

# Art as a Medium for Social Change

Kakembo Aisha Annet

Faculty of Education, Kampala International University, Uganda

## ABSTRACT

Art has long been a powerful agent for social change, serving as a mirror to society and a medium for collective resistance, empowerment, and transformation. This paper examines how various forms of art—visual arts, performing arts, literature, film, and digital media have historically and contemporarily functioned as platforms for advocacy, identity formation, and systemic critique. It traces the legacy of political art from figures like Diego Rivera to grassroots mural movements and participatory installations. The study highlights how artists increasingly collaborate with marginalized communities, using social practice methodologies to democratize artistic production and amplify underrepresented voices. It further investigates the role of art in policy discourse, education, and public consciousness, especially regarding disability, racial justice, migration, and mental health. By analyzing case studies such as the For Freedoms project, the Post Secret initiative, and digital activism in protest culture, this paper critically evaluates the efficacy and ethics of art-led interventions. The challenges faced by activist artists—including co-option, sustainability, and impact assessment are discussed to underline the complex interplay between creativity and social responsibility. Ultimately, the study reaffirms art's capacity to not only reflect but also shape societal realities and encourages a reevaluation of art's role in contemporary civic life.

**Keywords:** Art and activism, social practice art, community-based art, cultural resistance, participatory art, protest culture.

## INTRODUCTION

Art, particularly visual arts, has significantly influenced sociocultural change by engaging audiences politically. For centuries, artists created works to provoke emotional responses, inspiring recognition of injustices and calls to action. Currently, a new aesthetic of social practice has emerged in the visual and performing arts, where artists collaborate with communities to address social issues through various media like installation, theater, and new media. These social practice events reshape community norms and often shift focus from artists' expertise to community knowledge. This movement includes artists advocating for the inclusion of people with disabilities, intertwining business development, narrative building, urban planning, and anti-abuse campaigns in their projects outside traditional art spaces. Like their predecessors, these artists seek to challenge inequitable social paradigms, critiquing the neglect of disability in community activities as a social failure. They envision a fully inclusive society, circulating their ideas widely. However, the viral nature of their work raises questions about effectiveness, as the abundance of proposals complicates assessing impact. This paper explores the challenges faced by these artists during this pivotal moment in the social practice art movement [1, 2].

### Historical Context of Art in Social Movements

Miles reviews a recent book that provides an in-depth examination of the political art of renowned figures such as Francisco Goya, Diego Rivera, and the Grupo Solidario. This insightful lectionary on the 'new' Cultural Studies retreads familiar terrain that has been established within the field of Art History for some years; however, it adds significant weight to the discussion by shifting the focus to perspectives that extend beyond the confines of Western Europe and the United States. In his analysis, he delves into critical questions surrounding representation, examining the myriad problems present, the strategies that can be employed for meaningful change, and the different audiences that are engaged through this art form. In Miles' view, the art of political activism is fundamentally about trying to address these pressing

matters rather than simply abandoning the concept of representation in a quest for 'new' institutions that may not resonate with the present socio-political context. He emphasizes that while it is essential to recognize that political art can take many forms, it is equally important to ensure that the vast multiplicity of critical approaches does not negate the undeniable necessity of extending capital beyond this art design that is politically engaged. The numerical data presented indicates, according to Miles, that urgent steps should be taken to address the alarming trend of capitalist expansion, particularly in marginalized regions often referred to as the Fourth World. Through a lens that is both prophetic and tragic, he articulates a vision of the ongoing struggle against the forces of total decline that threaten to overshadow these vital conversations. The essential question evolves from whether this discourse holds meaning to how, what, for whom, and why these struggles persist in the face of overwhelming power that seeks to silence voices and render them invisible. This reality embodies a tragedy woven deeply into the fabric of our existence, and it is not merely a farce to be dismissed [3, 4].

### **The Role of Visual Arts in Advocacy**

For decades, artists have engaged in social justice efforts worldwide, transitioning from fringe movements to mainstream art addressing issues like exclusion, war, poverty, and racism. A key player in this sphere is For Freedoms, a nonprofit founded in 2016 to merge arts and advocacy in the U.S. Through a national billboard campaign, it highlights climate change, healthcare, and civil rights. This initiative has garnered global attention through collaborations with local artists, such as transforming newspapers into flying homing pigeons in Valparaíso, Chile, to confront state repression, and creating a mural in Catania, Italy, addressing migration exclusion. The group also developed spaces like Pico de Gallo in rural Chile for collaborative testimony and knowledge sharing, alongside the Justice Initiative, which strives for equity through community foundations and grant-makers. This working group collaborates with civil rights organizations and philanthropic sectors to nurture a civil society that supports community wellbeing. Socially conscious artists and performers have united in various networks, exemplified by the 2019 Refugee Projection Project in Chicago, which illustrated the effects of U.S. immigration policy by projecting artworks from Middle Eastern artists at the U.S. Treasury Department. Additionally, community video projects and documentary theater continue to shed light on collective rights infringements, encompassing Indigenous and Black rights as well as labor and social justice issues [5, 6].

### **Performing Arts as A Catalyst for Change**

Art can be used as a tool to support activists and provide them with strength. This can range from making art before an event to use in that event, to holding training sessions in the skills of art for new and inexperienced activists. Artist activists need to be out in the field making art with the very communities they wish to support to be at their most effective. It is easy for 'professional' artists to lose touch with their community, which often comes from the art world becoming its world – mimicking the systems of power, privilege, and property-defensive behaviors that they are trying to dismantle. An art that works hand in hand with the communities it wishes to support, while at the same time allowing the needs of those communities to dictate the methods of the artwork, is stronger and much less likely to succumb to the dehumanizing situation of being in a box for endless movement, making the rich richer. Simpler forms of art allow for direct involvement by wider populations. Passivity does not encourage agency. The fewer the materials and the less the time necessary for participation, the potential for having the inquiry embraced as a method of working is greatly increased. It is critical to make space for inquiry to start for the art form and its practitioners before taking it somewhere else. The distinctions between creative sectors are complex and blurred – various people are engaging with art who are not 'artists' per se, and many practitioners move between sectors. While using the term 'artist-activist' it is important not to ignore this tangle but to bring people together under a venue for discussion where contemporary art can be more action-based and art activist can move slightly into a more hypercritical and reflective role opposite existing forms of action, and on to encompassing all the grey areas in between. Similarly, the various forms of actions by organizations cannot be categorized [7, 8].

### **Literature's Impact on Social Awareness**

Poetry, novels, and theater represent the main genres of literature. Poetry interprets real experiences through language attributes like rhythm and tone, historically categorized into epic, lyric, and dramatic genres. Each form reflects societal issues, and the remnants of historical oppression, like colonization, influence social realities, artistically expressed by intellectuals. Prose aims to depict reality using common diction and grammatically correct sentences. Critics argue that prose captures societal truths through individual stories reflecting broader social, political, or historical contexts. Theater presents human existence on stage, utilizing realistic characters in relatable situations, enriched by monologues and

dialogues that engage the audience's senses. Critics maintain that theater shapes societal morals and portrays transformed human conditions. To consider literature as a societal mirror, moral, ethical, social, and political critiques are vital, especially when literature portrays societal harm caused by oppression. Since written language emerged, humans have chronicled impactful experiences, turning dreams and tales into enduring narratives that inspire. Literature ultimately drives fundamental change by resonating with the human heart and soul. However, the fast-paced modern life often limits the time available for lengthy reading, even though modernity relies on literature, which remains accessible and relevant to contemporary life [9, 10].

### **Film and Media in Social Justice Movements**

Concerns have intensified about the impact of social isolation on children and parents and the rising prevalence of family violence. In response to the pandemic, a local film/video production team collaborated with community organizations, child care agencies, and victims of family violence to create video public service announcements aimed at promoting awareness of parenting and mental health resources and encouraging help-seeking behavior among parents in crisis. Evaluation findings suggest that PSA messages were well received by the intended audience of parents with young children, and that local social media channels were considered highly effective venues to distribute PSAs. Recommendations for future efforts include ensuring sustained efforts to provide support resources and further assess impact. Despite our collective ability and interest to create video public service announcements, it was not a medium that community members could envision as a vehicle for public advocacy and broader social change. Similar academic and community collaborations have led to other multimedia products, including wooden toys, a regionally successful boardroom game, and digital stories told through a cell-phone app. In addition to the entertainment value of such products, they have been intended to prompt conversations about early childhood development more generally and in local communities. In the case of PSAs, the aim was to create short video pieces featuring a series of simple, visually-enveloping everyday parenting scenes set to music and voice over that would promote community awareness of ongoing resources for parents during the pandemic. In venues where community-wide conversations regarding resources had previously occurred, they instead had the potential to help get the message out more broadly among an audience with which prior advocacy efforts had been unsuccessful [11, 12].

### **Digital Art and Activism in the 21st Century**

Digital art has often accompanied social movements. The sequence of the groups of dehumanization in social forums in the early 21st century in Latin America, the activist groups that emerged for the defence of rights, and the cities inhabited, are just a few examples. This has also happened in the social movements that emerged around the world after the global financial crisis of 2008. All of them know about the strength that digital platforms and social networks have had in disseminating actions, distributing messages, and elaborating visual devices with the clear intention of destabilizing social orders. From the hands of groups of very different situations and contexts, a forceful and prolific jaws of thought and action have been displayed in public space. In this framework, a first reading of some actions and events that resorted to a strong visual appeal will help locate some of the most powerful devices that social movements have channelled and communalized to dislocate the status of the legibility and visibility of bodies, actions, and events in contemporary life. In particular, the focus will be on cultures of protest, in the sense of the urban daily life that has developed for years, and excluding movements that have recently been gestated by major catastrophes, for instance. The examples will be propositions that work on the building of ephemeral urban spaces capable of displacing some aspects of the structure of perception of public space and of the status of the visibility and legibility of actions and events. One of the features of the protest culture this focus is on is its dynamics of commonisation derived from a double process of escalation and appropriation. On the one hand, the wide spread of devices adopted in the 15M demonstrations soon inspired cities, towns, and villages in Spain. On the other hand, as relayed by activists and remixed by other groups, these devices soon travelled to other countries, such as Greece, Turkey, Brazil, Egypt, Bosnia, and even India, Australia, and the United States [13, 14].

### **Case Studies of Successful Art-Led Movements**

Most notable is the use of visual art as a form of protest. In the summer of 2008, artists staged a protest against the School District 61 decision to discontinue funding for the Visual Arts Education program at Cook Street school in Victoria, British Columbia. As part of the protest, a group of artists, parents, children, and interested citizens gathered on a bright summer afternoon and began painting murals on what had previously been a blank wall. The audience became participants. In making pretend cars out of cardboard boxes, they were able to interact with the art, much to the delight of the children. No one was

intrusive, and the enjoyment of the art by the non-artistic community revealed an inherent flaw in the institutions that seek to marginalize the artists: everyone can participate in art, and ultimately the community will have the final say. A second notable example is the movement known as the “Post Secret Project.” In this participatory art project, run since 2006, the public creates postcards revealing their secrets using various mediums and sends them anonymously. He then sorts through them and displays them. Unlike the previous example, art in this case is used to challenge “healing” or “normalization” narratives championed by psychiatry and the state. The Post Secret Project provided an opportunity to explore depression and the stigma behind mental illness in a way that would have deemed too confronting otherwise. This was a cathartic release for many, and the subsequent widespread media production of the project demonstrated that art can inspire discourse on challenging topics. However, in the six years since the project’s conception, he has been championed and lauded as a “hero” counter to the stereotypical image of the artist. Once again, artists have become figures of uncritical adoration, unable to realistically affect a change in society at large. This raises important questions about the ethics of participatory art. This paper proposes to explore the ethical implications of employing personal stories in participatory art and the challenges artistic practitioners face in bringing attention to moral ambiguity and contention. The investigation is based in part on a participatory mural project undertaken with members of the Queer Refugee Network in Vancouver, British Columbia. In addressing the ethical implications of how artists interact with the stories of community members, it deals with the necessary loop of joy and pain that stories of survival create and the complexities this elicits in producing visual artworks. How does the story of survival become “art”? [15, 16].

### **Challenges Faced by Artists in Activism**

This study attempted to listen to emerging artists talk about their experience creating activist art in the hopes of gaining a better understanding of the challenges they face when considering an art form that is traditionally not considered a social medium. This is important for art educators so they can better understand how to guide their students in creating activist art. It is hoped the findings also underscore the importance of engaging with the arts in addressing social issues. For all the joys of allowing public art to span sad or angry emotional states, there are some difficulties artists face as activist artists. The challenges of activism and art are debated, and it is somewhat comforting to learn that unforeseen circumstances can derail even the most thoughtful of public art projects. Activists can become overwhelmed and lose track of their goals when there are so many feelings to unpack after a tragedy. When the goal is to create a public artwork that engages with the audience, the difficulty lies in the act of public engagement itself—getting people to notice the artwork in a setting where they may have other preoccupations. Another challenge of working with volunteers, especially anonymous students, is that artists may not know how their artwork is being interpreted or remembered over time. Although the donation of public art space is a gift, artists may feel powerless when the artwork is no longer theirs once it is completed. Even if the general public is engaged and empowered to remember a story in a new way, how can anyone measure that empowerment? Advocating for artistic engagement in public education requires a well-rounded argument that can be effective in boardrooms filled with representatives from architecture, art, and math and science disciplines. Even artist-friendly districts have their priorities, and art and music are often quickly cut from school budgets. Within established districts, the sheer logistical nightmare of handling many different public art projects often pushes art into the back seat behind academic programming [17, 18].

### **The Future of Art in Social Change**

Art can be a vital tool to positively influence society and create social change, from the murals depicting an after-school program on a city street to the starving children on posters sent to countless locations. Art activists embrace this belief that art is a platform and outreach tool that can educate, inform, raise awareness, provoke discussion, and present conditions for the Audience and government consideration. In a commercial context, art is a commodity, just like any other product; consequently, it has suffered more than other forms of social communication in the hands of the fast-moving commercial world. At the same time, it has become more disengaged from the dictatorship of commodification and profane consumption; for the same reason, it has become infrequent. Art has undergone a vast transformation in the past decades. Sometimes, it was claimed that it had died, become obsolete, or undergone a paradigm shift. Sometimes, it was said it was everywhere, inflatable, sliced, embedded, or that there was much more art than ever before. The obvious answer to such contradictions lies behind the complexity of the notion. This brevity aims to understand art as an agency in the disobedient production of culture, from the perspective of contemporary art. By the 1890s, even coded references to contemporary politics are

replaced by Symbolism's esoteric content. Art's distancing instantiates a disbelief in the prospect of political change, offering change only in the realm of imagination. In his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Herbert Marcuse argues that art can change how the world is apprehended. Thus, art's imaginative potential remains a factor in the pursuit of freedom. Today, the situation is bleaker than in the 1970s. Neoliberalism insists today that there is no alternative to its regime, and enforces this through consumerism. However, hope reappears in direct action, from anti-roads campaigns in the 1990s, to anti-capitalism in the 2000s, to Occupy in 2011-12. Is art part of this picture of radical alterity, or relegated to museum vaults? Among the issues raised are Marcuse's view of art as autonomous creativity and a blurring of the divide between art institutions and the cultures of protest. It begins with art's production under neoliberalism, considers protest culture and engaged art practices [19, 20].

### CONCLUSION

Art remains one of the most potent forms of social commentary and activism, with its capacity to inspire, provoke, and mobilize. Across media from murals and theater to poetry and digital platforms, artists have challenged dominant narratives, exposed injustices, and fostered community dialogue. The case studies and theoretical discussions presented in this paper illustrate how art, when rooted in collaborative, ethical, and community-informed practices, transcends aesthetics to become a transformative social tool. However, the effectiveness of art as a medium for change depends on critical reflection, sustainable engagement, and genuine inclusion. As neoliberal forces commodify culture and restrict dissent, the artist's role as both creator and citizen becomes increasingly vital. The future of art in social change lies in its ability to continually adapt, resist co-option, and reassert its place not only in galleries but in the streets, institutions, and lives of those it seeks to serve.

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