

Art as a Tool for Social Activism: An analysis of the use of art to address social, political, and economic issues

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Abstract

The value of art as a vehicle for social activity cannot be overstated in a society where social, political, and economic challenges continue to impact our culture. This study explores the world of the arts and their extraordinary capacity to deal with these urgent problems. We can see the transforming power of visual arts in bringing about consciousness by looking at the works of artists like Banksy, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Frida Kahlo, and Shepard Fairey. The essay also looks at the ways in which Ai Weiwei, Joseph Beuys, and Tania Bruguera's performance arts promote inclusivity and dialogue. It will also look at how Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Olafur Eliasson's installation arts act as catalysts for heightened awareness. Additionally, the digital online platform develops into a cutting-edge setting for artistically motivated social activism thanks to artists like The Yes Men and Molly Crabapple. This paper also reveals the difficulties and constraints art faces as a tool for change, such as censorship, commercialization, and co-optation. We gain an understanding of the intricate relationships between art and social activity by critically examining the effects of these barriers. In the end, this study highlights how important using art in social activism opens the door for additional study and activist work in this dynamic area.

Introduction

Art has an extraordinary capacity to transcend the confines of canvas and stage, propelling itself into the heart of social, political, and economic discourse. The intersection of art and

social activism represents a dynamic realm where creativity and conscience converge. This exploration ventures into the realm where brushstrokes, performances, installations, and

digital platforms become tools for raising awareness, sparking dialogue, and advocating for change. In the chapters that follow, we embark on a journey through the multifaceted world of art as a catalyst for social transformation. We will encounter visionary artists and their works, each wielding their creative prowess to confront pressing issues of our time. From visual arts that serve as potent instruments of reflection to performance arts that nurture dialogue and inclusivity, and installation arts that disrupt public spaces, we will navigate the varied landscapes of artistic expression. Moreover, we will delve into the digital frontier, where artists leverage the power of online platforms to amplify their messages, transcending geographic boundaries and democratizing the dissemination of art-driven social activism. Yet, as we traverse this path, we must also grapple with the challenges and limitations that artists and activists encounter, from censorship and commercialization to accessibility barriers. This exploration seeks to unravel the profound significance of using art as a means of social activism. It invites us to reflect on art's unique ability to engage the intellect, stir emotions, and provoke action. As we journey through these pages, let us keep in mind that art is not merely a passive observer of society but an active agent, a catalyst for change, and a beacon of hope in a world marked by complexities and challenges.

I. Visual Arts as a Catalyst for Raising Awareness (Use of paintings, sculptures, to

depict social issues)

Banksy, a pseudonymous street artist, has emerged as one of the most influential figures in contemporary art and social activism. With a distinct style characterized by stenciled images and clever subversion, Banksy's artworks often serve as biting commentary on a range of social, political, and economic issues. Banksy's identity remains shrouded in secrecy, allowing the artist's works to speak for themselves without the distractions of personal fame. By utilizing public spaces as his canvas, Banksy reaches a wide audience, transcending the traditional confines of the art world and bringing attention to important societal matters. By utilizing public spaces as his canvas, Banksy reaches a wide audience, transcending the traditional confines of the art world and bringing attention to important societal matters. Banksy's artworks are known for their provocative messages and clever juxtapositions. His pieces challenge established power structures, question societal norms, and shed light on the often-overlooked voices and struggles of marginalized communities. Through his art, Banksy has addressed a myriad of issues, including capitalism, consumerism, war, poverty, and government surveillance. By using humor, irony, and satire, Banksy's works have the ability to captivate viewers and inspire reflection, ultimately prompting them to question their own beliefs and the world around them. What sets Banksy apart is not only his artistic talent but also his ability to create a sense of urgency

and relevance in his works. By using public spaces as his canvas, Banksy transforms everyday locations into thought-provoking sites that demand attention. Whether it is a politically charged mural on a city wall or an unexpected installation in a museum, Banksy's art disrupts the status quo and forces viewers to confront uncomfortable truths. Banksy's works have not only gained critical acclaim but have also captured the public's imagination. They have become iconic symbols of resistance and social activism, resonating with people from diverse backgrounds and inspiring a sense of collective action. Banksy's art encourages viewers to question authority, challenge injustice, and strive for a more equitable society.

Jean-Michel Basquiat, an influential artist of the late 20th century, used his art as a means to address and advocate for social and economic change. Born in Brooklyn, New York, Basquiat became an artistic prodigy who defied traditional boundaries and confronted societal issues through his raw and expressive works. His art reflects his personal experiences as a person of African and Hispanic descent, as well as his observations of urban life, racism, and economic inequality. Basquiat's art often incorporated social commentary and political symbolism, providing a visual critique of the systemic injustices that plagued society. Through his bold and expressive brushwork, Basquiat tackled themes of racial inequality, urban decay, and the commodification of art and culture. His work captured the complexities

and struggles faced by marginalized communities, shedding light on their experiences and demanding recognition and justice. One of Basquiat's recurring motifs was the use of crown imagery, which represented power, authority, and the desire for recognition. This symbol can be seen as a commentary on the limited opportunities afforded to individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds, particularly people of color, in a society that perpetuates systemic racism and economic disparities. Basquiat sought to challenge these barriers, highlighting the potential for social and economic change through the empowerment and upliftment of marginalized voices.

Shepard Fairey, an American contemporary street artist, graphic designer, and activist, is renowned for his impactful art that merges aesthetics with social and political activism. Fairey's work embodies the spirit of resistance and empowerment, using art as a tool to advocate for positive change and raise awareness about critical social issues. Through his distinctive style, characterized by bold colors, stenciled imagery, and striking typography, Fairey has become a significant figure in the realm of street art and social commentary. One of Shepard Fairey's most iconic pieces is the "HOPE" poster he created during Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign. The poster features a portrait of Obama with the word "HOPE" in bold letters beneath him. This image swiftly became an emblem of optimism

and political engagement, capturing the enthusiasm of millions of supporters during the campaign. Fairey's artwork transcended its original purpose, symbolizing a broader call for hope, unity, and progressive change in the face of challenges. Beyond the "HOPE" poster, Shepard Fairey has consistently used his art to shed light on various social, environmental, and political issues. His "Obey Giant" series, featuring the image of a wrestler, confronts themes of commercialism, propaganda, and individualism. Fairey challenges viewers to question authority and resist conformity, encouraging them to think critically about the messages they encounter in the media-saturated world. Fairey's art also reflects his activism on environmental matters. In his "Earth Crisis" series, he addresses climate change, sustainability, and the urgent need for environmental consciousness. Through powerful visuals of endangered animals and messages of environmental stewardship, Fairey emphasizes the importance of protecting the planet for future generations. Moreover, Shepard Fairey has consistently supported various social justice causes through his art. He has produced artwork to promote LGBTQ+ rights, immigrant rights, and racial equality. Fairey's artistic activism extends beyond the streets into the realm of fundraising and awareness campaigns, collaborating with organizations to amplify their messages and support their missions. Despite facing legal challenges for his street art and appropriation of

existing imagery, Fairey's commitment to artistic expression and social change remains unwavering. His works continue to resonate with a diverse audience, transcending cultural and linguistic barriers to convey messages of unity and solidarity. By blending art with activism, Shepard Fairey has proven the transformative power of creative expression, inspiring others to engage critically with the world and contribute to meaningful social and political discourse.



Shepard Fairey's Hope (2008)

II. Performance Arts as a Means of Fostering Dialogue and Inclusivity

Ai Weiwei, a Chinese contemporary artist, social activist, and cultural critic, has utilized performance art as a powerful medium to foster dialogue, challenge societal norms, and advocate for inclusivity and human rights. Renowned for his bold and provocative artistic expressions, Ai Weiwei's performances

transcend geographical boundaries and cultural differences, addressing universal themes and inviting viewers to contemplate pressing issues that affect humanity. One of Ai Weiwei's notable performance art pieces is "Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn" (1995). In this provocative act, Ai Weiwei intentionally drops a valuable ancient Han dynasty urn, shattering it into pieces. By destroying a symbol of historical heritage, he raises questions about the value of artifacts, the fluid nature of cultural identity, and the complexities of preservation versus transformation. This performance urges viewers to consider the notion of permanence and impermanence in the context of history, culture, and societal values. Another significant performance by Ai Weiwei is "Sunflower Seeds" (2010). For this installation, Ai Weiwei filled the Turbine Hall of London's Tate Modern with millions of handcrafted porcelain sunflower seeds. Each seed represented an individual, evoking themes of mass production, globalization, and the commodification of human labor. Through this visually stunning performance, Ai Weiwei drew attention to the power dynamics and interconnectedness between individuals in a globalized world, encouraging contemplation of the impact of consumer culture on human experiences and relationships. Beyond individual performances, Ai Weiwei's involvement in broader social activism has led him to engage in acts of dissent against government censorship and suppression of free speech. His involvement in the aftermath

of the 2008 Sichuan earthquake in China is particularly noteworthy. Through social media and performance art, Ai Weiwei documented and raised awareness about the tragic loss of life due to shoddy construction in the earthquake's aftermath. His relentless pursuit of truth and justice became a powerful rallying point for accountability and transparency, transcending borders and inspiring international support. Ai Weiwei's performances also address themes of migration, displacement, and human rights. His collaboration with refugees and displaced individuals in the "Laundromat" installation (2016) offered a platform for their stories to be heard. Through this project, Ai Weiwei humanizes the experiences of those who have been forcibly uprooted from their homes, encouraging empathy and understanding amidst the global refugee crisis.



Ai Weiwei's "Sunflower Seeds" (2010)

Another artist who used performance Arts as a means of fostering dialogue and inclusivity is Joseph Beuys. As a pioneering German artist and social activist, Beuys revolutionized the concept of performance art by using it as a powerful tool to foster dialogue, challenge conventions, and promote inclusivity. Beuys's performances, often referred to as "actions" or "social sculptures," sought to break down barriers between artist and audience, encouraging active participation and reflection. Through his innovative use of materials, symbolism, and personal experiences, Beuys invited viewers to engage with complex social and political issues, ultimately aiming to transform society through collective understanding and action. In Beuys work "How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare" (1965), Beuys was able to perform with his face covered with honey and gold leaf while holding a dead hare, whispering and gesturing as though explaining art to the deceased animal. By creating a visceral and enigmatic experience, Beuys confronted the questions of human communication, interconnectedness, and the role of an artist as the mediator between the living and the non-living. Through this performance, he challenged the traditional boundaries of art and embraced inclusivity by urging viewers to look beyond the surface and connect with the deeper essence of human experience. Beuys's performance art also encompassed a strong socio-political dimension, as seen in his "I Like America and

America Likes Me" (1974). During this groundbreaking performance, Beuys spent three days confined in a gallery space with a wild coyote. Through this intense interaction, Beuys sought to address the fraught relationship between humans and nature, questioning the impact of Western consumerist culture on the environment and indigenous cultures. By confronting the primal and the cultural, Beuys encouraged dialogue on environmental stewardship and social responsibility, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings. Furthermore, Joseph Beuys's performances often incorporated democratic and collaborative elements, aligning with his belief in the transformative power of art as a social practice. In his "7000 Oaks" project (1982), Beuys involved the community of Kassel, Germany, in the planting of 7000 oak trees alongside 7000 basalt stones. This performance served as a living testament to collective action and sustainability, highlighting the potential for art to bring diverse communities together and inspire lasting change. Through his multi-faceted performances, Joseph Beuys emphasized the importance of art as a means to empower individuals and promote inclusivity. By challenging conventional notions of artistic expression and engaging with pressing societal issues, Beuys opened up new avenues for dialogue and understanding. His legacy continues to inspire artists and audiences alike to view art as a dynamic force for social

transformation, encouraging active engagement with the complexities of the human experience and the shared responsibility for building a more inclusive and compassionate world.

Tania Bruguera, a Cuban-born artist and activist, has harnessed the power of performance art to facilitate dialogue, challenge oppressive systems, and champion inclusivity. Through her daring and thought-provoking performances, Bruguera navigates the boundaries of art, politics, and public engagement, aiming to create spaces for open discourse and encourage social transformation. Her works often blur the lines between art and activism, emphasizing the potential of creative expression to effect meaningful change. A notable example of Tania Bruguera's commitment to fostering dialogue is the "Tatlin's Whisper #5" (2008) performance. In this participatory piece, Bruguera utilized a simple yet powerful gesture: inviting individuals to step up to a podium and speak their minds for exactly one minute, mirroring the practice of free speech. By offering a platform for unrestrained expression, Bruguera confronted issues of censorship, control, and the right to voice one's opinions. The performance resonated particularly with audiences in countries with limited free speech, highlighting the value of open dialogue in a democratic society. Bruguera's art also often addresses issues of immigration, displacement, and cultural identity. In "The Francis Effect" (2015), she invited immigrants to a confessional booth

to share their personal stories and struggles. By transforming the traditional confessional into a space of catharsis and empathy, Bruguera highlighted the universality of human experiences and the importance of acknowledging and supporting marginalized communities. Another significant work by Tania Bruguera is "Untitled (Havana, 2000)" (2000), where she created a piece involving an open microphone in a public square in Havana. The microphone was left for people to freely express their thoughts and feelings. This act of allowing free expression, even for a limited time, challenged the censorship prevalent in Cuba and empowered individuals to voice their opinions without fear of retribution. Bruguera's "10,148,451" (2018) was an installation that addressed the global refugee crisis. The work comprised a floor covered with heat-sensitive material that revealed an image of a boat filled with refugees when walked upon. By literally inviting viewers to walk in the shoes of those seeking safety and refuge, Bruguera sought to bridge empathy gaps and inspire collective action to address the ongoing crisis.

III. Installation Arts as a Catalyst for Raising Awareness

Jenny Holzer, an American artist known for her innovative use of text and public spaces, has harnessed the power of installation art to raise awareness about pressing social, political, and cultural issues. Through her thought-provoking and visually arresting installations, Holzer has transformed public spaces into platforms for

critical reflection, challenging viewers to confront uncomfortable truths and engage with complex societal narratives. One of Jenny Holzer's signature works is her "Truisms" series, which began in the late 1970s. These succinct and often paradoxical statements, displayed on electronic LED signs, confront viewers with provocative ideas and uncomfortable realities. By infiltrating public spaces with messages that disrupt daily routines and challenge assumptions, Holzer's installations prompt passersby to pause, contemplate, and question the world around them. This immersive engagement fosters a sense of critical awareness and encourages individuals to consider their own role in shaping societal norms. Holzer's use of unconventional mediums, such as LED signs, projections, and monumental text-based sculptures, amplifies her installations' impact. For example, her "Protect Protect" (2008) installation at the Whitney Museum in New York used LED displays to project provocative statements about war, violence, and authority onto the museum's façade. By juxtaposing her powerful messages with the museum's institutional architecture, Holzer disrupted traditional expectations and underscored the power of art to transcend conventional boundaries.

Barbara Kruger, a renowned American artist, has made an indelible mark on the art world with her distinctive style of installation art that merges bold text and imagery to address issues of power, identity, consumerism, and gender.

Through her impactful installations, Kruger challenges viewers to question societal norms and assumptions, fostering critical awareness and igniting conversations about pressing social and cultural issues. One of Barbara Kruger's signature works is "I shop therefore I am" (1987). This installation features a photograph of a woman's face overlaid with the bold white-on-red text that reads "I shop therefore I am." Through this thought-provoking piece, Kruger critiques consumer culture and the notion that personal identity is often intertwined with material possessions. The juxtaposition of text and image challenges viewers to reflect on their own values and the impact of consumerism on their lives. Kruger's "Untitled (Your body is a battleground)" (1989) is another iconic installation that addresses issues of gender and reproductive rights. The work features a close-up image of a woman's face bisected by the powerful text "Your body is a battleground." This installation was created in support of women's rights and against the restrictions placed on reproductive choices. By placing the viewer in a position of reflection on issues of bodily autonomy, Kruger prompts a deeper understanding of the complexities surrounding gender and feminism. Moreover, Kruger's immersive installations often transform exhibition spaces into environments that challenge the viewer's perceptions. Her work "The Globe Shrinks" (2010) is a room-filling installation that features an inflated globe suspended from the ceiling, with the words

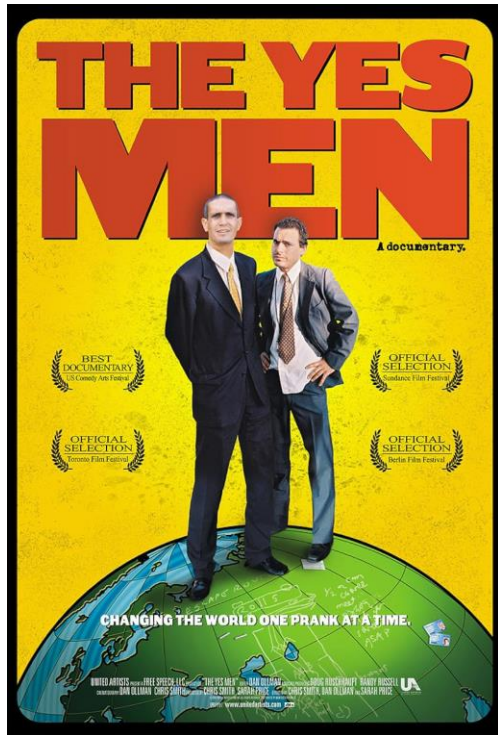
"The Globe Shrinks For You" emblazoned on its surface. This installation provokes questions about globalization, interconnectedness, and the influence of media and information in shaping our worldview. Kruger's use of direct and declarative text, often presented in striking red, black, and white color schemes, demands attention and elicits immediate responses. By appropriating advertising techniques and subverting them to convey critical messages, Kruger's installations bridge the gap between art and popular culture, engaging a wide range of audiences and prompting conversations that extend beyond the art world. In conclusion, Barbara Kruger's installation art stands as a testament to the power of visual communication in raising awareness and inciting dialogue about pressing social issues. Her ability to merge text and imagery in bold and provocative ways challenges viewers to examine their own beliefs, question established norms, and actively engage with complex themes. Kruger's installations inspire critical reflection and offer a space for individuals to consider their roles within broader societal narratives, underscoring the transformative potential of art as a catalyst for awareness and change.

IV. Digital Online Platform for Art-driven Social Activism

The Yes Men, a dynamic collective of artists and activists, have emerged as pioneers in the realm of digital online platforms for art-driven social activism. Founded by Jacques Servin and Igor

Vamos, this group employs a unique blend of satire, subversion, and spectacle to tackle some of the world's most pressing issues, ranging from corporate malfeasance to climate change and human rights abuses. Central to their approach is the use of digital platforms as instruments of disruption and awareness. The Yes Men often create fake websites and pose as corporate or government representatives to deliver sharp and provocative messages. These digital personas serve as vessels for their biting critique of societal norms and the powers that perpetuate injustice. One of their most notable projects is the creation of websites that mimic those of major corporations or organizations, such as the "Dow Chemical" website. In 2004, The Yes Men launched a faux Dow Chemical website and issued a fabricated press release claiming that Dow would take full responsibility for the Bhopal disaster, one of the world's worst industrial accidents. This audacious act drew widespread media attention and underscored the ongoing struggle for justice faced by the victims of the disaster. Moreover, The Yes Men's digital presence extends beyond fake websites. They leverage social media to disseminate their messages, engage with a global audience, and promote their documentary films. Their ability to blend humor, irony, and social commentary has made their online content highly shareable, turning their digital platforms into vehicles for mobilization and education. In essence, The Yes Men's digital interventions exemplify the power of online spaces to disrupt the status quo,

provoke dialogue, and effect change. By using digital tools to expose corporate and political wrongdoing, they challenge the dominant narratives of power and profit, urging viewers to question the systems that perpetuate inequality and environmental degradation.



The Yes Men (2003)

Molly Crabapple, an artist and writer renowned for her intricate and emotionally charged artwork, is another luminary in the world of digital online platforms for art-driven social activism. Crabapple's work transcends traditional artistic boundaries, utilizing digital spaces to amplify her message and advocate for social and political change. At the heart of her online presence is her website, which serves as a portfolio of her work and a hub for her activism. Through her website, she showcases her visually striking illustrations, paintings, and sketches,

which often feature themes of social injustice, inequality, and the struggles of marginalized communities. These artworks are more than mere aesthetic creations; they are poignant narratives that convey the human stories behind the headlines. Crabapple's digital reach extends to social media, where she engages with a global audience. Her platforms are spaces for both art appreciation and activism. She uses her digital presence to document and comment on current events, from the refugee crisis to political protests. Her use of social media as a canvas for art-driven activism has allowed her to connect with individuals who share her commitment to social justice, while also serving as a means to educate and mobilize a wider audience. One notable project by Molly Crabapple is her collaboration with journalist Marwan Hisham on the illustrated memoir "Brothers of the Gun" (2018). Through a blend of vivid artwork and powerful storytelling, the book provides an intimate and humanizing look at the Syrian conflict. By utilizing digital tools for publication and promotion, Crabapple and Hisham reached a global readership, illuminating the complexities of war and displacement. In addition to her art, Crabapple has also used digital crowdfunding platforms to support her art-driven activism projects. Crowdfunding campaigns have enabled her to undertake initiatives like "Theater of Justice," which documents the legal proceedings against detainees at Guantanamo Bay. These digital fundraising efforts exemplify the capacity of

online platforms to democratize the financing of socially engaged art projects.

Conclusion

In this comprehensive examination of the synergy between art and social activism, we have embarked on a journey through various artistic mediums and the artists who wield them as tools for raising awareness, fostering dialogue, and advocating for change on the intricate tapestry of social, political, and economic issues. From the provocative and enigmatic works of visual artists like Banksy, Jean-Michel Basquiat, Frida Kahlo, and Shepard Fairey to the immersive and thought-provoking performances by Ai Weiwei, Joseph Beuys, and Tania Bruguera, and finally, to the disruptive and transformative installations crafted by Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and Olafur Eliasson, we have witnessed the profound impact of art in challenging the status quo and prompting reflection. The digital realm, exemplified by *The Yes Men* and *Molly Crabapple*, has provided a global stage for these artistic expressions, transcending geographic boundaries and democratizing the dissemination of art-driven social activism. These artists have employed digital platforms to not only raise awareness but also to mobilize individuals, inspiring them to engage with complex issues and embrace their roles as active agents of change.

However, our exploration has not been without its recognition of challenges and limitations,

including censorship, commercialization, co-optation, accessibility barriers, and the complexities of measuring impact. These obstacles remind us that the path of art-driven social activism is not without its hurdles, but it is precisely in overcoming these challenges that artists and activists find opportunities for growth and resilience. The significance of using art as a tool for social activism is undeniable. It resonates with the essence of human experience, appealing to our emotions, intellect, and conscience. Art's ability to transcend linguistic and cultural barriers makes it a universal language of change. It challenges our perceptions, amplifies marginalized voices, and calls for action in a world marked by inequality and injustice.

As we peer into the future, it is clear that this intersection between art and activism will continue to evolve. It calls for interdisciplinary research to better understand the mechanisms through which art ignites change. It demands continued digital engagement to leverage the full potential of online platforms. It underscores the importance of building inclusive communities of artists and activists, and it encourages us to explore the long-term impact of art on society. In conclusion, art-driven social activism is not a solitary endeavor; it is a collective call to action. It reminds us that art is not a passive observer of history but an active participant in shaping it. As we navigate the complexities of our time, let us heed this call, engage with the challenging questions it

poses, and continue to harness the profound power of art to transform our world, one brushstroke, one performance, one installation, and one digital platform at a time.

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