A.G., BMW, Daimler-Benz, Volkswagen and others—profited from the Holocaust through their use of Jewish slave labor. Thus, product reliability in this context had nothing to do with moral or ethical positions, but everything to do with active participation in atrocity.³¹

Feinstein also saw themes of historical repetition in the work. In 2012, the Warsaw art museum purchased *Konzentrationslager* for 55,000 euros, or approximately \$71,800.³² In a statement accompanying the purchase, the museum lauded the pieces as “one of the most important works of contemporary Polish art.”³³

There were many similarly positive reactions to Libera’s *Konzentrationslager*, but it is more informative and revealing to examine the negative critiques to the piece, for it is within these arguments that the conflict between LEGO brand and art becomes apparent. In the controversy surrounding *Konzentrationslager*, the crux of the outrage is due to the juxtaposition of the Holocaust and LEGO. People were “uncomfortable” with the depiction of genocide with a toy, while some “Holocaust activists saw the work as trivializing the experiences of survivors.”³⁴ These reactions differ greatly from the reactions to other art about the holocaust; the many paintings, sketches, sculptures, novels, poems, and other artworks have been praised for

³¹ Feinstein, S. (n.d.). Other Voices 2.1 (February 2000), Stephen C. Feinstein: "Zbigniew Libera's Lego Concentration Camp: Iconoclasm in Conceptual Art About the Shoah" Retrieved May 05, 2016, from <http://www.othervoices.org/2.1/feinstein/auschwitz.php>

³² Ng, D. (2012, January 3). Warsaw art museum buys Zbigniew Libera's 'Lego' concentration camp. Retrieved June 09, 2016, from <http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/culturemonster/2012/01/lego-concentration-camp-warsaw-museum.html>

³³Ibid

³⁴ The world's most controversial Lego model. (2011, October 25). Retrieved May 3, 2016, from <http://boingboing.net/2011/10/25/the-worlds-most-controversial-lego-model.html>

depicting one of the most tragic events of the 20th century.³⁵ Why is it then that Libera's work, differing only in that it is made from LEGO, so controversial?

One reason is that, before LEGO entered the Art World, the only context for LEGO sculptures was in toy stores with happy, childlike themes. The prevalence of LEGO as a brand is what makes LEGO art noteworthy, but it also impacts how we perceive art in which it is the primary medium. As New York Times critic Edward Rothstein put it, we are looking at a "form of technology on display."³⁶ LEGO is a modern invention, a product of our consumer-driven, capitalist society. Any branded medium is inseparable from its cultural context. Branding allows companies to charge a "premium" for their products and impart upon consumers "additional and particular meaning to their generic commodities."³⁷ Branding turns MP3 players into iPods, tissues into Kleenex, and cereal into Lucky Charms. The brands associated with these products result in "far fewer acceptable substitutes at a given price."³⁸ These brands also make way for distinct and emotional brand identities that resonate with groups of consumers. To a six year-old, the differences between Raisin Bran cereal and Lucky Charms are blatant. Even though both products function the same in providing nutritional value, that young child has been conditioned to. Brands serve to distinguish products from each other, and make it easier for companies to expand their product lines.

³⁵ A Holocaust Art Exhibit. (n.d.). Retrieved June 09, 2016, from <http://www.english.illinois.edu/maps/holocaust/art.htm>

³⁶ Rothstein, E. (2013, June 14). A Vision That's Not Quite a Snap. Retrieved May 28, 2016, from http://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/14/arts/design/in-art-of-the-brick-nathan-sawaya-works-with-lego.html?_r=0

³⁷ Muniz Branding Sociology Paper, P 5

³⁸ Ibid

People are challenged to accept LEGO art as “legitimate” precisely because of the LEGO group’s success within the global marketplace. The LEGO brand image as a catalyst for young creativity is so cemented that we see LEGO and can’t think of anything else. LEGO art cannot be separated from the LEGO brand, which is why critics struggled to accept Libera’s *Konzentrationslager* and Sawaya’s *The Art of the Brick*. Sawaya, in his early career, struggled to have audiences see past the LEGO brand. He shared:

I think it was very confusing at first. LEGO was a very prevalent brand, it still is a prevalent brand, but it's known for being a child's toy. When people think of something being done out of LEGO back then, it was "well I've seen something like that at a Toy Store" like a toy store display, like a castle or spaceship. But when it came to creating artistic work out of LEGO, people didn't get it. They were like "it's just a toy, it's just craft."

Before Sawaya’s LEGO creations, the only other context for LEGO sculptures was within a branded, commercial setting. Sawaya struggled to have audiences understand his art at a deeper level than “just a toy.” Sawaya came to realize that in order to find success, he had to diminish the influence of LEGO as a toy, brand, and cultural phenomenon. For Sawaya, the key to this breakthrough was a focus on surrealism. He explained:

I really had to take it out of doing replicas of anything in the real world and make it more surreal. That's why I focused on human forms that were surreal, they had an emotional impact. And that allowed people to say Oh, okay that's not just a toy. And then when I can create something where people were forgetting that it was made out of LEGO, then I was actually getting to them, right? Then it was no longer about it just being a toy.

This is the key to LEGO art establishing itself in the Art World!! It must break free from the confines of the LEGO brand and make a statement. If the LEGO brand overpowers the art, the

aspects of branding, commodity, and consumption become the focus of discussion rather than how the art conforms and adds to the standards set within the art world. In 2015, Chinese artist and political activist Ai Weiwei shared publicly via an Instagram post that the LEGO group had declined his request for “a bulk order of Legos to create artwork to be shown at the National Gallery of Victoria as ‘they cannot approve the use of Legos for political works.’”³⁹ This prompted an avalanche of internet discussion and outrage.⁴⁰

In the discussion surrounding Ai Weiwei’s LEGO work, and Libera’s *Konzentrationslager*, LEGO as a brand dominates the conversation even when both artists were established within and conforming to the rules and structure of the Art World. *Konzentrationslager* failed by having too strong of a resemblance to the LEGO toy, and Ai Weiwei’s ideological conflicts with the LEGO group overshadowed the artistic merits of his piece. It was only by overcoming the looming shadow of the LEGO brand, and conforming to rules of the Art World that Sawaya’s LEGO art found success. This seemingly simple revelation can be applied in a multitude of ways, both in and outside the art world.

What is the point? Why does this matter?

³⁹ Ryan, F. (2015, October 25). Ai Weiwei swamped by Lego donation offers after ban on use for 'political' artwork. Retrieved May 17, 2016, from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/25/ai-weiwei-swamped-by-lego-donation-offers-after-ban-on-use-for-political-artwork>

⁴⁰ See Appendix B for further discussion of Ai Weiwei LEGO controversy

Allow me to take a pause from this formal, third-person exploration of LEGO art to share a first-person perspective on how this realization can be useful. Before my courses in sociology at DePaul University, I subscribed wholeheartedly to the philosophy of going with the “societal flow.” If believed I kept my head down, filed my taxes, voted in the elections, tried not to kill people, and paid for the goods and services I consumed, I would be a “successful” member of society. It was an easy and boring philosophy, and I easily saw how the rest of my life would play out.

It was not until I commenced my Sociological studies that I began to see just how many of our behaviors are programmed by the society we live in. Think of the norms expected for us when ride elevators! We are taught to enter quietly, push the button for the floor we are traveling to, face the doors of the elevator, avoid eye contact with other riders, and exit silently once we have reached our floor. For the first 17 years of my life, I took this process for granted as the way things *have* to be. It wasn't until this order of behavior was dissected in my Sociology 101 class that I understood the level to which we take for granted our societally encoded beliefs and behaviors. I didn't *have* to stand quietly during awkward elevator rides! I didn't have to wait for the crosswalk light to turn green if no cars were coming! We are constantly bound by societal rules, but only laws enforced by the government have true consequences! I began to exhaustively question the informal norms of society.

Flash forward to spring quarter of my senior year. It was difficult to fight off the pessimism that accompanies the revelation that everything around us is (sometimes arbitrarily) socially constructed, but I somehow managed. As I wrote this thesis, I was faced with a dilemma

of how to move forward with my own future as a member of the upper-middle class with two educated parents and a college degree of my own. I am expected to find a corporate job, and work diligently until my retirement, but that future doesn't sit right with me. I feel drawn to learning how to bartend, and starting my own business, and jumping from job to job until I find my way. But, this goes against the narrative I have learned to accept. How do I both somewhat conform to the societal expectations of success (to please my parents and somewhat appease the judgements of society) while also pursuing the things that intrigue and drive me?

This dilemma (stay with me, now) in many ways parallels Nathan Sawaya's journey into the Art World. He began as a corporate lawyer, conforming to societal expectations of success and contribution to capitalism. When he found himself spending more and more time working with LEGO (and growing a following on the internet) he took a moment, and decided to take the plunge and pursue LEGO art full-time. I see many facets of my present life stage in this point in Nathan's journey.

What Nathan did (and what I will try to repeat) is go **BIG**. Even though there were not artists who had worked solely with LEGO before, he pushed his way through Art World barriers, rules, norms, and judgement to establish himself in the Art World. Before, Sawaya, LEGO art was not art. It wasn't until Sawaya made his art conform to Art World standards that it began to be accepted. Sawaya had to learn to "walk the walk" *and* "talk the talk." Sawaya could have been cornered into an artistic career on the fringes; he could *easily* have been the weird guy in a booth at artisanal craft fairs trying to hawk his LEGO figurines. But instead, he took something that had never been done before and pushed it into museums, galleries, critical reviews, and

more. He followed the rules of the Art World and made his work so similar in appearance and presentation to art that it *became* art.

The rules within organizations, communities, and societies can be strict at times, but that does not mean they are completely airtight and impervious to change. The change we see in the acceptance of LEGO art in the Art World is a passive change; slowly but surely Sawaya conformed his work to Art World standards until it was accepted into the Art World. This approach cannot be applied to all forms of change (social change would be quite ineffective if implemented passively!) but the concept of camouflaging change until it is accepted by authorities and the general public is worth considering. We are not chained to the endless informal rules and norms of our society. Learning to identify the passive change and conformity around us awakens us to the endless possibilities of change in modern life.

Future Work

While this thesis represents a significant achievement in the author's collegiate career, the work contained in these pages is just one brick in the metaphorical LEGO Sculpture of potential research on the Art World of LEGO.

One of the major limitations of this paper is the narrow definition of art as anything given recognition by leaders within the art world. After all, hundreds of pages could be dedicated to the various definitions and perspectives on what art is and is not. This paper also does not even touch on the massive body of work made by AFOL, or Adult Fans of LEGO. It is highly encouraged

that future research incorporates the perspectives of AFOL on the Art World of LEGO. Many AFOL participate in micro LEGO Art Worlds, with online rules and standards for what and how LEGO models can be made. Significant advances in this study can be made by including AFOL perspectives in an Art World analysis of LEGO art, that broadens the definition of art.

The End

This paper is dedicated to DePaul University Professors Albert Muñiz and Greg Scott. Thank you for your inspiration and assistance!

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Appendix

Appendix A- Edited Transcript from Interview with Nathan Sawaya Conducted on May 6,

2016

NS: I mean uh, I always had LEGO. I had it in college, I had it in Law school, it was always around. I've never really defined a dark ages

KP: Okay

NS: It wasn't as prominent I suppose in college, because I uh, I kept it under my bed in my dorm room.

KP: Interesting

NS: But it was still there, uh and even in Law School, at a certain point I created a little Washington Square Park Scene which is where NYU's law school is, essentially doing the neighborhood in LEGO form. As an art form though, it didn't really hit me though until much later in life. Again, when I was practicing law and needing some sort of creative outlet. That's when I eventually turned back to lego, more than I had been. But it was always around.

KP: Okay, where did you go to college for undergrad and what did you study?

NS: I attended NYU for undergrad and I liked the neighborhood so much, I stayed there for Law School. I studied, like every young budding artist, I studied Political Science.

[...]

NS: Um, that was just a forray into working with folks at LEGO for a short time and it was an interesting time but I found I really liked choosing my own projects, like any artist would, right? You don't wanna be told what to build or what to create all day. So, I quickly pivoted to doing my own thing.

KP: Community?

NS: It was much different for me. I didn't fit in. I wanted to do my own thing. I came out of it laser-focused on being the first person to take LEGO into the art world. Because back then, it wasn't in the art world and that's what I learned very quickly that the Art World is this *thing*.

[...]

NS: I think it was very confusing at first. LEGO was a very prevalent brand, it still is a prevalent brand, but it's known for being a child's toy. When people think of something being done out of

LEGO back then, it was "well I've seen something like that at a Toy Store" like a toy store display, like a castle or spaceship. But when it came to creating artistic work out of LEGO, people didn't get it. They were like "it's just a toy, it's just craft".

I really had to take it out of doing replicas of anything in the real world and make it more surreal. That's why I focused on human forms that were surreal, they had an emotional impact. And that allowed people to say Oh, okay that's not just a toy. And then when I can create something where people were forgetting that it was made out of LEGO, then I was actually getting to them, right? Then it was no longer about it just being a toy.

KP: Were there any specific collectors or curators you befriended a bit to help you change the tide a bit,

NS: Well it was a lot of different things. Putting together a website that gave me a virtual gallery, right was a big step. Although it's commonplace now, in 2003, it was less known that you could share your art in a community virtually. And that's really what kicked it off for me because people were able to see it. One person I owe a lot to is Cindy Morrison who was an executive director of an art museum in Lancaster, PA. the Lancaster museum of art, and she and I collaborated on doing my first solo show because she saw what I was doing and said "I want to see you put together a solo show" and at the time I didn't even have enough artwork for a solo show. So the next 6 months, I was just like, let's do this. Let's make it happen. And that was big because when I did that solo show people got to see the art more than it really caught everyone's attention and it caught national coverage, it got a lot of press in the northeast, because it was in the northeast.

Appendix B- Additional details from Ai WeiWei LEGO controversy

It was not the first time the artist had attempted to use LEGO as a medium; in 2014 he had "created a series of portraits of political dissidents" that were shown in an exhibition in Alcatraz prison in 2014⁴¹. At first Ai WeiWei did not think to publicize the LEGO group's unwillingness to donate bricks, but when it was announced a few weeks later that a LEGOLAND

⁴¹ Lego changes bulk buy policy after Ai Weiwei backlash. (2016, January 13). Retrieved May 17, 2016, from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-35299069>

park would be opened in Shanghai, he chose to reveal LEGO's decision to stay away from supporting his project⁴².

Ai Weiwei's statement prompted hundreds of thousands of fans to react on social media. Some made their own LEGO-inspired versions of Ai Weiwei's work (see figures 1 and 2) while others offered to send him their own LEGO bricks so he could complete his work.⁴³

⁴² Ibid

⁴³ Ryan, F. (2015, October 25). Ai Weiwei swamped by Lego donation offers after ban on use for 'political' artwork. Retrieved May 17, 2016, from <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2015/oct/25/ai-weiwei-swamped-by-lego-donation-offers-after-ban-on-use-for-political-artwork>