

Creative Resistance: The Role of Art Activism in Advancing Social Justice

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Abstract: *Art activism, or "creative resistance," has emerged as a dynamic force in advancing social justice, using artistic expression to challenge systemic inequalities, provoke critical dialogue, and inspire collective action. This review explores the evolution of art activism, tracing its historical roots and theoretical underpinnings while examining its diverse strategies, including street art, performance activism, digital media, community-based art, and institutional critique. It evaluates the impact of creative resistance in mobilizing communities and shaping public discourse, while also addressing key challenges such as censorship, commercialization, and sustainability. Finally, the article considers future directions, including the role of emerging technologies and global artistic collaborations in redefining the landscape of activist art. By synthesizing multiple perspectives, this review highlights art's enduring power as a tool for resistance and transformative change.*

Keywords: art, activism, creative resistance, social justice

INTRODUCTION

Art and activism has long been established as a powerful medium for social change. Advocacy through art can take many forms, challenge conventions, as well as provide an avenue to facilitate complex conversations around pressing issues. Contemporary artists are using their talents and creative resources to shape the world around them. Each work is deliberately governed by an objective to promote social change; whatever the medium, be it painting, poetry, performance, or photography and sculpture. From time through history, artists have long been using visual communication to express and to convey messages. (Enya, et al, 2025). The role of art in political

engagement, social injustice, and even the healing process are all being explored by art activists. The term art activism is used here exclusively to describe visual artists whose primary or constant body of work is aimed at expanding awareness and social course. (van den Berg A, 2020).

In recent decades, art activism or creative resistance has gained prominence as a means to confront injustice, empower communities, and reimagine equitable futures. Many contemporary artists have de-emphasized their studio practice and instead channeled their focus on social engagement through a social practice methodology.

This paper investigates how artistic expression functions not only as a mirror to societal issues but also as an active agent in catalyzing change (Demos, 2016). It aims to provide a comprehensive synthesis of strategies, theories, and case studies that illuminate the role of art activism in advancing social justice. During this discuss, artists like of El Anatsui, Jelili Atiku, Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and Banksy who have been found to indulge in this line of social practice shall be under studied.

Theoretical Foundations

The practice of art activism draws on diverse theoretical frameworks. Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony reveals how dominant ideologies are perpetuated through cultural institutions, making counter-hegemonic art a powerful form of resistance (Gramsci, 1971). Relational aesthetics, introduced by Nicolas Bourriaud (1998), centers on social interaction and collective experience as central to art. Socially engaged art, as defined by Helguera (2011), emphasizes participatory engagement and community dialogue. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory (1991) allows for a nuanced understanding of how overlapping identities affect experiences of marginalization-a crucial perspective for activist art.

Defining Art Activism

Art activism refers to the integration of artistic practices with political or social activism, using creativity as a means to challenge, question, and reshape societal norms and injustices. Rather than merely creating art for aesthetic purposes, art activists aim to provoke thought, foster dialogue, and inspire action toward social change. According to Felshin (1995), art activism often exists at the intersection of art and life, blurring the boundaries between creative expression and direct political engagement. Through mediums like photography, painting, sculpture, street art, performance, film, and digital media, artists convey powerful messages about issues such as human rights, climate change, racial injustice, gender equality, and more.

Art activism often seeks to reach audiences beyond the traditional gallery or museum spaces, bringing creative protests into public spaces where the message can be more immediate and accessible (Demos, 2016). This approach allows the artwork to engage people who might not typically encounter political messages in everyday life, amplifying the impact of both the art and the activist cause.

Moreover, art activism is not only about protest but also about imagining and creating visions of a better world. As Duncombe (2002) argues, art activists use creativity to open up possibilities for hope and transformation, making distant or abstract social ideals feel tangible and achievable. In this way, art activism becomes a powerful tool for both resistance and reconstruction. In contemporary movements like Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion, and feminist protests around the world, the role of artistic expression, whether through murals, music, or public performances has been crucial in mobilizing communities and sustaining the emotional energy required for long-term activism (Thompson, 2012). In the whole, art activism is a dynamic and transformative practice where art serves not only as a reflection of society but as an active agent for social and political change.

Creative Resistance

Creative resistance refers to the use of imaginative, artistic, and unconventional methods to oppose oppression, injustice, or dominant power structures. It blends art, performance, humor, symbolism, and other creative expressions with political activism to engage people emotionally and intellectually. Rather than relying solely on traditional forms of protest like petitions or marches, creative resistance employs unexpected tactics to disrupt dominant narratives, provoke critical thought, and inspire hope (Duncombe, 2007).

Through methods such as street art, theater, music, and satire, activists can bypass censorship, connect with diverse audiences, and sustain movements by maintaining enthusiasm and participation. Creative resistance emphasizes the power of storytelling, spectacle, and shared cultural symbols in shaping public consciousness and fostering collective action (Milkman, 2017). By making resistance visible, memorable, and emotionally resonant, it can challenge hegemonic systems more effectively than conventional political tactics alone.

Social Justice

Social justice refers to the principle and practice of creating a society based on fairness, equality, and the recognition of the inherent dignity and rights of all individuals. It seeks to address and dismantle systemic inequalities related to race, gender, class, sexuality, disability, and other social divisions. According to Rawls (1971), social justice is achieved when the distribution of resources and opportunities is equitable, and when institutions are structured to benefit the least advantaged members of society.

Social justice involves not only redistributive efforts (such as economic reforms) but also the recognition of cultural differences and the protection of human rights (Fraser, 1997). It demands both the correction of historical injustices and the establishment of systems that prevent future oppression. For instance, the 2020 “#End SARS” protest. Activists, educators, and policymakers working for social justice advocate for systemic change at local, national, and global levels, aiming for an inclusive society where everyone can participate fully and thrive (Sensoy&DiAngelo, 2017).

Historical Context of Art Activism

Globally, art activism has long been intertwined with political and social movements. Its roots can be traced back to the early 20th century, particularly through movements like Dadaism during World War I, where artists like Marcel Duchamp used absurdity and irony to protest against nationalism and war (Richter, 1965). In the 1930s, during the Great Depression, artists in the United States, such as those in the Works Progress Administration (WPA), created murals and performances that highlighted workers' rights and social inequalities (Contreras-Koterbay&Mantooth, 2015).

The 1960s and 1970s witnessed a surge in art activism during the civil rights movement, anti-Vietnam War protests, and feminist movements. Artists like Judy Chicago and collectives like the Guerrilla Girls used art to critique systemic racism, sexism, and war (Felshin, 1995). Similarly, Latin American art movements such as Taller de Gráfica Popular in Mexico used printmaking to support revolutionary causes and educate the masses (Lucie-Smith, 1995).

More recently, global movements like Occupy Wall Street (2011) and Extinction Rebellion (founded in 2018) have harnessed performance art, visual protest, and digital media to critique capitalism, inequality, and climate change (Demos, 2016).

In Nigeria, art activism has deep historical roots tied to colonial resistance, nationalism, and post-independence social struggles. During the colonial era, Nigerian artists used traditional forms such as masquerades, storytelling, and performance to critique colonial rule and advocate for cultural preservation (Oguibe, 2004). In the mid-20th century, during the nationalist struggles leading up to independence in 1960, visual artists like Ben Enwonwu symbolically portrayed African pride and identity through modernist art forms, blending traditional aesthetics with contemporary political themes (Ogbechie, 2008).

After independence, the brutal civil war (1967 - 1970) and successive military dictatorships inspired many artists to become outspoken critics of injustice. In the 1980s and 1990s, figures like Fela Kuti through Afrobeat music and Chinua Achebe through literature embodied the spirit of art activism by highlighting corruption, oppression, and neo-colonial exploitation (Olaniyan, 2004). Contemporary Nigerian art activism continues to thrive through movements like #End SARS (2020), where artists used music, visual arts, digital illustrations, and performances to protest police brutality and demand governance reforms (Adebayo, 2021). Young creatives leveraged social media, murals, and performance installations to galvanize international support and document the struggles of Nigerian youth. Thus, both globally and within Nigeria, art activism has been a powerful tool for resistance, social critique, and envisioning a more just world.

Strategies of Art Activism

Art activism employs a range of strategies to provoke social and political change. These strategies combine creativity with activism to reach audiences emotionally, intellectually, and visually.

Public Art Interventions

One major strategy is creating public art interventions, such as murals, installations, graffiti, or performances in public spaces. These works disrupt everyday environments to confront viewers with political or social messages outside traditional gallery settings (Demos, 2016). Public interventions make activism unavoidable and democratize art by removing the barriers of formal institutions.

Street Performance and Protest Theater

Performance art and Protest Theater allow activists to dramatize issues, often in public areas, making abstract injustices tangible and emotionally relatable. This strategy uses spectacle, satire, and symbolic acts to capture public attention and challenge dominant narratives (Thompson, 2012).

Culture Jamming

Culture jamming is a subversive strategy that involves altering or parodying mainstream media and advertising to reveal hidden ideologies and contradictions (Duncombe, 2002). For example, activists might remix corporate logos or billboards to critique consumerism, environmental destruction, or political corruption.

Digital Art and Social Media Activism

With the rise of technology, many art activists use digital platforms to spread their work globally. Memes, viral videos, augmented reality experiences, and digital collages are created to quickly and effectively raise awareness and mobilize communities online (Tufekci, 2017).

Participatory and Community-Based Art

This strategy involves collaborative projects where communities are not just viewers but active creators of the artwork. Community-based art empowers marginalized voices and fosters solidarity by making collective experiences visible (Helguera, 2011).

Tactical Media

Tactical media refers to the temporary creation of art projects or media events that intervene in public discourse for a short period, often during key political moments (Lovink & Garcia, 1997). These fast, flexible actions aim to disrupt mainstream narratives before authorities can respond.

Symbolic Actions and Visual Protest

Symbolic visual actions, such as wearing coordinated colors, creating human chains, or using striking props (e.g., giant puppets, banners, costumes), serve as powerful visual metaphors for complex political issues (Bogad, 2016). These images are often media-friendly and amplify the movement's visibility.

Discuss on Art Activist

Banksy

Banksy, an anonymous British street artist, has revolutionized the relationship between art and activism through politically charged graffiti. His works address a wide range of global issues, including poverty, war, human rights, environmental destruction, and consumerism. For example, his iconic image "*There Is Always Hope*" (figure 1) featuring a girl reaching for a balloon speaks to themes of innocence and lost ideals, while "*The Flower Thrower*" (figure 2) presents a protester throwing flowers instead of a bomb, symbolizing peace over violence (Brill, 2018). Banksy's strategic placement of art in public spaces ensures that activism reaches the masses directly, bypassing traditional media and gallery systems (Ellsworth-Jones, 2012). His work critiques authority while offering poignant, accessible messages of resistance and hope.

Figure 1.



Banksy (n.d.) *The Flower Thrower* [Street Art]. <https://www.banksy.co.uk/out.asp?loutD=1>

Figure 2.

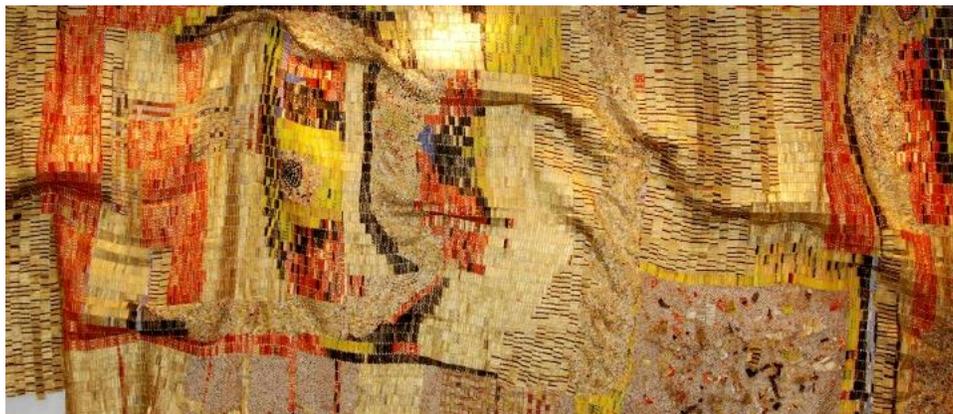


Banksy (n.d.) *There Is Always Hope*. [Street Art]. <https://www.banksy.co.uk/out.asp?loutD=1>

African Artist: El Anatsui

El Anatsui, a globally renowned sculptor, uses discarded materials like bottle caps, metal, and wood to explore themes of colonial history, globalization, and environmental degradation.

Figure



3.

Anatsui, E. (2007) *Earth's Skin* [Sculpture]. Brooklyn Museum. <https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/218077>

By transforming waste into massive, visually stunning installations, Anatsui draws attention to the cycles of consumption and waste, as well as Africa's history of exploitation (Binder, 2010). His practice of using "poor" materials critiques the value systems imposed by Western consumerism and highlights Africa's resilience and creativity. Anatsui's work, such as *"Earth's Skin"* (2007), (Figure 3&4) demonstrates how traditional forms and contemporary concerns can merge, offering a subtle but potent form of activism through reimagining African identity and environmental responsibility (Oguibe, 2004).

Figure 4.



Anatsui, E.

(2007) *Unjnown* [Sculpture]. Brooklyn Museum.
<https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/218077>

FelaAnikulapo-Kuti

Fela Kuti remains one of the most influential activist-artists in Nigerian and African history. Through his invention of Afrobeat - a fusion of traditional African music, jazz, and funk Fela challenged political oppression, colonial legacies, and military brutality. His song "Zombie" (1976) mockingly portrays Nigerian soldiers as mindless tools of oppression, while "Water No Get Enemy" celebrates unity and resilience (Olaniyan, 2004). Beyond music, Fela's life itself was a form of political performance; he founded the Kalakuta Republic, declared it independent from the Nigerian state, and used it as a platform for social experimentation. Fela's activism came at great personal cost, including harassment, imprisonment, and violent attacks, yet his influence endures in Nigerian activism today.

JeliliAtiku

Jelili Atiku is a Nigerian multimedia and performance artist who uses his body, costume, and installations to address issues such as human rights abuses, political violence, poverty, and environmental injustice. His performances often occur in public spaces, where he engages with audiences directly

Figure 5.



Atiku, j. (2015). *Redlight* [Performance art]. Freedom Park Lagos.
<https://artafricamagazine.org/jelili-atku-redlight/>

For example, his project "*Redlight*" (2015) (Figure 5&6) employed dramatic use of color and movement to comment on political bloodshed and oppression (Ikponmwosa, 2017).

Atiku's commitment to using performance art as a form of social commentary has made him a critical voice in contemporary African art activism. His practice is deeply rooted in Yoruba traditions while simultaneously addressing global human rights issues, making his work resonate both locally and internationally.

Figure 6.



Atiku, j. (2015). *Redlight* [Performance art]. Freedom Park Lagos.
<https://artafricamagazine.org/jelili-atku-redlight/>

These four artists - Banksy, El Anatsui, Fela Kuti, and Jelili Atiku, demonstrate how art can be a powerful tool for activism across different cultures and media. Whether through street art, sculpture, music, or performance, they challenge injustice, inspire resistance, and envision more equitable societies. Their work shows that art activism is not limited by medium or geography but united by a shared commitment to social change.

Challenges

Despite its strengths, art activism faces challenges. Governments and institutions often censor or co-opt activist art, stripping it of its critical potential (Sholette, 2011). The commodification of resistance risks depoliticizing radical messages. Moreover, artists face financial precarity and personal risk, especially in authoritarian contexts. Evaluating the tangible impact of art activism also remains a methodological challenge for researchers and practitioners.

Future Directions

The future of creative resistance is shaped by technology and transnational solidarity. Virtual reality offers immersive protest experiences; blockchain technology may support independent art economies. Artists across the globe are collaborating to address shared concerns such as climate justice, digital surveillance, and Indigenous rights. These innovations underscore the need for

interdisciplinary approaches that combine artistic creativity, activist strategy, and academic rigor (Jenkins et al., 2013).

CONCLUSION

Art activism, or creative resistance, continues to be a vibrant force in the pursuit of social justice. By drawing on historical practices, innovative strategies, and critical theory, artists can challenge dominant systems and engage communities in transformative dialogues. The integration of art and activism offers not only a critique of injustice but also a vision for a more equitable and expressive future.

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