

ARTISTS AS CULTURAL WORKERS FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

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Abstract

When we talk about social change, but also about the evolution and dynamics of the processes for social change, art and artists have always had an important part. Art has been an instrument of introspection for man's universe as well as society in all its diversity. Art has always been the expression of an era and the artist was the one that transferred the dynamics of his experiences that were filtered by his sensibilities and mediated by the societies in which he lived into the universe of art.

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Artists are central, not peripheral, to social change. To have the movements that make the wave, you need cultural workers. (Rodriguez, 2013).

Using various art form—visual/conceptual art, participatory art, photography, new media, video, dance, theater/performance art, music, creative writing, or other forms, artists meaningfully engage with issues of advocacy, justice, and community-building. Through their expressive talents, artists can challenge cultural narratives, shift imagery and inspire emotions in a way that traditional political methods alone rarely do. In a 2013 essay entitled “Change the Culture, Change the World,” artist Favianna Rodriguez puts it this way: “You may attend a rally or vote, but you also read books, listen to music, engage with visual art, turn on the radio and create your identity through culture. Artists are central, not peripheral, to social change. To have the movements that make the wave, you need cultural workers.” (Rodriguez, 2013).

Art has enriched society by forcing it to extend its real universe and to transform it into a fiction that generates progress. The dynamics of change in the contemporary era, the progress of science, of technology, all we've gained in general knowledge have all stimulated the artists' creativity which brought about major changes in both artistic concepts, ideas and themes, as well as language. All this led up to a more intense inter and trans-disciplinary dialogue and art has become an area of surprising occurrences. The language of art has turned into a work instrument, a vessel for transmitting social messages, for reclaims, for debates that highlighted certain issues regarding gender, ethnic, religious, political or cultural discrimination.

The artists' forms of engagement with the world and processes of making art create new avenues that can shift the thinking on major local, national and global issues. Bringing artists into the conversation about economic, social, political change enrich the discourse and ultimately strengthens the solutions. Through artistic gestures the artists are stimulated as much as they stimulate critical thinking on various social issues such as globalization, consumption society, surveillance, violence, environmental issues, discrimination and inequalities in general, democracy, human rights, etc. Socially engaged art can ignite outrage and demands for change, and/or provide a platform for reflection, collaboration, and building community.

Artists, as cultural workers, are the ones that provide an interesting lens through which we might view our world's challenges. Many artists today are deeply committed to making work that addresses pressing social issues and changes the way we perceive the world. While some artists use traditional forms of visual, literary, or performing arts to make work that comments on, responds to, or advocates for the

need for change, others are exploring new forms of “social practice” that engages communities in an interactive exchange.

An abundance of engaged art forms have emerged today using aesthetics to affect social dynamics. In what follows I will summarize a few of the major artistic productions of the contemporary era that had a big social impact and made their way in art history as works of art through which the artist explicitly criticizes issues concerning the real world, he sounds the alarm using specific means of expression to face a series of dangers concerning discrimination, injustice, teaching, etc. For the coherence of my exemplifying march, my leitmotif will be the human body.

The body has been the visual artist's tool of expression on numerous occasions. As B. Turner put it, we live in a somatic society in which our social issues and social anxieties can often be transferred to the body (Turner, 1992). This is why the body was and still is an inexhaustible source of inspiration for artists, but also a battle field for expressing profound concerns regarding social issues. The artist, eternally preoccupied with the human body - the central theme of numerous art representations - has always paid very close attention to the symbolics of the body, to the significance of the corporeal representations, to the dynamic of the various perspectives of the human body that were circumscribed to the aspirations, tastes, ideals, beliefs of those respective eras. Be it conservative or visionary, documented or innovating, the artist has used the human body as a source and resource or inspiration and creation, but also to promote messages with a profound social and political characteristic

The theme of racial and/or gender discrimination, the theme of excessive surveillance of our private and public bodies, the theme of violence (via plastic surgery or wars against our bodies), etc. are just some of the subjects approached by artists using the body as a tool for expression and revolt. On more than once occasion, the body turned into a territory for artistic happenings with profound social messages about injustice and social policies. Oleg Kulik is sitting in a cage as a reference to Beuys' performance where he was trapped three days and nights with a coyote. The group of Viennese actionists were conducting extreme corporeal experiments that would sometimes lead to suicide during the 60s-70s. Let's not forget about the self-mutilation, the sexual freedom, the disgust as opposed to fear, to shame in Otoo Muehl's art, Rudolf Schwarzkogler's suffering and castration, Hermann Nitsch's ritual mutilations as a satire to sacrifice or Gunter Brus' destruction of conventions and taboos. These are not meaningless artistic gestures, these are screams of suffering, cries of despair for the social and moral norms and values of the world inhabited by these artists.

If we talk about the issues of social inequality (for example ethnic or sexual discrimination) and the way they have been embodied in art, we can look at Frida Kahlo's work in which she would approach feminist themes about motherhood as experience vs. motherhood as an institution, or becoming pregnant in the era of artificial insemination. We can look at Yoko Ono that lets people cut off all of her clothes to better understand an approach on harassment and violence against women. We can look at Vali Export's projects as a profoundly social body of work, with the artist wishing to highlight in her many happenings the patriarchal regimes that dominate the female image by daring the youth to reinterpret the image of a man walked on a leash in the streets of Paris as a renegotiation of the gender relationships in the contemporary world. Marina Abramovich uses her body as material for what she calls her 'performative field', enabling us to decipher the statements of the second and third wave of feminism. We mustn't forget about Adrian Piper, who used to dress up as a man as an approach to themes of racial and sexual discrimination. The African-American artist has a skin discoloration which allowed her to play an uncertain role in her performances in order to investigate the relationship between the two communities, trying to open a dialogue about normality. We can discuss Orlan and her famous plastic surgeries that were broadcast live, or about Laurie Anderson which distorts her own voice in order to suggest sexual ambivalence and welcome a deconstruction of the rigid and constraining definitions of gender making way for diversity. We also encounter feminist statements in the work of Martha Wilson who makes comments on woman's role in society as a slave, as marginalized, as forced to lead an obscure existence.

We can find provocative statements on identity and multiculturalism in the visual project of Shirin Neshat and the covered faces of women in her works, which talk about the controversial issues of contemporary Islam. As an extension of these experiments in which the body becomes the support, the object of interventions and the project of social and cultural transformations, we must also include a series of artists who were known for their harsh embodied commentary on themes like sexual identity, eroticism, negritude, normative beauty, violence, etc. Artists such as Robert Mapplethorpe, Carl Lewis or Glenn Ligon explore such themes in their works. Their artistic routes help normalize the attitude against ethnic and sexual minorities, leading to the acceptance of differences, of diversity.

As part of the same artistic discourse we can also mention Stelarc's hybrid, robot bodies, Marta de Mesezes' pieces that use video cameras and med scans, or Eduardo Kac's bio and transgenic art, all of which are meant to provoke critical thinking when faced with superteching and implicitly monitoring the human body, to highlight the side effects and the ethical dilemmas of today's progress of science.

These brief reflections of the major role of the artist in society in the processes of social change and the particular ways in which, by using the body as a form of expression, the artist hits the right nail on the head, highlights, reclaims, opens the discussion and implicitly demands social change, all lead up to this: today's artists must be in sync with the preoccupations, the anguish and restlessness of the times they live in. In a world of hyper-globalization, hyper-communication and hyper-technology, the acts of isolation and simply contemplating the world are no longer possible. Today, more than ever, the artist is a cultural worker who builds and rebuilds, along with many others, the foundations of our society.

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