

Artivism: The Social Intervention

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Abstract

Artivism and California's Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum converge around the idea of social change through civic engagement. The purpose of this study is to examine how artivism, through public participation, is a tool for expression and civic engagement as well as disrupts the status quo to create change locally and globally. The research questions focus on what artivism is, the theoretical foundations of artivism, and how artivism has functioned as a tool for change around the globe and in the local context. This study includes examples from public schools and global movements of artivism playing an essential role in advocating for change. The future implications of this study are to examine ways to integrate artivism into schools where student agency can be cultivated to purposefully bring about social change.

Keywords: social change, civic engagement, ethnic studies, Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW), REDress Project, student agency, disrupting the status quo, liminality

Artivism was coined by Italian artist Tatiana Bozzichelli to name the means of participation (Pfaller Schmid, 2022), which employs artistic capacities and integrates the participating individual as a symbolic representation of an idea (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018). The power of either creating imagery or becoming an image by assuming a role is present throughout the various examples examined in this study. Artivism, through this synthesis of art and activism, has become a communication tool for bringing about social change.

Social change through civic engagement is one of the outcomes of Ethnic Studies. California's Model Ethnic Studies Curriculum consists of eight outcomes, of which the sixth outcome promotes *self-empowerment for civic engagement*. This outcome emphasizes the need for students to develop civic participation skills to contribute to constructive social change (California Department of Education [CDE], 2022). The underlying principles of the California model of Ethnic Studies connect to artivism, as both stress working towards social change. This study will highlight examples of those who have brought attention to social injustices and have caused social change through artivism.

Working toward social change can take various forms. Some examples of artivism include: people wearing socio-political messages printed on clothing; an African American man wearing a t-shirt



Figure 1. Dear Police I am a White Woman (Indica Plateau)

with the message *Dear Police, I am a White Woman* (see Figure 1) to communicate to the police officers who may stop him on the road due to profiling; or a Sikh wearing a t-shirt with a message *Randomly Searched at 100% of the Airports* (See Figure 2) attached to the image of a U.S. Map of airports are methods of communicating social messages confronting profiling through creative means. The messages printed on clothing can disrupt the existing views and exemplify activism at a colloquial level. The act of wearing a message raises awareness of the issues impacting various groups of people.



Figure 2. 100% Randomly Searched (Dank and Funny)

Besides communicating through a printed message, clothing has been used to raise awareness of complex social issues. Indigenous groups have raised awareness for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women (MMIW) by hanging red dresses to show the absence of women who would have been wearing them had the women been alive (See Figure 3).

The REDress Project is an example of activism that has brought political recognition to the cause of MMIW through physical transcendence (Presley, 2020). Wearing t-shirts to raise awareness of the problem of profiling, or displaying dresses representing missing or murdered women, are powerful public declarations that bring attention to complex social issues. While this study discusses the role of activism in shaping social movements around the world, the examples of classroom instruction integrating activism-centered teaching exemplify the possibility of students assuming the role of an activist or creating a narrative-based imagery.



Figure 3. REDress Project by Jaime Black Artist

What is Activism?

Activism, through public participation, has become a tool for expression, civic engagement, and local and global social change. Since activism exists in both arts and politics, without one superseding the other, open-ended events, environment, actions, concepts, and installations become visual manifestations of the cause (Pfaller Schmid, 2022) through an artist's creative approach. Activism—the convergence of art and activism—became a global language in the 21st century (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018). While activism gained its position as a new way of communicating, urban art has been recognized as a 20th century art form. Activism differs from urban and other art forms due to its immediate connection to social action, with the intention to disrupt popular narratives and bring about social change (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018).

Social intervention using art can be misinterpreted as political art, especially because the term is a blend of art and activism. According to Oprea (2020), political art, as seen in advertisement, propaganda material, clothing, and other articles, can be associated with social issues. Activism

differs from political art because the purpose of creation transforms from solely being political commentary to social engagement with an aim to attract the public for participation. Activism is a way to interact with others through artistic methods of argumentative imagery or role-play, removing the option of neutrality or passive observation.

Activism is considered a new global language to channel ideas (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018; Oprea, 2020), a language which enables messaging whether the message is disseminated through wearing a t-shirt or hanging woman-less dresses. The function of activism is to intervene and disrupt the systems of oppression (Presley, 2020) and conduct a social intervention as its main goal (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018). The purpose of activism is not to offer critique, but to use alternative images, metaphors, irony, and humor to inform others (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018).

What Are the Theoretical Foundations of Activism?

Although activism intervenes by making the oppressive systems and the attempted disruption visible, the invisible intentions inhabit the visible structure. The instability of activism, which occurs through the merging of visible and invisible, becomes a balancing act in attempting to either express or mitigate the significance of an issue depending on what side of the dialogue an individual or group is on. The theory of liminality provides a foundation to understand the convergence of visible art and invisible concepts.

Theory of Liminality

The theory of liminality was introduced by Van Gennep in 1909 centering on the idea of the detachment of a subject from the environment which provides a structure for the presence of an absent subject (Presley, 2020). People or ideas become manifested through the structure while in a state of being absent. The contradiction of being present (visible) while absent (invisible) is liminality. For example, the metaphor of an open wound or "*una herida abierta*" is an artistic expression to represent the grating between the U.S. and Mexico border as a conflict between wealthy and poor countries (Presley, 2020). Within the contradiction of a wound or tension being a present idea while visibly absent, the interaction between the environment and the past or present inhabitants impacts actions. The field of ecological psychology provides the notion of affordance which emphasizes the complementarity of the environment and people, and this interactive relationship calls for actions to occur (Nielsen & Pedersen, 2022). Liminality occurs through the connectivity of subjects and environment despite the physical or figurative detachment.

The REDress project, where the haunting absence of the murdered and missing Indigenous women becomes present through the structure of the red dresses, is a way to mark the presence of those absent women in a contradictory and unstable space (Presley, 2020). The instability of the contradictory space compliments the environment of a given context. The artwork created and sold by Indigenous women is an example of liminality where through their art they remind us that they are not the relics of the past, but continue to be present. In this case, their perceived absence is defeated through their presence. Art is not a reactive act by the Indigenous women, but an outcome of their need to keep their stories alive. Nielsen and Pedersen (2022) assert people's actions as not reactions, but a result of reciprocal relation between people and the environment they belong to. According to Presley (2020), women's presence marked through their art is activism

and is a form of liminal protest. Protests can bring policy-level changes in addition to impacting mindsets through disruption of existing narratives.

Artivism, in this way, is a mechanism for challenging popular narratives, raising awareness about issues, and shifting deeply held biases. Activists, individually and socially, practice self-agency to create change. Societies often establish fixed categories based on age, capabilities, and more, but the liminality of transitional periods creates new spaces for new possible positions (Nielsen & Pedersen, 2022). For instance, the period between childhood and adulthood is where individuals try to construct meaning and find direction. The spaces between the fixed positions is where individual agency occurs calling others to action. Artivism occupies the space of liminality and ambiguity. These abstract and unnamed moments between the fixed time and space bring opportunities for social change to occur where activists engage others through participatory action.

How Is Artivism a Tool for Social Change Both Globally and Locally?

A participatory pedagogy, whose function is to disrupt the existing or potential establishments of oppression through social intervention (Presley, 2020), artivism de-normalizes fixed or normalized ideas through artistic representations (Oprea, 2020). This process of de-normalization has occurred in various places around the world and has brought changes at the socio-political levels. The examples from across oceans raise awareness of the global issues providing insights into how others have disrupted social narratives and practices. With the understanding of global artivism, examples from local schools can be understood at a deeper level.

Global Examples

A variety of artivism examples around the world illustrate diversity of methods based on the needs of the situations demanding change. Activists have engaged others to participate in the political discourse impacting peoples' lives.

Feminist Artivism in Latin America

Feminism, from a liberal white perspective, has been presented as individual empowerment (Afzal-Khan, 2022), but outside Western conceptions about empowerment, feminism is more a community-oriented, collective action. Women, mostly, have been negatively impacted by policies which are designed to benefit corporations. For instance, Central and South American asylum-seeking women have been forced to migrate to the United States because of poverty, lack of educational or employment opportunities, and to gain access to healthcare (Afzal-Khan, 2022). These women journey together with their children as a result of the oppression from corporate and state policies. The images and sounds of their journey are communicated around the globe by sharing visual snippets of their struggles (Pfaller Schmid, 2022). Activists, capturing and sharing imagery of migrating women passing through urban and rural landscapes, engage the audience in how these women leave their storylines to mark their migratory presence after having moved on. The collective feminist activist approach here connects people, their hopes, and the journey they endure. This representation of migratory women with their children humanizes them and challenges policy-makers to see beyond the seemingly neutral stances news and the media portray. The particular use of visual imagery centers the stories of human survival, and such

activism intervenes and shatters the option to deny their stories of struggle or to remain neutral on issues like immigration.

Feminist Activism in South Asia

Around the globe, women are using activism to publicize injustices. In Pakistan, Bangladeshi women are trafficked with a promise of a better life, only to be sold into prostitution. In addition to prostitution, controlling Bangladeshi women's bodies in the name of religion renders them victims of patriarchy (Afzal-Khan, 2022). Pakistani activists have used theater to shed light on the plight of these women. Ajoka Theatre has been performing *Dukhini*, a play raising awareness to bring about change. According to Pfaller Schmid (2022), artistic intervention positions participants, performers and audience, as a part of the social or political discourse instead of remaining gazing spectators.

India's farmers protest of 2020-2021 brought to light the essential role women play as active participants in these struggles. Farm unions from all over India had gathered in Delhi, India's capital city, for almost a year. These protests and rallies, originating in Punjab, had spread to the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States. Women activists protested not only the Indian model of development but also patriarchy and capitalism (Afzal-khan, 2022).

A large number of women from towns and villages of Punjab left their homes, drove their tractors to Delhi, set up community kitchens, and camped in the outskirts of Delhi. The images of women in their colorful scarves sitting in the thousands with fists raised in the air; images of women cooking, singing, driving tractors, running medical stations and schools, managing newspapers, and giving fiery speeches—these images became the driving story for the movement. The posters, photos, banners, and videos all became the artistic medium that spread globally. According to Pfaller Schmid (2022), this type of participant-led activism becomes an impactful message to the masses. The imagery on social media was disseminated around the world and used in international rallies in support of the farmers. Thus, these participatory and feminist interventions expanded the notion of public protest, making the family and women's struggles central to it. As a result of localized movements and global pressures mediated by activist strategies, Prime Minister Narinder Modi was forced to repeal corporate laws negatively impacting farmers in India.

Feminist Activism in Europe

For three decades, women in Ireland faced a constitutional ban on abortion called the Eighth Amendment, which was forged through the converging interests of the state and the Catholic Church (O'Hara, 2020). In 2012, the grassroots resistance movement was accelerated with the death of Savita Halappanavar, who was denied a life-saving abortion. Feminist artists challenged the "abortion-free" status of Ireland using storytelling to vocalize the plight of abortion seekers and shift the narrative of shame to that of resistance (O'Hara, 2020). For instance, Home|Work Collective emphasized female voice through performances in transport hubs and directly challenged state-sanctioned policies dictating women and womanhood (O'Hara, 2020). Social participation, through personal interaction with a given environment, enabled a call for action (Nielsen & Pedersen, 2022) where the artistic performativity acted as a counter-hegemonic tool leading to social transformation (Moura & Cardeira, 2021). In May 2018, as a result of grassroots feminine activism, the Eighth Amendment was repealed.

Artivism in South America

Rising prices across the globe have led to social unrest due to people not being able to afford everyday necessities. In 2019, hundreds of thousands of Chilean high school students protested rising fees for traveling via state-owned Metro service. This act of mass civil disobedience, manifested as a refusal to pay public transportation fees, led to a military takeover of cities (Pfaller Schmid, 2022). While the artistic images shared on social media were not the outcome of the protest, they were an important part of the movement where people became transmitters of information (Pfaller Schmid, 2022). Artists created hundreds of 3D models as a collection inspired by the uprising (Pfaller Schmid, 2022). The presence of artivism in social spaces facilitated a movement that was in direct contact with people (Jivkova-Semova et al., 2018). While the issue of rising prices still exists in Chile and other countries, the historic documentation in the form of 3D models remains a living archive and a reference for future generations. These global examples provide evidence of the power of imagery in artivism disrupting socially established practices and narratives. The insights gained through the global examples can facilitate understanding of instructional practices integrating artivism in classroom settings.

From Global Artivism to Local Classrooms

While global artivism from various continents has provided opportunities for an examination of local case studies, exemplary lessons from local public schools in Southern California reveal artivism integrated in curriculum through visual and performing arts education. The following examples illustrate how artivism can be a part of teaching and learning practice.

Practical Classroom Example: Unity Day Dance Choreography

A high school in Southern California celebrates Unity Day annually to bring awareness to issues of oppression, ignorance, and injustice. Prior to a performance for this event in 2018, the dance students and instructor began with a conversation about current issues associated with social media use in the school which reflected social media trends on a global scale. A theme identified by the dance students was the observed frequency of people filming and posting fights and verbal altercations on social media rather than stepping in to assist. Students found the display of personal conflict as entertainment problematic. The dance students, through choreography, sought to confront and disrupt this idea of violence as entertainment.

The choreographic process began by defining the act of filming as a form of bullying. Then, dance students examined the types of bullying frequently being displayed on social media. The following types of bullying were prevalent and were explored further: domestic violence, school bullying, and online bullying. For the purpose of the choreography and to connect all sections of the dance, the students also had to develop a representation of bullying and a representation of an intentional interruption of the trend. Props like cell phones were used to symbolize bullying and an orange flower to symbolize an interruption. During the performance, the intervening action of replacing cell phones with flowers at specific times revealed a shift in awareness.

With the normalization of social media bullying and the need for intentional interruption, students were tasked with creating short sequences of movement vocabulary to demonstrate different scenarios: schoolyard bullying, instances of domestic violence, and response to online bullying. The teacher used a selection of music to help the students organize the dance segments and provide students with a guide for timing, dynamics, and tone. Using these tools, students built sequences using the creative process: inspiration, conceptualization, creation, and expression. Throughout this process, the teacher provided critical feedback to help students to align and strengthen the sequences with the message of intentional interruption of social media bullying. Once sequences were complete, the teacher assumed the role of director and lead choreographer to weave the segments together with variations on a synchronized movement narrative.



As a final step, the finished choreography was performed live in the amphitheater of the school on Unity Day during lunch (See Figure 4). The schools' student body was present to witness this performance and random audience members were the recipients of orange flowers. The dance students remarked on the feedback they received: audience members felt this performance made the topic of bullying comprehensible in a way that enabled students to understand their role and responsibility as users of social media.

Practical Classroom Example: Digital Self-Portrait Inspired by Indigenous Poetry

High school students in Ethnic Studies courses across a school district in Los Angeles County were engaged in a unit on the oppression of the Indigenous people of the United States. In this unit, students learned along with their classroom teachers. Visual and Performing Arts Teachers on Special Assignment (VAPA TOSAs) in collaboration with the Ethnic Studies TOSA, created a lesson designed to introduce students to contemporary Indigenous art and poetry, so students understood Indigenous people's continued survival and their identities expressed through activism in today's societies. The lesson opened with sharing the district adopted Land Acknowledgement.

Figure 4 (2 photographs). Example of Performing Arts. Meghann Kraft

"I invite you to join me in honoring the history of this land and stopping the erasure of Native people who are still here - thriving in the face of marginalization. Despite centuries of colonial violence, this will always be Indigenous land.

I stand on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Kizh and Gabrielino Tongva Nations. To

them, I offer my respect.

I wish to recognize you as well. I hope you will be an intentional ally to our Native neighbors: support Native entrepreneurs, follow Indigenous organizations on social media, amplify the voices defending Native lifeways. Thank you for learning and leading - *huutokre* (Kizh: I see you).”

Next, students were invited to participate in a mindfulness activity. They were asked to sit comfortably in their seat with their palms face up or face down on their thighs. They were invited to close their eyes or find a soft place to gaze. They were guided through three breaths. On the first inhale and exhale students were asked to silently acknowledge the people who came before us on this land. In this case the Gabrielino Tongva people built the first communities. On the second inhale they were asked to embrace our place on this land and in our community. On the final inhale they were asked to recognize that our example will guide future generations.



Figure 5. Harvesting the Hair of Mother Earth by Jackie Traverse (2019)

When students opened their eyes, the VAPA TOSAs shared the following quote by Kimberly Morales Johnson, a Gabrielino Tongva, Tribal Secretary for the San Gabriel Band of Mission Indians/Gabrielino Tongva. “The relationship with the land is so important – it’s vital to our being. The word ‘Tongva’ literally means ‘people of Earth’ because in our traditions, we’re taught that we rose up out of the ground. So, if you think Mother Earth is your birthplace, you are in constant relation with Mother Earth, and [there is a] respect and reciprocity that goes along with that” (Dangelantonio, 2021, para 8). To provide a visual representation of this sentiment *Harvesting the Hair of Mother Earth*, 2019 by Jackie Traverse was shared and discussed (See Figure 5).

Students also analyzed and discussed KC Adams’ *Perception: Leona Star*, 2014 (See Figure 6) to better understand the desire for native people to be seen not as victims, but as modern Indigenous people who are contributing members of society as they respect and practice the traditions of their ancestors. TOSAs explained that many Indigenous artists create art that communicates this desire.



Figure 6. Perceptions by Leona Star by KC Adams (2014)

Finally, students listened to the poem “I Am California, California Is Me” by Kelly Caballero, a Gabrielino Tongva, poet, singer songwriter, and jeweler (California Native Voices Through Poetry, 2020). After students listened to the poem, they were invited to find the instances where Kelly Caballero employed metaphor to create imagery that illustrates the Gabrielino Tongva people’s relationship with the land. TOSAs facilitated a discussion that welcomed all contributions so students felt safe and validated. Once the group identified the metaphors in the poem, students

were invited to share the place they are from or a place they identify with and emulate Caballero's work as they used the "I am California, California is me" line as inspiration to make their own "I am statement." For example, some students wrote "I am Mexico, Mexico is me." Some students were more specific and wrote a statement that included the city they call home.

Next students were asked to do a search online for one or more images of the place they were using for inspiration and save it. They were asked to emulate Caballero again and use metaphor to compare their physical attributes and/or personality traits to elements of the place they have selected. For example,

I am California.

California is me.

My skin is the pale, freckled sand that covers the beaches.

My eyes are the blue ocean waters that are altered by the moon.

To create a deeper lived experience and engage learners in activism of their own, students participated in a digital art lesson where their photographic self-portrait was digitally collaged with images of places, events, and objects which represented them outside the limits of time and space. What they held significant, while physically detached from them, became a presence in their digital-art. Students were guided by TOSAs as they imported a photo of themselves into the Sketchbook app and removed the background. Next students learned to use the layers feature in Sketchbook and placed the image of the locale they selected under the photo of themselves and adjusted the size until it made sense with the photo of themselves. Students then learned how to manipulate the image in each layer and change the colors, values, transparency and more to add more images that represented how each student saw themselves and their relationship to the land they identify with. Finally, students learned to use the text tools to add the lines of poetry they had written to their final image. Students were encouraged to share the image they created with their family and friends in any way they were comfortable with to extend the discourse the learning experience was inspired by.



Figure 7. Example of Digital Self-Portrait. Photo by: Lisa Ruiz (2022, Nov. 1, with permission)

Conclusion

The examples of activism from around the world and local communities demonstrate that individual and systemic changes can occur through artistic intervention. Real life experiences with activism have transformed students into change agents. Whether studying historic or present-day injustices from around the globe or recognizing them in our local communities, educational leaders need to connect subject material to students' lives, so that they see themselves in the content they study. This connectedness helps students own their learning through relationships with the

community and through civic participation. Civic participation via the arts can be meaningful to the lives of students, both personally and socially. These connections also help with social emotional learning (SEL), as students connect the learning from the history and ethnic studies courses to the real-life experiences. Activism-centered lessons can facilitate the connection as shown in the examples included in this study.

Activism has been effectively used as a tool for expression, civic and student engagement, and proactive change as evident in the aforementioned examples of arts pedagogy. With ongoing and supportive professional development, teachers and administrators can build professional capacity and learn how to harness activism to bring much needed social change. Through implementation, teachers design learning experiences for students that help them not simply go through lessons, but grow through them. Students' reflection of their cultural and historical perspectives, examined through activism, can lead to empowerment and celebration of their uniqueness, strengths, and traditions. In these ways, master narratives are disrupted through counter-stories that open the possibilities to systemic paradigm shifts. To cultivate student agency and active participation and bring about social change, activism is a practice that should be integrated into teaching and learning.

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Figures

Figure 1 Dear Police I am a White Woman

<https://www.indicaplateau.com/products/american-patriot-shirts-dear-police-i-am-a-white-woman-mens-t-shirt>

Figure 2 100% Randomly Searched

Brand: Dank and Funny Indian, Arab and Sikh Community. 100% Randomly Searched at The Following Airports T-Shirt. Retrieved from <https://www.amazon.com/Randomly-Searched-Following-Airports-T-Shirt/dp/B0B6Q34QL2>

Figure 3 REDress Project by Jaime Black Artist

<https://www.jaimeblackartist.com/exhibitions/>

Figure 4 (2 photographs) Example of Performing Arts. Photos by: Meghann Kraft. Included in this publication with permission.

Figure 5 Harvesting the Hair of Mother Earth by Jackie Traverse (2019)

<https://resilienceproject.ca/en/artists/jackie-traverse>

Figure 6 Perceptions by Leona Star by KC Adams (2014)

<http://www.kcadams.net/art/photography/Perception/PerceptionLeona.html>

Figure 7 Example of Digital Self-Portrait. Photo by: Lisa Ruiz. Included in this publication with permission.